

Chapter 4 | Memories

The café was located in one of those newly gentrified sections of the city. The area had once been a haven for the well-to-do and rich back in the late 1800s. There had been plenty of brick mansions with personal horse stables, public squares laced with fountains, and manicured hedges hard by custom-designed sidewalks. Recessions, depressions, bankruptcies and cost of upkeep had gradually turned the area into a collection of derelict buildings. Most of the mansions had been turned into makeshift apartment complexes. Those that weren't adaptable had been torn down, their generous plots of land redeveloped with multiple units of cheap 1940s housing. Those in turn had fallen into such disrepair, even the absent landlords didn't try to rent or repair them.

Gangs and the refuse of humanity moved in, bringing with them the ills of modern civilization: homelessness, drugs, disease and crime. The area's proximity to the center of town and the large portion of the city's budget spent on managing this section of violence and corruption demanded changes. Federal grants, private money and citizen initiatives began restoring the area. Small boutiques emerged along with exclusive cafés, high-priced watering holes and manicured parks. More than a few of the remaining mansions were now being renovated to their original state. Beth waited for Tommy inside a café located in one of the area's renovated buildings.

The structure was originally built as a home for those not as well-to-do as the other founding families of the neighborhood. The large front parlor had been turned into a serving area for patrons. Small round tables were draped in cloth and accompanied by two simple wooden café chairs. The dark-hued floor contained the original wood planks and matched in color and tone the original wooden mantels, wall trim and window sills. Lace drapes hung on each side of the large front windows that looked out on a wide front porch and the changing neighborhood. It was a café for discrete meetings, rendezvous, or a chat with a girlfriend.

But it wasn't the atmosphere that captured Beth's attention. As she waited for Tommy, she stared at the house across the street. It was one of the 1940 two-story derelicts slated for demolition. It had a rusted iron fence set atop a concrete base. The gate hung on its post with one rusted hinge bound by a loose wire clothes hanger. Two steps up from the sidewalk the cracked concrete stairwell gave access to the yard and a wooden porch nested to the right of the house. The yard, if it could be called that, had a swath of thick overgrown grass that threatened to overwhelm the single broken concrete path that led to the porch.

A tree set in the left section of the front yard shaded and hid the boarded up windows on the first and second floors. Vines climbed from the yard to the second floor. Various rusted implements of unknown purpose rested within a front yard that also included discarded mattresses, destroyed furniture, and even open garbage bags. Evidence of each item was revealed only with focused looks through the long, bending grasses. The house structure looked as though it probably hadn't seen many better days.

Beth stared at the house while she sipped her tea. She tapped her fingernails on the glass encasing the lighted candle in front of her. The scene before her brought back strong memories. Beth didn't even notice Tommy as he sat down and ordered a coffee. Tommy reached over gently to break Beth's reverie.

His touch startled her. She turned her head slightly to confirm it was whom she was expecting. A smile replaced her face's muted demeanor. She raised her hand slightly to point at the house across the street. Tommy's look followed her direction. He paused at the revelation.

“Could have been our house. I’ll bet I could tell you the lay-out down to the last room and never even set foot in it,” Beth said.

“How’d you find it?” Tommy asked.

“Didn’t. Came here. Sat down and there it was.”

“Damn.”

Beth grabbed Tommy’s hand tightly. Tears began to fall down her face unheeded. The room was empty save for her and Tommy. The waitress had left and the late afternoon drew shadows across the room, creating a dark atmosphere. The light of the candle stood out between Tommy and Beth. Beth tried to regain her composure, but failed. The room seemed to close around her and Tommy as the weight of time past pressed in on them.

“The candle. It smells a bit like the lantern we kept in the mudroom in the back. You remember?” Beth asked.

Tommy couldn’t help but remember. The memories hit him like a flood. He wasn’t prepared for this trip and he didn’t want to go. This wasn’t reminiscing, this was terror. He began to tremble as the smell of the candle hit his nostrils. His eyes glazed over as he held tight to Beth’s hands. All he could see now was the darkness of that long ago night. The occasional lightning strike illuminated a decrepit concrete sidewalk pelted with large drops of rain. The brown gray look of the cement and its unique smell in such a rain wafted across his memories. Holding Beth’s hand now forced him to recall how small, soft and cold it felt on that long ago night.

