

Chapter One

For the first ten years of my life, I grew up on Ash Street, “Trash Street” people called it, in a rundown Baltimore rowhouse across from the Pepsi cola factory. Stubborn weeds and patches of prickly purple burrs tortured our knees in the summertime of 2003. And no matter how often Daddy swept our sidewalk, chalked with graffiti and hop-scotches, our neighbors’ smelly garbage cans still overflowed.

In our Hampden community, some folks called my Daddy “Nigger Lee”, even though he was a diehard redneck and white as a loaf of Wonder bread. Daddy had a single teardrop tattoo inked under his right eye, and inexplicably he walked with a black man’s strut. Also, he wore his jeans “jail style”, showing several inches of his Hanes boxers, even though he never served a day of prison in his life.

At 22 years old, my Momma, Pamela Sue Miller, overdosed on heroin (China White Daddy called it) which killed her just three weeks after I was born. Sometimes walking to school, Daddy and I passed the bus-stop where sore studded junkies, bent over at the waist, teetered and swayed, heads nearly grazing the sidewalk.

“Baltimore yoga-“ Daddy would remark sadly.

Once when I was in kindergarten, I begged to see a picture of my mother. But Daddy just hung his head. “I’m sorry, Tabitha, all your mom’s things got lost when I couldn’t pay for the storage unit-“ I cried so hard, my eyes nearly swelled shut. Everybody in my class had a Momma but me. Daddy rocked me. We rocked together, united in our misery.

Daddy was a housepainter. But sometimes between jobs, he prowled the local rich neighborhoods (Roland Park and Guilford) in his pick-up truck, and he stole patio furniture which he sold cheap to a nearby used furniture store.

The day Momma passed, Daddy quit shooting heroin cold turkey to take care of me, his baby girl. After that he just sipped at his Popov vodka, which he bought for two dollars a pop at Dimitri's Tavern and kept tucked in the back pocket of his painter's pants.

Daddy's idea of fun was for us to go plant stealing on the weekends. We'd go very late at night. He double parked the truck, then my scrawny ten year old limbs would fly up onto immaculate porches with their fancy porch swings and umbrella stands, and I'd snatch a hanging plant or maybe a potted one, sprint back to the truck, jump in, and Daddy would gun it. We'd laugh with glee, the smell of rich soil and fragrant flowers flooding our nostrils. Our sagging front porch on Ash Street was a neighborhood spectacle. It was our own mini Hanging Garden of Babylon, which I learned about in fifth grade social studies.

When I got my report card from Robert Poole School #56 at the beginning of June, I brought it right home so Daddy could see I passed with straight A's into the gifted program of the sixth grade. He smiled so big, I could see the cavities in his back teeth.

"Let's go celebrate-" he crowed. We strolled hand in hand over to the Avenue, Hampden's main drag, lined with pricey restaurants and antique shops and boutiques. There used to be just a G.C. Murphy's dime-store, Cavacos Drugstore (which had a genuine marble lunch counter and soda fountain), and a Little Tavern Hamburger joint. All gone now. Daddy said the Artsy Fartsys have taken over.

First we got a snow-ball at King's Pizza Shop and sat on the warm bus-stop bench to eat it. I got strawberry with goops of marshmallow on mine, and Daddy got Spearmint. Daddy poured some Popov in his. A fragrance of honey suckles and cherry blossoms mixed with the odor of melted roof tar hung in the air. We watched the teenaged girls roll their baby strollers up and down the street. Daddy smoked a Newport.

"Feel like making some money tonight, Tabitha?"

Earlier I'd seen the cut-off notice for BGE on our kitchen table. I didn't like to sleep in the dark. I was used to my seashell night-light. But when Daddy lit a candle for me,

I worried our rowhouse might burn down. And the shadows the candle cast on my walls spooked me. If I would have a nightmare, Daddy would sit up with me. In his lilting drunken voice, he'd tell me to call on a throng of animal friends he invented for me to come to my rescue. "Call on your two silverback gorillas-"he'd whisper into my ear. "They're big and strong but fiercely loyal only to you. Anybody dares to harm you, and they'll break them in two-"

"Okay-" I answered drowsily, closing my eyes.

"Here they come busting through the forest to find you. Can you see them?"

"Yes-" I mumbled, feeling safer already.

"And call on your Hoot Owl. He has claws sharp enough to rip the face off anybody who tries to hurt a hair on your head. And call on your Elephant and ride on his back to safety whenever you need him, okay?"

"Okay, Daddy-" I'd say and fall peacefully back to sleep.

After polishing off our snowballs at King's, Daddy and I walked into this bar called Frazier's. It was bigger than any bar I'd ever been in. There was carpet, not cement, for the floor. Some of the ladies wore skirts and high heels. The men wore pastel colored shirts with alligators on them, khaki pants, and loafers. Not the Dickies work pants, paint splattered t-shirts, and work boots I was used to seeing. Suddenly I felt very small and imperfect, with my head of out-of-control curls, my crooked teeth (the front two overlapped), my thrift store clothes, and Payless sneakers. I squeezed Daddy's hand, and he squeezed back.

Daddy bought me an order of mozzarella sticks and a garden salad with ranch dressing for my dinner while he checked out the pool tables. He put his quarters up. A bunch of college kids were playing. Patiently Daddy watched them.

When his turn came, Daddy swaggered over to the table, purposefully dripping some

beer from his pint glass, and slurred, "So how you fellas doing tonight?"

"Good. Fine-" they answered, smiling with their perfect white teeth. But they cut each other some looks, too, as if to say look at this bum, this guy's a joke. But I knew it was all part of Daddy's plan.

Daddy's first game he made some balls and he missed some balls. He let the jock win. The guy had squeaky clean hair, in stark contrast to Daddy's greasy mop which he secured into a messy ponytail with a newspaper rubberband. The college guy's hands were twice the size of Daddy's and adorned with a chunky gold and ruby classy ring. Daddy never made it past the eighth grade. He quit school to take care of his younger brother, Rusty. Because their mother, Kelly Williams, was a rummy and a cokehead, the neighborhood prostitute, never home, and neither boy had a clue who their father was. (Even at 52 years old, my grandmother was a full-time crack junkie). The minor brothers spent their afternoons hiding out on factory rooftops, steering clear of the cops and Child Protective Services. When the sun went in, they'd clamber down and scavenge for food, raiding trashcans and dumpsters, eating black berries from bushes and crabapples from backyard trees. Once they even cooked and ate a pigeon they trapped.

Daddy wobbled some. "Give me another try...and if I lose I'll buy you a pitcher of beer-"

"And what if I lose?" the college boy asked, a little suspicious now.

"Then buy me a shot-" Daddy was already racking the balls.

"It's your funeral-" the guy joked.

Daddy glanced over at me and winked.

Daddy would run a few of his balls then leave the cue ball in a difficult spot so that the college kid missed the eight ball three times. Finally Daddy snapped the eight ball into the corner pocket. "Shot of Jack-" Daddy grinned and shook the guy's hand.

The guy smiled, too, but it was forced, since all his buddies were now chuckling,

ribbing him. "Let's play for five bucks-" he suggested, suddenly all bravado.

"Sure-" My Daddy agreed.

I watched Daddy beat him four games in a row, playing just good enough to barely win, each time letting the cocky jock think the next game was his.

Wisely the guy gave up. But now all his friends wanted to try to beat my Daddy. Never winning by more than two balls, Daddy beat them one after the other. Couldn't they see my Daddy had sly eyes, like a fox? He was smarter than all of them college boys put together. My chest swelled with pride for him.

"You are one lucky somebody-" the jock announced.

"Rather be lucky than good any day of the week-" My father shook his opponent's hand, grasping the wad of folded up bills there and slipping them discretely into his pocket.

"I'd play more if I could-" the guy explained to Daddy. "But we got a party to go to-"

"Be safe then-" Daddy waved goodbye to them, and I walked over and gave my Daddy a hug. He smelled richly of the house paint which crusted the cuticles of his fingernails after a long afternoon of hard work. "Having fun, baby girl?"

"Yes, sir-" I said

Right then, two boys in white t-shirts, knee length jean shorts, and bucket sized tennis shoes approached Daddy's table.

"This your table, man?" the thicker built of the two asked. Both boys were wallpapered in tattoos up to their jawline.

"Yes, it is-" Daddy answered him.

"I'll play you, Old Timer-" The two boys looked to be no older than 21 or 22. Daddy was 28, but the lines creasing his face from working out in the sun year after year made him appear a decade older.

“Rack ‘em up-“ Daddy cooed.

“Let’s see what you got...let’s see what you got-“ the boy murmured back, rolling a bar stick across the green felt to test its’ straightness.

I didn’t like these boys’ flashy gold rings and necklaces, their tattoos of pit bulls and guns.

“I’m tired, Daddy. Let’s go home-“ I tugged at his hand. But he wriggled from my grip. “One more time, baby-“ he said.

Daddy let the boy have only two shots, and then he finished it, pocketing all six of his remaining balls in a row and then the eight. “Hell’s bells I’m good-“ Daddy brayed, trying to get under the kid’s skin. He changed his tactics, depending on who his mark was.

“All right...all right...-“ the boy gulped a huge shot of liquor before re-racking. “Let’s go again. But this time we play for twenty-“

Daddy simply nodded.

“I got you, old man...I got you....I got you-“ the defeated boy blustered, tightening the bandanna wrapped around his partially shorn head.

Daddy pocketed a few balls, let the boy drop a few. Then Daddy ran the table and made a spectacular eight-ball bank shot to win. The beaten boy’s eyes were a clear gray, like frozen ice. He blinked hard at Daddy. “Double or nothing-“ he gritted his teeth.

Daddy let him pocket five balls this time before he ran the table again for his third win.

“Motherfucker-“ the boy hissed. One of his front teeth was encased in spit-shined gold.

Daddy said, “Please watch your language in front of my daughter-“

The boy glanced my way. “Pardon my French-“ he mumbled to me, then handed Daddy two crumpled twenty dollar bills. “Again-“ the boy commanded.

And Daddy complied, beating him three more times.

“Go again?” Daddy asked, pocketing more of their cash.

The two boys commiserated. They whispered fiercely back and forth. "I ain't got no more money-" I heard the second pimply boy say. He had angry red, star-shaped acne scars behind his ears.

So the first boy unhooked his thick gold chain from around his neck. He draped it on the edge of the pool table.

"No thank you-" Daddy replied. He never liked to play for people's personal property. If they lost, they'd get too riled up. "My little girl's sleepy. Got to get her home-"

I slid my hand in Daddy's, clutching his warm bony fingers. "Let's go-" Daddy said softly and we started to walk out. But the boys glared after us. The beaten boy's face was puffed up now, like a white balloon. "Fucking hustler-" he cursed my Daddy. My heart raced then because I could sense the impending danger, could smell it like a Summer storm brewing, could taste it, like a hot penny thrust into my mouth. Blood pounded in my ears. I gripped Daddy's hand.

"Keep walking-" Daddy said, even softer than before. The exit door was just five feet away.

Then suddenly Daddy dropped to one knee, oddly, like somebody proposing marriage. I thought the bigger boy had sucker punched him, knocked the wind out of him. But a fist-sized blotch of blood spreading across the back of Daddy's t-shirt told a very different story. Briefly I saw the flash of a knife, and then I screamed. The thug boy had stabbed my Daddy in the back. The punks blazed out the door as Daddy fell face down on the carpet. Somebody stuck a bunch of napkins to Daddy's back to stop the blood, but it just kept flowing. Somebody else called 911. I kneeled down beside my Daddy. He struggled to breathe. His eyes flickered back and forth in his head like the American Girl baby doll he got for me last Christmas.

Two hours later, Daddy passed away. A doctor and a nurse approached me, sitting alone in a plastic chair. "I'm sorry-" the doctor said.

I covered my eyes.

The doctor's words were like a baseball hurled 90 miles per hour at the window of my heart. Glass shrapnel burst outward and inflamed every cell of my body with unbelievable pain.

"Would you like to say good-bye to your father?" The nurse laid her freckled hand across my skinny shoulders. She smelled like rubbing alcohol and fabric softener. She guided me to a white door. "I can go in with you if you want, Tabitha-"

But I walked into the cold room alone. I shuffled over to where my Daddy laid on a silver table. Perspiration trickled down my face, my armpits, my back. The flow of salty water burned.

I stood before the shell that was left of my Daddy. His skin was now stiff and waxy looking. In his total stillness, he no longer resembled my Daddy who in life was always moving, always hustling. There were no laugh lines, no black man's lope, no sly expression, no nothing. He was simply gone. In the frigid room, I started to shake. My teeth chattered, too. I was both freezing and burning up. I thought about Pompeii (something else I learned about in school last year). I thought of molten lava, of roiling flames, of people found curled up in fetal positions with their mouths thrust open, burned alive. And I knew their pain.

Daddy never carried no wallet, didn't have an ID or a driver's license. He wore no jewelry, no watch. He left no items behind for me to remember him by. Nothing I could hold or treasure. He left this earth with nothing, the same way he came in. My small body felt full of nothingness, too.

Child Protective Services tracked down some of Daddy's relatives in rural Pennsylvania. Apparently Daddy had an older brother named Arly. (Rusty, his younger brother, was not an option since he was locked up at the Hagerstown jail for multiple burglaries). Even though I had no idea who these people were (Daddy never spoke of them, not once), the CPS lady turned me over to them. I did not want to go. Because if Daddy never spoke of them, he must have had a damn good reason. But the CPS lady, a thick black woman with glossy plum-colored lips and a neatly trimmed afro, assured me the Williams family was checked out thoroughly and found to be suitable.

When my new guardians arrived, they looked like normal working class folks, in Target clothes and sensible shoes. But no way did I trust them. If Daddy had rejected them, so would I.

"Tabitha, this is your Uncle Arly and your Aunt June-" The CPS lady informed me, smiling her big false grown-up smile.

"Well don't she look just like her Daddy-" Aunt June hushed. And Uncle Arly grunted his agreement. Uncle Arly wore clean blue-jean overalls and work boots. He was missing a front tooth. His hair was cropped short, salt and pepper gray. If he was my Daddy's brother, you couldn't tell by looking at him. He was much thicker and about a head taller. Aunt June was heavysset, too. Her ginger-colored hair was sprayed into a tidy halo above her forehead. She smelled like Avon perfume.

"We live on a farm-" Aunt June enthused. "Have you ever been to the country?"

My lips pressed shut.

“I’m sure Tabitha will love it-“ the CPS lady smoothed over the awkward silence.

So Aunt June chirped on, “We got a barn, a lake, even some cows...-“

It was a three hour drive to the farm. Only Aunt June spoke. She apologized for Daddy getting cremated by the state and not given a proper funeral. (The CPS lady said in three weeks time Daddy’s ashes would be shipped to Pennsylvania for us to keep).

At 36 years old, Uncle Arly was 8 years older than Daddy. He did not strut like a black man or have any tattoos that I could see. He smelled like hay and soap.

As their Oldsmobile ate up the highway, I watched out the windows. I had never seen a mountain or a lake. Never seen so many tall green trees. (Daddy preferred to stay in our Hampden neighborhood, since he had no driver’s license or car insurance.) I squinted my eyes to see if maybe I could catch a glimpse of any of Daddy’s animals out there. The magnificent silverback gorillas or my sharp-eyed hoot owl or my humongous elephant, but all I saw were some bony cows and a few dusty horses.

A long and winding gravel road lead up to the William’s farm. I saw a sun-glittered lake with a wooden dock. I saw inner tubes and toy floats and colorful rafts. There was a kid’s swing-set. Some clean clothes flapped on a line.

The house in Pennsylvania was a big one with pale blue aluminum siding and an American flag billowing out front. The rooms inside were much bigger than any in our Baltimore rowhouse.

I carried two plastic bags full of my thrift shop clothes to my new bedroom. It was plain but clean with a matching bed and dresser of blonde wood. The bedspread was patterned with yellow sunflowers. There was a white fringed rug on the floor. A lamp and a small desk for me.

“We hope you’ll be happy here-“ Aunt June said behind me. “Come down to the kitchen and I’ll fix you something to eat-“

She made me a turkey and cheese sandwich and a bowl of chicken noodle soup. I ate in wolfish bites, having barely eaten in a week. Sunlight poured in through the kitchen window. You could smell the salty lake nearby, and a praying mantis hummed.

“We got four kids of our own-“ Aunt June divulged to me. “Dolly, Skeeter, Bugs, and Arly Junior. They’re at a friend’s party, but you’ll get to meet them soon-“

Had Aunt June ever even met my Daddy? What was the bad blood between him and his family? So bad he never even mentioned them to me? My ten year old brain was a tangle of questions I dared not ask.

“Are you tired, hon? You want to take a nap?” Aunt June wiped down her formica tabletop with a clean sponge.

I nodded, trudged to my room, climbed into bed, and slept for two days. After that Uncle Arly started teasing me, calling me Tabitha Van Winkle. The first thing I did upon waking was to eat three bowls of Lucky Charms cereal.

Aunt June said, “Everybody’s down at the lake. Do you swim?”

Daddy drove me to Hampden’s free swimming pool every summer. I could swim since I was 5 years old. Aunt June let me borrow one of Dolly’s bathing suits. It was too big for me, but I didn’t care. I just couldn’t wait to get in that water. She walked me down to the lake. “Everybody, this is your cousin, Tabitha Williams-“ she announced.

Kids were splashing and whooping it up in the lake. The youngest wore colorful, puffy life jackets. “Hi!” they all greeted me.

“Hi-“ I mumbled back.

Truthfully I had never swam in a real lake, but I didn’t want to look like a chicken. So I trotted to the edge of the dock and just dove right off. Swimming beneath the surface, I found the opaque green water unexpectedly dim and chilly and frightening. When I stood up, the muddy bottom freaked me out, too. My toes squished in icky gunk. The country water even tasted terrible. Salty and bitter when I accidentally swallowed some. Not the clean

transparent blue water I was used to. I coughed, nearly gagged.

“You okay, Tabitha?” Aunt June hollered.

“Yes, ma’am-“ I snagged a float nobody was using, climbed on board. It was shaped like a dragon. I glided, safely on the surface of the spooky water, daring to dip my toes every now and then. Aimlessly I swirled, but I was careful to stay within the allowed parameters, marked clearly with orange buoys. It was a pretty big lake with drop offs that were very deep. I wondered if any real creatures like the Loch Ness Monster might live here. Creatures dwelling down down down in the bottomless cold darkness.

After a while, Uncle Arly called everybody in to eat. He had a charcoal grill going. We all sat at a picnic table and ate off paper plates. I ate two hotdogs and a hamburger. I drank three Dixie cups full of cold lemonade. After eating, we all piled into an SUV and drove to the mall. As we rolled past corn fields, my cousins all chattered, a grating noise, like turkeys gobbling.

At the mall, the boys and the girls split up. “Be back here in one hour-“ Aunt June decreed. I didn’t know which way to go so I stayed put.

“Come with me, Tabitha-“ Aunt June said. “Do you like Walmart?”

I didn’t know what Walmart was, so I just shrugged. (Daddy always shopped at Rite Aid or the Dollar Store).

“You’ll love it-“ Aunt June unharnessed a cart and rumbled inside the overly lit mega-store. I followed her. She tossed items for me into the cart. Underwear. Shampoo. Deodorant. Some brightly colored short sets on sale two for one.

Never had a woman bought me anything. Only Daddy. Why didn’t he allow me to meet these seemingly nice people, my own flesh and blood kin? Aunt June must be a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

When she approached a jewelry counter, looking for watches for Uncle Arly, I looked at some gold chains with various charms to match. One of the bright charms caught my

eye. It said, "Daddy's Girl". My body filled with electricity. Daddy could not walk into a store without pocketing something. Even if it was just a pack of gum or a lollipop at 7-11. In the Wintertime he dropped me off at the Roosevelt Recreation Center to play kids indoor basketball or volleyball, then he'd head over to the Mondawmin Mall. Wearing an old coat, Daddy would enter a department store, try on a new coat, hang his old one on the hanger, and walk right out with the new one on his back (still dangling the price tag). At the Nike Store, he did the same for shoes. I would like to see the face of the salesman when he presented Daddy's stinky fishheads to some ritzy person expecting brand new tennis shoes.

I guess Daddy figured the less money he had to spend on himself, the more he had to take care of me. And as far as I know, Daddy never got caught. My eyes scanned the Walmart. I looked left and then right. The cashier, a black teenager with blue and red glitter in her hair, was busy snapping gum and ringing up a purchase. Aunt June was inspecting a watch. The other shoppers were filling their carts. My heart raced. My nerves jangled. But in an instant, my small hand shot out, jerked the charm loose, and pocketed the necklace into my shorts. The tips of my ears tingled, and a warmth flushed my cheeks. I waited for an adult to call out, "Hey, stop, you, thief!" But nobody did. There was just the electric hum of all those white lights in the store. I felt a sudden giddy high and a rush of pleasure then. Because the pretty "Daddy's Girl" charm was mine.

Chapter Three

To my surprise, my cousins: Dolly, Skeeter, Bugs, and Arly Junior treated me kindly. Dolly was 14 and pretty with long shiny blonde hair that glowed (unlike my unruly brown locks). Skeeter (real name Wally) was the oldest; at 18 he'd just enlisted in the army. Skeeter was short for mosquito, because Wally had unusually long arms and legs. Bugs (real name Timothy), ten years old, was nicknamed for the first word he ever spoke, toddling in the grass, grasping after some lightning bugs. Arly Junior was the youngest at six, a whirlwind of energy, stocky like his father. He wore the same blue jean overalls as his dad.

Thursday nights we had Game Night where I learned to play Stratego, Monopoly, Life, and other board games. Friday nights, we had Card Night where I learned to play Gin Rummy, Uno, Hearts, and Spades. Out of respect for Daddy, I tried not to have too much fun. But I had to admit that the William's family seemed to be about as fine a family as any child could hope for. Saturday nights, we had Movie Night, my favorite night of the week. We all piled into the Oldsmobile or the SUV and drove to the movie theater to see the rated G or PG movie of our choice. My favorite was "Jersey Princess" where a confused princess is banished to modern day New Jersey by an evil witch and then taken in by a construction worker father and his troubled, motherless young daughter who need her help just as much as she needs them. Just like me, the princess had all types of animal friends: mice, chipmunks, pigeons, even some cockroaches.

Sundays were church days. We went to a big white church. The closest Daddy and I ever got to church is when we'd go to the flea markets at Saint Thomas Aquinas, the only Catholic church in our neighborhood. Daddy liked to put his quarters down and roll the game wheels to try and win a basket of cheer, full of fifths of liquor. I'd try and win the baskets full of stuffed toys, game books, jump ropes, and bat-and-balls. The sermons were boring at Aunt June

and Uncle Arly's church. But afterward we got to picnic and play in the field out back.

When I started wearing my "Daddy's Girl" necklace, Aunt June noticed and commented on it. "Oh, what a pretty thing. Did your Daddy buy that for you?"

"Yes, ma'am-" I lied.

"It's a blessing you have something to remember him by-"

"Did you know my Daddy?" I finally worked up my nerve to ask her.

"The last time I laid eyes on Lee was about 12 years ago-"

The disappointment must have showed in my face because Aunt June motioned Uncle Arly over. He lumbered across the field, picking up a dripping can of ginger ale from an ice bin. "Arly, Tabitha was asking me about her father. Don't you have a picture of him in your wallet?"

Dutifully Uncle Arly fished out a photo. The teenager in the picture looked like my father and yet he didn't. Shockingly it was a junior high school photo. Daddy's hair was swept to the side. He wore a collared shirt and a striped tie. He was handsome but didn't smile. His eyes were stormy-looking. "That's Lee at 16 years old, right before he left us-"

What? Daddy always told me he grew up on the streets of Hampden in Baltimore, not Pennsylvania, with his junkie mother Kelly. That he dropped out of school in the eighth grade to care for his younger brother, Rusty. Aunt June must have read the confusion on my face. "Lee and Rusty come to live with your Uncle Arly and Lee's grandfather when your Daddy was just about your age. Because his Momma couldn't take proper care of her boys, so Pop Earnest stepped in to help them-"

Why had my Daddy lied to me?

"I was 18 when I married your uncle Arly-" Aunt June continued. "We moved right up the street from Pop. And Lee would come to visit us. He was a sweet boy, always running errands and helping Arly around the house-"

Aunt June held my hand, a small dead weight. "If there's anything else you want to

know about your Daddy, you know you can ask us, right?"

With true concern, she peered down at me, and her eyes reminded me of Daddy's, just so full of love.

My chest and throat ached with pent up emotion. I wanted to say, "I love you, Aunt June-" to say, "thank you for giving me a good home-" to ask why, at 16, my Daddy had left such a wonderful place and never spoke of his family again. But the words felt like an egg stuck in my throat. With silent hot tears, I tried to hatch those words, to break the egg, but the words would not come out.

Chapter Four

I met my Great Grandfather Earnest for the first time at Arly Junior's seventh birthday party, as kids crammed our two wooden picnic tables outside, drinking punch and eating cake off plastic plates. It was the end of June, and a perfect blue sky canopied our party. Pop Earnest was a hulk of a man, just like Uncle Arly. At 70, Pop's gray hair was still flecked with some black. He was a master carpenter: a Silver Duron measuring tape always secured at his hip. He smelled of fresh paint, the way my Daddy used to smell. And that familiar scent alone was enough to conquer my initial apprehensions about the William's family.

"So, Lee had a daughter-" Pop announced. His voice was surprisingly soft for so large a man. "What's your name, honey?"

"Tabitha-" I said.

"A pretty name for a pretty little girl-" He smiled and revealed a mouthful of strong, butter-yellow teeth. But he had no cavities like Daddy. I checked.

"Welcome to the family-" Pop shook my hand. Momentarily it disappeared in his, and he gave me a reassuring squeeze.

When it came time to pick teams for horseshoes that afternoon, Pop picked me. I had never pitched horseshoes before. But secretly I was thrilled that Pop chose me above all his other great grandchildren. He spent the next hour teaching me how to pitch, molding my fingers around the heavy metal horseshoe, aiming for me, then letting me release and shoot. Together we watched the horseshoes fly. By the hour's end, I had made my first ringer. I actually jumped up and down with excitement.

"That's my girl-" he whispered in my ear, again something my Daddy used to say, and honestly I felt like I was home. After that, my ten year old self gravitated towards Pop, like a smaller planet circling the sun.

Pop visited Uncle Arly's frequently. He bought my first scooter, a bright pink one with matching pink tassels on the handlebars. And he let me help him build things, too, a rabbit coop and a new hen house out back. I'd hand him his nails and tools when he asked me, with all the seriousness of a surgeon's assistant.

All Summer long Pop had been promising to take me fishing, and on the last Sunday of August, he came for me with two fishing rods in hand. I was elated, jabbered excitedly all the way to Ocean City, Maryland with him in his red Chevrolet truck. (The rest of the family had a church trip to Hershey park planned for that day. But I said I'd rather go with my Pop).

Once we arrived in Ocean City, we paraded up and down the wooden boardwalk. Pop bought me a box of warm candied popcorn sprinkled with glazed nuts, and he let me get a section of my hair bound up with colorful twine at a surfboard shop. It was the newest fad for kids. Then we rented a small boat, and we fished for hours out on the water. We ate baloney and cheese sandwiches and drank Gatorade from a cooler we'd packed. The ocean spray on our faces felt wonderful. We both got sunburned, and all the fish we caught were too small to keep, but we didn't give a hoot. We didn't get the boat back until after dark.

On the long drive home, Pop pulled the truck over into a dark empty lot.

"I'm tired-" he exhaled. "Need to take a little break-"

He tuned the radio to a country station, and then he stretched some. When he lowered his right hand it came down to rest halfway up my ten year old thigh. His thick fingers kneaded my tender, sunburned flesh.

"We're good friends now, ain't we, Tabitha?" Pop asked me.

I nodded my head. But I felt half sunk into my seat now, like it had turned suddenly to quicksand.

"Then how about a friendly little kiss for your old Pop, huh?"

I had never kissed anybody on the lips before. Not even Daddy, who would

kiss my cheek or forehead at bedtime, but never on the lips. I did not say no to Pop's unusual request, didn't know what to say. So Pop dipped his head and kissed my small mouth. His lips tasted salty, slightly fishy from the ocean spray. His thick tongue probed my lips apart and tasted of old saliva. I was sinking deeper into the quicksand now.

Pop's hand roamed beneath my peach colored Ocean City t-shirt. When he found my quarter-sized breasts, he pinched them and moaned into my mouth. Then I heard a zipper opening. Hastily, his large fingers tucked my smaller ones inside his pants. I felt a squishy bulge of flesh, started to pull away, but he gripped my hand tight, working it up and down, until the mysterious mound in his lap grew harder. His breath came in rasps. Like at horseshoes, he guided my fingers, kept stroking himself up and down, up and down. His other hand encircled my throat. Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes, as Pop kept increasing the pressure, cutting off my air. I closed my eyes and silently tried to summon Daddy's silverback gorillas, my elephant, or my hoot owl. As I was about to pass out, I heard a sudden sharp exhalation, and warm liquid exploded in my hand, dribbled down my fingers. Finally Pop released his grip on my neck, and I gulped air. He pulled a handkerchief (smelling faintly of paint thinner) from his back pocket, erased the tears from my face, swabbed the sticky mess from my hand, and then cleaned himself up. In the truck, the liquid smelled strange, like bleach or chemicals.

"We're special friends now, Tabitha-" Pop told me.

Through the fogged window I stared out at a blurry crescent of moon. My throat ached, my lungs burned, and my head throbbed.

"This is our little secret. Because if anybody ever found out what you just did, they'd take you straight from your new family and ship you off to a foster home. Do you understand?"

Numbly I nodded.

"You're mine now, Tabitha. You breathe because I let you. It only takes three pounds of pressure and three minutes to end a life, to choke a person to death, did you

know that?"

My heartbeat pounded like ocean waves in my ears.

"Do we understand one another?" When he drew his big face close to mine, his eyes gleamed with a darkness I had never seen. "Do we?" he hissed.

"Yes, sir-" I mumbled.

Pop clicked the truck into gear and soon we rejoined the flow of traffic, headed home, two very different people than we were before.

Chapter Five

When school started back up, I was relieved, because Pop didn't come around as much, usually only on Saturday or Sunday. In front of Aunt June and Uncle Arly, Pop still treated me kindly. He even insisted on buying my school supplies, clothes, and shoes. But out of my new family's sight, Pop acted very differently. He had an uncanny way of catching me by myself, usually in the changing shack out back shedding my wet bathing suit. He'd corral me into a corner, rub his big hand between my pipe cleaner legs, jamming his middle finger hard, working to penetrate me. "Slut-" he berated me, "-whore....you're just like Kelly...just fucking like her...-"

He only cursed when we were alone together. Otherwise his language was clean, befitting the status of head church deacon which he occupied for years.

On the walls, in the living room at Aunt June's house, I'd seen some framed photos of Kelly Williams from before she became a crackhead, when she still radiated cheerleader prettiness. Her glossy red lips, shining brown eyes, and long hair parted in the middle perfectly matched her hopeful young face. A far cry from the broken down, middle-aged woman I'd seen only once, out on Falls Road, selling her body at 7 in the morning to strangers in cars passing by. Daddy and I were on our way to Dunkin Donuts. He pointed Kelly out to me. "Look. Over there. That's your grandmother-" he whispered, like he was pointing out some exotic creature at the zoo. Nearly toothless at 52, Kelly Williams still wore blue jeans which bagged around her bony rear end. Her frizzy hair was pulled back into a plastic banana comb. Small scabs spackled her face. I did not ask, nor did Daddy offer to let me go say hello to her. We just walked on by.

