

Chapter One:

Aleisha Turner felt tired, worn out from walking. Her muscles ached. Not just her legs, though the miles she had put on today were beginning to have their affect on her, but her arms and lower back as well, with a soreness that was much too prevalent lately and stubbornly refused to go away. She realized it wasn't the walking alone that made her uncomfortable. The fatigue and general listlessness she experienced was a condition that had lingered for months now - for longer than she could remember - the discomfort seeming to increase with each passing day.

But she had come to accept the fact. Like so many things in her miserable life it was merely something else she had to put up with.

Turning the corner onto Maple Street, heading west now toward the setting sun that tentatively attempted to peek through the accumulation of evening clouds, Aleisha continued her leisurely stroll along what had become in the past few months her usual route. The motion was an automatic maneuver anymore. She barely noticed the buildings she passed. Mickey's Pawn Shop. The First National Bank. Subway. Ernie's 24-Hr Grill. She had seen them all so many times before that Aleisha didn't need to look at them to know they were there. They didn't interest her anyway.

She would have liked to go home, to just crawl into bed and forget about everything else, but she knew there was no escape in

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slumber. Sleep was a temporary respite only. It couldn't compare to the escape she was so eagerly anticipating.

As the sun sank lower in the sky, blocked now by the buildings of downtown Toledo, an unexpected chill approached, the summer day losing the warmth it had exhibited earlier in the afternoon. Aleisha felt colder now in her shorts and halter top, the breeze raising a row of goosebumps along her bare arms, but she couldn't do anything about it. So she walked, ignoring her discomfort, eyeing the passing vehicles, her thoughts focused on the score she needed, motivated by the release that awaited her at the end of the long day.

The blue Ford slowed as it drew closer. She had noticed the car a few minutes earlier, when it had driven by and then taken the turn onto Cherry Street. This time it pulled to the curb ahead of her, the maneuver betraying all the signs of a last minute decision.

As she approached the window went down on the passenger's side, a beckoning invitation to the young woman. Aleisha's movements were casual, as though she had all the time in the world and wasn't about to hurry for anyone else. It was better not to appear too eager. To make them think they had to earn her attention.

She rested her arms on the side of the door as she leaned in, presenting what she hoped was her most radiant smile. She noticed with smugness that the driver's concentration seemed to be focused on the halter top, and the attributes barely concealed within, rather than on her expression. Which was fine with her. It meant she had him hooked already.

She sized-up the individual in a few seconds, her professional experience processing

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the information in a calculating manner. About her own age, in his mid-twenties, he was slightly overweight and casually dressed. He didn't look particularly prosperous, his clothes having a worn and somewhat soiled look to them, but at least he had shaved recently and looked relatively clean.

Not that it mattered to her. She wasn't planning on spending that much time with him.

He looked to be good for fifty anyway, she decided before making her pitch.

"Hello, Honey," she began, using the lilt in her tone the men seemed to expect.

"You need a ride?" His voice was quiet, barely reaching to her side of the car, as though he didn't want to disturb anyone nearby.

Or didn't want to be heard making his offer.

"I might. Where ya headed?"

He shrugged. "No where in particular. Just cruising. Looking for some fun."

The words she wanted to hear.

"Works for me."

With casual ease she opened the door and got in the car. She closed the door behind her but didn't bother to latch the safety belt, tugged instinctively at her halter top in adjustment, then turned in her seat to face him.

"So ya like ta party?" she asked.

"Who doesn't?"

"You not Police are ya?"

"Do I look like Police?"

"A girl can't be too careful, ya know."

"No. I'm not a cop."

"That's good. Don't need no cops giving me a hard time tonight. So what ya got in mind?"

He hesitated, as though searching for the words. Finally he attempted an answer, his

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voice again the whispered tone he had first greeted her with. "How much for...?" He stumbled once more before managing a meek reply. "You know."

Aleisha laughed at his obvious discomfort. He seemed more than a little nervous. She couldn't help wondering how often he had done this. "Damn, Honey. If ya can't even say it how ya gonna do it? How much ya willin' to spend?"

