

**Part I**  
**Chapter 1**

Thalia Hendershott never had a birthday party. Not one that she remembered. She was two years old the day her daddy died, killed in action on a beach in Normandy, France. Thalia had the misfortune of being born on a date that would go down in the annals of history as D-Day, and on that particular day, one of the bloodiest battles chronicled in American wartime would take place. But more importantly, it would be the date carved onto a tombstone planted in a tiny cemetery in North Wildwood, New Jersey. Much like the unexpected grasp and pull of an undertow to an inexperienced swimmer, sometimes life granted no warnings. Sometimes it took without notice, without consideration, without pity. The stone served as a reminder that even the life of a good, kind and decent father could be confiscated — just like that — leaving nothing in its wake but the hopelessness of a piece of paper delivered by the sheriff — and anger. Deep-seated anger.

She would never forget the day the telegram came. It was hot, mid-July. It was her only memory as a young child. At least, she thought it was a memory. It could very well have been an aftereffect of her mother's constant harping on the subject, as if she blamed the little girl for her burden. The sheriff had been standing on the front porch when her mother collapsed. Thalia was digging in a sand patch in the front yard. She had looked up in time to see her mother drop, crying and rocking on her knees. Thalia considered in her childlike mind that the big man on the porch had struck her mother. And to a degree, he had. Just not in the physical sense, although news of this nature would more likely feel as if a swift punch to the stomach had actually been delivered. Yet, the bruises left by the sheriff would be worn on the inside. Trying to lift the woman from her knees, he was only shooed away; her legs were kicking and thrashing.

Coming down from the porch with a look of sadness encroaching upon his features, he had rested his hand on Thalia's round shoulder, already red from too much sun. He shook his head. There were many telegrams distributed that day. Eighteen in all by the end of the week.

It was a soldier's funeral. Guns going off so loud and so close, Thalia had cried, holding her plump, dimpled hands to her ears. She didn't understand death and the formalities that were often a result of such events. She couldn't fathom that she would never see her daddy again. If it weren't for the weeds that grew up regularly around the gravesite, she would have forgotten about his very existence.

The neighbors brought casserole dishes and Jell-O molds that refused to be eaten. The nightmare of the week of telegrams and all those funerals that followed seemed to put a curse on the town. Instead of joining hands, neighbors wandered away from each other, as if fearful that death would, somehow, rub off the grief-stricken. Death wasn't contagious; it only made the naive, the superstitious — more obtuse, more apprehensive.

And so, after the funeral, and the casserole dishes and the Jell-O molds, life resumed. It was a different life, though. The remaining Hendershott family subsisted on a meager pension from the United States government, a thank you of sorts for their loved one's job well done. The little girl didn't know it then, but the fingers of despair would eventually catch up to her — like it did her mother — and snatch her away from whatever small amount of happiness she was fated to own. They would grab her, seize her, hold her down, suffocate her; they would claw at her wavy hair and encircle the nip of her waist with icy tendrils. At the age of fourteen she would find herself pregnant — for the first time. But, because there were a slew of years in between the telegram and the pregnancy, it was difficult to determine what had caused Thalia's rebellion. Circumstances, people, places — would be strung together like baubles on a bracelet. Some large, some small, multi-shaped and multi-faceted — each one a supporting factor.

Her mother wore her own string of stones. Widowed now at an age too young to be a widow and too old to start over, she was already hardened by the years to come without her husband. She found her

only solace in a routine in which she and Thalia would visit the grave every Sunday. They brought with them a variety of rusted gardening tools — shovels, weeders, pruning shears — and, depending upon the time of year, gladiola bulbs or marigolds or blue pansies. At a tender age, Thalia would learn the rudiments of living poor and the hardships that were closely associated with that way of life.

On her knees, young Thalia would pull out dandelions by their roots, clip around the base of the small marble headstone and plant scrawny clumps of whatever was on sale at the Stop ‘n Shop that day. While the daughter went about the business of tending her daddy’s grave, the mother, perched upon a nearby wooden park bench, read from the Bible. This became a favorite pastime, bordering on obsession.

“Just because money’s tight, doesn’t mean you got to be a slob, can’t have pretty things,” she would recite to Thalia from her bench, the heavy bound book open upon her lap, while the sweat popped from the girl’s pores like bubbling lava under a heady volcano. “Take care of the things you have and they’ll take care of you, Thalia. No sense in wishing on a star.”

The girl’s response was always the same. Thalia would blow a persistent curl from her eyes and continue. It was not until her plump dimpled hands had blackened with the earth and had finally been permanently discolored, did she understand her mother’s litany. In a roundabout way, her mother was admitting that she had given up; she was teaching her daughter that she mustn’t wish for any more than what was allocated. Accept your lot in life. Take it by the reins, guide it to pasture and allow it to thrive.

The cemetery was crowded during the pleasant weather months. Sunday was a popular day for visiting the dead. And like clockwork, right around Halloween, a cold breath from the north would boldly blow its way through the sandy streets, the dunes and the jetties that stuck up from the ocean like lumpy black fingers — and the visits would stop. Once in a while they would trudge out there on Thanksgiving where, up until the age of nine or so, Thalia would offer to her daddy the wishbone from a meager roaster chicken they had feasted on earlier. She breathed a wish over the grave that perhaps next year she could leave him a wishbone from a turkey. But there was hardly money for turkey.

She wished for many things. A new dress. A trip to the beauty parlor. A big, juicy hamburger. To place a sprig of holly upon Daddy's grave at Christmas time, for rarely did they venture out into the frozen winter landscape. And it was this last star that she wished upon the most. She didn't mind the cold, actually preferred it to the heat and humidity of the summer months. Her mother, on the other hand, was not an Eskimo, as she would put it. Mrs. Hendershott was quite aware of how a mild winter's day could quickly become a tempest, an upheaval of the worst kind. The coastline of New Jersey was especially hard hit during the month of December, lasting straight through into March. It was mystifying that the beaches brutally pounded on, stormed on, iced on — were the same shores the crowds clamored to in the summer. If they only knew how the sky darkened for days at a time, as if confused, thinking it the seaboard of Alaska and not New Jersey. Sometimes, those dwellings closest to the water would be taken by the sea, a claim for mankind's misdeeds. It was a continual cycle, and always, by the Spring's inception, the remnants of the ocean's outbursts would be carted away so that a new crop of tourists would not have to look upon the ruins of its violence. It was true that the brave who made their homes on the coast were certainly no stranger to the pissed-off side of Mother Nature.