Now I was attending the same red brick middle school as Kelly had 40 years earlier. Sometimes roaming the hallways with their rows of graffitied lockers, I'd try to imagine which one may have been hers. My eyes would well up with tears thinking about her.

Did Pop do the same things to his own daughter that he was doing to me now? What wicked things did he do to my Daddy to make him flee his own home? Was I the new Kelly? The thought terrified me.

But because Pop threatened to saw off my head and arms and legs and hide the pieces all over the woods so nobody would ever find me, I did not tell a soul about our little secret.

Somehow I managed to do my drills, classwork, and homework every day. Though routinely I would rub a gum pencil eraser up and down my arms until the skin peeled off, carving painful marks that turned after days into deep brown scabs. (I'd hide the wounds with long sleeves).

And I began to steal compulsively. Mostly stuff from the desks of the stuck up girls in my class: barrettes studded with rhinestones, Avon pins shaped like cats or pumpkins full of creamed perfume, and tubes of lip-gloss which tasted like watermelon or Dr Pepper, their stupid treasures. I never even used any of it, just collected it in a drawer at home.

Relentlessly the world turned, and I turned with it.

Chapter Six

Mid-autumn, Pop asked Uncle Arly if I could spend the night with him and his new wife, Nana we called her. Nana was nearly six feet tall and sturdily built as Pop. She liked to bake pies from scratch in her frilly apron and garden in long plastic gloves.

I was too afraid of Pop to protest. So I took small comfort that Nana would be there with me. When we got to their home, as pretty as a dollhouse, Nana showed me to my own lovely bedroom. It was wallpapered in tiny violets. The wood floor glowed and smelled like Lemon Pledge. My bed was neatly made with a patchwork quilt.

I helped Nana in her garden. Then we made chicken pot pies for dinner. Afterward, we watched "Jersey Princess". Nana popped popcorn and we melted butter to pour over it. We sat together on the sofa, and Pop sat in his reclining chair drinking can after can of his Busch beer.

When it came time for my bath, I asked Nana to stay in the bathroom with me. She poured some bubbles into my bath water and then sat on the closed toilet lid reading the Walmart circular as I bathed.

At nine o'clock I said goodnight to Pop, and Nana tucked me in. "Sweet dreams, Tabby-" she hushed.

Some relief started to set in that maybe I escaped Pop's attention this time. But that relief drained quickly away about ten minutes later when I heard my doorknob twisting softly, slowly open, and Pop stepped into my room. He smelled strongly of Busch beer. He had a grape soda for me. A bedtime treat, he said.

But the soda tasted funny, tinged with a familiar odor I instantly recognized as Popov vodka. So I took smaller and smaller sips, beginning to feel light-headed already.

"Drink it all down-" Pop commanded softly. "I'm not leaving until you do-"

So I did. Then Pop snapped off my lamp, and he left. He left!

Soon I fell into the deepest sleep of my life. When my eyes flickered open some time later, I felt a searing pain, splitting my naked buttocks. I was face down, and Pop was riding on top of me. My eyes rolled in my head like Daddy's did when he got stabbed. Pop had a belt leashed around my throat, and if I whimpered too loudly, he pulled it tighter. Mercifully I passed out. When I woke much later, Pop was gone, and I was redressed, back in my Little Mermaid pajamas. I curled up into a ball and wept into my lace-trimmed pillow. I could only remember random seconds of Pop's attack. The rest of the horrible memories I locked into a mental box, just like Pandora's, and I shut the lid down tight. (I discovered Pandora in our school library, where I always went to escape the snobby girls at lunchtime). My physical pain I imagined was a small impish creature I could keep safely sealed inside. But the demeaning words, the death threats, and the soul robbing secrecy I imagined was a much larger monster, dragon-sized, which I did not know how much longer I could contain.

My sixth grade English teacher, Miss Simms, was an ex-nun with a plain unmade face. But she was clever, even witty at times. “Who can tell me the meaning of the word slattern?” she asked us.

A boy raised his hand. “A wanton female-“ he responded. “A slut-“

“That’s right-“ she said. “Now who can tell me the word which is the male equivalent of the word slattern?”

Nobody knew. Some kids snickered, some giggled nervously.

“Oh my-“ she revealed with a tart expression, like she’d just bitten into something distasteful. “That’s right. There isn’t any such word-“ Then she laughed a high-pitched bitter laugh, like Heathcliff’s crazy wife locked up in the attic. (Jane Eyre was my newest library discovery). From that moment on, I really liked Miss Simm’s.

Days later, I walked by her empty classroom and saw her purse sitting unattended on her desk. My body tingled with that familiar adrenalin, and a low soft roar filled my head. It didn’t matter that she was actually my favorite teacher. Like a wind-up toy soldier, I snatched her purse anyway, stuffed it into my bookbag, then bolted out of the room.

I ducked into a bathroom and hid there until the hall thronged with students heading home.

On the school bus, I worried a principal or a teacher might board and start searching student’s bookbags. I bit my fingernails to the quick. The minutes ticked by, until our bus driver, a stout Mexican we called Mister Hector, climbed on board and put the bus into gear. Staring at the diminishing school through the bus window, I felt heady with triumph.

At home, I went straight to my bedroom and locked the door. I had so many nightmares

now, Aunt June sat me down and we had a “talk”. She asked me what my bad dreams were about. I lied and told her I was afraid of burglars breaking into my room. So Uncle Arly fastened a metal latch on the inside of my door and gifted me with a key. To keep the burglars out, he said. I loved Aunt June and Uncle Arly now. I never wanted to leave them.

I arranged Miss Simm’s things out on my bed. The contents of her purse included a pair of glasses in a case, a bottle of hand sanitizer, a half eaten roll of Life Savors, a spotty apple, some Christian tracts rubber banded together, a pack of Kleenex, some odd pens and pencils, a collection of keys on a Jesus fish keyring, and a wallet with some cash and a few credit cards. I cut up the credit cards and pocketed the cash, 72 dollars.

Tonight was Mall Night. At Walmart, I picked out four Beanie Babies, I intended to clip onto my bookbag. I selected two gorillas, one owl, and an elephant. Sadly I realized now they could not protect me in real life. But in the sleep world they were still very powerful creatures. In my dreams, if Pop came for me, I called on my animal protectors, just as Daddy had taught me. And without fail, they would come flying through the forest to find me, and they’d claw Pop to pieces, tear his limbs off, and eat his face away.

“Ain’t they darling?” Aunt June complimented me on my choice of Beanie Babies. She didn’t question my having the money since Pop was always sliding me a 10 or 20 dollar bill.

That night, standing by my open window in my locked bedroom, I smoked my first cigarette, one of Miss Simm’s Parliament 100’s. At ten years old, I didn’t know why I wanted to smoke. Maybe it was because I’d seen Daddy soothe his nerves with a smoke so many times. That first calming rush of nicotine was exhilarating. I hadn’t seen Pop all week. But tomorrow was Sunday, and I knew my tormentor was coming for me.

Aunt June and Uncle Arly had a hayride planned for us. About 30 neighborhood kids were invited. It started at nine o'clock. And miraculously Pop couldn't come because he had a six AM job hanging sheet rock. I felt like a million ton burden had been lifted from my back. The nights were getting cooler and crisper as Winter approached. The air smelled like fresh hay and burning wood; Uncle Arly had a bonfire going. And free of Pop, I actually ran around, frolicking with my cousins for once, instead of hiding in my locked bedroom.

After the hayride, we all drank hot cocoa and roasted hotdogs and marshmallows.

Aunt June helped me whittle my stick down and turn the puffy marshmallows at the fringe of the licking flames. I loved the burnt gooey candy so much that Aunt June let me roast some left-over marshmallows on a fork the next day over our kitchen stove.

"Honey, do you know what tomorrow is?" She asked me in a gentle voice.

"Monday-" I responded. Some sticky marshmallow clung to my lips.

"It's court day, remember?"

With a blank expression, I just stared at her.

"Tomorrow's your Daddy's trial. We're gonna drive you to Baltimore so you can testify-"

Suddenly I felt like I might choke.

"Just tell the truth and everything will be okay-" Aunt June hugged my stiff body to her pillowy frame. She smelled like the Jean Nate body powder Arly Junior bought for her every Mother's Day.

And with all my heart and soul I truly wanted to believe her.

Chapter Nine

In court the next day, the Judge presided over a mostly empty court room. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the two boys who stabbed my Daddy. They wore ties and long sleeved dress shirts which hid most of their tattoos. But even a ten year old could see straight through their disguises to their thug souls. I prayed the Judge would throw them in jail for the rest of their lives for what they did to my Daddy. But the boys claimed that Daddy struck the first blow, wielding a poolstick after he lost all his money to them at the pool table. My throat felt tight, as I watched their friends who were at Frazier's that night, get up on the stand and lie baldly for them. Perspiration dampened the underarms of my dress.

I was the star witness, the only one who had actually seen the boy stab my father. But my throat kept getting drier and drier the closer it came for me to take the stand.

"Tabitha Williams-" the prosecuting attorney, a skirted lady, finally called my name. Aunt June nudged me forward, palming my keyring full of beanie babies into my shaking hands.

I do not remember walking up to the stand or putting my hand on the Bible and being sworn in. My throat felt like it was full of dried up corn husks.

"Is Lee Williams your father?" the prosecuting attorney started.

I tried to speak, but no sound would come out. Tears slid down my cheeks, and my lips trembled. I squeezed my Beanie Babies.

The prosecuting attorney repeated her question.

Still I could not speak.

"Tabitha, please nod your head if Lee Williams is your father-" Thank God our lady lawyer was a quick thinker.

Vigorously I nodded my head.

“Objection-“ the defense attorney jack knifed to his feet. “Let the witness answer the question-“

The judge stared over at me, waiting. Everybody stared.

But it was as if an evil witch had cast a spell rendering me mute.

“Clearly the child’s been traumatized-“ our attorney defended me. “Let her indicate by her actions her answers to my questions please, Judge-“

The stenographer stopped her typing to hear the judge’s decision. Finally after some long moments of deliberation, he agreed.

“Thank you, your Honor-“ our attorney exhaled a sigh of relief. “We understand you’re frightened, Tabitha. But let’s continue, okay?”

I nodded my head.

“On the night your father was stabbed, did he lose any money playing pool with the two boys here on trial today?”

Vehemently I shook my head no.

“Did he win these boys’ money?”

I nodded.

“Did your father at any time pick up a pool stick and threaten either one of these boys?”

Again I shook my head emphatically no.

“Can you please point out to me the boy who stabbed your father?”

I pointed straight to the boy with the ice-colored eyes. I kept my finger aimed at his white balloon of a face.

“Thank you, Tabitha-“

Next it was the defense attorney’s chance to question me. He had the warty

complexion of a bullfrog. He marched up into my face. His breath smelled like tuna fish with pickles and onions. "If your Daddy was in trouble, Tabitha, would you lie for him to help him?"

I sensed it was a trick question. I felt panicky with indecision. Yes or No? I squeezed my Beanie Babies harder.

"Would you LIE for your Daddy?" He would not let up. "If he were in trouble, would you tell a fib to help him out?"

"Objection-" my lady lawyer sprang to her feet. "Badgering the witness-"

Quite honestly I believed I would lie for my Daddy if he was in trouble. And I was under oath. Yes or no? I didn't know which answer would best help my Daddy's case. I shot a pleading look over to my lawyer.

"Please answer the question, Tabitha-" the Judge rubbed his glasses.

I searched my lawyer's face. But all I saw was a blank mask. Then I recalled what Aunt June had advised: just tell the truth and everything will be okay. Tears sopped my face, as I nodded up and down, telling the truth. Yes, I would lie to help my Daddy.

Abruptly the defense attorney thanked me. He seemed very pleased with himself and my response. My own attorney huffed with exasperation, and I knew then that I had answered incorrectly.

"You may leave the witness stand-" the bullfrog lawyer released me.

On wobbly legs, I rose and somehow made it back to my seat and into Aunt June's soft waiting arms. "Great job, Tabitha-" she assured me. But deep down in my heart, I knew I had screwed everything up.

After six hours, the jury returned.

"On the count of murder one, we find the defendantsnot guilty-"

There were gasps of disbelief from our side.

"On the count of murder two, we find the defendants...guilty-"

Aunt June squeezed my small cold hand. "Thank you, Jesus-" she exclaimed.

But the boys got just ten years in prison each. Apparently all their phony witnesses and lies had made some impact on the jury. And I'm sure my clamming up and then admitting that I would lie to help my father didn't help matters. Grinning, the two boys shook hands with their lawyer.

"For good behavior, those two murderers will be out in just eight years-" Uncle Arly actually spat on the ground outside the courthouse.

I held tight to my Aunt June's ample middle. "It's not your fault, Tabitha-" she consoled me.

But I knew it was. I should have made Daddy leave Frazier's that awful night. I should have answered the defense attorney's questions another way. Pop hurt me because I deserved it. That day I dumped my own stupid, dirty soul into my Pandora's box, too, and I would not see it differently for a very long time.

For the next three years, Pop raped me whenever he got the chance. I learned to deal with the pain by cutting my stomach, arms, and legs with a box-cutter I stole from Uncle Arly's toolbox. Or I burned myself with a cigarette, neat little circles of pink scars that lasted for weeks on my inner thighs and the undersides of my breasts.

I shop-lifted habitually.

At school, there was this boy, a 14 year old black kid named Ravon, who sold candy and packs of cigarettes (or loosies) out of his duffle-bag. We worked out a deal. I'd steal music CDs for him, and he'd pay me in packs of smokes. I smoked a pack of Newports a day now.

One Friday after school, Ravon hit me with a powdery snow-ball. It broke apart, and a pack of Newports tumbled out. "Hey thanks, Ravon--"

"That packs on me, sexy. Just cause you're so fine--"

I laughed at him. After two years of wearing braces (which Aunt June and Uncle Arly paid off in installments for me), I now had a perfect smile. Dolly ironed my hair for me (no more kinky curls), and she taught me how to apply make-up, too. Somehow the guys in my class started calling me a "fox", leaving me love notes and candy on my desk. But their messy hair, oily skin, drooping jeans, and nervous finger popping ways did not appeal to me in the least. Some older boys, juniors and seniors, asked me out, too. But I put them off with excuses that Uncle Arly and Aunt June wouldn't allow me to date until I turned 16.

"You ever try weed, Tabitha?" Ravon sidled over to me.

Truthfully I was still scared of drugs because of what happened to my mother and grandmother so many years ago. But another part of me yearned for a better high than cigarettes.

"Why don't you come over to my Dad's place, and you can try it with us?" With his cat green eyes and iced coffee complexion, Ravon was a handsome, honey-

voiced boy.

“I don’t know-“

“Come on. It’ll be fun. We can all get stoned-“

At first I just laughed Ravon off.

“My Dad’s real cool. He was a football star in college. He’s chill-“

“When?” Was that me talking? My response was like some tiny creature slithering out of the cracks of my Pandora’s box.

“How about right now?”

And like a moth to a flame, stupidly, I followed him.

Chapter Eleven

Ravon's father's house sat on a corner all by itself, surrounded by a privacy fence. The house was freshly painted, a crisp mint green. The backyard was meticulously trimmed.

Ravon paused outside. "You ready?"

I felt a little nervous, but I didn't want to back down. "Yes-" I said.

Inside was like a show house. The sofa and chairs were gleaming black leather. There were several black lacquer coffee tables and a well stocked bar. On the wall hung velvet paintings of Al Pacino in Scarface and The Godfather. Brass candelabra winked in the sunlight pouring through a white lace curtained window. The house smelled of fresh fruit and a man's woody cologne. The carpet was so thick, your feet sunk into it, as soon as you walked in the door.

"Hey, Dad?" Ravon called out.

Shortly, a 46 year old black man strode into the room. He resembled Ravon, except he had a thicker, more muscular build. He stopped and looked curiously at us. The skin on his face was still baby smooth.

"Dad, this is Tabitha-"

"Well ain't you a peach, Boo-" Ravon's father shook my hand and stared down at me, smiling hugely. "I'm Declan-"

"Nice to meet you-" I said. His green eyes were like chips of jade, but his open smile softened that tough guy impression.

"What you up to, boy?"

"Tabitha wants to try some weed-"

I nearly passed out. I thought we might work up to that subject. But Declan did not

seem surprised that a 13 year old girl was asking him for marijuana.

“That true, Tabitha?” he asked me.

“Yes, sir-“ I muttered. “I guess-“

“Well who am I to keep a lady waiting?” he sauntered over to the bar, pulled open some drawers, and found the weed, already rolled into a thick blunt. He fired it up. A pungent, grassy odor filled the room. Dragons of smoke curled upward from his full sucking lips. Ravon hit next. Then it was my turn. I held it, but wavered.

“It’s just like a big cigarette, Boo-“ Declan said.

So I took a huge hit, then coughed violently. Father and son exploded with laughter.

“Easy. Easy-“ Declan said.

We passed the blunt around again, then I tipped backward on the sofa.

“Whoa. Whoa. No more for little mamasita-“ Again father and son cracked up.

Declan put in a movie, a comedy. I don’t remember a thing about it. I floated on a heavenly cloud for almost two hours. My head hung limply. I was nearly comatose with pleasure. Ravon and Declan chattered, eating snacks of cheese and salami on crackers. They ate mini eclairs and raspberry popsicles. I refused any food, except for the popsicle which tasted heavenly, refreshing my parched mouth. When my limbs started to work again, I tried to get up, but fell right back down.

More laughter.

“Well did you like it, Boo?” Declan asked me, sucking at his second frozen treat.

“Outstanding-“ I replied, which made all three of us convulse again.

“Bring her back tomorrow-“ Declan rubbed the back of his boy’s head with affection. “See you tomorrow, Tabitha-“

I did not even bother to protest. Because we all knew that I was hooked.

Chapter Twelve

Kids with money were always coming to Declan's house. Respectfully, they sat. If they smoked, they used an ashtray; if they drank, they used a coaster. Everybody paid cash for their weed or pills (Vicodin, Percocets, and Oxycontin). But there was no heroin or cocaine here which bolstered my belief that I was not doing what my mother or grandmother had done. I offered to pay, too, but Declan would not take my money. "You on the house, Boo-" he'd tell me, then smile and wink.

A few weeks later, I felt comfortable enough to walk to Declan's without Ravon. I rapped at the door, and Declan answered wearing a lush bathrobe. Inside he palmed me a wine cooler which I sipped.

Then finally he said, "What you want, Boo?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"You want to try something new?"

I nodded. I liked the pot, but that initial high never replicated itself. I wanted something better.

"You sure about that?"

"Yes, please-"

He smiled at my good manners. Then he reached into his pocket for a small clear baggie. Inside was a round pill, divided into four perforated pieces.

"What's that?" I asked.

"A Xanax pie-" he replied. "You ever had a slice?"

"What is it?"

"Anxiety pill. You want to try it?"

My anxiety level was through the roof lately. I chain-smoked. I cut. I burned. But nothing seemed to bring me relief anymore.

Declan broke the pill in half, then walked over with it on his salmon-colored palm.

I started to take it with my fingers, but his large hand closed up around it, like a Venus fly trap. "Lick it off my hand-"

I did as I was told. I knew there would be a price to pay.

Half an hour later, when I was feeling like the world was all butterflies and rainbows, he escorted me up to the master bedroom. He had a king-sized water-bed. He had a dresser full of brand new lingerie with the tags still on. "Pick something-"he invited me.

Self consciously I thumbed through the velvet and the satin, the thongs and g-strings. I found a white cotton tank top with matching boy short panties. Declan grinned, seemed to approve of my modest choice. He gestured for me to go change in the bathroom. Riding my magic carpet, I glided inside. My 13 year old brain felt fuzzy though, like I was walking under water. I tugged off my school clothes and put the skimpy white outfit on. Briefly I caught a glimpse of my glassy-eyed reflection in the mirror. In a moment of clarity, I considered opening up the bathroom window, jumping down, and sprinting away. But I did not. I chose to walk back to him.

Chapter Thirteen

After that visit to his bedroom, Declan gave me whatever I wanted. I stuck to Xanax washed down with wine coolers. I tried Vicodan and Percocets, too. I steered clear of the Oxycontin which Declan warned was way too strong for me. I explained my absences to Aunt June with a lie. I told her I had joined the Debate club at school, and we traveled around to other schools. Since I was still an A student, she believed me.

One afternoon while watching music videos on his mammoth TV and chilling with Declan on his sofa, I felt some warm liquid drip out of me and saturate my panties. I was confused, since we hadn't even had sex yet. So I jumped up, not wanting to soil Declan's sofa and hurried to the bathroom. In my underpants I found a splotch of blood. I just stared down at it. I wiped myself with some toilet paper and there was even more blood flowing out of me. I called for Declan. When he arrived, I was nearly in tears. "Something's wrong with me-" I told him.

"Nothing wrong-" he responded. "You just on the rag, Boo-"

"What?" I said.

Declan fished around in a counter under the sink and handed me a box of tampons. Stupidly, I just held the box, not comprehending. So patiently he explained to me that I had reached my womanhood. This strange occurrence was called my period. Now I could have babies. But not to worry since he was fixed; he'd had a vasectomy years ago. Then he left. Alone I read and followed the directions on the box. Tears sopped my face. At this moment, I missed my mother more than ever. It should be her here with me. Her comforting and congratulating me. Why hadn't Dolly or Aunt June discussed this with me? Maybe they were too embarrassed, maybe they thought I already knew. I was scheduled to take Sex Education at school in just a few weeks. Maybe Aunt June thought that would be the best way for me to learn. Still, I felt short-changed, forlorn, and weepy hormonal for days.

But I also felt powerful, that I had control over a grown man. Declan treated me like his princess. I got whatever I wanted: cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, clothes, jewelry, shoes. After a month together he professed his love for me, and I professed my love back. Sometimes he massaged my feet with fragrant oil, then washed and toweled them dry. He would kiss and suck my toes, staring up at me with adoration in his vivid green eyes.

But on the days Pop assaulted me, I would not let Declan touch me. Declan would fuss and whimper like a hungry baby. "Why you acting like this, Boo? I want my sweet Tabitha back. Where did she go?"

One afternoon I broke down. I had been drinking Grey Goose and pineapple juice for hours and taking Xanax on top of it. I blubbered out the whole awful story about Pop. Sitting on the sofa across from me, Declan grew very still, like that statue of The Thinker I saw once at the Baltimore Museum of Art on a school trip. It was as if his face were now cut out of stone. "What's his name, Boo?" he asked softly.

"Earnest Williams-" I answered just as softly back.

"Where he live at?"

"2246 Webber Road-"

"You want this taken care of then?"

I wasn't sure what he meant. I was hoping he would threaten Pop, warn him that if he ever hurt me again, bad things would happen. Let Pop live in fear for once.

Declan grasped the sides of my face. His own cinnamon-colored face was shiny with wet tracks. "Do. You. Want. This. Taken. Care. Of?" Carefully he enunciated each word.

"Yes-" I replied. "Yes. Yes. Yes-"

"Then it is done-"

Chapter Fourteen

Two days later, while shopping at Home Depot, Pop was gunned down. He was not robbed. And the police had no suspects. When Aunt June told me Pop was killed, my heart leaped in my chest. I actually dropped to my knees on the kitchen floor. Aunt June kneeled with me. "I got you. I got you. I got you-" She thought I was devastated by the loss of my beloved Pop. But honestly I was just so relieved. That man would never hurt or humiliate me again. Another part of me was terrified at what my words to Declan had accomplished. Either way, I loved Declan now with all my heart.

Declan and I never spoke about the murder. But after Pop's funeral, which I attended, not wanting to offend my family, Declan lead me down to his club basement to show me something. He had a safe full of guns down there: 22's, 38's, 357's, and Glock 40's. He was now my protector, my hero.

I decided never to tell Aunt June or Uncle Arly about the real Pop. They were already devastated by his murder. I didn't want them to suffer anymore. I stopped cutting and burning myself. I started to feel some small hope that my life might amount to something.

At school, I remained on the Honor Roll, even skipping a grade. And I continued to date Declan. I never used drugs at school, only after. So long as I remained in control I would not turn out like my mother or grandmother. Declan took me to concerts. He took me to Hershey Park, Kings Dominion, and Water World. Everyday we ordered carry-out food from nice restaurants and ate together. But slowly, over time, I sensed that something between us was changing. Three years into our relationship, we were becoming more like friends than lovers. His desire for me began to wane. It'd been months since he accompanied me upstairs.

"What did I do wrong?" I begged to know.

"It ain't you, Tabitha-" Declan tried to explain to me. "It's my fault-"

Broken hearted and with my sixteen year old, now hundred and twenty pound, body curled up on his sofa one afternoon, I finally realized the truth, when a 12 year old girl named Champagne knocked softly at the door. Immediately Declan jumped to let her in. She was a rail thin beauty with caramel colored skin and amazing hazel colored eyes. Her long soft hair was crimped into waves which reached all the way down her fragile back. She hung shyly behind Declan who pulled her forward to meet me.

“This here Champagne-“ he introduced her. He held her small hand.

And I knew then that he was done with me. I had grown too old for his tastes. He liked little girls, not nearly full grown women.

“Champagne, go upstairs and wait for me-“

The young girl did as she was told, leaving us alone.

“I don’t want you to come by here no more, Tabitha-“ Declan said to me in his softest voice.

“Please, Declan-“

He stuffed a wad of hundred dollar bills into my hand, then grasped my arm, and pushed me out. “Goodbye-“ he said. And just like that he shut the door in my face, and it was over between us.

Chapter Fifteen

Over the next few days, I stayed in my bed. Aunt June came in with food numerous times. For her sake, I picked at it.

“What’s the matter, Tabitha? You know you can talk to me-“

A sob caught in my throat.

“Boy troubles?”

I nodded my head. Although it was more like grown man troubles.

“Are you pregnant?” my aunt asked me gently.

My head snapped up. “No, Aunt June. No way-“ In three years I had never missed a period.

“Well whoever this boy is, if he’s making you feel this bad, he doesn’t deserve you-“

“Thanks, Aunt June-“ She had a knack of knowing just what to say to make me feel better.

“I want you to go back to school. Don’t wreck your future over some stupid boy, do you hear me?”

“Yes, Aunt June-“

The next day I went back. Word had gotten around that I was no longer Declan’s girl, and all the boys were chasing me.

But I didn’t need them. A girl in my tenth grade class showed me how to crush my Percocets and snort them up my nose for a quicker and more powerful high.

Halfway through the eleventh grade I ran out of Declan’s money, so I got a job at a seafood restaurant called Joe’s Place. Everybody came for the delicious shrimp salad and jumbo crabcakes. Aunt June and Uncle Arly were regulars. Joe, the owner, was 42 years old.

He wore dockside loafers without socks and always looked like he just stepped off a sailboat. After interviewing me, he hired me on the spot, as a busser. But the work was so boring, just clearing people's dirty dishes and resetting tables, that I sometimes sneaked into one of the walk-in coolers, cracked open a Bacardi Breezer and guzzled it. One day Joe caught me. He just grinned and shut the door behind him. "Tabitha. Tabitha. Tabitha-" he said. "It's always the quiet ones you got to watch out for-"

Somehow I knew that I was not in trouble.

"You got a boyfriend, Tabitha?"

"No, sir-"

"Call me, Joe. I'm not ancient, you know-"

"Okay, Joe-"

He sauntered closer to me, snaked his tanned arm around my waist. His other hand slid through my hair. "Do you like to kiss, Tabitha?"

"Not really-" I answered truthfully.

"That's a shame. Because you have such beautiful lips-"

When he started kissing my neck, I did not stop him. So he reached for my breast and squeezed firmly. When again I did not stop him, he slid his hand down the front of my pants. His excitement grew more frenzied when I moaned faintly, like I'd seen the porn stars do in the movies Declan showed me. Panting, Joe wrenched my pants down, leaned me over a beer keg, and fucked me quickly.

When he was done, he asked, "Have you ever done any accounting?"

The next day I graduated to assistant floor supervisor.

If I worked late, Joe drove me home. Riding in his convertible, I felt like a grown up living the high life in a luxury car commercial. Frequently we'd have sex in the backseat because Joe was married. His wife Joanne was a pear shaped 40 year old with an

expensive haircut, frosted to make her look younger. But her veiny hands were constantly raw with dried-up hashes of blood from shucking oysters. She watched me like a hawk, sensing there was something going on between me and her husband.

Joe bought me a single real pearl on a gold chain, and I wore it every day under my work t-shirt. He told me that for every year we were together he would add a new pearl for me until the chain was full. He insisted he would soon divorce Joanne, and I believed him. I couldn't wait to graduate so we could be married and start a family. I wanted nothing more than a husband and a baby to love.

"But we can't let anybody know about us until you turn 18-" Joe insisted.

So dutifully I kept my mouth shut.

When I missed a period, I didn't tell Joe, until I had missed the second one. We were parked outside a fast food restaurant we had just eaten at. "How could you be so stupid, Tabitha?-" he exploded. "I thought you were on the pill or something-"

"I never said that-" My chin wobbled and some tears unfurled down my cheeks. The greasy food in my stomach churned.

"I'll pay for an abortion-"

"But why?" was my pathetic whine of a response. "You told me you loved me-"

"After you turn 18, we'll try for another baby, okay?"

I did not want another baby. I wanted the one growing in my belly right now. I had already picked out some cute onsies, baby blankets, and toys.

"Do you know what my bitch of a wife would do to me if she found out about us and this baby? She'd take me to the cleaners! And on top of that, she'd put me in jail for statutory rape! How can you be so selfish?!" Joe grabbed a handful of my hair and wrenched my head back. "You WILL NOT ruin my life-" He jerked my head harder, for emphasis. And I saw stars.

A doctor friend of Joe's performed the abortion at his suburban office. The place smelled like new carpet and rubbing alcohol. Joe perused a Sport's Illustrated in the waiting room the whole time the vacuum tube was sucking out our baby. Wearing a paper gown, I squeezed my hands so tightly into fists that my fingernails dug bloody crescents into my palms. My mother had left me, an accidental overdose. And a part of me really hated her for that. Yet here I was murdering my own child. I was worse than Pamela Sue Miller by far. At least my mother had let me live.

Afterward my stomach cramped horribly. Joe drove me home. I limped upstairs and crawled into bed. I did not tell anybody about the procedure. I tried to call Joe numerous times, but each time my call went straight to voicemail.

On the fourth of July, one of Joe's busiest days, I showed up for work and was greeted by Joanne's livid face. "Get the hell out of here, you slut-" she bellowed. "You're fired!"

I glanced over at Joe who was busy bartending. But he just looked right through me, like I was invisible. When he and his wife exchanged glances of solidarity, I knew that Joe had tricked me into having the abortion. He never intended to leave his wife at all.

"He's the slattern-" I declared.

But I just got blank stares and snickers from Joanne and the regulars.

"Look it up, assholes-" I said.

I could have made a bigger scene. But I was so disheartened at the loss of our baby and now by Joe dumping me that I simply didn't care. I strode out yet another door I would never again enter.

At 17 years old, heartbroken and alone, I overdosed on 20 Xanax tablets. Aunt June found me collapsed on my bedroom floor with foam frothing from my mouth.

