

Fast-Moving Dreams

Part One, 2010

Chapter One

Paige doesn't have to see in the dimly lit truck to know the purple vein in Big Daddy's forehead is pulsing, that his hands clench the steering wheel and his lips twitch as he prepares to unleash a barrage of shaming words. The speedometer glows white, faintly illuminating Big Daddy in his stiff new overalls. Fifty, sixty, seventy miles per hour, too fast for the clunky red pickup that whines to keep up with Big Daddy's rage. Paige crouches against the passenger door.

It's before dawn, three or four in the morning. Paige isn't certain of the time. They are headed to the bus station. Big Daddy had shoved Paige in the truck and said he was putting her on the next Greyhound leaving town. Said he wanted her gone for good. Said this is tough love, which makes his chest heavy, but there is no other way.

Big Daddy drives in angry silence at first. Then the yelling starts, builds to high speed like the truck, madder and faster as Big Daddy fumes. Paige only hears some of the words. She learned long ago to put an invisible helmet over her ears, and to pretend she is invisible too.

Paige has heard most of these words before. *Addict. Weren't raised this way. Piece of shit boyfriend. Trash. Hurting Abby. Stealing, from me! Me!* He bangs his fists on the steering wheel. *Ought to call the cops. But no! You'd be back like a damn feral cat. Getting you the hell away from Abby.*

Paige winces at the mention of Abby. She hadn't gotten to say goodbye to her little girl. Big Daddy won't really make her leave, will he? *Back like a damn feral cat* made her cringe too. She is his daughter, not some stray animal.

Surely, Paige thinks, this will end like when she was a teenager and Big Daddy caught her skipping school with Danny. Big Daddy drove around yelling until his throat hurt, then ground her and refused to speak for days. Mother had treated her like a sick, wounded creature, bringing soup and crackers on a tray to her room for dinners, until Big Daddy got worn out being mad and let life settle to normal.

The mean words continue now though, like a stream of consciousness. She hates Big Daddy because he doesn't understand her. His words make her want to go away, to live with Danny again. Danny will get her from the bus stop if Big Daddy follows through. Big Daddy's eyes are on the road. Paige plucks a strand of long brown hair from her head and presses the tip to her lips.

"Stop it Paige!" Big Daddy yells and snatches the thin strand. *How did he see that?* Paige wonders. The butterflies wake up and flap, flap, flap in Paige's stomach. She'd always called worries and nerves the butterflies. Mother calls them that too. Paige smiles remembering how Abby thought they were real butterflies, black monarchs and orange and yellow painted ladies flying around in your stomach like on a bloody summer day in a garden.

Big Daddy couldn't make her leave Abby.

A wave of nausea washes through Paige and tears well. She doesn't know what to do about Abby. Her sister, Melissa the perfect, thinks Paige is a terrible mother, but Paige loves her daughter. That's all you need, right? But she can't have Danny and the drugs, and be a mother, responsible and all. Danny and the drugs always call her back. The heroin, the meth had chosen her, but no one understands.

Paige rolls down the passenger window for air to tamp the nausea and to let Big Daddy's words dissipate into the night rather than hover around her all hot and moist in the cab. She looks out into the Knoxville sky, lit with billboards, and beyond that a faint sprinkling of stars. The rain-scented mountain air helps her breathe, refreshes her face, and whips her hair.

Big Daddy pulls off I-40 at North Central and eases down Magnolia to the Greyhound station. He parks the truck, which ticks to cool down as they sit in silence.

"Next bus leaving," he says. Big Daddy looks straight out the windshield into the night. "Don't care where it's going."

Paige wipes her runny nose with the back of her hand, opens the passenger door, picks up her backpack and sling purse from the floor, and steps outside. She stares at her father, who sits in the harsh glare of the overhead cab light. His eyes look sad, but unrelenting. His lips press together in a firmness that says Paige can't come home.

"It's cruel to kick out your own flesh and blood," Paige says, spitting the words. "What kind of father does that?" She waits for Big Daddy to say "I know. I can't do it," and order her back inside the truck. Instead, Big Daddy sighs and gets out of the vehicle, slams the door hard.

"This is your own doing, Paige," he says. "You're 25 and acting 15. You're killing me, taking years off my life."

