



# I

## Adamsville State Penitentiary | Death Row

With the man's first step, the others on the Row began a slow tapping on their cell doors.

The tiny procession reached the end of the pod, and the rest of the way through security and all the way to the death chamber was lined on either side with corrections officers shoulder to shoulder, feet spread, hands clasped behind their backs, heads lowered. As the condemned reached them, each raised his head, snapped to attention, arms at his sides, feet together.

*What a tribute*, he thought. Who would ever have predicted this for one who had, for so much of his life, been such a bad, bad man?

## October, seventeen years earlier | Touhy Trailer Park

Brady Wayne Darby clapped his little brother on the rear. "Petey, time to get up, bud. We got no water pressure, so . . ."

"Again?"

"There's a trickle, so give yourself a sponge bath."

"Ma already gone?"

"Yeah. Now come on. Don't be late."

At sixteen, Brady was twice Peter's age and hated being the man of the house—or at least of the trailer. But if no one else was going to keep an eye on his little brother, he had to. It was bad enough Brady's bus came twenty minutes before Peter's and the kid had to be home alone.

Brady poured the boy a bowl of cereal and called through the bathroom door, "No dressing like a hoodlum today, hear?"

"Why's it all right for you and not for me?"

Brady closed his eyes and shook his head. "Just do what I say, okay?"

"Whatever."

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“Straight home after school. I got practice, so I’ll see ya for dinner.”

“Ma gonna be here?”

“She doesn’t report to me. Just keep your distance till I get home.”

Brady rummaged for cigarettes, finally finding five usable butts in one of the ashtrays. He quickly smoked two down to their filters, tearing open the remaining three and dumping the tobacco in his shirt pocket. Desperately trying to quit so he could stay on the football team, Brady couldn’t be seen with the other smokers across the road from the school, so he had resorted to sniffing his pocket throughout the day. If he couldn’t cop a smoke from a friend after last class and find a secluded place to light up, he was so jittery at practice he could hardly stand still.

Brady grabbed his books and slung his black leather jacket over his shoulder as he left the trailer, finding the asphalt already steaming in the sun. Others from the trailer park waiting for the bus made him feel as if he were seeing his own reflection. Guys and girls dressed virtually the same, black from head to toe except for white shirts and blouses. Guys had their hair slicked back, sideburns grown retro, high-collared shirts tucked into skintight pants over pointy-toed shoes. Oversize wallets, most likely as empty as Brady’s, protruded from back pockets and were attached to belt loops by imitation silver or gold chains.

So they were decades behind the times, even for rebels. Brady—an obsessive movie watcher—was a James Dean fan and dressed how he wanted, and the rest copied him. One snob called them rebels without a clue.

Brady scowled and narrowed his eyes, nodding a greeting.

The fat girl with the bad face, whom Brady had unceremoniously dumped more than a year ago after he had gotten to know her better than he should have in the backseat of a friend’s car, sneered as she cradled her gigantic purse to her chest. “Still trying to play jock?”

Brady looked away. “Leave it alone, Agatha.”

“More like a preppy,” one of the guys said, reaching to flick Brady’s schoolbooks.

“*You* definitely don’t want to start with me,” Brady said, glaring and calling him the foulest name he could think of. The kid quickly backed off.

Brady knew he looked strange carrying schoolbooks. But the coach kept track.

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The trailer park was the last stop on the route, and the yellow barge soon drifted in, crammed with suburbia's finest: jocks, preppies, and nerds—every last one younger than Brady. No other self-respecting kid with a driver's license rode the bus.

In a life of endless days of open-fly humiliation, this boarding ritual was the most painful. Brady took it upon himself to lead the group. They could hide behind him and each other, avoiding the squints and stares and held noses as they slowly made their way down the aisle looking, usually in vain, for someone to slide over far enough to allow one cheek on the seat for the ride to school.

“Phew!”

“... brewery ...”

“... smokehouse ...”

“... B.O. ...”

Brady neither looked nor waited. His daily goal was to find the most resolute rich kid and make him move. Today he stared down at the short-cropped blond hair of a boy who had been trying to hide a smile while pretending to study. Brady pressed his knee against him and growled, “Move in, frosh.”

“I'm a sophomore,” the kid huffed as he made room.

On the way home, Brady would ride the activities bus. There he would for sure be the only one of his type, but football earned him his place among the jocks, cheerleaders, thespians, and assorted club members. Wide-eyed at first, they seemed to have grudgingly accepted him, though they still clearly saw the trailer park as a novelty. One evening as he trudged from the bus, Brady had been sure everyone was watching. He turned quickly, only to be proven right, and felt face-slapped. At least the trailer park was the first stop at the end of the day.

### **11 a.m. | First Community Church | Vidalia, Georgia**

Reverend Thomas Carey knew he would not be getting the job when the head of the pastoral search committee—a youngish man with thick, dark hair—dismissed the others and asked Grace Carey if she wouldn't mind waiting for her husband in the car.

