



Woven  
Part One

Present Day





One

## Peel and Strip

:: to remove the cover of protection in preparation for something new

**David Brennan**

*Thursday, March 23rd, 11:35 pm*

*Foster Avenue, Baltimore, Maryland*

Josh, Kate, and I have an ongoing debate about who does the most work around our house.

Not that it matters.

It's kind of a ridiculous argument. But here's the thing, it's easier to ignore problems with the foundation when you're only focused on repair. Far better to build a house than fix one, right? We're learning that the hard way.

And as for who does the most work? It's Josh, no question.

But don't tell him I said that.

His footsteps echo in the hall and I burrow deeper beneath the covers. Our bedroom door creaks open, the light switches on. A loud, exasperated sigh.

Josh. He's a bit dramatic.

"Seriously, David, you're going to bed?"

I squint up at him half tempted to laugh. He's a mess. Sweaty, paint-stained T-shirt, face and hair all streaked with dust. There's more paint on him than the wall we'd been priming. Seeing as I'm already in bed, I choose not to state the obvious.

"Josh," I say slowly as if speaking to one of my students. "It's eleven thirty. Put the paint away." We've been working in the kitchen all night. I finally escaped around eleven and hid in the bathroom.

Before he can respond, Kate peeks in. "Hey boys, the toilet overflowed again. And no," she looks pointedly in my direction, "I didn't do it."

A growl escapes Josh. "It's always something. I hate this house!"

"Me too," says Kate.

"Let's move," I say.

"You two are not helpful," Josh sputters with an angry wave of the brush he's clutching. He's adorably flustered, and I cannot help a glance at Kate. We burst out laughing as he storms from the room. "Not funny!" he hollers. "What, I'm the only one capable of unclogging a toilet?"

The squishy-sucking sound of the plunger only makes us laugh harder. Poor Josh. The kitchen paint is peeling again, and he's beyond frustrated.

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I feel a bit guilty about leaving him to clean up, but not enough to get out of bed.

Kate's still laughing as she leans in to say good night. Her loose blonde curls tickle my cheek, all silky-smooth and fragrant like Pantene shampoo. She pauses to touch my face, stroke my hair. It feels good, and I'm tempted to reach for her. I *want* to reach for her.

But I don't.

She frowns, her finger tracing the scar above my ear, a month old now and still healing. I can practically hear her thoughts.

"It's fine, Kate."

"Yeah, but..."

I cut her a look, and she sighs, shoulders slumping as she makes her way toward the door. I have to bite my tongue to keep from calling her back. We made promises, after all. And there's Josh to consider.

She blows a kiss before shutting off the light. "Night, David," she murmurs.

"Night, Kate." Then a little louder I say, "Night, Josh."

"Stuff it, *Princess*," he mutters.

They bicker in the hall a moment, and I listen, warmed by the sound of their gentle sparring. My eyes drift shut, thinking of them. Of our years together, and the paths that brought us here.

And of what lies ahead.

Friday, March 24th, 6:25 am

Our bedroom wall rattles to life, and I peel one eye open.

I love how the pipes clang so loud that I don't need an alarm in the morning, and I hate everything else about plumbing. And home improvement in general. One day I'm going to live in a pre-furnished fully decorated condo and pay exorbitant homeowner fees, so I don't have to lift a finger.

I tunnel under the covers and indulge this fantasy while listening to Josh in the shower. It was his idea to buy this place. *A project*, he'd said. *Something for us to work on together.*

Once Josh gets an idea in his head, there's no persuading him against it. Kate and I eventually agreed—we needed somewhere to live after all. Maybe it would be fun?

And it has been.

A disastrous, chaotic sort of fun. We've learned a lot about each other, which really says something because we already knew a lot about each other. Like the fact that Josh is a perfectionist, I'm a procrastinator, and Kate's indecisive. This translates into Josh dictating everything, and Kate and I struggling to complete the few tasks he delegates.

Or, as is often the case, us hiding in the bathroom.

Not that you can hide in this house. We tried in the beginning to maintain a pretense of privacy, but then the three of us got sick from Kate's

cooking. One bathroom, paper-thin walls. Need I say more?