Goosebumps pop on Paige's skinny arms and legs. The early morning June air suddenly feels too cold for blue-jean shorts and a tank top.

"Daddy," she says. Her voice cracks. "Please don't. I can't leave Abby. And where will I go?" Paige shivers as she talks. *He's really doing this*, she thinks.

“You’ve already left Abby,” Big Daddy says. “You aren’t there for her at all. It’s the rest of us -- me, your mother, and Melissa who tend to Abby.” His voice is soft but firm. A thick moment of silence passes as they glare at each other across the expanse of the truck bed, the parking lot light drawing gnats toward their faces.

“You can’t force me to go!” Paige stomps her foot. “That’s child abuse. You could be arrested.”

“Twenty-five is not a child, Paige. Don’t threaten me,” Big Daddy says, his voice strangely calm now.

“I hate you,” Paige hisses at him through clinched teeth. “I hate you for this.”

“Well, I don’t hate you. But I don’t know what to do with you,” Big Daddy says. “A man shouldn’t have to put a private lock on his bedroom door to keep his child from stealing cash from his wallet or rummaging through the closet for the guns.” His lips twitch as though he might cry. He waves away a swarm of gnats. “I can’t have you stealing from me, coming home high, and then disappearing for weeks without a thought for Abby. And as for your mother, you’ve caused her to age way beyond her years.

“Mama’s not my fault,” Paige yells.

“I’m sorry, honey, but we are done. I hope you learn something from this, grow up and get your life together. Until that happens, you’re on your own.”

Paige squares her jaw, tightens her lips, and slams shut the passenger door, trembling mad inside. Well screw him, she thinks. He never loved her. No decent father would throw his daughter on the streets. He loves Melissa, the smart one. Sorry she can’t be Melissa.

Paige walks fast into the station, hating Big Daddy for crossing this line, hating Melissa. She keeps her head down. Her heart pounds. Big Daddy follows her, purchases a one-way ticket on the next Greyhound headed to Denver, Colorado. Paige has never been there, but she knows it is far away. Too far to easily get back home.

Paige snatches the ticket and walks to the far end of the station, takes a seat in a blue plastic chair attached to a row of blue plastic chairs. She doesn't look back, determined not to give Big Daddy the satisfaction. Big Daddy clunks coins in a vending machine for a Coke and sits a distance away, sipping the drink. Paige decides that when he leaves, she'll cash in the ticket and take a cab to Danny's house, or find a motel for the night and stay there until she can get her thoughts together.

But Big Daddy doesn't go anywhere. Paige has no choice but to board the bus and leave everything she knows behind.

Big Daddy takes the backroads home, driving slow and easy, the city skyline and the foothills in his rearview as the sky turns quickly from dark to fuzzy pink. He rolls the truck window down and breathes in cool air, relaxes his shoulders. His eyes fill with tears that roll silently down his cheeks until he wipes them away with the palm of his trembling hand.

The past few hours have brought a full range of emotion. Anger, hate, love, compassion, responsibility. Anger, hate, love, all rolled up in his feelings for Paige. It takes a toll, those emotions, leaves his muscles tense and aching, his throat dry.

He'd finally done what he threatened. Sent his baby girl into the world on her own, ill-equipped for whatever she might face. Tough love, the only route left to save Paige from herself,

to save Abby from the influence of Paige. Lovey would be shocked at what he'd done, but her mind would soon forget. Melissa would say "good riddance, thank God," and tell him he'd done the right thing. Abby would be furious. His heart hurts, thinking of his granddaughter. He had done this for her, but she wouldn't see it that way. Of course, Abby loves her mother, but she's too little to understand.

Big Daddy pulls into the shabby subdivision where he has lived for forty years, trying all that time to keep his family safe and happy. Lights glow inside a few of the houses, others are still dark. Old Mrs. Chapman next door walks out in a housecoat with a cup of coffee to gather the News Sentinel. She waves, like today is an ordinary day and Big Daddy hasn't sent his daughter away.

Anger, love, compassion, responsibility. Those emotions are gone now, though, as Big Daddy pulls into the gravel driveway of the little brick house that he's worked his whole life to pay for. The overriding emotion as he turns the doorknob and walks inside is relief.