## Chapter 2

Thalia was eleven when her mother joined the workforce. In 1953, there wasn't much for a woman in the way of a promising career, and especially if that woman had no employable skills. She found her calling at the bottom of a brown paper sack, bagging groceries at the Stop 'n Shop. The job was a double blessing, for at the end of the day, whatever was left over would be distributed to whomever needed it the most. Meats on the verge of spoiling, bruised vegetables, mottled fruit, dented canned goods — anything that would have ended up in the dumpster.

Most days, Thalia would arrive home from school to an empty house. If loneliness was a disease, she would have withered and died before her twelfth birthday. You might wonder — didn't she have friends? She did. One friend. A shy girl of ten who lived in the tiny bungalow next door. Her name was Penelope Johnson. Thalia called her P.J.

P.J. carried with her the aroma of mothballs, as if she slept packed away in tissue paper at the back of a storage closet. It wasn't an overall unpleasant smell; it was just that Thalia could spend only a certain amount of time with the girl before she felt lightheaded and sick to her stomach. She would make up an excuse like her mother needed her or she had homework to do or chores. If P.J. sensed that Thalia was being anything other than truthful, she didn't give it away. She was a trusting soul.

P.J. talked with a midwestern drawl and said words like 'crick' when she meant to say 'creek' and asked for a cold pop instead of reaching for a soda. For the longest time, Thalia had no idea that when her friend proclaimed she was going 'on the ruff' that her real intentions was to cop a squat on the peak of those randomly-tarred shingles above the garage of her home. If she had figured it out earlier, Thalia would have been able to stop P.J. before she took that nasty spill off the edge of the gutter and broke her arm, in three places. P.J. came home from the hospital with a bright white cast, a blank page tempting to be filled. And it wasn't long before the spotless cast became masked with inked names,

crayoned flowers, smiley faces, stick figures. There were names from boys who normally paid zero attention to P.J. and Thalia. No one could resist defacing a virgin surface.

“I’m never gonna take this thing off,” PJ said one day during lunchtime, glowing as she perused her arm. “Here, take a look at this . . . look . . . look at it.” She shoved the cast under Thalia’s nose. “Tommy Rydell signed it. Look . . . did you see? He signed it, ‘Get better soon, P.J. Your friend, Tommy Rydell.’ Wasn’t that sweet?” She was having trouble removing her bologna sandwich from its waxed paper sheath.

Thalia hissed back and took a big bite of her own sandwich, grape jelly on white bread, making loud exaggerated chewing sounds. She would feel real bad about that when two weeks later, P.J.’s daddy would die in a construction accident, forcing the family to sell their home in New Jersey and move back to Indiana. They say that jealousy is a green-eyed monster; it was also a thief.

- - -

Things changed for Thalia after she spread her legs for the first time. That dark, mysterious fissure was more gold mine than unrefined ore. Starved for attention, she discovered through trial and error that she was the one and only creator of her destiny. She could not look to her mother for companionship, for Mrs. Hendershott had only enough room for her Bible readings, her double shifts of cracked eggs and flattened bread, and her end of the day reward of brown, mushy bananas. The woman who had moved into P.J.’s home was older, Thalia guessed to be in her forties, and was childless. She heard her mother curse the day the woman moved in.

“God damned neighborhood going to shit. Now I gotta worry about getting robbed. Thalia, you go lock the windows now.”

Thalia moved the flimsy curtain to clasp the window lock. She saw a handsome brown woman directing the movers. She looked up at Thalia just then; her red lips, a perfect shade for her tawny skin, glowed in the afternoon sun. The woman waved, white teeth in a friendly smile. Thalia waved back. This woman could never be a friend, though. It was color of her skin that prevented fraternity.

So, she had, instead, asked her mother for a puppy, which was reduced to a kitten, reduced to a hamster, reduced to a goldfish. The answer was always that there was no food for an extra mouth. Thalia took little interest in school; college was not in the cards for her. Being satisfied with just finding a man and getting married and having babies seemed her only viable option. She surmised that if she started early, maybe she'd be able to hunt down a good man, instead of settling like she'd seen others do around the neighborhood. The day she unearthed the secret to her future — the fact that a male can detect from miles away when there's a girl willing to put out — would become, instead, Thalia's personal D-Day. What she did not know then, would come back to haunt her later in life.

And, it didn't matter whether they liked her or not. In her mind, they worshipped the very ground she tread upon.

"Do you think I'm beautiful," she asked a sour smelling prickly haired boy named Lloyd.

Lloyd continued to rub himself against her thigh.

She had developed into a gangly pre-teen. Taller than most boys in her age group, she was all knobs and jutting bones. Sunken eyes in a sunken face were a far cry from the chubby, bright-eyed, puffy-cheeked toddler. Although her mother insisted they were of good German stock, Thalia retained a stray gene somewhere along the way — American Indian or African; the truth, never confessed, seemed to be an embarrassment to the older woman. But that blue-black hair — waves that cascaded halfway down Thalia's back; radiant that when the sun hit just right, those highlights reflected like a mirror — was not of her mother's coloring, or her fathers, from pictures she had seen. P.J. used to say that if Thalia was ever to be stranded on a deserted island, she could send SOS signals with that hair.

There was one boy in the neighborhood who did not respond to Thalia Hendershott's particular charms. His name was Johnny Avila. His given name was Jose, but he was widely known by his Americano name. He was a beautiful boy of Puerto Rican descent, skin the color of cinnamon and a halo of golden hair, sandy like the beaches he loved to roam upon. He attended the Catholic Elementary School on the other side of town and was bussed to and fro every morning and every afternoon. He

would wave to Thalia from his bus stop on the corner of High Street and Beach Avenue; she would walk on by, clutching books to her hardly-there chest, her face warm with the glow of adoration. Thalia loved Johnny, not because he took advantage of her like the others, but because she was forced to earn his attention. Love without a price was hardly worth the effort.