“Wake up, Tabitha!” she shrieked. “You wake up right now!” She patted my cheeks hard. Then she rolled me onto my side to let the foam dribble out.

I waited to see my Daddy, to see his face when I passed over. Just a glimpse of my Momma, too. That’s all I wanted.

Instead I woke in a hospital room with a foot long plastic tube snaked down my throat. Aunt June held my limp hand. “This too shall pass-“She crooned to me. “This too shall pass-“

When the tube was removed some time later, I said, “I want to visit my mom’s grave-“

“She’s cremated, Tabitha. And her people have the ashes. Last I heard they moved to California-“

“Then I want to see my grandmother-“ I insisted. “I need to speak to Kelly Williams-“

Aunt June did not ask me why I tried to take my own life or even why I wanted to see my grandmother so badly. And for that I was grateful.

A week later, Aunt June drove me to Baltimore, to search for my grandmother. Gnawing a piece of gum, she pointed out various places she recognized on our trip. This was the house she grew up in, this was the movie theater where she had her first date with Uncle Arly, this was the little church they got married in. I was happy for the distraction her conversation provided. At around noon, we arrived in Hampden.

Although a humid July heat waffled up from the sidewalks, the Avenue was thronged with shoppers searching for antiques or vintage clothes or a nice brunch. I smelled cinnamon French toast wafting from the doors of the Café Hon where a seven

feet tall statue of Elvis greeted diners. Aunt June shuffled beside me, trying to keep up as I marched toward Falls Road, the local hooker hang-out. There was a sun-bleached laundromat where I'd seen my grandmother last. Outside there were a few junkies milling about, panhandling. Their heat glazed faces were sunburned. I was too afraid to speak up, but Aunt June wasted no time in pulling a five dollar bill from her purse and braying, "Anybody seen Kelly Williams around here?"

A guy with a scrappy tangerine colored beard and wild hair plucked the cash from Aunt June's hand and mumbled through his missing front teeth, "Naw, ain't seen Kelly around. Maybe somebody in the Laundrymat might know--"

"Thank you so much--" Aunt June pulled me into the Laundromat where clothes rotated in washers, mirroring my twisting insides. Some ancient fans on poles puffed futilely.

From behind a counter, an Asian man greeted us. "You need quarter?" he asked. Pops of sweat beaded his forehead.

"No, sir--" Aunt June said. "We're looking for somebody. Kelly Williams is her name. She's 58 years old, and somebody outside told us she used to hang in here--"

"Had to kick her out--" the Asian man informed us dispassionately. He pointed to a sign posted clearly up on a wall which read NO SOLICITING.

"Right--" Aunt June said. "Well would you happen to know where she hangs out now?"

"How would I know?" he shrugged us off and went back to sleeving quarters into paper rolls.

"She's my grandmother--" I piped up, surprised by the sound of my own voice. "And she's sick. It's very important that we find her--" I must have spoken with some urgency because he stopped what he was doing and stared over his black framed glasses at me.

"Try the Ice House--" he advised us.

“What’s the Ice House?” Aunt June asked.

“Griffith’s Tavern on Hickory Avenue. Somebody in there might know her-“

“Thank you-“ Aunt June said and we hurried out.

As we pressed on, the sun scorched the top of our heads. Griffith’s Tavern was three blocks away. A beer and whiskey joint with a wooden clapboard exterior. Apparently the place used to sell blocks of ice long ago. Inside we found about a dozen bar stools. There was no TV. No jukebox. No pool table. No dartboard. Just a lit up Cherry Master and a Crazy Bugs slot machine along the back wall for entertainment. There was an array of jarred snacks along the back bar, soft-ball sized pickled onions and deep purple pickled eggs. Mercifully there was air-conditioning. It chilled our sweat drizzled faces and our damp backs. The regulars stared at us when we strolled in. The cement floor smelled like wet bread.

“Help you, ladies?” the barmaid, a waif of a woman with crinkled, chain-smoke-for-decades lips, did not smile at us.

“Yes ma’am-“ Aunt June replied. “We’re looking for Kelly Williams-“ Then she spoke up a little louder for the rest of the bar to hear. “Anybody know Kelly Williams?”

“Last I heard she moved to Dundalk-“ a man with a tobacco bulge in his cheek muttered without looking up from his Pabst Blue Ribbon.

“That’s right. Dundalk is what I heard, too-“ An old timer wearing a Korean War veteran cap chimed in.

“Do you know where at in Dundalk?”

Nobody knew.

“You ladies having drinks or what?” The bartender was running out of patience with us.

“Thank you kindly, but we got to go-“ Aunt June and I stepped out in the blazing sun again and I felt a little dizzy from the heat and the disappointment of not finding my grandmother. Truthfully I had no idea what I would say to her if I did manage

to locate her. I didn't know if I had the guts to ask her about Pop. But she was a piece of my father, an integral piece in the puzzle that was my real family. And whether she wanted to be found or not, I now wanted my father's mother in my life. I never had a mother; but there was still a chance to have a relationship with my grandmother.

Streaming sweat, Aunt June and I trekked back to the Avenue.

"Maybe we should put up some Missing Person signs?" I suggested.

"We don't have a recent picture of Kelly--"

"Why did she leave Pop's?" I ventured. I did not believe that Aunt June knew anything about Pop's evil ways. I trusted her now. Maybe she could shed some light on the situation.

"According to your Uncle Arly, he heard all his life that his mother ran away from home at 15 to be with an older boyfriend, some kind of musician. But things didn't work out between them, so Kelly showed back up on Pop's doorstep eight months later, pregnant, drunk, and high. Miraculously her baby, your Uncle Arly, survived. But right after he was born, she took off again, leaving her son with Pop and his first wife. They raised Arly up from an infant. Then your Daddy and Rusty come, too, ten years later, when Kelly got turned onto crack--"

"Did Uncle Arly ever meet his mother?"

"She come home to see him once or twice for his birthday or Christmas when he was a little boy. But she was always messed up. She never come around to see Lee and Rusty--"

"Did my Daddy and Pop get along?"

"Why do you ask?" Aunt June was perplexed.

"I was just wondering why my Daddy left home at 16 years old--" Finally I felt close enough to Aunt June to ask her the question I had been wanting to ask for 6 long years.

"Did somebody hurt him?"

"I know your Daddy started experimenting with drugs at that time--" she ventured.

“Maybe that caused some friction between him and Pop? Plus he met your momma, Pamela Sue, at around that time-“

“Did you ever meet my Momma?” I actually stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Some embedded glass winked brilliantly, reflecting sunlight.

“She was a pretty girl, just like you. I remember she really liked punk music when everybody else was listening to country or pop. She dyed her hair bright pink and pierced her eyebrow. Your father fell for her hard. She was four years older than him. I remember he started ripping up his bluejeans and wearing “The Clash” t-shirts to impress her-“

I was fascinated to learn these new facts about my mother.

“Yeah, Pamela Sue was kind of a trendsetter in our small town. She liked to rile things up. Wasn’t afraid of nobody. Didn’t care if people whispered about her or not. I really liked her-“

My eyes welled up. “I wish I could have met her, too-“ I lamented.

“I’m sorry she’s gone, Tabitha-“ Aunt June commiserated with me.

Using a Kleenex from her pocketbook, she dabbed my sweaty face and then her own. “Let’s get some lunch. I’m starving-“

“Okay-“

“Where to? Take your pick-“

And without skipping a beat, I said, “Frazier’s-“

Chapter Eighteen

“Are you sure you want to do this, Tabitha?” Aunt June lingered with me outside of the restaurant where my Daddy was killed.

“I still have nightmares about this place-” I divulged to her. “I need to confront my fears-“

She clasped my hand and we walked in. The AC blasted. And some pop music trilled from an overhead stereo system. The dining room was large and dim, with mostly empty tables. The carpet was no longer green. It was a bland gray now. (Vaguely I wondered if they changed it because of the blood stain left by my Daddy’s body 7 years ago).

An eager waitress approached us with menus. “You all want to eat?”

“Can we look around some first?” Aunt June asked.

“Sure. Then pick any table you want-“

“Thank you-“

We passed by the spot near the door where my Daddy’s body had lain. And I stopped cold. My hands trembled.

“Is this where it happened?” Aunt June asked.

I nodded. I said a silent prayer, telling my Daddy how much I loved him and that I hoped he was in a good place, free of all worries and pain.

Next we walked over to the pool table my Daddy had played on. I dragged my fingers across the nubby green felt.

Then for 20 minutes Aunt June and I explored. We checked out a claw machine full of stuffed toys, a jukebox, shelves full of beer steins from around the world, autographed photos of movie starlets, lit up beer signs, sports memorabilia etc...

“You okay, Tabitha?”

“Yes-“ Surprisingly, seven years later, Frazier’s was just a restaurant with sun shining in through the windows and some customers contentedly eating their lunches. It was no longer the evil place in my nightmares. In just a few minutes, I had found some peace. I felt like a portion of the burden had been lifted from me. I actually felt like maybe I was starting to heal some.

“You ready to eat now?” Aunt June asked me.

“I am-“ A week prior, I could not have imagined sitting down to eat in the very place where my Daddy was murdered. But I knew in my heart that I had to move on, to let go of some of the pain, the guilt, and the fear.

We got a booth in the back by the pool tables. Quietly we ate our hot turkey platters and drank our iced teas. While we ate, a young man started playing pool, setting up practice shots. He was good. I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He wore painted up cargo shorts and a black t-shirt with The Cure plastered across it. He was a medium build with long dark curly hair pulled back into a loose ponytail. He had about ten earrings in each ear. Intently he pocketed ball after ball. You could see his eyes were a startling blue, even from across the room.

Aunt June interrupted my reverie with a shocking request, “Why don’t you see if he’ll play you a game? You’re good at pool, Tabitha-“

We had a pool table in our club basement in Pennsylvania. I played my cousins all the time. I could even beat Skeeter, 8 years older than me, 90% of the time.

“No way. He’s practicing, Aunt June-“ I don’t know why, but my heart actually started to flutter.

“Maybe he’d like some competition?” she wouldn’t let it drop.

“Not today-“ I mumbled, squeezing some more lemon into my tea.

Not two minutes later, the young man sauntered over to our table. He had the toned arms and legs of a construction worker. But his lips were full and pouty, like a model’s.

“Would either of you two ladies care to shoot a game?” he asked. “I’m getting kind of bored playing by myself-“

“Sure. Tabitha will play you-“ my aunt piped up.

“Great-“ he said. “My name’s Erik-“

I cut my aunt a dark look, which she pretended not to see, then dragged my ass from my chair. “I just need to use the bathroom first-“

“Okay-“ Erik waited over by the pool table for me.

Inside the bathroom, I crushed two percocets up on the sink with a spoon I’d slipped into my pocket from the table. I snorted the white powder. That familiar rush of warmth took away my shakiness. This guy was no big deal I told myself.

The first game we played, he chatted amiably, pocketing balls with ease.

“Where you from?” he asked me.

“Pennsylvania-“ I kept my replies to a minimum, concentrating on my shots.

“What you doing in Hampden? You got relatives here?”

“I grew up here-“ No way was I telling this guy about my grandmother.

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen-“

“I’m 21. Me and some buddies just rented a warehouse down by the post office.

I’m a sculptor-“

I had never met a sculptor before. So I clammed up. But he kept chatting away.

“I just won a grant from the Md state arts council. I got a studio at the warehouse where I do my art at night. But during the day, I work construction-“

I had one ball left on the table when he smoothly pocketed the eight ball for the win.

“You’re good-“ he remarked. “Play again?”

“Sure-“ I racked the balls. No way was I going to let this hot shot beat me again.

He scratched on the break, so I began wordlessly pocketing balls with careful

deliberation.

“Yeah right now my thing is working with horseshoes... I make chairs out of them... Or just abstract sculptures...recently I made two sculptures out of wrenches to honor two Hampden War heroes...sometimes I sell my art on E-bay-“

When I pocketed the eight-ball, after running the table on him, he laughed with delight and shook my hand. “You are a real Chatty Cathy, you know that, Tabitha?”

I didn't want to smile, but he was sort of funny.

“I got to go-“ I said.

“Can I get your number? I'd really like a rematch-“

I wrote down a bogus number on a napkin, and then he took my hand for a second time.

“I dig a girl who can shoot pool-“

“Goodbye-“ I said. But my pulse quickened when he turned my hand over and gently kissed it, like the knights do in fairy tales.

Back at our table, Aunt June bubbled with enthusiasm. “Wow...what a hottie...you going out on a date?”

“I don't know-“ I let her down easy.

At this point, I thought I was gaining some control over my life. I had successfully confronted at least one of my demons by returning to Frazier's. But I could not foresee what the devastating downward spiral of addiction had in store for me. And I would not see Erik again for two long years.

Back in Pennsylvania, I returned to the 12th grade. Although the rote memorizing of facts and figures no longer held an ounce of appeal for me, I did it for my Aunt June. Her pride in me would not allow me to quit. I simply couldn't let her down. However, I was bored and depressed. I ate and bathed infrequently. I began to wear all black, even dyeing my hair and painting my fingernails jet black. Like my mother I pierced my eyebrow, then took it a step further by piercing the cartilage at the top of both my ears, my nose, and my bottom lip. I rarely conversed with classmates who began to call me "The Grim Reaper" and "Pin-face". Aunt June wanted me to get some therapy, to see a doctor. But I refused to go. "You can't be a clam your whole life, Tabitha. If you're going to get healthy, you need to talk to somebody-"

"I don't want to talk to strangers-" was my rebuttal.

"Then talk to me-" Aunt June pleaded. "How can I help you?"

"I don't know-"

Aunt June and Uncle Arly went religiously to Pop's grave, once a week since his murder. It would destroy her to know the sickening things he had done to me. To know that I was responsible for his death.

I got high at school now, crushing and snorting my pills in the bathroom between classes. (Ravon was my drugdealer). But I still managed to graduate with As and Bs.

Aunt June and Uncle Arly bought me a used car, a gold Geo Storm, for my graduation present. And for the first time in nearly a year, I was ecstatic. Over several weekends, Uncle Arly patiently taught me how to drive. Then he took me to take my driver's test.

"Good luck, Tab-" he smiled encouragement and waved to me, as I walked to the test car.

I wasn't even high, but I was so nervous I somehow gashed my forehead getting into the driver's seat. I didn't look back to see my uncle's reaction. Putting my seatbelt on and checking

my mirrors, I sneaked a peak at the damage and saw a sizeable stripe of blood just above my left eye. I thought for sure I'd be the first person in the history of the DMV to fail for injuring myself just getting into the car. But the DMV guy never even noticed, just kept making check marks on his clipboard as I performed the necessary maneuvers he called off. I scored a 98, only lost two points for not signaling on a turn.

Celebrating at Appleby's, with a band-aid plastered to my forehead, I asked my uncle if he saw me hit my head. "I thought you fainted-" he said, dismantling a blooming onion with his thick fingers and laughing heartily. "But don't feel bad...I failed my first driving test in less than ten seconds-"

"How?"

"I backed the car up without physically turning my head to look behind me...I just used the rear view mirror...the DMV guy patted me on the back and said congratulations, son, you just killed a three year old riding his big wheel. He was an asshole. He wouldn't even let me retake the test the same day, I had to wait until the next day. If I saw him today though, I'd thank him. I never backed up again without turning my head and looking first. And a few times I know I would have killed a kid if I hadn't-" My uncle dunked his fried onion into the remoulade, eating happily.

Aunt June said, "I failed my driving test three times. I couldn't parallel park to save my soul... knocked over all four cones-"

"Yeah-" Uncle Arly added. "Some of them more than once-"

We all laughed together. A happy family. On occasions like these I still wished my mom and dad were here though, sharing the milestones with me.

My Uncle was so impressed with my driving score that he let me drive him and Aunt June to Dolly's wedding the following weekend. Dolly was marrying her long time boyfriend of six years, a fire-fighter named Mark. The wedding was held at a Baptist church in Richmond, Virginia where Mark's folks lived.

For Dolly's sake, I did not wear black. And I removed all of my "face hardware", too. (Mark's parents were devout Baptists, and Dolly was afraid all my piercings would just be too much for them). I chose a pale lemon sundress with a skinny belt of darker yellow ribbon. Dolly even took the time out from her busy day to French braid my hair. She twined in some small daisies. I was so excited for Dolly; she'd always been a good sister to me. Her wedding was the first wedding I ever attended. And it did not disappoint. Candles glowed in the small country church, and flowers emanated a lovely fragrance, as a perfect twilight night bathed the pews in a soft violet glow. The maid of Honor and the bride's maids looked stunning strolling down the aisle in their matching satin gowns and pumps. (Dolly asked me to be a bride's maid, too, but I declined, not wanting my mercurial moods to spoil her big day). It was a short but poignant ceremony. When they exchanged their vows, Mark, who is a man's man, who bears hunts and white water rafts, who races into flaming buildings without a moment's hesitation to save lives, wept openly with joy. Then Dolly, in her beautiful white gown, started to tear up, too. By the time they exchanged rings, half the congregation was soggy-eyed, moved to tears by their young love. But secretly I envied the newly wedded couple their innocence and their optimism. I could not imagine ever being so deliriously happy.

At the reception I met Mark's father and grandfather. Both retired firefighters. I sat with them at the bride's table. We ate chicken cordon blue, and for the grown-ups, the Coors Lites and the Budweisers flowed.

Mark's grandfather sat to my right. He slipped me a glass of champagne and winked.

"Thank, you, kind sir-" I said, sipping the sweet bubbly. I was already flushed from the two Percocets I snorted a half hour previous.

"You look lovely tonight, in case nobody's told you that already-" Mark's grandfather had a deep voice, laughed somewhat nervously, and he smelled like Brut cologne. He had the face of a boxing turtle with puffy bags under his watery eyes

which were magnified slightly by his over-sized glasses. His tuxedo was a gray one which perfectly matched his closely cropped silver hair. The material strained across his wide shoulders. He was fit and muscular as a retired heavyweight boxer.

“You look nice, too-“

“I’m an old fossil-“ he insisted. “Name’s Rick. Can you guess how old I am?”

“Sixty-five-“ I guessed. Being nice.

“Nope. I am 77 years old. How old are you?”

“Eighteen-“ I said.

“Legal-“ he laughed some more. “Mark tells me you just graduated high school. Says you’re a real smart cookie. You going to college, Tabitha?”

“I’m not sure. I thought I’d take a year off, maybe travel some, maybe find a job-“

“What kind of job are you looking for?”

“Something challenging. I want a job where I can learn something new-“

“Do you know anything about antiques?”

“Not a thing-“

“I own an antique shop on Howard Street in downtown Baltimore-“ he said.

“You ever been to Antique Row?”

“No, sir. But I was born in Baltimore-“

He handed me a small white card with his name, shop address, and phone number on it. “I’m looking for a saleslady-“ he said. “Stop by and see me if you’re interested-“

“Thank you, sir. I’ll think about it-“ I played it cool. But I needed a job badly. I was nearly out of the money I earned from Joe’s Place since I was up to six percocets a day now, a very expensive habit at ten dollars a pill.

“Let’s dance, shall we?” He extended his puffy, liver-spotted hand, and he peered down at me so hopefully that I couldn’t say no. At six feet two, he was a good head taller than me. He taught me the box step and then some Cha-cha, leading me with a firm hand.

Unlike me, he was an excellent dancer. He was delighted with my company, and I already knew that he would suffice to meet my needs for the immediate future.

A week later I drove down to Baltimore's Antique Row. Inside Rick's shop was crammed full of ornate vases, fancy lamps, polished desks, antique dressers, and some expensive jewelry locked in glass cases.

"Be still my beating heart-" Rick said when I walked through the door and the bell jingled. Essentially my piercing faze was over, except for my earrings. I wore a modest skirt, cardigan, and pearls in my earlobes. Pink blusher highlighted my cheeks and a clear gloss moistened my lips.

"How are you doing, Tabitha?"

"Fine, sir-"

"Call me Rick-"

He showed me around, then he hung an Out To Lunch sign on the door. "You hungry?" He looked older than I remembered him. All of the features on his face drooped, like melting candle wax, and he had some fleshy lesions on his forehead and cheeks. "Do you like Italian? Ever had cacciatore?"

"I do like Italian-"

"You ever been to Sammy's on Read Street? They got the best cacciatore. Better than Little Italy-"

He drove me in his Cadillac, even though Sammy's was only four blocks away.

When he sat in the driver's seat, his pant's leg hiked up and revealed a small handgun attached by a strap to his ankle.

"Don't be alarmed, Sweetheart. I got a permit to carry it, just in case the store gets robbed-"

At Sammy's, we sat at a table by the window, looking out onto Charles Street.

"Are you a people watcher?" Rick asked me after the waiter took our order.

"I guess I am-"

"Are you good at reading people?"

“What do you mean?”

“If you see a bull-shitter, can you tell it by looking at them?”

“I’m not sure-“

“Am I a bull-shitter?” he removed his glasses. His eyes were the color and texture of a silver fish. His thick nose matched his wide and full mouth. He reminded me of the Wiseguys you see in the movies.

“Class A bullshitter-“ I surmised. And he snorted with laughter.

“Good girl-“ he said, patting my knee.

I was down to a few percocets, and I was broke. I had to really turn on the charm.

“Mark tells me your wife passed away. I’m sorry to hear that-“

“She was a good wife. A real lady-“ Rick intoned solemnly.

“How long have you been retired from firefighting?”

“Twenty years. I spend all my time in the shop now. Dinner here every night, a couple of drinks, and then I go home to an empty house. But you don’t want to hear my sob stories-“

Our food came, and we ate hungrily. He drank a vodka gimlet, and I drank iced tea. After we finished, he settled back in his chair, patted his full belly. “You taking the job or what?”

“I don’t know-“ I hedged. “I live way out in Pennsylvania and commuting would really cost me in gas money-“

“I got a small apartment over top of the shop you can have. It’s fully furnished. And I won’t charge you any rent. How’s that sound?”

“Wow-“ I said. “Really?”

“I’ll pay you 400 dollars a week in cash, under the table. Here’s 200 now in case you need an advance-“ He peeled two bills from his money-clipped wad and tucked it into my hand. “We got a deal, Sunshine?”

“How can I turn down such a generous offer?”

He extended his hand and we shook. Our eyes locked across the candle-lit table.
At the time, I did not realize that I was staring across at my first husband.

A week later, I moved into my new apartment. My sofa was upholstered in pale blue satin which matched the dark blue carpet. There were antique mirrors and paintings on the walls. My bed was a four poster canopy job. Rick even filled my refrigerator with gourmet food he bought at the up-scale Eddie's Supermarket.

Every morning I came down to the shop, and Rick had me do some inventory or dusting or pricing. Mainly we hung out and played chess or listened to Italian opera. We waited on a customer occasionally. Sometimes I answered the phone. I made coffee, reminded Rick to take his diabetes and cholesterol medications. It was a gravy job. Rick was just lonely and wanted a pretty face around. Twice a week I called Aunt June just to say hi.

I found a drugdealer in Hampden everybody called Rooster because of his orange hair. Thirty-ish, he was a big sweet guy who always wore preppy clothes and donned aviator shades. "What's uuuuuuppppp?" was his staple greeting. He hung at Dimitri's Tavern where my Daddy used to buy his Popov pints. The place hadn't changed in seven years. The same plumbers and trash haulers and house painters and carpenters still sat on their regular bar stools. Everybody remembered me from when Daddy used to buy me peanuts, popcorn, and Slim Jims. So they let me come in and drink sodas. Frequently I asked about my grandmother, but nobody had seen her.

My days I spent with Rick downtown working in the shop and then eating dinner at Sammy's. My nights I spent in Hampden. There was a skate park at the Roosevelt Recreation Center I liked to go to and watch the skateboarders do their tricks. A few boys had crushes on me and would share their pot. I wasn't old enough for Hampden's new wine bars. So I explored the many gift shops. I'd buy a book or maybe a journal, stealing ten times what I spent. Then I'd take the hot items (jewelry mostly) and sell it cheap to the Goth girls at the skate park.

I was only in my new apartment for a week, before Rick started stopping by.

“You busy?” he’d ask, filling my doorway with his bulky frame. He’d have tickets for the symphony or an opera. We’d go, then hit Sotto Sopra, our new favorite restaurant, and share a bottle of champagne in a private corner. Rick knew the bartenders so they turned a blind eye if I drank a glass or two of bubbly with my dinner. Rick talked about his childhood, growing up in New Jersey. He loved Atlantic City and Coney Island. “I’m taking you-“ he’d enthuse, “You like corndogs? Best corndogs in the world right at Coney Island-“

We’d talk for hours. One night, while twisting a pinkie ring nervously round his finger, he stammered out the question I’d been waiting for, “You seeing anybody, Tabitha?”

“No-“ I told him truthfully.

“I’m just an old fool-“ he said. “But this old fool’s quite smitten with you. I’m not asking you for sex. I’m too old for that nonsense now. But I want a faithful companion, somebody who feels something for me, someone to take care of me when I can’t do it for myself-“ Very slowly his pinkie finger began to caress mine.

“I’m not a rich guy. But I own the shop, two Cadillacs, and two nice homes. I might last a couple more years if I’m lucky...I want to marry you and take care of you, Tabitha....I want us to take care of each other...-“

“I care for you, Rick-“ I replied softly. “But marriage is a big step-“

“I’ll leave everything I own to you, Tabitha. My heart is in your hands-“

Rick let me pick an engagement ring from the shop. I selected a wide gold band from the 1920's which had a single round two carat diamond. But when Rick announced our engagement, our families weren't exactly thrilled. Even Aunt June. "Are you sure you know what you're doing, Tabitha?" she asked me, her face stamped with worry. Dolly and Mark stopped speaking to me, not even trying to hide their disgust.

By October I was popping six Oxycontin 20's every day. If I couldn't get them, I bought pain patches filled with morphine I chewed. I had a list of people in my phone that sold their prescription pain pills every month. At a dollar a milligram, I was spending 120\$ a day. To support my habit, I began to steal small items from Rick's store and sold them.

Rick bought me a cell phone and called me like thirty times a day now. "Where you at, baby?" His gruff voice demanded. In public, he held my hand, draping his heavy arm possessively around me. But true to his word, he never asked for sex. Stupidly I thought this marriage would be a walk in the park.

On a rainy Thursday we tied the knot at the Courthouse. Our witnesses were two friends of Rick's who, just like him, resembled wiseguys. No family came. Not even Aunt June who tried to talk me out of it. Eyes glazed with drugs, I married Rick anyway. I thought I was set, no more worrying every day about where to get cash for my drugs.

Rick moved me from my apartment to his big house in ritzy Roland Park. The place had dozens of windows he liked to clean with newspaper and vinegar. If I used a blender to make a smoothie he expected me to wash it right away. Nothing was allowed to sit on his immaculate marble countertops. No dirty dishes were allowed in the sink. "What the hell are you doing?" he'd bellow if the bed wasn't made just right or if I left some make-up in the bathroom. My stomach twisted into knots, and I began to tiptoe around him.

Even though we didn't have sex, he expected me to sleep in the bed with him every night. He clung to me like a drowning man. He smelled like menthol ointment. His

teeth floated in a glass on a night table nearby. He wrapped his thick arms and varicose veined legs around me like a boa constrictor. If it wasn't for the drugs, I wouldn't sleep at all.

My new husband began having nightmares that I was cheating on him. One night he rolled his heavy body on top of me, choking me with his bare hands. I gasped, flailing. "Don't you ever do it!" Froth flew from his gummy mouth. "I'll kill you if you cheat! I'll fucking kill you!"

I tried not to leave drops of water in the sink, tried vacuuming the carpet so the nap all faced the same direction, tried not to dress "like a whore". I kept telling myself Rick's health wouldn't last much longer. But he was hearty as an ox.

I couldn't go for a walk by myself, not even to the corner grocery store without Rick throwing a paranoid tantrum. Rooster began leaving my drugs in a special potted plant on the front porch. And Rick cut off my paycheck. Now that I was his wife, he considered it my duty to work for free. So I stole more expensive items from the shop, passing them off to Rooster who would pretend to be a customer, or he would send in one of his friends when Rick's back was turned.

I thought I was getting away with it. Until I woke one night to a pillow smothering my face. With all his strength, Rick pressed down until I passed out. When I regained consciousness, he was sitting on the side of the bed, cradling his gun. "You think I don't know that you're stealing me blind!" I was too terrified to move. "And I know you're fucking somebody--"

"I'm not, Rick. I swear--"

"Lying cunt--" He smashed the side of my face with his gun. He beat me until I blacked out.

When I could open one eye, I found myself confined in a dark cramped space. I was locked in the trunk of Rick's Cadillac. The car sped along. An unbearable ache spread from my nose outward. My enlarged lips flowed with the tinny taste of blood. My head felt like a pumpkin. I prayed. I prayed. I prayed. Please come, silverback gorilla. Come now, Hoot owl. Help me, elephant. Oh God. Oh Daddy. Please help me.

Suddenly the trunk popped open and night air surged inside. Rick yanked me out. I fell to the ground. He kicked me with his wing-tipped shoes. I tried to cover my face. Huffing with exertion, he finally dragged me to my feet. He held his gun to my head. "Where do you want to be buried?" He gestured around the wooded area. His white balloon of a face reminded me of the boy who had murdered my father.

"No, Rick, no-" I pleaded through my throbbing lips.

"You don't want to die?"

"No-"

"Give me an annulment then and I'll drop you off at a hospital. Tell them you were car jacked, kidnapped, I don't care which. But if you mention my name I will hunt you down and finish what I started here tonight-"

"Hospital... please-"

I felt another thwack to the side of my head and then nothing.

When I opened my eyes, I didn't know if I was dead or alive. I was lying on cool white sheets in a lighted room. I hurt all over. Tears leaked from my swollen eyes. Everything glowed and wavered like a hologram. Somebody in white approached and pricked my arm with a syringe. A blanket of warmth enveloped me. The pain began to subside. "Thank you...oh thank you..." I mumbled. Then I began to see blue angels floating around my bed. Each angel held a candle. I must be floating on a cloud up in heaven. Because I saw my Daddy's loving face next, and right beside him I saw my mother, Pamela Sue Miller. I knew it was her because she so resembled me. She radiated compassion and warmth. In my whole life, I never felt so wonderful.

The next morning the euphoria was gone and a lot of the pain was back. I was in a hospital. My doctor, a stout brown woman with a thick accent, informed me I suffered from a cracked cheekbone and a broken eye socket. She was from India. "Who did this to you?"

"Somebody tried to rob me...that's all I remember-"

"I see you still have your diamond wedding ring though-" Her dark eyes glistened with concern. "Where is your husband?"

I didn't answer.

"You are very young to be married-"

Still I had no answer.

"Do you wish to file a police report or apply for a protective order?"

"No, ma'am....I just want to go home-"

"And where is home?"

"I live with my grandmother in Hampden-" I lied.

"Can she come pick you up?"

"No...She's on a walker....so I need to call a taxi-"

The doctor handed me a small white card. "This is the number of a woman's shelter nearby if you need it, okay?"

"I'm going to my grandmother's-"

"All right... Okay-" she sighed then, threw her hands up in defeat, and left. But she dropped the card on my hospital tray, right next to my uneaten supper. The card remained there, even as I signed my release papers and rolled out.

I could not call my Aunt June. I didn't deserve her help or pity. Since I did this to myself. I trekked two miles to Hampden, found a pawn shop, and sold my wedding ring for 400\$. Then I

headed to Dimitri's.

