**Excerpt from Raven Girl**

The worst part of being a kid was that you never knew how good you had it until it was too late.

Childhood was simple. My parents told me it was because I didn’t have bills to pay or mouths to feed, but it was more than that. It was because nothing was planned. When you didn’t plan for it, you didn’t worry about the consequences. They just happened naturally without the coercion, manipulation or mindfuck games that came with becoming an adult.

I never planned for Sylvie Cranston to be my best friend. I never expected her to be the muse in all my dreams, or the girl who later haunted my nightmares. I certainly never planned to fall in love with her, but that was exactly what happened.

Everyone told me I needed to move on. That was like asking me to pierce my own flesh and crush my empty, beating heart. They wanted me to toss it away and continue to breathe. How could a man function without his heart?

**Age 10**

“Caleb, the neighbors are moving in. Come on, I need you to carry the casserole.” My mother’s hurried voice echoed down the hall to my room.

I didn’t think that woman knew the term ‘lazy Sunday’. I had no desire to meet the new neighbors let alone bring them a casserole. I wanted to get out of my Sunday suit and fish before it was time to worry about Monday.

“Why can’t Mandy carry it?” I asked. My little sister and my momma were pretty much a package deal. Wherever Amelia Tanner went, Amanda Tanner followed. Mandy was my momma’s mini-me with long, curly red hair and dark green eyes that my father fondly referred to as sharply sweet. They even had the same pattern of freckles across their noses. However, my momma was elegant whereas my sister was as clumsy as a blind dog in a figurine factory.

“It’s way too heavy for her, and I’m not risking it. I worked too darn hard on it. Now get your butt in gear and help me.”

I begrudgingly walked out of my room to the foyer where the two females in my life waited for me impatiently. “Can I at least change first?”

My mother sighed, putting her hands on her hips. “They’re going to see you looking like a bum every day this summer. At least make a good first impression. I hear they’re from up north, and we want them to think of you as a perfect Southern gentleman, not the wild ruffian you are.” I shook my head, but didn’t protest. You didn’t argue with my mother. Even a peaceful protest was out of the question. “You know, there is no hospitality like the Southern kind, so let’s go show these folks how lucky they are to be living here.”

I tried not to roll my eyes, but it was exactly what I wanted to do. She smiled at me, ruffling my hair. “You never know, they might have a little boy your age.”

“Geez, Momma, you act like I’m five. I’m not a little boy and I don’t need a playmate.”

“You sure are throwing a temper tantrum like a little boy,” Amanda chimed in, who actually was five.

“You will always be my little boy. Now come on,” my mother stated.

I led the procession of Tanners, carrying the cheesy casserole dish that felt like it weighed at least twenty pounds. We marched outside our little brick ranch, walking all the way out to the sidewalk and crossing over the ten slabs of cement to the driveway of another almost identical brick ranch. It was easier to cut across the grass, but I knew better. My momma would have a few remarks if I dared cross the patch of grass between the houses. It was not proper. It was not neighborly. And we had manners. This philosophy applied even though the other house had been vacant so long it was more like weedy thistle than a real lawn. Still, my father mowed it down once a week for appearances’ sake when he tended to our lawn. “Can’t let the neighborhood go downhill,” he’d say. I knew with his promotion to sheriff, he would be working longer hours, and the chore would soon be mine. At least I’d only have to mow our lawn.

I stepped aside so my mother could knock on the door. A moving van was in the driveway and several men were unloading it. The whole thing was a little weird. No one ever moved to Prairie Marsh, Texas. Sure, there were people who left to pursue life in other parts of the country, only to return homesick or bitter from their experiences, but it was a strange occurrence to see a new family here. We were a small town in the middle of nowhere, East Texas. Even at ten, I knew that much.

A tall dark-haired man in black trousers and a crisp white shirt answered the door. This was strange too. People around here either wore Sunday clothes or regular clothes. This man was in semi-Sunday clothes. If you were doing heavy lifting, you definitely wore jeans. I doubted he would fit in.

“Well, hello, we’re the Tanners, your neighbors next door. I’m Amelia. This is my son, Caleb, but you can call him Cal. And this little princess is Amanda, but please call her Mandy.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Harry Cranston.” He shook my mother’s hand and smiled widely at Amanda. I one-armed the casserole dish to shake his hand, happy he wasn’t ignoring me like most adults. “Nice grip, son.”

We walked into the three-bedroom replica of our house I’d always known as Mrs Miller’s place. Mrs Miller had died last year and her son had sold it, but that had been months ago. We’d begun to think the new owners had changed their mind until my mother had spotted the moving van this morning. The old house appeared new again. The oak floors were so shiny they looked wet, and the furniture was brand new with the store tags still on it. The whole house smelled of fresh paint and lemon juice. That would please my mother. She liked a clean house.

I held up the casserole and thankfully Mr Cranston took it from me before I dropped it. I had no idea how my mother made that pan feel heavier than my dad’s old medicine ball in the garage, but she did. My dad always said, “The heavier the casserole, the better it is.” If that was the case, I was pretty sure my momma made the best casserole in the county.