He was handsome in a hoodlum sort of way. Elvis Presley had his first number one record on the charts and all the boys scrambled to imitate his look. Greased back hair swirled into ducktails and one dramatic lock plunging over the forehead. It was not a haphazard design; the shock of coil was planned and carefully positioned. Johnny's family was well off, the rumor being their money was made from the sweetness of pineapples. When all the other boys were shuffling around in windbreakers, Johnny carried a leather bomber jacket on his back. Real leather. It smelled oily and rugged and it reminded Thalia of sweat and glistening muscles. Soft to the touch, it whispered when he moved.

Johnny and Thalia became "an item" and were inseparable all throughout junior high and high school, where now he was bussed to the Boys Catholic Preparatory School. For some reason unbeknownst to Thalia, Catholic schools hardly acknowledged the padded years in between elementary school and high school: the years recognized by the public school system as junior high. There was quite a chasm between grammar school eighth grade and high school freshman year. Some of those kids were still well under five feet tall, and scrawny — scrawny like that saying, a stiff wind could blow them away. She was relieved to have a cushion, for she attended the local public school, but shuddered at the thought of all those unknowing and unsuspecting children — her Johnny included — marching into that oppressive red-bricked building like cattle to be slaughtered. Tumultuous and uncivil, its flat roof sat low to the ground as if fearful of possessing a height that could topple at the slightest breath of rebellion — this place they called the Boys Catholic Preparatory School. But Johnny would survive; it was his way.

She stayed with him late into the night. The next day he would enter into his new world and she did not want to think about how things would change. Her mother was working a double shift and Thalia's own classes would not start for another week.

He told her he was scared, not knowing what to expect. She kissed him and wrapped her arms low around the 'v' of his slim waist. She knew they were going to do it. She had not, thus far, with this boy, although many a night the fire scorched her deep inside. She would be reduced to dousing the flames with heavy petting and afterward, a cold shower. Johnny believed in the sanctity of a relationship, in its pureness. He had a deep and abiding respect for Thalia. There was a time and a place.

So when he rested his hand on her breast for the first time; so gentle she could hardly feel it, it was apparent to Thalia that they had finally found the time and the place. Under the pier closest to the boardwalk, the tide was low; the waves washed over the pilings and then petered out on approach as if unable to muster enough strength to lap onto the warm dry sand of the beach. She had her blouse off, he could count every rib, and he did, tickling her and she laughed. They were familiar with each other, yet clumsy, stumbling around the bases. She rubbed him over the fierce material of his blue jeans and felt him grow under her touch.

"Can we do it," he asked, breathing short hot puffs into her ear.

"Do you have a rubber?"

"No, do I need one?"

She stopped what she was doing to look at him. When was her last period? She hardly kept track of such things. Boys always had rubbers on them. They carried them around in their wallets, like latex badges of honor, flashing them at lunchtime, making their friends believe that, yes! — I've been getting some.

"Thalia?"

What did she know about getting pregnant? There was a girl last year that was sent away. She had gotten herself in trouble, that's what they called it, and was shipped to a home for unwed mothers.

“Thalia?”

“What?”

“Is it safe?”

“What would you do if I got pregnant?” She blurted out the question that stood between them.

“I don’t know. Why? You’re not planning nothing, are you?”

“Planning? What would I be planning? You think I want to have a baby?”

“No. I don’t think so.” And he paused. “You don’t want one, do you?”

“What would I do with a baby?”

“I don’t know. What would you do?”

“Give it away, I guess.”

“You wouldn’t keep it?”

“If I had no husband, I wouldn’t want to keep it. When that girl Louise got pregnant last year, my momma said the best thing for that child would be for the mother to give it up for adoption. Babies can’t raise babies. What do I want a baby for? I’m way too young.”

“Gosh Thalia, now I don’t even want to do it. Come on, it’s getting late.”

“Come here, Johnny. Let’s stay for just a little while longer. I want to see the stars come out.”

She kissed him and it didn’t take long before he was out of his jeans, his skivvies and she was on her back in a cut swath of sand. The granules rubbed her skin raw but she didn’t mind. She would suffer for Johnny. He pumped away on top of her in his careful, inexperienced awkwardness.

“Am I hurting you?”

“No. Johnny. No.”

He squealed and then he pulled out of her, letting go, spattering onto her stomach, sticky strings of liquid and not-quite-liquid. The substance pooled in her belly button. It reminded her of milk on its way to souring.

When she missed her period, she thought nothing of it. Vitamin deficiency, she told herself — and believed — yet, the days passed. When the blood still hadn't spilled after a month, she became concerned. She knew she was more than malnourished. It was there, in her face; her sunken look had become swollen, filled out. She questioned the mechanics of her body. She didn't have the morning sickness that she had heard was one of the first symptoms. So maybe she wasn't.

But she knew she was. Of course she was pregnant. Didn't they say that a woman could tell the minute she conceived that she was carrying life within her body? She knew it. Deep down, she knew it.

“Do you think you are? Oh God, Thalia.”

She had never heard Johnny take the Lord's name in vain before. His temper flared. He kept on repeating, ‘Oh, Thalia. God, Thalia,’ until she couldn't listen anymore.

“Will you hush? I can't even hear myself thinking.”

“What are you thinking, Thalia? Oh God, my father's gonna kill me. What about law school?”

“Yeah, yeah. I know all about your precious law school. I'm not asking you to marry me. I don't want to get married.”

“Did you tell anyone?”

“No. You're the only one.”

“You didn't tell your mom?”

“I can't tell her.”

“I'll pay for an abortion.”

“And how will you do that? Your parents?”

“I have savings.”

“I ain't gonna have an abortion. I don't want to die. I don't want to get butchered. I heard this girl at school talking about another girl that got herself pregnant and she went to one of those back alley doctors. He wasn't even a doctor, just some quack that felt her up first and then scooped all of her

insides out. She almost bled to death. I heard that she's sterile now. Can't ever have no more babies. I don't want that to happen to me."

"What're you gonna do, Thalia?"

"There's this lady that lives next door. She's gonna help me."

