

# The Color of Longing

## Chapter 1



When Jake arrived in the meadow, the dance had begun. Students were weaving brightly colored silk through the old split rail fence as Paul orchestrated an intricate pattern. Paul's idea to celebrate the turn of the millennium had seemed crazy to Jake, an environmental extravaganza of expensive fabric that would go mostly unnoticed by the good old boys in the Virginia farmland. But Jake had to admit that the effect was gorgeous, breath-taking even. Marnie would love it.

He already knew that she wasn't there. He had known without looking, the way we just do.

Some of the silk was still spread across the grass. Around the edges of the long strips hummed a hive of activity. Paul called out his instructions to that group too, and the students moved the golds and purples, the turquoise and shimmering pinks from place to place, interlacing the colors into a symphony that only Paul was seeing. Other students stood around, laughing and chatting.

Jake felt a twinge of envy. Paul's gatherings were always full of laughter and banter, and while they seemed inviting, he could never see how to mix in. This performance seemed especially well choreographed, and he felt even more the outsider. He hung back by his truck.

He'd arrived late. His studio was warm and bright in the late September sun, and he was reluctant to leave it. He was resolving the shading difficulties in the second portrait of Marnie, trying to capture the loveliness of her throat and chin, and that made him feel closer to her, another warmth he was loathe to leave. But a promise to your best friend is a solemn thing, and so he'd interrupted his work and driven out into the countryside, nearly 30 minutes from town. He'd been a witness to Paul's creations since art school 10 years before.

Now he leaned against the old pickup, wishing he'd brought some of the coffee in a thermos. It was cool in the shadows, and he fastened up his jean jacket and shoved his hands in the pockets. He didn't bother to catch Paul's eye. Paul knew he was there.

A loud thump sounded to his left. A young woman in jeans and a tight red sweater was wrestling with a cooler. Jake went over to her. "Let me help. Where do you want this?"

The girl smiled at him with big blue eyes and the assurance of someone who knew her way around men. "Is that your truck?" she asked. "Can we use the tailgate?"

“Sure,” Jake shrugged. “What’s in here?”

“Champagne,” she said, smiling again and tossing her long pale hair back. She stepped around to one side of the cooler so he could lift the other. “For the toast.”

“For the toast,” Jake said, “of course.” Leave it to Paul to make a ceremony of it all.

They hefted the ice chest on to the tailgate, Jake doing most of the lifting. The girl went back to Paul’s car and pulled out a grocery bag. Plastic glasses stuck out of the top. The girl busied herself with preparations, and Jake went back to watching and leaning against his truck although he looked over at the girl from time to time. He wondered if she was Paul’s lover. There always was one.

While the girl was pretty, she didn’t appeal to him. Blondes were too open somehow, too obvious. He was drawn instead to dark-haired women like Marnie and the secrets that lay in their dark eyes. He thought of the three portraits of her that he was working on and wondered if he was expressing any of that mystery in them.

Paul gave a sudden shout and Jake saw that the creation was nearly complete. In an artistic tug-of-war, the students had gathered on each end of the weaving and were pulling against each other to tighten the strips and secure them. Paul said something to the students that made them all laugh, and they settled into making final adjustments.

Jake was rummaging in his truck for a bottle of water when he felt the hand on his shoulder. There stood Paul, grinning ear to ear, his brown eyes twinkling. He was so ecstatic that Jake could feel the energy humming off his big frame.

“Isn’t it great? I just knew this would work out.” Paul paused, waiting for Jake’s praise.

Jake gave it to him. “It’s great. It’s beautiful. I take back what I said about it being a stupid idea.”

“I know, I know. I was so right to do this.” Paul was almost dancing around.

“Marnie should have come,” Jake said. “She’d like this one.”

Paul didn’t seem to hear. “Come on,” he said, taking Jake by the arm. “It’s time to celebrate.”

