

A LOVE IN DARKNESS

by

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For David, Judy, Parvin, and Robert.

Thank you for all the support and help.

Chapter 1

Sharon couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that tonight she would die.

While driving back to Rosebud Foster Care at 5:34 p.m., her whole body trembled. Her nerves were sharpened around the family visit she would monitor. This mother had banged a hammer into her nine-year-old daughter's head while the father reclined in a lounge chair and watched.

Worries tangled and knotted in Sharon's mind. *The abuse happened only five months ago. Is the girl psychologically prepared for the visit? How bad will it have to get before I must end it, even though the court ordered a full hour? Will the parents be appropriate? Did I explain the rules with enough depth and reasoning?*

She sighed. She wanted everything to go smoothly.

Sharon hated children being traumatized. If she could prevent that, she would. That was the reason she had become a foster care social worker. It was measly power over the evil done to children, but at least it was something.

Turning on the Honda Civic's stereo, she surfed the oldies rock stations, but none of her favorite musicians were playing.

She longed for Johnny Cash, Buddy Holly, or Jerry Lee Lewis to buoy her spirits. Ever since turning twenty-seven and finishing college, she sought a less complicated life outside of work, like it seemed to have been around the 1950's.

Back then, a cola was only five cents and a hotdog just ten cents. Family members didn't seem so violent towards one another. That simplicity and ease would be wonderful in the present. But of course those qualities couldn't be transported through time, so as a substitute she collected CDs and memorabilia from that lost era.

Sharon braked hard and clicked off the radio.

Up ahead, an old Toyota pickup truck lay overturned beside a bent light post. In front of the accident, a man stood beside the open door of a midnight blue Mercedes. He wore a fluttering white scarf, a gray flannel shirt, and blue jeans.

He faced the accident, body frozen still.

Slowing to twenty miles-per-hour, she continued approaching.

No one else had stopped to help the crash victims. In fact, the street was deserted. It was six at night and this street only had two lanes, connecting two busier streets of Covina. Dark office buildings loomed on either side.

Although a little frightened, she slowed further. She had heard stories in the news of carjackers in Los Angeles feigning crashes to take advantage of do-gooders, but this accident appeared real.

She was torn. It wasn't exactly safe to offer assistance, yet she was a helper by nature. She had been trained early on by her alcoholic mother who was in need of someone more responsible, forcing young Sharon to be the adult in the family. In fact, she had just about single-handedly raised her younger sister, Marlene; that is, until Marlene died from a car accident at age ten. Since her death, guilt haunted in the shadows of Sharon's life.

She screeched the car to a stop.

She couldn't believe she was stepping out. But she had to. She was compelled. Already having punched the numbers 9-1-1 into her cell phone, she waited for a response.

"Do you need help?" she yelled to the man in blue jeans standing beside the Mercedes.

He didn't answer. He seemed absorbed in something.

White light sprayed from him onto the cab of the truck. She assumed he was holding one of those high-powered, halogen flashlights. The illuminated man inside the cab was upside down, frantically scratching his face and banging his head against the window, evidently unable to roll it down. He appeared to be a large, muscular man, capable of smashing the window to pieces with one punch.

"Hello?" she called out.

The man in blue jeans continued to stand motionless with his back to her.

"Do something!"

He didn't answer, and her phone reached a tape recording urging her to hold on and someone would be with her shortly.

"Can you hear me?" She stepped closer. Maybe the man had damaged his hearing from the accident or developed a

concussion that affected his reasoning. But his Mercedes didn't appear to have been dented or even scratched.

The trapped muscle-man bled from the forehead. He managed to get out of the seatbelt and turn right-side-up in the cab, and oddly, he began tearing his clothes off. A small fire rose from the truck's undercarriage. She guessed it was heating up the inside the cab.

Her heartbeat raced, and the feeling that this would be her last night alive deepened in the pit of her stomach. But she had to do something.

The emergency operator answered. Sharon desperately searched for the nearest cross-street signs—Badillo Street and Angeles Drive—and relayed them to the operator. He said he would send a patrol car and ambulance to the scene.

She stepped closer, just five feet from the man in blue jeans now, able to see his brown, leather Clark shoes. His long gray flannel shirt slapped his thighs in the light breeze that flowed down the street. His white scarf trailed behind him.

“Hello?” Her voice echoed with deathly hollowness between the two-story office buildings.

A few distant honks of cars, a lapping from the growing fire, now chewing and crackling one of the tires, and muffled curses from the muscle-man inside were the only sounds. The thought that these could be the last sounds she would hear made her feel so alone. But she pressed ahead.

