

The Seed Is Planted

“Emma! Get your ass down here, you *stupid* little bitch! What the *fuck* did I tell you about *not* living like a pig?” Pepper screamed.

Panic-stricken at the thought of what would happen next, Emma rushed her younger sister, Gracie, over to the bedroom closet and pushed the tiny child inside. Before shutting the door she said, “Don’t move or make any noise.” Then in a softer whisper she warned her younger sister, “You have to be really, really quiet. I’ll be right back. I promise.”

That was code for “be invisible.” Gracie obeyed her older sister, tears of fright silently dribbling down her cheeks.

Emma rushed into the hallway and stopped to look at her mother, who was standing just inside her own bedroom. “What the hell did you do now?” she accused. “How many times do I have to tell you to do what you’re told? You brainless idiot!”

Gracie listened from the closet to the rapid patter of eight-year-old Emma’s feet as she ran down the stairs. There was an eerie silence during which she unconsciously held her breath. Then the first blow was struck. Followed by others. Gracie cringed at her older sister’s muffled shrieks of torment as she imagined the scene downstairs with telling accuracy. Emma, she knew from past experience, had once again been transformed into her father’s punching bag. She wondered why their mother didn’t go and help Emma. Resisting the urge to run downstairs, Gracie stayed hidden upstairs in the bedroom closet as she was instructed, waiting for the beating to end, scared that her father would come for her after he was finished with her older sister.

Down in the kitchen, Pepper Murphy lurched around, unsteady on his feet. He towered over his young daughter, contemplating her stricken face for several minutes and deriving a sickening enthusiasm and fresh energy from her growing terror. She stood before him, whimpering from the fear that was planted in her heart, wishing, as always, that her father’s love for her would overpower his fury. That never happened. When she had worked herself up into a frenzy of fear, Pepper punched her in the eye. Emma lost her footing and hurtled back into the doorframe. Almost immediately, her face began to swell at the site of impact.

Snatching her up by the collar of her shirt, Pepper slapped Emma across the face with such force that he split her lip open. Blood gushing into her mouth and down her chin, she watched as her father walked over to the stove and turned on the burner. When the cold black coil began to glow a scorching orange, he shut the burner off and stood glaring at his daughter. Her body involuntarily shook as she wondered what he was going to do to her. Huddled in the corner of the kitchen, Emma wished the walls would open so that she could crawl inside of them and find the needed protection from her father’s wrath. “Please, Daddy. Please don’t hurt me. I’m sorry,” the child begged.

His eyes bored into hers, undeterred by her fear and pain. Emma watched in terror as the corners of his mouth curled up, until he was smiling like a sadistic monster. She trembled visibly in anticipation of what was to come. Her father suddenly pounced on her. Grasping her by the arm, he dragged her, kicking and screaming, over to the hot burner. Then he seized her left hand and ordered her to unclench her teeny fist. After she opened her hand, Pepper slapped her palm down on the hot burner in one swift movement, holding it in place for a couple of seconds and letting the young, tender skin boil and blister from the intense heat that still remained. Then he bent down, his face close to his daughter's, and snorted, "Oink! Oink! Oink!" into her ear.

All through the ordeal, Emma's shrills of agony sliced through the silence of the house. Valerie lay on her bed upstairs. Her mind filled with raw horror as she imagined what would happen to her if Pepper killed the child and was sent to prison. She prayed that he wouldn't take it too far this time. She didn't give a thought to the suffering that her older daughter was enduring at the hands of her husband. It was as if she had ice water running through her veins in place of blood.

As Emma collapsed on the floor, Pepper stood over her threateningly. Speaking in a tight, cold voice, he said through clenched teeth, "You are a *worthless* piece of shit. I don't know why I just don't kill you right now. I'm giving you another chance to act like a human being. You can forget about eating dinner tonight. I don't see why a little pig like you should be fed. Consider yourself lucky that I don't beat you to death." He began to leave the kitchen, but turned back at the doorway and bellowed, "You *better* have this place cleaned up before I get home from the bar!" With that final warning, Pepper grabbed a beer from the refrigerator then stormed out of the kitchen and left the house.

