

Devil's Night

By Fiona Wilde

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Chapter One

Chicago, 1934

Mary Walters picked up the muddy rag, dropped it in the bucket of water and sighed as she rose to her knees. Her hands massaged her lower back and she felt a stirring of frustration as she looked surveyed the scuffed floor that still needed scrubbing. It was hot for October, which didn't help. Sweat beaded on her forehead and soaked the thin cotton dress, adhering it to her muscular back. The breeze that had blown through the open window earlier in the day had vanished. The heaviness of the air even seemed to muffle the sound. Mary could hear the sounds of engines and footsteps outside the boarding house, but they seemed muted somehow.

She dipped the rag back in the water and started scrubbing again, glancing up at the clock as she did so. Roger should have been home by now. School let out at three, and she'd warned him - hadn't she warned him? - of the danger of hanging out afterwards where the McClatchy boys and others could offer him things that would lead him down the road to ruin. She was already worried that he wasn't heeding her advice. The day before he'd come in late and she was sure she'd smelled the scent of cigarette smoke on his clothes. He'd denied it, and she'd believed him because she had to. Roger and the decrepit house they shared were the only things left that reminded her of her life with Adam. Everything else she'd sold off just to make ends meet. When that was gone she'd opened their house to strangers for a few coins a night. It wasn't easy given how hard everyone had it, but it kept food on the table. For now.

She heard the sounds of footfalls on the porch and breathed a sigh of relief. Mary achingly climbed to her feet, but the smile that she

reserved for her only son disappeared when she opened the front door to see a strange man standing in front of her. He was tall, a good foot taller than she was - maybe more - and he looked almost as tired as she felt. Stubble grew on his face, darkening it. The only bright thing about this dingy man were his ice blue eyes.

He stood in silence for a moment, and Mary realized with embarrassment that he was waiting to be greeted.

“Hello...”

“The sign says ‘boarding house...’”

They’d both begun to talk at once and then stopped. Mary finally broke the awkward silence that hung between them.

“Forgive my manners,” she said, pushing a tendril of wavy brunette hair back under the kerchief that covered her head. “You’re in the right place. This is the boarding house. I was just...well, we don’t get many people these days.”

“So I assume then that you do have a bed for someone who needs it?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes.” Mary moved out of the way so he could come in, silently hoping the visitor would avoid stepping on the wet floor. He did, which was encouraging. Most of her guests were too drunk or uncaring to notice.

She quoted her rates, praying he wouldn’t find them too high and quibble or offer to barter as some of her guests did because she knew she’d have to accept any offer at this point. But he merely nodded as he looked around at the threadbare wallpaper, the worn furniture and the scuffed floors she tried thrice weekly to polish back to their former glory.

“How long will you be staying?” she asked.

“Until I decide what to do next.” The stranger didn’t seem to be addressing her directly as he answered the question.

“As long as you can pay you’re welcome to stay as long as you like,” Mary said. She glanced down at the floor, torn. She hated leaving things halfway done, but she didn’t want to lose a customer, either. Especially not one who planned to stay a while.

“Let me show you to your room,” she said. “Once you’re settled in you can come down and get something cool to drink. It’s warm out today.”

“Too warm for Chicago,” the man said. “I thought it was supposed to be fall here.”

“It was supposed to be fall long past,” she said wearily and glanced down again at the floor that would have to wait.

“This way,” she said, seeing no more need for small talk. She had things to do and Roger’s absence still gnawed at her and before she could mount the stairs she heard footfalls on the porch again but this time she knew better than to mistake them for her son’s. She could see through the screen that it was Dale Patterson.

“Excuse me,” she said, nodding towards the guest and it occurred to her that she’d not even gotten the man’s name.

“Mr. Patterson,” she said. “Good day. Can I help you?”

“Do you know where that boy of yours is?” There was no greeting, just an abrupt question.

“No,” she said, and she could feel the flush in her face at the admission. Patterson’s expression was accusing and it made Mary feel guilty even though she’d told her son to stay out of trouble.

“Well I do,” he said. “I saw him and a couple of other youngsters rifling through my trash bins behind the store this afternoon,” he said. “Looking for eggs. I told Ray not to put them out there because these kids are collecting them for throwing. I know it doesn’t do much good to tell the parents of these kids to keep them in on Devil’s Night but...”

“It *does* do good, Mr. Patterson,” Mary said firmly, her flush deepening. I do not condone my son running the streets. If he was in your bins on the way home from school then...”

But the man just grunted and waved her off. “Do what you can,” he said. “But I’m not expecting much and come the thirtieth you can believe I’m going to be ready to whup any boy I catch making trouble, yours included.”

“He’s not a troublemaker!” she said, unable to contain her temper.

Patterson stopped and turned, a smirk on his face. “It wasn’t after school that I saw him in my bins, Mrs. Walters. It was around noon, when he should have been in school. And it wasn’t the first time I’ve seen him out there either.”

Mary felt like she’d been punched in the stomach. She felt stupid, just standing there staring in disbelief. Patterson smiled, tipped his hat and walked off without another word.

Mary was blinking back tears as she turned and shut the door. He’d lied to her. Roger, the one person she had left in this world, had lied to her. She was losing him to a crowd of hooligans, and if she

wasn't careful she'd lose him completely, just like she'd lost his father.

"Something wrong, ma'am?"

She looked up to see her guest staring at her. It made Mary feel self-conscious.

"Nothing of your concern, Mr..."

"Benson," he replied. "Will Benson."

"Mr. Benson," she repeated curtly. "Now if there's nothing else you need."

"There is, actually. You were going to show me to my room?"

Mary flushed at her absentmindedness. Shame and apprehension over where her son might be and might be doing were crowding everything else out of her head. She brushed past her new boarder and mounted the stairs. At the top landing she removed a ring of keys from the pocket of her apron. The hallway was long but the threadbare carpet that covered the wooden floors was clean, at least.

She stopped at the third door and removed the key to it from the ring.

"This is the only one I have," she said. "Please don't forget to return it to me before you leave. Breakfast and dinner are served daily. Breakfast is at seven, dinner at six. I clean sheets on Wednesdays so you can either leave the door unlocked on that day and I'll strip the bed or you can strip the bed yourself and leave the sheets in the hall by the door. I'm not a pious person, but I do have a reputation to maintain..."

She paused here, thinking of Roger again.

“I know nothing of your marital status, but I know that single men enjoy a drink at the bar and the women who frequent that place. What you do outside of here is none of my concern, but I do not allow boarders to bring whores into my house.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Will replied.

“Thank you,” she replied. “Is there anything else?”

“How old is your son?” he asked.

Mary stood there, taken aback. She’d just made it clear, she thought, that her personal business was just that. And yet he dared to ask such a personal question? She didn’t want to answer, didn’t want to talk about Roger. But Will Benson was a paying boarder and right now he represented the only money that she had coming in. Because Devil’s Night was coming, and people didn’t usually come to Chicago - especially this part - on Devil’s Night. Usually they got out, if they could.

“He’s twelve,” she said, looking down at the keys in her hand.

“And not heedin’ his mama?”

“Mr. Benson, as I said...”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t mean to pry. I suspect when his papa is going to whip him good when he gets home.”

She dropped the keys into her pocket and glance past Will towards the window.

“There is no papa,” she said. “My husband is dead.”

“Then I guess you’ll have to whip him,” Benson said. “Boy like that’s going to need it, else he’ll end up with the wrong crowd...”

“Mr. Benson,” Mary said, trying to keep the anger out of her voice. “There will be no ‘whipping’ in this house because I don’t believe in it. Neither did my husband. He was a gentle man and I believe Roger will grow into one as well. Kindness and understanding is what he needs.”

“Kindness and understanding have their place,” he replied. “But sometimes the best understanding you can give someone you love is the understanding that they’ve earned a good whipping.”

She looked at him directly now, and scowled. “As I said, I don’t believe in it. I was raised without being hit, and I’m raising Roger that way. But as I said, this really is none of your concern, is it?”

“No, ma’am,” he said. “I don’t suppose it is...”

A shadow of a smile crossed his handsome face. He looked amused, and Mary found herself flush with anger at his expression. Was he amused at her position or her plight?

“Dinner is at six,” she said, and turned on her heel to walk away.

Will Benson watched her go, admiring how the simple cotton dress clung to her curvy body. Mary Walters was a pretty woman, fine like her house must have been. He wondered how long it would take before she started to show wear. Widowed with a kid and trying to make it on her own. It made him sad, but he couldn’t help but admire her spirit. That was why he had smiled. It didn’t surprise him when she said she’d been raised without having ever been spanked. Only a person who’d been raised with a healthy dose of the belt realized spankings were only scary when you got

them but later, when you reflected on how you earned them and why someone felt the need to take that course of action.

