

A Slow Burn

Chapter One Defiance, Texas 1977

Worry had its way with Emory, enticing her to stay up late after her night shift, hoping against hope that her missing daughter, Daisy, would walk through the front door laughing and shouting and singing all at once. It made for groggy, sleep-sloppy mornings, where the only promise of coherence was a cup of joe followed by a tepid shower. Under the spray Emory shook hands with her tears, let them slip down her face, run down her chin and mingle with lukewarm creeks of shower water, racing in lines down her skin into the rusty drain circled by soap suds at her feet. Even then she listened. Turned off the nozzle three times when she thought she heard a noise.

But Daisy hadn't barged through the front door for two months now. Her unmade bed stayed that way, waiting for Daisy's warm thirteen-year-old body, bronzed from too much Texas sun, to collapse into it. Emory, dripping wet, stood in Daisy's doorway this morning—haunted it, really—and memorized the wrinkle of the sheets. Towel clutched around her as if the day gave a chill, she took five barefooted steps into her daughter's room, dropped the towel, and curled naked on Daisy's bed.

She didn't weep; that was for the shower. She didn't even pray. Preachers handled that. Every Defiance preacher prayed up a storm, she'd heard, but even their multitudes of prayers did nothing to undo Daisy's disappearance. Prayer didn't amount to much. No leads discovered. No kidnapper nabbed. No one but Daisy's dad under suspicion, and he was nowhere to be found. Pray? No, she moaned instead, a guttural anguish she pushed through her lungs, vibrating Daisy's bed. Two months without her only child, and all she could do was groan, hug her knees, and smell Daisy on the sheets, hoping this whole ordeal was a cruel nightmare and when she woke up, Daisy'd be standing over her, a sharp-witted look in her eyes and a sassy, "Mama, you're naked. Get yourself some clothes."

Daisy'd only found her near naked once. Or was it more? On the day Daisy went missing, Emory lay on the living-room floor half-nude and strung out. Emory remembered the shame, how it felt hot, simmering her face. She had noticed her attire: just a bra and panties, no real clothes in sight to cover herself, her body displayed like abstract art on the canvas of a hardwood floor.

“Mama,” Daisy said, “I’m tired of taking care of you, you hear me?” Though Daisy’s voice scolded, she grabbed a favorite quilt, the one she camouflaged their old couch with because she hated that ugly thing, and pulled it over cold toes, knees, belly, shoulders, and neck. “There, Mama. There. You sleep. I’m going to see Jed, okay? I’ll be back for dinner.”

Emory murmured a hung-over okay. She pulled the quilt around herself, closed her eyes, and slept away the afternoon, while Daisy played with her friend Jed Pepper, then disappeared into the Defiance dust under his neglectful care.

She stood, thirty years old but feeling arthritic all the same. She wrapped the towel around her and headed to her room, where a floor full of dirty clothes made up her wardrobe.

A knock startled her. Three stark raps against an aging door. “Just a minute,” she hollered. She pulled on a ripped pair of Levis and a gauzy shirt. Emory caught her gaze in the full-length mirror; gaunt eyes stared back, the eyes of a bitter old woman.

Three more raps.

Halfway between her room and the front door, she knew.

She knew.

Emory stood in front of the door, the passageway Daisy was supposed to skip through, and tried to settle herself, but her heart hammered her ribcage. She took a deep breath, letting out a whisper of a moan. She opened the door. It creaked on its hinges as it opened onto her covered front porch.

Officer Spellman stood at her door, patrol hat in hands.

“Ma’am.” He cocked his head, his eyes moist.

“No.” She backed away two steps. Then again, “No.”

“We found Daisy.” He hesitated. “Actually, it was Jed Pepper who found her—in a clearing.”

“No.” Emory’s gut wrenched sideways; her cold hands began to sweat.

“We’ve taken the body to Tyler. I need you to come with me to identify her.”

Emory wilted into the doorframe, not caring a bit if it held her up or gave way and let her crash to the floor. Daisy. Her Daisy. Laughing, singing, skipping Daisy.

A body.

Nothing more.

The journey to Tyler in the back of a police car took ten years, or maybe ten minutes. She couldn’t be sure. But she felt her body aging in the seat, the wrinkles forming around her frown, her eyes deteriorating in the light of this terrible day. She’d be an old woman by the time she reached Tyler. An old, childless woman.

“We’re here,” Officer Spellman said. He opened the car door for her. Opened the door to the hospital too.

A gentleman even in the face of death, she thought.

They wound through the hospital’s underbelly, down stark corridors. Heels — hers and his — clicked a cadence she’d never forget, one that would accompany her nightmares from here on out.

Another door opened.

Then another.

She filled out forms. In triplicate. Answered questions no mama should ever have to answer. Officer Spellman sat in an antiseptic chair, hat in hands, eyes to the floor.

A man in a white coat said, “Right this way, Mrs. Chance.”

“It’s Ms.” Emory didn’t look up.

“My mistake,” he said. “We won’t know her exact time of death until the autopsy’s done. I’d wait on ordering the gravestone just yet, until we pinpoint it.”

“Gravestone,” she croaked to the sterile air.

“She’s right in here.” The nameless man opened another door.

Emory felt her heartbeat in her neck; put her hand there, as if to calm it back down to its proper rhythm. In front of a pale green wall was a gurney with a white sheet stretched over a body. Her little girl.

The last time Daisy’d had a sheet over her head, Halloween did its haunting. Though past trick-or-treating age, she’d insisted on being a ghost, taking young Sissy Pepper around their Defiance neighborhood. “To protect her,” she said.

“And what kind of ghost can protect a little girl?” Emory had asked.

“My kind.” She tugged at the sheet pulled taut over her head. Two phantom eyes darkened with black-tinted Crisco looked through two crudely cut holes in the nearly white sheet. Around Daisy’s neck Emory tied a ratty string, giving her head a jack-o-lantern look — just like the picture in Family Circle’s Halloween issue. Daisy flapped her arms, sheet billowing in stark contrast to the porch’s light. “I can even scare away the boogie man.”

The man pulled back the sheet to the body’s chest, but Emory wouldn’t look. Not yet. She turned away, pretending interest in the wall color. She inhaled. Swallowed bile. Shook her head as if that would keep the tears away somehow. She turned.

Daisy.

Her blonde hair browned by clods of dirt. Emory wanted to comb them away, give her hair a good brushing, though she’d never bothered when Daisy was alive. Daisy’s eyes, closed lids over caved-in sockets, emanated death. Her mouth turned uncharacteristically down, a frown etched into Daisy’s face for eternity.

“Ma’am? Is this your daughter?”

She looked at the man. “She was.”

“I’ll slip out. Give you a few moments.”

Emory watched Daisy. But Daisy didn’t move. Didn’t sing. Didn’t holler. Didn’t run. Didn’t scat. Didn’t pick the dirt out of her hair. She lay there. That was all.

Emory stepped closer.

Dark marks circled Daisy’s neck — the same place that cord circled her ghost costume. Was she choked? Were her last breaths stolen from her by hands too strong?

“Daisy, it’s Mama. Your mama.” She suspended her hand inches above Daisy’s pale shoulder, afraid to touch it. “Who did this to you, baby?”

Daisy didn’t tell.

Emory knew who bore part of the blame, felt it way down inside. If Daisy’s eyes were open, they’d look right into Emory’s soul, spotlighting guilt, the guilt she kept pushing down with the same ferocity she tamed her nausea.

She touched Daisy’s shoulder. So cold. So hard. So unlike Daisy.

Yet so much like herself it made Emory shudder.