



# Summers Only



**"Chappell is a master writer."**

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Terri Miller is recruited by Frank Cordell to advocate for Michigan's homeless. She's homeless herself, so she possesses the qualifications. She also harbors a secret. If discovered, that secret will taint the very shelters Frank is charged with establishing statewide.

Self-imposed penance for past sins takes her on the road every summer. Shoe leather is her mode of transportation. Along this incredible journey, she's caught up with Iris Cordell, Frank's daughter, who idolizes Terri's lifestyle. She saves the life of a car-accident victim, then befriends his teenage son, Yates Strand. When she contracts AIDS from a homeless woman, she meets Eddie Gaven.

Frank, Iris, and Yates prod her for her secret. But it's Eddie with whom Terri shares a clue. It's Eddie who will write her epilogue.

# *Chapter 1*

## *Summer 1*

### **Calhoun County, Michigan, 1987**

Something rattled and shook Abigail Walker awake. Her eyes fluttered open. She sat on hard ground, the sun hitting her in the face.

At first, the clattering seemed to emanate from deep inside her skull, then the world lurched away, taking her tipping over with it. A breath of escaping cool air whisked past her head and shoulders as they sagged and twisted into a shadowy void.

She heard a human gasp, high-pitched, a mini shriek. Shoes tap-danced a few steps. She turned her head enough to see child-sized shoes on a concrete floor. She lifted her gaze and found a young girl with cornsilk hair draping her shoulders. The girl's small hand flew to her mouth and was immediately clamped in place by the other one.

The next noise Abigail heard was the door, banging back against the building's solid brick wall. She'd used the door as an overnight backrest. When it opened, her sleeping body shifted with it like a canvas sack of grain. Apparently, she shared another characteristic with the grain: Her depleted condition and hazy mind worked against any attempt she might make to right herself.

She brought the child's eyes into focus. They were wild and wide. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe she hallucinated. That wouldn't be the surprise of the ages. The girl's left eye appeared blue, the other one brown. A kindred meeting, blue skies and shadow. In the next second, the girl spun away. Her eyes were gone, erased by a swish of flying blonde hair.

From her slumped position, Abigail heard retreating footsteps and a repeated chorus of "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" until it ebbed into a muted echo.

A strong male voice answered. "Iris! What's wrong?"

"There's a woman."

"What? Where?"

"She was sitting there when I opened the door."

Footsteps pounded toward Abigail.

"How did you get it open?"

"It wasn't locked. I just opened it."

"How could that be? It should have been locked." His softly spoken words were shot through with concern. He stepped over Abigail's legs and

into the Michigan morning. There, he knelt down, felt her neck, and got a bead on a pulse rate. His thumb lifted first one eyelid farther open, then the other.

Abigail knew the drill. He was looking for dilated pupils. This was triage training. Was he both daddy and doctor? His sense of bearing and authority was augmented by the fine features of his face and defined by dark hair and eyes. The stubbly two-day growth of beard spoke of an underlying casual nature.

“Daddy, what’s wrong with her?” Iris stood back out of range.

“It’s possible she hasn’t had any food or water for a few days, honey. Go back to the kitchen, get my bottle of water from the table, and bring a dishtowel. Hurry!” The heels of girl’s shoes rushed away.

Gently, his supportive hands sat Abigail up to lean against the doorjamb. “Here, let me have this.” He tugged at the length of wood Abigail held all night as protection. Grunting, she glared at him. She would not relinquish the board. “You’re fine. You’re safe. You don’t need this.” All her remaining strength charged the fingers that gripped the piece of lumber. She understood his concern. He wanted to pry it out of her hands before she used it on him. What if she were short on sanity? But she would not part with it. After she growled with frustration, he said, “Okay, okay, you win. Hang onto it.”

She wore a stained shirt and baggy pants. He pushed up the sleeves to her elbows, inspecting for track marks he wouldn’t find.