Coming to the side of the lean man, she could see he held his hands together, almost in prayer, except that the edges closest to the pinkies were opened facing the car. A light was emanating from inside his hands. She assumed he was holding a very small flashlight, although she had never seen one that could be that bright, and the light was *different* somehow. Clean.

The muscle-man now only had on his boxer shorts and was scratching his body, leaving bleeding trails. His brain must have been damaged in the crash. He required immediate assistance.

The flames on top of the overturned truck drank air, rising higher like giant demons rising from hell.

Is this man with his hands in prayer crazy? Is he a religious nut? Maybe he's just enraged because the old truck almost crashed into his expensive Mercedes.

Annoyed, she brushed against his shoulder as she ran past him, noticing his light shutting off. When she reached the pickup, she kicked her foot into the window. Her foot bounced back, and her black pump fell off. She quickly replaced the shoe and stepped back to try again, but the man grabbed her from behind, dragging her away while she shouted, “Let me go.”

After a brief struggle, they fell to the ground, him on top.

The truck exploded, and she reflexively closed her eyes and screamed the loudest she had ever done since the day Marlene died. She heard bits of glass showering down around her and pangs from chunks of metal hitting the ground.

Opening her eyes, she saw excited flames dancing and chasing one another around the vehicle.

Turning her head to him, his weight pressing her back on the hard pavement, the firelight on their faces, she could see his face. It was irritatingly handsome for someone who did nothing to help the crash victim. His dark brown eyes were calm, as though he had anticipated this outcome, as though it were *right*.

A strange mewl escaped her lips as she struggled underneath him, and he began lifting himself up. She shook his arms off her shoulders and pushed him back. She straightened her blue, now dirty and torn, blouse and sat up. She wanted to sock him in his handsome face, but he had saved her from the explosion.

“Why?” was all she could say.

Sirens whined in the distance.

Instead of answering, he stood—no flashlight in hand or bulking up a pocket—ran to the open door of the Mercedes, got in, and raced away.

She realized her cell phone was missing.

She searched the ground, failing to find anything. Not even a flashlight.

Chapter 2

Still rattled from the deadly crash scene, the strange man with the scarf, and subsequent police report, Sharon was sitting opposite the Brewster family at 7:04 p.m. in a creaking office chair, trying to keep quiet while monitoring them.

She hoped her golden retriever didn't mind a late night bath when she got home tonight. She had been busy this week and had forgotten the dog's bath yesterday.

Cindy Brewster was holding two Barbie dolls very still in her lap. She had been on Sharon's caseload for five months now. The foster girl had been as soft-spoken and even-tempered as an angel.

The mother clicked her tongue scornfully and complained, "Why aren't you playing?"

The girl remained silent.

She tapped the girl on the back of the neck.

Cindy launched herself off the couch onto the orange carpeted floor of the visiting room, causing Barbie dolls to fly through the air. Her tortured screams wouldn't stop.

Mary Brewster stood up, raised her right clenched fist behind her ear, and took two icy steps toward her daughter, crunching a bikini clad Barbie under her heeled foot.

Cindy rolled under the glass coffee table, arms and legs flailing about.

Unable to pursue her daughter, Mary looked at Sharon with a wiggling smile, which looked more like a worm stuck on a hook. She lowered her cocked fist, slowly unclenched it, but her body remained rigid.

Sharon felt a rush of inadequacy as the monitor of this family visit. How did things get so out of control so quickly? She rushed to the table, reached underneath, and pulled the girl into her arms, preventing the girl from hurting herself against the glass table or its metal legs.

Sharon glanced at the sole window in the room, which viewed the office hallway. Two agency guards busily conversed with another social worker. It gave her a sense of security knowing she could call upon them if the parents became violent.

“Don’t you see?” Cindy cried softly. “Can’t you see?”

“See what?” Sharon asked gently.

“Them.”

“Who?”

The girl’s head sank, blond bangs hanging into her face.

“The guards outside?”

She wouldn’t look up, but shook her head no.

Mary dropped back into the couch and scooted to her husband, Joe. Both of them grasped each other’s hands, eyes shifting uneasily around the room. From Joe’s knees all the way down to his dirty white tennis shoes blurred in nervous vibration.

Sharon whispered, “Your mother and father?”

The girl weakly replied, “Yes.”

Mary Brewster’s grip on her husband’s hand was so tight that her knuckles were bone white. Joe’s thick black mustache quivered on his upper lip. Their faces were ashen. To Sharon’s dismay, neither of them was making a move to help soothe their daughter.