His answer came with no hesitation, like he had considered long and hard on the question ahead of time and the reply was firmly planted in his mind. "Sixty dollars."

She considered for only a moment before answering. She would have liked more, but it was above what she had originally figured him for. At least it was enough to get her through the next day or so. Beyond that she wasn't too concerned. Something else would come up by then. It always did.

"That will work," she informed him, presenting another one of her smiles. "And I promise ya won't be disappointed with what you're getting."

Now that the business transaction had been agreed upon there was no sense wasting further time. The sooner she got this over with and ditched the asshole the sooner she could get on with the rest of her evening.

"Let's not sit here no longer attractin' attention." She pointed ahead. "Just start drivin'."

The car pulled away from the curb, entering the light flow of traffic.

"Ya from around here, Honey?"

He shook his head. "Just visiting."

She considered the possibilities. "Where ya stayin'?"

"We can't go there." He offered nothing

further and she didn't press for an explanation. There was always some sort of reason. She'd heard them all before. "Don't you have anyplace?" he asked at last.

"I know a house we can go ta. It's safe. Pete's a good guy. Won't give us no trouble. But it will cost ya another ten."

He answered immediately. "Okay. Where to?"

"Just keep drivin'. I'll tell ya when we get there."

As the car moved along the driver cast occasional glances her direction, his eyes taking in the entire package. She offered her most enticing come-get-me look and shifted to face him more directly, thrusting her breasts forward with the maneuver. They always liked her breasts. Aleisha considered them her best feature, and most of the Johns seemed to agree. She had lost weight lately but at least had managed to maintain what she needed on top.

"What's your name, Honey?"

He hesitated, no doubt considering his reply. "Ray," he answered at last.

She was certain Ray wasn't his name.

"I'm Aleisha," she supplied. "So, ya ever done it with a black girl before?"

"No."

"No? Never had no brown sugar before?"

He shook his head.

"Then you in for a real treat." She leaned toward him, running her hand over his right thigh until it came to rest between his legs. She allowed her hand to linger there a moment before withdrawing, then turned to look out the windshield. "Yeah. We're gonna have us a good time tonight."

The young man smiled, no doubt pleased with the prospect.

Aleisha's mind was already on what she was

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planning to do with her earnings.

After several turns that threaded through lesser traveled streets, and eventually down a trash-strewn alley, Aleisha instructed the driver to pull over.

Pete's place wasn't much to look at, a rundown house with a droopy porch and saggy windows. Several of the windows were boarded over, the plywood lettered with names and obscenities in the bold colors of city graffiti everywhere. Not that the house stood out. It blended in well with the other residences on the block, a conglomeration of dwellings that must have been new at one time but gave the impression of having been perpetually old and worn. The small plot of grass in front of the place was ragged, interspersed with patches of dirt. A broken bicycle, one tire missing, lay abandoned in the weeds. Dog droppings littered the lawn.

"Don't worry," she assured him as the car drifted to a parking place in front. "It's safe."

He followed her up the wooden steps, his eyes focused more on the attributes of the young woman in front of him than on his surroundings. Aleisha knocked a quick beat on the door then immediately opened the panel, walking in uninvited, comfortable with the routine she had done countless times before. "Come on in," she prompted.

Once both of them were inside she closed the door behind him.

The hallway was dark and cluttered, with barely enough room for a path through the obstacles. From a room ahead on the left a television could be heard, its volume overpowering.

"Ya got the ten for the room?"

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Wordlessly he fished the bill from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Wait here, Honey."

She entered the adjoining room. Pete was a big man, not tall but with an overabundance of girth to him, dressed in baggy pants and a white t-shirt that somehow managed to contain all the bulges beneath. He sat on the couch puffing on a cigarette, his form vaguely indistinct due to the accumulation of smoke already filling the cramped space. No lights were on in the room, the only illumination the glare from the television. The ever-shifting scene projecting from the screen painted Pete a rainbow of colors with its glow.

"Hey, Pete. 'Kay if I use the back room?"

He made no acknowledgment other than a slight nod.