Her only possession, other than the newly acquired section of wood, was a My Little Pony backpack. She found the discarded pack several months back. It was threaded around one arm. She allowed the man to slip the backpack free and sling it over his shoulder.

“Okay, let’s get you out of the sun.” The man hoisted her up in his arms. Her lolling head jerked sharply when he kicked the door closed behind them. The wood lay angled across her midsection, pointing in the direction he took her.

The building seemed cavernous and yet they encountered no one else until they met Iris coming from the other direction. She carried a capped water bottle and a blue-checkered towel.

“Honey, go open that first door down the hall. Make sure nothing’s in my way. I’ve got to get her in a bed.”

“But there aren’t any sheets.”

“We’ll worry about that later.”

“Daddy, what’s wrong with her? Is she sick?”

He left those unanswered questions in the hall as he stepped through the door Iris opened. “Let’s hope we put these bunk beds together correctly.”

“Oh, we did,” the girl said, brimming confidence. The room contained two sets of varnished pine, no-frills bunk beds with three feet of aisle space between them.

“Set those things down, hon, and help me with the pillow.” The girl was right there to position the pillow. “Thanks, Two-Tone.”

Two-Tone, Abigail thought. A reference to the girl’s mismatched eye color. If Two-Tone is Iris’s nickname from Daddy, then the girl has a way to handle comments from others, especially other children. When a classmate said, “Hey, your eyes are two different colors,” she might say with a smile, “I know. My daddy calls me Two-Tone.” Her answer would transmit her pride, a security in herself. Those two commodities were a gift from parent to daughter. Those two commodities were not in Abigail’s repertoire any longer.

She heard the girl sniff. “Daddy. She’s dirty.” Her face took on a squeezed expression, trying to extricate the ripe smell of body odor from her nostrils. Her father caught the child’s hand before it reached her nose. He gave her an infinitesimal shake of his head. Despite this back and forth motion, it was a nod toward hospitality and kindness.

“First things first, Iris. Give me those things,” he said, then sat on the edge of the bed and turned toward his patient. He let water dribble between her lips and caught the overflow with the towel. She felt the liquid moisten her throat and savored the experience.

“Daddy, why does she keep looking at me?”

“Because you’re the prettiest little girl in the world.” Holding the bottle between his knees, he reached for the girl and snuggled her up close. With the tall man folded down and perched on the bare mattress, he and the girl were shoulder to shoulder, a force, a team. “This is Iris. She’s my daughter.”

Would she ever be able to look at a young girl or pretty teenager and not remember her own daughter, not feel her heart wrench, become sickened with herself?

“I’m seven,” Iris chirped.

“And I’m Frank. Frank Cordell. What’s your name?”

Streetwise enough not to offer such information so readily, Abigail let running her tongue over her lips be her nonresponsive answer.

“More water?” Frank concluded. He raised her head and tipped the bottle so a small amount of water washed over her tongue. “We’ve got your backpack. It’s right here. Don’t worry about that.”

Iris's mismatched eyes studied the ratty pack on the floor, then reasoned out it was a mismatch for the woman it belonged to. "It's a little girl's backpack—"

Frank cut into the thoughtless comment a child would naturally make. "Wait, honey, give me a minute." He turned his head back toward the bed, saying to Abigail, "You can stay here. No problem. I'll stay close. You're safe. We'll get you better. Rest a minute or two. Are you hungry?"

She nodded and attempted the best smile her dry lips could produce.

"Iris, go to the refrigerator and get that jar of applesauce we opened yesterday. And a spoon."

"I can't reach the bowls."

"That's okay. I plan on feeding her right out of the jar." His broad smile inspired the girl's impish grin at the idea of misbehavior. She spun to do his bidding and he swatted her lightly on her rump as a sendoff.

"Does applesauce sound good? We'll take it slow. Get some food in you. Some sleep. We've got showers here and clean clothes. We'll fix you up. How did you find us? The sign's not even up yet."