Anyway, Josh and I share a room for now. It's a bit small. But that's typical for a turn-of-the-century Baltimore row home. Every room feels like a glorified closet. We've been here four months now, and there've been some hurdles. Remember that old Tom Hanks movie, *The Money Pit*? Picture that. Kate refers to our little city fixer as The Canton Catastrophe. Josh and I just call it The Shit Box.

But back to our bedroom situation. I don't mind sharing with Josh. Over the years, he and I have spent more nights together than apart. We're about as close as two humans can be. Which sounds like a good thing—and it is. I love Josh.

I love Kate, too.

Our situation is a little...complicated.

She tiptoes in, all stealth-like.

"Stop staring," I say, without opening my eyes.

She slides beneath the blanket. "How do you always know?"

"Extrasensory perception," I say, pulling her close. She's damp from the shower and smells of Sea Island Cotton-scented body wash. We all use the same soap. Is that weird? I'm pretty sure body wash is for girls, but Josh and I are addicted to it.

I sort of love how we all smell the same.

Kate doesn't talk for a few minutes. This has become our morning routine. She showers first, then snuggles with me. Josh used to hold that coveted position, but he got bumped—from the shower, I mean. He and I snuggle all the time.

## Woven

Here's something about Josh—he takes absurdly long showers. It doesn't take a crime scene investigator to figure out what's going on in there. But really, should it take that long? Kate didn't think so. After a month of freezing-cold-post-Josh-shower taking, she put her foot down. The order now stands Kate first, then Josh, then David. I haven't had a warm shower in months.

But it's fine. I'll sacrifice for them. I'd do anything for the two of them.

We met fourteen years ago; five days shy of our tenth birthday.

The three of us share the same date. This seemed all cool and coincidental at the time. Of course, we know better now. What's the saying? About coincidence being a plan in disguise?

Totally true.

Like our move to Maryland. That was no coincidence. *A fresh start*, my father, Ian, had promised. *Some place far from the memories*. I'd needed no convincing. In the years following the sudden death of my mother and twin sister, Abigail, our Atlanta bungalow had become a shrine. He changed nothing. Clothing hung neatly in their closets, coats by the door, their shoes still mingled with ours. The move to Maryland was like a lifeline. Or so I'd thought...

That was the summer I discovered Harry Potter. Thank God for J.K. Rowling. Her words transported me. Harry, Ron, Hermione—I'd never experienced friendship like theirs, never dreamed I would. Until I met Josh.

Peel And Strip

And Kate.

I hug her close and bury my face in her curls. She weaves her fingers through mine. “David?”

“Hmm?”

“You got a call yesterday.” She pauses, and I immediately sense where this is heading. “A nurse from the neurology department at Hopkins.”

I sigh and withdraw my hand.

“I thought you made the appointment.”

“I’ll get to it.”

“But D—”

“Back off, will you? I’m fine.”

My tone’s sharper than I intend, and she flinches. Instant regret. She’s only looking out for me. I swing my legs out of bed, then turn back.

“Look, I’m sorry. I’ll deal with it, okay? Don’t worry.”

“Deal with what?”

*Josh.*

He’s in our doorway wrapped in a towel scrolling through his phone. I take full advantage of the interruption, yanking the towel from his waist as I brush past on my way to the bathroom. That ought to distract her.

Sure enough, I hear her shriek as he shouts after me. And I’m grinning to myself until the shower spits a few angry drops of cold, smelly pipe water. Have I mentioned our plumbing issues? Despite the upgrades, our sink drips, and the toilet backs up. Like, every time we use it. But the shower remains our biggest problem.

And it's not even a shower problem. It's the water heater. If water heaters came in people sizes, ours would be a toddler. Unfortunately, there's no room for a larger unit. We're working on it. Or rather, Josh is working on it. He's the one with an engineering degree.

He and Kate headed to North Carolina for college, Josh at Duke and Kate at UNC. They begged me to come south, but I'd been offered a scholarship to Towson and surprised even myself by accepting it. Like them, I'd planned to flee Maryland, our adolescent years having been a painful, chaotic blur.

But by the time we graduated high school, my father was dead, our home burned to the ground, and I'd lost everything. I figured, why not Towson?

