

1

For months, Tate had done nothing but watch, plan, and learn everything about Ashley. She was beautiful, but that didn't do a woman justice, not in the world we lived in today. Beauty was just the half of it.

He watched Ashley wake in the morning. She didn't know that he could see everything she did. Like when she made her coffee, adding cream and two sugars; then stirred, and tapping the spoon twice before setting it down on the red ceramic spoon-holder next to the coffeepot.

The way she gathered her blonde hair and twisted it into a bun on the top of her head before she crawled under the covers at night to read for exactly one-half-hour before placing the book down on the nightstand and clicking off the light.

Ashley repeated this routine every day—from the moment she woke in the morning to the time she picked up her daughter Lily from her mother's place three miles down the road every evening. Although, on occasion, there were nights she didn't come home. That was when she'd sleep over at her boyfriend's house and her sweet little daughter stayed with her grandma.

Tate had on several occasions camped out and watched the grandmother who lived by herself in a two-story house surrounded by woods. Those woods made it an easy place to hide and watch the grandmother.

The grandma's house was much easier than Ashley's place to watch because Ashley lived in an apartment. There was no place to really hide so that was when he rented the apartment across the parking lot from her. It gave him a direct view into her home.

The grandma had been a grieving widow for some time. At least that's what he'd gathered since Tate had never seen a man at her place. He watched her from time to time, but not as often as he followed Ashley around because she was who intrigued him the most.

The child, Lily, was almost a spitting image of Ashley, except for one thing; her long-wavy black hair, which Tate assumed, came from her father's side of the family. He'd never seen the little girl's father to know if she looked anything like him. The little girl's father wasn't in the picture. He hadn't been for as long as Tate had been watching them. Tate hadn't any clue where the sperm donor went or what happened to him—to them. Did they have a fight? Or did he just ditch her the moment he found out Ashley was pregnant with his baby? That would be something only God knew.

It was sad to see Ashley raise this child alone, but that would change in time. She would come to see that Tate was good for her. It would only take a little push in the right direction, and Tate knew just what to do to get her to see what love was. Show Ashley how wonderful and true it could be.

Ashley's so-called boyfriend wasn't who she thought he was. He wasn't true to her. He didn't love her the way a man should love a woman, especially someone as beautiful and smart as her—like Ashley. Her name sounded so sweet rolling off his tongue every time he said it.

As for the little girl, Lily, she would learn to love him and worship him. She would never be without a father again. A man who would give her everything she would ever need—want, but that would all come soon enough. Soon they would know all about him. Soon Ashley would be with him.

Because after today the cat would come out to play...

2

Ashley Teodora drove until she reached the state line, entering Indiana. Night was beginning to fall when she stopped at the first rest stop.

She was driving back to Illinois where she'd been just two weeks earlier to see her best friend Carla and her newborn baby Mya. Carla's friend Veronica had called yesterday telling Ashley there'd been an accident and that she needed to come back to Illinois.

Ashley had met Carla when they were six years old and had been best friends ever since. Ashley still lived in Ohio where they grew up, but Carla left after graduation and went to college in Tallahassee, Florida, where she'd met her husband Tim. After they finished college, Carla and Tim were married and moved to Tim's hometown in Homer Glen, Illinois.

Even though life at times got busy, Ashley and Carla still made time to keep in touch, even though it had been weeks since they'd talked. Carla was never far from Ashley's mind, especially since her recent visit a couple of weeks before when Carla had told her about what happened a year ago.

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Ashley went inside the rest stop, used the restroom, grabbed something small to eat, and got back in her dark blue SUV. She pulled up to the pumps, filled her gas tank, and then merged back onto Interstate 80/90.

She watched for signs showing lodging and took the next exit. On her last trip, she'd stayed at a motel that was now under an investigation because there had been some *dead bodies* found buried behind the motel. She was praying this one was different.

She drove down the road until she saw the lit-up sign MOTEL. There weren't many cars in the lot, only two if you counted hers. She pulled in and parked by the front office.

The sign on the door stated that there was Vacancy available and by the look of the place, she could see why.

She glanced out the windshield, giving the run-down motel a-once-over-look. The place definitely needed a new coat of paint. The doors and windows of each room were dirty and grimy.

She sat and wondered if she should find another motel to stay for the night. She was beyond exhausted and didn't have a lot of money to afford a room at the Hampton; this place would have to do. She'd take her chances the rooms here were clean enough to sleep in, and that there weren't any *dead bodies* buried behind the motel. She chuckled a laugh, not that it was funny. People had been killed and buried. No, it definitely wasn't funny at all, if anything she was laughing at herself for thinking that *this* motel was just like the last one. Sometimes you just have to laugh at the things that scare you the most.

She grabbed her purse from the passenger seat and got out of the car. The gravel crunched under her feet as she walked to the office door. She turned the knob, but the door wouldn't budge. She threw back her hip and bumped the door, pushing it at the same time. The door swung open, she stumbled forward, but caught herself by grabbing the counter in front of her.

After regaining her composure, she looked around the cluttered, dingy room, but saw no one. She cleared her throat loud enough for someone to hear her; still, no one came.

A bell sat to the right of her with a note stating: **ring for service**. She tapped her pointer finger down *twice* on the metal bell. The noise echoed through the room, bouncing off the walls where no pictures or decorations were hung.

A voice from the backroom called out, "I'll be right there."

"Okay, thank you," Ashley replied.

A door to the backroom opened and a short, rounded woman with shaggy white hair that could hide a bird's nest came tromping down the narrow hall; her plump butt swaying side to side.