This confused her. Her lips parted, but she had no answer.

"Well, no matter. Backdoor guests are the best. Isn't that what they say?" He winked.

Iris returned with the large applesauce jar pressed against her chest with one hand and a spoon in the other. Frank twisted off the cap. "Iris, do one more thing for Daddy. A napkin would be nice. In fact, bring two."

"Oh, Daddy." Iris sighed.

"Hurry. Last trip. I promise."

She watched Iris skip out, suspecting this last request was a pretense to get the girl's innocent ears out of the way for an adult conversation, but she misjudged Frank. "Thank God, we were here. With some of the bunk beds assembled, Iris wanted a sleepover." He touched her arm. "I think you're going to be fine. Everything's going to be fine. It's my pleasure to welcome you to—" He cut off with a laugh. "You know, the place doesn't even have a name yet."

Swallowing, Abigail croaked out her first words. "What kind of place is this?"

"It's a shelter," he said. "People sometimes lose their way. People sometimes need to lean on others for a while."

As she taught herself over the last nine months, she watered down the sincerity, compassion, and true depth of service that rang in Frank's words. Instead, she spooned her own brand of lowered expectation into her new

and miserable life. Nothing but dumb luck sat her at the shelter's door. She refused to believe in any amount of providence.

That was until Iris skipped back into the room with a white paper napkin in each hand. Iris passed the first napkin to Frank, who, in turn, held it out to Abigail. The white napkin seemed to beckon her to surrender, just a little bit, just enough. Her head on the pillow, she looked up, over the offering and her own pessimism. She found Frank's brown eyes, saw the presence of laugh lines on a young face and allowed herself to drink in all the possibilities hope could extend to the lost and leaning.

Very slowly, she relinquished her hold on the wooden plank and let it lay on the mattress beside her. She reached for the napkin, meeting hope halfway. She didn't use the napkin to dab at the corner of her mouth, but the corner of her eye. A hot tear welled there. Another one spilled over the edge.

Over the next three days, Abigail Walker, whom Frank decided to name Backdoor, for lack of her offering the real one, received the full attention of the two Cordells.

That first evening, still rather weak, she sat on a plastic chair in one of the shelter's two shower stalls, to clean off a month's worth of grime. After she was freshly attired in a shirt and cotton pants donated to the shelter through a community clothing drive, Frank brought her the day's newspaper. The paper confirmed that she traveled through Springfield, Michigan, a small town east of Battle Creek, in Calhoun County. In the space of time that Abigail lived on the streets, the calendar changed from 1986 to 1987. The summer progressed to Friday, July 3.

The paper reported that Michigan's governor, James J. Blanchard, vetoed an increase in the speed limit. A rate of 65 was proposed for rural stretches of interstate highway. Blanchard's decision had no effect on Abigail. Since she hoofed it from place to place, she was not in danger of attracting a traffic cop. In fact, she did all things possible not to encourage the eyes of the law tracking her for any reason.

In a somewhat related story, Lee A. Iacocca conceded that the Chrysler Corporation acted unforgivably in selling cars that were driven with the odometers disconnected. He announced compensation for the owners. Abigail thought back to the last car she owned. She sold the relatively new Chevrolet Caprice to a used car dealer in Sioux City, Iowa, at a loss. She was too jumpy, trying to come down off drugs, to drive it safely. She needed the money the sale brought for food and the occasional cheap motel when she couldn't find shelter during the harsh winter months.

Then spring came. In the last six months, she made her way back to



Michigan.

Abigail shook the newspaper back into its folds just as Frank walked in with two dishes of ice cream. She sat up in her lower bunk. He handed her a dish of vanilla, then took a seat across the way on the other bed.

“Iris ate hers earlier. She’s asleep,” he said, looking tired himself. The room the Cordells shared was next to Abigail’s. Iris said good night to Abigail about twenty minutes ago.