The students had gathered around the back of the truck. The blonde was dispensing the champagne and handing out cups. The adoring look she gave Paul told Jake all he needed to know about the two of them. Marnie crossed his mind again. He saw the portraits again, the green silk drape that set off her skin, the pale pink of her lips, the lovely dark arch of her brows. A surge of love and desire washed over him, and it took a moment to shake himself free of her spell.

Jake took champagne when it was handed to him but he didn’t drink from the cup, even when the students noisily toasted Paul’s brilliance. He watched instead, half-amused, half-annoyed, as the young people fawned over his friend. Then he moved away from the others and into the field where he could see the finished work.

The sky was a crisp blue, the cumulus clouds high and white and buoyant. The wild grass of the meadow was still mostly green, a yellowish tinge just coming on. The trees along the left side of the weaving were sparsely leafed in gold and green and they shimmered slightly in the breeze. But it was the silk that threw back the light, the glimmer that seemed caught in the knots, the astonishing softness of the fabric against the deeply worn grooves of the splintery rails. He wondered how he would paint that.

A cloud passed over as Jake watched, the silk going dark for a moment. Suddenly he lost touch with the noisy crowd behind him and his whole world became the play of light and shadow and color on the fence. There was a whisper of something in his ear, something that made his breath catch in his throat and his whole body tingle. He could sense its importance but not its meaning. And then the cloud passed and the sun shone brightly again on the weaving and he heard the slam of a car door. He turned back to the group.

The students were leaving, piling into their cars. Two of them dumped the ice out of the cooler, stored the empty bottles in the chest, and stowed it away in Paul's trunk. The young blond woman drove off with some other girls. Paul must have dismissed her, Jake thought.

At last, only the two men were left. There was some champagne left in one bottle and Paul brought it over to Jake, who was sitting now in the cab of his truck, the door open. Paul tried to hand him the bottle, but Jake smiled and shook his head as always. Paul shrugged and took a big drink, then walked around the front of the truck and climbed in beside Jake. He heaved a great sigh and Jake saw a tear roll down his face.

"Marnie's left me," Paul said. He took another big swig from the bottle. His hand was trembling and Jake realized he was drunk. "She caught me with Melissa. We had a big row and she left."

"Melissa, the one handing out the champagne?" Jake didn't know why this detail was important to him.

Paul nodded. "How did you know?"

Because only a fool wouldn't figure it out. But he said nothing, just waited for Paul to go on.

"Marnie packed up and left. I don't know where she's gone." And he began to cry. Jake sat next to him for a moment. He felt impotent in the face of the tears, by the unfamiliar weakness in his friend. But then he tuned Paul out, consumed with his own feelings for Marnie, for the hole in his heart that her leaving would bring, if leave them she did.

"Tell me what to do, Jake," Paul was saying. "You know her. You could talk to her, tell her to come back." He began to sob, big hiccupping sobs.

The guilty desire of a decade swept over Jake. "I don't know where she is, Paul. She didn't call me, not last night or this morning."

Paul's sobs deepened at that, and Jake waited only a moment before he got out of the truck. He stood there, fists clenched, and took several deep breaths. It had never occurred to him that Marnie might leave Paul. Now there was a sudden rush of hope. Maybe she would come to him. Maybe he could take her away from here. He let himself entertain this idea for a moment, a fleeting fantasy of Marnie and him in a house together somewhere, of Marnie and him and maybe a child, a dark-haired girl as pretty as Marnie. It wasn't an impossible idea.

Then he shook himself free of the dream and went over to Paul's car, took the keys from the ignition, and locked it up. Back in the truck, he sat for a few minutes with his hands on the steering wheel. Paul was still sniffing and wiping his eyes on his sleeve. Then Jake said quietly, "I'll take you home. You shouldn't drive. We'll get your car later."

Paul quieted then. At Jake's prompting, he pulled the door shut and put on his seatbelt. And they drove off down the country lane. In the rearview mirror, Jake could see the weaving glowing in all its splendor, its colorful music ringing through the trees.