



Spring Rain

By Gayle Roper

Excerpt provided courtesy of www.gayleroper.com

Chapter 1

Leigh Spenser looked at the FedEx package waiting on the doorstep of her apartment over the garage and made no move to pick it up. She felt the familiar cramp in her midsection. Johnny again. She closed her eyes and put her hand on her stomach. It was amazing how many times being his daughter felt like a bad case of the flu.

The return address read State Penitentiary, Trenton, N.J., her father's address for the past eleven years, right up until his death last month. She rubbed her stomach lightly as if the action would take away the nausea. It didn't work; no great surprise since it had never worked before. Even though he was dead, she was still marked now and always as Johnny Spenser's daughter.

She bit back a sigh, staring sightlessly across the yard to the sand dunes and the path through them to the beach. Beyond lay the great stone jetty and the deceptively calm expanse of water where the bay met the ocean at the northern tip of Seaside. In the far distance Atlantic City would be dancing on the water, its towering casinos reduced to mere toys.

"Hey," said Billy, his young voice eager and excited. He poked at the package with his ratty sneaker. "It's from Pop-pop."

Leigh studied the envelope again. "It's not from Pop-pop. It can't be. It's from the warden or somebody sending us the last of his things."

At least I hope it's the last. My nerves have taken about all they can stand.

"They already sent us a bunch of stuff. How much did he have?" Billy bent down, lifted the envelope, and shook it with enthusiasm. "I mean, he only lived in a small cell."

"Hey, careful." Leigh grabbed her son's arm. "You might break it."

Billy looked at her with that increasingly frequent Mom-think-about-what-you-just-said look; the look that made her feel every one of her advanced twenty-nine years and more.

He's only ten, she thought desperately as she released his arm. He's still supposed to think I'm wonderful. I should have three more years before the hormones kick in.

She shook her head as if to clear it. She was making too much of nothing. She knew that. Such looks were just a natural part of growing up. The fact that she'd never have dared turn such a look on Johnny meant that she was abnormal, not Billy. All those psychology classes had taught her that, and her observations had confirmed it. The challenge was in learning not to take the looks personally.

"Mom, it's not the right shape for breakable." His tone dripped with condescension laced with patience. "It's an envelope, not a box. And do you really think they'd let a convict have something breakable?"

Leigh wrinkled her nose. Well, maybe, just maybe she deserved the look this time. "I guess not."

Billy nodded. "You guess right. Too dangerous. It could be made into a weapon."

"Pop-pop wasn't violent," Leigh protested, jumping to Johnny Spenser's defense as usual, though why she did was a mystery to her. He had certainly never come to hers.

"Prison policy," Billy said with all the authority of one who knew what he was talking about even when he didn't. He held the large envelope out to Leigh, and when she didn't take it, he put it down. "They couldn't make exceptions for the few nice guys like Pop-pop."

Nice? Johnny Spenser? Her stomach jumped again. Non-violent, okay, at least most of the time, but nice? Not in her book. But if Billy thought his Pop-pop was nice, that was all to the good. And understandable. In her son's limited experience with his grandfather, Johnny had always been on his best behavior. Of course, if one chose to be cynical, one would say that the prison guards stationed at the doors during visitation hours had helped.

Leigh reached out to ruffle her son's fine brown hair, her heart full of love for this amazing child of hers. Thankfully he didn't have to deal with scars like those she had acquired growing up with Johnny during the years when he was not so nice, the years that had made her so cynical about him, that had scarred her more than she liked to admit.

"Mom," Billy protested, ducking away from her hand.

"Afraid I'll mess your hair and scare the girls away?"

He looked at her aghast and rolled his eyes. "Girls? Puh-lease!"

Of course, Billy had his own scars to live with and his own crosses to bear. And they were all her fault, Leigh knew, every single one of them. She blinked against tears.

Failure again.

She frowned as she picked up the envelope. *I must be more tired than I realized. I'm usually not so emotional.*

Billy cleared his throat and turned to Leigh with dancing eyes. She recognized the look and held her breath. She knew something outrageous was coming.

“The guys all think it’s cool that my Pop-pop was in jail.” He puffed his bony chest with pride.

Leigh rolled her eyes just like he had a minute earlier. “Puh-lease!”

Billy giggled.

Leigh tucked the package into her carryall filled with paperwork to be finished over the Easter break; paperwork she probably wouldn’t look at until the night before school reopened. “They think it’s neat because they’re in fifth grade and because he wasn’t their father.”

If he had been theirs, she knew there’d be no cool, no pride. There’d be hurt and embarrassment and incredible loneliness.