It turned out to be a good fit. I developed a friendship with my faculty advisor, Michael Bennett. I even lived with his family at one point. I wouldn't call him a father figure, exactly—but he's the closest thing I've got.

And a pillar of morality compared to my own father.

The bathroom door squeaks open.

Josh's head pokes through the shower curtain. He eyes me with a perverse grin. "Looks cold."

I'm literally shivering. "Must you take all the hot water?"

He shrugs. "You could join me, you know. Plenty of heat in my shower."

I roll my eyes, biting back a grin as I yank the curtain closed. He's joking. Sort of. Josh and I have

some boundary issues. Namely that our relationship lacks them. We're working on it. And by this, I mean we dodge the subject completely.

"Listen," he says in a more somber tone. "Kate sent me in here."

I heave a sigh and shut off the water. They aren't going to leave me alone about it.

The *episode* last month.

I was in the kitchen working on lesson plans when I just dropped. Like, out of the freaking blue. No warning or anything. Busted my head on the counter and blacked out. Lucky for me, Josh is a paramedic.

He insisted we go to the ER. Josh is a bit over-protective where I'm concerned. Not without reason. He's been looking out for me since the night we met...

I'd been living in Maryland a month when Ian announced he was taking me to a cookout.

*Dress nice* was all he said.

Never mind it was July and a thousand degrees outside, I did what I was told. I wouldn't have considered crossing him. Or asking questions because the neighborhood where he took me might as well have been another planet.

Sprawling estates, meticulous gardens and lawns, houses like castles rather than homes. It was a far cry from the dilapidated rancher where we were staying with a man named Chris Janney. Turns out my father was orphaned as a teen, and Chris and his family took him in.

Chris had no patience for Ian, and even less for me. I was relieved to be away from him for the night, and more than a little awestruck by our destination. A rambling, two-story brick cottage with large shutters and climbing ivy. It reminded me of a fairytale, right down to the squat little valet who took our car.

But my fantasy ended at the driveway.

There was no smoking grill, no hot dogs, no burgers. Just a catering van and a hundred spoiled adults milling about with frothy drinks in hand. It was at that point I decided “cookout” must be synonymous with cocktail party in this part of Maryland.

The other kids, like me, were over-dressed and consigned to a spacious backyard. One of those kids was Josh, who I spotted immediately. Someone had organized a kickball game, and he was dominating. I lingered on the patio, drawn by his laughter and the good-natured, playful way he teased the other kids.

Eventually he noticed, pausing mid-pitch to beckon me over. But Ian kept a tight rein on me back then. Especially at social events. My mother had been the outgoing one; her quick wit and infectious laughter always charmed a crowd. They’d been an attractive couple, my parents, but his rugged appeal dulled in comparison to her beauty.

And I favored her.

It’s the eyes, I think. I have her eyes. People were always staring and making ridiculous comments as if I were an object rather than a child.

And Ian ate it up. He basked in the glow of their admiration as he'd done with her.

I remember that night stretching on interminably as I watched the kids through an open window. And then, out of nowhere, Josh approached.

He regarded Ian with a suspicious frown. "I know you," he said.

His attitude was arrogant and bold and in complete opposition to the grinning, carefree boy I'd seen in the backyard. He had sun-warmed, golden-brown hair cut in a long fade, and wide, deep-set eyes the same color. We were similar in height, but he had a sturdy, solid build and spoke in a low tenor that made him seem much older. He observed me in the appraising way boys do.

"David, this is Joshua Janney," Ian explained. "Chris is his grandfather. I grew up with Josh's dad, Nick. So, I guess you two are like cousins."

I stood there, stunned. My parents rarely discussed family. I knew my mother had an older brother she'd lost touch with before Abigail and I were born, but there'd never been mention of aunts or uncles on my father's side. Or cousins. Let alone any living nearby. No matter we weren't related, I was thrilled.

Josh, however, was not as pleased. I could see whatever he knew of Ian, wasn't good. His gaze shifted from my eyes and face to Ian's arm draped possessively over my shoulder. And he camped out there, like he knew.

"I bet you're good at kickball, cuz," Josh said, ignoring Ian's overbearance.

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Without warning, he yanked me free from my father's grip and we ran, holding hands and laughing as we broke into the yard. My lonely soul flooded with joy at his willful defiance for my sake. No one ever stood up for me like that.

