

# Excerpt: The Glass Forest

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Touchstone

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

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Angie

*Door County, Wisconsin, 1960*

The day started out clear and crisp—a perfect September morning with no foreboding of what was to come. After PJ woke from his nap, I bundled him into a sweater, stretchy knit pants, and a matching cap—hand-me-downs from my sister Dorrie’s children. Holding the baby against my hip, I stepped outside the cottage. It had rained the night before, and I breathed in the sultry fragrance, familiar as the scent of my own skin, of swollen lake water and sparse Wisconsin woods.

My feet crunched across our sand path over the unpaved road to North Bay; like all residents of North Bay Drive, Paul and I had created a path of sand across the gravel-and-oil road, to curtail oil sticking to our shoes. I made my way down the rickety wooden staircase to the bay, careful of the mud that always stuck to the stair treads after a hard rain. At the bottom, I squelched through the tall, mucky grasses to the edge of the water and with one hand turned over the lightweight canvas canoe my grandfather handcrafted decades ago. Over the weekend, Paul had fashioned a small wooden seat for PJ, padded and reclining, across the canoe’s middle bench. I was eager to try it out.

Humming softly, I fastened the baby with leather straps that Paul had hammered into each side of the bench. I was thinking about the night before. I remembered how rain had pelted the tin roof of the cottage, pounding into my ears as Paul and I rocked together in tangled sheets, our limbs entwined. At the end, I’d cried out Paul’s name, my voice raised above the sound of raindrops lashing against the windowpanes. Afterward we were still, listening to the occasional rumble of thunder as the storm moved eastward over Lake Michigan. Gratitude—for my marriage, my life, my future—wrapped itself around my heart as securely as Paul’s body encircled my own.

Now, twelve hours later, my breath caught at the memory. I paddled onto the bay, which PJ and I had to ourselves, save for a gathering of ducks floating serenely near the shore and a pair of gulls farther out. All the gnats and most of the mosquitoes were gone for the season. Only the occasional dragonfly buzzed over the water, its wings shimmering purple and blue in the sunlight.

I put up the paddle and let the canoe drift. Lulled by the gently rocking craft, PJ babbled cheerfully as he watched birds flying overhead.

I looked up, shielding my eyes from the sun, and as I did, a burst of splashing water erupted to my right. I whipped my head and shoulders around in time to see a trout shooting out of the bay, sending ripples across the surface when it plunged back in.

Pulled off balance by my sudden shift, I felt the canoe tipping sharply. PJ let out a wail. I twisted and saw the baby roll to the side and the top of his head touch the water. His shoulders and torso followed. The leather straps had come loose from the bench—Paul must not have hammered them in securely enough.

I grappled forward and snatched the baby by his ankles just before he went fully underwater. The canoe tilted and I sat down hastily, grinding my hip into the bench as I restored myself upright.

The baby wailed with surprise, his hair soaked, lake water dripping into his eyes and

mingling with his tears. I hugged him to my chest and ran my fingers across his drenched head. “It’s okay, my little one,” I murmured. “You’re safe.”

I kissed PJ’s brow, tucking his head against my breast, and with my free hand crossed myself. *Thank you, Virgin Mother*, I silently prayed. *Thank you for watching over for us.*

The wooden paddle drifted nearby. Shaking, I stared at it. I snuggled the baby under my left arm, dunked my right forearm into the water, and propelled the canoe by hand until I reached the paddle. I retrieved it and tucked the baby more tightly against my body. Awkwardly, one-handed, I paddled toward the shore—graceless but steadfast.

I was just walking in the door when the telephone began to ring—the two short rings signifying the call coming over the party line was for my household. Still trembling, I slipped off my muddy galoshes. I dashed to the bathroom, wrapped the baby in a towel, and placed him on the davenport.

I crossed the cottage’s diminutive living room and picked up the telephone receiver on the desk, turning down the radio volume with my other hand; I’d neglected to shut off the radio before I went out on the bay. Throughout the morning on WDOR, the announcers had been discussing last night’s presidential debate. They said that while Vice President Nixon came off favorably over the airwaves, those who’d watched the televised version felt Senator Kennedy won by a landslide. The first time I heard those words, earlier that morning, I’d raised my fist in a little cheer. In less than two months, I would be voting in my first presidential election. The senator from Massachusetts had my full support.

“Aunt Angie?” The female voice on the other end of the line was unfamiliar. I have more than a dozen nieces and nephews—I’m the youngest of six, and all my siblings have several children apiece—but only a handful of those children were old enough to make telephone calls. And of those few, none had a mature voice like this. Not quite the intonation of an adult, but surely not a child, either.

Only one person might call me *aunt* in that type of voice.

“Ruby?” I asked. “Is that you? Are you all right?”

There was no answer. I glanced across the room, watching PJ burble to himself as he swatted the loose threads on a sofa pillow. Considering what he’d been through on the bay, PJ was terrifically calm. How lucky I was to have such an agreeable baby, when all I heard from my sisters and sisters-in-law were gripes about colic and crankiness.

“We got us a winner,” Paul said whenever I marveled at this. “The boy’s a winner, Angel.”

And I would smile, both at his words and his pet name for me. *Angel.*

There was an almost inaudible sound on the line—not spoken words and not quite the clearing of a throat. I hoped it was Ruby, but I suspected it was old Mrs. Bates from down the road, using the party line to snare gossip like catching a weasel in a baited live trap.

“Ruby?” I said again. “Are you there? Are you all right?”

“No,” Ruby answered in that restrained voice of hers, devoid of emotion and cool as the water in the bay. “No, Aunt Angie, I am not all right.”

There was another pause, and then Ruby said, “Aunt Angie, my father is dead. And my mother has run away.”