"You're a doll." She bent over provocatively, presenting Pete a closer view of her breasts. It was a favor she always granted him. Sometimes it seemed the brief glimpse was worth more to him than the ten for the room. She slipped the bill on the table in front of him, deliberately taking her time with the procedure so he wouldn't feel cheated.

Returning to the hallway she led the man who called himself Ray to the back of the house. The room they entered was cold, with a coldness that seemed to emanate from every surface, as though the heat hadn't been turned on all year. A mattress lay on the floor, rumped blankets covering it, the only other piece of furniture a worn dresser beside the window. A closet door stood slightly ajar, overflowing with debris.

"The money goes on the dresser," Aleisha directed.

As he retrieved his wallet from the rear pocket of his jeans Aleisha closed the blinds

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on the windows. The chore completed, she glanced at the bills, making out the three crumpled twenties, then closed the door, satisfied with the transaction.

Turning, she smiled in reassurance.

"Don't worry. No one's gonna bother us."

He stood by the bed, as if uncertain what was expected of him.

"What say we get comfy?"

It only took a moment for the halter top to come to rest on the floor at her feet.

Ten minutes later the blue Ford drove away. Ray was alone in the car now, Aleisha having stayed behind to confer with Pete concerning other transactions.

Chapter Two:

The two children sat together in front of the television, the glare from the set highlighting their young faces. Willard Turner was the oldest at age eight. His six year old sister, Nataya, sat beside him. She slumped against her brother, as though seeking warmth from his closeness. Her arms held a tiny doll in a garish purple outfit. Though she seemed unaware of the plaything's presence her arms continually caressed it, as though it was a security blanket she held and not a plastic figurine.

Both children were captivated with the activity on the small screen in front of them, immersed in the undersea adventures of the yellow sponge creature and his ridiculous

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companions. Neither uttered a sound, other than the occasional laughs that punctuated the funny moments of the show. They were simultaneous expressions that issued from both of them, as though there was a synchronized bond between the two siblings. Once the moment passed they would lapse again into silence.

When the show paused for a commercial Nataya looked at her brother. "I'm hungry." She spoke quietly, in whispered tones, the way she always expressed herself. "When do we eat?"

Willard shrugged in answer. "Prob'ly not 'till Mom gets home."

"Can we have a snack?"

He sighed, intending at first to drop the matter, then realized he was hungry as well.

"I'll go see," he finally decided.

Leaving the tiny bedroom at the end of the hall that the two children shared, Willard stepped onto the cold wooden floor of the hallway. Time had worn the flooring smooth in the center, buffing away any semblance of grain, though the edges betrayed the telltale marks left from the dogs of previous owners. The floor had apparently been stained several times in the past, as evidenced by the varying shades of wood, though it had been so long ago and the passage of countless footsteps had so worn the planking that it would be difficult to say which color was the most recent of those present.

Passing Michael's room Willard could hear the infant stirring in his crib. As the baby moved a rattle sounded, the snake-like cadence accompanied by the faint stirring of blankets and bed clothes, the tentative motions of the child in the early stages of awakening.

Willard hardly noticed. He didn't even bother to look in.

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Heading downstairs he entered the living room at the front of the house. His step-father sat on the couch. Mark Bradley's attention was focused on the hockey game in front of him, the roar from the television speakers reverberating off the walls of the room as he added his own shouted comments to the pandemonium. The table his feet rested upon held - along with an assortment of papers - a half-empty bag of potato chips, two pop cans, and a selection of candy bar wrappers. Some of the contents had managed to fall onto the floor, forming a small pyramid on the far side of the table.

Willard stood there a moment, saying nothing, waiting to be noticed.

After thirty seconds he finally spoke up. "We're hungry, Mark."

No reply.

"Mark?"

"I heard you."

"Can we have somethin' to eat?"

"When your mother gets home."

"When will that be?"

"How the hell should I know? She'll be home when she gets home."

Willard realized there was no sense in arguing about it. He started to leave when something else occurred to him.

"Michael's awake."

"So?"