“Oh, not at all,” she said, but Thomas interrupted.

“Anything you say to me, you can say to her.”

The man put a hand on Thomas's shoulder and spoke softly. “Of

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course, you're free to share anything you wish with your spouse, Reverend, but why don't you decide after you hear me out?"

Grace assured Thomas it was all right and retreated from the sanctuary.

"You tell her everything?" the man said.

"Of course. She's my—"

"She knows we saw you at your request, not ours, and that we didn't feel you warranted a visit to hear you preach?"

Thomas Carey pressed his lips together. Then, "I appreciate your meeting with us today."

The committee chairman pointed to a pew and leaned against another as Thomas sat. "I need to do you a favor and be frank with you, Reverend. I can tell you right now this is not going to go your way. In fact, we're not going to bother with a vote."

"That doesn't sound fair."

"Please," Dark Hair said. "I know these people, and if I may be blunt, you rank last on the list of six we've already interviewed."

"Shouldn't you poll the others on their—?"

"I'm sorry, but you have a three-year Bible college diploma, no real degree, no seminary training. You're, what, in your midforties?"

"I'm forty-six, yes."

"Sir, I've got to tell you, I'm not surprised that your résumé consists of eight churches in twenty-two years—the largest fewer than 150 members. Have you ever asked yourself why?"

"Why what?"

"Why you've never been successful, never advanced, never landed a church like ours . . ."

"Surely you don't equate success with numbers."

"Reverend Carey, I'm just trying to help. You and your sweet wife come in here, I assume trying to put your best foot forward, yet you look and dress ten years older than you are, and your hair is styled like a 1940s matinee idol."

Dark Hair extended his hand. "I want to sincerely thank you for your time today. Please pass along my best wishes to your wife. And be assured I meant no disrespect. If it's of any help, I'm aware of several small churches looking for pastors."

Thomas stood slowly and buttoned his sport jacket. "I appreciate your frankness; I really do. Any idea how I might qualify for a bigger work? I

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don't want to leave the ministry, but our only child is in her second year of law school at Emory, and—”

“When there are many Christian colleges that would give a minister huge discounts?”

“I'm afraid she would be neither interested in nor qualified for a Christian school just now.”

“I see. Well, I'm sorry. But the fact is, you are what you are. None of your references called you a gifted preacher, despite assuring us you're a wonderful man of God. If you cannot abide your current station, perhaps the secular marketplace is an option.”

### **5 p.m. | Head Football Coach's Office | Forest View High School**

Brady hadn't even thoroughly dried after his shower. Now he sat in Coach Roberts's cramped space with his stuff on his lap, waiting for the beefy man. Every player was listed on a poster on the wall, his place on the depth chart and his grade in every class there for all to see. Brady knew what was coming. He should have just skulked out to the bus and, by ignoring the coach's summons, announced his quitting before being cut.

But he knew the drill. Never give up. Never say die. Keep your head up. Look eager, willing.

Finally Roberts barreled in, dropping heavily into a squeaky chair. “I gotta ask you, Darby: what're you doing here?”

“You asked me to come see you—”

“I mean what're you doing trying to play football? You're a shop kid, ain't ya? You didn't come out as a frosh or a soph. I smell smoke all over you.”

“I quit, Coach! I know the rules.”

“We're barely a month into the year, and you're makin' Ds in every class. You're fourth-string quarterback, and entertaining as it is for everybody else to watch you racing all over the practice field on every play, we both know you're never gonna see game time. Now, really, what're you doing?”

“Just trying to learn, to make it.”

Brady couldn't tell him he was looking for something, anything, to get him out of the trailer park and closer to the kids he had despised for so long. They seemed to have everything handed to them: clothes,

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cars, girls, college, futures. No, he wasn't ready to dress differently; he took enough heat from his friends just for carrying books and playing football.

"Listen, your teachers, even the ones outside of industrial arts, tell me you're not stupid. You're a good reader, sometimes have something to say. But you don't test well, rarely do your homework. What's the deal?"

Brady shrugged. "It's just my ma and my brother and me."

"Hey, we've all got problems, Darby."

*Do we? Really?* "Like I said, I quit smoking, and I'm trying to get my grades up."

"Look, I want to see you succeed, but frankly you're a distraction here. I rarely cut anybody willing to practice and ride the bench—"

"Which I am."

"Yeah, but this isn't working, and I don't want to waste any more of your time."

"Don't worry about wasting my—"

"Or mine. Or my coaches'. If you're determined to get involved in some extracurricular stuff, there's all kinds of other—"

"Like what?"

Coach Roberts looked at his watch. "Well, what do you like to do?"

"Watch movies."

"Don't we all? But is it a passion for you?"