“And there’s nothing cool about getting knifed and dying in a prison shower, even if it was a case of mistaken identity.” Or so they said.

Billy grinned at her again, unconvinced, his glasses so full of fingerprints it amazed her that he could see anything.

“I’m going to get something to eat,” he announced. “Then I’m going over to Mike’s.”

He waited a split second before he moved, his way of making his statement a request for permission but without the ignominy of actually asking. Sometimes he was so clever it was frightening.

Like his father, she thought and pushed away the all too familiar combination of ache and anger, all the more painful because it was so true.

“Come home at six or when Mike’s family starts dinner, whichever happens first.”

With a nod he disappeared up the stairs to their apartment with enough thumping and bumping to indicate a rhino instead of an undersized boy. She refused to think about the new paint she and Julia had applied to the stairwell just last weekend.

Leigh stared morosely at the large envelope wedged in her carryall. What else could her father possibly have had? Or more accurately, what else could he possibly have had that she didn’t want? She pushed the envelope down until it was no longer visible in the welter of papers.

“Out of sight, out of mind,” she told the large marmalade cat who wandered over and collapsed on her feet.

The cat sighed deeply as she draped her head over Leigh’s shoe, her ear twitching as it touched the ground every time she exhaled.

“My feeling exactly, Mama.” She bent over and rubbed the cat’s head. Mama purred in ecstasy.

Mama had adopted Leigh and Billy one frigid Wednesday in December and proceeded to make them grandparents the following Saturday morning.

Leigh had gone to bed that Friday night like every Friday with firm instructions to Billy not to waken her for anything short of blood flowing freely. Saturday was her one morning to sleep.

“Mom! Mom! You gotta come!” Billy had shrieked in her ear at 6 A.M.

Leigh leaped out of bed, blinking against the sudden blinding brightness of the bedside lamp he’d flicked on, ready to do combat, put out fires, or wrap tourniquets about Billy’s skinny limbs.

“The bathroom!” And Billy’s slight pajamaed figure disappeared down the hall.

“This had better be good, William Clayton Spenser,” she growled as she followed, arms wrapped about her middle to combat the morning chill.

She’d never been convinced that good was the proper word for what she found, but it had taken all the venom out of her. And it certainly wasn’t bad, especially considering the joy Billy received.

Lying on the floor in the linen closet, all cuddled in a pair of worn-out towels Leigh couldn’t bring herself to discard, was their new marmalade cat with six tiny kittens, eyes tightly shut, nuzzling her.

“Aren’t they wonderful?” Billy cried. “Aren’t they the cutest things you ever saw?”

“I knew taking her in was a mistake,” Leigh muttered even as she knelt smiling in the doorway. “Just because it was below freezing and she was crying on our doorstep and you begged—”

“Can we keep the kittens, Mom? Huh? Can we?” Billy danced around the bathroom, unable to keep still, waves of delight and excitement shimmering off him.

And have seven cats? Leigh shuddered at the thought of all that cat food and litter and multiple litter boxes. Seven boxes? Did cats share? “We cannot.”

Billy put on his patented pleading face. “They’re so little. They won’t take up much room.”

“They’ll grow, and the answer is still no. Absolutely no. Unequivocally no.”

As Billy fondled the marmalade’s ears, he said, “She’s a mama now, and once a mama, always a mama. At least that’s what you say.” He turned and grinned impudently at Leigh. “So Mama’s what we’ll call her.”

So Mama she had become, and Leigh stood in the early April sunshine talking to her for want of another living, breathing body in the vicinity. She pointed to the envelope buried in her carryall. “Will there ever be an end to the misery he causes me?”

Her voice was weary as she remembered the media frenzy his murder had generated. Reporters at the door, at school, even interviewing students! And there were the phone calls from prison officials, the buzz of curiosity in her classroom and the teachers’ room, the stares wherever she went. “He’s dead and buried. It should be over. I want it over.”

Mama rolled off Leigh's shoes onto her back, revealing her belly with the recent spaying scar still visible through her newly regrown fur. Leigh automatically bent and rubbed. Mama purred in delight. All her kittens were now gone, and, fickle animal, she apparently felt no maternal loss whatsoever.

Change maternal to paternal, and you have Billy's father.

No, she caught herself, trying to be scrupulously honest, always a challenge when thinking about him. As far as she knew, he didn't even know about Billy. You can't abandon what you don't know exists. She straightened and rubbed the headache beginning behind her left eye.