There's a quote by Paulo Coelho about important encounters being planned by the souls long before the bodies see each other. Kate has it up in her room. She collects quotes, bizarre words, funny sayings—she's got a bit of a word fetish. Kate says it reminds her of Josh and I, our relationship, how we've always had this unusual connection.

In the years following my sister's death, I'd been miserably alone. It seemed Josh might fill that void. Kate, too. They were kind of a package deal back then. Twins, like me and Abigail. Or at least that's what they'd been told.

We'd come to learn nothing about their family was as it seemed.

After rescuing me from Ian, Josh ran off to pitch the kickball game and left me with Kate. I remember feeling all flushed and giddy with delight over my newfound friends/cousins, not even considering how much more to the story there was. His boldness gave me courage though because back then I didn't approach anyone—especially girls.

But Kate was different.

She stood on the edge of the kickball field, this petite, fairy-like creature completely at home in a sea of rowdy boys. She wore a bright yellow sundress with cowboy boots. Her knees were all

skinned up and she had wild curly honey-blonde hair that framed her face in a halo. Warmth radiated from her smile like sunshine in a cloudless sky.

I grinned until it became awkward. "I'm David," I finally said. And because I've always been a complete idiot when it comes to her, I added, "I think you look like sunshine."

Smooth right? But Kate is not your average girl. She didn't laugh or anything, just flashed me a mysterious smile.

"You know, David," she replied, a hint of mischief twinkling in her hazel eyes, "I kind of feel like sunshine tonight."

I later discovered she wore yellow because her mother hated the color, and cowboy boots because she lost a bet with Josh. But that image is forever burned in my brain. I still call her Sunshine sometimes.

Josh makes clicking sounds with his tongue.

"I don't need to see a doctor," I say, not bothering to hide my irritation.

"Just do it for Kate, will you? She's not going to let this go."

*Kate* is responsible for the situation escalating in the ER last month. After an excruciating wait and a battery of tests, I'd ended up needing a few stitches on the side of my head, and that was it. Nothing.

But then someone asked about traumatic events and she mentioned my mom and Abigail's accident. Then, unbelievably, she brought up Ian's

death and the fire. Seems losing your entire family to tragedy is something of a red flag, because suddenly I was getting questioned.

Had anything prompted a memory, they wanted to know. Had I received counseling in the past? Maybe it would help to talk. Was I aware thoughts can trigger a blackout or even a seizure?

Um. No, I was not aware of that. And no, I'd rather not talk. Kate of all people should know this. Josh, who'd been sitting by the bed, stone-faced, had gripped my leg so hard I almost cried out.

As if I needed reminding?

We do not discuss details of the fire. Not even with each other. It is a secret we will carry to the grave. One of many, thanks to our fathers.

And so, I lied. Or rather, omitted.

I told no one, not even Josh and Kate, what happened before I blacked out. Who I'd seen, and the shocking news he delivered. The lies he propagated. Because, what good would it have done, upsetting them? The past cannot be changed by dwelling on it. And the future is a fickle beast. Better to focus on the here and now.

Besides, it's been a month and no more episodes. The whole thing was a fluke. Dehydration, probably. I'd been recovering from a virus at the time. And I refuse to believe my mind had a role in it, I don't care what anyone says.

They're concerned because I've been getting headaches. But those started long before the episode.

## Peel And Strip

“It’s stress,” I tell Josh in a measured tone. “You try teaching English to a bunch of distracted teenagers.”

He sighs and tosses me a towel.

I open the shower curtain and wait for him to go—only he doesn’t. He stands in front of the mirror posing like a bodybuilder, his muscles all flexed. Our eyes meet, and he winks, reminding me for the briefest moment of that brazen, brown-eyed boy who crossed a room and changed my life, changed all our lives. I watch him saunter into the hall as a wave of dizzying affection grips me.

I love that boy. I miss him.

That’s what this little house project was supposed to be about—a kind of renovation therapy, working together to heal from the past, strip down the walls of guilt and regret, and sort out feelings for each other. Face, head-on, the secrets we’ve been avoiding. Those were our promises when we moved in here.

Only, we’ve yet to do any of that.