“I haven’t had ice cream in a while. This is wonderful,” she said appreciatively, after swallowing a spoonful. In all honesty, she didn’t feel deserving of the pampered treatment. She had nothing to give in return. She didn’t want to adjust to the good life when she was forever destined for hardship. In reality, she felt far more comfortable these days left to her own devices.

“So, where are you headed?” Frank’s question seemed equal parts standard conversation-starter and ungovernable curiosity.

Abigail decided there was no harm in going with a bit of the truth. “East,” she said. “I thought north of Detroit.” That took in a lot of unspecified territory.

“On the lake, huh?”

“Yeah.” They referred to Lake Huron. More accurately, she referred to Larkspur, her hometown, the small place where, nearly a year ago, she lived with her husband and teenage daughter, Cliff and Beebe.

In reality, she was ambivalent from day to day, hour to hour, about returning, but, for the last month, she headed in that direction anyway. She hitched a fifty-mile ride in the back of a pickup at the western Michigan state line, then proceeded on foot, pushing eastward. Right now, warm, clean, safe, and enjoying a scoop of French vanilla, she felt the genesis of survival stirring in her chest. Survival might just win out over returning to face Larkspur authorities for her crimes. Returning also meant facing her family. Eyes closed, she left that unbearable thought in the darkness when Frank spoke.

“East,” he repeated. “That’s still a good little trip. More than a hundred miles. I hope you decide to stay at least one more night. It’ll do you good and you’ll want to see the fireworks. We’ll have quite a view from here, without making the trip to Buford Park.”

She cast him a suspicious look. The invitation was genially issued, but the fireworks were a frivolous excuse. He gave her a reason to accept his hospitality when he already did more than enough. She had not yet reached the grubbily grabbing-for-anything-free stage she witnessed other street

people exhibit. It was his hint toward the shelter's fortuitous location that gave her pause. Did he know she must stay out of crowds to avoid being recognized?

"Know you can stay as long as necessary to recoup your strength. If you change your mind about traveling east, speak up. I'm here to help people change their lives, if that's what they want."

She studied the unblinking sincerity living in his eyes and dared to let herself consider his offer.

When twinkling stars made their appearance on the Fourth, the two Cordells and Abigail sat in a short row of chairs in the parking lot. The small town's fireworks exceeded her expectations. They were exceptional.

All that day, Frank pumped more food into her. By Sunday, her third day of living in high style, she made herself useful. She sorted and stocked personal items on shelves in one of the shelter's back rooms. Personal items included shampoo, deodorant, toothbrushes, toothpaste, combs, and brushes. These were community donations. She remembered the many, many days throughout the past months when she washed the best she could in a variety of fast food restaurants' ladies' rooms, using paper towels to dry herself.

On one very cold January night, she locked herself inside one such ladies' room, hoping for shelter until the place reopened the next day. The manager forced his way in with a key after the closing bell. He hauled her out to the empty dining room, where he succumbed to empathetic pity. He gave her a hamburger and fries, allowed her to eat inside, before pushing her out with directions to the church three blocks over, open to keep the homeless out of frigid temperatures.

There were long stretches when Abigail hadn't washed, ate, or slept at all. These last four days were a godsend in that regard. She debated every day though, striking out on her own again, mostly to relieve her feelings of guilt for her past, primarily to separate herself from Iris's innocent eyes and the way they watched her. Close contact with the girl was more punishment than she could bear. Close contact with the girl produced hatred for herself.

Abigail thought and thought. There was no way to fix what she'd done to her family. She abandoned them for the drugs she became addicted to over the previous period of nine or ten months. Painkillers won out over her husband and daughter. Family stayed behind; Percocet became her traveling companion.