He walked into his room. It was clean and simple, like the rest of the house. The window overlooked the busy street below. The shadows of the day were starting to lengthen and he could see Mary now, walking briskly out into the street, no doubt looking for her wayward son. He wondered if the boy's father had ever tanned his hide, or bothered to put his pretty wife across his lap. He doubted it; she was awfully direct for a woman.

Mary Walters reminded him of his sister-in-law Jenny, who had the sharpest tongue in southwest Indiana until she married Will's brother, Jared. Like all the other men in the Benson clan, Jared believed that women should be loved, cherished, protected and - when necessary - put over a strong man's lap and spanked to the point of tears. Or beyond, depending on the offense.

He'd been at a cookout on the Fourth of July a year before when Jared had finally had enough of his bride's attitude. Jennie, who was as pretty as she was willful, had caught the attention of a distant cousin who was following her around like a puppy. This hadn't set well with Jared, who took her aside and politely requested that she stick close to him for the remainder of the picnic.

"I will do no such thing!" she said in a voice loud enough to draw the attention of those nearby. "If you aren't man enough to keep me that's not my fault!"

It had likely been the wine talking; Jenny had downed two glasses and had eaten little. But for Jared that was no excuse. He'd drawn a line in the sand and she'd deliberately put the pointy toe of her shoe across it, and in front of family and friends. Will had taken one look at his brother's face and knew that Jenny was in for a

some Benson-style correction. He'd never witnessed it, but growing up he knew that's how his father had handled his mother's temperamental outbursts. Jenny, like Mary Walters, had been raised without corporal punishment. As his brother guided his wife to the barn across the yard, he knew she was in for it.

Will knew it was wrong to watch, but he'd been on the receiving end of Jenny's nasty comments more than once and had kept it to himself. He didn't want to go running to his brother, and figured that if she was disrespectful to Jared's family it was just a matter of time before she was disrespectful to him as well. So he'd bided his time, and now that it had come he felt compelled to watch the show.

He casually walked around the pecan grove to the back of the barn, where the weathered boards had swelled and contracted over the years, leaving gaps perfect for spying.

Jared was seated on an old milking stool, a struggling and obviously infuriated Jenny over his lap. She kicked her legs frantically and called him some choice names as he lifted the hem of her flowered dress. She wore garters underneath, and white panties edged in lace. Will knew he should look away and was about to when his brother glanced up and winked. It shocked him that his sibling not only knew he was there, but apparently approved.

Jared raised his hand and brought it down hard on the seat of those panties. And Jenny's angry tirade ended in a wail that Will believed audible to everyone back at the picnic.

"You're going to watch that tongue of yours young lady," Jared said, raising his arm again.

“BRUTE!!” Jenny said, her voice edged with fear now. “When I tell my father what you’ve done...”

He hit her again, hard and she burst into tears, her hips wagging back and forth to avoid what she predicted would be another hard blow. But she could not, and soon Will was watching, fascinated, as his brother’s hand vigorously laid a rapid fire set of hard spanks on an upturned derriere that began to glow red through the thin fabric of the panties.

“PLEASE!!!!” Jenny was wailing. “STOP!!! I’LL BE GOOD!!!!!!”

She continued to kick, her shoes flying off in the process. Jenny was getting just the comeuppance she deserved, and just when Will thought the show was almost over, his brother reached up and pulled the panties she was wearing down to mid-thigh.

Will’s eyes widened. His brother glanced up and smirked; he couldn’t believe it. He was going to get to watch Jenny get her bare bottom - already glowing at hot pink - spanked on the bare to a cherry red.

And that is exactly what his brother did.

SPANK! SPANK! SPANK! SPANK! SPANK! SPANK! SPANK!
SPANK! SPANK! SPANK! SPANK! SPANK! SPANK! SPANK!

Jenny’s pleas had dissolved into unintelligible mewling bawls now. Her body was limp over her husband’s lap, the back of her dress soaked with sweat. Jared’s blows slowed down, but he landed the last two especially hard right on the lower half of his wife’s plump buttocks and then roughly pulled her to standing.

Her back was to Will, and he could see the white garters framing her red bottom and shifted, suddenly uncomfortable that the sight

was giving him a raging erection. It wasn't just the sight that aroused him, but how exciting the whole thing had been and still was as he watched the feisty, outspoken Jenny collapse into her husband's arms and beg his forgiveness.

He turned away. They needed their alone time and he was sure that when he next saw Jenny that she would be a different person. And she was. The couple returned to the picnic later and if anyone else heard the spanking, they weren't saying so. But Jenny stuck close to her husband and did not even look in the direction of the distant cousin who backed away when his attention to Jared's wife resulted in a stare-down by her much larger husband.

Jenny had been transformed by that spanking. She still remained outspoken, but within limits. Will's brother had not broken his wife's spirit, but merely tempered it. And it seemed to him that Jenny not only responded to this, but appreciated the guidance. Will wondered: Was it possible that his sister-in-law had pushed things because she knew that it would lead where it did? His father always said that handling a woman was like handling a stick of dynamite.

"Keep a firm grip," he told his son, "because when they go off they can do just as much damage."

A noise pulled him from his thoughts. The front door had slammed. Will had been at the window thinking for some time and had not seen Mary return. He didn't think anyone else was in the house. If it was another potential boarder he didn't want her to lose the business.

He opened the door of his room and headed quietly down the hall as it occurred to him that rather than a boarder it might be an intruder. As he reached the landing he looked down and saw a boy. He was thin with blond hair and features that immediately

identified him as Mary Walters' wayward son. The lad was looking from left to right nervously.

"Mama?" He waited for an answer. He called again. "Mama?"

Still no answer. Will watched now as Roger reached under his shirt and pulled out a sack and then went towards the steps. Will shrank back out of sight, but kept his eyes on the boy as he pulled at the bottom step, loosening it, and then secreting the bag inside. Whatever was in that sack was something the boy did not want anyone else to see.

Skipping school, running with the wrong crowd, hiding things from his mother...the boy needed a good hiding. That much was true. Will could only see trouble in the boy's future if he didn't get the benefit of a firm hand soon. It was clear the lad was asking for one. And, he thought, perhaps his mother was too...

Chapter Two

He could hear them from his room, mother and son, talking in earnest voices. The mother: exasperated, almost pleading. The son: defiant, defensive, dishonest.

It was all Will could do to keep from going downstairs and intervening as Roger Walters sought to worm his way out of trouble. It infuriated him how easily the boy lied to a mother who was clearly struggling to act as both supporter and guide.

“You’re not dad!” Will heard the boy say when Mary pressed him about the absences from school. “He wouldn’t have believed Old Man Patterson over his own son.”

“Roger that’s not fair!” she said.

“Yes it is!” he shot back. “I bet you’re going to go down to the school and ask about it, aren’t you. And you know what, when they tell you that I’ve been there I’m going to run away because you didn’t believe me!”

Manipulative too, Will thought.

“Roger, you still haven’t told me where you were today!” she said. “I was looking all over for you.”

“I was fishing,” he said.

“Fishing.” Her voice was skeptical. “Since when do you fish?”

“Since Danny’s dad lent me a rod,” he said. “It’s not like I have a dad to take me.”

Will could hear pots and pans now as Mary moved around the kitchen. He didn't know her, but had he been a betting man he'd put money on her being close to tears at that moment.

"That's not my fault," she said.

"I didn't say it was," Roger replied. "But fault don't change nothing. Dad's dead."

"I know," she said. "And I'm sorry. If there was anything I could do to ease your pain."

"There is," Roger said. "You can stop fussing at me, Mama. You can stop believing all my friends are bad and you can stop believing in gossip."

She laughed, and Will could hear tears in her voice even as she did so.

"You sound like your father when you say that," she said.

"I'm the man of the house now, Mama," he said.

Will could take no more. The boy was trouble through and through and was playing his mother like a fiddle. And Mary Walters was buying it because she wanted to. He knew none of this was his business; his business was actually to get a buyer for the corn crop his brother was harvesting at that very moment. It wasn't going well; he'd yet to find a buyer who could offer them enough to even break even. No one locally could do it, which is what had sent him to Chicago in the first place.

Will had cleaned up and changed and now he walked downstairs. He found his way into the kitchen, where Mary was peeling

potatoes while her son bounced a ball off the floor. He bit his tongue to keep from telling the boy he should be helping her more.

She looked up when he rapped lightly on the doorframe.

“Ma’am,” he said.

“Mr. Benson..” Her eyes widened as if she just remembered he was there and then she turned to her son.

“I forgot to tell you, Roger. We have a boarder. This is Mr. Benson.”

The boy just nodded, his eyes moving over Will appraisingly. He looked older and more knowing than a kid his age should, Will thought. Roger looked as shifty and as calculating as he’d sounded.

“Mr. Benson, this is my son Roger...”