"You mean the colored lady with the big bloomers?"

"She's got even bigger bras. You should've seen what was hanging on the clothesline yesterday." A half-snicker escaped Thalia's lips; she was unable to muster a complete chuckle.

"What's she gonna do?"

"She said she could help. She said I have the glow. Yesterday . . . when she was hanging out her bras. She saw me and waved me over to the fence."

"So you told her?"

"I didn't tell her nothing. She guessed it right. And she said she can help. She's helped other girls before."

A look wavered across Johnny's features. Whether it was relief or sorrow or suspicion, the emotion was difficult to pinpoint.

"Don't worry Johnny. Nobody's ever gonna know. It's our secret. You keep your money in your bank account, but next time you gotta use a rubber."

### Chapter 3

“Now honey this ain’t gonna hurt but a bit. You have to do exactly as I say and keep yourself calm.”

She had a southern lilt to her voice. Ever so slightly, but it was there. She said her name was Ethel Wallace. She didn’t talk much about herself and Thalia didn’t ask. She didn’t volunteer how she learned what she was about to do and to whom she performed this procedure on and Thalia didn’t want to know. A person’s business was their own.

“Now sweetie, first I want you to drink this. Down the hatch.”

Thalia raised the glass of amber to her nose. It smelled wicked.

She flinched. “What is this?”

“Just a little whiskey, dear. Daddy’s finest bootleg. To calm you. Hold your nose and just gulp it fast. You’ll never taste it.”

Thalia did as she was told. She gagged on the fire liquid that burned the lining of her throat.

“You can go into the bathroom down the hall and take your clothes off. Put this robe on.”

The brown woman handed Thalia a robe of pink silk with satin cuffs around the wrist and a long satin belt. She hoped she wouldn’t ruin the beautiful fabric.

“Come into the kitchen when you’re done,” the woman called to her down the hallway.

The layout of the house was similar to her mother’s home. A hallway branched off the living room, a small bedroom on her right, bath on her left and at the end of the hallway, a kitchen with a pantry. The one difference was that Ethel had food in the pantry; the pantry in Mrs. Hendershott’s home was used as Thalia’s bedroom.

“Oh, sweetie, that color looks nice on you. Okay now, get up on the table. Come on, lay on the table and bring your feet down to the end. That’s it. Spread your legs. Honey, spread your legs. Gotta be wider if I’m gonna see anything. Honey, haven’t you ever been to the doctor’s?”

“When I had strep throat, I had to go for antibiotics.”

“No. I mean the doctor that ladies go to, a gynecologist.”

“No, ma’am. I don’t believe so.”

“Oh, no matter. You’re gonna have to spread your knees and relax, Thalia. I’m gonna tell you everything I’m about to do. No worries, you here?”

“Yes, ma’am.” By then, the whiskey had started to take the proper effect and Thalia was flush with warmth. Her knees loosened and fell to either side.

“I’m gonna fill this hot water bottle . . .”

“What’re filling it with?” Thalia interrupted.

“Why, water, honey.” And then she showed Thalia a brand new rubberized water bottle, right out of the manufacturer’s packaging. “Now, using this enema syringe, I’m gonna hook a drainage line to it. Are you aware of your own physical anatomy down there?”

Thalia only shook her head. Ethel, she thought to herself, was a little strange.

“I’m gonna insert water into your uterus with this enema and like magic, that cluster of cells you got growing inside of you is gonna come sliding right out.”

“I won’t mess up this pretty robe, will I?”

“Oh, sweetie, it takes a bit of time for this to happen.”

She pumped her hand once, twice, three times. Thalia felt the warm water flood through her lower body, splashing onto her thighs and puddling under her backside. There was no pain, only warmth. Her body was consumed with heat.

“Thalia, honey, now you listen to me. You don’t do this on your own. If you get into trouble again, you come to me. I’m not gonna judge you. But, hear me now, this is a dangerous procedure. If by chance you inserted air with the water, you’d be long gone of this earth.”

“Is it done, Miss Wallace?”

“You hear me, girl?”

“Yes, Miss Wallace.”

“Please honey, call me Ethel. I’ve never been a Miss anything in my life and I’m not about to start now.”

“Ethel, am I not pregnant anymore?”

“It’s gonna take a day or two to be over with. You’re gonna have some bleeding, like you’re having your period, maybe some cramping. You’ll know when you’re done with it. It’s important that you tell me when that happens, though. It’s very, very important. Cause we might have to do this again if it didn’t take. One girl I had to do four times. She was a stubborn one.”

“Miss Wallace. Oh, sorry ma’am.” Thalia paused, and then cleared her throat. “Ethel . . . ma’am, I’m sure glad we’re neighbors. I don’t know what I would’ve done. I didn’t want to raise a kid on my own. My boyfriend, well, his parents are real uptight about him seeing me. If they knew he was sneaking behind their backs to see me, a poor, stupid white girl, and then got me knocked up and all . . .” She took Ethel’s brown oversized hand in her own. “What I’m trying to say is thank you. Thank you for taking care of me.”

“Oh, now sweetie . . . that’s no way to talk about yourself. Maybe you’re poor, and you had nothing to do with that, but you’re certainly not stupid. Why, you seem to me to be as bright as they come. You got street smarts, which counts for a lot. Book smarts might get you a good job, but street smarts will keep you alive. Take it from me. I flunked out of high school in the tenth grade. Never went back. Never had to. I’ve been self-sufficient ever since.”

## Chapter 4

Thalia buried her mother on a cold, rainy day in February. It had iced earlier that morning, and now with the mercury rising ever so slightly, standing there at the tiny cemetery next to her father's grave, at least it wouldn't feel like glass shards pummeling her back. The ground was frozen and she could hear the men with shovels and pickaxes, grunting to the rhythm of their backbreaking work. The doctors at the hospital had told her it was a massive heart attack. Thalia fought back. But she's a young woman. She hasn't lived that long to develop any bad habits that would contribute to a heart attack. She hasn't had a history. They shrugged and drew the sheet over her mother's face.

And now, Mrs. Hendershott was finally where she's wanted to be for the past sixteen years, next to the rotted body of her dead husband. She had never forgiven him for leaving her. She just might give him a piece of her mind.

