

Pine Valley Series : Book Two

MOTHERS
OF
PINE WAY

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Sylvia paused before getting out of the car. The smoke of a nearby fire had reached their home. The sharp peel of a siren swiftly carried through the woods, drawing near. Soon, the volunteer fire truck came by, turning down Jim and Beth Hart's driveway. Forty transformed into a madman, trying to hurry into the house, tripping over the porch steps and nearly colliding into the front door. Frantically, he tried unlocking it, but dropped his keys. Pounding his fist on the door jamb, a splinter caught in his hand. He cried out in pain and frustration, though he managed to finally open the door and hurry inside, leaving his wife ignored. She hesitantly followed behind in his wake, entering their home and turning on the lamp in their living room. Observing her husband, she felt helpless to stop him, becoming increasingly frightened. He appeared to be in an exceptionally unstable frame of mind.

Forty first wanted to grab his Bible from the coffee table and pray, but thought he should get his gun instead. Leaping and stumbling, he made his way up the darkening stairwell to the useless derringer's hiding place before returning downstairs and

running out the front door. Seconds later, he ran back in, having changed his mind, and snatched up his Bible. Reminiscent of his father, he halted before going out the door again, pointing his finger at Sylvia, commanding her to stay in the house.

“Stay *put!* I don’t want to come home and find you gone off somewhere!”

He turned and went out the door, slamming it behind. Shook up and alone, Sylvia began to unconsciously pace the floor of their living room where, innocently, the doorway to her childhood opened once more, beckoning her to enter. She did so, though only far enough to see what was being shown to her. It was her mother, Charity Cadwallader, who was also alone, her husband gone off to war. Infrequent letters arrived with money and a few words, which had become meaningless.

“I love you. Hug Sylvia for me.”

Charity neglected her little girl, often sent her away to stay with Aunt Justice Walker, who adored Sylvia. Aunt Justice curled her hair and fussed over her, made her clothes, even matching sets for her dolls. Justice wanted this little girl for her own, terribly disappointed in the way her youngest sister treated the darling little thing, which is how she saw her niece.

In Sylvia’s memory, she saw her mother growing more anxious, pacing, like Sylvia, herself, was doing. Her mother wore a new dress Aunt Justice made for her. Nearby, stood the unwanted child, watching her mother’s every move. Sylvia stopped and fearfully beheld her own dress. Only then, did she begin to see that she had somehow become her mother. This observation struck her hard. Seeing the truth was more difficult than avoiding it.

Holding herself, as if to hold in what wanted so badly to be heard, the tears that begged release ran down her face. She

remembered being that small child who needed attention and affection from her mother, though it rarely came.

Her mother told her one night to go next door to the Stewart's and tell them something needed fixing. In her pajamas and slippers, Sylvia peeked out the door. The neighbor's house seemed too far away for an errand in the night, yet, off she ran, falling once and getting up, before timidly knocking on the Stewart's back door. Her friend, Tucker, answered.

"What're you doin' over here? It's late." Glancing at the Cadwallader's house, he assessed the situation, opening the door wider to let her in, saying, "Come on."

He called out to his father. "Dad? Sylvia's here."

Upon seeing her, the eager man instantly tossed aside his newspaper, as if years had dropped from his life and he was young again. He gave a brief hello to her, a pat on the head in passing, and a hasty, "goodbye, I'll be right back," to them both, and was out the door.

She timidly followed Tucker into the boys' bedroom and, together, they looked at picture books, dug through a box of small toys, and played whatever they felt like playing. Dewey shushed them, because he had to get up early to go to work and needed to sleep. Usually, their father returned and carried her home.

"There, there, little one," he would say. "I've gotcha," which somehow always made things better. In his arms, she pretended that Mr. Stewart was her father, hoping for another moment like that again, forgetful of why they took place at all.

Mrs. Stewart had died by that time. Sylvia recalled the children yet living at home. She imagined they knew about the shamefully iniquitous arrangement between their father and her

mother. Once, she overheard the girls in their bedroom, talking before going to sleep. It was one of those nights.

“I wish Mother was here,” Marjorie said wistfully.

Angrily, Lois remarked, “She’s dead, you dope.”

“Still...what are we supposed to do? She’s married!”

“There’s nothing we can do, except move out, soon as we’re old enough!”

Standing by the girl’s bedroom door, waiting to use the bathroom, Sylvia came to believe that nobody wanted her. She tiptoed to the boy’s room and nestled onto a makeshift bed of blankets, like a kitten, and fell asleep. Early in the morning, before sunrise, she returned home. Across the kitchen and living room, into her mother’s room, she ever so quietly climbed into bed between Mr. Stewart and her mother, who were soundly sleeping.

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Sylvia stepped off the back porch, recalling her earlier conversation with Forty, in which she asked if he remembered her mother. Regretting having brought it up, she walked away from their home, taking her usual route to get to Jim’s workplace. Out the back alleyway, looking around her and back toward the house, she carefully made her way into the dusky night air. The evening song of crickets halted as she passed their chorus ground amidst the weedy roadside. The air held the harsh smell of smoke, hanging like a pall in the woodland growth of trees and vines. Noticing people driving into and out of the neighborhood, she waited in the shadows beyond the reach of Pine Way’s one streetlight until they passed. She knew Jim would be at the barn, tending to his horses before checking on his house. She needed to see him and was hoping he needed to see her.