Will walked over, hand extended. “Pleased to make you acquaintance, Roger,” he said.

The boy just nodded again.

Mary looked up, obviously embarrassed.

“There’s going to be boiled ham and potatoes for dinner,” she said.

“And greens and biscuits. I hope that’s all right.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Will replied. “But there’s no water on the stove. Hand me a pot and I’ll put some on.”

“No, Mr. Benson, please...”

“Oh, I see,” Will said smoothly. “Roger was probably about to do that, being man of the house and all and not wanting his mother to do any more heavy lifting than she should.”

He reached up and took a large pot down from the rack hanging from the ceiling and walked over, handing it to the boy.

The boy looked at him sullenly.

Smart Will thought. He knows I'm putting him on the spot. And he doesn't like it....

The boy took the pot, casting a resentful glance at Will as he did so. His mother seemed not to notice and smiled lovingly at Roger as he went to the sink and began to work the pump handle that filled the bucket with water.

“That woodpile is a little low,” Will said, nodding to the three logs by the woodstove. “Where can I fetch more.”

“I don't expect guests to work, Mr. Benson,” Mary said.

“She can do fine by herself,” the boy piped up, but Will did not even acknowledge him.

“Is it out back?” he asked.

Mary cast an embarrassed look towards her son and then looking back at Will, nodded. He was glad, both that she did and also that he was headed out there door where he could temper his desire to give Roger a good shake.

There was a small woodshed in the little fenced lot behind the house. It looked almost out of place in the urban landscape. Will remembered having such a shed on the farm where he and his

brother still brought in a crop year after painful year. He'd been hauled out there more than once, and had even hauled his sister Penny there when she was sixteen and he was eighteen after he'd caught her skinny dipping with Eddie Sloan.

"You either take the whipping from me or I tell pa," he told her, knowing that his father might not be able to stop hitting if he found out what she'd done. Penny had taken what they'd both considered to be the lesser of two evils, but Will had made darn sure that she regretted her decision just the same.

"If you're going to show your butt again, you're going to show it striped!" he told her as she howled and danced at the end of his arm. Will did not put Penny over his knee; he had no desire to have his sister writhing over his lap. It was the switch for this one, laid hard across her still-wet panty clad bottom. He'd made her pull on her clothes as soon as he found her, and when they got to the woodshed he'd cut the switch as he held her fearful gaze in his.

She'd begged and pleaded; as the youngest she'd always been able to sway him with her little pout. But he had to be strong now and it was both physical and emotional torture for pampered Penny to discover that the brother who had always protected and coddled her could transform into such an unwavering disciplinarian. By the time he finished, Will had proven true to his word. His sister's bottom was covered in wheals that showed through her damp underwear. Her upper thighs were striped too, both front and back; she'd learned rather quickly that turning around did not spare the lash.

She never skinny-dipped again after that and went on to marry a respectable man who was not Eddie Sloan. They had two children now and were very happy. Will looked forward to the day he would have a family and was actually surprised it had not happened yet. He'd had plenty of opportunities; mothers of

daughters of marriageable age in his farming community were eager to unburden themselves of their offspring, especially to such a stable and honorable man as Will, who came from a good family to boot.

But as the economy had spiraled, he'd feared too much for his siblings' families and spent his spare time keeping the farm afloat to keep them fed. He'd gotten to where he even ignored the women who flirted and smiled and stopped by the farm with homemade bread and jam dressed in their Sunday dresses even though it was Wednesday or rainy or both.

He was past noticing women, it seemed. Until now.

What was it, he wondered, that was so appealing about Mary Walters. She was pretty, but not a raving beauty. And besides, she looked tired and preoccupied. And she hadn't been particularly nice to him now that he thought about it.

He walked back into the house, his arms laden with wood, and looked up at her as he began to stack it by the stove in the steamy kitchen. Mary had put the potatoes and ham on and was rolling the dough for biscuits. The muscles in her arms worked as she pushed the pin back and forth; her face was a study in concentration. Tendrils of blonde hair had fallen from the bun she'd fashioned and framed the sharp but delicate features of her pretty face. She looked so intense, so serious. It hit him then; she had a strength about her but also a sort of vulnerability that touched him somewhere, awakened something in him.

"Can I do anything else?" he asked.

She looked up, almost startled. What had she been thinking about? He almost wondered the thought aloud.

“You’ve done more than enough, Mr. Benson,” she said. “Thank you. Just remember, dinner is at six.”

It was five o’clock already. An hour’s wait. Will nodded at her and noticed then that Roger wasn’t in the kitchen. He decided to take a walk and exited through the kitchen and walked to the sitting room. It was empty. He looked out through the window; he could see Will by the side of the house, throwing the rubber ball almost angrily against the fence.

He moved quickly the lower step, looked cautiously around and then pulled up the loose step. The little canvas bag was still there. He lifted it and put his hand inside. The first thing he pulled out was a roll of wadded cotton. The label still clung to it. “Doctor’s Choice Medical Wrap.” The price tag was still on it; he knew the kid didn’t have money. It was likely stolen. He fished through the bag some more and this time withdrew a small metal tin. He opened it and sniffed, making a face. Kerosene.

He frowned, angry, and put the lid back the tin before stuffing it back into the bag. Why the boy had these things he didn’t know, but he had an idea that it had something to do with Devil’s Night, which was just two days away. Will had heard about the mischief townspeople expected almost as soon as he got to town, but from what he understood it was usually just small, annoying acts of vandalism the locals were used to. But cotton and kerosene? It looked like someone was planning to ratchet up the excitement this year.

“Not if I can help it,” he said.

He went out the front door and walked down the street. A small mercantile was on the corner down the street from the boarding house. He walked in and began to look around. The very items

contained in the bag were on the store's shelves. He made mental note of this and then picked up a bag of sugar and some apples.

At the counter he waited behind two women, eavesdropping on their conversation.

"I don't know what's becoming of these boys," an older woman was saying to a heavyset woman in early middle age who was holding a late-in-life baby.

"They're hoodlums, the lot of them," the older woman continued. "I've run them out of my garden twice now. They stole every windfall pear from under my trees and took the eggs from Miss Milliken's henhouse, and her needing the income from selling eggs to pay her rent. And all for what...?"

"I'll tell you what," the weary mother intoned. "So they can egg houses and throw rotten pears, that's what. Rather than helping their folks they're out planning trouble."

"Especially that Walters boy," the older woman said. "Child has the face of an angel, but he acts more like the devil. His father must be rolling in his grave..."

"Excuse me.." Will's curiosity had gotten the better of him now. Are you referring to the son of the lady who runs the boarding house?"

The two women looked him up and down, the middle-aged mother more than the older one, and more appreciatively.

"Why yes," the latter said, her lowering. "If you're new in town that's a place you should steer clear of. Any woman who can't handle her own child can hardly run a business."

“Now, Linda. That’s not fair,” said the older woman. “Poor thing does as well as she can.” She turned to Will. “Things have taken a bad turn for poor Mary Walters in the last couple of years. Her husband kept the family comfortable, if not wealthy. He bought that big house to turn into a hotel, as an investment. But before he could make the improvements he died of a heart attack. A fit man, and barely thirty-eight. Everyone was shocked. He’d sunk his life savings into that place even though everyone told him not to, but he was determined that he and that plucky little wife of his could make a go of it...”

“It still doesn’t excuse letting her son run amock,” the mother said, bouncing her fretful baby on an ample hip now to keep it from fussing. “The boy should be packed off to live with a relative who can raise him with some guidance if she’s not fit to do it...”

“She has no relatives,” the older woman replied. “Mary Walters’ parents are dead. She was an only child of a good family that fell to ruin several years ago. It’s a good thing she had her looks. At least that helped her snag a decent husband.”

“For the good it did her,” the heavy woman said spitefully. The older woman shot her a dirty look.

“How do you know Mary Walters?” she asked.

“I’m boarding there,” he said. “I’ve seen how hard she works and I was just curious.”

“Are you a single man?” the mother asked. Her baby was beginning to suck on its fist now and kick its chubby legs.

“Regretfully so,” he said.

“Well I’d watch that Walters woman,” she replied. “I’m sure she’s looking for a man to take care of her and that boy and that’s nothing but trouble.” She paused. “If you’re looking for a good Christian woman, though, I have a sister...”

Will tried to imagine a slightly younger version of the woman before him and even that made him slightly nauseous.

“I appreciate the offer, but I’ve already got someone in mind.” He tipped his hat. “Good day, ladies.”

He moved past them and paid for his purchases. It was getting later now. On his way out he passed two men and found himself again drawn to the conversation. One man was showing the other a shotgun.

“I’m not putting up with it this year, Harold,” he said. “They may just be kids but I’m not going to spend Halloween morning scraping rotten dried egg off my windows this year. If I do, it’ll be while those boys are picking bird shot out of their backsides....”