After the service, Johnny walked on one side of Thalia and Ethel on the other, propping her. She stumbled on the gravel of the single lane road that led from her parents' double plot. At any moment, she would melt into the ground in a puddle of steaming liquid and skin, smothered by a hand-me-down herringbone coat — which started out as too tight and too short — and a splash of royal blue. She wore royal blue, for her closet revealed nothing in the way of appropriate funeral apparel. She was not ready, not prepared to bury her mother so soon. She thought to herself, now she would have two gravesites to tend to every Sunday. Double the work. Double the expense in posies. It was funny how the mind strayed when the body was in shock.

In the years following the almost baby, Thalia convinced herself that once again she was the sole supporter of her fate and — she was given a second chance. She would turn her life around. Before the miracle of the disappearing baby and her subsequent metamorphosis, she had been going nowhere; and as a result, was destined to arrive in just the same place: nowhere. And now, she had a second chance at

life! She held her renaissance in the palm of her hand and was amazed at its beauty. Finally, there was something worth living for. But of course, a price tag had been attached to the second chance. A down payment, of sorts, for transgressions of the past. Nothing was free and the lesson learned was that Mrs. Hendershott would never get to see her daughter graduate from high school, and with honors no less. This was to have been Thalia's surprise to her mother. Unfortunate as it was, though, the second chance account had been overdrawn and four months short. Thalia's life — once unlivable — and then shiny like a new penny, had been interrupted with yet another helping of affliction. What good was a second chance when in the end it could not be shared? The second chance became meaningless.

- - -

There's a considerable amount of camouflage that goes on in a household that some family members living right under the same roof are never aware of. Such clandestine operations do not necessarily have to be scandalous or criminal. There can be a positive outcome. Like the question of the house. Who owned the house? And now that her mother was gone, where would Thalia go? She did not know her mother had drawn up a will. She did not know that the reason her mother had slaved — had put in so many double shifts that a cot with her name on it could have been erected in the little back room of the Stop 'n Shop — was so she could pay off their humble abode. She thought far ahead into the future to the day when Thalia could inherit it, free and clear of any mortgages or liens, only needing to keep up property taxes and maintenance fees. This was her mother's gift. Thalia cried when the man who called himself Mrs. Hendershott's lawyer, came to the door three days after the funeral to explain just how well the law worked.

- - -

Johnny was accepted into a college that would take him far away. He would need to make a decision; residing in his heart, though, the decision had already been made.

“Chicago? When would you come home?”

“Thalia, be happy for me, for us. This is for you too.”

“Johnny, come on. Who’re you fooling? You’ll forget about me.”

“How can you say that? It’s just not true.”

“I’m not going to keep you from your dreams. So you don’t have to worry about me ranting and raving and carrying on. I won’t.”

“I’m not going until September. We still have the whole summer, four months.”

“Johnny . . . “

“Yeah, babe?”

She paused, reaching for the precise words but there were none. “Johnny, I’m pregnant.”

Johnny swung the car over as if broadsided by a locomotive and swerved off the road, the front right tire jumping the curb. Two hands gripped the steering wheel; his golden-brown hands had paled by degrees.

“Tell me you’re not serious.”

“Johnny . . . “

“What? God, Thalia. But we’ve been careful. I’ve been using the God-damned rubbers.”

“I don’t know how it happened. But I am.”

“How far?”

“Couple months now.”

“You can go see your neighbor. Right? She’ll patch you up.”

“I don’t want to do that. It was bad enough one time. I can’t go through that again.”

“I thought you said it didn’t hurt.”

“It didn’t. But you can’t understand what went through my head when it was, you know . . . coming out of me. It was like I killed it.”

“It wasn’t even a baby. It was just an embryo. Just a bunch of cells . . . “

“That could have grown to be a child. I’m not a murderer. I don’t want to go through it again.”

“Thalia.”

“No, Johnny.”

“Do you want to go to a doctor? I’ve got the money.”

“Keep your God-damned money. I don’t want an abortion. How else can I say it so that you’ll understand? I’m gonna have this baby. With or without you.”

“Then I guess it’ll have to be without me. Is that how you want it?”

“I don’t want to fight. Please, let’s not.”

“You’ll be alone. Who’ll take care of you?”

“I have Ethel.”

“What will you do?”

“I’ll have our baby and you’ll go to school.” She paused to smooth her blouse over her still flat belly. “And then you’ll come back for me.”

## Chapter 5

It was right after the first of the New Year, 1961, when Kenneth Hendershott entered the world. Thalia offered the child her own surname; there was none other to give. He would not be an Avila. Johnny never did come back for Thalia. What arrived instead was a letter from Chicago. His family was moving back to Puerto Rico. He was transferring to the University there. How was she? Johnny wanted to know.

How was she?

Ethel insisted that Thalia hit the boy up for child support payments, but she wouldn't hear of that. She wanted to forget about Johnny Avila. And as if the brown woman had to make up for a penance not fulfilled, she bought for the baby the Rolls Royce of prams, a Silver Cross Henley. The carriage had the most charming lines, with its shiny, curved steel body and big graceful wheels. It reminded Thalia of a sleek silver convertible. Ethel demonstrated some of the more modern features — the reversible carriage bed that could also be detached and used as a bassinet — merely by folding and unfolding the handles.

“How did you afford this? It must have cost a hundred dollars.”

“Don't you go worrying about money; I found some, okay? Now, look at this. The brochure says the hood has a vinyl waterproof lining so you can go for nice long strolls and not even fret about the weather.”

“It's beautiful, Ethel. But I can't possibly accept it. It's too . . . extravagant.”

“It's about time someone spent some money on you, girl. And anyway, it's not for you. It's for our sweet Kenny-boy. Look at that precious little boy. Mm-mm. He certainly has the good looks of that boyfriend of yours. Look at all that golden skin.”

“Yeah, but he got my hair. My best feature. Thank God!”

“Yep. He’s gonna be a real looker.”