Someone called the McGrew's residence and told them about the fire. Patty's husband, Clarence "Daddy" McGrew, informed the guests at the reception who lived in Pine Way, to hurry home and check on their houses. Jim Hart left without delay, along with several others. Beth picked up her purse and stood up, prepared to go with him, but Jim's mother told her to wait and let Jim take care of things.

The fire was burning through some tall weeds near one corner of Jim and Beth's house. Fortunately, for them, the firefighters controlled the small blaze until they extinguished the flames. While the crews collected the hoses and tools, Forty spotted the young man he saw earlier with Ev Mendoza's old housekeeper. He knew something was wrong. He called aside the captain of the volunteer fire department to inform him what he observed.

"That guy over there. I saw him here another night! And, just this evening, I saw him driving past me with that girl who used to live with Ev Mendoza. They were driving real fast down Pine Way Junction, like they were being chased!"

The captain was exasperated with Forty's meddling, fully prepared to give him a talking-to. "Forty!" He had a grieved expression on his face, had missed his dinner, and would likely return home to a plate of cold meat and soggy bread. He said, "Forty, they live here in Edenville," his open hand striking the air for emphasis. "Of course, you're gonna see them around." He had enough, pointedly jabbing his finger back up the driveway. "Now, why don't you go home and let us do our job. You've done enough. Really. You've done e-nough."

Forty stepped off to the side, determined to watch his suspect. He refused to leave.

Once they drove away, even a guilty man could not take Forty seriously, seeing him standing in the dark like he had missed his bus. With concerns now on other matters ahead, they ignored what the rearview mirrors revealed, Forty's flashlight beam, searching for clues. His worthless gun, laying in the road where it fell, also went unseen.

Meanwhile, Jim stopped at the barn to check on his horses. Shep and Tessie came running up to him from the direction of his house, whining and agitated. The horses whinnied loudly. He unlocked the barn and grabbed the lantern, striking a match with which to light it. He removed his tuxedo jacket and put on his coveralls. Hanging the lantern near the stalls, he tried calming the horses. "It's okay. It's okay," he said. "Fire's not gonna hurt you. Everything's gonna be all right."

Walter Henry and Millie were out of town with Johnny for the weekend. Jim wished his partner was here, not only for his own sake, so he could check on his house, but for the sake of everyone at the wedding, most especially his sister, Rosa. Managing to calm the horses, he stepped out of the barn to walk a ways down the road, to look for any sign of fire. Though he could smell the smoke, he knew the fire was out once he saw the volunteer fire truck approaching. It stopped nearby and the captain rolled down the window. Jim ran to meet him.

"Almost got your house burned down, Jim." The captain shouted over the engine noise, "Fire was right next to it! You need to clear that brush around your house! If we hadn't have gotten there when we had," hooking a thumb through the air in that direction, "your house would've been torched!" He waited for Jim's response.

Jim was shocked. "Thank you, Mr. Andrews! I appreciate it." He reached up to shake the man's hand. "I'll do that! Walter and

I will clear those weeds away!" It was a well-meant promise, though one he would never keep.

The captain started rolling his window back up, but stopped himself. He recalled Forty, left behind at Jim's house. He was unsure whether he should mention it or not, including what Forty reported to him. So, rolling the window down again, he casually said, "Oh, Jim!" Jim waited. The captain chose his words carefully, pushing his loose hardhat further back on his head, before saying, "If you get a chance, come by the station. We need to do an investigation into how that fire might have gotten started." Seeing Jim's face grow concerned and worried, he reassured him, "No big deal. Just paperwork. You know how it is!" He laughed to put Jim at ease. Jim promised to stop by on Monday, while the fire captain made a mental note to send someone he knew over to Jim's house to investigate.

The truck drove off, catching Sylvia in their headlights before she crossed the road. The captain, Richard Andrews, shook his head, but said nothing. He shifted the stubborn old gears and they bounced along in the big fire truck.

Although surprised to see her, it was not long before Jim was leading Sylvia up to the loft. "We don't have much time," he said. He needed to get back to the wedding reception.

"I know," Sylvia said, her voice low. She had to return home to her suspicious husband.

What Sylvia craved in the moment, was to believe that she and Jim were in love, to be young again...and wanted. She fought to suspend the urgings of the past, to instead encapsulate a lost dream, shield it from her troubles and from Jim's. But, change was due to come. Her innocence was lost, as was his, and the truth, she would soon learn, enlightens even those who seek to dwell in the dark.

Watching Jim hastily spread the blanket upon the hay, a thought came to her, more like a tender knowing. The lantern light shone faintly from below, illuminating his features in golden light and shadow. His back, broad and strong, attracted her to him, and she drew her hand across it, laying her head on his shoulder. Drawing away, she caught the look on his face exposing his childlike worry, as though he was afraid, having become that young, teenaged boy whom she remembered well.