Will scowled at what he’d heard. Roger may see these shenanigans as a game, but a misplaced shot by an angry homeowner could leave him maimed or dead. He stepped outside and was surprised to find it windy and overcast. Clouds were moving in over the city; a rare fall storm was in the works.

He jogged across the street and entered through the front of the house. He found Mary still in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on dinner. Roger was nowhere to be seen.

She looked up at him, her eyes questioning as he dumped the sugar and apples on the counter.

“I was thinking apple pie would be nice one night,” he said.

“All you had to do was ask,” she said softly.

He shrugged and smiled. “I like to help.”

A silence hung between them.

“Then if you’d like you can fetch my son and tell him dinner is ready.”

Will smiled and was pleased when Mary smiled back. Her face flushed charmingly as she did so.

“I’d be glad to,” he said.

Chapter Three

Mary Walters felt a surge of guilt. How ridiculous was she, feeling attraction to a man she did not even know. He was a boarder, a stranger. For all she knew he was on the lam. Maybe he was a robber. Or worse. Maybe he was being kind to lure her into a sense of complacency and she'd wake in the morning to find him gone along with what was left of her grandmother's silver -- the portion she had not sold to keep herself and her son afloat.

She'd been initially annoyed at what she considered Will Benson's intrusion into her private affairs. It still piqued her a little, his insinuation that she needed to be stricter with her son. Perhaps he had been right, but who was he to say. And then to come in and help with the wood and suggest to Roger that he should help. Oh, she'd picked up on that, even if she'd not shown it. Because secretly she'd been glad that someone had said to Roger what she could not bring herself to say.

Mary knew she was not doing herself any favors by holding back with her son. Adam had been dead for two years; enough time had passed for them to cope. But somehow, she felt she'd not really helped him do that. Whenever he'd tried to talk about his father, she'd just hugged him and told him how much she loved him, because in truth she did not want to talk about Adam's death. Because talking about it forced her to relive the moment her world had been ripped apart, the moment a knock at the door from the preacher - hat in hand - had brought her world crashing down as she realized that she was utterly and completely alone and unprotected, that the one other adult she'd loved completely had vanished without even a good-bye.

The funeral had been surreal. She'd stood there, trying not to waver as she looked down at his body. It had been early winter, right before Christmas, actually. Somewhere outside the funeral

parlor she remembered hearing carols being sung, and remembering how the year before she and Adam and Roger had opened their door and listened to the singers serenade them with songs of the season. He'd given her an early present that year, a doll. It was a silly sort of gift he could not wait for her to open and she had, just two days before his death.

"A doll for a doll," he'd said, and she'd marveled at the porcelain skin. And then there she was, looking at her husband in the casket looking like a doll version of himself. It made her weak with confusion. It could not be real. She could not be alone, a widow at twenty-seven. She could not, she could not, she could not. Mary had closed her eyes and then opened them. But the casket was still there and the only thing that pulled her back from the brink of collapse was the shuddering sobs of Roger. And she remembered then, that there was someone else even more confused and had turned her attention, her will, her everything to him and from that moment on had made it her life's mission to make him happy.

But had she gone too far? Had she indulged Roger because she feared causing him any more pain? Mr. Patterson's words came back to her, and Roger's threat of running away if she followed up on the man's information. She was supposed to be the parent, so what was stopping her?

Mary knew the answer. Fear. Fear of losing the one person she had left. But if she kept going the way she was, she knew she might lose him in other ways - the streets, prison, death....

The kitchen door slammed and Roger came back in.

"Is dinner ready?"

Will walked in from through the other door.

“Ah, there you are,” he said to Roger. “I was looking for you.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Your mother asked me to,” he said. “It was dinner time and she was in here doing everything on her own. She didn’t have time to go look.”

The implication was clear, drawing a frown from the boy. But there was no guilt on his face, no indication that he felt obligated to be there for his mother.

“You know, guests can eat in their rooms if they want,” the boy said. “They don’t have to eat in the main room with us. So if you want I could help mama by taking your food upstairs..”

“Roger...” Mary’s tone was indignant.

“I’ll be eating down here,” Will said. His tone was firm and he fixed the boy with a stare that was close to menacing and felt rewarded when the boy recoiled a bit.

“Good,” Will thought. “It’s about time you learned that there are people out there tougher than you...”

“And we’ll be delighted for you to join us, won’t we Roger?” Mary mustered as stern a gaze as she could muster and led the way to the table. She’d laid out her good china; she rarely ever did this but her new boarder had bought sugar. And apples. She saw Roger fix her with an almost accusing look, silently communicating that this man wasn’t worthy of such a gesture.

Mary ignored it.

They sat down and she led them in a short prayer of Thanksgiving and then began to pass the bowls of food around. She served herself last; it was her way.

“Have you been in town long?” she asked Will as they started eating.

“No, just for today,” he said. “I’m on business. My family owns a farm in Indiana and they’re harvesting back home. But no one can afford to buy the corn. I’ve come all this way looking for a good price.

“You have come a long way,” she said. “Are you finding any success?”

“I’ve had some nibbles,” he said.

“You’re lucky to live on a farm.” Mary’s voice was almost wistful. “Must be so open. The city can be so stuffy.”

As if to disprove her, a breeze of cool air blew in through the door. A cold front had come in. Fall had finally arrived, it seemed.

“Yes, it is a bit stuffy,” he said. “And obviously more exciting, too. What’s this I hear about Devil’s Night?”

Mary looked at her son. “Apparently for some area boys, it’s their idea of fun. But you wouldn’t be involved in that, would you Roger?”

“No ma’am,” Roger said, but his tone was almost mocking. Will chewed his ham an extra few seconds to keep from saying what he wanted to say. He wanted to be careful, to make Mary and Roger aware of the seriousness of the situation without making her feel like he was intruding somehow.

“It’s a good thing you’re not, young man,” he said. “When I was at the store getting the apples and sugar I saw a man show another man his gun. He said he’d use it against anybody who egged his property on Devil’s Night.”

“Which man was it?” Roger’s curiosity was telling. Will put his fork down and studied the boy, who was suddenly trying very hard to look like he was less interested in the answer than he actually was.

“Why does it matter?” Will asked.

“It doesn’t,” Roger said. “But I still want to know.”

“Well, he was about this high.” Will indicated someone around average height. He had gray...no, brown...maybe black hair. He was thin, but not too thin. More average to heavy really. Or not...”

He shrugged.

Roger flushed angrily. Will knew that he wanted to know so he could warn his friends.

“A gun?” Mary was still processing the information. It was as if her worst fears were knocking on her door.

“Roger, you’re not going to school day after tomorrow. You’re staying here.”

“Not going to school? Why?”

“Because,” she said. “If you’re here all day I won’t have to worry about you not showing up and then going out with that crowd at dark.”

“I wasn’t going to!” he said hotly.

“Well then it shouldn’t matter,” she said. “In fact, you should be grateful. I want to keep you safe, Roger. The last thing you need is to be heading home and have those hoodlums abduct you and get you in trouble...”

Roger stood, visibly angry now.

“You believe Old Man Patterson, don’t you!” he said. “That’s what this is about. You believe him over me. YOU DO, MAMA! ADMIT IT!”

“Don’t raise your voice to your mother.”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Roger shot back. “You’re nothing but a boarder. You’re probably not even who you say you are. That’s the kind of people Mama brings in here because since my father died she doesn’t care!”

Mary went pale and now Will was on his feet. He’d not meant to get this involved, not this way, and not so fast. But there was no stopping it now.

“Roger, sit down,” Mary said. “Just sit down and calm down. Please. You, too, Mr. Benson.”

“I’m not going to sit at the table with this....bastard!” The word flew out of Roger’s mouth and his mother gasped.

“That’s pretty tough talk from a kid,” Will said. His voice was so calm that Roger fell quiet, too. “I guess you think talking like that makes you a man, huh?”

“I’m man enough,” Roger sneered.

“Man enough to be honest with your mama?” he asked. “Because men don’t sneak around, Roger. They’re honorable and they’re honest. If you were a man you and your friends wouldn’t steal from the mercantile. And you wouldn’t hide dangerous stuff under the broken stair step.”

The boy fell silent now, his face gone pale as his mother’s.

Mary stood. “What on earth are you talking about?” She looked at Will, and then turned to Roger. “Roger, what is he talking about?”

Will’s gaze was still on Roger. “Tell her, Roger. If you’re really a man this is the time to prove it.”

The boy swallowed. He looked close to tears now, and panicked.

“Ma, I didn’t take it,” he said. “They did. They told me to hold it here until...”

“Take what?” she asked. “Roger, tell me!”

“Go on, show her,” Will said, his voice gentle. He nodded towards the stairs. “It’s the right thing to do, boy. And you know it.”