At the bar, I drank a Sprite. My jaw hurt so bad, I couldn't chew the peanuts piled in cardboard bowls. My reflection in the long mirror across from me was not a pretty sight. My face was swollen and bruised the color of an eggplant around both my eyes. I told everybody who asked the same story I told the doctor. I was mugged. Rooster said, "You need anything, hon?"

"I'm okay-" I had a prescription for Oxys from the hospital. "But, hey Rooster, do you know anybody with a room to rent?"

"Yo, Adam!" he hollered down the bar, "- you still got that room to rent on Hickory?"

Adam, a scrawny housepainter, shuffled down. "Yeah-" he said. "Who you got in mind?"

"My good friend Tabitha here-"

"What the hell happened to you?" Adam's long greasy hair was stuffed under an Oriole's baseball cap. His abdomen was distended from cirrhosis.

"Mugged....that's why I'm looking for a safer place to live-"

"It's a hundred bucks a week-"

"I'll take it-"

At Adam's rowhouse, my room was on the third floor. It had one window, paint sealed shut and smelled heavily of cats.

After I bought some used clothes at a consignment shop around the corner, I headed to Griffiths, just a few blocks up the street for a soda.

"No, we ain't seen your grandmother-" the bartender, Miss Linda, squawked as soon as she saw me. Everybody called her Little Bit since she was like four feet tall and weighed about 85 pounds.

When I became a regular at Griffith's, I met a bunch of colorful characters. There was English Mark, an aging punk rocker and wanna-be writer from England; Shorty, an egg-shaped roofer who always reeked of melted roof tar; and Susan, a woman with

Multiple personality disorder. When one of Susan's alter egos named Sinful Sadie came out, Susan knocked back whiskey and whispered hotly in the guys' ears. Nobody took advantage of her though, knowing she might just as quickly switch to Monica, a prim Miss who didn't even drink and might slap the crap out of them for getting fresh. And then there was me: sad sack teenaged girl with a busted up face. Since I had no family nearby, the regulars looked out for me. They shared tomatoes from their gardens, brought me novels to read, and even treated me to banana splits when the Mister Softee ice-cream truck rolled by.

Only 62 year old "Millionaire" Murphy was anti-social. He was a troll of a man with buck teeth and gingivitis. Nearly emaciated, he survived on two cans of pork and beans a day, even though he hit the lottery for a million dollars last year. He drank his Natty Boh in a plastic cup, same as everybody else. As my face healed, I tried to get him to warm up to me. But all I got for my troubles was gruff monosyllables. I guess having all that money made him suspicious of gold diggers. I wish I could say I was different than the rest. But I was down to my last couple bucks, nearly strung out, and desperate. He was my new mark.

The turning point for me and Murphy came one Sunday afternoon while watching a Raven's game on the new flat screen TV the owner of Griffith's bought for football season. I offered to cut Murphy's hair, which was overgrown, lank, and full of dandruff. "You ever cut hair before?" he asked me suspiciously.

"Sure-" I lied. "I studied cosmetology-"

"How much do you charge?"

"Twenty bucks-" If I offered to cut it for free he might think I was trying to butter him up.

"You got scissors?"

"Yep-"

"Are they sharp?"

"You worried she's gonna pull a Lizzie Bordon on you and steal all that money hidden under your mattress, Murph?" Shorty cracked.

"You can't cut hair good with dull scissors-" Murphy insisted.

"I got sharp ones-" I assured him.

"When you want to do it?"

"How about now?"

"Lemme finish my beer-"

"Okay. I'll get my shears and meet you back here-"

"Not in here!" Little Bit shrilled. "Health Department-"

"I live just across the street-" Murphy said.

"If we hear screams coming from that way, we'll send a posse for you-" Shorty joked again.

But if anybody seriously knew how much money I'd scam from poor Murphy over the next year, they would have called the law right then and there.

Chapter 28

After showering and changing into a pretty, low cut top, I shop-lifted scissors at Rite Aid and headed to Murphy's. I popped an Oxy which took the edge off. I couldn't afford my normal two pills at a time right now.

Murphy's place was a formstone rowhouse with a bare front porch and a scrappy lawn. Inside there was cigarette scarred furniture. Tin ashtrays overflowed. Natty Boh cans were strewn everywhere. "Sorry about the mess-" Murphy grumbled.

"I clean houses, too-" I told him.

"Where you want me?" Murphy shed his plaid shirt and stood before me with his bony chest poking through some holes in his yellowing t-shirt.

"The kitchen-" I said. "Pull up a chair by the sink-"

Luckily he had one of those water hoses by the faucet. He sat, and I draped a towel around his shoulders. "Got shampoo?" I asked.

"Use the dish detergent-"

He tipped his head back, and I lathered up his hair. The suds turned gray with dirt. But I kept rinsing until the water ran clear. I massaged his scalp a little with my fingernails, and he purred lightly.

Then I dried his hair and began to cut. I snipped a little here and a little there. Measured this piece of hair against that piece. Trimmed his bangs. Tried to even out the back. Finally I could do no more.

I brought Murphy a nearby mirror. He inspected his new haircut. It didn't look half bad, except the shorter hair did accentuate the size of his two protruding front teeth.

"Look's nice-" was his verdict. He fished in his tattered wallet for a twenty.

"Thank you-" I pocketed the cash. "You headed back to the bar?"

"Yeah-" he said.

We strolled back together. The air felt crisp and smelled faintly of apples.

Rowhouses had pumpkins on their stoops, cotton cobwebs on their gates, and nylon ghosts swinging from their porches. At Griffith's most folks thought Murphy's haircut was an improvement. Only one smart-ass said it looked like I put a bowl over his head and then cut.

Murphy listened when I told him about my Daddy's murder.

"That's a shame-" he said. He had some relatives in Pennsylvania, too.

He let me wash his hair and clean his house once a week now for 75 bucks.

Peanuts considering I was three weeks behind in my rent and severely drug addicted.

So I enlisted Rooster's help to rescue my GEO Storm from Rick's driveway.

I could sell the car and get caught up on rent and still have enough left for drugs.

I handed Rooster the car key.

"Call the cops if I'm not back in 5 minutes, you hear, hon?"

"Be careful-"

I shredded my fingernails with my teeth until he returned a few minutes later.

"The driveway's empty-" he said.

"Rick probably sold my car. Thanks anyway, Rooster-"

I was in deep shit.

I applied for work at a few convenience stores and restaurants. But nobody even bothered to call me back.

So I returned to Plan B. Seduce Millionaire Murphy.

Chapter 29

While cleaning Murphy's house, I kept my eyes peeled for any valuables or hidden cash. But he lived like a pauper. A box of crackers, a few tins of sardines, and a case of pork and beans was all he had in his kitchen pantry. The fridge contained a six pack of beer, a greasy stick of margarine, one petrified lime, and a slimy jar of olives. In the livingroom he had a clunky metal desk piled a foot high with old newspapers and unopened mail. Inside the desk drawers I searched for a checkbook or credit cards. But all I found was bundles of old lottery tickets, hundreds of paperclips, and saved rubber-bands.

Up in his bedroom I spied a collection of Playboy and Penthouse magazines stashed in the back of his sparse closet, behind his hanging gabardine slacks and wrinkled Hanes t-shirts. So Murphy did have some carnal desires. I'd never seen him with a lady friend though. The only thing it seemed he spent any real money on was more lottery tickets. He had stacks of losers in cardboard boxes in every room. "What do you save them for?" I asked him once.

"It's a tax write off-" he informed me.

Murphy was not a stupid guy. He had worked for some computer company for like 20 years before he retired. So I waited for him to make the first move. I think he wanted me but he didn't know how to tell me.

Rooster was floating me for my drugs until I could pay him back, but I wasn't sure how long his generosity would last.

A week later my patience with Murphy was rewarded when he came to the door for his monthly haircut wearing only a dingy bathrobe. I went about our routine like normal. But when I started to wash his hair, he yanked open his robe and thrust my hand between his legs, where I discovered a walnut-sized penis, eclipsed by a nest of pubic hair. I stroked the globule of flesh until he came, just a few dribbles pumped from his mouse-sized member. It took all of two minutes.

When it came time to pay me, Murphy doled out two crisp one hundred dollar bills from a bank envelope this time. "You coming by tomorrow?"

"Sure ...If you want to see me-"

"Of course I do, Tabitha-" He smiled sheepishly, then awkwardly kissed me. His mossy front teeth bumped my lips first. Mercifully he offered no tongue.

After that, I started visiting him every day. I knew the Hampden bar crowds talked bad about us. But I didn't care. I was earning 1400 dollars a week now. And that was just the beginning.

Chapter 30

Six months later, by the Spring of 2011, I was up to ten 20mg oxycontin a day, more than a cancer patient would need, a lethal dose for any normal teenager. I now spent over a grand a week on drugs and my tolerance just kept getting higher.

I figured out that Murphy slept with his checkbook in his back pants pocket. (he never wore pajamas). So I started to spike his evening meal of pork and beans with liquid Benadryl. He trusted me now to heat his food up. In a half hour, he'd pass out in front of the TV watching Hogan's Heroes. I'd snag his checkbook, writing myself a check for two thousand dollars each week. Shrewdly I took the checks from the back of his checkbook in case he kept track of the check numbers. Then I cashed it at Dimitris where I paid off the bartender, a gypsy scarecrow with wrecked teeth, with a hundred bucks and a few Oxys. He knew the checks were forged but he had a serious pill habit, too.

I didn't worry too much about Murphy seeing his bank statements or the returned checks since he never opened his mail anyway. But as much as possible I intercepted his bank statements and destroyed them.

I stayed high, avoiding Aunt June's phone calls. Because Rick told her I cheated on him and stole from him on top of it which is why he divorced me. Plus Dolly told me rumors were flying around PA that I was hooked on drugs and prostituting myself in Baltimore. Even though I missed my Aunt June terribly, I chose drugs over her.

I hung out with Murphy and the locals at the VFW or the American Legion. We shot darts, danced to the jukebox, pitched horseshoes, ate pit beef sandwiches and steamed shrimp. After I walked Murphy home, I'd wait until he fell asleep then head to Frazier's to shoot pool. I was only 19 but I had a really good fake ID I paid 300 bucks for. Plus the doorman was a good friend of Rooster's, and I always left hefty tips for the bartenders so they hooked me up.

One night while strolling to Frazier's I got caught in a torrential storm. It came out of nowhere, drilling me with rain. I was only two blocks away from the bar so I made a run for it. Thunder exploded and lightening forked across the sky. Suddenly the power zinged and went out. "Holy shit!" I exclaimed when I burst through Frazier's door, drenched. The few customers at the bar barely glanced up. Only the bar-maid, a bottle blonde with pin-up girl bangs and red fishnets offered me some paper towels to dry off. The owner broke out some candles.

When somebody lightly touched my elbow, I swiveled and saw Erik, the hot-shot pool guy I met two years ago. "Hey-" he said, "Are you okay?"

I was shivering, and my teeth chattered like crazy.

He unzipped his paint-spattered hoodie, offered it to me.

"No thanks...I'm fine-"

"Don't be stubborn-" he insisted. "Put it on-"

So I tugged the jacket on, zipped it, burrowed in its warmth. "Thank you-" I said.

"You visiting again?" His hair was cut short now. And he only wore a single small hoop in each ear.

"I recently moved here-"

"Cool. You want to shoot some pool?"

"It's too dark-"

"I can fix that-" He placed candles all around the rim of the pool table. "Voila-"

Before we started, he bought me a shot of Jameson to warm me up.

Appreciatively I took small sips.

Shadows flickered all over the pool table. But we used our instincts to find the pockets.

"So do you work or go to school or what?" Erik asked me. "What makes Tabitha tick?"

"I was working at an antique shop downtown. But I quit. So now I'm looking for something else-" The antique job was six months ago. But I didn't want Erik, who

obviously had his shit together, to think badly about me, that I was some kind of bum.

“I’m working on some new sculptures-“ he said. “I’m using copper wire to make trees-“

“What kind of trees?”

“Oaks. Maples. Birches. Weeping Willows-“

“Why trees?”

“Because trees fascinate me. Their beauty and their strength. They’re like snowflakes. Every one is different-“

I’d never met a guy like Erik. Most guys just talked about sports or tried right away to get into my pants.

Some Johns Hopkins kids ambled over to the table and wanted to play. So we played doubles with them. But nobody could beat Erik and I. We won three shots of Jameson each. Consequently when we won our fourth drink with a three rail bank shot Erik advised me to try, and he swooped me up into his arms and hugged me, I just hugged him right back.

By closing time we were all jacked up, and nobody wanted to go home.

“Come to the warehouse-“ Erik invited us all.

Some of the Hopkins kids agreed to come, so I followed along. We ambled down Old Falls Road, past the rippling Jones Falls, stepping over downed tree branches, laughing and tripping drunkenly as we went. It was still near pitch black out.

The red brick warehouse Erik lived in was enormous, 5000 square feet. And there was light inside from a generator. Racks of women’s clothes and costumes filled part of a back wall. There were easels with half finished paintings and artists’ wooden work tables cluttered with various projects. The cement floor was spattered with dried paint, sawdust, and copper shavings. I saw two of Erik’s horse-shoe chairs which were beautifully crafted and impressive sitting in a corner. They were over six feet tall and looked grand enough

to belong to a king and his queen. A large pot of some delicious smelling food simmered on the stove. The fragrance of curry and exotic spices wafted through the air. The place hummed with life.

Erik put on some Cuban music, the Bueno Vista Social Club, and he passed around a fifth of Jameson which we drank straight from the bottle. Two Hopkins girls started to salsa dance, and one of the guys, drunk as shit, began to try on some of the frillier women's costumes. Clearly he had a predilection for cross dressing. But nobody seemed to mind.

"One of my roommates is an actress-" Erik explained about the extensive wardrobe and nearby vanity table.

I sat on a giant wooden spool of copper wire, watching the giddy girls twirl. And I envied all of them their futures. Even drugged up and drunk on whiskey, I knew my life came up way short in this place which teemed with creative energy and a pure enthusiastic joy for life. For the first time in years, I recognized that my daily drug use was a dead end. A soul killing trap. Was there even a spark of ambition or real happiness left in me? I prayed so.

But when Erik shimmied over and extended his hand for me to dance, I refused.

"No thank you. I'm no good-" I sat stiffly.

"Come on...Give it a try, please-"

"I'm terrible-"

"Get up-" he insisted, pulling me to my feet. He positioned my arms and then began to move us gracefully to the music. Surprisingly I remembered some of the dance steps Rick had taught me, as Erik lead me in a simple salsa. "You can so dance-" he declared, starting to twirl me around. At the song's end, he snapped my body up close to his for a brief dramatic second, and then released me. I felt quite giddy. "That was fun-" I admitted.

“Then again!” Erik merengued me this time. Round and round. When breathlessly we stopped, I found that Erik had danced us right into his bedroom. Suddenly my heart boomed in my chest. I had never been intimate with anybody even close to my own age. When he pressed my body against a wall, I froze up. He didn’t seem fazed though, even after I turned my head when he tried to kiss me. “What’s up, pretty girl, don’t you like me?”

“I’m just drunk-“ I didn’t know what else to say.

“You’re right-“ he agreed. “The first time we kiss, we should be sober-“

Then he stepped away from me, and I missed his warm closeness instantly. I felt like I was on an emotional see-saw.

Just for something to do, I traipsed around his room. Erik’s bed was a king-sized futon, layered with nice gray sheets and matching pillow cases. He had bookcases full of Art books. A record player and boxes of record albums spanned one whole wall. A few comic books, some Zen philosophy texts, and several small twisted copper trees occupied his nightstand fashioned from a latticed wooden orange crate. Magnificent reproductions, his copper trees glowed.

Erik sighed, “ I figured when you gave me a bogus number two years ago, that maybe you had a boyfriend or something?”

I didn’t reply.

“But I sort of felt like we had a connection when we first met-“

“I just got a divorce, Erik-“ I admitted, hoping to scare him off.

“No shit-“ he said. But he didn’t seem as alarmed as I expected.

“I’m a mess-“ No truer words had I ever spoken.

“Bad timing-“ He figured. “Then I’ll just wait until you’re ready-“

Wow. How could he be so calm and patient?

“I’ll give you my phone number this time. And when you feel like you’re ready, just give me a holler. Even if you just want to talk or hang out as friends-“

“Okay-“ I relented. Suddenly I felt depleted, spent.

He called a cab and waited outside with me. Side by side, we sat on a cement bench. It was five in the morning. The smell of morning glories and honey suckles cloaked us. Some starlings chirped. The cool night air felt wonderful, but my bones were still weighted with sadness. I didn't want to be this drug addicted freak I had turned into. I wanted so bad to be normal. I didn't want to cry in front of Erik. But I couldn't stop my tears once they started to flow.

“Hey. Hey-“ he hushed, “Why the tears?”

I just shrugged, trying to swipe them away, but they fell so abundantly, I couldn't keep up.

“Everything's going to be okay-“ he draped his arm around me. “I really like you, Tabitha. You're the coolest chick I've met in a very long time-“

How could he like me, such a fucked up loser? Couldn't he see how defiled and dirty I was?

“Sometimes whiskey makes me cry, too-“ he admitted. He rubbed my back with a soothing rhythm.

When the cab finally pulled up, I tried to give Erik his jacket back.

“No. No-“ he insisted. “Just give it to me the next time you see me-“

Chapter 32

Back in my rented room, I slept wrapped up in Erik's jacket.

The next day, I woke, feeling nauseous and jittery as hell because I hadn't taken one Oxy the whole time I was with Erik at his warehouse. Outside my window, the sky was turning the color of dirty dish water. It was about five o'clock.

For hours, I tried to tough it out and not take any drugs. But I was so restless I couldn't lay still for more than a few minutes at a time. It felt like I'd swallowed a jar of Mexican jumping beans and they were all trying to get out of me. The few moments I somehow managed to lay still, I watched some cat hairs jiggle in a weak band of light. Come on. Come on. I can do this. But soon my body thrashed from side to side like an alligator had me in a death roll. Even worse my stomach starting cramping, and my intestines roiled. I stumbled to the bathroom stricken with the worst diarrhea of my life.

When I returned to bed, my head and body ached terribly. And time seemed to slow down, like it does when you experience a traumatic event, like an armed robbery or a plane crash. Each second seemed like an eternity of misery. I landed in the bathroom with more diarrhea. And as I was sitting on the toilet, my leg muscles began to contract, and my fingers curled into claws. I slid off the seat which was slick with watery poop and sweat. Adam found me on the bathroom floor, writhing and vomiting.

"Hold on, Tabby-" he said. Quickly he crushed up an Oxy on a spoon and stirred in some warm water. He tried to feed it to me. But I just heaved the bitter liquid right back up.

"Don't you dare die on me, girl-" He crushed up another Oxy, but this time he melted it down, using a Bic Lighter to heat the bottom of a spoon. Then he grabbed a syringe from his medicine cabinet and filled it with the liquid drug.

"Do you want this, Tabitha?" His eyes nearly loomed out of his head, he was so terrified.

"Yes. Yes-" I remembered the needle the Indian doctor gave me after Rick

nearly beat me to death. That sublime relief I felt. I wanted that relief now, so badly.

I wanted my parents, too. And the blue angels.

So Adam lassoed my arm with his belt, pulled tight, found a vein, pricked my flesh, and plunged the needle. Almost immediately my agony disappeared. And in just a few more seconds, sweet euphoria cocooned me.

I was laying in a pool of my own sweat and vomit and watery shit but I didn't care. I wasn't even embarrassed. Because Adam knew how it was. He'd been addicted for years.

Any thoughts of Erik were erased from my mind. Because I had just found a new love. The needle.

Chapter 33

At first, I got Adam to inject my heroin for me because I couldn't stomach giving myself a needle. He shot it between my fingers or toes, the same way he did it for himself.

"Nobody's got to know our business-" was how he put it.

I loved the instant rush of warmth and euphoria shooting heroin gave me. Nothing else could match it. Yes, I knew this was the same drug that killed my mother, but I was 19 years old and felt invisible. I seriously believed I could never die from it like she did. Because we got clean needles from a nearby church that handed them out every third Weds. of the month so we didn't have to worry about getting AIDS. Also they distributed these cellophane strips to test liquid heroin for the presence of Fentanyl, the super powerful narcotic which was killing two or three people a week in my Hampden neighborhood. Grieving families held wakes in bars and churches every week it seemed as a result of the overdose deaths, and I felt terrible for them. But using the test strips, I didn't have to worry about getting a "Hot" dose.

Frequently I visited Dimitris after seeing Murphy to keep Adam company. If he was low on funds, I bought his dope for him. And he reciprocated by cutting my rent. Also he started to buy me little presents: lollipops and small boxes of Whitman's chocolates he'd slide right next to my Sprite on the bar when I wasn't looking. We became good friends. We'd stay up late at night, getting high and listening to his ancient Cat Stevens and Jethro Tull tapes.

But the bar regulars saw things differently. It wasn't long before some tattletale blabbed about our "torrid romance" to Murphy. Adam and I were sitting together, shucking peanuts and gabbing innocently when Murphy strode into Dimitris' for the first time. His eyes blazed with fury and his neck was stretched upward like an ostrich. "What the hell are you doing with Adam, Tabitha?" He screeched.

"Nothing-" was my automatic response.

I didn't see the baseball bat hidden behind his back until he attacked Adam. Instinctively Adam jerked his hands up. But Murphy got in a few good whacks, before two of the burly local tree cutters, regulars, wrestled the weapon away from him.

"Motherfucker-" Adam muttered, cradling several obviously broken fingers.

But nobody called the cops. It was an unspoken rule at Dimitris. No cops unless somebody was murdered. The locals handled their own business.

"Are you crazy, Murph? What the hell did you do that for?" Adam was already downing a stiff shot of whiskey the bartender slid across to him.

From the floor, Murphy growled, "I'm through with you, Tabitha!" He was frothing at the mouth like an animal.

"Okay-" I said quietly, trying to diffuse the situation.

"That girl ain't nothing but a common whore and a thief-" Murphy yelled for the whole bar to hear. "My son found dozens of checks she stole from me! 30,000 bucks worth!"

Some folks rolled their eyes. One whistled. Jack, the bartender, who usually cashed the checks for me, just slunk away, rubbing the bar with his emaciated arm and a damp towel.

But nobody was really surprised.

My cheeks flamed and my heart pumped hard. I wasn't really sure what to do next when Adam came to my rescue. He stood over Murphy. "You just broke three of my goddamn fingers, and I got a dozen witnesses here to prove it. Do you really want to spend the rest of your life in prison for attempted murder?"

Murphy drooled. "She's a slut-"

"You leave Tabby alone, and I won't sic the cops on you for assault with a deadly weapon. You got that?"

Murphy's head hung low. He whimpered, knew he was beaten.

“Do we have a deal, motherfucker?”

“Yeah....yeah.....I don't care about nothing no more-“ Murphy swabbed at some tears. Clearly he was heartbroken.

Jack said, “Escort him out of here, guys-“

The two tree cutters drug him out. Then everybody went back to their drinks. Some cast me disparaging looks.

“Don't nobody feel sorry for him. That asswipe's got plenty money left-“ Adam sat beside me. “You okay, Tab?”

With as much dignity as I could muster, I got up off my barstool. “Let's get you to a hospital-“ I said.

Chapter 34

Without Murphy's checks I was royally screwed. I scrambled to cover my ass. Rooster fronted me for a week, then cut me off. "I'm sorry, hon. But business is business--"

Adam took care of me for a while, too. But when he tried to kiss and fondle me while I napped on his sofa one afternoon, I shoved him away.

"You'll fuck that buck-toothed asshole. But you're too good for me--" he complained.

"You and I are friends, Adam--" I assured him, "And I don't want to ruin that--"

"I want you to get the hell out--"

"Are you serious?" I had nowhere else to go.

"Pack your bags--"

"Come on, Adam--"

On the edge of the sofa, he sat brooding, glaring down at his bandaged fingertips.

"I wasn't trying to hurt your feelings. You know I care about you--"

"You're a user, Tabitha, a taker. My friends were right all along....so just get the fuck out!!" With his good hand, he punched the back of the sofa. And I figured a slap or a punch was coming my way next. So I scrambled upstairs.

Quickly I stuffed some clothes into my knapsack, clipped my Beanie Babies onto the side strap, raced back down the steps, and fled out the front door. "Fucking bitch--" Adam called after me. But it didn't really hurt my feelings. All I cared about anymore was getting drugs.

I couldn't go to Griffiths because that was Murphy's territory, and I couldn't go to Dimitris because that was Adam's territory. So I ventured into another bar called Zissomos. It was very similar to Dimitris, both owned by Greeks, both with a mostly working class clientele. I sat next to two older ladies. Both wore Friday night eyeshadow and drank Smirnoff Ice. The bartender was a hefty woman eating Strawberry Twizzlers from a pound

bag. Her long dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail and her plain face was bare as the day she was born. She stared me up and down, chomping on her candy.

“Really?” was all she said to me. “You’re 21?”

I slid my fake ID across to her. She held it up to the light, grunting with suspicion.

“Anybody know this girl?” she finally called out to her bar patrons.

“She’s 21-“ An old timer I knew from the VFW spoke up for me.

“Anybody else know her?”

“I just want a sprite and a bag of chips-“ I said quietly.

So she handed my ID back and got me what I asked for.

“Thank you-“ I handed her a five. “Keep the change-“

She raised an eyebrow at my generosity. “All right-“ Then she went about her business.

I had 30 bucks to my name, knew I had to use it to make some friends.

Before I could proceed, one of the older ladies close by, the one with the blonde beehive and pink frosted lips, purred, “I like your Beanie Babies. My grandbaby collects them, too. I been looking for her an owl forever. I went to Walmart, Target, everywhere. How much you want for that one?”

“I’m sorry. It’s not for sale-“

“That’s okay-“ she had a husky voice. A bright red bow was clipped to the back of her hair-do. Even at her age, she was very pretty. In the 1960’s she must have been a stunner.

“I like your bow-“ I said.

“Everybody calls me Betty Bow-“

“Nice to meet you, Betty Bow-“

We chatted for a while before I disclosed my situation, how my landlord had hit on me, I rejected him, and then he kicked me out. That essentially I was homeless.

“Take your lease down to the courthouse and file a complaint-“

“He never gave me one-“

“Can’t your folks help you?”

“They’re dead-“ I tried not to tear up.

“I’d let you crash with me but I live at 3939, the old folks home, and all’s I got is an efficiency-“

Her friend chimed in. “What about Maggot’s place? He rents rooms cheap by the night. And if you can’t afford a room, he’ll rent you a chair in his livingroom to sleep in for five bucks-“

“No. It’s nothing but junkies and jailbirds that flop there-“ Betty Bow protested.

“What’s the guy’s name that runs it?” I asked.

“Gary Maggot. But he’s nothing but trouble. He befriends the addicts with AIDS then convinces them to take out a life insurance policy with him as beneficiary. So he collects when the poor bastards croak. Plus I heard a story one time that a junkie desperate for a fix went to him with 1000 dollars worth of power tools to sell and Gary talked the poor guy down to trading all of those tools for just one pill of dope and an egg sandwich. He’s a monster-“

“Where is this place?”

“Chestnut Avenue. The apartments with all the shitty lawn chairs set up out front. But a nice girl like you don’t want to go there, Tabitha-“ Betty Bow clutched my arm with her bony fingers. “You take the number 27 bus downtown and get yourself a room at the YWCA or the shelter, okay?”

I bought Betty Bow and her friend a round of drinks, gave them each a hug before I headed out. Then I made a bee-line straight for Chestnut Avenue to find Gary Maggot’s flophouse.

Chapter 35

Gary's place was run down but surprisingly clean with some aluminum pinwheels and American flags stuck in the dirt front porch. Nobody sat in the mismatched chairs outside. So I had to knock. I took a step back, just in case some crazy person answered the door and I had to make a run for it.

A bare-chested man with white hair and a white mustache pinched into two curled tips yanked the door open. "What can I do for you, Miss?" He spoke like a gentleman, another surprise.

"I'm Tabitha Williams-" I began. "Somebody told me you rent out rooms cheap here-"
"Come in. Let's talk-"

I followed him inside, where some derelicts were eating spaghetti off paper plates and drinking cans of Milwaukee's Best beer. Most of them had track marks. The furniture was all threadbare. Suspiciously they glared at me as I ambled through with Gary. He lead me into his bedroom. His bed was piled high with clothes. He tugged on a t-shirt.

"Sit-" he said. So I sat on the very edge of the bed.

"What's your story, Tabitha?" Gary lit up a black and mild cigarillo. The sweet fragrance filled the stale room.

I didn't know where to begin.

"You from Hampden?"

"Yes, sir-"

"What's your dad's name?"

"Lee Williams-"

Gary pondered a moment. "Housepainter-" he said. "Was he a little guy?"

"That's him-"

"He did some work for me once-" Then he shook his head sadly, "I

read about him in the paper years ago. I'm sorry about your loss-

"Thank you-

"You related to Kelly Williams?"

A knot of raw emotion seared my throat. "She's my grandmother-" I managed to whisper.

"Kelly stays here sometimes-

"Is she here now?" I couldn't disguise the excitement in my voice.

"No. I ain't seen Kelly in a while. But she left some of her stuff here in a plastic bag last time she rented from me. I reckon she'll be back for it-

Instantly I was deflated.

"She wasn't in such great shape last time I saw her. Some punks over in Patterson park roughed her up pretty good-

"What for?" I asked. But I already knew the answer.

"She was just in the wrong part of town-" he replied discretely. Then he pulled out a yellow pad of paper filled with names and dates and sums of money.

"How long you want the room for?"

"I'm not sure-" I didn't want to tell him about my limited funds. Some sweat trickled down my back. I had only one shot of dope today. Somehow I'd have to find some more real soon.

"It's ten dollars a night. But I'll cut you a deal. Let's say 60 bucks for the week-

"Can I pay for just two nights first and see how I like it?"

"That'd be 20-

I paid him, then we both signed and dated the book. "I do this so there's no confusion over what was paid and when. Got some renters with real poor memories-

Then he showed me to the room. It had a padlock on the outside of the door.

"Lock up when you leave-" he handed me a set of keys. "There's a lotta sticky fingers around

here-“

“Thanks-“

The small room consisted of a thin mattress on the plank floor, a wicker clothes hamper with a hole in it, and a dresser missing two knobs.

“You can fix it up-“ Gary said. “Some of the gals got their rooms looking right nice-“

Wearily, I slid off my backpack, dropping it with a thud into my new home.

Chapter 36

I napped, then hit the Avenue to shop-lift. I hit Mud and Metal first, then Minas. Because their jewelry was made of sterling silver and semi-precious stones.

As the Spring sky faded to evening, I haggled with some girls at the skate park. Most of them were just teenagers working for minimum wage at the local McDonald's or Dominoes Pizza. Plus they knew the jewelry was hot, so I was lucky to get 80 bucks. I could no longer afford to crush my Oxys, so I had to resort to straight heroin which was way cheaper. I learned that good heroin was brownish in color, but the only shit I could afford was white, loaded with cut, like baking soda or laxatives. I bought it from Blake, this lanky teenager with a curved back resembling the upper end of a rattlesnake who hung out on the park bleachers, always in a wife-beater. Because I bought four 20 dollar bags every night, he even supplied me with clean needles he swiped from his diabetic grandmother.

