

A Lifetime of Betrayal

A McKinney Brothers Novel

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The puff of light colored smoke was followed a second later by a barely audible yelp of pain. From Harold Trent's vantage point nearly 700 yards away, Colonel Milton Chester's howl sounded like rubber tires briefly screeching on a paved road.

Harold watched two men; Colonel Milton Chester seated at a picnic table under a pavilion covered with a sheet metal roof, and Ace Glover, a younger blond-haired man with a slight build standing about ten feet from the colonel. The pavilion stood next to a small, concrete building that had once housed the elevator down to the control room for one of the United States' long range Patriot missile silos outside of Grand Forks Air Force Base in eastern North Dakota. The site had been abandoned many years ago.

Through powerful binoculars, Trent clearly saw the scene under the pavilion, despite the heat waves that rose from the acres of prairie grass. He licked his dry lips, feeling three days' worth of stubble at the base of his lower lip. A salty taste

filled his mouth from the accumulation of dried sweat. He smelled his own stench, the result of three continuous days on the road following the young blond man standing under the pavilion. Now, as his excitement grew, he all but forgot about his lack of hygiene.

After a moment, he saw another puff of smoke. Chester jerked his arm back and once again let out a scream, muted by the hot, dry breeze. It was clear that the shot had hit its mark, confirmed by the dark spot expanding on his arm.

Ace, standing on the other side of the table, held the source of the puffs of smoke. Trent couldn't make out the type of gun, but it was definitely a pistol with a silencer, explaining the lack of a report.

The sun was high in the sky even at this late afternoon hour. The hot, dry wind blew across the grassy plain, sucking moisture from everything. From Trent's vantage point, the sun was slightly to his back. It would make it difficult for anyone looking his way to see him crouching down in the dry prairie grass.

Trent had been sitting in this grassy field for nearly half an hour before Chester had pulled up to the deserted missile silo in his dark military issue sedan. He'd confidently strolled out to the pavilion to meet Ace, who had preceded his arrival by some fifteen minutes. How the kid had managed to get the colonel, the Commanding Officer of Grand Forks Air Force Base, to meet him at this site was a mystery, but it didn't matter. He was here.

Moments before, the colonel had been

confident, almost cocky in his attitude. Before any of the current drama had unfolded, he had stood and said something to the kid, then turned as if to leave. As he started towards his car, Ace pulled the gun from the back of his waistband and convinced the colonel to stay. Holding his hands up in an expression that seemed to say, 'Wait a minute, let's calm down,' the colonel slowly, carefully turned back to the picnic table and sat. That had probably been a mistake, though, in all likelihood, it wouldn't have mattered. A man with a gun can be very convincing and bullets travel much faster than a fleeing human, no matter how fast they run. In this case, the man with the gun was only nineteen, a fact Trent knew with certainty.

The colonel's demeanor changed from cocky to cautious. The kid motioned at the officer to look at something on the table, held there against the hot breeze by a rock. Chester picked up a piece of paper and when he read the document his facial expression went from disbelief to shock, then to fear. Even at this distance, the change in the colonel's body language was obvious. His arms and legs tightened, his back stiffened to an upright position. It was as if he'd seen hell approaching and there was nothing he could do about it.

Trent said out loud, though no one could hear him, "That's right, you prick. You were her father and you didn't even know it. You put her mother through hell. I wish your old man was alive to see this."

If anyone could have heard him they would have wondered who "she" was, but that didn't

matter. He knew. And now the colonel knew. He continued to look through the binoculars, unconsciously pressing the eye piece tight against his eyes. "Do it, Ace. Do it now!"

That's when he saw those first telltale signs the kid meant business, when the first two shots were fired. They were merely meant to coerce the colonel to action, but the warning shots, even though they struck the colonel in the left hand and left arm, apparently didn't work. That's when Ace threw something on the picnic table. Whatever it was, the colonel's face turned to pure terror. He bolted and tried to run. There was third puff of smoke. This time, Chester fell to the concrete floor of the pavilion. He turned over and looked up as Ace eased around the picnic table, as if pacing himself, knowing that his wounded prey had no means of escape.