- - -

When the first green of spring settled over the town of North Wildwood, Thalia and Kenny walked to the tiny cemetery and stood over the double plot at the bottom of a grassy knoll. Grandma and Grandpa. In the ground. Kenny slept while she pulled weeds and planted the red geraniums that were on sale at the Stop ‘n Shop. When her work was finished, she rested under the shade of the maple trees that lined the gravel walkway, the spot where her mother once sat.

She was a mother now. A mother without a spouse. It seemed ironic to Thalia how the past repeated itself; it was a continuous circle. When her mind rested on that tiny life that she was responsible for, her heart ached and swelled with pride. But money was dwindling. She would need to find a job. It seemed that there was always an expense to pay — diapers, milk, baby clothes, for the child was growing by leaps and bounds, the electric bill, the telephone bill. Hospital administration had been generous in their offer of a payment plan for her four-day stay in the maternity ward. It would take the next five years of months to pay this bill; but she would pay in full.

The home that she had inherited was falling rapidly into disrepair — from the window screens that needed re-meshing to the kitchen linoleum that dipped and quivered as if the floor joists were punching holes through the planking. Ethel had pointed out that the exterior paint was chipping and peeling away from the clapboard in strips, dangerous for curious little minds that happen to expand their perception of the world around them through their mouths.

The Stop ‘n Shop advertised an opening for a cashier. Thalia was picked up almost on the spot, being a high school graduate, with honors no less, and having had family employed there before. And of course, Ethel being the type of neighbor she was, offered to watch little Kenny while his mother was away. Thalia insisted on paying her but she wouldn’t hear of it. Where was the sense in leaving your infant in the arms of another — and going off to a job that would be nothing more than a job — only to relinquish a good portion of each meager paycheck? They wouldn’t be Thalia’s arms holding that baby.

Someone else would be reaping those benefits. When reasoned in these terms, how could Thalia disagree?

On her nineteenth birthday, which went as uncelebrated as the previous eighteen, Thalia pinned her hair up under a baseball cap, donned a tired-looking baby blue smock and marched the three blocks to her new job. She hated leaving her son and looked for ways to shun his beseeching eyes when it was time to say goodbye. He was good-natured about her leaving, even from the start, which in a way, made it worse for her. It was Ethel she would turn against because of her son's even temperament and his uncanny inclination for cheerfulness.

Thalia found the summer season and warmer climates to be a drain on her system, mentally and physically. The tourists from New York were demanding, slipshod, just plain downright rude, and more often than not, she would return to her home in a foul mood, her head caught within the vice grips of pain. And Ethel, being the type of neighbor she was, would many a night have dinner warming in the oven and for that, Thalia was most grateful.

Summer turned to fall. When the changing leaves gave way to a more threatening downpour of ice and snow, Ethel would slip her a few bucks for the bus. Many times, Thalia turned down her generosity. She did not want to be indebted to anyone. Paranoia would spring from the very fountain of affection she had originally attached to the older woman. Day after day, she trudged the three blocks to the corner of 18th and Ocean Avenues, a bobbing blue dot in the landscape. So this was her lot in life. Each day she endured, the meaning of her mother's words from so many years ago would come crashing down on her like a fist. She would never leave this one-grocery-store-town. The days blended into one another until the heat, a sticky swelter of haze over the land, reminded her that it was summertime again. And the noise. And the tourists. Lines of cars snaked through the intersecting streets, blaring radios, screaming children, drunken teenagers. Crowds stormed the beaches and in their wake, polluted the sands and the waves with tossed away scraps and waste and the selfish attitudes that the ocean was their own to do with what they pleased, at least for the summer. And with all that came the demands, the

slovenly attitudes and the rudeness. Could it be that a year had passed her by without even a sweet caress or a moment of contentment to mark the page?

The Stop 'n Shop, with all of its faults, was still a better place to be during those heightened summer days for its aisles were comforted by the healing power of air conditioning. At home, Thalia had a window fan that only displaced warm stagnant air from one area of the room to another. While listening to the lazy buzz of a fattened fly tapping and sputtering against the window screen, she could do nothing but idle away the time, knobby knees draped over the worn arms of the nubby couch that sagged in the middle; her eyes were wired to the television set, blinded by static and gray snow. Kenny would cry in his playpen until she plugged his mouth with a pacifier or a bottle of warm sour apple juice. He reached his stubby hands to her, the tears pooled in his eyes like bright chips of glass. She would only, could only muster the strength to expunge the cigarette smoke from her lungs — for she had picked up that nasty habit from a couple of the girls at work — and turn away from her needy son. Yes, she decided that he was needy. He required too much of her time and time was what she was deprived of. When did this button of a child become such a burden? Demanding, like the hordes of consumers she had to surrender herself to. This, she could only surmise was Ethel's doing. The woman was turning her son into a fussy, spoiled version of the child with whom she had originally started. Thalia was accustomed to hearing the whines and whimpers of such children. Their drivel. Foolishness. Blathering. Parents that would give into their every want. Candy, cheap dime toys, a new blow up beach ball when a perfectly suitable one lay shriveled in the back seat of a wood-paneled station wagon or a four-doored sedan. When she looked at her own son, she saw instead, those whom she resented the most. And in turn, she resented him for that. Even on her days off, she had to be reminded.

It was a particularly torrid Sunday, near the end of August. The television gave off its habitual rhythm of hums and chirps. Kenny had been competing from within the playpen, when came a sharp rap at the door. The door swung open and, to Thalia's amazement, Ethel stepped over the threshold like she owned the place. The room, decorated in pizza boxes, empty beer cans, MaryJane wrappers and

cigarette butts, was an invitation for deliberate strides and footfalls; Ethel did not heed the warnings. She plowed through the room scattering the rubbish in her wake.

“Thalia, honey, that child’s been carrying on most of the day. You need to tend to him.”

Kenny raised his arms; dimpled fingers hovered in the space above his tiny prison.

“This boy’s soiled hisself. Thalia, he needs to be cleaned up.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. He’s my kid and if I wanted to change him, I would have.”

“Thalia, what’s wrong with you? You’re not acting like yourself.”

“What do you care?”

“Honey, I do care.”

“You have no idea what it’s like to live this shit life of mine. It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. Ethel, it wasn’t.”