"Don't worry. She's got boxes of the shit-" he told me. "Medicare ships it to her for free-"

What I bought didn't even get me high. Four bags was just what I needed to keep me from getting sick. Day after day I felt like a rat on a wheel. Always chasing money or drugs. The anxiety was endless. In Hampden, the Royal Farmstore on Roland Ave. was the place to score drugs. Dealers and addicts congregated there at the handful of tables and chairs, sipping coffee or Slurpees, eyes glued to their cell phones. Several old guys on medical scooters hung outside, too, selling their prescription opioids. The end of the month and holiday weekends were the worst days to find shit. But even if I was desperate, I avoided this black dealer named Slick who had a reputation for pimping out young girls he got hooked on his supply. Recently one of his girls held back some of her earnings, and he beat her head in with a brick in broad daylight, leaving her braindead on the sidewalk. His black SUV with tinted windows trolled the streets late at night. And Slick's eyes, rarely

glimpsed, were like chambered bullets.

Because I worried about Narcs, I built a network of people I trusted, including two young lesbians, Bethany and Sissy. Sissy played guitar outside of Frazier's for tips, but Bethany was one of Slick's girls. Hillbilly pretty, Sissy sang "Knock Knock Knockin on Heaven's door" with the raspy, heartbreaking voice of a fallen angel. I'd toss ten dollar bills into her open guitar case whenever I could. And in return, she'd find drugs for me in a pinch. When I couldn't find her playing her guitar, I knew she and Bethany were hiding out from Slick. Then I'd have to call this guy Doug whose skin was covered with gumball sized lumps from head to toe, some kind of genetic condition he had. When the streets were dry, Doug could almost always find me something. With laser blue eyes, he was like a terminator, hunting down opiates. Cutting through alleys and hidden pathways, he walked fast and with purpose. His hair was the color of hay. Countless times he saved my ass from withdrawals, showing up looking like he just ran the Boston marathon, with a pained expression and a stitch in his side. Frequently I hooked him up with cash and fronted him pills. And he never did me wrong; on the rare occasion he couldn't find anything, he always returned every penny of my money. I considered him a friend.

Constantly I worried about getting caught shop-lifting and thrown into jail. Sissy told me a story about this girl Helen who got picked up for stealing at the Giant supermarket, hiding steaks and crabmeat in a baby stroller. The cops tossed this beautiful 18 year old girl into a crowded holding pen at Central Booking where she suffered such severe heroin withdrawal it killed her. Other jailed girls begged for help for her as she convulsed on a filthy concrete floor, but nobody came until it was too late.

Although I made friends easily in the bars, it seemed impossible to make friends at Gary's. Most of the women there were older hookers, yet they still decked themselves in tight blue-jeans and cut-off tops which displayed their muffin top midriffs. Daily they curling ironed their frazzled hair. Since I was much younger, they considered me a threat. Even though I

wasn't currently prostituting or chasing their johns. I'd try to be nice and wish them good morning or good night but they all ignored me. Behind my back they snickered, calling me stuck up or gossiping that I was giving Gary head instead of paying my rent.

After a week of job interviews, I finally landed a job at the Walmart in Hunt Valley. I had to ride the lightrail to work. The cashier position paid only minimum wage, so I started looking for a way to line my pockets. I hated the bulky blue smocks, the fake cheerfulness, the paltry breaks, and drone managers. It was impossible to under-ring items and pocket the cash, since everything was barcodes, computerized. Even giving the merchandise away was not possible since an armed guard stood at the exit door checking customer's receipts against the contents of their shopping carts.

But one day I saw my chance while on break in the employee lounge, a drab room with some coffee and snack vending machines. Susan, our manager, was drinking her Sanka at the table beside mine. There were only a few other employees scattered about, slurping ramen noodles or munching candy bars. When Susan got up to leave, her set of keys slid from her pocket to the floor. She didn't even notice. Nobody else did either. Quickly I swooped them up, pocketed them in my smock, and darted outside to make a phone call.

Gary Maggot didn't seem surprised by my proposal. "Okay. I'll rustle up a few guys in a van and be right over--"

For the last few minutes of my break, I unlocked the back door where the delivery trucks dropped everything off. There were wooden slabs piled high with boxed TVs and computers everywhere. Seated lawn mowers and ten speed bikes were all unguarded in the back room, too. I ditched the manager keys then hustled back to my register. For the rest of my shift, my chest was tight with anxiety. But nothing out of the ordinary happened. No alarms. No cops. No nothing.

At five o'clock, I rode the lightrail home, as usual. I tried to call Gary, but his phone went

straight to voicemail.

When I hit Chestnut Ave, I noticed Gary's place was deserted. But then I heard some commotion in the back alley. So I hustled back there to find Gary's white van with a line of junkies, like worker ants, unloading Walmart boxes.

"There's my girl-" Smiling from ear to ear, Gary gave my shoulders an affectionate squeeze.

My cut was 1000 bucks. A month's salary working retail. I quit Walmart that same day.

Chapter 37

Because Gary's eyesight was failing, he had trouble reading street signs. And his pill habit caused him to sometimes nod out at the wheel. None of the other knuckleheads working for him had their license, so Gary hired me to drive the van for him. The last thing we needed was to be stopped by a cop with Gary comatose at a red light, hauling stolen goods.

Gary had a network of contacts. In broad daylight, in back rooms all over Maryland, we loaded up our truck with cartons of cigarettes, expensive packages of meat, cases of crabmeat in tubs, Orioles and Ravens jerseys, Nike and Reebok tennis shoes, and expensive sunglasses. The bounty was never-ending.

When the girls in the house finally realized I was not a threat to their livelihood, they warmed up to me. And with all the income flowing now, Gary hosted bbqs where he treated all his misfit residents to hamburgers, hot dogs, chicken, and ribs. He bought watermelons, sweet corn on the cob, and cantaloupes, too, from the horse drawn wagon which rumbled by on sunlit afternoons. The girls showed me how to sprinkle black pepper on my cantaloupe, how to butter my corn using a heel of bread, how to slather my breakfast Poptarts with a stick of butter.

One summer night, a few of us were sitting outside, drinking Bud Ice and watching fireflies when a lone figure approached us, cloaked in a dark hoodie even though it was 85 degrees out. The figure stopped just short of the porch and in a raspy voice asked, "Gary around?"

"He went on a bus trip to Atlantic City-" Albert spoke up. He was an emaciated alcoholic with a cockroach shaped face, ravaged from acne. "Who wants to know?"

The figure removed her hood to reveal a head of hair which zigzagged in every direction and the ruddy face of a homeless person. She was toothless, her eyes two dark slits. As if she'd been frowning for decades, her mouth turned upside down, like it could no longer hold any

other position. Her chin was clotted with boils. And her cheeks were like corrugated cardboard.

“Kelly Fucking Williams-“ Albert brayed. “Where the hell have you been hiding?”

Suddenly I felt so lightheaded that I might fall out of my flimsy chair. My stomach dropped, my mouth dried up, and my heart kicked frantically.

“Around-“ Kelly said. “Dundalk mostly. Anybody got a smoke?”

I watched Albert pass my grandmother a Newport.

“Got a light, too?”

Albert fired up his Bic for her, and she sucked at the flame, causing two hollows to form in her cheeks. Her dented up and scarred face was a map of human misery.

Then Albert said, “Ain’t you even going to say hi to your granddaughter?”

He pointed right at me.

My scalp tingled, my body zinged with adrenalin, and my palms itched with perspiration. My beer bottle trembled some in my hand. A sip felt like a boulder going down. Would my grandmother even recognize me?

But Kelly just squinted across the dimly lit porch with an expression of utter incomprehension.

“This here’s Tabitha...Tabitha Williams-“ Albert explained. “Lee’s daughter-“

Kelly’s mouth opened up some then, ghosting puffs of smoke my way.

Uneasily she shifted from side to side. “No shit-“ she finally said.

Chapter 38

Out of her hoodie, my scrawny grandmother reminded me of a turtle without its shell. Her claw-like fingers were stained yellow from nicotine. Her rear end was as shrunken as her cheeks. A shawl of gloom surrounded her. I loaded up a paper plate with left-over barbeque food for her. Quietly she sat with us on the porch and devoured every bite.

“I need a place to crash tonight-“ she said to Albert. “Even if it’s just a chair to sleep in-“

“You can sleep in my room-“ I offered.

“I can sleep sitting up. I done it before-“ she insisted, as if this was a point of honor with her.

“All the ones in the livingroom are taken-“ Albert said. “But we got a few left in the kitchen-“

“The kitchen’s fine-“ she agreed. “Is it still five dollars a night?”

Albert nodded.

My grandmother fished a grubby handkerchief, the same color as her nicotine stained fingers, from her jean’s pocket. The handkerchief was knotted in a sack. When she opened it, it was filled with dull nickels and dimes. “This here’s five bucks exactly-“ She handed the wad over to him. “You can count it if you like-“

“I trust you, Kelly-“ Albert said, retying the knot. “So what were you doing in Dundalk?”

“Worked at a 7-11 for a while. The graveyard shift-“

“Why ain’t you still there?”

“Got fired. Late too many times-“ Somebody passed her a beer, and she took a long pull, like a camel sucking up water.

I wanted to say something nice to her. To cheer her up. But something inside told me it was wiser to hold my tongue. I didn't want to scare her off, now that I finally found her, a flesh and blood piece of me. Looking across at her frail frame, her once cheerleader prettiness completely blotted out, I vowed to love my dispirited grandmother like nobody ever did. My mother and father were gone, and I couldn't get them back. That was final. But here was a chance to have a relationship with my father's mother. I would be so nice to her, she would have to love me. I didn't know how, but I would try my best to save her.

Chapter 39

At about midnight, I tiptoed downstairs to check on my grandmother. I found her sleeping, hunched in her kitchen chair with her head lolled to the side. A droplet of spittle burbled at the corner of her shrunken lips. She emanated a metallic odor, an outdoorsy smell, like dried up fallen leaves. Her grubby tennis shoes were pinned under her front chair legs. On the table before her, I spread out a few Newports, a Hershey bar, and a 20 dollar bill. I started to scurry away, but then she stirred, waking with a jolt.

“I didn’t mean to wake you-“ I apologized.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” she cocked her head from side to side, glancing around with alarm.

“Nothing-“ I assured her.

Then she saw the cigarettes and the money I had left for her. Her expression softened. She rolled a cigarette beneath her palm, as if to make sure it was real, then she picked it up. I scrambled to light it for her. “Thank you-“she whispered. “You wanna sit down?” It was like hitting the lottery for a million bucks. I was elated, but tried to act real casual.

“Sure-“ I said, sitting immediately. I glanced at her shoes trapped beneath her chair legs.

“I learned that little trick at the shelter-“ my grandmother divulged to me. “This away nobody can steal your shoes-“ She smoked contentedly, staring away from me now, as if maybe she was seeing a newsreel of her life. I wanted so badly to be able to see it, too.

“Did you hear about what happened to my Daddy?” I ventured.

“I heard-“ she admitted. Her lips were pinched around her cigarette.

For a while it was so quiet, all I could hear was the hum of the refrigerator and my own heartbeat.

“What you doing here?” she finally asked me. “In a place like this?”

“I don’t know-“ My throat felt like it was swabbed with acid.

“You don’t belong here. I can tell by looking at you-“

“But I’m here-“ was all I could think to say.

“How old are you?” my grandmother wanted to know.

“Nineteen-“ I said.

“You finish school?”

“Yes, ma’am-“

“I never did-“ she stared off to the side again, like she was going back in time, seeing the sad progression of her life again.

“I was staying with my Aunt June and Uncle Arly for a while after Daddy died-“

She shut down then. Her face closed up, like a black curtain drawn in a house of mourning. “I’m tired-“ she mumbled.

“Are you sure you don’t want to sleep in my room?”

“I’m fine-“ she lied. But I think we both knew she was far from fine. Her wretched face was a fortress, hiding years of pain and abuse and lies.

When Gary returned from Atlantic City the next day, he gave Kelly a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. He nearly lifted her out of her kitchen chair. “Good to see you, you old bag-“ he crowed.

“You need any hands tonight?” she cut straight to the chase.

Tonight was a very big night. We had an actual burglary planned. A lawyer that frequented the local bars, a gambling addict who played the slot machines, had divulged to some locals at Dimitris that he was going on vacation to Barbados for a week. This news had worked its way to Gary’s ears. He’d already scoped out the house in ritzy Roland park. No alarm system. Ground level windows and a sliding glass door in the back.

"I could use a look out-" he offered.

"When do we start?" she asked.

"Three AM tonight-" Gary said. "Tabitha, are you ready?" He straddled the chair next to mine.

"I'm ready-" I said.

My grandmother did not try and talk me out of committing a felony which could land me in jail for years. This was our normal.

Gary slid a small baggie across to her, and her fingers scooped it up. Inside was a white rock-like substance. She shook it into her dirty hand, stared down at it like it was a nugget of pure gold. Then she fished in her pockets for a crude pipe made from a Tylenol Bottle, some silver foil, and the hollowed out body of a Bic pen. "Got a light?" she asked Gary.

He handed her one, and she shuffled off to the bathroom to get her fix. I had a feeling that if I wasn't there, she would have lit it up right in the kitchen.

"Tonight I want you to go in first, Tabitha-" Gary twirled the edge of his white mustache. "Because you're small and quick. Check desk and dresser drawers for cash and jewelry. The guys will haul out the big stuff, TVs, computers, and the like-"

"All right-"

"If you hear Kelly honking the horn outside, you get out fast, okay?"

"Yes, sir-"

"You need anything?"

I had enough drugs to last me for a week. "No. I'm good-"

He shook out a few pills from a prescription bottle and chewed them dry.

When my grandmother returned she was slack-faced and quiet. I wanted so much to ask her about growing up in the Williams family, to ask her about Pop. But I knew she wouldn't talk in front of Gary, if at all.

“You planning on hanging around here for a while, Kelly?” Gary asked her.

“Don’t know-“ Her lower jaw began to rock steadily from the crack.

“You know you still got a bag full of belongings here-“

“Do I?” She brushed some limp hair away from her face. She was in her own little world now. Her face was an utter blank. Maybe she would run off again tomorrow. I had no idea. So I pushed my luck.

“Hey, Gran-“ I called over to her. “You know that Pop passed?”

“Who?” she mumbled.

“Pop. Earnest Williams. Your father. He was shot outside a Home Depot six years ago. Did you hear about that?”

She jimmied her leg now, strapped her arms around herself, closed off, inaccessible, cocooned. But I kept on.

“He’s buried in Pennsylvania. I can call Aunt June and have her drive you back there if you want to pay your respects-“

I hoped my grandmother might start telling me about her feelings for Pop, if she loved or hated him, anything.

But she was gone. She continued to rock her jaw and hold herself, staring away from me, as if I no longer existed.

Gary said, “You all right, Kelly?”

My grandmother did not respond.

“Must be some good shit I gave her-“ Gary snorted with laughter.

But I knew that nothing was funny. I wanted to hug my grandmother, to comfort her, to share my experiences with Pop. But I had no idea how to bridge the gap between us. I would just have to be patient with her and hope that one day soon she would open up to me.

I chewed my lip with anxiety.

“Don’t worry, Tabitha. Tonight should be a piece of cake-“ Gary winked across at me, and I tried my best to smile back.

At three AM, Tully, a muscular 45 year old, one half Cherokee Indian, and Roman, his stocky twin brother, hoisted themselves into the back of Gary's van with me. We squatted on overturned five gallon paint buckets. Reeking of booze and body odor, the brothers, furniture movers by day, passed a bottle of Mad Dog 20/20 between them.

"You want some, Tab?" Tully asked me. The twins wore soiled bandanas around their shoulder length, greasy black hair, and they carried multiple knives holstered in leather cases along their pot leaf stamped belts.

"No thanks-" I already felt woozy and flushed with warmth from the shot of heroin I had before leaving Gary's.

Gran sat up front with Gary. She drove.

Outside the streets were mostly deserted. I stared through the van window at a blanket of inky sky salted with stars which loomed above us. It made me feel so small. I was a 19 year old drug addicted burglar. Was this the only fate the universe held for me?

My reverie was interrupted as Gran pulled into the lawyer's driveway, crunching gravel. She cut the headlights, turned off the ignition. Then she passed out cheap brown work gloves. Mechanically we all tugged them on.

Me and the twins stayed put, watching nervously as Gary crept around back to the sliding glass door. Using a simple metal bar glass cutter, it was his job to etch a hole, punch out the circle of glass, reach in, and unlock the deadbolt. It must have gone well because he gave us the all clear signal, a single loud whistle.

We scrambled from the van, loped across a perfect lawn rimmed with tulips, over to Gary. A small pond burbled out back. Some goldfish darted beneath the water, reflecting moonlight. A faint chill goose pimples my arms. Quickly we followed Gary into the dimly lit house. Immediately the twins set to work, hefting TVs and computers to

the waiting van with soft grunts. I stood in the middle of the strange livingroom, staring at a brick fireplace, lined with framed photos of a smiling family. They looked like nice people. The house smelled like fresh bread and clean laundry. What the fuck was I doing here?

“Move-“ Gary’s firm hand on my back nudged me into action. I ransacked drawers, snatching check books, credit card bills, and tax forms that Gary could lift valuable personal information from.

In a drug addled haze I flew up some glossy wooden stairs next to search dressers, night tables, and jewelry boxes. There were rug runners in the hallway. The polished floors were slick as ice. As soon as I hit the rug runner it took off like a sled. I skidded, falling on my ass with a loud crash. Fuck. Had the neighbors heard? Were they now dialing the police? I jumped up, planning to return to the van. But the snarl of two enormous pitbulls who slunk out from the master bedroom stopped me dead. Their necks were bigger than any linebackers. Their taut muscles rippled beneath gleaming fur. Canine teeth dripped ropes of gooey saliva. As I backed away, I felt a doorknob jab my back. And then the dogs charged down the hall, straight for me, toe nails clacking, and barking like mad. Desperately I scrambled inside a closet, pulling the door shut tight. The dogs threw their barrel chested bodies at the door. Oh Jesus fucking Christ. Panting, I shrank back and a vacuum cleaner scraped my shoulder. I knew I shouldn’t scream for Gary’s help but I did. I prayed he or one of the twins would come rescue me. But after ten agonizing minutes waiting, I realized that was a pipe dream. They had left me here. I was now in this alone. The pitbulls actually stuck their paws under the door, sweeping the perimeter, trying to get at me with their claws. I could smell their musty dog breath. And then I heard police sirens. My body jangled with adrenalin. From a hanger above me, I yanked down a puffy, full length winter coat, and stuffed myself into it, zippering it all the way up to my chin. I wound several thick scarves I found around my throat. If the dogs attacked, they’d go for my jugular first. I removed the bat length hard plastic vacuum nozzle from its socket. And before I could

reconsider, I burst from the closet door, screaming like a banshee and hacking at the air with my weapon. To my surprise the dogs scattered briefly. I blazed down the hall, jumped half the stairs. The pitbulls twirled back around and gave chase, bounding after me. I just made it across the foyer and out the front door.

I shed the winter coat and scarves, stuffed them into some bushes, then raced down a dark alley edged with some yellow recycling barrels. Several lit up cop cars skidded to a halt in front of the lawyer's house. Car doors flung open. I clambered into the nearest empty barrel, scooching all the way down, like a baby curled up in a womb. Inside it smelled like Griffiths, like mildew and spilled beer. When the light from a flashlight swept across the top of my head, I tried to quiet my breathing, tried to hold my shivering body still. Several pairs of heavy footsteps passed me by. I heard squawks from a police radio and held my breath. But the cops kept going, hustling inside the house.

I gave it just a few minutes before I braved it and birthed out of my hiding place. Cutting through alleys and barely lit side streets, I ran. The night was like a tunnel. My limbs cut through the chilly air like blades. I bawled, tears of rage. I refused to stuff down my anger any longer. It bubbled up in my belly, like a witch's cauldron, overflowing. Gary and the twins had left me to get eaten by two enormous pitbulls and to rot in jail. Those fuckers left me!!

When I finally rounded the corner of Chestnut Ave, I saw the van was parked safely. So I stormed inside to find them all congregated in the kitchen, passing a joint. A dragon of smoke unfurled above their heads.

"You fuckers left me!" I panted with fury. "How could you just fucking leave me?"

"Take it easy, Tabitha-" Gary spoke up first. "What choice did we have?"

"I never would have left any of you!" With all my strength I kicked the kitchen door, actually tried to wrestle it from its hinges I was so mad. Nobody tried to stop me. Nobody said I'm sorry. Not even Gran.

When I was spent, I collapsed in a chair. Roman passed me the joint and I took a long toke.

Gary said, "What's done is done. Now let's move on-"

"Fucking cowards-" I swiped at some tears which sopped my face. "I hate every one of you-"

Gary said, "Did you get the checkbooks and credit card bills?"

I wrestled them out of my hoodie pocket and flung them across the table at him. Then I strode out, up to my room.

"Goodnight, Tabitha-" Gary called after me, like they all hadn't just betrayed me in the worst possible way.

Chapter 41

Up in my meager bedroom, I tugged off my own hoodie and wrapped myself in Erik's jacket. Frequently I did this when I felt depressed and alone. It still smelled vaguely of cinnamon from the exotic dinner which percolated on his stove at his warehouse last year. I sunk to my knees, right on the floor, just kneeled there, fingering Erik's phone number which was folded into a paper square in my pocket. The paper edges were frayed from me rubbing it so much. I wanted to hear his calm voice so badly right now. Through a thin towel which covered my single rotted window, some morning light penetrated through a few small holes. Would Erik even be up this early? I fumbled for my cell phone at the bottom of my bookbag. Gingerly I unfolded his number. I held it for some time. An ounce of hope sparked within me. Would he even remember who I was? Would he be mad I waited so long to call him? I took a deep breath and dialed. It rang four times before somebody picked up. "Hello? Erik?" my voice was just a wisp.

"Who is this?" It was a girl's sharp tone. Holy shit.

"Is this Erik's cell phone?" I managed to squeak out.

"Yes, it is-" She sounded just as delighted to be talking to me. "Who is this?"

"Just a friend of Erik's-" I muttered.

"What's your name?" I could almost see her pinched and sour expression.

"Tabitha-"

"Well Tab-i-tha-" she enunciated my name like it was a mouthful of bad food she wanted to spit out. "This is Erik's f-i-a-n-c-e-"

"Oh-" I was flummoxed.

"Do not call him again-" Every word she spoke was driven hard, like a nail

into a coffin.

I hung up on her, tore Erik's jacket off, hurled it into a corner, far away from me. What an idiot I was to think that a decent, talented guy had actually felt something special for me. I paced, curled and uncurled my fists. If anybody was ever going to love me I knew I had to change, to get away from this awful place. I did not want to end up dead or in jail. I needed a place to heal. Briefly I thought of returning to Aunt June. But I was too embarrassed for her to see the wreck I had become.

I crammed some clothes into my bookbag, grabbed the grand I had saved working for Gary. I left my needles and some heroin behind. Quickly I padded downstairs. Dangling from my bookbag, my four Beanie Babies flopped reassuringly against my back. Everybody was still sleeping. Junkies balled up on sofas and chairs; their sore-crusted faces were ghoulish in the early morning light. I didn't say goodbye to a soul. Not even to Gran. I didn't have a plan. But I felt such relief walking away from Gary Maggot's flophouse that I knew that wherever I landed I was moving in the right direction.

I hopped a taxi to the downtown bus station where I bought a ticket to Ocean City, Maryland. The beach and the carnival there was where I spent the last few hours of my innocence at ten years old, right before Pop got to me. So Ocean City held a certain idyllic allure for my trouble soul. On the bus ride, a clammy sheen dampened my forehead and my hands jittered, just the preview of coming attractions, a terrible withdrawal I dreaded.

After disembarking from the bus, I found a Howard Johnson's hotel and checked in. My room had AC, peach colored curtains, white wicker furniture, and cream colored carpet. I holed up for five days, withdrawing alone.

First I put a DO NOT DISTURB sign on the outside of my door.

Then I watched movies on demand to kill some time. As each hour passed my anxiety spiked, knowing the worst of it was coming. I tried to ignore the pops of discomfort in my hands and feet, electric zings of panic as my body went on high alert, searching desperately for the opiate. *Where is it?* I knew that soon my own body would mutiny against me, its withholding host. I envied people their normal lives, where nobody met shady men in back alleys or pawned everything of value they owned chasing narcotics. How did I ever fall to this low point? The truth is the change happened slowly over time. I was like the oblivious frog cooking in warm water getting hotter one degree after the next, not even trying to escape, as it gets boiled.

I saw the world as a kaleidoscope now. Turn it just a fraction and the picture becomes very different very quick. That weird guy in the bar you used to wonder about was now your best friend. Click. Robbing a compulsive obsessive lunatic with a gun seemed like a good idea at the time. Click. Aborting my unborn baby, why not? Click. Deserting a family that loved me, of course. Click.

Twelve hours in, I was so deeply uncomfortable on a cellular level that I couldn't stay still for more than ten seconds at a time. Sleep was futile. My limbs kicked and spazzed out. I

got Charlie horses in the thin layer of muscles covering my ribcage. I cried out and tried to massage them away but nothing helped. Only medieval torture could be worse.

Endlessly I paced my room just to pass some time. I felt like climbing the walls or breaking them with my fists. That was the easy part.

The vomiting and diarrhea I thought might kill me, from dehydration. I tried drinking water and Gatorade but threw it right back up. I laid on the bathroom floor, as sweat drenched as if I was giving birth. I was one big ache from head to toe. When I felt the need to scream I did, into a folded hotel towel. I got Charlie horses in my legs that were like softballs. I got Charlie horses in my neck, too. Frantically I kneaded my throat. My head twisted and bucked like Daniel Day Lewis' in *My Left Foot*. Soon my whole body curled up like it was deformed. Thank God I left my remaining heroin at Gary's because if I had it I would use it. It was good I couldn't get up off the floor to go searching for any either. My fingers retracted like in a horror movie. I felt like I had a demon inside me that was being exorcised. I couldn't get my head or ass to the toilet in time. I had knots on my head from it banging against the wall and floor. I prayed for mercy, for time to speed up, for ten minutes sleep. This lasted for two days.

But still I held on. Because buried somewhere deep inside of me, like a frozen seed in a hard winter ground, was the belief that something wonderful, something new might actually grow, that my spirit could possibly flourish again.

At the three day mark, the muscle spasms finally stopped. But I still felt like I had the worst hangover in my life. Which was a definite improvement. I was able to pick myself up off the floor and clean up the mess. Then I showered, fell into bed and slept for 24 hours.

On day five, I was able to eat some room service scrambled eggs, hashbrowns, and toast. I drank three cups of OJ. Simple food never tasted so good. Then I slept some more.

By day six, I dressed and headed to the beach. The sky was still overcast.

I was achy, weak, and wobbly. I inhaled the briny smell of the ocean. I passed a father and son fishing. Some seagulls squawked above my head. I turned up my jean legs and waded into the dull green water. I squished my toes against the silty bottom.

The faded gray boardwalk stretched for miles. Off in the distance the carnival seemed shabbier than I remembered it, less glamorous, a skeletal, rusted version of my childhood memories. But I didn't care. My new life started today.

In minutes the sky turned to slate and let loose silvery ropes of rain which drilled my back and shoulders. So I galloped out of the choppy ocean, sprinted to the nearest shop that sold fleece pull-overs. I bought one and tugged it on right away.

Then I ducked into a dive bar right next store, drawn by the clacking of pool balls and the smell of board-walk fries. I sat at a wooden table, ordered a coke and a large paper cup of fries which I sprinkled with Old Bay and malt vinegar. OMG. So delicious. I was licking Old Bay from my fingertips when I felt somebody tug at the back of my hair. I whirled around to find a sunburned Erik smiling down at me.

"Hey, stranger-" he said.

You have got to be kidding me. My breath hitched. I couldn't believe it. I just stared up at his glinting blue eyes, radiant as jewels, in his tanned healthy face. A white macramé necklace encased his almond colored throat. His hair was crimped and a bit wild from the salt water. I'd never seen him look better.

"You on vacation, Tabitha?"

I just nodded. What were the odds of me running into *him* here?

"Can I buy you a beer, pretty girl?"

"Where's your fiancé?" I asked curtly.

"What?" Erik's face was a map of confusion.

"Forget it-" I started to bolt away.

But Erik stepped in front of me. My nose actually bumped his chest. "Wait. Wait.

What are you talking about?"

"I called you the other day. I'm sorry it took so long. But your fiancé answered the phone--"

"Allison--" he sighed heavily. "My roommate. The actress. She's not my fiancé. We're not even dating. She's just a conniving little stalker. She's the reason I left Baltimore. I have zero interest in her. But she won't take no for an answer. I told her to pack up and move out by the time I got back. I was in such a hurry to go that I left my phone. She must have found it. I'm sorry--"

I still wanted to flee, but somehow stayed rooted to my spot.

Erik sucked in a soft laugh. "Look...I think there's a reason we keep running into each other like this, you know what I mean?"

My head filled with white noise.

"I know I barely know you...but...honestly...I missed you--"

My heart banged around inside my ribcage. Suddenly I felt very dizzy. I teetered a bit, and Erik steadied me. "Whoa...You okay?"

"I've been sick--" I said. "But I'm starting to feel better--"

"Good. Come sit with me--" He carried my drink and fries back to the bar. A paper napkin twisted into a regal tree sprouted by his Sierra Nevada and his pack of American Spirit cigarettes. He handed me the tree. "For you--" he offered.

"Thank you--" I twirled the miniature tree in my fingertips, marveling at how a tiny seed can grow into a such a marvelous construct as an oak or a maple tree. The little tree in my hand was just paper, but somehow Erik had infused it with life.

Chapter 43

Two beers later, I felt mellow and relaxed in Erik's sweet company. A tang of ocean clung to him. His feet and flip-flops were gritted with sand.

"You still living in Hampden?" he asked me.

"I'm not sure-" I answered truthfully. "The place I was staying turned out to be an unhealthy environment for me. I'm here in Ocean City trying to figure out my next move-"

"That's cool-" He did not probe for details which I appreciated.

"You know with Allison leaving-" he ventured. "we have an extra room to rent-"

The white noise came back. Did I really deserve this chance for happiness?

"How much is the rent?" I asked.

"500 a month plus BGE...But I could float you for a little while if need be-"

"I could cover it-" It'd be tight though until I landed a job.

"You're thinking about it then?" His smile was electric. It dazzled.

"I liked your warehouse-"

"You'll love it. Besides Allison, the roommates are all cool-"

"How long were you planning on staying at the ocean?"

"I was going to leave in the morning. How about you?"

"Me, too. I could catch the bus and meet you at the warehouse-"

"So you're moving in?" He couldn't stop grinning.

"Yes-" I said. I had made so many bad decisions in my life, it was time to start making a few good ones.

"You could catch a ride with me if you want-" he offered.

"Thank you-" I raised my glass, and we toasted my decision. The rain had

stopped. And sunlight shone through a window behind us, straight through our glasses, spangling a rainbow across the bar.

“To new beginnings-“ Erik said.

“To new beginnings-“ I agreed.

We played a bunch of games of pool, laughing and teasing each other. I tried not to stare at his muscled biceps which flexed every time he stroked the cue.

When the sky turned a soft plum color outside, Erik suggested we head to the carnival. Neither one of us had been yet.