The Percocet offered no warning label about her own naivety. Too late, she realized she hadn't known how to live life on the streets and keep her

habit going. Once on the streets, she reassessed her situation for survival's sake. She convinced herself she could survive on the streets without the habit. Without the habit and with the resultant clear mind, she might not make a stupid mistake. She might stay ahead of any law enforcement officer looking for her. It was probably a mistake to come back to Michigan, but then again, what was the theory about hiding in plain sight?

Tuesday morning arrived, the fourth morning she woke in her private room. This was the day she set aside to announce her decision to leave the shelter. Plain sight was one thing, but staying too long in one place was another. Abigail lay in her bunk bed in the windowless, twelve-foot square room. She reached for the lamp on a table between the two sets of bunks. Light from the low-wattage bulb lit the space enough for her to complete what became her standard ritual. She held her hands out before her. They weren't the least bit shaky. In months past, her hands shook while her body fought withdrawal. Recently, she got the shakes from lack of food, water, and sleep.

To say the addiction didn't still plague her was and would always be wholly inaccurate. It plagued her at night. During the day, it was stirred to life when she caught sight of white pharmacy bags or orange pill bottles.

Abigail slept the last two nights in a man's oversized T-shirt. What a simple treat: changing clothes for bed. She grabbed her backpack of personal items, yesterday's still-clean clothes, and went past the kitchen to the showers.

After her shower, Abigail returned to the kitchen and fired up the Mister Coffee. The action made her feel like a normal person with a normal life, then her gaze dropped to her hand-me-down clothes. She guessed if one had to point out normal activities to oneself, there was something not so normal going on.

With her mug of coffee, she wandered the shelter's main hall. It connected a reception area and front offices with the intersecting hallway of kitchen and guestrooms. Frank mentioned the day before that the shelter could house 32 guests. Of course, the individual rooms were set up to sleep four. Keeping families together, once inside the shelter, was paramount. As she walked toward the rear of the facility, the showers, lockers, restrooms, and laundry nook came up on her right. The hallway here was a double-wide corridor where the job of painting the walls a shade of celery was incomplete.

Across the way was a common room, sparse on furniture, but spacious enough to accommodate 25 without crowding. Currently, the room's

inventory consisted of one sectional couch, two upholstered chairs, and one small bookcase already stocked with an ancient set of Funk and Wagnall's. Another door inside the room led to a locked alcove where the personal items and donated clothing were kept.

She stepped inside the bricked room Frank carried her through four days ago. The bricks were old. Large areas of cement patching covered those that crumbled. A switch just inside the doorway lit the chamber with its solid back door. No renovation efforts were evident here. The floor was concrete while the rest of the facility boasted tile. She easily assumed this back area was slated for storage since odds and ends already occupied one corner and an accumulation of construction supplies were piled in another.

Over to her left sat an ancient wooden desk, its varnished finish darkened by the passage of time. A not-so-old but, by the tilt of the backrest, broken chair on wheels was pushed up to the knee hole.

Inquisitiveness lured her to the monstrous desk. Before she set her mug down on the scarred surface, she studied the presence of several splotchy black stains. She ran her fingertips in circles over one. It was ever so slightly raised, but smooth to the touch, almost slick.

She took a precarious seat on the lopsided chair. It supported her weight so, one by one, she proceeded to snoop through the drawers. The first few proved disappointingly empty. However, the large deep drawer on the lower right presented a challenge. It extended only part way. She gave a heartier tug, but it stubbornly refused to budge.

The long drawer carried a wooden divider. Nothing was stashed in the front compartment, so she sent her probing fingers to the thin margin of space above the divider. They came across a mangled piece of something that felt like heavy cardboard. She pinched the jammed object between finger and thumb, worked it from side to side, pulling at the same time. It released with a lurch.

Dropping the accordion-folded cardboard in the front compartment, she pulled on the drawer handle again. Still, the drawer dragged. It didn't appear to be a good fit for the opening. Getting out the chair for more leverage, she used both hands and willed the drawer to expose its contents.

With a scraping squeal, it did.





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