"He's gonna be hungry."

"Then fix him a bottle. Christ, do I have to do everything around here?"

Shuffling to the kitchen, Willard grabbed one of the bottles off the counter and filled it halfway with milk from the refrigerator. It never occurred to him to question whether the bottle was clean or dirty. He spilt a little of the milk, having misjudged how quickly it

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would gush from the gallon container, and wiped absentmindedly at the counter with a soiled dishrag. He actually managed to remove some of the mess with the maneuver.

Leaving the cap off the baby bottle he placed it in the microwave and set the timer for thirty seconds. While the seconds counted down he moved over to the cupboard, stealing a quick look behind him to be certain he wasn't being watched. There wasn't much to choose from. Eventually he decided on a selection. Removing the box of saltine crackers he reached in and withdrew a handful.

When the timer went off the box of crackers was already returned to the cupboard. The young boy tightened the nipple on the container of milk, shook the bottle a few times, then headed back through the living room - the crackers safely hidden behind his back - to go upstairs.

As he mounted the first step he heard the scraping of the key in the front lock. The door opened and his mother entered.

Aleisha Turner walked in slowly, as though in a daze. She failed to notice her son on the stairway as she closed the door behind her. The motions were meticulous and precise, as if they were the most important actions in the world to her.

Her halter top drooped on the right side, evidence that it had been hastily thrown on. The legs of her shorts were uneven, the lining of one of the pockets peeking out from beneath the material in a haphazard manner. Her hair was in disarray, her lipstick smeared.

She started up the stairs, actually stepping over Willard in the process, who moved to allow his mother to pass. She had only taken four steps by the time Mark made it to

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the front of the house.

"Where you goin' 'Leisha?"

She halted. Her shoulders slumped slightly, as though she was exasperated with a situation she had been hoping to avoid. She didn't bother to turn around as she answered. "I'm tired. Headin' ta bed." Her words were slurred. Mumbled. Like she had a difficult time forming them.

"Like hell you are."

His words funneled up the stairway, as though projected through a bullhorn. Instantly the baby began to cry, startled by the loud tone, and tiny footsteps raced through the hall as Nataya scampered to the top of the stairs, halting abruptly at sight of her mother.

Mark noticed none of it as he reached up to grab Aleisha's arm, spinning her around as he took a step on the stairs. His fingers dug into her arm, though she failed to exhibit any reaction to the grip. His hands felt warm against her skin, which had a cold, clammy feel to it.

"Your kids are hungry. Why don't you pretend you're a mother that gives a damn and fix them somethin' to eat?"

She tried to pull away but Mark still had hold of her.

It was then he noticed the telltale signs on her arm - the fresh prick of the needle, the dribble of dried blood left as a reminder of the event. The vein running down her forearm stood out with a blue boldness, like some sort of slithering creature crawling beneath her skin.

"Son-of-a-bitch."

He glared at her.

"I thought you were through with this nonsense."

She cast her head down, refusing to make

eye contact, and only then noticed her son crouched on the stair step. She turned from him as well.

"Where'd you get the money for this, 'Leisha?"

She spun to face him. "I earned it." Defiance was in her eyes as she met his gaze.

He pulled her toward him as his right arm swung at her face. Her position afforded a poor target, so it was little more than a glancing blow, but it managed to knock her off balance anyway. Mark released his grip as Aleisha fell away from him. Tumbling down the stairs she landed in a heap against the front door, making no movement as she lay sprawled on the floor.

Mark stared for a moment, his features an utter lack of concern. Stepping over her he headed back to his hockey game. "Fucking whore."

Nataya, still standing at the top of the stairs, began to cry, soft undulations that shook her tiny body. She stared at her mother, bewildered with what was going on.

Willard recovered more quickly. As soon as Mark left the room Willard was at his mother's side, grabbing her shoulders and shaking gently.

"Mom? Are you all right?"

No answer.

"Mom?"

He shook her again, getting no response.

His next words were shouted so Mark, already seated in front of the television, could hear.

"She ain't breathin'. Do somethin'! She ain't breathin'."