Giddy as kids, we strolled down the crowded boardwalk to where the carnival lights blazed. A brisk breeze chilled our cheeks and fingertips. In the 20 minutes it took us to get there, the sky darkened to night. Music blared from the many rides. A rich smell of raw sugar from the caramel popcorn booth and the cotton candy barrels filled the air. The lit up ferris wheel loomed above us, rotating leisurely. Excited children darted about. Carnies in red and white striped smocks barked for us to visit their shoddily constructed game booths.

“What first?” Erik blew on his fingertips to warm them.

“Let’s try and win something-“

“What do you want, pretty girl, a stuffed toy or a fish?”

“A stuffed toy-“

Our first stop was a rifle game with jets of water you aimed at a small hole to hit a bull’s eye and send your tiny mechanical man racing to the top. A bell shrilled if you won.

Erik and I stood side by side. Snakes of water hissed all around us. Erik tried six times to win for me. But a sharp-shooter marine in fatigues kept winning prize after prize for his four little children who jumped up and down and whooped and hollered for their daddy. We had a blast. Erik shook the marine’s hand.

“Great job, man. And thanks for your service-“

“Pleasure to serve my country-“ the marine replied.

We started to stroll away, but the carnie called us back.

“Here, little lady-“ he plucked down a small floppy eared dog who dangled a red cloth heart from his mouth, “That’s for being a good sport-“

“Thank you!” I showed it off to Erik. “Look how cute he is-“

Next we won five goldfish by tossing ping pong balls into milk bottles.

We handed them out to some watching kids, knowing the fish wouldn’t survive the long ride home.

We sipped hot apple cider and ambled over to the ferris wheel. Another carnie clicked a metal bar across our laps and with a jerky swoop we took off. Erik draped his arm across the back of our swaying seat. I could feel the warmth from his skin against my neck. As the ferris wheel glided, we stared out at the sparkling carnival. Above us the night was dotted with diamond stars. The breeze rustled our hair back. Our seat grinded to a halt right at the top. Brilliant colors swirled all around us, as Erik dipped his head to kiss me. His lips tasted warm and cinnamon-y from the cider. He did not kiss greedily, but with a tenderness that melted my bones to butter. When he stopped, I ached with the loss of it. My whole life kissing was just a mechanical act which preceded mechanical sex; I was just a puppet going through the motions. Tears welled in my eyes at the realization, at what I was missing.

“I waited three years for that kiss-“ Erik whispered, brushing my ear with his lips. “Can I get another?”

Chapter 44

In the morning we met at Erik's truck, a gray Chevrolet, which he affectionately called "The Gray Ghost".

"Growing up in Southern Maryland, me and this truck had quite a few adventures-" he admitted on our drive back to Baltimore. "Me and the Gray Ghost could outrun anybody, even the cops. In the foggy backroads we'd just disappear-"

"What were the cops chasing you for?"

"Just childish pranks. Partying in the woods, smoking a little pot-" Today Erik wore a leather thong necklace which dangled an arrowhead.

"Are you part Indian?"

"One half Lakota Sioux, on my grandmother's side. My full name is Erik "Light Rain" Ewing. I was born in a barn. Right as it started to drizzle outside-"

"A barn?"

"Yeah. I came three weeks early while my mother was feeding the chickens. The mid-wife barely had time to get a blanket down, and out I popped-"

We both laughed.

As his truck ate up the miles, I told him about my mom dying from a heroin overdose, about my Daddy's murder, too.

"I'm sorry, Tabitha-" he said.

His mom's name was Elizabeth, and she was a devout Christian. He had two older brothers and a sister. Elizabeth was a devoted wife and mother, despite their father being a paranoid schizophrenic who terrorized the family for years, accusing his wife of being a porn star and all his children bastards. When he stopped taking his medication he became convinced the whole family was trying to poison his food. He walked

out, and nobody had seen him for 8 years.

“Do you miss your dad?”

“I was 16 the last time I saw him, and I punched him in the face and drove him out a screen door for calling my mother a whore-“

“Shit-“ I said.

“I miss my real dad, the one I remember before he got sick, when he used to take us all hunting and fishing-“

“If you got the chance to see him today, would you?”

“Yeah-“ Erik didn’t hesitate. “He can’t help that he’s sick. But I still got a lot of resentment for him deserting us. My mom took a job at our high school cafeteria just to keep us fed. I ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch for twelve straight years. Of course, all us kids got jobs to help her. I got a newspaper route, my older brothers mowed lawns and shoveled snow, and my sister babysat-“

“Are you all still close?”

“Yeah. I can’t wait for you to meet them-“

It warmed my soul that he was willing to share his family with me right from the start.

“Hey, do you like BBQ?” he digressed.

“Sure-“

“Then we’re stopping at The Stable. Best BBQ in the world-“ He exited the highway and steered us down a long and bumpy side road covered in fallen leaves the color of bananas and ripe mangoes. It lead us past some ancient watermelon and vegetable stands to a wooden shack with a single service window. A crude sign advertised full and half racks of ribs and numerous side dishes: macaroni salad, potato salad, collard greens, baked beans, mac and cheese, and cornbread. There was a dirt parking lot that could accommodate maybe a dozen cars. And there were a

few picnic tables to sit and eat at.

A hair-netted black lady took our order. She wore a white polyester uniform which clung to her full figure. "Full or half rack-" she greeted us.

"Full-" Erik said.

"Sides?"

"One of each-"

The black lady smirked. "For you and who else?"

Erik pushed me forward. "This girl here is an eating machine-" he joked. "Don't let her narrow gage behind fool you-"

I wriggled from his grip. "You are so embarrassing-" I said.

But we all laughed.

Erik and I plopped at one of the picnic tables and stuffed ourselves silly, licking the miraculous sweet and spicy BBQ sauce off our fingers.

"You think that girl Allison will be gone by the time we get back?"

"She better be-" Erik exclaimed, "Else I'll sic your narrow gage right after her-"

"I can hold my own-" I assured him.

"I don't doubt that for a second-" Casually he reached up and brushed away a leaf which had tumbled down into my hair. With all my heart I hoped that Allison would be cleared out.

When we arrived at the warehouse, we found Allison and her things were gone.

“Thank God-“ Erik exhaled a huge sigh of relief, seeing an empty space where Allison’s vanity table used to sit and a row of empty hangers where her costumes hung.

“Come on, Tabitha. I’ll show you to your room-“

It was a large, high-ceilinged bedroom with two enormous windows overlooking a somewhat overgrown backyard. But I could make out a birdbath, and I saw several birdhouses hanging from the low branches of a crabapple tree. Squares and circles of colored glass which rimmed the bird dwellings winked in the sunlight.

“That’s Cindy’s handiwork. She’s a bird fanatic-“

I set my bookbag down.

“Do you need to pick up anything from your old place?”

“Nope-“ I said.

“Well I got an extra futon and some pillows and blankets you can borrow-“

“Thank you-“

“Let’s introduce you to the housemates, okay?”

“I’m ready-“

The open kitchen had two wooden islands with matching slate cutting boards. An array of mismatched cabinets. Cast iron pans hanging from S shaped hooks looped across a ceiling pipe. Fresh basil and parsley grew in the windowsills. A bohemian paradise.

The housemates clustered around one of the islands where a tall dude with shaggy hair and mutton-chop sideburns expertly rolled a joint. My nose perked up at the aroma. I watched his Bic flame shrivel the EZ wider paper as he inhaled deeply. I could hear the sizzle. My body ached for the high.

“Everybody this is our new housemate, Tabitha-“ Erik announced.

“Sup?” the pot smoker, Brian according to his work shirt patch, offered me a toke. “You smoke, Tabitha? Or are you one of them Goodie Two Shoes?”

I bit back my yearning for the high. “No thanks. Pot just makes me paranoid-“ I hadn’t suffered through those agonizing days at the ocean for nothing. I was done with drugs, all of them. I just hoped my excuse would suffice and not make me appear to be a total nerd.

Brian passed the joint to Cindy who also declined passing it to Erik. “No can do-“ Cindy lamented. “I’ve got to be in court for a child abuse hearing in the morning-“

Erik passed the joint back to Brian. “Pot just makes me sleepy-“ was Erik’s excuse.

“Fuck you, slackers then-“ Brian wheezed. “More for me-“ He took another generous toke, coughing loudly, and we all cracked up.

Cindy, a brunette waif in a hippie skirt and tank top, palmed me a can of Natty Boh. “Welcome to the warehouse-“ she said. She had hairy legs and armpits on full display, but the prickly mustache above her top lip, she dyed blonde. Strong yet vulnerable were my initial impressions. I liked her immediately.

“Nice to meet you all-“ I opened the can and let a stream of the ice cold beer slide down my parched throat. “I like your birdhouses, by the way-“

“My boyfriend Rob cuts and saws the wood for me, assembles the thing, then I get to do the fun part and decorate it. We sell them at fairs and farmer’s markets-“

“Cool-“ I said.

From the fridge, Erik removed an ice cube tray, the metal kind with the handle you have to pull back hard to crack and loosen the ice. I hadn’t seen one since Daddy and I lived on Ash Street. Erik wrestled the ice loose, dunked a few in a rocks glass, and sloshed in a few fingers of Jameson. I got a sudden feeling I was really going to like it here.

“Are you in college, Tabitha?” Cindy asked me.

“Not right now-“ I said, feeling inadequate. “But maybe in the future-“

“What are your interests?”

Drugs, Sugar Daddies, and burglary were the first things that crossed my mind. But instead I responded with, “I’m not sure-“ And just to be polite I added, “What’s it like to be a social worker?”

“I see kids with cigarette burns, kids beat with extension cords, kids starved to death, it’s hard. Last week I got a case where an infant was raped. You wouldn’t believe the sickening things I’ve seen-“

“Who would do that to a baby?” Brian’s face contracted with disgust.

“In some parts of Africa the men believe that if they have sex with a virgin it will cure their HIV. The rapist was a Nigerian refugee living in the inner city-“

“Well I hope he’s in JAIL-“ Brian added.

“He is-“

“How’s the baby?” I asked.

“Three surgeries so far, but she’s doing okay-“

“How long did you have to go to college to get your social work degree?”

“Four years. I still have some of my old college textbooks if you wanna check them out-“

“Thanks. That would be cool-“ I said.

We drank more Natty Bohs and shots of Jameson. Brian blasted some Classic Rock tunes, and I helped Cindy make tacos for everybody. Brian’s little pug dog everybody called Chub-chub made the rounds, slurping ground beef off our fingertips.

By midnight, we were all pretty toasted and ready for bed. Erik walked me to my room. “I made up a bed for you-“

The comforter he chose for me was pink and white satin with a bright pink ruffle and a bow. “Where did you get this frou-frou blanket?” I teased him.

“It’s my niece’s. She calls it her “Little Pony” blanket. I bought it for her because she has nightmares sometimes when she and her dad spend the night. I tell her that nothing bad can happen to her if she’s under her special blanket. Try it-“ he insisted. “It works-“

“Really?’ I was charmed.

“Get in-“

“All right-“ I scooted under the blanket, and he tucked it under my feet, wrapping me up like a mummy which made me laugh really hard. I could definitely feel those shots.

“Don’t want your piggies getting cold-“ Erik was pretty drunk too. He pulled the blanket up to my chin, tucking me in. “Sleep well, Tabitha-“Gently he kissed the top of my forehead, snapped off my light, and walked to his own bedroom.

The Little Pony blanket did its job. In my whole life, I never had a better night’s sleep.

Chapter 46

The next morning, I woke to an empty warehouse. Everybody but me was off to work. So I got dressed for interviews and went searching for a job in Hampden. I soldiered my way down the Avenue, from the Lunch Box, a diner owned by Koreans, to Granos, a fancy Italian Restaurant, owned by a cosmopolitan guy named Gino who was a wine expert. "Sweetheart, what do you know about wine?" he asked me, as he sipped an espresso.

"I like wine. I drink it sometimes-" I bumbled. "I know there's red and white-"

"Red and white, eh?" he chuckled good naturedly and patted my hand, "Honey, you need more experience to work here. You need to know about varietals, vintages, bouquets, ports, cognacs, apertifs, and so on. I'm sorry-"

"Thank you anyway-" I slunk out with my cheeks burning.

By noon my mouth was drier than a turkey's asshole (something my Uncle Arly used to say), and all my optimism was depleted. I filled out a dozen applications in total. For the gift shops, I couldn't put my sales experience at Rick's antique store because a call for a reference would be a complete disaster. For the restaurant positions, I couldn't put down my experience at Joe's, for the same reason. I was only at Walmart for three weeks, so I declined listing that as a reference, too. Consequently no one would hire me, citing lack of experience.

With only 22 dollars left after paying rent, I grappled with the idea of shop-lifting. But what if I got caught? What would Erik say? How humiliating would that be? I could not take that chance. So I ambled into Zissomos for a soda, just to rest a bit and quench my thirst. The hefty, stony faced bartender still worked there.

"Just a Sprite-" I said, scanning the mostly empty barroom.

To my surprise, I saw my grandmother sitting by herself at a corner table, nursing a draft beer.

I gave her a shy wave, and she gave me one back.

So I strolled over to her. A stack of nickels and dimes teetered by her drink.

“Can I sit here?” I pointed to the stool opposite hers. Close up she reeked of cheap vodka.

“Knock yourself out-“ she slurred.

“Do you remember who I am?” I asked softly.

Her bloodshot eyes narrowed and she grunted, “I ain’t senile-“

“I’m Tabitha-“

“Lee’s girl-“ she finished for me.

“That’s right-“

I watched her grubby fingers shred a bar napkin.

“Where you staying now?” she asked me. Her head lolled some.

“Someplace better-“ I told her. “With a friend who lives in an artists’ warehouse. With some real nice people-“

“Glad to hear that-“ She took a long pull of her beer, nearly finishing it. Froth dribbled down her infected chin. I figured she was about ready to bolt, so I just dug into her.

“Hey, have you thought any more about visiting your father’s grave?”

Her lips cinched, and her eyes flashed now with unbridled hostility. “What’s it any business of yours? You don’t know me-“ she flung her words at me, like they were an assassin’s daggers, and they landed with deadly accuracy, impaling my heart. I fought tears.

“That’s right. I don’t know you-“ I spat back at her, “Just like I don’t know my own mother. Barely got to know my father. But I knew Pop real well. Just like you did-“

She blinked hard at me. Her gaunt face bobbed some. “Don’t you ever fucking speak to me about that man-“ she hissed.

This may be my one and only chance to ever find out the truth about my grand-

mother's relationship with her father, so I just let loose. "Because of the sick shit I believe Pop did to you, you were a fucked up mother, and now you're a fucked up grandmother, too-" I leaned in close, watched her eyes flutter and roll with panic, like a snared rabbit. "I'm your *family*. Don't you give a fuck about anything? Don't you care about Uncle Arly and Uncle Rusty? Daddy's gone, but two of your sons are still *alive*. Doesn't that mean anything to you?" I ached for my father, for my grandmother, for my uncles, and for me. My sorrow could fill a black hole. "Please talk to me, Gran-" I begged her.

"Fuck you-" Kelly Williams wobbled to her feet. She gripped the edge of the table and shoved it violently towards me, overturning my can of soda which clattered to the floor. Contorted with anger, my grandmother's face briefly mirrored Pop's, a fleeting resemblance which caught me completely off guard.

"No fuck you!" I screamed after her. My hands trembled with rage.

The bartender strolled over. "There a problem here?"

"I was just leaving-" I said.

Outside, I watched my grandmother list to one side, careening up the street towards Chestnut Avenue. Some drab Fall leaves, brown and brittle, skittered around her zagging feet. I fought the urge to chase her. Because I could see now that Kelly Williams was damaged beyond repair.

Chapter 47

Back at the warehouse, I curled up under the “Little Pony” blanket and tried to nap, to escape into oblivion. I craved the needle. It was a hunger that never stopped. It gnawed and gnawed at me. It would give me no peace. At least a physical wound eventually heals. For hours I tossed and turned under satiny pink covers. Desperately I wanted my mother and father back. I missed Aunt June and Uncle Arly terribly, too. I imagined impaling my stomach with a butcher knife, shredding my face until it was unrecognizable, gouging out strips of bloody pulp...

Then somebody rapped at my door. “Hey, Tabitha, dinner’s ready-“ It was Erik.

“I’m not hungry-“

“Come eat with us-“ he insisted.

“I’m not hungry-“

“But I made my famous pepperoni lasagna. Pretty please-“

Wow. He wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

“I don’t feel well-“

Finally he just inched open my door and poked his head around the corner, “Are you okay?”

Instantly I exploded into tears.

“What’s wrong?” he ventured a little closer.

I was so beside myself with misery and grief that I couldn’t even speak.

“Hey-“ he said, sitting on my bed. “Everything’s gonna be all right.

I promise you that. Okay?”

I just shook my head with despair.

“Hey. Hey. Calm down. What happened? Can you talk to me?”

“They all left me-“ The words catapulted from my throat. As if they had gestated

for so long, they could no longer be held back.

“Who left you?”

“Everybody! Everybody just fucking leaves me!” With my fists I pummeled the wall behind me.

“All right. All right-“ Erik said in his calm and steady voice. “Get it out-“

He let me attack the wall until I was spent.

“I need to call my Aunt June-“ I cried and cried. My eyes swelled.

My cheeks burned with salty tears.

“Okay. Call her then. But let’s eat first, okay? Dinner’s ready-“

Dinner’s ready. Such simple and life affirming words. Yet they were just the antidote to my self injurious delirium. Meekly I rose and followed him out.

In the dining room we had an oblong table with six padded office chairs somebody dragged home. Erik held my hand, lead me to a seat. Cindy, Robert, and Brian were there. But nobody commented on my distress. We simply ate, making small talk, and savoring these sweet moments of our lives.

Chapter 48

That night I dreamed I was walking through a dark cemetery. A breeze rustled the drooping leaves in some mossy trees. Fog shrouded the ground and dimmed the moon. I was lost. Fog wound through the many tombstones, too, like apparitions. I hurried to find a gate so I could escape this hideous place. When something brushed my ankle, I jumped, thinking it must be a rat. But instead I looked down and saw a slab of marble which bore the inscription: EARNEST WILLIAMS 1933-2009. Then Pop's big hand punched through the dirt and grabbed my foot. I screamed. His strong fingers shackled my ankle, trying to pull me down with him. Somehow I grabbed onto a tree branch. But the wooden limb was no match against Pop's brute strength. It began to crack. I had sinned over and over. I knew I did not deserve to go to heaven. But to be cast into hell with Pop was a punishment more than I could bare. I prayed to God. Please give me one more chance. Please. Please.

And then miraculously the branch I clung to transformed into gleaming copper. The whole tree lit up. Inch by inch I dragged myself up that flame colored branch, away from Pop. His grip weakened and his ghastly fingers just let me go. I climbed higher and higher into the wondrous tree. When I looked down I saw Pop's hand shrivel and return to the grave. The copper tree glowed, a holy spectacle. I settled in the fork of the tree. Euphoria poured through me, stronger than any drug. My eyes rolled back into my head.

In my bedroom, under the Little Pony blanket, I lay nearly catatonic with bliss. Tears slid from the corners of my eyes and wetted my temples. I thought of the statue of Saint Theresa I saw in an art book at the Barnes and Noble one time. How, upon meeting God, Saint Theresa turned her palms upward like satellite dishes collecting God's love. Like me, her eyes rolled, her body arched, and her toes curled, as if in the throws of orgasmic abandon. If this was heaven, I thought, then let me in.

When my eyes finally fluttered open, I saw my hand was copper colored, bathed in a band of sunlight shining through my bedroom window. Motes of dust dancing in the light rotated and twirled, like stars in the cosmos.

In these magical moments, I believed that God had touched me, even forgiven me.

Or maybe it was just the magic of the Little Pony blanket?

Leaving my bedroom to shower, I nearly tripped over some stacks of Social Work textbooks Cindy had left for me. It took me three trips to gather them all.

After showering and dressing I found Erik sitting alone in the kitchen. A coffee pot steamed. Erik wore a sweatshirt with a plaid shirt over top, and a pair of jeans splotted with dried paint and ripped at the knees. A pan of scrambled eggs mixed with diced potatoes, onions, and green peppers sat on the stove. The food smelled heavenly.

“Morning-“ Erik greeted me. He was sipping from a thermos of coffee.

“Morning-“ I replied back.

“You hungry? There’s plenty breakfast left-“

“Thank you-“ I fixed myself a plate, pulled up a stool next to him, and ate heartily.

“What are your plans for the day?” he inquired.

“Put in some more job applications-“ I groaned.

“You could work for me if you want-“

My fork braked in midair.

“I pay 100 bucks cash a day. It’s hard labor, but it’s only a six hour work day, and we take one hour for lunch-“

“Erik, I have zero construction experience-“

“Can you push a broom, paint a wall?”

“Yes-“

“Then you’re hired-“

“Wow. Thank you-“ Any job was better than no job.

“I can teach you dry wall and how to reconstruct windows-“ Erik promised.

“Do I have time for a shower?”

He sniffed my armpits which made me laugh. “You’re fine-“ he said,
“You’re just gonna get all dirty anyway-“

“What should I wear?”

“Layer up a t-shirt and a sweatshirt at least. Wear a pair of jeans you don’t mind ruining. And thermal underwear helps if you have any. If not, double up your socks-“

“Ok. Give me two minutes-“

The warehouse Erik worked in was full of art studios and tool cluttered workshops. Sawdust and a red gritty dirt coated some of the hallway floors and captured our footprints. In the 1930s the mammoth building was a telephone company. It still had yards and yards of plastic phone wire crammed up in the ceilings and walls. It contained four floors, each rimmed by huge old, wood-framed windows. Most of the windows were in serious need of repair. Panes of glass were cracked or busted, hastily repaired with tape gone brown. Chips and curls of paint scabbed the frames.

Our maintenance office was on the first floor. Shelves loaded with buckets of paint, saws, hammers, electrical tools, jars of nails, nuts and bolts. Erik snapped on an ancient radio, tuned it to NPR, National Public Radio, his favorite channel. Then he turned on a space heater, which was really a food warmer from a defunct restaurant.

“Today we repair windows-“ he informed me. “A window has three parts: the frame which we call the sash, the glass we call panes, and the thin wooden lattices which hold the panes in place we call styles. Now the first step is to remove the old glaze which holds the panes of glass in place. Watch me, okay?”

“Okay-“

Erik dragged a pitiful looking window over to our work table, hoisted it up, and gently laid it down flat. He used a small chisel which he wedged in behind the dried up glaze, then he tapped the top of his chisel with a hammer to pry the glaze up. Hunks and strips of the petrified stuff just popped right out.

“You try-“

But when I tried, the old glaze refused to budge. It was wedged in there, hard as a rock. I only worked out a few crumbles. “What am I doing wrong?” I huffed.

“Angle the chisel in the seam-“

“Okay-“

“Now press down, give it some muscle-“

I did and the adjoining pane cracked in half. “Shit-“ I said.

“We can replace any windows you break. I’m going upstairs to cut out some ceiling pipes. There are six windows on those metal carts over there to work on. Call my cell if you need me-“

“All right-“ I said. “I guess I can do this-“

“Just keep at it, Tabitha. At noon we break for lunch-“ Then he disappeared.

I spent the next three hours muscling hardened glaze from where it had mummified for decades. It was an epic battle just to work out a few inches of the shit. I perspired. I cursed. I paced. I chiseled, pressed, hammered, and dug. I broke four glass panes.

When I had only three windows finished, Erik returned.

“I’m sorry-“ I said. “I have three left-“

“You can do the others after lunch-“ he whistled happily, as he inspected my work. “Looks good-“

“But I only did three-“

“At least you didn’t give up. I had a guy quit one time after working on just one window for six hours-“

That made me feel a whole lot better.

“Nobody said manual labor was fun-“ Erik concluded.

“No kidding-“ I agreed.

Then we headed to Frazier’s for half price burger day.

A perfect gentleman, Erik opened the passenger door of his truck for me, and I climbed in. Did this man have any faults? Who was Erik "Light Rain" Ewing anyway? And did he have dark secrets like I did?

Our bartender at Frazier's was a dimpled blonde with a country twang and an infectious smile. She wore white plastic earrings laminated with the winking Natty Boh guy. "Hey sugar, what you drinking today?" she started with Erik first.

"Yuengling draft--"

"And for you, sweetie?"

"Coke please--"

"I hope you don't mind me calling your boyfriend sugar. Don't worry. I ain't flirting. It's a southern thing. Baltimore people are just a little more uptight then we are down South Carolina--" she prattled on as she poured our drinks.

"We're just housemates--" I assured her. I didn't want Erik to feel uncomfortable.

"I'm working on making her my girl though--" Erik confessed, not all nonplussed.

"My. My. My--" the bartender chirped. "Is she playing hard to get?" She wagged her finger playfully at me. And we all laughed. "My name's Noel--" she said. "You all eating, too?"

"Food definitely--" Erik said. "But ladies first--"

"Awww--" Noel cooed. "I'd keep him, he's so darned polite--" Then she got busy writing down our order.

"Cheeseburger, medium, lettuce, tomato, and fries--" I said.

"Same--" Erik chimed in. "Except make mine medium rare--"

"Heard that--" Then she scampered off to the kitchen.

The clacking of pool balls got my attention, and I turned my head to see who was playing. Then I whipped my head right back around. My heart boomed and my adrenalin flared. I had to be seeing things. I fought to steady my breathing. Then I turned my head again and stared openly. The man shooting pool by himself was the balloon faced boy who'd stabbed my Daddy nine years ago. He was heavier, balding

now, but his tattoos and his ice-colored eyes were unmistakable. How could he ever have the nerve to walk back in here?

“Tabitha? Tabitha?” Erik tapped my shoulder. “Noel needs to know what kind of cheese for your burger-“

My limbs tingled. My thoughts scrambled. I shook my hands to orient myself. I blinked dumbly. I breathed in shallow puffs.

“What’s wrong?” Noel stared across at me, a woman’s instincts on full alert.

I could not find the words, just glared across at the pool table where my father’s murderer nonchalantly played.

Both Erik and Noel followed my gaze.

“Who is that guy?” Noel asked.

“That’s him-“ I choked the words out. “That’s him, Erik-“

Erik caught on fast. “Are you fucking serious? He’s the one that stabbed your father?”

I nodded, clutched the bar so I wouldn’t pass out.

“Do you want me to take care of this?” Erik’s fists bunched and his eyes blazed. The last time a man asked me that question, another man died. And I didn’t want to mess up Erik’s life the way mine was so screwed up.

“No, please, don’t do anything-“

“What’s going on?” Noel dipped her head close and Erik divulged the details to her.

“Holy shit-“ she said. “I’ll call the police-“

“What can the cops do?” Erik said. “The guy isn’t breaking any laws right now-“

“I got this then, sugar-“

“No, I got this-“ Erik jack-knifed to his feet, but I gripped his arm tight. “Don’t!”

Before we could stop her, Noel swaggered over to the murderer with her hands on her hips and a dead-on stare. “Get out-“ she instructed him.

“I only had two beers-“ the guy protested. “I ain’t drunk or causing no trouble-“

“You know what you did-“ she pointed to the door. “Now get the hell out-“

The guy glanced over at Erik and me. His eyes lingered on mine. He took a long pull of his beer. “I done my time-“ he spat. “I’m a free man now-“

“Well you’re not free to come in here. So get the fuck out!” Noel picked up a pool stick, turned it butt end up, slapped it against her palm.

“Really?” the guy started to laugh at her. His body was hard with muscles.

Erik lurched towards them now, but stubbornly I blocked his path.

“We reserve the right to refuse service to anybody for any reason at any time-“ Noel recited. “And you are not welcome here-“

The guy drained his beer, shrugged. “My money’s good anywhere. I don’t need this stinking place-“

“So leave then-“ Noel pointed her pool stick towards the exit.

And my Daddy’s murderer just strolled right past me, cutting me a glance of pure indifference. He chuckled some under his breath, as if finding us all comical. His eyes were like a weak morning light or the distant moon. We watched him amble out. At the last moment, he tossed us back a shit-eating grin.

“Good riddance, Chicken Fucker-“ Noel muttered.

Erik stroked my hair. “It’s all right, Tabitha. It’s all right-“ I clung to him. Visibly, I shook.

Noel stepped back behind the bar then and picked up her guest check pad.

“So what kind of cheese did y’all want on your burgers?”

Her casual heroics really inspired us.

“Cheddar-“ I said. No way was that low life asshole chasing me off.

“Swiss-“ Erik sat down next to me.

“Heard that-“ Noel crooned, scribbling.

“Noel, thank you so much-“ I said. “You are my new favorite bartender-“

“Watch out for us Southern Belles-“ she warned. “Don’t fuck with Dixie-“

After eating our lunch, Erik insisted we take the rest of the day off.

If not for Erik and Noel's support, I believe I would have just withered up in the presence of my father's murderer, maybe even relapsed back onto drugs. I could see now that Aunt June was right: we all need to reach out sometimes for help. So Erik and I hung out with Noel until dark. She served us shots of Jagermeister and Fireball Whiskey. Erik played old country songs on the jukebox: Johnny Cash, Patsy Cline, and Hank Williams, and we sang along. Before heading out we tipped Noel ridiculously, leaving "The Gray Ghost" safely parked until we could rescue him in the morning.

Staggering home, we clung drunkenly to each other. It was freezing out. The temperature had dropped drastically. Frost sparkled the ground, glazed car windshields. Erik shed his Carhartt coat, wrapped me up in it.

"No-" I protested, my breath a swirling white cloud. "You'll freeze to death-"

"Take it, woman!" he insisted. "I don't have skin like you do. I got hide. I'm Tarzan! You Jane!" Erik started to beat his chest and lope around me like an ape. "I'm just a big monkey-" he grunted, dragging his knuckles. He took my hand and grinded it against the top of his head.

"Lord of Greystoke, I presume-"

He stopped acting. "Really?" he said. "You recognize the part I was playing?"

"It's the scene where Tarzan's mother dies-"

"That scene always chokes me up-" Then Erik stopped suddenly, kneeled at my feet, looked up. "Can I cuddle with you tonight? No sex. I just want to hold you, if that's okay?" His eyelashes caught some snowflakes which were just starting to tumble around us.

"Snow!" I shrieked, happy for the momentary diversion.

A frenzy of flakes whirled around us. Erik pressed his cheek to my

thighs.

“Your room or mine?” I asked him. We were like the boy and the girl inside a Christmas globe. I felt giddy with possibilities.

“Yours of course. Since you have the Little Pony blanket-“

Back at home, I scrambled into a pair of Erik’s pjs. He changed in one of the warehouse’s bathrooms. When he returned he rolled up my pants legs and sleeves for me. They were JC Penny fleece, warm as toast.

“Which side of the bed do you prefer?” he asked me. “Left or right?”

“Doesn’t matter-“

“Then I’ll take the side closest to the door. That way if an intruder breaks in he’s got to deal with me first-“

“All right-“ I said. His gallantry melted my heart.

Then we climbed into bed, nestled under pink and white satin. He scooted close. “Goodnight, my love-“ He draped his arm across my waist, twined one of his legs with mine. In seconds he was sleeping, puffing cinnamon breaths from the Fireball whiskey we drank earlier. I clasped his forearm with my hand. My eyelids drifted shut. Like two puzzle pieces, we fit precisely.

The next morning, at work, I finished deglazing my other three windows. I broke only two panes of glass this time.

After lunch, Erik said, "Now we go to step two. Heat gunning the old paint off, so the new paint will stick--"

"I'm ready--" I said.