“How was it supposed to happen, honey? As the wife of a president or a famous movie star? What? A doctor? This is your life. You have a child to take care of, a child who depends on you. From the looks of this place, you can’t even take care of yourself. Now, stop feeling sorry and get off that couch and tend to this boy.”

“I’m tired of my life.”

“Oh, so you give up? Is it that easy? Why didn’t I think of that when my sweet Lionel was beating the shit out of me? How come that didn’t pop into my head when, when that husband of mine put me in intensive care for three days? I guess I ain’t as smart as you white girls. I got kicked out of my home — my own home — and was living on the streets of Atlanta. I should of just up and quit. Think of all the pain I could have avoided.” She paused, lifting Kenny from the playpen. “Look at you. You’ve turned into a mess. Drinking and smoking. Ignoring your baby when he can’t do for hisself.”

“Get off your soapbox. I’m not interested.”

“Soapbox. Huh. I wish I had me someone who cared when I was your age. You used to be someone I was proud to know. You were strong and you had a way of looking at your troubles like they was gifts instead of plagues.”

“I’m not that person anymore. I don’t know where that person went.”

“Let me change the boy and put him in some clean clothes. When was the last time you fed him?”

“I don’t know.”

Ethel rocked the child in her arms and whispered into his ear a tune that her own mother had charmed her with as a young girl. She ran a warm bath in the kitchen sink and filled a bottle with milk, sat it on the counter so the chill would dissipate. Half hour later, cleaned and burped, the baby was fast asleep.

“We’re going for a walk.”

Thalia held fast to her spot on the couch, moving only so much as to stub her cigarette in the overflowing ashtray.

“And that smoking is gonna have to stop. You look like a chimney.” She stood there with her hands planted on her hips; she was not expecting a reply, so was not surprised when one was not offered. “Come on girl, we’re going for a walk. When was the last time you visited your momma and daddy? I bet you the weeds are high as my knee by now.”

“Ethel, I don’t want to go. You go. Take Kenny, so I can have some peace around here without all that screaming.”

“Sweetie, get dressed. A walk will do you good. A little fresh air. Maybe we’ll go to the boardwalk. Get a ice cream cone.”

“You go. Please. Take Kenny. I just need some time to myself.”

“This boy ain’t gonna know you. You never take an interest in him.”

“I don’t give a fuck. Do you understand? I need a fucking break. When do I get a break? Johnny got a break. My momma got a break. When do I get mine?”

“I guess when you’re no longer counted among the living.” Ethel paused. “Cause that’s when your momma got hers.”

## Chapter 6

The woman behind the cash register had long roapy hair, coarse and thick like sinewy vines. The color was as deep as the night. He could tell it would ripple like the tide if it were washed and taken care of. She smelled of cigarettes. There were the telltale signs — yellowed fingertips, ashes on the breast pocket of her work smock. And she was flimsy, paper-thin, a wafer-sliced waif. But when she bent from the waist to store her coupons under the counter, he could not help to notice the generous swell of her hips rounding out the buttocks to the tops of her thighs. There was some hope.

What he knew of her was that she was quick-witted with a sly intelligence that only sharpened when in the presence of a challenge. That challenge came to her one day in the form of a man named Roy Creaves. Roy was not what most women would call handsome. Years of hard drinking left him with a road map of broken capillaries running hither from the mountain of a nose to the flat plains of his cheeks. His daddy and his daddy's daddy had both turned white headed before the age of thirty. So, why shouldn't Roy? A nice head of pure snow, some silver highlights could be attractive, give distinction to a man. Roy Creaves was blessed, instead, with a jaundiced tinge, gray straw nearest the roots, giving the appearance of a great many years of peroxide dreams and a pillow of tin foil.

He had a way of looking at a woman's breasts when he talked, as if he could not fathom what lay underneath that blouse to make it rise up like so, mounded in two neat points. He would lick his lips and stick his finger in his ear, wrangling it around, unable to subside the tickle that seemed to him damn near poked straight through to the other side of his brain. If close enough, a squelching sound could be heard as he plucked whatever it was from that ear and examined it like a specimen under a microscope.

Roy was the store manager at the Stop 'n Shop. Having had a decent share of accomplishment since working his way up from stock boy at the age of fourteen, he had been known to brag out loud about building the business up from a little nothing fruit stand to the chain of multi-aisled food stores the

franchise currently operated — which was not true at all, but seemed to impress the impressionable young females that worked the cash registers part-time during the summer months. And being on the downside of twenty-nine and a success in his own right, thoughts of settling down had more than once flickered through that mind of his. Yes indeed, a little stability would go hand-in-hand with all this prosperity. Or, at the very least, it might be nice to have someone to come home to, with a hot meal waiting and a little something extra for dessert. He would soon discover that nothing came free in this life, however much it was bargained for or marked down in the discount bin. You could be sure to find a sticker price slapped down on most things, including love.

- - -

Like a lazy sloth, three years behind the cash register slinked on by for Thalia before Roy Creaves turned his sloping gaze in her direction. Thalia was not immune to his reputation of being a womanizer — or trying to be — and fraternizing with the hired help. She said yes when he invited her to a movie. If anything, a night out would have been a much-needed diversion from the blur she had been accustomed to living.

*Viva Las Vegas* was playing at the drive-in. Speaker box clamped onto the window and boxes of warm buttered popcorn in their laps, Roy was a gentleman — at first. It was at the scene right after Lucky Jackson arrived in town for the first Las Vegas Grand Prix, that two-armed Roy, normal for the human species, multiplied into a many-tentacled monster. Thalia lay across the back seat and was transported somehow back to her high school days. At what age did a man start acting like a man and not some horny teenager copping a feel for the first time? She was sick to her stomach thinking about what his tongue was doing swishing around the inner workings of her ear — around and around — leaving a ring of saliva coating the cheap gold plated hoops she bought from the Woolworth's next to the Shop 'n Shop, especially for the occasion. Popcorn and earwax. Washed down with a Pabsts Blue Ribbon.

