

“Stolen Serenity”

(an excerpt from “Streams Of Mercy” by Teresa Slack

Word count: 1369

The house had an eerie, empty feeling after three days of activity. Cory Steele sat in the rocking chair next to the window and looked out, her eyes focused on nothing in particular. She was bone-tired, mentally and physically. If she could sit and rock like this for a week, she'd be content. Of course, that wasn't going to happen. She considered herself lucky if she was able to rock in the evenings, undisturbed, for fifteen minutes while she listened to the girls in the kitchen cleaning up the supper dishes.

She watched the fireflies outside the window, their tails winking in the fading light, and a sad smile crossed her lips. Her memory transported her back to a simpler time when she and Harlan would sit on the porch swing and watch three dusty, barefoot boys scurrying around the yard, their hands cupped in front of them, as they tried to capture enough of the elusive creatures to put in a mason jar to use as a lamp in their bedroom.

The smile on her lips faded. Two of those boys playing in the yard were gone now; gone by their own carelessness, and inability to listen to reason when she tried to talk sense into their fool heads.

She would never forget the unseasonably mild, late-March day she sent Justin to the creek to call Jesse, her youngest, only eight-years-old at the time, to supper. She remembered every detail. She stood at the kitchen stove dropping bits of dough into boiling chicken broth for dumplings. A pesky housefly buzzed around her head. She batted at it with her elbow every time it tried to land on her or in the flour. As soon as she finished the dumplings, she'd get the swatter and put an end to the fly's infernal buzzing. While she worked, she watched for the two boys out the window. Then she saw Justin. He was hurrying up the hill from the direction of the creek—alone; her first hint something was wrong. As he got closer, she could see he was soaked to the skin and hysterical. She dropped the wad of dough on the sideboard and ran outside, leaving the chicken to boil over onto her stove and clean kitchen floor.

Justin had spotted Jesse's homemade raft floating upside-down in the rain-swollen creek. The next instant he saw Jesse's body in the water, partly obscured from view by the raft, tangled in the branches of an up-rooted tree. The water was only chest-deep, but moving fast and Jesse's clothes had snagged on the branches, trapping his head beneath the surface of the water. The more he struggled, the more entangled he became. Justin tore off Jesse's shirt to free his body and dragged him to the creek bank. He collapsed next to his brother, horrified at the sight of Jesse's swollen body, bruised and mangled from struggling against the tree. The realization that there was nothing he could do for Jesse—except go home and tell his mother what he found—made him retch violently on the ground.

When he relayed the news to Cory, her unearthly screams were heard by neighbors a mile down the road.

Cory Steele's life had never been an easy one. She had suffered devastating losses before but nothing prepared her for losing Jesse. He was her pride and joy, her sanity in an otherwise topsy-turvy world. He challenged her, argued with her, fought

imaginary villains for her, and sought her opinion before he made a move. She was the stability he needed and he was her reason for going on.

Suddenly he was gone. She was humbled by whatever force controlled such matters—her formidable strength draining away day by day.

The worst part about missing Jesse was the emptiness of the house. Harlan, James, and Justin were still there, but she was completely alone. She was being destroyed from the inside out and none of them seemed to notice—much less care. The fury she felt toward them was unreasonable she knew, yet she gave into it all the same. She was mad at Harlan for not hurting the way she hurt. She wanted to vent, rage, throw things, slam doors; but he wouldn't allow it. He closed his mouth, set his jaw in a hard line, and went about his work, refusing to talk about their loss. She was mad at Justin—the one whose grief most likely mirrored her own—for crawling inside his self-made cocoon and pretending the hurt didn't matter. She was mad at James for being too wrapped up in his self, to spend more time with his little brother while he was alive.

Most of all, God forgive her, she was mad at Jesse. How many times had she told him not to go to the creek alone to play when the water was high on the bank? Oh, she knew he did anyway, but she warned him again and again of the dangers. Didn't he care about her at all? Didn't he know how much she worried? Because he wouldn't listen to her or his own common sense, he was gone forever—and she was alone.

She still rose every morning before the sun burned the dew off the flowers by the front porch. Breakfast was prepared, dishes done, floors swept, laundry washed and hung out to dry. She did her chores around the little farm and muddled through her days in a foggy haze of disbelief. The days of summer lengthened and then shortened again as the season burned itself out. The corn tasseled out, the apples reddened on the trees, and the pumpkins, growing haphazardly around the garden, turned from green to gold. Nothing in her life changed...except everything. Her heart was crushed, her spirit broken, but she continued on, dreading each sunrise over the hills, knowing it was another day like the one before, another twenty-four hours to endure.

Now it was happening all over again with James.

She remembered she was still in her bathrobe early this past Wednesday morning when she heard tires crunch in the gravel outside. She plugged in the percolator for coffee and turned toward the open kitchen door. Through the screen, she saw Henry, the old hound dog look up, give a sleepy, indignant bay of warning, and lower his head back to his paws. A deputy—barely old enough to shave—climbed out of the car. She knew right away it was something about James. Her first thought was that he had been arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct or some such offense. It wouldn't have been the first time.

After listening to the nervous deputy's report, she slumped into a kitchen chair and wondered how she would tell Jamie and Cassie, who were sleeping peacefully upstairs. Unlike after Jesse's death, this time her concerns were more for the daughters James left behind than on her own grief. God would give her the strength to carry on. He always had. But the girls...she didn't know about them.

She no longer blamed Jesse for his death. She wouldn't blame James either. They hadn't meant to die and leave her alone. It was just the way life worked out sometimes. With the wisdom her years had brought, she accepted that; but what about the girls? Would they understand or see James's death as yet another of his slights

against them? He'd never been much of a father. She supposed that was her fault; the result of some mistake she'd made in raising him. Blame the mother! That's what everybody did these days.

What would happen if Jamie and Cassie found out about his distant past; a past involving Sally Blake? They'd demand answers. They'd want to know why she'd kept it from them all this time. That was something she couldn't even explain to Emmy Lou. She'd buried James already. She didn't have it in her to allow him to be prosecuted again for a crime he didn't commit. He wasn't guilty—she knew that better than anyone. She hadn't been fooled by Sally Blake, and she wouldn't allow anyone—even James's daughters—to steal what remained of his dignity.

Streams of Mercy is the first in a series of “Jenna’s Creek Novels by Teresa Slack. ISBN#0972548653 available in most bookstores or by visiting the Publishers website at: www.TsabaHouse.com