Tommy and Beth weren’t that young then. Teenage years had yielded to their twenties. He and Beth were on the downside of that mark. They had met panhandling on the street a couple of weeks earlier. Then they’d found a wreck of a house on a stormy night. It looked just like the one before them now. Tommy had led the way, busting in the back door, walking through each room to see if anyone or anything else was there. All he had was a pack of matches and an occasional lightning strike for guidance. The rooms were filthy, strewn with debris, smelly, damp and vacant. It wasn’t much. It wasn’t anything. But it was better than the street.

They stayed the night and the next day. Looking around the next afternoon, they realized the neighborhood was for all intents and purposes abandoned. Businesses were boarded up, along with most of the houses. There were a few homes and people, but they lived more than three blocks down the way. They hadn’t seen any cops for 24 hours. A good sign for the homeless. They decided to set up shop there, using only the back door so no one would see them come or go.

Tommy had found an old Coleman lantern and filled it with kerosene. He and Beth kept it lit on the back porch at night so they could find their way in when one of them returned late. They kept the windows sealed the best they could so no one would know they were there. They lit small candles in the rooms they used, staying mostly in the back kitchen and upstairs back bedrooms. Tommy “borrowed” a tool from a city truck and turned on the water. They had flushing toilets and cold showers. A bit of heaven in a sad world.

Beth found Molly and brought her back like a stray puppy. They had a fight over Molly and Tommy almost left. The argument settled when Tommy brought Edgar by. In a couple of months their emergency shelter had become a group home. Each and every one an orphan that had been in the system. Each and every one left on his own when they came of age. Each and every one losing their struggle with life. But that wasn’t the terror that held Tommy.

That dark night. No moon. Gray skies all day had turned to dark skies at night. It was miserable. Work had been hard to find. Food even harder. They were all sharing what they could,

but no one trusted anyone completely. So there were shortages. They had all been brought up in the system. Trust was hard to find, even among peers.

“Edgar was fighting with Molly in the mudroom,” Beth said, softly sharing her memories of that night.

Beth sat quietly as she stared at the house. Her thoughts overwhelmed her senses.

Tommy turned to the voice but really heard no one. He remembered the fight. Molly and Edgar always seemed to fight back then. For two people who hated each other so much they seemed to go out of their way to make each other miserable. It had gotten so bad the group threatened to kick them out if they didn't take their arguments outside. The mudroom was the next best alternative. He remembered looking toward the mudroom and seeing their shadows reflected in the lantern light.

He heard the slap. Molly had struck Edgar. In the middle of all that noise -- the rain, the chatter and their own arguments -- Tommy had heard the slap. It had been as clear as a bell toll in an abandoned church. He knew it stung. Edgar felt it against his cheek. Tommy had looked into the room and seen Edgar place the back of his hand on his face.

“I swear the temperature dropped 10 degrees when Molly slapped Edgar's face,” Beth said as she relived the moment with Tommy.

Tommy had to agree. Beth had joined him just as Molly slapped Edgar. She watched with him as Edgar raised his hand to his face. It seemed as if nature had stood in solemn, quiet waiting. Time had no meaning. Edgar stared a dark mean stare toward Molly. His heart burned in anger that was reflected in his features. His body was tensed, as if ready to pounce. Nothing seemed to register but that terrible smell and hiss of the Coleman lantern recording it all in its harsh light. Molly never wavered, never faltered in her conviction. She gave back stare for vicious stare toward her antagonist.

“I don't think I ever saw such a look of total hurt in a man's face,” Beth remarked once more, breaking into their mutual silence.

It was true. They stood at odds, never bending. Then Edgar's face changed. A deep, soulful hurt registered in his heart and was reflected in his face. Edgar suddenly turned and walked out the door. He left Molly alone with her anger and she fell apart. As soon as the door closed, Molly fell on the floor in a lump of inconsolable pain.