Not knowing for sure and only guessing that Elvis got the girl, Thalia and Roy left the drive-in for the boardwalk. It was a pleasant enough evening and with a break in humidity, the beachfront was heavily populated with tourists admiring the stars in the night sky. Roy named the constellations. He pointed out Libra, from the zodiac, the ring of constellations that the sun is known to pass through each year as the earth orbits around it. He explained that contrary to popular belief, there were actually thirteen zodiacal constellations — the thirteenth being Ophiuchus. And there! He pointed. The constellation Ursa Minor, more popularly known as the Little Dipper, which was not a constellation itself, but a distinctive group of stars called an asterism. She watched his lips as he spoke. They were thin and chapped but his words were round and smooth and beautiful. He went on to tell her that the most famous star in Ursa Minor was Polaris, the North Star — the star nearest to the North Celestial Pole. When standing at the North Pole, Polaris would be almost directly overhead. She was enraptured by Polaris and by Roy. He pointed to the brightest star in the sky. It was the most important star for piloting at sea. And to Thalia, navigating the heart.

They sat on a bench behind a slatted fence looking out to the ocean, waves licking at the shoreline. Could she be falling in love? It was too soon. She was held though, in the palm of his hand. Did she mind that he was crass? No. That he was homely, dangerously close to ugly? No. That he was and always would be a two-speed machine: third gear for maximum speed with minimum torque — and off? No.

He showed his generosity, buying her a funnel cake and then a Coca-Cola to chip away the grease and cloying sweetness that coated her throat. By the time he opened the passenger side door of his '62 Corvair, she possessed and held to her bosom gifts that demonstrated his prowess at the coin toss — a sparingly stuffed chimpanzee and a can of snakes — one in which the lid refused to stay put; the springing snakes spraying onto the dashboard like the tangle of affection Thalia's heart was pounding out for this man named Roy Creaves.

## Chapter 7

Sometimes it takes only a three-letter word to change the course of a life from the direction it was supposed to take. In Thalia's case, that word would be 'yes.' Roy had courted her for six months when he broached the subject of living together. Thalia's eyes saw this as one more step closer to marriage. She wanted a father for her son and was growing weary of her dependence upon Ethel. She told Roy she would sleep on it, not wanting to appear too eager. She did, then, put in a double shift the next day. She planned a nice dinner for that evening and bought a bottle of wine to celebrate her decision.

He came to her house, on schedule, ringing the doorbell and standing on the front stoop like a fool with both hands behind his back. Thalia was not much on surprises and demanded to see what he had that brought such a smile to his lips. A bouquet of early summer blossoms and a blank envelope. She set the flowers in her mother's best cut glass vase, one that had been purchased on special at the five and dime because of a chip out of its base. It was the envelope she was more suspicious of. How could she have known it would be a birthday card? She had to glance at the calendar to see that, yes, it was June 6th after all. She was twenty-two years old when she received that card — her first and last.

Roy was puzzled by her tears. He told her she looked beautiful with her brimming, hungering eyes. It did not take much to make her happy. Running back to the car parked at the curb, he reappeared with a radio under one arm and a boxed cake from Delasaro's Bakery under the other.

She was happy. So this was what it felt like. She wished she could freeze the moment, for it would surely take first prize if she had to rate the various fractions of units in time endured over the course of her life. She kissed him hard and swept him into the living room for he still had not been invited inside. A promise was whispered into his ear and the pop of a cork signaled that a package of happiness had finally been delivered to the rundown bungalow on Central Avenue.

Kenny clapped his hands and reached for the jelly glass of sparkling sweet wine. Thalia dipped her finger and came up with droplets to tease the child's tastebuds. The radio was tuned in to WJLK, the sounds of Asbury Park. They danced crazy to The Beach Boys and held each other close during The Drifter's hit, *Under the Boardwalk*. Ethel, who was taking clothes in from the clothesline, looked up for she could have sworn that music was drifting over from the house next door. She had to have been mistaken, though; she didn't believe Thalia even owned a radio.

After a dinner of cracked crab and store-bought coleslaw, Thalia put the baby down for sleep, then joined Roy, who, she discovered, had started to clean the kitchen table in her absence. He was a man of surprises — tapered candles on silver candlestick holders glowed above a red-checked tablecloth. Jelly glasses had been freshened. Two thick slices of gooey chocolate cake were perched upon two placesettings. He pulled out her chair and motioned for her to be seated. Raising his glass, he toasted her birthday and their future together. And then, from his pants pocket, he retrieved a small box of royal blue velvet, the same shade as a dress hanging in her closet. She gasped, unsure of what to do next. He ever so gently took her hand in his and placed the box upon her palm. This singular romantic moment drowned out the buzz in her head and for once, her senses responded with utter clarity. The space around her seemed brighter; she was alert to the whisper of air molecules dancing about her face. She caught the movement of a spider knitting her web in the far corner of the room. Dust particles swirled and floated through a pinpoint of light. Somewhere, a neighbor sneezed.

"Open it." Roy pressed the softness of the box into her palm. She was still struck by the purity, the transparency of her surroundings. The beauty of this one singular moment. Should she ruin it by moving? By opening the box?

"Go ahead."

With a muffled pop, the box snapped open. Two pearls peaked out from within deep folds of royal blue satin. Two perfect pearls. They emanated a fuzzy warmth, a silky pale mist drifting in a sea of royal blue.

“Do you like them? I can take them back and get you something else.”

“No. Hush now. Don’t you go ruining this for me with another word. Just let it last a wee bit longer.”

She could tell that he was pleased. And when a feeling of peacefulness seized her heart, it was safe to speak aloud.

“Roy . . . They’re beautiful.”

“So you do like them?”

“I don’t think I’ve seen anything so beautiful.” She laughed then. “I’m afraid to put them on. Wonder if I lose one? Oh my God! What would I do?”

“Don’t you worry about that. Here, try them on. Model them for me.”

She felt pretty wearing pearl earrings. She felt all grown up. The peachy glow from each tiny globe seemed to transfer and shift onto Thalia’s face; her neck, her chest under an unbuttoned blouse, her arms were suddenly blushed.

“They look good on you, Thalia. They look good.”

“Oh Roy, thank you . . . I’m really . . . I just don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything, darling. It’s your birthday. A pretty girl should have pretty things. Now, what do you say we dig into that cake, huh?”