

The Life and Death of Terry Dodd

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Chapter One

*T*erry Dodd lived next door. And I liked him.

In the mornings he walked outside, a cup of coffee steaming. I watched him through the door on our porch—the one that leaked when it rained, the screen torn at the top. Dad always said he needed to fix it.

He looked like Clint Eastwood. Not Dad, Terry Dodd.

Bambi said he was at least thirty years older than us.

“Joann! Are you up yet?”

I opened one eye, the other buried against my pillow. Warm sun streamed past my curtains and onto my back. I looked up at my door, opened a crack. Dad sat at the table, reading *The Hobbit* and drinking his coffee.

I curled into a ball and rolled the covers up under my chin.

“Joann!” Dad called. “It’s past seven.”

Terry Dodd had lived there for as long as I could remember. In the white house with peeling paint. When I was little, I used to sit under our porch and watch him across the yard as I ate an orange. He and his friend Earl, the one with the cap on backwards, lying down in the dirt, taking wrenches to the 1953 black Chrysler Windsor on ramps in the drive.

“Joann!”

I lifted my face off the pillows. “I thought grown-ups believed in summer vacation, too!”

Dad leaned back in his chair and grinned at me, his sparse black hair combed over his head. “Only until 7:18 a.m.”

“Mrs. Caller will be expecting you around eight, Joann,” Mom said from the kitchen. I couldn’t see her. “She wanted to show you around the house before Monday.”

That Windsor still sat out in his drive. I was too shy to ask what parts he still needed.

“Andre! Julie! Wake up your sister!”

A knobby knee dug into my hip. I jerked to the side, and fingers poked my ribs. I screamed with laughter and pain at the same time and twisted inside the covers as hands attacked from all directions.

Terry Dodd didn’t live with anybody. He’d buried his dad back when I was ten. He didn’t come home with

anybody. But he got home late on weekends, slamming his truck door and stumbling up to his house. Sometimes his Budweiser cans blew into our yard, and Andre and Dwayne threw them away.

A body landed square in the middle of my back, and the air whooshed out of me.

“Oh! Larry!” I cried. “Okay, that’s enough! I gotta get up.” I heaved up from underneath the quilt, and children tumbled off the bed, whooping and yelling.

“Time to eat, everyone!” Mom called.

I stepped over Larry’s fat little body on the carpet and tore my robe away from Dwayne.

“Do we have to eat everybody?” Andre asked, following me into the kitchen. It smelled warm and sweet. Like breakfast.

“I thought you were making French toast!” said Julie. Her pigtails flopped as she traipsed in single file behind Andre and Dwayne, Larry pattering in after them. “Everybody doesn’t sound very appetizing!”

Mom faked a grin as she slapped French toast onto the platter.

I sat down beside Dad and looked out the living room window.

Terry Dodd held that cup of coffee in his hand, three fingers around the handle.

“Grace, Julie,” Dad said as chairs scraped linoleum and everyone else sat down.

I took his hand, and we all bowed our heads as Julie whispered out her prayer.

“I’ll do the dishes when I get back!” I called.

“I can do them,” Mom said from the bedroom.

“Mom, it’s the 70s! California.” I grinned at her as she stepped out of the bedroom, laundry in her arms. “Moms have their personal dishwashers these days.”

“The electric kind, dear.” She dumped the armload into a hamper, water stains on the front of her dress.

“I am electric,” I said. “You send me to bed to recharge every night and—feed me breakfast every morning.” I kissed her smiling cheek.

“That really doesn’t go with the electric theme!” she said as the screen door slammed behind me.

As I hurried down the steps in the morning light, Terry walked to his truck next door, and I shut my mouth, tight, staring straight ahead.

Crossing the street, blown over with California dust, I stepped up the metal steps in front of the faded blue house, squinting through the screen as I knocked on the door.

Terry Dodd’s pickup roared to life, and I glanced over my shoulder at it, squeezing my fists.