Emma remained sprawled on the floor, paralyzed by the depth of her own despair, her eight-year-old mind trying to recover from what her father had just done to her. Then she scolded herself for failing to wash that one dirty fork that Valerie had left in the sink when she had gotten home from school. Maybe if she had washed it, none of this would have happened, she tried to rationalize, looking for some reason why she deserved such harsh punishment. She sat staring at her blistered, deformed palm. The pain the burn caused was only secondary to her overwhelming despair at being unloved.

This year of her life was when Emma became acutely aware of the possibility that Pepper might actually kill her. The years prior had been hard for her, but now that she was getting older her thoughts and senses were on high alert and she could no longer deny them. She grappled with finding different ways to behave that would stop the abuse, not because she was afraid of dying, but because she was afraid to leave Gracie alone with her parents.

After Pepper had burned her hand on the stove, she did everything in her power to fly below his radar. She made sure to clean the house after school every day and took special care in making his meals. But nothing lightened his fury. It was a Wednesday night and Emma was sitting at the kitchen table doing her homework after she had finished cleaning up from dinner. Her father staggered back into the kitchen to get himself another beer. He opened the can and took a long, hard swig. His head hung as if it were too heavy for his neck to hold as he eyed her with

disgust. “I don’t know why you bother with dat school shit; you’re never gonna ’mount to nuttin’ no matter how hard you try,” he babbled through his drunken daze.

Emma looked up at him, her heart pounding in her chest. “My math teacher thinks I’m really smart. She told me that if I wanted to, I could be an accountant someday,” Emma said, hoping to make him feel proud of her.

Pepper stomped over to the table and picked up one of her pencils and thrust the point into her forearm. The pencil stood at attention as she looked on in shock. She quickly yanked the pencil out of her arm and ran to the sink to wash off the blood with soap and water. “See dat! Now you’re not so worried ’bout pretending like you understand anything in those books of yours. Let that be a lesson not to leave your stuff all over my kitchen table. Now get this shit out of here!” he bellowed.

Pepper was tireless in his violent treatment of Emma. To her, the slaps, punches, and kicks came from a bottomless pit of hate that burrowed deep in her father’s soul. The endless bruises he left on her made Emma feel hopeless and ashamed. Alone in the bathroom, Emma would study the wounds and scars that Pepper gave her. She was consumed by her sense of loneliness and lack of power to change her circumstances. She was completely at his mercy and knew he could do whatever he wanted to her, regardless of how broken she became.

It was a warm morning in August and the two girls were jumping rope in the backyard. Pepper got annoyed because they were making too much noise while he was nursing a burning hangover with vodka. He flung open the back door and stood holding his aching head. “You two shut the fuck up. You hear?”

They immediately went silent and stood perfectly still. He turned and went back into the house, and Emma was lulled into a false sense of security as they began running through the yard, playing tag. Moments later, the rotted screen door burst open and Pepper barreled down the cement steps into the yard. He grabbed Emma under her arm and pulled her into the house. She began to plead with him, knowing she was in for something terrible. “I’m sorry, Daddy,” she cried, “I swear, we’ll be quiet. okay, Daddy? Please don’t hurt me,” she cried.

Pepper grabbed the soft flesh under her upper arm and pinched as hard as he could. Emma went to her knees as she tried to get him to release his hold. He dragged her into the living room where there was an old wooden trunk. “You want to disobey me? Well then, there is a price for that,” he said calmly.