The heat gun resembled a hair blow drier. He held it about an inch above the window surface, waited for the old paint to bubble up, then scraped it away clean with a chisel. "Now you try--"

For ten seconds, I held the heat gun then dropped it. "Ouuuu. Fuck. That's hot--" I shook my hand to erase the pain.

"Sorry--" Erik exclaimed. "I forgot to tell you to use a safety glove. I don't even feel the heat anymore--"

I tugged on thick safety gloves, then picked up the paint gun and tried again. This time some splinters on the window frame caught fire, and I jumped back. "Whoa!!" I said.

Calmly Erik beat the tiny flames out with his bare hand. "Just smother them and keep going--"

He watched me heat gun off about two inches of old paint. The molten goo bubbled up and I scraped it away. But Erik's side came out clean, a pretty raw wood color, while mine still had an ugly layer of dark gray paint stuck to it. "What am I doing wrong?"

"You're not pressing down hard enough with your chisel to cut through all the old layers of paint--"

Again I tried and pressed so hard I gouged out a chunk of wood.

"Not that hard. You don't need a sledgehammer to drive a tack--"

I just looked at him. This heat gunning shit was going to be worse than the deglazing shit.

“Call me if you need me, okay, Tabitha?” Then he rolled out to put in some installation upstairs.

I stared down at the ugly window. I took a deep breath. Then I set to work. For two hours, one tedious inch at a time, I heat gunned most of the paint from just this single window. I took numerous short breaks, exhaling with frustration. My neck and back ached like crazy.

When Erik returned, he squinted down at my handiwork. “Heat gun it again-“ was his verdict.

Oh. My. God. I wiped some sweat from my forehead. I wanted to hurl this heat gun clear across the room. “It won’t come off. The last layer of paint is stuck like glue-“

Erik took the gun from me, held it patiently above some of the remnants of paint, then scraped it away cleanly with his chisel. “It won’t?” he handed the gun back to me.

“You make it look so easy-“

“Don’t get frustrated. You’re doing great-“

For hours I labored. I heat gunned a second window. It wasn’t perfect, but it was better than my first.

“Okay-“ Erik said when he saw it, caressing the nearly bald wood with his fingertips, “We can sand out any imperfections-“

I nearly cried with relief.

Back home, Erik and I split up. He went to work on his sculptures, and I went to read the Social Work books Cindy left me.

I never realized that child abuse was so prevalent. When it happened to me, I felt like I was the only one. Inside one of the books Cindy had slipped in an application for the University of Maryland. I was filling it out when Erik tapped on my door.

“Frazier’s?” he inquired.

“Absolutely-“ I said.

At the bar, we shared some nuclear buffalo wings and cooled our tongues with Happy Hour Draft beer. I never knew a tongue could sweat!

“Tell me something I don’t know about you-“ Erik challenged me.

Fuck. Here we go. How about my first husband was 77 years old? How about I was a heroin addict for a couple years? How about I was a prostitute and a thief to boot?

“I’m afraid of heights-“ I said.

“Me, too!” he admitted. “But my Dad cured me-“

“How?”

“Well you got to understand my Dad’s a man’s man. Hunting and fishing weren’t hobbies for him, they were a way to put food on the table-“

“Okay-“ I said.

“My Dad’s people were dirt poor sharecroppers. At 15, my Dad’s hair turned completely white from malnutrition. Folks started calling him Whitey. So fear was not an option for my Dad. He saw my fear of heights as a weakness. This one time we’d saved a little money for once and visited Niagara Falls. We took the Maid of the Mist boat out to see the thundering water. We all wore plastic ponchos. At six years old I was scared to death. I cowered behind my mother. This really pissed the old man off. So he yanked me up and held me out over the safety rail and told me to look down-“

“And nobody tried to stop him?” I was incredulous.

“Nope. I guess they all figured he was batshit crazy. So nobody wanted to go near him-“

“Did you look down?”

“I had to-“

“And that cured your fear of heights?”

“Not right away. But it was a first step. When I went to work with him as a teenager, he made me climb up and down 40 foot ladders and walk on sloped roofs with no safety harness. Now I can walk a four inch beam six stories up. Thanks to dear old Dad-“ Erik chortled.

I wanted to add something to this conversation. “My Dad taught me how to swim when I was five-“ I ventured.

“Did he just throw you in?”

“No. He was very patient. He taught me to float first, then to doggie paddle, then to swim under water, then to swim on top. In the summer we went to the free pool every day. Then we’d go to Bella Roma and eat gravy cheese fries-“

“He sounds like a real good father-“

“He was-“

“What was your Dad’s name?”

“Lee Williams-“

Erik lifted his glass of beer. “To Gabriel Ewing and Lee Williams-“

We toasted our fathers, then Erik kissed me for the second time ever, cradling my face in his hands. Instantly the soft kiss lit up my whole body. Was this what it felt like to really fall in love?

The next day was Sunday, our one day off work. At about ten o'clock, Erik rapped at my bedroom door. But I was still curled up in bed.

"Morning, Sleepy Britches-" he said. "You hungry?"

"I'm starving-"

"Come on then. I got pancakes and bacon-"

Happily I skipped out to the kitchen. We sat together at one of the islands to eat. I was smothering my breakfast with maple syrup when somebody knocked insistently at our front door. Erik hopped up to answer it. Then I heard a familiar voice which made me drop my fork. My heart lurched. It was Gary Maggot. He was deathly pale and clutching a plastic bag.

"Can I help you?" Erik asked him.

"Somebody told me Tabitha Williams lives here. Is that true? If she does, I need to speak to her-"

"Tabitha-" Erik called me over.

Slowly I went. I did not invite Gary in. "What's wrong?" I knew from his expression that something really bad had happened.

"Your grandmother passed away last night, Tabitha-"

It was drop dead quiet for a few moments.

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you-" He shuffled uncomfortably, bunched his lips, whisked away a tear, stared down at the floor.

"How? Drugs?" My voice faltered a bit.

"No. A heart attack the paramedics said. We found her this morning slumped in her chair-"

We all stood awkwardly in the doorway.

"I have some of her things here. I thought you might like to have them-"

"Thank you-" Numbly I took the plastic bag, her paltry belongings.

“Will you alert her family?”

“Yes-“

“I can help pay for the funeral if need be. You still have my phone number?”

Mechanically I nodded. Erik touched my back. “You okay?” he asked me.

“I’m sorry, Tabitha-“ Gary said softly. “You know I really liked your grandmother. Everybody did-“

“Thank you for coming by-“ I replied woodenly.

“You’ll call me then with the funeral arrangements?”

Again I nodded.

“I’d appreciate that-“ Gary looked across at Erik. “This your boyfriend?”

“Yes, sir-“ Erik responded for me, and they shook hands.

“Take care of her-“

“I will, sir-“

We both watched Gary shuffle away. Then Erik shut the door. He embraced me. The plastic bag rustled between us. “Do you need to be alone or would you prefer company right now?”

“Alone, please-“

“All right. But if you need me, you know I’m here for you-“

“Thank you-“ Leaving my breakfast untouched, I trudged to my room, shut the door, sat on my futon. I gripped my grandmother’s bag. After a while, I overturned it, and her few belongings tumbled out onto my bed. There was some ancient make-up and goey nail polish, a hairbrush, a fake leather belt with a tarnished silver buckle, a soiled fringed handbag made of denim, a broken banana comb, a slew of stretched out hair scrunchies, and an envelope with my name written across it in a surprisingly neat and loopy script. The envelope was dusted with some of my grandmother’s old blusher which had crumbled at the bottom of the bag. My heart beat a little faster, and my breath quickened. I opened the envelope,

found a single page letter. My eyes ate up the words.

"Dear Tabitha,

The last time we ran into each other at the bar, you asked me about some things. But I was not yet ready to tell my story. Well now I think the truth needs to finally come out. You are right about Ernest Williams. That man was a monster who destroyed my life. I've been running from him for years, without looking back or worrying about the messes I left behind. I'm sorry that I didn't speak up sooner, because maybe if I had he never would have got the chance to hurt you, the same way he hurt me, over and over again. But he is dead now. So I guess there won't be justice for either one of us William's girls.

The reason I ran away from home so young is because Ernest Williams (my father) is also your uncle Arly's father. I am 100% positive since I never had relations with any other man at that time. I left because I couldn't bare to look at that baby. Because I was afraid I might hurt him, an innocent child. I don't have a good excuse for the way I treated your father or Uncle Rusty though. Just that I was a messed up drug addict and still am today. But Tabitha, you are still young and have a chance. Don't be like me. You are a smart and beautiful girl and you can do so much better for yourself. I'm real sorry I haven't been there for you or for my boys. I don't know if I'll ever have the courage to give you this letter. Maybe one day.

Your "Gran",

Kelly Williams

I dropped the letter, covered my face with my hands and howled.

In seconds, Erik was right beside me. "Hey. Hey. I'm here. Look at me--"

But I wouldn't. I curled onto my side, away from him, and bawled.

"All right, Get it out. Get it all out--" Erik rubbed my back with a soothing

rhythm. I cried for hours, until I ran out of tears. He stayed with me the whole time. When I finally lifted my face to look at him, he was just a blur. My eyes were nearly swelled shut. My body and soul ached. "I need to call my Aunt June-" My voice was a rasp.

"Okay. I know. But first let's take care of you. I'll be right back-"

When he returned he had a cold wet washcloth. Gently he swabbed my face. He handed me an ice cold can of coke. "Drink some of this-"

I took a few sugary sips.

"Is that a letter from your grandmother?" He pointed to the envelope on my bed.

I reclaimed the letter, gripped it tight. "Yes-"

"Are you upset because of the letter?"

"Yes-"

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't know-" My face crumbled. I strapped my arms around myself.

"Can I read the letter?"

"No-"

"It might help. Get it all out in the open. I know you've been through a lot of painful shit. We both have. But I'm here for you, okay? I won't let you down. You can trust me-"

At this point in my life, I knew if I was really going to heal I needed to reach out for some help. He had helped me before. So with shaky fingers, I ferried the letter across to him.

Quickly he read it. His lips blanched, and he shook his head despondently. His eyes glistened with tears, but he held them back. "Is Ernest Williams your grandmother's father?"

I nodded. "My great grandfather-"

"Holy fuck-" Erik exhaled softly.

For some time we both just stared down at the letter.

Then Erik slipped his hand into mine. "The secret is out. The hard part is over. Do you realize that?"

"No, it's not, Erik. How am I gonna tell my Aunt June and Uncle Arly this?"

"The same way you told me. Show them the letter-"

"This will kill them. Especially my Uncle. Maybe I shouldn't tell them-"

"Your uncle has a right to know, as painful as this all is-"

"Fuck-" I exhaled now, too. I was exhausted, but at least I had somebody on my side, somebody to share the burden.

"Call them right away. Tell them about your grandmother passing and invite them to stay with us at the warehouse. We've got plenty of room. Maybe after the funeral, you can show the letter privately to your Aunt. I think it's best if she's the one who tells your uncle-"

"You're right-" I agreed.

"Do you want some privacy to call her?"

I gripped his hand. "No, please stay with me-"

Immediately Erik sat on the edge of my futon. I held my phone. I paced. I took some deep breaths. "You can do this-" Erik counseled me. "I know you really miss your aunt. So go on and call her-"

"I just don't want her to hate me after she finds out. You know, kill the messenger-"

"Call her, Tabitha-"

I dialed. It rang four times before she picked up. "Hi, Aunt June. It's Tabitha-" I began. She sounded genuinely happy to hear from me. So I pressed on, told her about Gran passing.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I'll call Arly and tell him right away. We'll

drive down to Baltimore and make the arrangements-" she said.

I swiped at a few fresh tears. I invited her to stay with us, and she agreed.

"I'll see you in a few hours... I love you, Aunt June-"

"I love you, too, baby. We're on our way-"

I hung up the phone and Erik clasped me in his arms. "Okay. Okay. You're doing great, Tabitha. The ball is rolling-"

Chapter 54

When my aunt and uncle arrived three hours later from Pennsylvania, Erik and I had prepared lunch for them. A hearty beef stew which we threw all our nervous energy into, washing and peeling and chopping the vegetables, braising the meat with flour and spices. The warehouse smelled delicious. Fresh coffee dripped into a pot.

“It smells heavenly in here!” Aunt June exclaimed when she arrived, hugging me.

I introduced Erik. He shook their hands, invited them to sit and eat. “I hope you folks are hungry-“ he said.

We all sat in this big booth that was nestled in the corner. It was scavenged from a restaurant that was going out of business. But it was still in great shape. The warehouse was full of stuff like that. One whole wall was filled with traffic signs that roommates over the years had dragged home, finding them on the side of the road or at flea markets. Uncle Arly’s eyes scanned the numerous metal signs- a STOP sign, A YIELD sign, and a 55MPH sign. “Don’t invite no state trooper in here-“ he kidded.

I filled Aunt June and Uncle Arly in about my adventures with Gran. I left out the burglary part. I was saving her letter for after the funeral. Also I told them about my run in with my father’s murderer at Frazier’s.

“You’re kidding me?” Aunt June could not believe it.

“Don’t worry, Aunt June. Noel, the bartender, barred him for life-“

“I wish I would have been there-“ Uncle Arly divulged, sipping his coffee.

“He would have got a lot more then barred-“

We ate, then made a bunch of phone calls to the Burgee Funeral home to make Gran’s final arrangements. The funeral was scheduled for Tuesday at two in the afternoon. Aunt June and I made up some fliers to hang in Hampden so people would know about it. Then we all piled into Uncle Arly’s SUV to deliver them.

It was too cold to walk. The wind sliced your skin like a knife. The frigid air took your breath away. The trees were bare, stark looking. A phantom moon was barely visible in the pale sky above us.

Uncle Arly drove us around, then Erik hopped out and stapled the fliers to some telephone poles. "It's too cold for you ladies to get out-" He ran into the bars Gran frequented, too. Lastly I dashed out and hung one up in the laundromat.

Then we all went to Frazier's for a beer. I had just a soda. Erik and Uncle Arly chatted about carpentry, while Aunt June and I caught up. I told her about my plans to attend college next year, and she was delighted. "I'm real proud of you, Tabitha-" she said. "You always were a bright girl-"

That night, the four of us played cards back at the warehouse. We didn't have a regular deck, but we had a deck of UNO cards which belonged to Erik's niece. At the end of the first game which Aunt June won, Uncle Arly turned to me and asked, "While you lived with her at that apartment place, did my mother ever ask you about me or Lee or Rusty?"

"Yes-" I lied. "She told me she'd heard about Daddy passing. Then she asked me how you and Uncle Rusty were doing. I told her about Uncle Rusty being in jail and all. Shit! We got to get in touch with Uncle Rusty-"

"I'll write him-" Uncle Arly promised.

"How much longer will he be in there?" I asked.

"He gets out next year-"

"Was she still into drugs real bad?" Uncle Arly asked me about his mother.

I nodded my head.

"Drugs were her whole life-" Uncle Arly shook his own head now with profound sadness. "How do you abandon your own children and live with yourself?"

I thought about giving him Gran's letter. Because Uncle Arly had a right to some

kind of explanation as to why his mother left him and never looked back. But I glanced at Erik, and he gave me a little head shake to indicate that he didn't think the time was right yet.

"Are Dolly and the grandkids coming for the funeral?" I asked my aunt.

"No-" she said. "Dolly and Mark are on vacation, Skeeter is deployed in Afghanistan, and Bugs and Arly Junior got exams-"

"I'm beat-" Uncle Arly yawned.

"I'll show you to your room-" Erik lead them to his bedroom. He'd rigged a wooden frame for his futon which raised it about a foot off the floor now. He thought my aunt and uncle would be more comfortable that way. We topped it with fresh sheets and a plaid quilt. Warily my relatives dropped their luggage by the night table.

Aunt June picked up one of Erik's little copper trees and turned it in the light.

"Oh, what a pretty thing-" she declared.

"Erik makes them. He's a sculptor-" I told them with pride. "Remind me to show you his horseshoe chairs in the morning. Uncle Arly will love them-"

I wished them goodnight. Then we left them to rest. Because tomorrow was a day that would change my Uncle Arly's life forever. My Aunt June's, too.

Chapter 55

Back in my room, Erik and I plopped down on my futon. He stared around my bare room. "I'm going to make you some furniture-" he said.

"You've helped me enough-"

Then he jumped up, strolled over to my bookbag, inspected my Beanie Babies. "Did your Dad give you these?"

"He inspired them-" I said. I had added the little stuffed dog that Erik won for me at the fair. He seemed pleased to see it with my other prized items.

"You got to be exhausted-" he said. "Let's go to bed-"

I just looked at him.

"Oh, right...I'll change in the bathroom and give you a few minutes-"

Five minutes later, Erik returned clad in a t-shirt and boxer shorts. He climbed into bed with me, then checked himself. "Oh...Is it okay if I sleep in the bed with you?"

"I don't mind-"

Immediately he snuggled up to me. "Tell me a story-" he said.

"Like what?"

"Just a childhood memory. Anything-"

"I don't have a lot of happy stories to tell you-" I admitted.

"I'll pick the subject-" he insisted. "Ice cream-"

"I don't know-"

"I'll go first-" he caressed my stomach as he reminisced. It was hard to concentrate on what he was saying, his simple touch felt so good. "When I was seven, my Dad brought home a box of fudgesicles from the grocery store. We all got one. He even let us take them up to our bedroom to eat. I was real sleepy. So I curled up in my bed which was covered in a puffy white quilt. I called it my "Snowflake" blanket-"

“Do you name all your blankets?” I kidded him.

“Shut up-“ he kidded back. “Anyway the boys’ bedroom was up in the attic and in Winter it was freezing cold. So I adored this quilt, it kept me so warm. Unfortunately I fell asleep holding my ice cream, and when I woke up, it had melted all over “Snowflake”. My Dad never let me eat ice cream upstairs again-“ Erik laughed. “My mom tried to wash my favorite blanket, but the stain wouldn’t come out. She even showed me how I could just turn the blanket over and not see the stain. But I cried my eyes out anyway. I was kind of a sissy kid”

“Nuh-uh-“ I protested.

“Yeah, really-“ he insisted. “I was the family dumb-ass, too. Every night my mom spent hours trying to help me with my homework. But I just couldn’t fathom it. It wasn’t until 10th grade that my teacher finally realized that I was severely dyslexic-“

“Why did it take your teachers so long to figure it out?”

“Shitty public schools, I guess-“ Erik shrugged. “I’ve read maybe two books in my whole life-“

“But there are classes you can take to get better, right?”

“Expensive classes-“ he said. “I tried but the exercises they gave me triggered the worst migraines, that I had to stop-“

“You’re not stupid-“ I assured him.

“My sister is a surgical nurse. One of my brothers is an architect and the other is an engineer. My father was some kind of genius. I mean he could do long division in his head. And he never forgot a measurement on any job he ever did. He’s never seen my sculptures, but I guarantee you if he did he’d shake his head and say *Boy, why don’t you build a house or a boat, something useful?*”

“I love your sculptures, Erik-“

“Thank you, Tabitha. That means a lot to me... Now you tell me a story-“

“Ice cream-“ I wracked my brain. “Okay....one time Daddy took me to this

restaurant called Reynolds. There were red booths and glass mirrors along the walls. Pictures of Elvis Presley hung everywhere. Each booth had a little jukebox which was attached to your table. You had to press the buttons to turn the selection pages, then drop your quarter in the slot. Daddy let me play four Elvis songs. Then he ordered me a banana split. It was a three scoop job bigger than my head. I ate the whole thing. Daddy even showed me how to tip the ice cream boat back and get the last few drops. Outside, walking home, I threw up all over the sidewalk. After that Daddy started buying me the kiddie cone-“ I laughed, remembering.

“That’s a great ice cream story-“ Erik laughed, too. “Sweet dreams, baby-“ he flicked off the light. “Rest up for tomorrow-“

He fell right to sleep. But my thoughts raced. All night long I tossed and turned, rehearsing how I would present Gran’s letter to my Aunt June. I prayed for the strength to do it.

Chapter 56

The Burgee Funeral home had blue carpet, a sea of tranquility which soothed the eyes. And the fragrance of some modest flower arrangements situated by my grandmother's coffin wafted through the crowded room. I was surprised by the turn out. Only Gary Maggot and my Uncle Arly wore suits. The other men wore clean blue jeans and long sleeved dress shirts. The women wore black skirts or dresses.

In her casket, my grandmother looked grim. Her lips were downturned, as usual, but her emaciated face was powdered and lightly rouged. I'm sure the funereal home did the best they could. Since I don't believe it's possible to erase a lifetime of pain with just some make-up. Her hair was washed and curled, her bangs hair-sprayed into a tiny cloud above her forehead. Like mine, her fingernails were bitten to shreds. She was attired in dress pants and a pale green blouse with silver threads woven through it and a flowing bow knotted at her throat. The outfit was incongruous with her worn, sore-studded face. It was probably the donation of some pious church lady.

Erik and I milled about, thanking folks for coming, hugging them and shaking hands. The junkies mostly congregated by the coffee station, loading the free coffee with extra sugar and scarfing the free donuts.

At two o'clock, a nervous balding counselor from a nearby recovery house for addicts, clean himself only a few years, spoke briefly. He did not know my grandmother, but he had walked a similar hard road he confessed. He prayed that she was in a better place. He quoted some scriptures from the book of Psalms. Then he asked if anybody would like to say a few words about Kelly Williams. At first nobody volunteered. "Don't be shy-" He said, "You don't have to be eloquent. Just a few plain and simple words will do-"

Finally, Susan, the lady with multiple personality disorder I knew from Griffith's, stepped boldly forward. "Kelly Williams was one of the first people I met

when I moved to Hampden. Yes, we drank in bars and did other things that we're not proud of, but she welcomed me here with open arms. She would give you her last cigarette if you needed it. She was always a shoulder for me to cry on, and I thank her for that--"

"Thank you for those kind words--" the relieved counselor acknowledged Susan. "Anybody else?"

I prayed for somebody else to step forward for my grandmother. I wondered if Uncle Arly would. He'd been sober and silent since we arrived.

Gary Maggot stepped forward next. He cleared his throat. "Kelly Williams was a tough old bird--" he started awkwardly, which made some people laugh. "But she was honorable to her friends and to me. She never asked for charity. If she didn't have the funds for a room or a chair at my place, she'd make do, sleeping in the park or on a stranger's porch. If she gave her word about something, she kept it. I know this world was not kind to Kelly Williams, but she pressed on. She took her joy where she could find it, in the little things in life, like an all night card game or a meal of Spaghetti O's and Kool Aid with her friends. She will be missed--"

"Anybody else?" the counselor continued.

It was very quiet. Nobody else wanted to volunteer. So I stepped nervously forward.

"I'm Tabitha Williams--" I stated. "Kelly Williams was my grandmother--" I took a deep breath, unsure what to say next. "We were just getting to know each other when she passed... She was a complicated person. She had her demons, just like a lot of us do... But in the end, she found the strength to open up to me and share some difficult things, which really helped me. And for that I will always be grateful to her....I'm real sorry I won't get the chance to know her better--" With my fingertips I squeegeed away some tears. Some ladies from Gary's gathered me into their fold, embraced me. They swatted at some tears, too.

"Thank you, Tabitha...And thank you all for coming--" the counselor concluded his

ceremony.

Since my grandmother was getting cremated, there would be no burying her. The viewing and cremation alone cost 5000\$. A burial would double that.

In the parking lot, Gary Maggot stuck to his word and handed my uncle an envelope which contained 25 hundred dollar bills. We all thanked him.

“You sure you all don’t wanna swing by my place for some food?” he offered. “I got roast beef, mash potatoes, and green beans, the works...-“

“No thank you-“ My Aunt June said, “We’d prefer to grieve privately at home-“

“I understand-“ Gary assured her. “Good luck, Tabitha-“ he gave me a half hug, and I half hugged him back.

At the warehouse, we drank coffee and ate left-over beef stew and a salad Erik whipped up. Erik and Uncle Arly volunteered to do the dishes. “Why don’t you show your aunt your bedroom, Tabitha?” Erik suggested, passing me a knowing look. It was time. My heart hammered in my ears and my chest felt tight, as I lead my aunt inside my nearly empty room.

“I got a dresser I could give you-“ she offered gently.

“Aunt June, I have something really important I need to show you-“ My hands trembled. My throat dried up. I clutched my grandmother’s letter.

“Okay-“ she gave me a quizzical look, as I handed her the letter. She read it, stood absolutely frozen for a few moments, then staggered back against a wall.

I rushed to her. “Aunt June?”

“God, no-“ she moaned. “Oh please God, oh God no-“

My lips quivered, and my eyes overflowed with tears. “I’m so sorry-“

In a daze, she read the letter again. Her face was as pale as Gran’s was in her casket. Her lips nearly evaporated. Her hands grasped at her halo of permed, ginger-

colored hair, yanking it. Her eyes rolled like loose marbles. I enclosed her face in my hands. "Aunt June, look at me-" I commanded.

"Not Pop-" she wailed. "Not Pop. How? How? She's got to be lying-"

I squeezed my aunt's face, "She's telling the truth. I know. Because he did the same thing to me for years-"

"No, Tabitha, no-" she moaned with despair. She slid her back down the wall, collapsed on the floor, hiding her face, sobbing.

I just sat on the floor beside her, waiting for her to uncover her face.

When she did, her cheeks and neck were blotched with patches the color of rare roast beef. "Why didn't you tell me, Tabitha? How old were you when the abuse started?"

"Ten-"

"Goddamn that sick motherfucker-" I had never heard my aunt curse before. "He's lucky he's already in the ground-" Her pudgy fingers curled into tight fists.

"I'm so sorry-"

"It's not your fault, Tabitha. You're the victim here. I hate myself for not seeing it. I swear to you, I didn't know-"

"I believe you, Aunt June-"

"I don't know how I'm gonna tell Arly this-" She bit at the skin around her fingertips, another thing I'd never seen her do.

"Show him the letter. It's the easiest way-"

A tap at the closed door startled us. "You gals okay in there?" It was Uncle Arly.

"Yeah. Just having some girl talk-" I answered for Aunt June who quickly folded Gran's letter into a small square and pocketed it.

"All right then-" he left.

With relief, we listened to his boots clomp away.

“Aunt June, I think it’d be best to tell him at home where he can have some privacy to process this-“

“You’re right-“ she agreed.

“You have to be strong for him-“

“I want to arrange some counseling for you, Tabitha. Will you let me do that?”

“Okay, Aunt June-“

We embraced each other for a long time, our bodies cemented together, as one.

The next morning, Erik and I walked my aunt and uncle to their SUV. A faint frost etched their windshield. I passed my Aunt June the small copper tree she had admired the day before. “Erik and I want you to have this-“

“Thank you for everything. You are a treasure, Tabitha-“ The sturdy little tree gleamed, refracting sunlight, in her hand.

“I’ll call you tomorrow-“ I promised.

“Tomorrow-“ Aunt June repeated, and for the briefest second panic flashed through her eyes. But then she climbed resolutely into the SUV, gave me her bravest facsimile of a smile, and they drove off.

For the rest of the day and all night long, I prayed for her.

The next morning, Erik and I drove to work as usual. The wind gusted. Some erratic droplets of ice flitted about. They plinked against our windshield.

Inside our office was freezing, even with the heater turned on high. I shivered, and our breath puffed white clouds.

“Step three in repairing windows is the easiest step-“Erik told me.

“Outstanding-“ I said.

“You just sand any imperfections from the wooden frame-“ Wearing a respirator, he demonstrated how to operate the electric sander which rotated a round piece of sandpaper at high speed to remove any traces of old paint. He made me wear a respirator, too. It was a clunky contraption with goggles and a snout-like filter which strapped around your head. I felt like Darth Vader.

“I don’t think there’s any lead paint in this building, but we’re not taking any chances-“ he handed over the sander. “See you at lunch-“

Clouds of dust swirled through the air and gritted every surface, as I sanded. Every two minutes my sand paper kept spinning off its Velcro bed, and I had to chase it. I persevered. But when every two minutes became every 20 seconds, I called Erik.

“Press down more firmly on the sander-“ was his advice.

I tried that, and the sander flew right back off again.

So I called Erik back.

“Just keep at it-“ he said, “Work it out-“

I spent three hours sanding the best I could, chasing the damn frisbee of sandpaper over and over.

Mercifully lunch time finally came. At Frazier’s we spent exactly one hour eating then drove right back to work.

“On to step four-“ Erik announced, after examining my six sanded windows and

giving them a thumbs up. "Time to replace the broken window panes--"

I watched Erik trim down some sheets of glass to fit the empty holes. I flinched whenever a pane broke in his gloved hand. When he had a stack of cut panes, he showed me how to nestle one into its' rectangular spot, and adhere it with these small black metal tabs he called "points". But I could not figure out how they worked. He just showed me, but still I was stumped. Calmly Erik turned the tab over for me. "The points face up, not down--" he said. "Use your chisel to dig the tiny prongs into the wood--" He slid it in perfectly. I repeated his actions, but the prongs wouldn't bite the wood. "Press harder--" he instructed. I did but couldn't muscle the point into place.

"Fuck--" I huffed.

Then he took the chisel from me and slid the point right in, like the wood was butter. "Work the point. Search the wood for the soft spot. Don't just ram it in there. Okay?"

I glared at him.

"Don't be a Grumpy Britches--" He passed me the small box of points.

He returned to cutting glass, and I worked on setting the panes. After a while I started to get the hang of it. Erik was right. You had to maneuver the point until you found a soft spot in the wood, then you simply tucked it in, securing the glass. Together we labored until we had new panes set in all six windows. Erik stepped back to admire them. "We're getting there--" he said.

And I had to agree. The once nearly ruined windows were starting to come to life.

Chapter 58

Back at the warehouse, I called my Aunt June from my bedroom while Erik prepared dinner out in the kitchen.

“Is Uncle Arly okay?” I asked her right off.

“He’s out in his workshop in the garage, drinking Jack Daniel’s-“

My uncle never drank more than a few beers.

“Shit-“ I said.

“I think he needs to get good and drunk and cry it all out. After reading the letter, his face just turned to stone. Then he slammed out the door with a fifth, and he’s been in the garage ever since-“

“I don’t mean to scare you, Aunt June, but does he have any guns?”

“Don’t worry. I hid all his firearms. I don’t think Arly would take his life. He loves his children too much. But in a situation like this you never know. I’m going to go check on him right now-“

“Ok. Good luck, Aunt June-“

After hanging up, I joined Erik, and he poured me a glass of red wine from an over-sized bottle. Something was boiling on the stove.

“What’s cooking?”

“Gnocci-“

“What’s that?”

“Gnocci means old potato. Because the oldest potatoes-the ones with the eyes- are the best to use. On the farm you don’t waste nothing. My mom would even peel off the eyes of the potatoes to replant, then use the rest to make gnocci....potato dumplings-“

I was just starting to relax when some unexpected pounding on the front door made me nearly jump out of my skin. Even worse, somebody shouted, “FBI! Open the door!”

Astonished, Erik and I just froze. "FBI!" a booming voice repeated. "Open the door!

Erik scrambled to answer it. But I stayed put. I had a sinking feeling that the long arm of the law had finally caught up with me. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Maybe Rick filed some charges against me for stealing his antiques? Or maybe Murphy's family was trying to get restitution for all the fraudulent checks I wrote? I didn't know which would be worse.