The back door of the main house opened, and the home health nurse walked out. Leigh - waved at her, and the woman smiled back as she walked to her car parked in the drive turnaround. As the nurse drove away, Leigh looked up at the rear bedroom window of the main house, Ted's window. Sweet Teddy. It wouldn't be long now.

As always the thought of Ted's impending death wrapped Leigh in a cloak of sorrow. She couldn't imagine life without Teddy, her one true friend through the years.

He would be twenty-nine next week, and twenty-nine was too young to die! She prayed constantly that God would give her the strength to stand the pain of being without the man she loved like a brother.

When had he first adopted her? She thought for a minute and decided it was the beginning of her sophomore year in high school. She had been standing by her locker, shoulders slumped as she struggled with the combination. She was wearing a secondhand top and slacks that she had thought were wonderful when she bought them at Goodwill.

As soon as she walked into homeroom, she'd know differently.

How did the popular girls know what was cool? How did they know what shoes to buy, what slacks to wear, what hairstyle to get? It was one of the great mysteries of life. She watched TV like everyone else, but she still got it wrong. She got everything wrong! She couldn't even open her locker, for Pete's sake!

"Having trouble?" a kind male voice asked.

She spun around to see Ted Wharton looking at her. Ted Wharton! He and his identical twin Clay were two of the most popular boys in her class, in the whole school, and they were both handsome, handsome!

"Uh, my lock," she managed, feeling herself flush the bright crimson her father always mocked her about.

"They can be a challenge at first, can't they?" He leveled his engaging grin on her. "Let me help."

Of course he'd opened the locker in a flash, but then he walked with her to the cafeteria, just like she was one of the real girls, not plain old Leigh Spenser. Once there he sat with Clay and their

friends, but just having him walk with her made sitting alone not quite so painful. He didn't seem to care in the least that she was Johnny Spenser's drip of a daughter.

The miracle was that he'd sought her out after that, talking with her at her locker, laughing at her weak jokes, walking her to lunch most days. At first she had thought he might like her in a boy/girl way, but she understood quickly that he liked her in a better way: as a friend. She couldn't understand why, but she knew it was true. She in return loved him unconditionally. He brought light into her somber, often dark world and acceptance where she usually knew rejection.

She wasn't certain when she first realized that Ted was leading a double life— Dr. and Mrs. Will Wharton's wonderful church-going son on one hand and Teddy Wharton, denizen of the wild gay life, on the other. The deceit that came to characterize his life bothered her a lot, more than any moral questions.

"You're trying to be two things at once, Ted. You can't keep it up. Either you're the straight, good guy most people think you are or the gay one."

He'd just smile and ask, "Which one should I be, Leigh?"

"The honest one. No matter how open-minded I try to be, I don't like you being gay, but I can live with it if you're honest."

"I can't be honest. Too many people will get hurt."

"But, Teddy," she warned him time and again, "you're asking for trouble hanging out with those loose people."

He always waved her worries away. "I'm being careful, sweetheart. Believe me. I'll be okay."

But she had continued to worry and with reason. And he hadn't been careful enough. She had cried when he told her he was HIV positive. He had just held her and told her he was going to beat it. He'd be okay. She should save her tears for someone who needed them.

Because she loved him, she wanted to believe he'd never get really ill. At least by now she had met Jesus, and Teddy wasn't the main rock in her life anymore, but the pain and fear she felt for him were incredibly intense.

Then came - the full-blown AIDS. And now the unexpectedly rapid deterioration. The weekend he came home "to live as stress-free a life as possible," she knew - it meant he'd come home to die, however long that took. She wasn't - able to stop crying. She actually made herself sick, scaring poor Billy half to death as she knelt in front of the toilet and heaved and heaved.

Now there was just overwhelming sadness whenever she thought of him.

She reached for the door to her apartment. It had been a long, long day at school. Usually her fourth grade students were fine, but a week of spring vacation began with the close of school today, and they were more than ready. So was she. All she wanted was to climb the stairs and flop in her favorite chair, a good book in one hand, a sweetened iced tea in the other.

“Oh, Leigh!”

Her hand on the doorknob, Leigh turned back to the main house. The main house. It always sounded like some great manor house in an English novel with lots of outbuildings dotting the vast estate, but there was no vast estate here, no mansion, just a large cream Victorian with dark green, crimson, and white gingerbread trim. The garage with Leigh’s apartment over it sat at the back of the property and was painted the same colors as the house. Leigh and Billy had lived here for four years now, a wonder she still had trouble comprehending. There was no location in Seaside as wonderful as this property, reaching directly to the dunes, the beach, and the Atlantic Ocean.