Pepper pushed the glass vase filled with dusty plastic flowers off the chest. It slammed to the floor and shattered into a million pieces. Emma’s eyes bulged as she frantically wondered what he was going to do to her. As her father lifted the lid to the trunk, she shrunk away from him trying to run and escape. He lifted her around the waist, her feet flailing as she tried to break away from his tight grip. Her movements made it impossible for him to get her legs into the trunk. Growing more irrational by the moment, he clamped his teeth on her shoulder until he could taste her blood in his mouth. Then he twisted her arm behind her back until he heard the pop as it dislocated at the shoulder. With excruciating pain in both shoulders she stopped fighting and sank into the trunk. After he slammed the lid shut and locked it, he left her and went to find Gracie. Ignoring her own painful injuries, Emma’s

gut twisted as she heard her father slapping Gracie around the living room. *I wish I were a superhero*, she thought, *so that I can break out of here and help my sister.*

Inside the trunk her body was twisted in an unnatural position. Her legs were folded at the knees behind her and her torso was bent at the waist so that her nose touched her knees. There was not enough room in the small space for her to reposition herself, and after a couple of hours her limbs went numb.

After the first twenty-four hours had passed and he hadn't let her out, all she wanted was to die. She reveled in the idea of leaving her measly existence and finally being free of her tormentor, believing that death was a much more appealing option than her current living conditions.

During her imprisonment, every so often her father would flip the trunk on different sides, smashing her dislocated shoulder and twisted body against the walls of the wooden box. Two days later, when he finally opened the lid and let her out, Emma could barely walk.

She literally crawled, with Gracie's help, over to the sofa where she lay for another four hours. Finally she managed to get to her feet. As she headed toward the foot of the stairs to go up to her room, Pepper put his foot in front of her. Unsteady on her feet, she crashed down onto the floor. She broke her fall with her hands before her face hit the floor and she scurried like a wounded animal to get away from her father. He stood over her and began to laugh. He laughed so hard that tears streamed down his face as his daughter watched him, humiliated and defeated.

Then, without warning, her stomach twisted into a tight knot as disgust for her father overcame her anguish. She felt a surge of hatred so profound that no one could stop it from taking complete control of her. It shook her entire being. Emma grappled with an idea so horrifying that it took her a while to accept it: she now believed that her father was the devil himself in a man's body. This conviction would mark a new beginning for her, eventually determining who she would become. The seed had been planted.

Chapter One

It was a cold November night a little more than a year later and the temperature had dipped into the low thirties. The family was having dinner in the small, dimly lit kitchen. Valerie's eyes were fixed on her plate as Pepper grumbled about his boss and how much he despised the man. That evening, like most others, his drinking had started before he even got home and only ramped up the moment he walked through the front door.

Emma had just spooned some peas onto Gracie's plate. The six-year-old reached for her glass of water and accidentally caught her father's freshly opened can of beer with her small arm. Pepper erupted. His face looked like a twisted mass of bumpy, pulsating flesh as the veins in his temples stood out and he turned bright red. Clenching his fists, he put them up against Gracie's dainty face and yelled, "You fucking little *whore*! You *spilled* my beer! You're an *idiot*, just like your sister!"

Without warning, he yanked the terrified child out of her chair and flung her down on the floor. Before she could recover from the shock, he bent down and slapped her in the face, sending her flying across the kitchen floor. Her body seemed weightless, like a rag doll, as she tumbled head over heels and landed on the other side of the room. Pepper trudged over to her, buried his fingers in her hair, and closed his fist over a handful of strands. Then he pulled her upright until she was standing. Gracie's face twisted with pain as she let out a blood-curdling shriek.

Her father ground his nose against hers. "You *fucking* maggot!" he yelled. "I *never* wanted you! You belong to that *stupid* bitch over there!" He gestured toward Valerie. As Pepper released his daughter's hair, she fell back to the floor.

Stunned by what had happened, Emma ran to her little sister. She desperately hoped her mother would protect them, even though Valerie had proven time and again that she wouldn't. She now snapped at her father. "Why don't you leave her alone? You bully!" she screamed.

Outraged by what he considered to be the ultimate form of disrespect, Pepper snatched a frying pan from the top of the stove and whacked the side of her face with it, knocking her unconscious. When Emma woke up, she found herself lying on the cement steps that led from the back of the house into their small yard. Dressed only in the jeans and sweater she had worn to school that day, she felt the cold seeping into her bones, clearing the cobwebs of confusion that had clouded her mind. Emma picked herself up and knocked softly on the back door.