Roger looked from his mother to the stranger. He glanced at the door and Will knew he was thinking about running. He looked at the door, too, and glanced at the boy, to let him know he’d be a step ahead of him if he tried.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to Mary, her son’s shoulder’s slumped and he shuffled over to the stairway, knelt down and forced the top board off the bottom step. He pulled out

the canvas sack and brought it over. It made a soft plunk as it landed on the table.

Mary reached for the bag, opened it and withdrew the cotton and the flask. She opened it, sniffed the contents and closed her eyes.

“Sweet Jesus,” she said, sitting down.

“Roger,” she finally said, looking up. “Don’t you understand what could happen if you get involved in stuff like this? Someone could die. You, your friends. If you set a fire that got out of hand, an innocent family could burn. Do you want that on your conscience?”

“I don’t have any choice, Mama,” he said. He didn’t sound so tough now. In fact, he sounded very confused and afraid.

“What do you mean?” asked Will.

Roger closed his eyes and sighed. “Frankie and Joe and Mark...if I don’t do this they’ll....they said I have to or I’ll be sorry.”

Mary stood up to comfort her son but Will reached out and stayed her with his hand. He shook his head and looked at her, his expression asking for trust and latitude he knew she could rightfully refuse to give. But she backed off, instinctively knowing that this stranger at her table had her and her son’s best interests at heart.

“You won’t be sorry,” he said, because I’m going to teach you how to handle these boys. “I may have grown up on a farm,” he said. “But I’ve had experience with bullies. You’re right about one thing; it’s time to be a man. And you can’t have other people fighting your battles. Now I know you’re thinking I’m a stranger and wondering why I even care, but if you put that aside, I can

teach you what you need to know to get them to leave you alone. I may have grown up on a farm, but I dealt with bullies at your age, too. My pa showed me how to get rid of them. If you want me to show you, all you have to do is ask.”

The boy looked at him, doubtfully. Will was reminded of a wounded dog he found on the farm one day. It had been caught in a trap and its leg was swollen and infected. There were marks on its body from where it had been beaten by a previous owner. He’d had a piece of beef jerky and had held it out. The dog had looked at that jerky like it had wanted it more than anything in the world, but it had looked at Will, too, as if afraid of what the treat would ultimately cost. That was how Roger was looking at him now.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” he said.

“All right,” Roger said. “Yeah, if you can I’d...I’d like that...”

“OK then,” Will said. “You get a good night’s sleep and I’ll talk to you before school. If we get an early start you might not have to skip day after tomorrow.”

“Mr. Benson,” Mary said, feeling angry that he was overstepping her order. But he looked at her again and she felt the trust once more without knowing why.

“He can do this, ma’am,” he said. “Your son can do this. Just watch.”

Mary wasn’t sure what to think. She finished her meal in silence and rushed to do the dishes. She heard Will tell Roger to get to bed early, because they’d be getting up before dawn. She wondered what the handsome stranger had in store for her son, or why he was even doing what he was doing. Who was this man, that he’d taken such an interest in the wellbeing of her child.

Will came into the kitchen.

“He went to bed,” she said.

“You must be a magician,” she said. “I have to beg.”

“You shouldn’t,” he said. “You’re the parent. He should do what you say. I listened to my mom..”

“Did you have a father to back her up?” she asked.

It was a fair question. “Yes,” he said. “But even if I had not.”

“Don’t even say that.” She held up her hand. “You can’t imagine what my son’s going through. Don’t even try.”

Will sat down in a chair by the stove. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Walters...”

“Mary,” she said. “You can call me Mary. And apology accepted.” She paused, looking at him. “Just answer one question for me,” she said. “Why? Why are you doing this?”

“I guess it’s the protector in me,” Will said. “When I see someone who’s clearly so vulnerable, so clearly in need of a firm, guiding hand I can’t help but to step in...”

“He does need that, I guess,” she said.

“I’m not talking about him,” Will said. “I’m talking about you.”

“Excuse me?” Mary, who had started to mix flour and water together for a piecrust stopped and fixed Will with an incredulous look. “How dare you say such a thing!”

“Quite easily,” he said calmly, which infuriated Mary even more. “Your son is out of control and you’re afraid to rein him in for fear of losing his love, which is likely all you have left. It’s an understandable, emotional reaction.”

Mary’s eyes narrowed and her face flushed in anger. When Adam had been alive, he’d been used to her temper, but he’d largely ignored it. Like a storm, it eventually blew over. And since her husband’s death Mary had been more worried than angry. But this, this arrogant man who now offered his analysis of her in such a casual was...it infuriated her.

“You have no right to make such a statement,” she said and slammed the rolling pin down on the counter. Mary stomped to the kitchen door and opened it, pointing towards the hall.

“Leave, Mr. Benson,” she said.

Will crossed his arms over his chest.

“No,” he said.

Mary’s eyes widened. The man was incorrigible. He’d offended her and was now refusing to leave.

“This is my house,” she said. “You will do as I say.”

“That’s the problem,” he said. “You have to run things even though you don’t want to. When someone comes in and offers to help you’re so afraid of how it makes you feel that you try to throw them out.”

He stood and walked over to her, but did not exit the kitchen..

“But the truth is, you need the money from the board or else you and your son might not have a place to stay. Now what kind of man would I be if I listened to a woman so intent on acting against her best self-interest?”

His calm rational infuriated Mary even more. He’d pegged her completely; it was as if he could see into her soul, and that was a place Mary had promised to close off to anyone else after Adam had died. This man had no right! And now he was standing there practically telling her she was incapable of taking care of herself?

She’s struck him across the face before she’d even realized, and before she could comprehend the impact of what she’d done, Will Benson’s hand was gripping her forearm and guiding her back through the kitchen, down the rickety back steps and across the small fenced lot to the back where the woodshed stood.

“What are you doing?” she demanded to know as he pushed her inside.

“Isn’t it clear?” he asked as he slammed the door behind him. “I’m going to give you a spanking?”

Chapter Four

She must have heard wrong.

That was the first thought that occurred to Mary as she stood there with an expression of complete shock on her pretty face. Spank her? Was he serious?

“This is nonsense,” she said. “Move aside, Mr. Benson.” She tried to keep her voice calm, for the panic was rising in her chest. This man didn’t look any closer to moving than he had in the kitchen.

“I’m not moving aside,” he said. “You hit me, with no reason. You don’t know me, have no idea of my nature. You’re lucky that I’m not the type of man who would beat a woman or worse for such a thing. If you ask me, you ought to be grateful that a spanking is the only thing you’re going to get!”

“You are NOT going to spank me!” she said, backing up now. But he’d already pulled a footstool from the corner and had grasped her again, pulling her towards him as he sat down. Mary felt herself fall ungracefully over Will’s broad lap.

She tried to keep calm. Surely he’d let her up. Surely this was just some odd attempt to make a point. Surely he couldn’t mean to actually spank her! But when she felt his strong arm tighten around her slender waist, felt his arm raise and then felt his hand descend in a painful smack across her bottom, then she knew that this man was indeed serious.

“STOP!” she cried out, but it was as if she had not spoken. Will spanked her methodically, hard enough to sting but not so hard that it caused her to lose control. He didn’t spank her nearly as hard as his brother spanked his wife, for he wanted to send Mary a message, not actually punish her. He’d understood that she’d been

angry, but he wanted her to know that there were consequences for raising her hand to someone so much bigger and stronger.

But while it was not a particularly hard spanking, for a woman who had never been spanked it was enough to elicit tears. Mary was as mortified by her own reaction than by the act itself. The sheer humiliation and feeling of helplessness was enough to almost make her cry. The building sting in her bottom was just enough to push her over the edge.

When she was sufficiently but not overly sore, Will stood Mary on her feet in front of him. Her face was flushed and tracked with tears. Her blonde hair had come unpinned from its bun and cascaded in waves down her back; he'd had no idea these silken tresses were so long.

Mary pushed away from him and stood there, glaring, as she rubbed the sting from her backside. But she did not run, she did not inform him she was calling the police to have him arrested for assault. After all, what would she say to them? She'd have to tell the truth, and given the crowd her son was running with some of the officers who patrolled the grimy streets had probably had the same idea.

"So we're square now," he said quietly. "You hit me and I spanked you for it. I hope you'll think twice before going up against someone twice your size, especially when you don't know what they're capable of."

Mary's glare intensified. "What else are you capable of?" she asked. "Or do I want to know."

"If you're asking if I'm capable of hitting a woman anywhere except on her deserving backside, the answer is no. I am not. If

you're asking if I'm capable of delivering a much harder spanking should a woman deserve one, the answer is 'absolutely yes.'"

Her face flushed, but she did not turn away.

"I'm also capable of mending broken stair steps, chopping wood, hauling water and maybe talking some sense into a young man who seems to be having trouble standing up at a bunch of bullies that are intent on making trouble for him. I'm going to be here for a few days. I'd like to do all those things for you, with your permission, of course."

