

DEDICATION

Dedicated to our friend,

Deborah Renee Daniel

She brought the authors together,
never imagining her kindness would create a collaboration so special.

FOREVER VIOLET

From Stony Hill to Broadway

CHAPTER 1

The first thing I saw when I opened the kitchen door was my Uncle Billy tugging my father out of the back seat of his police car.

"Not again," I said, stepping out on the porch. "It's the second time this week."

"C'mon, Cowboy John, let's go. And don't you be puking in my car like before," Uncle Billy barked. "It took an hour to clean it up and a week to get rid of the stink. Get your fat legs out here. Let's go. I ain't got all day."

Cowboy grunted. "I'm fine, go'damn it. Nothin's wrong with me."

"Sure, nothing wrong that an ice-cold bath and six months drying out on the farm won't fix."

Cowboy's my father and drunk as a skunk is how I usually saw him. I looked up at my uncle, a giant compared to me. "Where'd you find him this time, Uncle?"

Uncle Billy hauled Cowboy to his feet. "Greyhound station," he said, huffing as he wrapped his strong arms around Cowboy and half-carried him up the porch steps and inside the house. "Boozed up and unconscious on a bench. People reported him smelling like a gin mill, just sprawled out and hogging space where they sit." He nodded toward Cowboy's bedroom. "Same place?"

"Be careful you don't drop him too sudden. His bed's so decrepit it could cave in."

Uncle Billy backed off, still breathing hard and looking down on Cowboy. "John, you're lucky you're my brother or you'd be sleeping it off in the hoosegow right now." He turned to me. "He'll be out for a while."

That's the way my rotten life was as far back as I can remember. Cowboy, I'm not proud to say, was the town drunk. And my mother? That would be Crazy Annie. Anyway, it's what everybody called her. Where she could be at any given time was a mystery. She could be dead or sleeping on a picnic table up in Stony Hill Park. She'd been doing it for years. If she *was* my mother you couldn't prove it by me. Every time she came home, all hell broke loose.

"You're a no-good rotten drunk, Cowboy, that's what you are!"

"And you're a go'damned whore, Annie!"

"Drop dead, you worthless bastard!"

"No, you drop dead, you worthless bitch!"

Back and forth they'd go, him with a voice scratched raw with alcohol, and her with a whiny voice that cut right through me. Their battles lasted for hours. Dishes flew, chairs got busted and anything else they could get their hands on got wrecked. I was sure that someday they'd kill each other. It was hard for me to do my homework or write the stories I loved to make up. Writing and listening to songs on the radio, like 'Deep Purple' was how I tried to escape all the ugliness around me.

That was life for me on Stony Hill, a poor section of New London, Connecticut, back in 1938. I was fifteen then, living in a crappy house on a crappy street with other crappy houses and crappy families who lived in them. I called it the 'pits,' with four D's: dark, dirty, damp and depressing. Everybody was poor and most men were on the dole.

If you listened to grownups, you'd never know my name is Violet. They'd just say, 'There goes Crazy Annie's kid' or 'There's Cowboy's kid.' I loved my name. Growing up, it was the only thing I really loved. I thought it was the prettiest thing in my life. Sometimes I'd repeat it over and over, just to hear the sweet sound of it. My mother must have seen the field of violets up in the park where she sleeps and named me Violet in one of her saner moments. It's the only good thing I can say about her.

Winter was long and cold. Spring was finally turning summery and waking up the buds in the trees and the pretty wild flowers along the roads. I felt restless and didn't feel like writing my stories, especially with Cowboy in the next room snoring loud enough to wake up the dead.

I cleaned the cracker crumbs off the table, put on my moth-eaten sweater and decided to take a walk up to Stony Hill Park. Annie might be around or she might not. With her, you never could tell. Personally, I didn't care one way or the other. I just wanted to visit my favorite place, a beautiful patch where the wild violets grow. It was my secret place, where I felt free like the butterflies that dance among the flowers, my private place where no one could yell at me or hit me or tell me how stupid I was. To me, it was the most peaceful spot in the world.

The sun was already burning away the morning chill as I climbed the rocky path, still slippery with dew. When I neared the picnic table where Annie always slept, I heard yelling. Hurrying as quickly as

possible, I reached the top just in time to see Annie chasing a bunch of rowdy boys down a steep path. They were whooping like Indians and running zigzag downhill, with Annie chasing after them, her arms flailing. I ran hard trying to catch her, but when I got near to the south slope, I couldn't see her anymore.

"Annie!" I cried, at the top of my lungs. "Annie!"

Listening, I could hear their voices fading in the distance around a ragged stand of pines. Then silence. Descending the slope a short way, I stopped, waited a few moments, and finally gave up. It would be hopeless to wait any longer. Annie was gone and only God knew where to.

I climbed back up and made my way to Annie's table, stepped on the seat and plopped myself on the flat top, thinking there was a slight chance she might come back. I often wondered where she went when she wasn't there or at home or chasing off a gang. I could only hope nothing bad happened to her. I'd heard that some of the local boys liked to tease and taunt her, but as far as I knew, they never hurt her. I could never understand how anyone could enjoy being cruel to a helpless person.

After a while I realized it was hopeless to sit waiting, so I slipped off the table and walked to the far side of the hill. Carefully, I edged my way down the gravel part of the slope to a beautiful field of violets that perfumed the air and spread out before me like a rainbow carpet: blue, orchid, white and purple. Never in my life had I ever seen anything so beautiful.

Stepping gingerly, I found a dry spot, smoothed my skirt under me and sat in the middle of the patch. The sun had already burned away the dew and warmed the ground beneath me. Except for a few birds chirping in the trees and two chipmunks playing tag, I was alone. I pulled my knees up and rested my cheek against them. For a long while I sat with my arms wrapped around my legs and gazed at the shifting purple haze shading the distant hills. There's a new world out there, I said to myself, a better, cleaner world and someday I'd find my place in it. I vowed then and there to leave Stony Hill some day and put its ugly memories behind me forever. In my heart I knew it would happen. It had to happen!

I thought of Annie, out there somewhere. She was crazy, no doubt about it, but I didn't really know what made her that way, except for losing my baby brother, Eugene, in an accident. That wouldn't seem to be enough to make her crazy, but maybe it was. I never had much sympathy for her, no more so than for any other unfortunate person. Maybe I should have felt guilty about it, but I couldn't. She was my mother, yes, but I never really understood the meaning of the word.

Annie was a stranger to me. I saw the meterman more often than I ever saw her. She would stay away for weeks or even months, and then show up, for no particular reason I could figure out. I know it wasn't to see me. No doubt she preferred the peacefulness of the park, away from Cowboy and maybe to forget whatever memories haunted her. I didn't know how long she could go on that way. She was old, worn and scarred, just like the picnic table she slept on.

In time I'd learn there was far more to Annie's tragic life than I could ever have imagined.