Pepper, who had been waiting for her to wake up, immediately flung open the door, startling her. "You think you're smart?" he snapped. "You think you can talk to me like that? *Nobody* tells me what to do in my house! Tonight, you'll sleep outside and learn *never* to talk back to me, girl!"

After he had slammed the door in her face, Emma huddled into herself, trying to keep warm. The wind slashed through her worn clothing, increasing her desperation to find shelter. Afraid to go too far, she decided to seek refuge on their front porch. There, she remembered, was a broken down sofa that had never made its way to the trash.

Mrs. Tisdale, her elderly neighbor who lived across the street, was looking out her window as Emma made her way to the front of their row home. The old woman watched the child move slowly up the front porch, trying to step as lightly as possible so that the creaky boards wouldn't betray her presence. Then her eyes widened in alarm as the little girl crawled under the worn cushions on the sofa and completely vanished from sight.

Mrs. Tisdale kept her eyes glued to the sofa for more than fifteen minutes before she put on her coat and went across the street to find out what the hell was going on. She approached Emma with great care, so as not to startle her, and gently lifted the cushion covering her face. "Child," she murmured, "why you out here in the cold? Where's your mama?"

Her eyes red from crying, Emma replied, "My father is making me sleep outside tonight. He was hitting my little sister and I yelled at him to stop. So he hit me with a pan and put me outside. This is my punishment."

"Well, I'll be dipped in shit if a little child like you is gonna sleep out here in the cold!" the elderly neighbor said in a huff. "Come on, baby, you sleepin' at my house tonight."

Emma's body stiffened with resistance. "No, Mrs. Tisdale," she protested, "I have to stay here so I can get up in the morning and get out back before my father goes to work. If he finds out I didn't stay on the back steps during the night, I don't know what he'll do to me."

Mrs. Tisdale gave her concern due consideration. "Okay then," she conceded, "you'll come sleep at my house and we'll set an alarm so that you can get up before he does. That way, you can go back on those steps before that bastard goes off to work. okay, baby?"

Comfortable with Mrs. Tisdale's proposition, Emma dug herself out from beneath the cushions and followed her across the street. Once inside her own house, Mrs. Tisdale wrapped Emma in a warm blanket and made her a steaming cup of cocoa. The chocolaty milk warmed her insides, filling her with a sense of security. Emma was grateful for Mrs. Tisdale's kindness as she lay, warm and cozy, on her neighbor's sofa waiting for sleep to provide a temporary release from her life.

This was the first real encounter that Emma had with Mrs. Tisdale. From here on the relationship grew, and over time, the girl came to rely on her for the support she needed to make it through each treacherous day. Mrs. Tisdale was well aware of how Pepper treated his two daughters. As a result, she tried to compensate by showering the children with the love their parents couldn't seem to find for them. Mrs. Tisdale failed to understand how Valerie could allow her husband to beat their own children. If it were her husband, the old lady told herself, she would surely have set things right. *Hell, she thought, I'm gonna try my best to set things right and I ain't even married to that no-good dirty, rotten bastard.*

Chapter Two

A voluptuous black woman, Mrs. Tisdale had short salt-and-pepper hair that fell about her head in large curls. Her eyes were such a light brown that people mistook her eye color for hazel. Her bright smile lit up her jolly face, and her hands, although extremely large, gave Emma tender comfort when she needed it most. Mrs. Tisdale's loving ways filled the girl with joy, and when the old woman laughed, a rumbling sound rose from deep within her belly, making the child's heart soar and offering her a temporary reprieve from the darkness that enveloped her life.

From the time she had gotten to know Emma, Mrs. Tisdale often brought up the issue of Child Protective Services, explaining to the girl that they offered a way out of her predicament. The old lady wanted to alert them so they could take Emma and Gracie away from their brutal father, but the child had pleaded with her to keep the secret. Not understanding how the system worked, Emma feared that they would take her away and leave Gracie at home to become the new target of Pepper's abuse.