Mary studied him in silence. If Will was surprised at the fact that she'd not instantly fled from the woodshed, she was even more surprised at her own reaction. He'd hit her, spanked her like an errant child. And yet here she stood, listening....no, not just listening but strangely drawn to what he was saying. Something about Will made her forget the spanking and only focus on what he was offering. The rebellious part of herself demanded that she send him away. The practical part of herself ignored that demand.

"What does it matter to you if I give my permission?" she asked. "You've just proven that you're not going to listen to me."

"No, I've proven that I'm not going to let you order me around when you're dead wrong. But this is your house and if you want my help, I'd like to give it to you."

She considered this and then felt her head nod. It was a small nod, but enough of a communication to draw a smile from Will. Her heart tumbled in her chest and Mary blushed scarlet. What was wrong with her, having some ridiculous school-girl reaction to a man who'd just spanked her.

"I need to go in," she said. "It's getting late."

“I’ll walk with you.”

Will picked up a few more logs on the way out. The temperature was dropping and fast. It wasn’t just a cool front that had moved in. It was a cold front.

“When’s the last time you lit your fireplace?” he asked.

“Last winter,” she said.

“Have you had the chimney swept?”

“Of course,” she said almost defensively. “It wasn’t cheap, either. It took the last of my savings but I can’t have the place burn down.”

“Clever girl,” he said. “I’ll build a fire so you won’t wake up to the house being so cold.”

It was the kind of thing Adam would have done, she thought.

She got the matches from the kitchen and brought them into the living room. Will was stacking logs in the fireplace.

“The kindling’s in that little bucket there,” she said, directing him to the strips of heart pine. She watched as he wedged the wood between and under the logs. She lit the match and handed it to him. He put it to the kindling on the bottom. The wood lit immediately and the blaze came to life, moving and stretching up towards the chimney like an animal that’s glad to finally wake up.

“Thank you,” she said. “It’s been a long time since anyone’s helped me with anything.”

“Why doesn’t your son help more?”

Mary walked over to the horsehair sofa and sat down. Her bottom was still sore, but not terribly so.

She sighed and rubbed her hands together. “I’ve indulged him since my husband died. I think it’s because I blame myself for leaving Roger fatherless.”

“How can you possibly blame yourself?” he asked.

She looked around the cavernous living room.

“This house,” Mary explained. “He had this vision of our turning this place into a bustling motel where we could live and work together. One happy, little family starting a business we could pass on to Roger. But it was really too much for us to take on. I think I knew it, even though Adam assured me we could make it work. Then he died of a heart attack.”

“You can’t blame yourself for that,” Will said gently.

“And why not?” Mary said, looking up with a pained expression. “I could have said no. I could have told him not to buy the house. I could have put my foot down....”

“But you didn’t,” Will said, “because that’s not who you are, Mary. And it’s not what your husband wanted. Most men don’t want that. They want to be the leader, the provider, the protector. If you’d have assumed the leader role your husband wouldn’t have lived any longer, and if he had he wouldn’t have been as happy..”

He reached into his pocket and handed her a handkerchief for tears she’d started to shed.

“Am I right?” he asked.

“You ask too many questions, Mr. Benson,” she replied.

“Please call me Will,” he said.

“All right, Will.” She dabbed her eyes. “Given your keen insight into women, how is it that you are single? Or are you a husband to a wife with no idea that you’re toying with the emotions of a widow while away on business?”

“I have no wife,” he said. “But it’s not for lack of want. I’m just too busy trying to keep our farm afloat so my siblings and their families don’t starve. As the one with less commitments, I’m the one with the most time to travel.”

“You sound like a very selfless person,” she said.

“Maybe I’m selfish,” Will replied. “I like taking care of others, so it’s not like I don’t get something out of it, too.”

Mary laughed through her tears and sniffed. “That’s an interesting perspective, I think.”

She stood. “Thank you for building the fire, for hauling the wood, for....”

She paused, feeling uncomfortable. She was dangerously close to thanking him for a lovely evening when that evening had included an embarrassing over-the-knee spanking. Mary fell silent.

Will knew why. He walked over to her.

“Look,” he said. “I really did what I did to keep you safe. I know it’s hard to believe, but I really would hate to see you hit the wrong person. If something happened to you...”

She glanced up at him.

“You don’t even know me!”

“I know enough to know I like you,” he said. He nodded cordially at her. “Good evening, Mary Walters.”

Mary watched him leave the room. She sat down on the sofa and for a moment she stared at the fire, her mind replaying what had happened. When he’d spanked her, she’d wanted to tell herself that he was a heartless brute; but he’d proven to be just the opposite.

Mary had always thought that hitting in any form was wrong and abusive, and now she’d been spanked by a man who’d stood that entire notion on its head.

The clock began to chime. Outside a cold wind whipped against the side of the house. The walls creaked and groaned as if complaining about the change in weather.

Mary slept well that night, and awoke to a cold room. But downstairs the fire was still blazing in the fireplace. Will was already up. So was her son. She could hear them in the backyard. There were voices. And something else. Thumping.

She pulled her robe tightly around her and walked out. In the dim morning light, she saw her boarder teaching her son how to fight. Her first instinct was to stop him. Adam had been a gentle, passive man. He’d had an aversion to fighting and had always told Roger that anything that could be settled with fists could be settled with words. But she knew that Roger was facing something now that he

might not be able to talk his way out of. She knew that he needed the confidence of someone who knew how to use his fists, even if he never actually got into a fight.

She ducked back into the kitchen and began to make breakfast for the three of them. She'd been saving a side of salted bacon for a special occasion and decided that showing gratitude was as good as occasion as any.

She sliced the bacon and cooked it along with some eggs she'd gotten on trade for the pecans from the tree by the woodshed. There was plenty of flour still so she made biscuits. By the time Will and her son, looking winded but satisfied, came back in the house the kitchen was filled with the aroma of food.

She'd never seen her son eat so much - or say so much - since his father had died. He was even smiling, and when Will placed his dishes in the sink Roger, who usually just left his, followed his lead.

"Let's bring some wood in before you head out to school," she heard Will tell her son, and then waited tensely for the lad to balk. When he didn't she stole a look around to find Roger following the tall boarder out like a puppy.

Mary used some of the bacon and biscuit to make a bag lunch for her son. She stuck an apple in the bag and turned to him.

"Have a good day," she said.

He nodded. "I will."

"Stay out of trouble?"

He looked at Will then.

“Yeah, Ma. I’m going to try real hard.”

He turned and went out the back door. Mary walked to the window and watched her son disappear through the door in the fence.

“What did you say to him?” she asked. “He seems so....different. More grown up.”

“I just gave him some advice, man-to-man,” Will said. “Roger’s not a bad kid. He just feels kind of powerless. Those bullies he’s been running with have him stuck between being afraid and feeling like he needs to hang with them to keep from becoming a victim. He’s got some natural abilities, though. I think I taught him enough this morning to where he can take care of himself if he has to.”

“Against a whole group of them?” Mary asked.

“All he has to do is beat up the lead one,” Will said. “Bullies are usually followers. Stomp the head and the body dies.”

But Mary wasn’t so sure. She worried her lip with her teeth, fearing for her son. She did not want to tell Will how afraid she was every day when her son left the house, how part of her wanted to keep him home with her so she wouldn’t lose him, too.

She could not think of him fighting, but she forced herself to trust Will’s instincts on the matter. The way of boys was not the way of girls, and she did not know how to teach Roger the kinds of things that this stranger was teaching him. She just hoped that her son would remember the lessons after Will was gone.

Gone.

The thought of Will leaving suddenly made her very sad. He'd come back into the kitchen now, dressed in clean shirt, trousers and a jacket. He still looked like someone who'd scrubbed up nice to go to the city rather than a city man himself, but Mary liked the look. Will looked clean and decent.

"Wish me luck," he said. "I'm going to try to sell some corn. I'll be back by evening and I'll cut the wood, so don't try to do it."

"I usually don't," she said. "I usually pay some of the men who come through looking for odd jobs. They don't usually speak English, but they know how to ask for work."

"Today you get that done for free," Will said, placing his hat on his head.

He left and Mary went about cleaning the house. She swept the floors, cleaned the hearth and put another log on the fire. She finished the pies and put them in the oven. She had enough ingredients to make three, which would give her two to feed to the three of them and one to trade at the baker's for some breads or other pastries. When she made pies, they were always the best in town and everyone knew it.

The day passed slowly. Several times, Mary found herself glancing out at the woodshed in the back yard, her mind replaying the spanking. He'd not hurt her, but he'd certainly made sure she'd felt the sting of his hand. Her own hand moved back to the firm round flesh of her bottom. No man had touched her there since Adam died. He'd always complimented her on her perfectly formed backside, blushing as he did so. He was a modest man and said little about her nude body, but she knew he appreciated the way she looked in and out of her clothes.