Trent held his breath and gritted his teeth for what seemed like several minutes, but in reality was just a few seconds. He leaned forward in anticipation as Ace stopped and stood over his victim, his face twisted in an expression of rage behind a sinister looking smile. Trent had often wished he would be the one to carry out this grisly act, but he knew it wasn't his place. At least, he could watch as the sentence, imposed by the kid's own mother, was carried out.

Chester's face was barely visible in the binoculars, but Trent saw that his mouth and eyes were wide open. The colonel frantically pushed back using his good arm, kicking with one foot. His other leg was limp, incapacitated by the third shot.

Dust stirred as the colonel scrambled to try and get some traction to escape his pursuer. In quick succession, three more puffs of smoke rose from the gun. No more sounds of pain came from the colonel lying motionless on the dusty concrete floor of the pavilion.

Ace casually placed the gun on the picnic table, then picked up what looked like a pen. He leaned over the colonel's dead body and placed the point of the pen on the colonel's chest. Trent frowned for a moment, trying to see what he was doing.

With a pen in one hand and what looked like a notepad in the other, Ace appeared to be making a quick note in the pad. Then he threw the pen aside. He put the notebook in his pocket, picked up the gun and the other papers from the picnic table, then walked slowly to a white Dodge Sebring. Calm seemed to come over him even though he'd just murdered a military officer in cold blood. His shoulders and arms hung loose. His body movements slowed, becoming smooth, almost fluid.

Harold Trent froze for a moment as the kid stood by the Sebring and scanned the area around the missile silo and picnic pavilion. He stopped and seemed to stare directly at the binoculars. After several long seconds, Ace broke off his stare and opened the car door. The car started then did a U-turn around the government issued sedan and headed for State Route 20.

Harold Trent waited for another twenty minutes before heading back to his own car. Pulling the dry grass away from the vehicle, he opened the

windows and waited for the heat that had built up to dissipate. He also headed for State Route 20. It had been a very satisfying day.

After ten more minutes, another car started and left the murder scene from the opposite side of the pavilion. A rented Ford Taurus headed towards State Route 20, stopping as the person looked east then west for any oncoming traffic on the sparsely traveled road. Nothing was coming in either direction. Wiping his hands over his face, then over the top of his head, he moved his head in a circle, working out the tension that had built up as he had watched another human murdered in cold, vengeful, blood.

In a southern drawl that was far out of place in the northern plains, William ‘Hatch’ Hatcher asked himself, “Well, wudn’t that sumthin’?”

Chapter 1

June 30, 1999

Ace Glover's thoughts were back in Savannah, Georgia as he traveled south on Interstate 95 just east of Kingsland, Georgia. It was just after 3:00 AM. He was heading for Jacksonville, Florida to try to catch some shut-eye before continuing on to St. Augustine later in the day. It had been a long night. He was tired from having driven the winding back-roads along the Atlantic coast prior to jumping on the interstate south of Brunswick, Georgia. He feared that he'd fall asleep at the wheel and end up in one of the roadside ditches or a salt marsh in this rural section of the state.

But Ace's mind wandered from more than just fatigue. He was thinking about women, two in particular. He would probably never see one of them again. He was absolutely certain that he'd never see the other.

He smiled as the bright reflectors in between the white lines in the center of the road passed in a hypnotic rhythm. He thought about Angelina Valentine's platinum-blonde hair draped across her left shoulder. It had flowed onto her chest like a silky smooth waterfall as she sat in the corner of her over-stuffed couch. The too-blonde color contrasted with the short, shiny black robe draped across her ample breasts. The nails on her hands and toes were painted a high gloss black to match the evening's night wear, a sexy black negligee and matching panties. Her legs were tucked up under her rear end,

a wine glass sat within easy reach, nearly empty on the modern art deco end table. The entire room smelled faintly of her perfume. She was already in the mood for a long night with her man.

He remembered her yell to him in a southern drawl, “Ace, be a dear and fix me another glass of wine. And put another bottle on ice. I’m sure we’ll need it before the evening is through.”