"Mrs. Tisdale," Emma had sobbed, "it won't be any use. My mother will just stick up for my dad and tell them I'm lying."

Against her better judgment, Mrs. Tisdale had let it go. Instead, she had turned to prayer, asking for peace and love to be bestowed upon Emma.

At home, Emma lived in fear, but with Mrs. Tisdale, she always felt safe and secure. Life was sweet with her elderly neighbor, regardless of how short-lived those moments of happiness were. When Pepper was at work or drowning himself in booze at the bar, the child helped Mrs. Tisdale fold clothes and do small chores, listening intently to the stories the lady shared of her own youth. Emma would pretend that her neighbor was her real mother, knowing that if she were, her life would be very different.

In the neighborhood, Mrs. Tisdale was regarded as a tough old black woman. Nobody in Norristown fucked with her. She had three grown sons. They were big and they were mean. When it came to protecting their mama, they were ruthless. Her sons were always nice to Emma, because their mama had explained to them, "The poor child has to put up with brutal beatings from her papa. He's a sorry excuse for a father. We need to give her as much lovin' as we can, so she knows people care for her. Otherwise, she's likely to turn out just like him. Children become what they know. You hear me now?"

Rather quickly, Emma secretly began to wish that Mrs. Tisdale's sons would stop Pepper from hurting her. But just like Valerie, they never came to her rescue. Emma had no choice but to carry the burden of her sickening youth alone.

Chapter Three

Pepper Murphy's mother had died in childbirth, leaving his alcoholic father to raise the boy. The man often beat his small son, berating him time and again for killing his mother. The boy's destructive temper evolved over time, fueled by his anger and helplessness as he endured daily rounds of abuse from his father. When he was still a young boy, Pepper had taken to hiding behind bushes and cars and either throwing large stones at other children as they walked by or whacking them on the back with thick tree branches. He did these things in an attempt to release his own anger.

In middle school, he acquired quite a reputation as the class bully; he would hit and verbally abuse his classmates for no good reason, leaving them defenseless and humiliated. As a young teen, Pepper's explosive anger at his peers escalated to intolerable levels, often leaving his weaker prey with scars and bruises from his boiling rage.

By the time he reached high school he was drinking and smoking and had only a couple of close friends. However, when he entered eleventh grade, Pepper's shop teacher took a liking to him. The teacher realized that with some encouragement the boy could be saved from the fate that he was heading toward. He thought Pepper could someday be a talented home builder, a dream of Pepper's from the time he was small and had used his homemade wood blocks to build houses.

Pepper's whole attitude changed with the positive attention he received from his shop teacher. He made the teenager believe that he could actually do something good so that he would become a man that others respected. For the first time in his life, Pepper was filled with optimism. He quickly became likeable to many of his peers. He enjoyed the last two years of high school—making new friends, going to parties, and becoming the guy that all the girls wanted as their boyfriend.

When he graduated from high school, he had big plans of setting up his own construction business with his closest friend. They talked with excitement about getting contracts for building houses for a large company. The two friends mapped out how they would start out with smaller construction jobs before branching out to build homes on their own. They agreed to save a portion of their earnings from each job to purchase their first company truck.

Only four months after they graduated high school, the two young men signed their first contract. They believed that all of their dreams were coming true. "We need to celebrate! We're on our way to the big time," Pepper boasted. "Let's go to the bar and have a few beers."

They had only been at the bar for an hour when Pepper raised his beer. "Here's to building houses, buddy!"

As they banged glasses and chugged their beers, a beautiful woman named Valerie walked in front of them. Pepper and his friend stared at her, along with every other man in the bar, as she made her way over to a table of friends. That was the night Pepper and Valerie first met.

Pepper and Valerie were almost immediately infatuated with each other. Her beauty stirred a sexual hunger in him that he couldn't control and she was smitten by his apparently strong, protective nature. The two made an attractive couple. Pepper was tall and full-bodied and his intimidating stature matched his burly character. Pepper's jet-black hair and thick, dark eyelashes set off his blazing green eyes. His full lips complemented his long, slender nose, and his rugged features and square jaw made him appear fearless.

