

—CLOVER

by Gina Ranalli

Danny Clover lay in the infirmary, his breath wheezing in and out of his chest slowly—so slowly—and he looked up at the doctors flanking either side of his bed. The doctors exchanged a knowing glance and the one on his left pressed a stethoscope against Danny's chest. The first doc listened for a moment, looked up at the second doc and shook his head slightly before removing the stethoscope.

What the fuck, Danny thought. He wanted to *say* it, but for that he would have needed *air* and he didn't have any. Not even a frigging thimbleful to spare.

He knew he was dying. Of course he did. He wasn't a goddamn *idiot*. He knew what it meant eight months ago when he'd started coughing and couldn't stop, wasn't even slightly surprised when he heard the words "lung disease." He'd been smoking since he was nine years old. Non-filters. Four packs a day. Hell, yeah, he knew he was a goner all along, but there were some habits that, no matter how bad they were for you, no matter how much of a toll they would take, you just couldn't stop doing them. Smokes had been that way for Danny. Never touched a drop of alcohol after that one time when he was seventeen, never smoked weed or did any other kind of drug either. That was all stupid shit. But, he couldn't quit the butts. No way, no how. That was his only vice, he used to tell people and it was pretty much true.

The other vice—the one he *didn't* tell people about—was the kids. Goddamn, he was a sucker for the kids. Boys, girls, didn't matter. As long as they were young and pretty and looked up at him with those big innocent eyes, smiled at him with genuine liking. And when they laughed! Oh, God help him, when they laughed, it was all over for him. He was *in love* and there never was any kind of cure for real love, was there?

Despite his condition, Danny smiled at the memory. He wasn't afraid of death—had no one in his life who he would miss, no one who would miss him—but his one regret about dying would be the fact that he would no longer be able to love children in his own special way. He would never be able to touch and hold them, feel their warm, soft skin against his own, smell the fresh scent of them as he burrowed his face in their hair.

This was the one thing that made him sad.

When he'd first gone to prison, he had missed these things as well and despite his sentence of life without parole, he'd still harbored some little hope—a tiny flame of optimism—that he would someday leave this hellhole, whether it be through a retrial or an escape, and hence, be able to be with children again, even if for only a little while.

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It was this miniscule ray of sunshine that had kept him sane throughout the years. When the inmates had taunted him, calling him every vile, disgusting name their small ignorant minds could manufacture, when he'd suffered beatings from those men who were fathers themselves, and some who were not, Danny had held his chin high, refused to listen. There was no way the opinions of common criminals were going to get to him. They didn't understand. They had tunnel vision. They were no brighter than the average rat and as soon as one of them said something, all the others would follow along, parroting back what they had heard.

Danny had no choice but to endure and wait.

Now it seemed his waiting was close to over, though it wasn't going down in the way he'd hoped for. Ah, well. He tried to look on the bright side, knowing he'd had his day.

He'd been lucky enough to know the love of children—dozens of them, through the years—and no matter what they'd been forced to say on the witness stand, Danny himself knew they'd loved him back. He had *been* there, had seen the love sparkling in their eyes, had felt it in the warmth of their bodies. Nothing mattered beyond that. No court, no lawyers, no parents could touch the truth of the matter and that was what Danny held close to his heart and would carry with him into the next life, if there was a next life.

The doctor on his right—the one who hadn't listened to his chest—walked away without saying a word. He hadn't even made eye contact with Danny.

That was okay. Danny was used to that kind of treatment and remained unsurprised when people, even those sworn to help him, looked down on him with disdain and did only what was necessary to aid him. They did their jobs and nothing more.

"How are you feeling?" the doctor with the stethoscope asked.

Danny opened his mouth to reply, but began to cough instead. The coughing quickly became violent enough that he was gagging, fighting for breath, feeling his neck and face burn red. He'd already burst blood vessels in both his eyes several days ago and he wondered if it was possible to burst them again, before they'd even healed.

The bright infirmary suddenly dimmed to gray, as though a storm cloud had drifted across the sun. Danny continued to hack as his vision began to fail. He caught a brief glimpse of an oxygen mask, felt it being placed over his mouth and nose and wondered, more with curiosity than fear, if it would be the last thing he saw and felt. And for a time, it was.

Danny stood in a schoolyard beneath a crisp blue autumn sky. He recognized it immediately. He'd been the janitor in this school for nearly twenty years, had stood just where he was standing now, watching the children laugh and play.

He smiled broadly as one particularly beautiful boy leapt down to the ground from atop the monkey bars, landing with a grace and agility that Danny himself had never possessed. The boy looked to be about nine years old, which would have put him in the fifth grade, probably, which made sense since Privett was an elementary school, housing grades one through six.

The boy raced away from the bars, heading for the swings, until he glanced to his left and saw Danny observing him. Stopping suddenly, the boy stood still for a