Mary had almost forgotten what it was like to be touched intimately. She wondered what it would be like with someone like Will. She had an instinct that it would be different than it had been with Adam, who had been sweet and gentle, treating her as if she were made of glass, forever asking permission before touching her. She couldn't see Will asking; he was clearly the kind of man who would lead and let her follow, which was the one thing she'd always secretly wanted in the bedroom but had never asked for because she feared hurting Adam's feelings.

She flushed with shame for thinking on these things, for comparing how her husband was in bed with how this stranger might be. What was wrong with her?

Mary heard a sound downstairs and looked at the clock. It was past three. It must be her son, or at least she hoped it was. If it was Roger then Will had indeed worked wonders, because he'd come straight home from school.

She descended the stairs. Through the window she could see the two of them on the porch - Roger and Will. But something wasn't quite right; they were standing too close together. Will looked to be supporting her son.

She flew to the door, opened it. When she did her head began to swim. Will was indeed helping Roger, whose face was so covered in blood that it was barely recognizable at all.

Chapter Five

“What happened!”

Mary stepped back so that the two could come in. Well, Will came in. Roger was carried in, his thin arm over the taller man’s shoulder.

“It looks worse than it is,” Will said. “Calm down...”

But it was hard to calm down until Will indeed did confirm that things were not so bad as they appeared. The blood was coming from a relatively small gash on Will’s scalp. Mary knew from falls that her son had taken as a toddler that the scalp bled worse than anything. But even after the blood was mopped up and the cut bandaged she could see he had a swollen lip and a black eye. But curiously enough, her son was smiling through the pain.

“He got it worse!” Roger said, and above him Will smiled.

“Who?” she demanded to know.

“Some kid named Danny,” Will said. “I saw the whole thing.”

“You saw it and didn’t stop it?” Mary was indignant.

“Your son did quite well without me,” Will assured her. “He’s got the makings of a good boxer, this one.”

“What happened. I want to know what happened.”

Roger told her, and her face blanched as he recounted how the boys had met him coming through the alley and demanded to know if he’d gotten the cotton batting and kerosene. Roger had calmly

told them that he'd decided their plans were too risky and that he would not be participating in Devil's Night after all.

But this had pleased Danny, the leader of the group. The hulking boy wasn't used to new recruits spurning the honor of being inducted into his circle of troublemakers. He had informed Roger that loyalty to the group - to him - was not an option. When Roger had stood his ground the boys, led by Danny, began to taunt him about. They teased him about the death of his father and about his ramshackle house. Roger had stood his ground and kept his cool, until Danny had suggested that his mother was a whore who slept with boarders.

That was when Roger had hit him. It had been a hard blow that scared the younger boys, sending them flying lest they become targets. Only Danny and another boy remained. Both of them ganged up on Roger and Will, who had happened to be passing when the confrontation started, stayed back and watched the whole thing play out. He was fully prepared to jump in if he needed to, but he soon realized that Roger -while smaller - possessed instincts and strength he'd never thought possible in one who'd only had one lesson in how to fight. By the time it was over, Roger had sustained a gash on his head where Danny's companion had hit him with a rock before taking a game-ending kick to the groin.

Roger had rounded on Danny, who'd landed a punch to Roger's lip before enduring a flurry to his face that dislodged two front teeth and broke the other boy's nose. The larger boy left the alley in trailing threats and tears.

"What if they come after him again?" Mary wanted to know.

"They won't," Will said. "Cowards are just that. Cowards. That boy was shamed in front of his whole tribe of followers. I don't

think Roger here has anything to worry about, except maybe the adoration of some local girls.”

“You really defended my honor?” she asked, touched.

“No one’s going to say bad things about you,” Roger said. “Not to me. Mr. Will here said a good man takes care of his mama first.”

Over her son’s bloody head, Mary shot Will a grateful glance.

“I’m going to take him out back and run some cold water on this cut,” Will said. “Why don’t you finish dinner.”

“Sure.” Mary stood and went back into the kitchen. Her head was swimming with relief, but in the back of her mind a niggling bit of fear remained. What if Will was wrong and those boys came back to hurt her son. The notion was almost too much to endure. But Will seemed confident that the type of boys her son had fought would not have the nerve to face a second round of punishment, and since all the other boys had fled, perhaps he’d have a harder time enlisting allies for an attack.

She made a chicken pie for dinner, stretching a stringy hen, potatoes and leftover vegetables into a meal large enough to feed all of them. She’d traded the pie for cornmeal for the crust, and had been given several sweet potatoes by the grocer whose wife she’d helped learn to sew a few months earlier.

Soon she had a big meal on the table. Roger began to yawn halfway through it and it was apparent to both her and Will that his victory in the alleyway had taken its toll.

“Why don’t you turn in early?” Will suggested.

“Will you teach me to fight some more tomorrow?” Roger asked.
“It’s Devil’s Night and since I’m going to be home anyway...”

“Sure,” Will said.

Mary smiled as she watched her son go.

“So how did things go for you today?” she asked. “In all the excitement I forgot to ask.”

“I’m seriously hopeful for the first time,” Will replied. “There’s a mill on the outskirts of town that offered me close to what we have in mind. If all goes well tomorrow then....”

Mary finished the sentence. “Then you’ll be leaving...”

Will looked at her. Mary’s face had the tense look of someone trying to keep their emotions in check.

“I’ll pay you through next week whether I’m going to be here or not.”

She stood, turning away quickly. Her heart felt like it was being stabbed and she was embarrassed, more embarrassed even than she’d been during the spanking. She felt more exposed now than then, more vulnerable, more capable of being hurt. Only this was worse.

“You don’t have to do that, Mr. Benson.”

“Will,” he said. “Call me Will.”

“Why?” she asked, “whirling to face him. Why does it matter?”

Will stood and walked over to her. He looked down at her face, reached up, took a tendril of hair from the loose bun and wrapped it around his finger. It was like silk.

He leaned down, took her in his arms and kissed her. She offered no resistance. She'd been right. He was not the type of man who asked for permission. Her arms wound around his neck as the kiss deepened. Mary knew what was happening now would make his departure even harder, but she didn't care. It had been so long, so long since she'd had this kind of attention. She'd sworn to herself that she'd never seek it again, or would reject it if it came her way. But she'd never counted on someone like Will Benson coming into her life.

"Roger..." she began.

"Is asleep," he replied. "I'd bet anything."

"I can't take that risk," she said. "He just defended my honor, remember?"

"So he did."

They went to check on Roger. He was, as Will predicted, fast asleep. Will shut his door.

"This doesn't mean we should..." Mary's voice died away. "I'm not the type of woman who sleeps with her boarders Will."

"I know," he replied. "If I thought you were then I wouldn't be about to do that."

She raised an eyebrow.

"And what makes you think that's what's going to happen?"

His answer was to pick her up and walk her down the long hallway to his room. Will laid her on the bed and stood over her, pulling his shirt off. His body underneath was so unlike Adam's, who was pale and stringy. Will's body was bronzed and muscular. His arms were larger than she'd thought, his shoulders broad. He would have been perfect except for a long silver scar that ran across his shoulder. She wanted to kiss that scar, but his lips found hers so she kissed them. He stretched out beside her, his hands undoing her hair, pulling it down, spreading it out.

Will's fingers moved to the buttons of her dress. Mary's back arched as he undid them. Her breasts sprang free and he reached behind her to undo her bra. Mary helped take it off. Her skirt followed. She did not wear stockings like the other women in town. They were luxuries she could no longer afford. But Will did not mind. He liked the smooth, muscular legs that wrapped around him now. He reached down and cupped her bottom, still encased in her panties.

Mary raised her hips as he slid them down. She was barely aware that she was playing the wanton, which was something she never did with Adam. He'd always been so sweetly unsure of himself, even after years of marriage. But with Will it was so different. He was pulling her towards him, and she could not temper her response.

He rolled over, pulling her on top of him. She felt him hook his fingers into the waistband of her panties and pull them down. She slid out of them and then his hands were cupping her bottom, possessively, appreciatively.

He'd managed to get out of his pants. Her hands found him, hard and eager and so much larger than what she'd been used to. The skin of his cock was warm, the veins like ridges just under the

surface. She slid her hands lower, touching where she'd always been curious to touch a man. His balls were soft and almost hot, the skin almost velvety.

He grasped her, sat up until she was straddling him. She stifled a cry as his mouth found her nipples, going from one to the other he lapped them and then suckled hard. Mary groaned and then found herself underneath him. She spread her legs, ready, more than ready. She could feel her own heat between them, feel the moisture glazing the inside of her thighs.