In our doorway loomed two FBI agents. One male and one female. Both attractive as soap stars. They wore dark blue jackets with FBI emblazoned in white. Their expressions were mannequin-like. "We're looking for Tabitha Williams-" the female began.

"That's me-" I admitted softly. I didn't see any handcuffs or a search warrant.

"Ma'am, we need to speak to you privately-" the male said.

"All right-" At least whatever they were here for Erik wouldn't know about it right away.

Erik gave my arm a reassuring squeeze. "I'll be in my room if you need me-" But he looked back with concern and puzzlement.

I turned off the gnocci and stood at an island with the agents.

"I'm Agent Turner-" the lady said. Her face was make-up free and her hair was brushed back into a glossy ponytail. "And my partner is Agent Montgomery-" From an inside pocket, she produced a photograph. "Do you recognize this man?" she asked me.

My heart jolted. A vein pulsed in my forehead. This might turn out even worse than I imagined it.

"Miss Williams, do you recognize this man?" she repeated.

"It's Declan-" Somehow I managed to speak. I gripped the edge of the island, struggled to compose myself.

“His real name is Harvey James Wallace-“ Agent Montgomery spoke up. His blonde hair was cut short, expertly trimmed, and his cheekbones jutted like a runway model’s.

Now I feared this was about my grandfather’s murder. I squeezed the wooden island harder to hide my quaking fingers.

“When did you last see Mr Wallace?” Agent Montgomery continued.

“Four years ago-“ I was becoming breathless and dizzy.

“And when did you first meet him?”

“I was thirteen-“

“What was the nature of your relationship?”

“I knew his son....Ravon-“

“Did you have any type of relationship with Declan?”

“We were....friends-“ I finished lamely. Did they know he was my drug dealer? Maybe this was about drugs and not my grandfather’s murder at all? I swayed unsteadily on my feet.

Agent Turner suggested I sit.

I tried to remember how. In a haze, I lowered myself onto a stool.

“Mr Wallace is currently incarcerated in a federal prison awaiting trial for owning and distributing child pornography. Did you know that?” Her tone was gentle now. Even her face relaxed some. She added, “We know what he did to you, Tabitha-“

I panted, like an animal in distress.

“I know this isn’t easy for you to hear, but we have you on film, as well as numerous other underage girls. Did you know he was videotaping you?”

My mouth dropped open. I shook my head with disbelief. For three of my teenaged years, from 13 to 16, I believed Declan loved me. Naively I trusted him, and this betrayal was the result.

“How did you...catch him?”

“One of the girls’ parents suspected Mr Wallace was trading drugs for sexual favors with their 12 year old daughter. They called the police who called us, and we raided his home. We found hundreds of pornographic videos he’d made with minors-“

“Champagne-“ I whispered, remembering the cinnamon-haired slip of a girl who’d taken my place. At the time I saw nothing wrong with what we were doing. Now I could see Declan for the predator that he was. My salivary glands filled my mouth with water, and I vomited into a nearby trashcan. The female agent held my hair back; she wiped my mouth with a dish towel. “You met Champagne?” Keen interest animated her face now.

“Yes, ma’am-“ I said. “Just once-“

“How long ago?”

“Four years ago-“

“Did you know she disappeared two years after becoming involved with Mr Wallace?”

“What?” My mind reeled.

“And she’s not the only girl who has turned up missing after becoming involved with Declan. Our theory is the girls “outgrew” Declan, found boyfriends their own age and were going to leave him. And Declan couldn’t handle that-“

The reality of the true danger I was in while I was with Declan hit me then. If I had left him, rather than him leaving me, I might have disappeared, too.

“We need your testimony, Tabitha, if we’re going to get justice for Champagne, justice for all the girls like you, who Mr Wallace secretly videotaped and exploited-“ Agent Montgomery’s face no longer appeared mannequin like now either, but was infused with righteous indignation. His perfect cheeks flamed. “My sister disappeared 15 years ago, killed by a similar murderous pedophile. Tabitha, please help us get

justice for yourself and for these other missing girls-“ He now looked like an avenging angel.

My grandmother said in her letter that if she’d spoke up sooner maybe Pop would never have had the opportunity to hurt me. If I spoke up now, there might be justice for these girls and their families. For hours, I told the agents everything I knew, including that I suspected Declan had murdered my grandfather. They took copious notes. At the end, my voice was a hoarse rasp.

Agent Montgomery wanted me to come downtown with them right away and sign sworn statements. But Agent Turner recognized how exhausted I was and offered to let me come in the next day.

After the agents left, I trudged to Erik’s room with the jumbo bottle of red wine and our glasses. I tapped on his door. He was sitting up in his bed, working intently on another copper tree, twisting and stretching out the branches. This one was nearly a foot tall.

“Can I come in?”

“Yeah. Sure-“ he set the tree aside.

“Erik, I’m sorry I’m such a hot mess-“

“You’re my hot mess, Tabitha-“ he reassured me, stroking my back as I sat down beside him and poured some wine for us. By the time we drained the bottle, I’d explained pretty much my whole life to him, about Pop’s abuse and my three years with Declan and my struggle with drugs and Rick and Murphy and why the FBI agents were now knocking at my door. Patiently, he listened. Erik did not freak out. But still I was terrified he would leave me.

“I will not quit-“ he said at the end of my horror story. “I will stand by your side for as long as you’ll let me-“

Tears of remorse and relief stung my cheeks. I clung to Erik, and I did not let go until morning.

Chapter 59

Before work, Erik drove me to the courthouse downtown. It was the same courthouse where at ten years old I had testified against my Daddy's killers. The tall granite structure no longer appeared so imposing to me. As a child, I was scared to death. Now it was just a drafty old building with cracks in the ceiling and along the anemic walls, a place where sad and anxious-looking people trudged the worn floors. It took three hours to answer all the FBI's questions. Erik waited for me at a coffee shop across the street.

Afterwards we drove to Frazier's and picked at our lunches. Then we went back to work on our windows.

"Now we're ready to replace the old glaze we removed with new glaze-" Erik pinched a hunk of what looked like silly putty from a plastic container. "You have to work fast because this stuff dries quickly-" He rolled it in his palm, molded the glaze to the window seam with his thumb. Then in one fluid motion he formed a trail of glaze between the sash and the style, sealing the new glass pane snugly.

When my turn came, I fingered out a small wad of the glaze. I pressed it to the seam. But when I attempted to replicate Erik's dexterous thumb action, my glaze just squished and bunched and spilled over. It zigzagged in every direction. "Goddamn it-" I said.

"Roll the glaze into a tootsie roll shape first. Then pack it into the seam. Use your chisel to smooth it out-" A second time he created a perfect strip of glaze.

So I tried again. My glaze was still lumpy and had fingerprints in it. It had more humps than the Loch Ness monster.

"Use your chisel. Smooth it out-"

Working the chisel like a butter knife on cake icing produced a result which was a fraction better.

“I’ll be working upstairs-“ Erik said. “Call me if you need me-“

For the next three hours I glazed a single window. The edges of the sash weren’t so bad. But the styles were ridiculously hard. Because they were so thin, the chisel lifted up the new glazed strip as I worked. I nearly clawed my face off. The end result was passable though I thought.

When Erik returned, he inspected. He clucked. He shook his head.

“What?” I fumed.

“Way too much glaze. Less is more. An inch is as good as a mile-“ With his chisel he shaved off half of the glaze I had packed on. His result was beautiful, spare, and pristine. “See-“ he said.

For the next three days, I re-glazed two windows a day.

Erik rewarded my hard work with a surprise trip to the Outer Banks in North Carolina to meet his family. We had been dating for about two months. I was hesitant. But he begged me to go. I prayed they would love me like he did.

Chapter 60

On the eight hour drive from Baltimore to North Carolina, The Gray Ghost ate up the highway. We drank Gatorade and ate Gobs, these super sugary cakes filled with homemade cream Erik adored. We bought them at a convenience store in Virginia. "You can only get Gobs in the South-" Erik scarfed his. Halfway through mine, I got a serious sugar buzz. So I handed the rest over to him and he gobbled it down in one bite.

"Story-" Erik said.

"Subject?" I replied.

"Chores-"

"You first-"

"Okay-" he agreed. "When we lived on Old Man Cleary's farm, my father assigned all us kids chores to do. My job was to bring the animals water every day. I watered the horses, pigs, cows, and chickens. But this one day I forgot the rabbits. It was Summertime, like a hundred degrees outside. My father found the rabbits panting and in distress. He hunted me down. I was like nine years old. I thought he might beat me to death. But my punishment was to go 24 hours without water. In the burning sun I mucked stalls and raked hay. My tongue swelled and I fainted once. My mom cried. But my Dad wouldn't budge. Exactly 24 hours later he handed me a cold glass of lemonade. After I guzzled it, he put his arm around me and explained to me that he hadn't punished me out of meanness. He just wanted me to learn how much our animals depended on us and how they suffered if we forgot about them-"

"But you watered all the other animals-" I protested.

"My father was right. It was a just punishment. I never forgot any animal's water after that-"

"My turn-" I mulled for a bit. "Daddy never really made me do chores...He cleaned,

did the dishes, and the laundry...Poor is no excuse to be dirty he always said...he took pride in keeping our rowhouse tidy...But if we were short on money, he'd let me help him shovel snow or rake leaves to make ends meet. When the housewife or home owner looked down and saw this little girl offering to work for whatever they thought was a fair price, they'd look around and see my Daddy waving real friendly at their gate, and they couldn't say no. Daddy did all the hard labor. I just putzed around, bagging some leaves or shoveling a few inches of snow. It tugged at their heartstrings and they overpaid us every time--"

"Hustler-" Erik cracked up laughing.

"Yeah-" I admitted. "But we never went hungry-" I cracked up, too.

Trading stories, I learned that Erik used to be a quarter back on his high school football team. But he quit because his coach encouraged his boys to cause their opponents the maximum amount of damage and pain possible. After one game where a kid got his leg broke, Erik called his coach a bully and a jerk. Then he joined the cheerleading squad. Hoping to meet girls. Even now he could do a split and palm the floor without bending his knees. Bullies used to call him gay because he joined the art club, too. We vowed never to attend any class reunions.

In North Carolina, the sun was just setting, turning the sky the color of sherbet, when we arrived. It was a bumpy 20 minute drive along the beach to the vacation house. Some brave souls were surfing out in the cold choppy water. And some red-cheeked families were flying kites.

As Erik pulled up in front of a six bedroom house with an elaborate wooden deck, I took a deep breath.

"Just be yourself-" Erik advised.

Inside rows of sand gritted tennis shoes and sandals ran the length of the foyer. Some super-hero towels were drying across some bars built into the wall.

Some stairs lead up to the livingroom and kitchen where the Ewing family

chattered. Erik's mom was sitting in a recliner, reading the Bible.

"Hi, Mom-" Erik greeted her.

"Erik!" his mother sprang to her feet and hugged him. She wore reading glasses, a white zip up sweatsuit, and sensible sneakers. Her bobbed brown hair was streaked with some gray. Around her neck a small gold cross glinted on a thin chain.

"Mom, this is my girlfriend, Tabitha-"

Her face lit up.

"It's a pleasure to meet you-" I extended my hand but she embraced me warmly instead. Erik had warned me already that she hugged longer than most people thought comfortable. She believed a good hug could restore the soul.

"Welcome, Tabitha-" She said when she finally released me. She smelled faintly of laundry dryer sheets. "How was your drive down, Erik?"

"Not too bad-" he responded.

"You just missed supper. But we've got plenty left-overs-" she chirped. "Did you eat?"

"Erik made me eat Gobs-" I teased him.

His mother scowled. "Now Erik, you know better. Those things are loaded with refined sugar and lard-"

"Gobs are the bomb-" he happily disagreed.

"Hey, Trouble-" A woman with dish soap dripping from her hands strolled over and kissed Erik's cheek. She wore a tangerine tank top, jean clam diggers, and flip-flops. Silver rings adorned some of her toes. Then she cheek kissed me, too. "I'm Caitlin, Erik's big sister-" A few little kids swarmed around her.

"The nurse, right?" I asked.

"Not for the next seven days-" she joked. "And those three guys glued to the TV over there watching football are Erik's brothers, Thomas and Westley, and my

husband, Peter-“

They all waved. Each man gripped a beer nestled in a Raven’s Koozie.

At a wooden table some tweenie girls were assembling a 500 piece puzzle of an aquarium loaded with exotic fish. “Hi, Uncle Erik. Hi, Uncle Erik’s girlfriend-“ The middle one, who flashed a mouthful of braces, hollered over.

“Hey, girls-“ Erik walked over, picked up a puzzle piece and slid it perfectly in its place.

“No help!” a second girl squealed. “We want to do this by ourselves-“

“You’re doing a great job-“ I commended them. They were three quarters of the way finished.

“There’s chicken and potato salad still set out if you two want some-“

Caitlin returned to her dishes, a mom in motion. “Tina, Albert, no ice cream until you shower-“

Her kids skidded down the stairs to the bathroom on their behinds, barking like seals.

Sitting on stools, Erik and I ate at a porcelain tile-topped breakfast bar, rimmed with painted seashells and star fish. Afterwards we stacked our dishes in one of three dishwashers and headed downstairs to the game room to shoot pool. When it quickly became apparent that Erik and I were a power team they split us up to give everybody a fair chance at winning. “Where’d you find this hustler?” Westley kidded Erik, after I ran the table on him for a second time.

“Don’t feel bad. She kicks my ass all the time-“

Westley, the architect, rolled up his shirt sleeves and ran a hand through his sandy brown hair. He was ten years older than Erik. He’d been team captain of an APA pool team. “One on one?” he challenged me.

“Okay-“ I chalked my stick.

Everybody gathered to watch us square off. Even Erik's mom closed her Bible to watch.

Westley won the coin toss for the break. He hunkered down over his pool cue and began to run balls. Five in total.

"Good run-" I congratulated him.

I also ran five balls. Then I missed the nine ball on a two rail bank shot.

Westley ran his final two balls. Then he studied a long shot down the rail on the eight ball. He stroked his cue and the eight hurtled towards the pocket he called. But at the last second it popped out.

In unison, all the guys groaned.

I used a stop shot to sink my nine ball, which set me up perfectly for a cut shot on the two ball. Then I studied the table. The cue ball was a table length away from the eight and frozen to the rail. If I called the eight straight in the pocket I was in serious danger of scratching since I couldn't get under the cue ball to give it any backspin. I recalled one time when my Daddy was in the same predicament. He used right hand English on the cue ball, sent it sailing down the table where it ricocheted off the side of the eight ball, propelling the eight in a straight line and dropping it right into the opposite corner pocket. I called the shot.

"No way-" Westley decreed.

The only sound in the room was the hum of a heat vent.

I lined up my shot several times, then stroked the cue ball with medium speed on the right hand side. The cue ball barreled down the green felt, collided with the side of the eight which catapulted it into a perfect horizontal trajectory. The eight ball dropped cleanly right into the unlikely pocket I'd called.

A roar of delight from the girls.

"Great shot-" Westley shook my hand.

While Erik played video games with his nephews, I taught Caitlin and the girls how to hold a pool stick properly, how to get low to the table, and stay low until you executed your shot. In fifteen minutes, they were happily pocketing balls.

At about midnight, Erik and I said our goodnights to everyone.

“She’s a keeper-“ Caitlin hugged Erik, then winked over at me.

For the next six days, we all took walks on the beach, waded into the cold water which lapped our ankles. The March sky was a soft gray. At low tide, we collected seashells. We watched the surfers glide and crash and the fishermen cast and tow their lines. When the wind picked up, we helped Erik’s nieces and nephews to fly their kites. At the vacation house, the kids swam in the heated pool. Only the adults were allowed in the hot tub. Sometimes we drove into town and shopped. I bought pink shorts with OUTERBANKS emblazoned across the behind. Erik bought us matching white coral bracelets. Back at the vacation house, we barbequed outside or took turns cooking in the enormous kitchen. After eating, we played board games. At night, we sat outside, watching the wild horses, powerful and majestic, gallop along the beach.

On our last vacation night, Erik and I lay in bed, facing each other, with our heads nestled on the same pillow.

“I’m so glad you’re here-“ Erik said.

“Thanks for inviting me-“ I replied.

Our tongues explored each other’s mouths, caves of delicious pink wetness. Our bodies entwined, grinded, and rocked. Even the smallest movements brought intense pleasure. My lips and nipples swelled.

“Is this okay, Tabitha?”

“Yes-“ Even my voice was swollen, husky.

"I have condoms if you want to take this further....if you feel ready...but no rush....-" Some strands of damp hair stuck to his forehead and his eyes shone with growing anticipation.

"Do *you* want to?" I kidded him.

He sucked in a laugh, rubbed his hard body against mine. "What do you think?"

"Okay then-"

His body froze and his face hovered close. "Okay, you want to, or okay you want to wait?"

"Okay, I want to-"

"Yes!" He pumped the air with his fist. Then he scrambled out of bed to get the condom from the medicine cabinet in our bathroom. "Don't go anywhere!"

"I won't-" I laughed at him.

When he returned he hopped back into bed and buttered my face with kisses. The first time we had sex was quick, frenzied, a pent up release. But the second time was slower, more sensual. Erik stared down into my eyes, as our bodies connected. I closed my eyes, too nervous to return his gaze. Still I had an orgasm for the first time in my life. For ecstatic seconds I was Saint Theresa meeting God. The sexual euphoria didn't last nearly as long as the ethereal euphoria I experienced under the Little Pony blanket though. Not that I was disappointed. Sex was the microcosm, and God the macrocosm. A real spirituality was burgeoning within me. I felt peaceful and complete. Erik was my nirvana, my little piece of heaven on earth.

Back in Baltimore the next day, Erik and I returned to working on our windows. The new glaze was dry. And now came the fun part. It was time to paint.

“I got this-“ I told Erik.

“All right-“ he said. “Go at it-“

Happily I dunked my paintbrush into a full can of green paint.

“Whoa, baby, you don’t need all that paint-“

My brush was already dripping everywhere.

Gently Erik pried it from my hand and gave me a clean brush.

“Just dip the tip of the brush into the paint. Then wipe off any excess against the lip of the can. That way you can angle the brush against the styles to get a clean paint job-“ He demonstrated. He swept the tip of his brush up and down a few styles, leaving a perfect strip of paint.

Unsteadily I held my brush, like a toddler with a fork now. Gently I dabbed at a style, smearing paint on the adjoining window pane. “Shit-“ I said.

“Don’t dab. Use clean strokes. Any paint that lands on the glass we can scrape off later-“ And like usual, he left me to figure it out.

I painted the easy outer frame of the window first. Then I whisked my brush up and down the inner length of the frame. The skinny styles I saved for last. But my wide brush kept slopping paint all over the glass. So I called Erik. “I need a smaller paintbrush-“ I whined.

“No, you don’t-“ he insisted. “Just work with the one you’ve got. Once the paint dries, we can use a razor blade to scrape away any mistakes-“

It took me three hours to paint three windows. I found it helped to stand the window up and rotate it as I worked. I switched to painting the styles first so the frames wouldn’t be wet and pick up fingerprints when I rotated them.

When Erik returned he just looked at me and said, "Oh Lord-"

"What?"

"Nothing-" He was trying to hide his grin, as he inspected my work. "Not bad. Your hand will get steadier the more you paint-"

"I'm starved. Let's eat-" I said.

"The brushes need cleaned and the paint recapped first-"

At a slop sink, I scrubbed my hands and arms with this gritty, orange scented hand cleaner that came in a five gallon jug with a pump dispenser. Then I washed my brushes. In a nearby bathroom, I peed, then caught my reflection in a dirty mirror. I looked like the Jolly Green Giant's sidekick Sprout. Okay, *that's* why Erik was laughing. With some wet brown paper towels I scrubbed my face clean.

At Frazier's, Erik and I wolfed our cheeseburgers and fries.

"Y'all watch you don't chew off a couple fingers-" Noel joked.

A tap on my shoulder halted my eating frenzy.

"What's up Tabitha?" It was Rooster, my old drug dealer.

"Hey, Rooster-"

He leaned in close and whispered, "You need anything, hon?"

"No thanks...I'm clean-" I responded, just as softly.

"Wow-" he said, temporarily befuddled. "All right....well good for you... You take care now...-"

After Rooster rolled out, Erik asked, "Who was that?"

"Just an old friend-" I said. (My kaleidoscope world rotated a fraction. Click.)

When we returned to work, I painted four more windows. With every stroke of my brush, my painting became more confident.

The next morning, I gave all seven windows a second coat.

“Looks great-“ Erik assessed my work.

A smile of satisfaction lit up my face.

“Let’s call it quits for today since you have court in the morning-“ Erik suggested.

Instantly my smile blinked off. Because tomorrow I would face Declan.

“You’re going to do great-“ Erik encouraged me. He pulled me close, kissed the top of my head.

It was a closed trial. All of the other victims were too afraid to testify. So I would be there alone, the sole witness for the state.

I could keep my mouth shut, too. But then who would speak up for Champagne and the other missing girls who had no voices?

Chapter 62

Inside the court room, I sat on one side and Declan sat on the other. Except for a smattering of gray at his temples, he looked the same. His smooth face stared straight ahead. He chose not to look over at me. His message was clear. That I was not worthy of even a glance from him. My stomach knotted, and a tiny muscle thrummed beneath my right eye.

Our judge was an old white man with a comb-over and fleshy jowls. He had a deep voice and a brisk manner. Intently he listened to the FBI agents building their case piece by piece against Declan. I prayed they wouldn't show any of the sex tapes I was in as evidence, but they did. I hardly recognized myself at 13 years old. Clearly I was high, my eyes glassed over and my head droopy. I could barely watch as I winced and whimpered at times, a sexual playtoy for a 46 year old man. The thought incensed me. I did not remember this particular occasion. I guess I buried it deep in my Pandora's box just like I did Pop's painful assaults. Mercifully they only played about a minute of the tape, but the jury gasped. Even the judge rubbed his eyes wearily, as if trying to erase the sickening images. Some tears toppled down my cheeks, and Agent Turner clasped my hand. Then they called my name to take the witness stand.

Declan chose this moment to look at me. His hard eyes flashed with malice and hatred. Quickly I averted my own eyes. I wasn't sure if I could walk up there now. My bones felt like water, like suddenly they just wouldn't support me. I prayed for strength. I gripped Agent Turner's arm. "Please help me-" I whispered.

"I got you-" She guided me up to the stand. I stumbled some. But I made it.

"State your name for the court please-" A clerk prompted me.

"Tabitha Williams-" I replied shakily into the microphone.

For the next hour, I answered questions. For Champagne and the other

missing girls, I pushed my embarrassment aside. My voice grew stronger with each passing minute, I was shedding layers of repressed memories and pent up pain I had stored for years. But that was the easy part. Because the defense attorney was set to question me next.

“Miss Williams, did you love Declan...uh...Mr Wallace?” the defense attorney jumped right in. Just a wisp of a black man, he strutted around like a preacher at a revival.

My tongue felt like sandpaper. My palms dripped sweat.

“I don’t know...I guess at 13 years old I believed I did....but I had no real understanding...”

“Just answer the question please-“ he interrupted me. “Yes or no?”

“Yes-“ I relented, waiting for the trick, the trap.

“Wasn’t it YOU who asked Mr Wallace to murder your grandfather? Wasn’t it YOU who asked him to “take care of this problem” for you?”

I felt faint. I gripped the hard edges of my chair to keep myself upright and focused. “No, sir-“ I answered. I offered no explanation. He was trying to get me flustered, trying to rattle me, to get me to blabber and entrap myself, the same way my Daddy’s murderers’ lawyer had done ten years ago. But this time I was ready.

The defense attorney strode closer and glared at me with a tight expression. “Miss Williams, you do realize that you are under oath, and that perjury is a crime punishable by law?”

“Yes, sir-“ was my answer.

“You never asked Mr Wallace to “take care” of your grandfather?” he hammered away.

“I asked Declan....Mr Wallace to help me end my grandfather’s abuse. I expected that he would confront my grandfather...maybe threaten him...maybe scare him... never murder him-“

“And what was your reaction to your grandfather’s murder?”

“Relief-“ I answered truthfully.

“And how did you reward Declan for murdering your grandfather? Didn’t you have sex with him afterwards? Didn’t you pay for your grandfather’s murder the same way you paid for your drugs?”

Agent Montgomery and Agent Turner had warned me the defense attorney might try to turn the tables on me, make me look like the bad guy. So I just gritted my teeth, swallowed back any emotional outbursts. Because at this point I really wanted to tell that asshole lawyer to go fuck himself. Instead I said quietly, “No, sir, I never paid Declan with sex for murdering my grandfather-“

The defense attorney huffed with frustration, “Didn’t you have sexual relations with Mr Wallace the VERY night you learned of your grandfather’s murder?”

My heart thumped. Because after Aunt June told me about Pop getting killed, I did go straight to Declan’s. We cried and held each other. It was true that I had sex with him that same night. I glanced over at Agent Turner. Her pretty lips were pinched. If I confessed, I would lose jury sympathy, some credibility, too. If I lied I was committing perjury. But which answer would best help Champagne and the other missing girl?

Everybody waited to hear my reply.

“No, sir-“ I lied smoothly.

“That’s a fucking lie!” Declan sprang to his feet. Spit sprayed from his lips. “You know you did! I’m going to kill you now, Tabitha! You’re dead! You fucking lying cunt!” Even with guards holding Declan to protect me, I cowered in my seat. Never had I seen Declan so enraged, so out of control. The wolf revealed. Some jurors sprang to their feet, ready to defend me.

The judge slammed his gavel. “Order! Order!-“ he bellowed. But Declan would not shut up.

“Remove this lowlife from my courtroom-“ the judge decreed.

Declan was dragged out, fighting. “Fucking lying whore!” he railed at me.

“I will kill you, Tabitha!!”

Agent Turner rushed over to console me. “You’re safe now...and you did great, Tabitha-“.

The judge nodded his agreement. “Mr Wallace is going to jail for so long that you don’t ever have to worry about him hurting you again, Miss Williams-“

My Pandora’s box was now empty, the ghosts and goblins freed. I felt about a thousand pounds lighter.

When I finally emerged from the courtroom, Erik rushed to me “Did everything go okay?”

I nodded my head, clung to him.

Back at the warehouse, I called my Aunt June. She told me Uncle Arly was trying to sober up after staying blind drunk for five days. On the last day he finally did cry his heart out. “I think he’s gonna tough this out-“ she said. Then she told me that she questioned her own children and none of them were abused by Pop.

“Why do you think Pop chose me to hurt?” I pondered.

“I don’t know-“ Aunt June sighed. “I guess we’ll never know... But all your cousins send their love and prayers for you-“

“Tell Uncle Arly and everybody that I love them, too-“

When I hung up, Erik suggested we go to Frazier’s.

“Let’s just go back to work...I think I need to keep myself busy-“

Back at work, Erik showed me how to use a razor blade to scrape away any dried paint, drips, or smears from my window panes. We did all six windows in about an hour. Then he helped me Windex the glass. The freshly painted, restored windows sparkled. They were beautiful now.

Chapter 63

The week Declan was sentenced to life in prison with no possibility for parole, Erik and I moved into the same bedroom at the warehouse.

I waited for a few weeks, to give my Uncle Arly some time to heal, then I called him. "Are you okay, Uncle Arly?"

"I'm fine, Tabitha-"

After some small talk, I asked him straight out, "Did Pop ever hurt you the way he hurt me and Gran?" I felt so close to him now, that I could ask him anything.

"No-" he replied.

"Did he ever hurt my Daddy?"

"Not that I'm aware of-" Uncle Arly said. "But I was gone, living my life with your Aunt June and raising babies when Rusty and Lee come to stay with Pop. Rusty might know better than me-"

"Can you please give Uncle Rusty my number the next time you two talk?"

"Will do-" Uncle Arly cleared his throat now. "Tabitha....I'm real sorry....that we didn't protect you better...if I had any idea what Pop was doing to you...what he did to my own mother...you know I would have killed him...-"

"I know-" My throat burned with raw emotion. "I love you, Uncle Arly-"

"I love you, too, baby-"

A week later I got a call from my Uncle Rusty from prison. His voice was a little gravelly. "Hey, Tabitha-" he greeted me.

"Hey, Uncle Rusty-"

In a month, he was getting out. He spent his time weightlifting and watching TV, staying out of trouble he told me. Also he had a little business going, making greeting cards for the

other inmates. All store bought cards, coming and going, were banned. Since too many inmates got caught smuggling in acid or liquid hashish. So Uncle Rusty's colored pencil sketches of eagles and dreamcatchers and horses and doves were in hot demand.

When I asked him if Uncle Arly had explained the situation about Pop, Uncle Rusty's voice broke some. "Yes....yes, he did...-"

Then, in a clear strong voice, I asked, "Did Pop ever hurt you or my Daddy?"

"Not me...But he was always harder on Lee...I seen your Daddy take quite a few whippings from the old man...I figured it was because Lee was smaller...not big like me and Arly...so I thought Pop was trying to toughen him up... -"

I waited to hear more.

"I could hear your Daddy crying sometimes in his bedroom late at night... I rapped on his door one time to see what was wrong...but Lee wouldn't open it.... he just hollered for me to "Fuck Off!" Uncle Rusty sniffled now. "Looking back...Maybe he was being messed with...-"

Chest aching for my Daddy, I admitted, "You know my Daddy never even told me he had family in Pennsylvania-"

"Maybe he was trying to protect you...by keeping you away-" Uncle Rusty's voice fizzled to a whisper, "Deep down I think I knew that something wasn't right...but I was two years younger than Lee....Just a scared kid really...I guess secretly I was relieved that Pop chose Lee to pick on..I figured if I stayed out of it, Pop would leave me alone-" He choked on a sob. "I guess that makes me a real loser, huh?" He was crying out-right now.

"Like you said, you were just a scared kid, Uncle Rusty-" I cried with him.

After that, he called me once a week until he got released from jail in the Spring. All over Baltimore, the cherry blossoms were starting to bloom. Erik rented him my old room and put him to work with us. Uncle Rusty really did look a lot like Uncle Arly. He was thickly built from years of pumping iron, and he did the work of three men. Similiar to my Daddy, he had an

identical teardrop tattoo. I learned that the brothers got them the same day, the day after my momma passed. (Pamela Sue was like a sister to my Uncle Rusty.) But unlike my Uncle Arly, my Uncle Rusty was a talker. Even humping 50 pound sacks of cement up three flights of stairs, Uncle Rusty told crazy jail stories and bawdy jokes. Erik and I liked him so much that we took him to Frazier's and introduced him to our favorite bartender. Who knew that a southern belle like Noel would have the hots for a "bad boy" like my Uncle Rusty? They dated and eventually married one year later.

At the end of Summer, Erik built me a beautiful desk for college. He shellacked the maple wood so many times, it glowed. It looked impressive enough to belong to the president of the United States.

In September, I started full-time at the University of Maryland. It took me four years to earn my degree in Social Work. Then I landed a job in a drab State Office building downtown, working for Child Protective Services. Just 45,000\$ a year to start, but I loved my job, drove eagerly to work in my used Honda, hoping to make a difference in abused children's lives.

Because of Erik, I know today what real love is. I no longer flood my body with drugs and alcohol to numb my pain. I no longer steal, take things that don't belong to me. Now the only thing I take is victims from the hands of those who hurt them. Now I am those Silverback Gorillas, who beat up monsters. I am the Hoot Owl who shrieks out against abusers. I am the Elephant who charges to the rescue.