Valerie was equally attractive, but what she possessed in physical beauty she lacked in brains. She had long, straight blond hair that fell to her shoulders like strands of golden silk. Her eyes were stunning, almost royal blue, and her pale pink pouty lips were plump and inviting. She was tall and thin with full breasts, a tiny waist, and curved hips.

Valerie's parents had died suddenly when their car slid off of a bridge on an icy winter night two days before Christmas. She was just thirteen-years-old with no other family, and spent the next five years of her life being raised in various foster homes. She carried an unrelenting resentment towards her parents who died and left her alone. Moving all the time annoyed the shit out of her and she hated having to adjust to new families and different rules.

By the time she was fourteen-years-old the other foster girls had taught her how to use her body to get men to do whatever she wanted. These girls influenced her into being manipulative and self-absorbed. Her mannerisms and good looks often created tension between each of her foster parents. The men took her side while the women resented that she stole all of the attention that rightfully belonged to them. Valerie lied and cheated to her foster parents, teachers and anyone else who stood in her way. The once sweet child had grown into a despicable young woman. Finally, when Valerie turned eighteen, she and another girl who she knew from foster care moved into a cheap, rundown apartment over a pizza shop in Pottstown.

Pepper and Valerie were inseparable at first. He took her to the movies where they sat in the very back row, kissing and groping each other. When the weather turned warmer, Valerie made picnics with egg salad sandwiches, potato chips, and homemade blueberry pie. They would spread a blanket out in Valley Forge State Park where they ate their lunch and talked about how much they liked being together. Since their conversations lacked substance, they spent most of their time together kissing and sexually teasing one another.

They had been dating for six months when, after Pepper had one too many shots of whiskey, he forced himself on Valerie against her will during one of their usual make-out sessions. Valerie was devastated that he had stolen her virginity. When she found out she was pregnant with Emma, she threatened to tell the police that she had been raped by him if he left her.

When Pepper turned to his old high school shop teacher for advice, he told him in no uncertain terms, "Good men take care of things when they make mistakes. If it's true that what you did was a mistake then your only choice is to marry her and raise the child together."

Pepper's attraction to Valerie had always been a physical one and he had never planned on spending his whole life with her. But between his shop teacher's advice and her threat of lying to the police, he grudgingly agreed to stay with her. Pepper, for his part, was forced to work on an assembly line at the local auto factory in order to feed his new and unwanted family. Abandoning his friend and the dream of his own business made his heart heavy and filled him with bitterness.

By the time Emma was born, Pepper already resented the baby who, he firmly believed, had destroyed his dream and stolen his life. It was inevitable that she would never know a father's love. She only knew the man as a large and frightening creature she had to please at any cost. But no matter how hard she tried, she was never successful. She clung to the only option available to keep his violent temper at bay—obedience. It might, she hoped, help to lessen the intensity of the physical and emotional pain he caused her.

Despite her dismal circumstances, Emma was still a sweet-natured child, respectful toward everyone she met. People took to her easily, and those who knew her well sensed a deep sadness about her. They couldn't help being moved to pity. A beautiful girl, she seemed to have the perfect combination of her parents' good looks. Blessed with her mother's blond hair and her father's piercing green eyes, she was taller than most nine-year-olds, her height alone leading people to believe that she was older than she actually was. She worked hard every day to keep her spirit intact in the unhealthy, dysfunctional place she knew as "home." While her father abused her physically and emotionally, her mother constantly blamed her for Pepper's rotten temper. "The two of us were doing fine," Valerie would explain as if it were really true, "until you came along and ruined everything we had."