The beautiful woman’s southern belle, over-the-top accent was hard to swallow, but it was her condescending attitude that had made the hair on the back of Ace’s neck stand up. He had lived with Angelina Valentine in her Savannah, Georgia home for the past year. The longer he had stayed, the more he had hated the terms of their agreement. He felt like a caged animal, as if he had to do circus tricks at the beck and call of the ring master, all the while looking for a way to escape. Now the gate had been left open and he’d made his move.

Ace hadn’t always loathed his situation. Over the last year it had been a good reciprocal arrangement. When Ace had met Angelina in the grocery section of the local Trader Joe’s, she’d been widowed for just over two months. She had been in the produce aisle and had dropped a bag of kiwi fruit. Being the gentleman that he was raised to be, Ace bent down, picked up the bag and handed it to her. They started a casual conversation about the trials and tribulations of their respective lives.

Ace told her the story of a life on the road with his poor, single mother who had lost her husband, Ace’s father, before he was born. He told her of the meager existence of his childhood and

how there were times when he went to bed hungry only to wake up to no breakfast. He said his mother took two and three part-time jobs just to make ends meet. He had to start work at the age of ten to help pay the bills, but they always ended up getting evicted from one trashy, dingy apartment or an old, beat-up trailer for non-payment of rent.

It was a sad story, very convincing, and mostly contrived. He'd had a lot of practice over the years, perfecting the lines with a false sincerity that would win over the greatest skeptic. The tall tale was delivered to his audience in a manner that pulled heavily on their heart strings. It was close enough to the truth that Ace felt no guilt in the telling.

Angelina bought it, hook, line, and sinker. Besides being a convincing storyteller, Ace was also a good listener. In short order, Ace became Angelina's new tenant with exceptional fringe benefits.

Angelina Valentine's wealthy sixty-year old husband had been killed in a car accident on Interstate 16 just south of Dublin, Georgia. He had been to a sales convention in Atlanta where he closed a multi-million dollar textile contract. His commission was substantial. His newly widowed wife was the beneficiary of the sale. That chunk of change paled in comparison to the fortune he'd already amassed, and that didn't count the mid-six figure life insurance policy payoff that she'd received. Though Angelina did grieve, her mourning period was tempered by her sudden marital and financial freedom.

Many of her husband's friends were appalled at her quick emotional recovery. They were even more stunned when she allowed a young, blond "housekeeper" to take up residence in her "husband's house" in the exclusive Whitemarsh Island neighborhood. Her husband's body was barely cold, the grass not even mature over his grave. Worse, she barely hid the fact that Ace was much more than hired help. At forty-one, she was over twice Ace's age. She frequently used hair coloring to hide the gray and she covered up her deepening facial lines with the most expensive skin care products on the market. No one could argue with the results. Angelina Valentine was still a beautiful woman. With Ace in her home and in her bed, she felt alive, vibrant, and sexy again.

For his part, Ace did everything he could to keep his new lover happy. She provided him with a roof over his head, great food, clothing, a generous allowance, and all the sex he could possibly want or need. The home was a mini-mansion with nearly ten thousand square-feet of living space, a swimming pool, four-car garage, and tennis court. There was enough room for several families. But Angelina had the estate all to herself. Through a chance meeting, Ace had the good fortune to share the estate with her...at least until now.

The arrangement had been heading south for many months, at least from Ace's perspective. Sex wasn't the issue. Ace was more than happy to keep her satisfied, regardless of the sometimes odd sexual games she wanted to play. She had a penchant for playing rough. Sometimes, she wanted

to be the victim, other times, the aggressor. Either way, Ace enjoyed most of the sexual acrobatics.

The problem wasn't even that she expected to be waited on, hand and foot. After all, it was Angelina's money, or more accurately, her dead husband's, that paid for everything. All Ace had to do was put up with her. Up until now, it hadn't been too difficult.