"You have no idea."

"You want to be an actor someday? study theater?"

Brady hesitated. "Never thought of that, but yeah, that would be too good to be true."

"Now see, with that attitude, you'll never get anywhere. If you want to try that, try it! Talk to Nabertowitz, the theater guy. See if there's a club or a play or something."

"There's rumors about him."

"Do yourself a favor and keep your mouth shut about that. Those artsy people can be a little flamboyant, but the guy's got a wife and kids, so don't be jumping to conclusions, and you'll stay out of trouble."

Brady shrugged. "I'd be as new there as I was here."

"Oh, I expect you'd be a sight among that crowd, though there's all kinds of behind-the-scenes stuff I'll bet you could do. But I need to tell you, football is not your thing."



## 2

5:30 p.m. | Atlanta

Ravinia Carey, named after a beautiful suburban Chicago park her parents had enjoyed while in Bible college, had sounded none too thrilled that they would be “dropping by” that evening.

“We’re on our way through Atlanta to look into ministry opportunities,” Thomas had told her from a pay phone, as cheerily as he could muster.

“You’re leaving Foley? What happened?”

“We’ll talk about it when we see you.”

“Oh, Dad . . .”

“Listen, hon, is there anywhere we can stay on campus? In a dorm, or—”

“Dad, this isn’t some church camp. No. The Emory Inn is within walking distance, and you’ll find the campus too complicated for parking anyway. Just have someone point you to Gambrell Hall, and I’ll meet you there.”

“All right,” he had said slowly, writing it down. “Any idea how much a room might—?”

“It’s owned by the university; just tell them you’re a parent.”

And so there Thomas stood after slowly pulling a U-Haul trailer more than 150 miles behind the eight-year-old Impala. Gas mileage was abominable with the extra weight, so he had tried to offset an expensive fill-up against a cheap fast-food meal. Grace hadn’t complained. She never did.

Even with the discount, the room rate made him blanch. “Might you know of any place more reasonably priced?”

The young black girl behind the counter leaned close and whispered with a smile, “Nowhere you’d want to stay, sir, really.”

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He and Grace carted in a few items, and she stretched out on the bed. “This feels so good after sitting all day.”

“What are we going to tell Rav?” he said.

“That the Lord will provide.”

Thomas sighed. “You know how she hates clichés.”

“That cliché is true, sweetheart.”

Thomas found a hand towel and gave his black oxfords a once-over, tucking away a tiny hole that had appeared in one of his socks. He ran a comb through his hair and massaged his chin, debating getting rid of his late afternoon shadow.

Soon Grace rose and smoothed her dress. “We’d better go. I can’t wait to see her.”

### **6:30 p.m. | Touhy Trailer Park**

Brady arrived home to find a familiar car on the apron next to the single-wide. He smelled dinner before he opened the door.

“Hey, Aunt Lois,” he said, tossing his stuff.

The short, freckled dishwater blonde rushed from the stove to hug him tight. “Oh, Brady!” she said. “Where’s your mama?”

“Probably stopped off somewhere,” he said. “You’ll be able to tell where from her breath.”

“You ought to speak of her with more respect.”

“Yeah, she deserves it. Petey here?”

She nodded toward the back. “Tell him ten minutes before corn bread, beans, and rice.”

“He’ll want iced tea, too.”

“Course.”

Brady picked through the ashtray.

His aunt poked her head around the corner. “Oh, Brady! No!”

He shrugged. “I just quit football, so give me a break.”

“Football or not, those things’ll kill you.”

“I can only hope. What’re you doing here, anyway?”

“You’re not happy to see me?”

“Sure I am. I always am. But—”

“I come with bad news, if you must know, but I can’t tell you without tellin’ your mom and Petey, so don’t ask.”

Brady found his brother in the back, riveted to a video game.

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“Wanna play?” Peter said without looking up.

“It’s rude to be back here when Aunt Lois is visiting.”

Peter sighed and paused the game. “She’s just gonna tell us about Jesus again.”

“Just nod and smile and tell her you’ll get to church again sometime soon.”

### **Gambrell Hall | Emory University**

Ravinia looked stiff when her mother embraced her, and she barely seemed to return the touch. Thomas shook her hand, and they sat in the student lounge.

“You look well,” Grace said. “I wish you’d let your hair grow out a little.”

“I wish I had time to take care of more hair, Mom. Regardless, I’m straight, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Grace squinted at Thomas.

“She’s not a lesbian,” he said.

“Oh, my, Ravinia! I wasn’t even suggesting—”

“To prove it, one of these days I’ll introduce you to Dirk.”

“Dirk?”

“Dirk Blanc. Works at MacMillan next door, the law library.”

“He’s a librarian?” Grace said.

Ravinia laughed. “He’s a student too, but most of us work, you know.”

“I know,” Grace said, “and we’re sorry you have to.”

