

SINS OF SUMMER

PROLOGUE

Audrey waited until Stewart and Diana drove away.

Her palms glistened wetly with perspiration. Recently, the days had been extremely difficult for all of them.

Trepidation filled her, but she slowly climbed the stairs to the locked door of their captive. Quietly, she placed her ear to the door. Maybe he staged the entire episode to gain his tormentors trust? Out of the need to show humanity, she was aware that she might lose her life. Last night, she decided that truth was the most important thing. Yes, she could have waited until the other two returned from the homeless mission with results of his tests, but she needed to confront her attacker alone, not doing so caused feelings of inadequacy and fear. For so many years, she lived with those feelings which produced the horrible nightmares. They stopped since facing her fears. Nothing was worth returning to the pain which engulfed her for so long. No, she must face this maniac. Audrey patiently waited, but no sounds emitted from the soundproofed

prison they had fashioned. Now, her hands were physically shaking. Nausea overcame her. She ran to the loo to expel the bile that filled her mouth. If he escaped, the others would never forgive her. Because of her, they would have to live each day looking over their shoulders. Never would they enjoy life again with the freedom they had known in the past.

The sound of the key turning the lock seemed hideously loud. Again, she waited. Would he charge her? Maybe he may harm her again? It seemed an eternity, but nothing happened. He could have harmed himself. That thought created a need for speed. Maybe they had killed him from the lack of water and food? A part of her hoped so, but then she recalled the feelings of inhumanity from behaving in such a reprehensible way toward this old, sick man.

The darkness seemed impenetrable as she entered. Then she spied the aged man spread out on the floor, naked and uncovered. It was cold due to the air conditioner. Stewart or Diana must have lowered the thermostat last night as a last-ditch effort to make him pay.

Audrey sat on the floor. The light from the hall allowed her enough to see a man who destroyed her childhood. She wanted desperately to hate but was unable as she

watched him. He was old and looked ill. Could even the vilest create such a scene which caused this much remorse?

Time inched by as she waited. Her thoughts returned to the tale that Diana shared after her conversation with Troy/Jason. If that was the case, could she hate someone who had endured such abuse himself? The abused would repeat abuse: was that the answer? Still, she waited, but he showed no signs of stirring. Gently, she nudged him. Slowly with apparent confusion, he opened his eyes.

“Is it my angel?” He looked disappointed.

“I thought that it might be over, and the angel had come to take me home. I am tired. All through the night, I tried to figure a way to obtain your forgiveness. Let me end this myself. You seem unable to finish what you started. That is what I thought early on would happen. Just give me the gun.”

Yes, he was clever. Did he think that Audrey would turn the gun over to him? He was just as evil and convoluted as she earlier thought. Still, she engaged him in conversation about himself.

CHAPTER 1

How much abuse can a human body and

mind endure before breaking? Each one of us responds in our way. This story is about extreme torture of both intellect and physique.

Some people seem to possess a trait that does not exist in all—that is, the ability to forgive.

Audrey McGinnis and John Brock inspired everyone whom they met. Transparency about their love produced an attraction to those around them. Not only the way they affectionately touched each other regularly while in conversation but how they also glowed when they looked into each other's eyes. Many couples envied the love of these two from their start together at Vanderbilt.

Audrey joined the popular cheerleader squad, and her fiancé, though not a jock, scored as the most popular boy in the university; he beat all the others easily. He was very tall with dark features. Audrey also towered over most of the other girls while maintaining a thinness and figure of a model. Added to that, she possessed beautiful auburn hair

and green eyes. Their kindness seemed to be their best asset; all their attributes cried “awesome.” Years would pass before another couple replaced them in the annals of that esteemed establishment. Four years quickly flew, not just their many friends shed tears, but even members of the facility cried that the “golden couple’s” smiles would no longer grace the life of those hallowed halls.

After they had received their diplomas, another important date came due on their calendar. Lovingly made plans from the bride’s family graciously invited John’s New York clan to attend the wedding. The Brock family anxiously looked forward to Audrey’s day. The Brock’s made plane reservations from NYC months earlier. Audrey’s family waited in Nashville for the anticipated event. Although both groups possessed great wealth, Audrey and John desired a small, informal wedding with a few close family members. Many friends voiced concerns about not being included; most understood the choice. Audrey and John chose an incredible honeymoon instead of a lavish affair. Choosing Paris as their destination only increased the anticipation. Both of them had vacationed with their families all over the world in their youth. Paris was the preferred destination for the couple. Two weeks in Paris definitely should help them unwind since both of them stayed extremely focused and

maintained an impressive grade point average throughout their college days. Grades, popularity, plus several clubs produced well- rounded, thoughtful adults.

Yes, Paris would set the posh standards for their life. While luxuriating in their boutique hotel, the Hotel Alison, they walked many miles each day. Dinner found them exhausted but ecstatically happy with each other in Paris.

What a delight it was returning for pampering each evening, the two young people thought.