“Her hair smelled like soot and her tears were warm on my cheek. Her body shook in spasms under my arms,” Beth said. “She was so lost. So heartbroken.”

Beth had gone to Molly when she fell. Tommy had watched for a moment, then left the women alone in their personal moment. He waited on the old couch in the front room. It was a crappy old couch a member of the group had brought back from some trash pile. But you could set on it to wait, and he did. Candles around the room provided soft, fractured light. Enough to be seen and to see by. It took the better part of an hour before Beth and Molly came back in and sat next to Tommy.

“Then the terror came,” Beth said and took in her breath.

Tommy squeezed her hand a little harder for support and held his breath as well. It was a searing memory they now seemed to share through the simple touch of their hands.

They had been upstairs when the back door crashed open. Tommy rose from a mattress on the floor to see what had happened. His heart raced as he went downstairs. He believed the police were finally raiding the place. It was much worse. There were four of them, and they had guns. But they weren't police. Edgar was a heaping mess on the floor in the main room. Then

everything went black for Tommy. All he remembered was the sting of the metal handle of the gun as it hit him. He had gone out cold.

“The screaming was frightening,” Molly recalled. “It was so terrible. Everyone seemed to be screaming. It never got quiet. The four of them yelled at us. Pushed us. Shoved us. And when we wouldn’t move as fast as they wanted or did what they wanted they hit us. Over and over again they hit us. They hit us on the head, the face and the stomach. Wherever they wanted. Then they would laugh and yell again. They used their fists, guns, anything they had available. But they always yelled so loud. I didn’t even know what language they were using. It sounded Spanish, but I never really knew.

“They tied up the boys first, all but Edgar. I think they thought he was dead. They put Larry on that old chair in the middle of the front room and tied him down. Larry was freaked out. He shouted and cursed at them. They just laughed and poked him with their guns. They weren’t tall men, but they were like monsters to me. They had such dark thick hair. A couple had mustaches. They stank of sweat, cigarette smoke and wet dog. One of them grabbed me by the hair and yelled at me. I didn’t understand what he wanted. He threw me against the wall and knocked the breath out of me. I was so terrified. I thought he was going to kill me.

“Then he grabbed me by the throat and pushed me up against the wall until I stood just in front of his face. He leered at me. His face was so close to mine, every time he said anything I could feel the spit on my face. And God, his breath. It was like he had eaten shit. He pointed his gun in my face and then pulled my hands above my head. I thought I was going to be tortured, raped and killed. Tommy, I pissed myself, I was so scared,” Molly whispered.

Tommy didn’t remember all of it. What Tommy did remember was waking up with blood dripping from his skull. His head hurt terribly. He was lying on his side in the front downstairs room. Through the dim light of six lit candles he saw Beth with one of the men’s hands on her throat. He couldn’t move, but he could see those assholes stand another one of the women against the wall. Then they placed flashlights on their heads and made them hold them. They forced them to point the lights towards Larry in the center of the room. Larry wore nothing but his boxers.

“This *gilipollas* wouldn’t tell us anything,” a man in a white muscle-shirt said, gesturing with his gun towards Edgar.

His shirt focused your all eyes on his arms as their tendons rippled in the candlelight. It was a very effective incentive to cooperate.

“So we brought him home to you. We were gonna let you convince him to tell us what we want to know. But the *coño* can’t talk right now. So now we’re gonna just ask you,” muscle-shirt said.

At the last comment, muscle-shirt leaned down and placed the tip of a lit cigarette next to Larry’s left nipple. Larry screamed and thrashed in agonizing pain. Then muscle-shirt took a long puff on the cigarette and placed the tip next to Larry’s right nipple. Larry screamed again. Then he took another puff and scarred the middle of Larry’s chest. Larry’s screams were wild and he was becoming hoarse.

“For God’s sake. What do you want to know?” Molly screamed.