“Even most students with normal parents have to work, Mom.”

“Normal parents?”

“Those not dependent on congregations for their income.”

“Well, one doesn’t go into the ministry for the money, sweetheart. But God’s people have been good to us over the years.”

“Oh, please. *No*-body’s been good to you, and you know it. You give and give and give, and what do you get? Ushered out. So, what happened at Foley?”

“I’d rather talk about what you’re doing, Rav,” Thomas said.

“You promised to tell me.”

“Well, I said I’d rather talk about it in person, yes, but there’s time. . . .”

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“No, there isn’t. I have no time, Dad. I study and I work and, if I’m lucky, I eat and sleep. And if you’re telling me that once again—surprise, surprise—you’re between churches, sleep may have to go too. So just tell me.”

“Where are you attending services, honey?” Grace said.

“Can we stop this, Mom? Even if I had the time, I don’t have the interest right now. And I have the feeling that whatever it is you’re about to tell me about the faithful at Foley just might close the church chapter of my life.”

“Oh, don’t say that, Ravinia,” Grace said. “We’re certainly not going to blame this on the people. The Lord just made it clear to us that it was time—”

“To move on, sure. I’ve heard that before. So what was it this time, Dad? You pick the wrong color carpet for the sanctuary? Spend too much time preaching through the Old Testament? What?”

“Actually, we’re pretty proud of what your dad brought to that little lighthouse. Sorry, cliché. But he got a visitation program going and even replaced their old children’s night with one that had updated curriculum. The kids loved it.”

Ravinia stood and rubbed her eyes. She moved to a window and gazed out. Appearing resolute, she returned. “All right, you’re not driving all the way up through here looking for ‘opportunities’ if everything’s peachy in Foley. Now out with it.”

“You’re going to make a fine lawyer,” Thomas said, forcing a smile.

“I’m going to start by suing those people if they did to you what the previous bunch did.”

“Oh, no; you know we don’t solve church problems in court.”

“Maybe you should. You certainly have grounds. Honestly, Dad, I know as well as anybody that you’re no Billy Graham. And, Mom, your piano playing and puppet thing are never going to make you famous. But how can people watch you work yourselves to death—on *their* behalf—and still treat you like garbage?”

Thomas chuckled too loudly. “Thought you hated clichés.”

“Don’t change the subject, Dad. You know I’m not letting you go until you tell me what happened.”

“Can’t we take you to dinner?” Grace said.

“C’mon! We both know you can’t afford it. Follow me through the cafeteria line, and you can share my meal.”

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“That wouldn’t be right,” Grace said. “It’d be like stealing.”

“The place is full of lawyers! I’d find you counsel.”

Thomas was warmed to see even Grace smile at that. “Rav,” he said, “we just wanted to see you because we were passing through. And we thought it only fair to tell you that we won’t be able to help with your schooling anymore. At least for a while.”

“It’s all right, Dad. I’m grateful for what you’ve done already, and I know you couldn’t really afford that and certainly didn’t owe me anything after the way I’ve disappointed you.”

“I wouldn’t say you’ve disappointed us.”

“Well, I hope I have, Mom! I’ve tried to!”

Ravinia said it with a smile, but Grace looked pained.

“I’m just saying, I appreciate knowing, and I will make this work somehow. I’ll start my career the way everyone else does: in debt. I’m not aiming for some high-paying corporate job, but I’ll be able to dig out eventually.”

“You know you could go to our denominational school and—”

“Mom! I’m way past that. Anyway, if I was honest on the admissions forms, they wouldn’t take me. Now I need to go eat within the next half hour, and then I’m studying till midnight. But I’m not leaving you until you tell me what happened, so unless you want me to starve . . .”

### 7 p.m. | The Darby Trailer

“I’ll keep your mom’s plate warm,” Aunt Lois said as she and Peter and Brady crowded around the tiny kitchen table. “Brady, you want to pray for us?”

“No, ma’am. You, please.”

“Petey?”

Peter shook his head. “All I know is, ‘God is great, God is good, now we thank Thee for our food.’”

“Well,” Aunt Lois said, “that’s not half bad, but let me. Dear Lord, thank You for these precious boys and for my sister-in-law, wherever she is. Protect her and bring her back to Yourself. Give her strength when she finally hears what I have to tell her.

“Now, Lord, never let these boys forget all that I’ve taught them about You, that You died on the cross for their sins so they don’t have to go to

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hell but can live in heaven with You. And thanks for our food. In Jesus' name, amen."

Peter was smirking when Brady opened his eyes, so Brady shot him a scowl before Aunt Lois noticed.

The woman had good intentions, Brady knew. It was hard not to love Aunt Lois.

A minute later Brady noticed a tear running down his aunt's cheek. "What's wrong?" he said.

"I'm just thinking about your mama and the news I have for her."