She continued to hold the girl a while longer, helping to slow her diamond tears. Then Sharon reluctantly went back to her creaking chair. She had to. It was essential the parents learn to comfort their child themselves so they could repeat this in the seclusion of their home. Cindy would probably be going home at some point in the future, and Sharon would not be there to comfort Cindy or assist the parents in these types of situations.

Mary glared at her daughter sitting on the floor. Knots pulsed where her jaws connected. “What kind of foster home is she in? Just what’re they doing to my baby?”

“I assure you it’s a good—”

“The hell it is! Just look at her.”

Sharon felt herself shrink back and heard the chair creaking in response. She tried to take a deep breath to gather her strength, but it came only in quivers. She wondered how a nine-year-old girl would feel against this woman’s wrath.

“The state steals my kid and places her somewhere I don’t know about, and I’m supposed to be happy!” Her head rolled on her shoulders. “I don’t think so.”

“I don’t know what set her off, Mary, but I know she’s being treated well in her foster home. Maybe if you try to comfort her ...”

The woman appeared horrified. A few moments of uncomfortable silence passed.

Joe patted Mary’s leg, snorted and stood. He tentatively walked towards his daughter. He paused six feet from her by two plastic shelves of colorful toys and looked at Sharon, appearing to ascertain whether she was serious.

She nodded to him for encouragement.

Cindy’s back was to Joe so that she couldn’t see him coming.

He took another step and stopped. With a tremulous voice, he said, “It’s okay, baby-doll. Everything’s all right.”

She jerked, smacking her head against a table leg and screeched. She threw herself at the wall, clawing at the paint trying to get further away from him. He took another step.

Sharon wanted to hug the girl again. She hated that the court was requiring these visits so soon.

Joe stretched his arm to reach Cindy’s shoulder. As soon as his first finger touched her, she sprang from the wall and crashed into his leg, making him lose balance and fall against the bookshelf, spilling five Dr. Seuss books, while the girl scampered to Sharon and wrapped her arms and legs around Sharon’s right leg. “Make them go away!”

That was it.

Even though only ten minutes had passed, Sharon had to stop this. She mustn’t allow the girl to be psychologically harmed, and this visit appeared to be worsening her emotional state. Perhaps Cindy was remembering the trauma she had suffered by her parents and was regressing. “Mr. and Mrs. Brewster, we are going to have to end the visit.”

“But we just began it,” Mary objected from the couch.

“Honey,” whined Joe, “don’t argue with the social worker.”

“I’m not arguing!” she spat with such venom that he flinched from across the room. “I just want to get what we’re entitled.”

Sharon could feel the girl's arms and legs tighten around her leg, cutting the circulation and causing her foot to deaden. "We need to end the visit now."

The mother sprang up from the couch. "But the visit is supposed to last an hour as ordered by the court."

"I was delegated," she asserted, almost losing her voice, "the monitor of this visit."

As Mary walked to them, the girl whirled around Sharon's leg to the rear, but didn't let go. Mary's stale breath smacked Sharon's face. Her upper lip had the beginnings of a mustache, black like the hair on her head. She fixed both hands on her hips and used her two-inch height advantage to look down at Sharon. "But I'm entitled to my time with *my* child."

Sharon had dealt with her share of difficult parents over the years, but something was different about these two. It was the way they made her feel, like she was nothing, worthless. She tried to sound confident. "We all signed a contract outlining the rules. You need to respect my decision."

Mary exhaled, sending decaying meat stench over Sharon's face. "To hell with your damn papers." She could see the woman's carotid arteries pulsing, blushing the cheeks. Lightning red veins broke through the whites of the eyes to the areolas of gray speckled black.

Joe came up behind his wife and rested his hand on her arm, perhaps more to hold her back than comfort her. "Okay, honey. Let's not do anything rash here."

Mary turned and almost slapped him, but at the last second checked herself. She plodded back to the couch, body stiff as a board, and retrieved her purse. She pulled out a tissue and blew her nose so hard some particles flew out. With the tissue still in hand, she walked to Cindy. "At least let me say goodbye to my daughter." And without waiting for a reply, Mary squatted and grabbed Cindy's back.

The girl screamed, tore away, and ran straight at the wall, steering away at the last second, running along it, rounding the corner, bumping toys off a shelf, stumbling into a plastic child's chair.

"I will call security," Sharon exclaimed, "if you do not leave now."