Molly was quivering as she sat between the two women holding the flashlights. All three were terrified and crying. Muscle-shirt turned on Molly. He grabbed her by the throat and blew smoke in her face.

“Don’t tell me what to do, *puta*, or you will be next.”

He reached back and slapped her hard across the face, drawing blood from her mouth and jerking her body backwards. Molly crawled back against the wall, pulled her legs to herself and sobbed. Muscle-shirt turned back to Larry and put his cigarette out on his thigh. Larry's screams burned into Tommy's mind.

The torture seemed to have no rhyme or reason. Muscle-shirt never asked any of them, or Larry, a question. He found an old coat hanger and heated it up. He used it to brand Larry over and over again, until Larry could no longer cry out. Tears just poured from his blood-red eyes. Muscle-shirt's friends seemed to enjoy the spectacle, laughing at each new torture and suggesting new places to place the pain. It was bizarre. It was surreal. Then muscle-shirt kicked Larry over and turned to Beth.

"His eyes were wild when he looked at me," Beth said. "I shuddered. I couldn't keep the flashlight steady. I knew I couldn't stand what he had done to Larry." Beth grabbed Tommy's hand even more tightly. Both sat at the table staring into their terror.

"No!" Molly had screamed at muscle-shirt.

Beth heard that terrified scream splitting into her fear once again as she sat silently next to Tommy in the café.

"You volunteering, *puta*?" laughed muscle-shirt.

He turned his attention from Beth to Molly. He grabbed her by the throat and dragged her to a standing position. Then he hit her hard in the stomach, as if she were nothing more than an old boxing gym punching bag. Molly bent over in sheer pain, all breath, all speech knocked out of her. He grabbed her by the neck again and forced her upright. He turned and said something to two of his buddies. They burst out laughing at the comment, then headed out the back door in eager anticipation.

"We got something special for heroes, *puta*," muscle-shirt said.

The third guy was nervously laughing at seemingly nothing. He twitched and shook as if he was high, or wanted to be. He said something to muscle-shirt. Muscle-shirt replied and the third guy went toward the back bathroom.

"Everyone wants to get ready for this, *puta*." Muscle-shirt laughed his wicked laugh and spat in Molly's face.

He forced Molly to stand in the center of the room. The flashlights fell on her half-naked body. Blood still dripped from her battered lip. Edgar lay in front of her, flattened against the wall. Muscle-shirt's back was to him as he focused all his attention on his new prey.

"I saw her eyes look to Edgar. They were so deep and soulful. She looked like she was saying goodbye," Beth said. "Her eyes held all her hurt and love. It was a deep, forgiving look, but bore no outward passion. It was as if only she and Edgar existed and we were all but minor players in their simple world. I looked at Edgar and saw his eyes were open and looking back at her. It was then his passion for her exploded."

A tear fell from Beth's eyes as she recalled that moment in the nightmare of hell.

"Edgar had taken that damn ever-present knife from his boot and bolted to muscle-shirt. He shoved the knife in his back while grabbing him across the mouth. That silenced any outburst. Molly grabbed the gun muscle-shirt had stuck in the front of his pants. Edgar then sliced his blade across muscle-shirt's neck. It looked like he was trying to cut his head off, he sliced so deep. He then dumped muscle-shirt on the floor, grabbed an old two-by-four lying nearby and beat his head to a bloody mess. Molly just stood by with a cold stare and waited.

"Edgar finally stepped back and grabbed his breath, his anger all but diminished. Muscle-shirt's brains were splattered across the room and the floor. Molly dispassionately tapped Edgar

on the shoulder and pointed to the back bathroom. She gave Edgar the gun and took his knife. Molly then went to cut you boys loose.”

Beth took a deep breath and continued speaking, as if in a confessional.

“Tommy, when Edgar started beating on that man, I just stood paralyzed. It was so brutal. His brains literally fell on my body. But I couldn’t move. I stood there holding that damn flashlight above my head like some statue watching that man beat another man to death. And I cheered inside, Tommy. I cheered. I wanted that man to die that horrible death.