When Angelina wanted to talk, he was there to listen, but she'd started to ask probing questions about topics for which he had no good answers. When she asked for specifics about his past, he'd try to deflect her questions and change the subject, but when her inquiries grew persistent, he'd simply lie. In that department, he was a pro. He'd had a great teacher, his mother, Abigail Glover.

As time passed, Angelina continued to press for more details about his tough family life. Where he was born? What schools he'd attended? Did he have any friends? As with all liars, he started to forget the stories he'd previously told her. But he could tell by her expressions that she knew he was lying. Ace wondered how much she really knew. *If she starts asking the right questions of the right people, this could become a problem.*

Besides, even though the arrangement was good financially and the fringe benefits were great, Ace had grown tired of the role of Angelina's play toy. And he had a job to do that had nothing to do with Angelina Valentine or Savannah, Georgia.

Several months before, he'd put a plan in motion that he'd hoped would help him accumulate cash more quickly. Part of it was to be in a position

to make off with a large amount of Angelina's money. He certainly wouldn't try to rob her blind. Far from it. It was more like he planned to take a sum that was in keeping with the work he did around Angelina's estate, in addition to being her personal play-thing. Ace's financial needs were not nearly as significant as his host's. But he did need enough cash to make a clean get away from Angelina and Savannah.

Ace planned on heading to Norfolk, Virginia, King's Bay, Georgia and several stops in Florida where some unfinished business required his attention. He was getting anxious, even excited to take the next steps in his plan. For the plan to work, he figured that he'd need about two hundred thousand dollars. Acquiring that much money from a single source, and not get caught in the act would be difficult. So he decided to venture out in search of other sources of easy money.

Ace possessed natural good looks, and even at the tender age of twenty honed skills that made meeting and wooing women easy. His handsome narrow face and square jaw, fit and trim body, and disarming charm attracted stares and interest from women as soon as he walked into a bar, restaurant, or grocery store. That's what had attracted Angelina.

And that's what had been the problem of late. Angelina was extremely possessive.

He couldn't get out alone in the evening. She rarely left the house and constantly demanded his services, either in bed or as a servant boy. Ace had thought long and hard, trying to figure out a

solution to his problem.

One day while he read the paper and Angelina slept on the couch, he thought, "If only she was a heavier sleeper." A light in his brain came on. The solution was simple.

Rohypnol. Roofies. One of the popular date rape drugs, Ace knew that he could slip Angelina a roofie in her drink most any time since he was always waiting on her, fixing dinner and drinks. Getting a supply of Rohypnol was easy, too.

And it worked like a charm.

Ace would fix dinner, then spike one of her after dinner glasses of wine and *voila*, instant freedom. Angelina would be out for long hours, giving Ace free reign to hop the local bars in search of another easy target.

In the first few weeks he'd drop into a downtown nightclub where the cover charge was twenty dollars, which, in Savannah, was pretty steep. The result was that only wealthy kids with hefty financial support from Mommy and Daddy made it through the doors. The ratio of young women to men was nearly three to one, especially on "ladies night." For Ace, it was like shooting fish in a barrel. He was actually only twenty, but his fake ID and the manner in which he carried himself made him appear much older. When the young girls would guess his age, they'd say mid to late twenties. Some would even say thirty-ish, which gave him a little self-satisfaction, since his mom had always referred to him as her little boy. *Your little boy's all grown up now, Momma.*

Ace moved quickly with his new dates. He

was amazed at how easily women appeared to believe his line of bullshit. He used two basic storylines. In the first and most convincing story, he was an ex-marine just back from Iraq. When asked what it was like “over there,” he would tell tales of raids north of Baghdad, but his tales were never about the horrors of war. He always spoke solemnly of finding an orphaned little girl or boy and how he and other members of his squad helped to feed these children and find them new families. The tales were laced with such emotion that it sometimes brought tears to his eyes, making the story seem more authentic to unsuspecting women.

After the orphan story, he told the tale of his poor mother who was about to lose her house because she had cancer and was unable to work. “I’m leaving this weekend to head home and try my best to help her.” Of course, Wall Street bankers were the greedy villains stealing his mother’s home in her most desperate time of need. The woman was ill, for God’s sake. All she needed was a couple thousand dollars to save her house. Ace had some money, but unless he could raise more cash quickly, he wouldn’t have enough to save the family home.