Nor was there anyone as wonderful as Julia Wharton, resident angel. Leigh smiled at Julia as she came out the back door of the house. She didn’t look like an angel, just an attractive widow in her late fifties with carefully colored blond hair and unbelievably thick brown lashes rimming her clear blue eyes, but Leigh knew from experience that she was one. She was also a crackerjack realtor, Ted’s mother, Leigh’s landlady and a very good friend.

“Will you and Billy come for dinner?” Julia asked as the women met in the middle of the small backyard. Property in a shore resort like Seaside was so valuable that no one wasted much land on lawns, especially since the salt air and the summer heat made keeping a decent one nearly impossible. Julia brushed a curl behind her ear with a hand covered with flour. “I’m making a lemon meringue pie.”

The mention of the lemon meringue struck a chill through Leigh, and her hand went to her heart. “Are you baking as therapy? Is Teddy worse? Did the nurse give you bad news before she left?”

In the weeks after it became obvious that Ted was dying and Julia had taken an indefinite leave from her job to be available in whatever capacity she was needed, she had baked so many pies and cakes and cookies that the rescue mission in Atlantic City took to sending a van over every day to pick up the bounty.

Julia blinked in surprise. “Ted’s fine. I just felt like baking.”

Leigh smiled in relief. “From scratch as usual?”

“Of course.” Julia’s eyes flashed. “I would never cheat with one of those store bought crusts.”

“If I baked like you, I wouldn’t either,” said Leigh who regularly bought her crusts premade. “We’d love to come.”

Even if there weren’t years of rescue and reclamation to Julia’s credit, that invitation alone proved her angel status, coming as it did at the end of a long month, a long week, and a longer day. The mere thought of coming up with a nutritious dinner for Billy and herself had been draining Leigh’s few remaining energy reserves.

“I’m indulging in celebratory baking,” Julia said in a happy rush. She grinned, absolutely delighted with her good news. “Clay’s coming home.”

Leigh shivered as a dark chill raced through her. She felt turned to marble just like in the game she had played as a kid when you were flung away and had to freeze in whatever position you found yourself until whoever was *it* came to wind you up.

Only this was real.

“— this weekend.”

Leigh shook her head and managed to hear the last part of Julia’s continued comments. “He’s coming for the weekend? That’s nice.” *And we can go away for the weekend, Billy and I. He will just have to miss his Little League game Saturday, and the choir will never notice my absence Sunday morning.*

“No, no.” Julia patted Leigh’s hand again. “He *arrives* this weekend, probably tomorrow, and he’s staying until after Ted— ” Julia’s voice broke and tears shimmered in her eyes.

Until after Ted dies. Words no mother wanted to speak.

Selfish, selfish! Leigh berated herself as she watched Julia blink back the tears.

Worrying about your feelings, your embarrassment in a situation like this. Are you so petty you’d deny Julia the consolation Clay could bring? After all she’s done for you?

“I’m glad for you, Julia. Having Clay here will be a wonderful comfort.”

Something in Leigh’s voice made Julia look at her quickly, apparently misunderstanding the restraint. “Not that you aren’t a comfort,” she hastened to say, reaching out and hugging Leigh. “I don’t know what I would have done without you over the past three years since Will’s death. And Billy. It’s just that Clay’s— ”

“Clay’s your son,” Leigh finished, forcing her voice to be warm and excited.

“And Ted’s twin. You need him. And he should be here.” Though why she hadn’t realized that before she’d never know. Something so blatantly obvious shouldn’t have been a surprise. But it was, probably because he came back to Seaside so rarely and stayed so short a time. His last visit of any length had been at his father’s funeral, and she had managed to keep out of sight by burying herself in the kitchen or staying in her apartment. When he came for just a weekend, she and Billy always managed to be conveniently away.

Julia rubbed her floury hand across her forehead. “Sometimes I hate what’s coming so much I can hardly stand it. And I hate facing it alone.”

This time Leigh wrapped her arms about Julia. When Will Wharton had died suddenly three years ago, she had been almost as lost as Julia. “I know.” Leigh kissed Julia’s cheek. “He was such a great guy. We all miss him.”

Julia pulled back and took a deep breath. She straightened her shoulders and raised her chin. “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me,” she quoted. “I can.”

Leigh watched Julia walk back to the house and marveled at the woman's strength. She turned back to the garage and slowly climbed the steps to her apartment, emotions roiling.

Dear Lord, on one hand I know Julia's right. I can do all things through Your strength. But I don't know about Clay, Lord. I just don't know.

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