“After Edgar was done, I started to get my senses back and began to cry. I almost put the flashlight down. But Molly came over and shushed the both of us and told us to keep still. Suddenly, we knew we had a chance but we had to keep the other men thinking nothing was wrong. So we did what Molly said and stood there waiting. I was so goddamned scared,” Beth said.

“When Molly cut us loose, we went and got some knives from the kitchen,” Tommy said. “I heard a muffled shot coming from the back toilet. I moved as quickly as I could to see what happened. I met Edgar as he was heading back to the main room. He saw me and handed me the third man’s gun. We both went towards the mudroom and joined the others. When the last two came back through the door, Edgar and I shot them.”

Tommy’s tone changed. His voice belied a confession of his own.

“Beth, I was so scared when I shot that man. I was shaking. I never shot anyone before. I didn’t know if I could do it. I was backed into a corner, with no good choices. I just reacted. But when I went out to that mudroom and lay in wait, I looked at Edgar. I don’t know what I was looking for, maybe support, maybe affirmation. But I didn’t expect to see what I saw. It was in his face, his eyes, his whole body. He was cold, Beth. Cold as death itself. It was as if he was no longer burdened by any sense of morality. Like right and wrong no longer existed. The only thing that mattered was what he was going to do next. And that was to kill.

“When those two bastards came through that door, Edgar just took aim and shot. There was absolutely no emotion in him. He could have as easily been taking out the trash. I was wrecked inside. I shot best I could and hit the bastard but I still don’t know how. Edgar’s guy dropped with a bullet in the head. Mine was writhing on the floor, blood gushing from his chest. Edgar walked over and put a bullet between his eyes. It was if he didn’t even see a man. Of all the things I saw that night, it was Edgar that chilled my soul,” Tommy finished.

Beth’s hand reached out and settled on top of Tommy’s. A small comfort offered as a barrier against terrible memories. Tommy shuddered at his thoughts. His body tensed in fear. He just stared at the house across the street. Beth’s quiet voice broke the tension and allowed Tommy to breathe.

“After we heard the shots, Molly came and got us. She told us to set the flashlights down. I remember you came and helped me sit down. You held me so tight, Tommy. It felt so good. I cried so hard.”

“Felt good to me, too, Beth. But Molly wouldn’t let it stay there.”

“No. She took charge immediately. Didn’t waste any time or emotion. She seemed to know what had to be done. She went through their clothes. I was horrified she could do that. But she found enough money in their wallets to buy us all bus tickets out of town. Then she told you guys to put the bodies in the trunk of their car. Molly had us girls clean up the mess inside. While we worked, Molly got ointments and bandages and took care of Larry’s wounds.

“By daylight we were all on our way as if nothing had happened. Just as if that night had never happened. As if none of us had ever spent time together. Or had ever even seen a house like that.”

Beth raised a finger from the hand she had rested on top of Tommy’s and pointed towards the abandoned structure across from the café once again.

“I saw her kiss Edgar before we all walked away,” she said. “He and Larry were getting ready to drive that car out of town. The one those assholes drove to our house. They were going to take it to some remote location to get rid of the bodies and any evidence. She held him by the front of his shirt and stood on her tip toes. She kissed him hard and then turned to walk away. He grabbed her before she could go any farther and lifted her into his arms. He kissed her once more passionately. I guess whatever problems were between them, they were over it.”

“Then Edgar and Larry found the money.”

“Yeah. That changed everything.”

The candle on their table had burned out. Long shadows were setting on the house across from the café. Beth sipped a bit more of her tea. Tommy’s coffee was getting cold. The waitress was moving towards them, but Beth waved her off. She stood to go. Tommy began to stand as well when Beth put her hand on his. He remained seated.

“Tommy, I owe Molly. I always will. If Edgar needs anything, you call me. I mean anything.”

Beth’s eyes were as serious as at anytime he had ever seen them.

“Don’t worry, Beth. I will.” Tommy paused, then added, “You think we can buy that building and tear it down. Might do me some good.”

“I’ll have my legal assistant look into it. Don’t doubt it might do me some good as well.”