Between the alcohol and Ace’s convincing manner, these young women were in a trance by the time Ace was through spinning his web. They were like putty in his hands.

Without bills and any other financial responsibility, his financial stash grew quickly. He was rapidly approaching his goal and his plan appeared to be on track.

Then he screwed up in a big way.

Angelina was fast asleep on the couch after a nice dinner followed by a spiked cocktail. Ace was at the *Jazz'd* lounge working his magic when a woman who knew Angelina listened in while Ace told his tale of life in Iraq. After a time, she struck up a conversation with Ace. At first, he didn't recognize her, but once he did, he knew his gig was up. This woman, Gloria Mason, would surely tell Angelina of his exploits. He couldn't allow that to happen. His time in Savannah was up.

Angelina awoke sometime after 2:40 AM, still lying on the couch. Her head felt like it was stuffed with cotton, her vision still blurred. She felt groggy, as if drugged, unable to shake off the feeling that gripped her. *This is getting to be a habit. Why am I always so tired?* Getting off the couch was a chore. She didn't bother to straighten out her nightgown. Unsteadily, she headed to the foot of the stairway, flipping on lights as she went. Something wasn't right. Ace was always there. Why did the house seem so empty?

In a deep southern drawl and a drunken-sounding slur, she called out to him, "Ace? Where are you, dear?"

The silence engulfed her for the first time since Ace had moved in. She started up the stairs using the handrail far more than should be necessary. But in her disoriented state, she needed the support.

She continued calling Ace's name, but when she got to the bedroom, the realization hit her. He was gone. His dresser drawer was emptied; his

suitcase was missing. She looked in her walk-in closet and noticed her safe was ajar. Peering in, Angelina saw that over one hundred twenty-seven thousand dollars in cash that had been stacked in the huge safe was gone. She smiled a sad smile. She then went to her jewelry box. It was still locked and looked undisturbed, but she checked the contents anyway. Not one piece was missing. *So all he wanted was cash. He should have just asked.*

Oh, well. It was fun while it lasted.

The phone rang. Normally, it would have startled her, but in her state, it was a dull, muffled tone. *It's nearly 3:00. It must be Ace. Maybe he's calling to apologize.* She picked up the receiver.

In a voice that still sounded as if she were a bit tipsy she said, "Hello."

A man with a deep voice and a heavy southern drawl said, "Mrs. Valentine?"

"Yes."

"This is Deputy Dewayne Arnold with the Chatham County Sheriff's office. First, I must apologize for calling at this hour."

That got her attention, but in her drugged state of mind she said with a slur. "That's alright...what did you say your name was?"

"Dewayne Arnold, ma'am."

"Alright, Dewayne. Is this about Ace Glover? Because he really isn't a bad person."

Deputy Arnold hesitated for a moment, wondering why she would comment about someone named Ace Glover.

"No ma'am. Why would you suspect that I'm calling about Ace...what was his name?"

“Glover. Ace Glover. He took some money from me and I thought that you might have caught him with it.”

“Sorry, ma’am, but that’s not my department.” A pause. “Did you know a Miss Gloria Mason?”

There was a long pause. Even in her foggy state of mind, the past tense wasn’t lost on Angelina. She shook her head, trying to clear out the stuffy feeling. Her voice stammered when she replied, “Y-yes, I do. What do you mean ‘Did I know her?’ And what department are you in?”

He ignored her question. “She was reported missing earlier by a friend. When was the last time you saw or spoke with Miss Mason?”

“We had dinner yesterday evening...no, the evening before last...around seven-thirty at Noble Fare, then we went shopping until about 10:00. We said our good-byes in the parking lot as the stores were closing. Is Gloria alright?”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Valentine. Miss Mason’s body was found out in the water near Fort Pulaski about half an hour ago.”

The receiver hit the carpet with a thud as Angelina Valentine passed out.