

CIRCLE OF SECRETS

~1969~

She was in love with Thomas Cole, her high school sweetheart. She was only sixteen when she realized she was pregnant. Tommy, only eighteen at the time, was thrilled. He loved Helen and believed they were destined to be married. The year was 1968, the same year the American involvement in Vietnam peaked at its highest. He received a letter in the mail in November of 1968, a letter that changed his life. His number had been called. He was being summoned by the United States of America, to serve his country or else be imprisoned for draft evasion. He promised that once he returned he'd marry her and they'd be a family. Helen's family was high in class, the total opposite of Thomas Cole's. He was a hard worker from a low income family. Helen's father, Joseph Burrows, refused to allow his daughter to marry such a peasant. He looked down at him as not good enough. When her parents learned of her pregnancy they became enraged that she'd do such a shameful thing. Catholic girls were supposed to be pure on their wedding night and only start a family after they were married. To have a child out of wedlock and especially someone of such a lower class was frowned upon. Because Tommy was the father, it worsened her parents' distaste. Her father and mother sat down with her and begged her to consider other options. Abortion, which was not even considered. Her religion and beliefs rendered her incapable of doing something so horrendous. They continuously suggested adoption, so that she could have a chance at a different life and it would spare any family embarrassment. She ignored their persistence and was determined to make this work, she would marry Tommy whether they approved or not.

Helen was eight months pregnant in the July summer heat when she received the call. His mother sobbed into the phone as she broke the news of Tommy's death. He had been killed in the line of duty protecting his country, doing what he thought he ought to. He died a hero, but now Helen was alone. She felt abandoned. The phone dropped to the floor as her hands instinctively went to her swollen belly. She cried out in anguish as the tears streamed down her face in lines of clear pearl droplets.

Her older brother, Elijah, had always been her closest sibling, in age and temperament. He had been there for her and she had told him first when she first found out the horrible news. Elijah was a year older than Helen and had found her crying in her bedroom that day.

"Helen? What is it? What's wrong? Is it the baby?"

"He's gone Eli...he's...gone," she said between her sobs. Burying her face in his shirt, she continued to cry. Tommy's face was still fresh in her memory, but her heart had just broken. Bunching his shirt in her hand, she weakly slammed her other fist down on his chest. "He's gone forever...I'm alone, I have to do this alone. Oh, Eli...what am I going to do?" She was distraught and falling apart.

Elijah wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on the top of her head. "Hush now Helen, you'll upset my niece or nephew. We don't want that. It's okay, we'll get through this, like we always do. You have to think positive, you have to focus on the life growing inside of you, little sister." He was trying to comfort her the best way he knew how. She continued to sob into his chest as he held her.

Her sister, Lorraine, the oldest of the three Burrows children, had gone off to college and had only been back a few times. When she learned of her baby sister's "situation", she tried to convince her that adoption was the way to go. Helen felt as if she only had Elijah on her side. Lorraine never had liked Tommy. Helen and Lorraine were complete opposites, night and day. Lorraine did not approve of Helen's decision to keep the baby and was vocal about it when she would visit. The week after Tommy passed, she came home for the holiday break and Helen broke the news to her sister.

"I'm sorry Helen. I can't believe he's gone. What are you going to do?" She sounded insensitive and Helen just looked at her.

Narrowing her eyes, with all the determination she could muster she spoke. "I'm going to keep this baby. I don't care what you think, what Daddy thinks...this is MY baby. It's the only thing I have left of him."

"But Helen, keeping the baby won't bring him back. It won't help you grieve his loss."

"What do you know, Lorraine? What do you even care?" Helen stormed back to her bedroom and hadn't come back down until her sister left. She'd grieved for weeks, knowing that she'd be alone in raising their baby.

"Gramma, Gramma!"

She heard little voices as she was snapped from her thoughts. She put her tea down and extended her arms as Jaxon, Hunter, and Maggie came running into them. She kissed their heads and smiled. Her grandchildren were the apples of her eye. She stood as she watched her grown children getting out of their vehicles and gathering things from the trunk. Every Mother's Day she looked forward to the Sunday afternoon when her children and grandchildren would come over for a family barbeque. Her husband, Tyson, emerged from the house and greeted the grandkids with pats on the head and hugs.

"Hey kiddos! Well Maggie, aren't you just getting so big? And Hunter, give me five my man!" He chuckled as his eldest grandson gave him a high-five.

"Jaxon, my little man, come give Grandpa hugs!" he said as he looked over and bent down to match Jaxon's height.

She knew he enjoyed seeing his grandkids often. Maggie had just turned two and had the cutest brown curls and chestnut colored eyes. She was the spitting image of her mom, Grace. Her older brother, Hunter, was five and would be six in the fall. He had short spiky hair just like his dad, Tyson "TJ" Morrison II. Jaxon was the only son of Brent and Abigail Morrison. He was three and would have a birthday this December. He had dirty blonde hair and blue eyes just like Abigail. The kids huddled around their grandparents as their parents made their way up the walk. Brent held Abigail's hand as she waddled up to the porch steps. She was eight-and-a-half months pregnant with their second child. Tyson Morrison II walked behind his wife Grace as she held a cake steady in her arms. Helen embraced Abigail and chuckled as she rubbed her daughter-in-law's back.

"Any day now, right?"

Abigail smiled and nodded with a mock frown. "I was hoping it wouldn't rain today, of all days."

Abigail was a perfectionist. She organized the Mother's Day get-together each year. "Brent planned on barbequing outside since it was so lovely earlier. Tennessee's unpredictable weather, huh..." she said with a shrug. Helen laughed.

"Oh, rain or no rain, at least I have all of you here today." Abigail nodded and agreed as she moved around to hug her father-in-law.

Brent hugged his mom and whispered "Happy Mother's Day" in her ear. She kissed his cheek before he moved to hug his father. Tyson Jr. smiled and gave his mom a hug and a kiss on her cheek as he greeted her. Grace smiled and wished her a happy Mother's Day, which Helen reciprocated. She motioned towards the door and Tyson let out an "Oh, yeah!" as he opened the screen door for Grace to enter carrying the cake. They all went inside to set up for the family get-together.

Tyson Sr. wrapped his arm around Helen's waist with a smile. "Your dad called, love, he'll be here a little late...but he'll be here." He gave her a kiss on her cheek and wished her another Happy Mother's Day as he opened the door for her to enter.

Helen smiled and nodded as she headed inside, the gray clouds moving at a slow pace across the sky, hiding the sun and showing signs of raining at any moment. She looked on as her family began to chitchat amongst themselves, talking babies and jobs. She smiled and listened, asking about the new job Brent had just landed.

"Oh, you know...it's great. Being a boss and all." He gave his mother a playful wink as Abby shook her head with a smile and teased.