Three years younger than Emma, Gracie was an average-looking girl with curly black hair and deep-set brown eyes. Her nose, a bit too large for her long face, merely accentuated the thinness of her lips. Although far less attractive and more timid than her sister, Gracie was equally sweet-natured. The child's only asset in life was her sister, who acted as her protector and was the only one to stand between her and their heathen father. As Emma grew older, she often spared her younger sister from their father's beatings by pushing herself forward as a buffer. When Gracie was old enough to understand her sister's sacrifice, her emotions were set in turmoil between guilt and love.

The so-called Murphy family lived in a small home on Chain Street in Norristown, Pennsylvania. They lived largely on bare essentials; sometimes even those were lacking. Their row home was a run-down shack that appeared on the verge of collapse. The wood porch had rotted and its roof was supported by four-by-fours sloppily nailed in place to prevent it from crashing down. The floorboards creaked when walked on, their mushiness giving a bit beneath their feet.

Inside, the once white walls were yellowed from Pepper's chain-smoking. The long shag rugs were old and so matted down with overuse that their fibers felt perpetually soggy under their bare feet. The furniture was secondhand with pieces of foam peeking out from the ripped upholstery in several places. The absence of adequate lighting made their home feel like the inside of a cave; but for the glare of the small television that stood on a battered table, there was almost no light at all.

Valerie and Pepper earned so little money that putting food on the table took great effort. The family rarely owned anything new and relied on handouts that were offered at local churches. Of the little that the couple earned, a major chunk went toward supporting Pepper's addiction to booze. The financial strain that the couple lived under only brought more tension into the home. Pepper knew they were destined to be poor white trash and for this he despised his family.

Emma and Gracie were submerged in dreariness day after day. They didn't enjoy the small gestures of affection like most other children that didn't cost anything to give, like a hug or a tender pat on the back. With no relief from their dismal circumstances in sight, they clung to each other to save themselves from the misery that threatened to swallow them alive.

Chapter Four

Over the next three years of Emma's life, Pepper's brutal beatings had become an almost daily occurrence. By the time she was twelve years old, Emma had suffered three concussions, two broken arms, three fractured ankles, and 250 stitches over her body. She bore several scars, all inflicted by her father, including the one on her left palm, a memento from the time he had held it forcibly against the hot burner of the stove when she was eight.

In that same period of time, Gracie had to be taken to the hospital twice. The first time was because she had left a dab of toothpaste in the bathroom sink. As a punishment Pepper bit the top of her hand until a deep purple bruise appeared. He was further annoyed with her when she wouldn't stop crying because of the throbbing pain he had caused. As she descended the stair case, with Pepper closely following, he kicked her down the last three steps breaking her ankle. Gracie's second visit to the hospital was to get stitches because he had shoved her into a wall face first with such force that her two front teeth tore through her lip. Other, less severe injuries sustained by Gracie and Emma were sneakily tended to by their mother.

Valerie was always ready with a stream of concocted explanations for the nurses and doctors who tended to her daughters' frequent injuries. She claimed that her girls were little tomboys who liked playing rough. A variation of that lie was her argument that their innate clumsiness led to "accidents." The most inventive fabrication of all was when Emma broke her ankle for the third time. Valerie insisted that the child had been playing dress-up and had fallen when she attempted to walk in her mother's high heels. Valerie never took the girls to the same hospital within the same year. She would drive for hours, when it was necessary, to bring them to a different hospital in order to harness their dirty little secret.

The daily violence that Emma endured seemed all too normal, no more than a routine part of her life—until the night that changed her forever. It was Christmas Eve and their father was drunk, as usual. "Embracing the yuletide spirit," he had slurred as he tried to coordinate his tangled feet into a celebratory dance. Their mother had made them TV dinners for supper and they sat in the living room, watching the blinking colored lights on their small aluminum Christmas tree. Nothing else mattered to the two little girls and for that night, at least, they were happy.

Once dinner was over, Valerie called her older daughter into the kitchen to help her clean the dishes.

"Emma," she told her, "this is going to be a great Christmas, so don't fuck it up. After we finish cleaning up here, I want you to take Gracie upstairs so the two of you can take a bath. Daddy's been drinking and I don't want anything to piss him off tonight. I'm looking to make this a great night for him and me, so don't fuck it up."