The location of the hotel near the Presidential Palace proved perfect for walking and dreaming. The youthful energy of such an esteemed place, as well as vibrant sights and smells, proved enticing. While whiling away lovely sun-dappled days, their love blossomed. Nothing would ever come between them, they pledged. True indeed, since they met, not one of them even considered going out with another person. They were young and sheltered. Real life had yet to inflict the scars of mere survival. That waited for them, neatly packaged lying in the years ahead. They believed they were equipped for the future but did not understand the deceit which waited.

While on their Parisian honeymoon, they devised a game plan. Audrey and John would spend each day committed

not with each other but their careers. After ten years of sacrifice, retirement at the young age of thirty-five would allow them time spending this earthly existence traveling between a home on the beach in the United States and their apartment in Paris all with money that they had earned themselves. They would make their decisions based on their values and plans even though both were “trust fund babies.” This young couple refused to cater to their wealthy, powerful fathers. Audrey claimed the idea because she wanted a glamorous, independent life with freedom from demands of their parents. Husband and wife spent days on their honeymoon locating the perfect place. Someone suggested the ideal real estate agent. Michelle’s love for Paris and the knowledge she controlled seemed intoxicating to the couple. Michelle was middle-aged but extremely energetic. It was difficult bounding up the stairs behind her. She dressed with the flair that only Parisians possess. Bright, French reds always wrapped her milky throat. They laughed heartily but not too loudly at her appearance. It was joyful. They agreed that the last apartment she showed them—after days of searching—would be theirs someday. Was their dream about to materialize? They wondered as Michelle led them into the two bedroom and two bathroom apartment located in the sixth arrondissement near Luxembourg Gardens. Two bathrooms of this size were

unheard of in a Paris apartment. Audrey cried. Her tears fell at the realization that someone else would be living their dream for ten years. John consoled her by purchasing an antique bracelet of dark green emeralds to match her eyes. Therefore, for the remaining time in Paris, they would stroll by *their* home daily. Spending hours on a local bench under the Horse Chestnut trees, they anticipated their successful life. Neither planned on having a family. Instead, they chose each other and the ability to travel. Lilac-laced days, staring at their future abode over a bottle of red wine, occupied most of their honeymoon. Oh, the plans they lovingly made.

The scheme that they devised also contained a second cottage. The beach house, Audrey wanted, proudly already stood in Florida. They did not have time to build a home. Busy lives awaited. There would be no time to waste on construction.

Audrey's Aunt Carolyn owned a home, which the family enjoyed all during her childhood. Strange indeed, that aunt remained a bit of an enigma to the rest of Audrey's clan. They deemed her *brilliant*. She may have lacked in looks, but her mental capacity overwhelmed everyone. Audrey's mother, Grace, noted a fine line marked the difference between brilliance and insanity. Carolyn straddled the chasm. Still, the beach home of Audrey's

dreams included a location at Cape San Blas in Florida, similar to the joyful place that delighted those summer memories. The joy that the young girl experienced in childhood summers, however, eventually turned to horror. Something terrible happened during the seasonal visit with Carolyn during Audrey's fifteenth birthday. No one from the family returned for fun at the shining white beach house after the tragic event. Carolyn hired a caretaker for maintenance of the residence. Only he entered the once-beloved home—the same home where a scattered family enjoyed life at least one summer of each year. Occasionally, they may decide to visit at other times but always during the summer.

On that morning so long ago, Grace gently kissed her precious Audrey as she happily left for one month with Aunt Carolyn at her beach home. Since the day that Audrey returned to Tennessee and walked through the gates pale and frightened, the vacation house wasted away unused. Teddy, the caretaker, had been a friend to Carolyn at the University.

Teddy drifted from job to job upon graduation from Vanderbilt. He possessed a bad reputation that followed him around the country. During his school days, he was handsome and bright, but the use of drugs had changed him into a sullen and rude person, which resulted with his

possessing few friends. The only exception was Carolyn who loved him since they first met at Vanderbilt. Years produced a McGinnis household of generations; who attended the prestigious University. This family of overachievers was very confused by Carolyn's attachment to the loner. Both young people long ago earned the right to be called "brilliant," maybe their intellect had been the attraction? Teddy remained the one whom Carolyn really loved her entire life; he was her *soul mate*. Everyone knew that this mismatched man did not return her love. He loved only drugs and darkness.

Carolyn traveled the world trying to replace Teddy in her heart, but she still could not remove him. She remained in touch with him after graduation. Soon enough, the need arose for a caretaker. He seemed perfect. She knew that she needed him in her life even if it meant paying for his drug habit. Care-taking was the only job he capably satisfied. Now, his drug use continued without repercussions. It mattered little to him the style of living. The small house Carolyn hired him to oversee was free for him. As long as he continued the habit or made his supply in another druggie's place, he did not mind where he slept. The addict in a haze always spent days doing what he wanted, nothing more.