Will plunged into her, unable to wait any longer. She was so sweet, so welcoming. She was everything he had ever wanted in a woman. She was beautiful, passionate, sweet and somehow innocent.

Mary bit her lip harder, tasting blood. She wanted to scream her passion to the world as he drove into her. She felt herself driven up, up, up and matched each thrust of his hips with an upward one of her own. Her hips were working like a piston, her legs squeezing him with time to his thrusts.

Then she squeezed him from somewhere inside, hard and rhythmically. She felt him try to hold back, to stop himself but she won. The warmth of him pumped deep inside her and she felt her body draw it in. She did not want it to end. Neither did he. They lay there in the dark, kissing and staring into one another's eyes until his cock softened and retreated reluctantly from her still warm nest.

He held her for a long time, but Mary could not sleep. She could not risk her son seeing her come from Will's room. When she was sure her lover was in full slumber, she took her leave. She was delightfully sore between her legs. In her cold room she shivered

as she sponged herself, washing away all physical traces of their lovemaking.

Tomorrow he would leave. She wanted to cry but did not. It was pointless, and at least she had this to look back on. If he'd been misleading her, she could always pretend it was not so, that the affection he'd shown Roger and her had been real. Will would have left them both with something - Roger with confidence and her with satisfaction. She told herself she would not play the victim; she was no fool, and now that she was completely honest with herself had she not secretly thought how nice it would be if something could happen between them; had that not been her first thought when she's set eyes upon this handsome man?

Finally she slept. In the morning she fixed breakfast as if nothing had happened. She could feel her eyes following her as she moved. She was more conscious of her own movements as a result, the sway of her hips, the way her fingers moved to brush aside a strand of hair that had fallen on the nape of her neck.

She kissed Will gently before he went to school.

"You can stay home today if you want," she said. "Tonight being Devil's Night, those boys might have it in for you."

"I can handle myself," he said. His lip was still swollen, but he seemed proud of his battle injuries and exuded enough confidence to make his mother believe him.

She handed him his lunch. Will stood as she did.

"I guess I'd better be on my way, too. We're supposed to finalize things today."

Mary nodded, telling herself again that she'd known this was going to happen. If she felt the extra sting of loss from his departure, that was her fault, not his.

"Will you be back for lunch?" she asked.

"No," he said. "But I will be here for supper."

He walked over to her and kissed her. "Last night meant something," he said. "It meant something to me."

She smiled sadly. "It doesn't have to, Will. You have another life in another state. And I have Roger. And this house..."

She'd never hated it more than that moment. It was like an albatross around her neck, holding her to the grimy town where she had no husband, no real friends - only work and more work.

"We'll talk later," he said.

She watched him go and kept herself occupied the rest of the day scrubbing the floors and trying not to watch the clock. In the afternoon she started a stew from beef, potatoes and carrots. It was a rare treat, but she wanted to make Will's last meal with them memorable.

She was relieved when Roger walked in, still looking confident. The boys had not even spoken to him, he said. Danny had not even been at school. Will had been right; he'd won. They wouldn't trouble him any more.

"Where's Will?" Roger asked, looking around.

"He'll be here soon," she said.

Her son looked at the log pile by the stove. “You’re running out. I’ll go get some.”

He whistled as he went, although it sounded odd with a busted lip. Mary wondered if her son would still be as willing to help after Will left, or if he would slide back into his old lifestyle. For a brief time, Will had become someone her son could look up to. When he was gone, would he substitute the rough crowd for Will once again? Would the streets reclaim him? Would Will use his new skills to make trouble?

She tried not to think about it. She could not make Will stay, and as soon as he walked in she knew by his expression that he’d found success at the mill.

“I’ll be coming back,” he told her. “Just as soon as I get back and get things settled.”

“Will...” She lowered her voice so her son would not hear. “It’s all right. Please don’t make promises. That just makes it harder. I don’t expect anything. You aren’t obligated...”

“This isn’t about being obligated,” he said. “And if you go talking like that I’m going to take you to the woodshed and spank your bare bottom for questioning *my* honor...”

Will did not look like he was kidding, and Mary wasn’t going to press it.

“I’ll talk to Roger before I go in the morning. I’ll keep in touch with letters until I can get back to you...”

“You’re days away!” she said. “Weeks!”

“It doesn’t matter, Mary. I want to be with you. I want you to..”

He stopped. Roger was back inside. He brought in wood and Will nodded approvingly. They all ate dinner and no one mentioned Will's departure."

After dinner they went to the parlor where Will told them both about his family farm, where they grew corn and cattle. In the spring and summer there were barn dances and picnics by the lake. In the winter, they went sledding. In the fall there were bonfires and autumn festivals and pumpkin carving contests...

It sounded wonderful to Roger, who had never been out of the city. He peppered Will with questions until it got late and his mother ordered him to bed.

For a while she sat and talked to Will, learning more about his farm. He told her his father was head of the house and when he settled down, he would be to.

"You think you could live on a farm and be a good and obedient wife?" he asked.

"Don't tease me," she said. "You know I can't go."

He stood and took her hand and pulled, raising her to standing.

"Mary, what did I tell you in the kitchen?" he asked.

She stood there, dumbfounded. He'd said a lot of things.

"I told you that if you questioned my honor again, I'd spank your bare bottom."

And then, with no more preamble, she was over his lap. He raised her skirts, pulled down her panties and peppered her bottom with

stinging slaps until her “ow-ow-ow’s” turned to cries and then little sobs and she was promising never to do such a thing again.

Then he turned her over, sat her up and kissed her deeply. She returned the kiss and he lifted her and took her upstairs, back to his room, for their last night of passion. This is what Mary told herself, for he could make all the promises in the world but she knew if the economy did not improve he could not pull himself away and justify bringing two more mouths to the farm to feed. But she said nothing. For this night, she would pretend that the plans he was making would come to fruition.

She didn’t mean to fall asleep, but she did. She dreamt of his home, a farm she’d never seen. She dreamt of fields of pumpkins, fall leaves, frosty fields and of bonfires. She could smell them, smell the smoke.

She opened her eyes. Smoke. It was not a dream. She sat up and coughed. Her eyes stung. She reached down and shook Will awake.

Fire. The house was on fire.

She looked out the window and in the dim light of the streetlamp she could see three figures running away. Boys. Danny and his friend had taken their revenge, but in a cowardly manner more awful than anyone could have predicted.

She pulled on her dress. Will was already up.

Roger’s room was just down the hall. They called to him, but there was no answer. Smoke swirled through the narrow passage. Heat rose from the floor below. The bottom floor was burning. She could hear the clanging of the fire bell now. She could hear shouting.

“Ma!!!”

“ROGER!!!”

Mary pushed through the smoke, but he held her back. “I’ll get him,” he said. Will shoved open the boy’s door. He was gagging on the floor. Smoke was seeping up through the floorboards.

Will lifted the lad, threw him over his shoulder. He took Mary by her shoulder and turned her around.

“Move!” he said, pushing them back down the hall to his room, where the window faced the street. Below the firemen and spectators were looking up. The window of the room was stuck.

“Stand back!” Will picked up a chair and threw it through the window. He jerked a blanket from the bed, trying not to gag as the smoke thickened around them. He laid the blanket across the jagged glass of the frame.

“You first,” he said to Mary.

“No!” she said. “My son first!”

“NO MA!” Roger said. “Listen to Will. Go!”

Listen to Will. And she did, climbing onto the roof. Below the firemen hands were holding a blanket. They wanted her to jump. She’d never thought her roof was that high off the ground. But already the shingles were hot. She had no choice. She looked back; Roger and Will were right behind her.

Mary swallowed her fear and jumped. She felt herself fall and then hit something springy. She bounced and catapulted into the arms of

one of the firemen, who deposited her on the ground. She looked back and saw her son make the leap. And then...where was he? It seemed forever, but then Roger came down. The blanket buckled under him. He did not bounce and when he stood he had a slight limp. But he was alive. They were all alive.....

They watched the house burn in silence. There was nothing else they could do. Will's arm was around her and her son, reassuring. Mary could feel people staring but she did not care. An officer came over and told her they'd apprehended three boys who had evidence on them suggesting they'd started the fire. Roger wanted to beat them up, but Will assured him that what they'd face in life would be far worse.

"Pick your battles, son," he said. "You've already beaten them. Those cowards aren't worth any more of your effort."

In the morning there was nothing left of Mary's house but smoking rubble. Acquaintances offered her food, but no one stepped forward to take her in. No one could afford to feed her and her son.

But Will wouldn't hear of her staying anyway.

"You're going with me," he said. "You're going to my farm and if you'll agree to it, you'll be my wife. I know you don't know me very well, but in time I think you'll see it is a good match."

"And Roger?" she asked.

"I'll have to ask his permission, of course, but somehow I think he'll approve."

Mary smiled through her tears. Somehow, she thought he would, too.

The End