As instructed, Emma quietly led her sister upstairs and prepared for their bath. The two girls bathed together, splashing about in the water and chattering excitedly in anticipation of Santa's arrival. They were hopeful that Santa wouldn't skip their house again this year, as he had in previous years because they were "rotten little shits," as their father had put it.

When Emma and Gracie came out of the bathroom, they heard their father screaming and Valerie trying to calm him down. She didn't want to spend her time mending her daughter's wounds on Christmas Eve.

"Pepper, please!" they heard her beg, "it's Christmas Eve. Please, not tonight."

He yelled, "I don't give a *shit* what night it is! Get your ass out to the store and get me a six-pack of beer or someone is gonna get it!"

Emma knew that "someone" was her. It always had been.

Still wrapped in their towels, the girls heard Valerie leave the house. Frightened at being home alone with their sloshed father, they rushed into their bedroom. Emma quickly helped her sister into her pajamas. After getting dressed for bed herself, she drew Gracie into the closet and there the two children sat in tense silence, pretending to be invisible as they waited for their mother to come home. Just moments later, they heard the stamp of angry feet on the stairs. Both girls knew at once that it wasn't their mother.

Terrified, they clung to each other, the magic of Christmas Eve quickly fading away. Although they anticipated the inevitable, the girls couldn't suppress an audible gasp as the closet door abruptly swung open. Pepper stood there, scowling at them. His hair stood on end and his jaw was clenched so tight that the sharp angles of the bones below the skin's surface were clearly visible. Sensing her father's fury, Gracie peed on the floor in fright. Pepper grasped her by the arm and hauled her to her feet. She was so tiny and fragile that Emma feared he might break her in two pieces. Instinctively she held onto Gracie's other arm as their father tried to yank her younger sister out of the closet.

"Who do you think you are, peeing on my floor, you little brat?" Pepper yelled.

Seized by terror, Gracie screamed and sobbed, trying to break free of his grip.

Emma grasped her sister tightly around the waist in a desperate attempt to resist their father's efforts to drag them both out into the hallway. Having managed to have his way, Pepper paused as he reached the top of the stairs and stood staring at Gracie with revulsion.

Through her sobs, the little girl pleaded, "Please, Daddy, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to pee on the floor!"

Pepper looked at her, then at Emma. His eyes blazed with unadulterated rage. "I didn't *mean* to pee on the floor, Daddy!" he mimicked his younger child, distorting his voice to sound absurd and menacing. "Wah! Wah! Waaah!" He looked at Emma again. "The problem with the two of you is that you're spoiled rotten!"

With mounting dread at what their father might do to Gracie, Emma forgot herself. "Leave her alone!" she screamed at him. "I hate you! You're nothing but a stupid *drunk!* We *both* hate you!"

Temporarily oblivious to Gracie's presence and his urge to punish her, Pepper scurried over to his older daughter, clamped a hand on her thick blond hair, and dragged her down the steps. Without uttering another word, her father took her down to the basement. Then he turned and, without warning, punched her in the temple. She fell to the floor, half-conscious. Despite the pain she silently wondered what she had done to deserve the parents she had been given. Why had God let her be born if she wasn't wanted? No matter how well behaved she was, Pepper always found a reason to show how much he hated her. He continued to beat her until she was senseless, her mind enveloped by blackness.

When she came to an hour later, she found herself sitting on a damp dirt floor, stripped naked, her arms tied to a pole behind her back. After several moments, she realized where she was: in the center of their basement. She could hear rats scurrying around her in the dark. Her bare bottom was chilled by the damp dirt floor. She opened her mouth to scream, but her voice came out muffled. She had been gagged. Scared and utterly alone, she focused on her breathing. She tried to pretend she was at Mrs. Tisdale's making the apple pie she loved so much. But Emma's mind kept going back to the dark, hazy space where something had happened before she fell unconscious. What had happened to Gracie? Where was her mother? Did anyone know she was down here? Why was she naked?