Only his druggie friends bothered with him. Although her aunt failed to fill time with genuine tenderness, Audrey possessed the opportunity to spend her life built on love with John. The only problem appeared to be the damage she carried in her heart due to that fifteenth summer spent with her aunt; she refused to acknowledge the pain. This refusal to deal with the trauma caused her many emotional problems.

John knew little regarding the house in Florida or about what had occurred there. He decided it would be less painful for everyone to bury the subject. Audrey experienced terrors over the years since John first met her in college. Admittedly, she was “damaged goods,” but he loved her. Perhaps he was trying to love her to wellness just as Grace attempted with Carolyn back during their childhood. Young Brock decided that it would be best to leave alone the women’s theatrics. After all, Audrey was a “drama queen” of sorts. Still, it shocked him that Audrey even mentioned choosing to live at the Cape, but he would do anything to keep her happy. Reasoning that something traumatic happened there, he also was cognizant that there had been more years of happiness and joy for the family in that beach villa.

Long nights of horror when Audrey thrashed in sweat-drenched sheets were always difficult. Audrey awakened,

screaming. John was ready to hold her until the dreaded memories passed. He started singing the “Teddy Bear” song to her in college. Those very lyrics soothed him as a child when he experienced nightmares; his mother held him dearly and would sing so sweetly the words lulling him peacefully to slumber. It never bothered him that two adults were holding each other in a hard embrace as John sang a child’s jingle to his recent wife. His voice and the refrain were the only things able to entice Audrey into sleep. It worked better than a sedative.

This couple would have a chance at a dream life, but already, tears which fell from Audrey’s eyes stained their start together as departure time from her beloved Paris arrived. Reality had set in with the couple. John was eager to begin his position as a trader on Wall Street. His dad was a banker and arranged the details. John’s patriarch, Martin, was a self-absorbed man of means. Love and compassion were not virtues that he possessed. No, not Martin, he existed to be challenging and mean-spirited. Polar opposite stood tiny Natalie, John’s mother. She never dreamed of missing Mass. Her endless hours of charity work frequently scored for discussion at meetings of the church. How anyone so kind and sweet put up with the dreaded “Martin of Wall Street?” With their heads

together, the parish members frowned over the way Martin treated their angel, Natalie.

Audrey's tribe was comparable to John's family. Her number was small but very close. Grace and Carolyn remained inseparable as youngsters. That was until that haunting summer of Audrey's fifteenth year, which began the horrors for the teenaged girl. Whatever happened remained buried. In fact, it created insurmountable barriers for the two sisters. Her mom tried to talk with Carolyn when Audrey returned home. She desired to understand the unspeakable pain inflicted upon her daughter. Audrey's very soul was deeply damaged by the trauma, which resulted in her inability to remember the details. The young woman found it impossible to discuss. Carolyn refused meeting with her sister. For years, she denied that anything had happened. Carolyn even claimed that Audrey fabricated the entire incident, but Grace knew differently. An unusual combination of brilliance and extreme wealth allowed Carolyn to entice just about anyone to follow her wishes. Usually, Grace bowed to Carolyn but not this time. Immediately after the episode at the beach, Grace flew with Audrey to Carolyn's home in Atlanta. She needed answers. Disappointingly, Grace and Audrey discovered the Buckhead mansion locked that day long ago. Grumpily, her caretaker told them that his

employer departed for an undisclosed time on a cruise to Europe. Poor choices created a chasm between Carolyn and the remainder of her family. Now, nothing Carolyn did surprised her family. Consequently, Grace struggled to cope with her damaged daughter. She spent several nights calming her the only way she knew, at the Ritz Carlton where they shopped at Phipps Plaza until the pain of the unfortunate episode eased. After that, Audrey was expected to “bully up” as Harry, her dad instructed.

“What’s wrong with you, girl?”

Audrey hated to cross him because he was angry much of the time. That anger often frightened mother and daughter. He amassed a small fortune building his investment company in Nashville. The similarities between Martin and Harry were apparent. The wealth, which both men accumulated, came from hard work as well as through their ruthlessness.

“You will be the death of your poor mother.”

Harry knew he could manipulate Audrey with that phrase. Grace’s sweetness next to his hardened state resulted in her appearing delicate and vulnerable. Therefore, Audrey found the resolve. Indeed, she did “bully up” hiding the pain that grew inside her. Whatever happened remained locked between two damaged women, but it dissolved the

memories of joy that previously existed in their family. Carefree, joyous summers spent at a beach cottage once loved and treasured hidden now in the hearts and minds of the family. Instead, replaced with darkness and fear only Audrey could feel. Carolyn maintained a hardness. Not much got through to her soul. Feelings were for the frail, like Grace. The older sister was incapable of feeling hurt; she was not weak as the other family members.

Once Carolyn left Atlanta on her cruise of undisclosed length and destination, there were no attempts at remaining in touch with her family. Carolyn spent the following years doing whatever it was that she desired. The mother and daughter did not care.

“Just let it be,” Grace softly said.

“Carolyn is damaged goods. Those people are dangerous, you understand?”

Her innocent smile melted Audrey’s heart.