The mother looked perturbed, but more satisfied with herself as though sending the girl into another fit was pleasurable. She took her husband by the arm, and they walked out the room.

Cindy was collapsed beside a plastic chair, hundreds of spilled Lego blocks, and three stuffed animals. Sharon felt horrible for her.

She gently lifted Cindy to sit and asked, "What happened?"

The girl continued to sob.

"Please, you have to talk to me or I can't help. That's what I'm here for."

After a few moments, she cried, "I told you. They ... my parents—" She gagged.

"I know they used to beat you, but that's not going to happen again. You're safe at your foster home until your parents get better."

"They won't get better. They *never* will!"

"Oh, sweetie, I know they're still troubled, but we're working with them to help them."

"They won't change. They're evil." Cindy began breathing faster, her blue eyes jerking about in their sockets.

It was hard for Sharon to continue defending the Brewsters. She didn't like doing it, and it felt wrong. The mother had hit Cindy's head with a hammer on the scalp so that no bruise would be seen. But the following day at school, her head began bleeding again, dripping down her neck, drawing the teacher's attention. This led to DCFS removing her from the home. But it was part of Sharon's job to prepare the girl for eventually returning. Whether Sharon liked it or not, family reunification was the direction the case was heading. So she said, "I understand they were terrible to you, but they've shown the court they're trying. They've gone to parenting classes, they began individual and couple therapy, and they're willing to visit you."

Tears pulled down the girl's cheeks. "They don't care. They only want me back to hurt me."

"Why do you say that?"

"You don't see them the way I *see* them." She looked deep into Sharon's eyes with a desperate pleading that shook her soul.

Sharon had to look away. She began picking up the spilled Lego blocks to put them back into the box. Without conviction, she

said, “Maybe they aren’t ready now to have you back, but when they are, you might see them differently.”

The girl didn’t reply.

Putting the Lego box down, Sharon looked back at the girl.

Cindy had turned to the wall where two framed pictures hung. One was an unimpressive watercolor of a potted plant. The other was a large oil painting of an angel in bright white light hovering just behind and above a woman in rich velvet, purple robes sitting beside a black lake. The sky above held dark clouds and rain, brightened only by several bolts of lightning—all of which the angel seemed to protect the woman from. Cindy’s eyes locked onto this painting like a vice. “Do you believe in angels?” she asked.

“Angels? Like souls that watch over us?”

“Yes. Protect us.”

“Well ... I do believe that people watch over us.”

Without looking away from the oil painting, Cindy grabbed a white stuffed bear from the floor and hugged it fiercely. “I hope angels are real. I really do. I pray with all my heart.”

Sharon took a couple of tissues from the box on the table and wiped the girl’s face. “Come on. Let’s get ready. Your foster mother will be back any minute.”

She continued to hug the bear and stare at the painting. “There has to be angels. There just has to be. Someone has to be there.”

Chapter 3

Cindy pulled her bedcovers up to her nose.

Her foster sister, Adriana Huffen, slept in the bed across the room. Adriana's crutches leaned against her mattress.

In the nightlight's green glow—which was too dim for Cindy—the crutches looked like a stick-monster standing beside Adriana, waiting for a ripe opportunity to stake her.

Cindy closed her eyes. She could hear her foster sister's deep, slow breathes.

She looked at the crutches again to make sure they hadn't moved. They were motionless, but not yet safe as far as Cindy was concerned. She felt like a scaredy-cat little girl, and she didn't like it, but she wasn't about to pretend she wasn't afraid and find the sticks only inches from her head, preparing to bang her to death. They seemed quite normal in the daytime, but darkness brought maliciousness to them.

In darkness, things can happen to me without me knowing. A green monster could slither out from underneath the bed, black widows could inch their way down from the ceiling on silent threads, crutches could grow or leap or anything!

Maybe she hadn't gotten over her mother beating her head with a hammer five months ago. Her therapist kept telling her that severe trauma doesn't just disappear after the body heals. She didn't think it could linger this long though. But even if her therapist were right, what could Cindy do? The crutches were still scary.

She was glad her foster mother let her have the green nightlight in the room. She only wished it were brighter.

Her foster sister was the nicest person. Cindy was only a couple of months older than the girl. They were both in the same grade, but in different schools because the social workers didn't want to keep switching schools for Adriana. Adriana cared about Cindy as a friend and a sister, but the girl had her own fears. She insisted on propping the crutches against her bed in case an emergency such as fire or mudslide or—although she didn't say it—an urgent bathroom trip. She used to have a problem wetting the bed, which really embarrassed her. She had her own history of

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