“Ah! Joann!” Veronica Caller pushed the door open, a little chunk of a baby boy on her hip. “Please, you come in!” Mrs. Caller said. “You well this morning?” I stepped inside onto linoleum like ours, brown and white and flowered.

“Uh, yes. I am well. How are you, ma’am?”

“Yes. We are well.” Veronica smiled, nodding. “This Michael.” She hefted the little boy higher onto her hip. “He *seis*—six months. Very good boy.”

“He’s adorable. So smiley!” I wiggled his foot, and his mouth opened wide in a grin.

“Ah! Yes! Happy all the time.”

“He looks like he loves to eat.”

“Oh, sí! Loves to eat! Sí. Yes!” She brushed long black hair from her shoulder. “Come in, please. This way to the kitchen.”

I glanced outside once more before following her, and Terry Dodd lifted the hood on his pickup, looking in at the whirring engine.

“And how old you are?”

“Fourteen.”

“Ah, yes! You mother tell me; I forget. Jenita!” Mrs. Caller called, saying something in Spanish as little feet pattered across the floor in the living room.

A dark-haired little girl hurried to her mother and leaned back against her legs, staring up at me with big blue eyes.

“This Jennifer. She two years. And you no have to worry—she speak Español and English, but she love to get

all words mixed up, so this word English, this word Español. Say hola, Jennifer.”

Jennifer hid a smile behind her thumbs as she bit into her nails.

“Hola,” she whispered.

“Hola,” I said. “It’s good you know English and Spanish. Can you help me brush up on them during the summer?”

Jennifer grinned and looked up at her mother. Mrs. Caller leaned down and kissed her on top of the head.

“Yes, you big muchacha, so you help. Would you like to see house, Joann?”

They led me through the living room. It lay bare but for a chair and a wooden rocker placed in front of a small TV set and a tall lamp in the far corner.

In the bedroom, just off the living room, Mrs. Caller said, “Michael sleep in crib, and Jenita no wake him, so she take nap on our bed.”

Jennifer climbed up and rolled around on the waterbed, the water sloshing at the sides.

Mrs. Caller took me around to the back, to the little yard with a tricycle and a doll. Jennifer climbed onto the tricycle and pedaled as fast as she could to the far end of the yard and back.

In the kitchen Veronica showed me the food, how to make a bottle with the formula, and where they kept medicine.

“And you eat lunch here,” Mrs. Caller said. “No have to bring lunch. We have plenty food, so you eat here.”

“Oh, thank you, ma’am.”

“And seventy-five cents an hour is okay?” I nodded.

“Yes. That’s great.”

Jennifer pulled at my hand.

“Come see. I show you my treasure.”

I trailed along after her into the living room. But as she dangled a purple beaded purse in my face I caught a glimpse of Terry Dodd through the window, still bending over his truck engine.

“Do you know him?” Mrs. Caller asked. “He get Steve the truck job and teach him how to drive, and he find this home for us, too. He is good friend to Steve.” She smiled out the window. “Do you know him?”

I looked away. “Oh, no. Not really.”

I’d never spoken a single word to Terry Dodd in all my life. Even when I was nine and I fell off my bike and scraped my knee on the pavement right at the bottom of his drive. He looked up from the empty gas cans outside his garage, a cigarette between his lips. I looked up wild-eyed, knee throbbing, as he squinted at me.

“You all right?”

I’d jumped as if a bomb had exploded and run home, leaving my bike in a pile in his drive, blood squishing out down my shin. My bike had leaned against the porch as I limped out to school the next morning.

“So you can come Monday morning to start, yes?” Mrs. Caller asked.

“Oh. Yes,” I said, turning from the window. “Monday will be great.”

“And three day week, eight to three?”

“Perfect.”

“Good! Gracias!”

Terry Dodd wore blue jeans and a white t-shirt most days and sometimes a white straw cowboy hat with aviator sunglasses pulled down to the end of his nose. And Bambi kept telling me how old he looked.

It wasn’t how he looked. It was the way he just plain did things and never needed to say a word while doing it.