"How can I help ya' this evening?" the woman spoke with a southern twang.

"I would like to get a room for the night."

"Well, ya' come to the right place," the woman chuckled. "I got no guests here, so ya' got your *pick-ins* of the place."

Pick-ins, Ashley thought. *What kind of place had she stopped at?* "Your best room will be fine." *Best room? Where did she think she was at, a Hilton resort or something?* Ashley almost laughed in spite of herself and the exhaustion that had brought her here.

"Well, let me see. Oh yes, I'll give you room eight. Will that do for ya'?"

"That'll be fine, thank you. Oh, do you have hot water?" She hoped she didn't sound rude.

"Hot water?" the woman snarled at Ashley. "Course there's hot water. What do ya' think this place is, an outhouse?" The woman's eyes narrowed in on Ashley's face, looking perturbed.

Well, it certainly looked like one, hoping she wasn't speaking out loud. "How much for the night?" Ashley changed the subject.

"That'll be forty-five dollars cash, and there ain't no refunds," the woman quickly added.

Ashley pulled out her wallet and counted her cash.

"Sign ya' name here for me and I'll get the key."

Ashley had seen too many horror movies and wondered if she should use a fake name. Not saying this woman was a killer or anything, but it'd probably be best if she stayed clear of her and locked the door once she was in her room. The woman made her feel uneasy; hell, the whole place reminded her of Bate's Motel. *Where was Norman*, she thought, almost chuckling? Ashley scribbled her name down before the white-haired woman returned.

The woman came back and held out a key attached to a long piece of wood. "Here ya' go. Just leave it in the box out front if ya' decide to leave before eight in the morning. I don't get up at no crack of dawn, and there ain't any room service here so you'll have to fend for yourself."

"That's fine," Ashley replied as she snatched the key and went out the door.

She hustled to her car, grabbed her bag, and hit the lock button. She looked around and spotted the room. An eerie feeling came over Ashley as if someone were watching her and she quickly bolted to her room. She stuck the key in the deadbolt, opened the door, and slammed it shut behind her. She turned, locked the door, and fastened the chain.

She leaned her forehead on the door as her heart was pulsating through her chest; she took in long shallow breaths to calm herself. She turned back around and flicked on the light switch on the wall beside her and placed her bag on the only chair in the room. As she walked further into the room, she had to pinch her nose and breathe through her mouth. There was a stench in the room, almost like a dead animal smell.

She walked to the bathroom and cracked open the window, and then decided she should probably open the window by the door as well to let the air circulate, but only a crack because the owner of this place freaked her out.

She gazed around the room, looking at the furniture and wallpaper. The place looked like it had never left the sixties or seventies with its avocado green chair, and what was that—pot leaves on the wallpaper?

She strolled back to the bed, pulled the comforter off, and shook it out. She didn't see any bed bugs, but that didn't mean they weren't there. *Were bed bugs even something you could see with the naked eye?* she asked herself. She grabbed her bag and headed into the bathroom to shower and change.

Fifteen minutes later, she stood in front of the mirror, wiping away the film that was left by the steam, and then brushed her hair and teeth. When she finished, she went back to the bed and switched on the television.

After flicking through the channels of nothing but static, she settled on the only channel that came in clear enough for her to watch. Not that she was interested in watching television; it was more for white noise if anything.

She took the comforter and folded it in half like a sleeping bag. She collected her cell phone from her purse, and then climbed between the blankets. She called and talked to her mom Catherine, hoping she could catch Lily before she went to bed.

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Lily Rose was her five-year-old daughter. Occasionally, her mind would flash back to the father of her daughter. This was one of those times. She wanted to hate him for what he'd done to her, but it was as much her fault as it was his. If she'd known that she would get pregnant after one night of hot steamy sex, she would've taken precautions. But the truth was, he didn't even know she had gotten pregnant. In fact, she hadn't seen him since that night almost six years ago.

They hadn't talked about what they wanted to do with their lives. It wasn't that kind of relationship. It wasn't even a relationship—period! They had bumped into each other at a party and the next thing she knew, they were back at her friend's place, who thankfully was still at the party, pulling off each other's clothes.

After that evening, she hadn't realized how much sex two people could have and the fact that each time he aimed to please. Oh boy, did he please her. She hadn't had an orgasm like that with another guy since. When she woke the next morning, he was gone. No name, no phone number. It was as if he'd vanished into thin air.

Now, Ashley had spent the last five years raising Lily Rose by herself; well, not exactly by herself, she had her mom's help when she was at work or school.

Ashley took college courses online and attended a couple classes at a college outside of town, studying to be an Architect just like her father had been—*God rest his soul*.

When she thought about Lily's father, as she so often did, and if he'd kept in contact with them; she would unquestionably consider a relationship with him. But, he didn't even know that Lily Rose existed, and Ashley didn't know anything about him. Maybe, he was married with other children?

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When Ashley finished the call with her mom, she noticed there was a voicemail and tapped the green icon. After listening to the message from Rob, her ex-fiancé, who seemed to only have called to make sure she was all right and that he wanted to talk about why she had ended it with him.

She had met Rob two years ago in college. She had gone to a frat party, but only after her friends had persuaded her to go. She didn't want to make the same mistake twice, not that Lily was a mistake. She was far from a mistake.

Once at the frat party, her friends had introduced her and Rob, and one thing led to another. But, after what she'd witnessed two weeks ago, there was by all odds not going to be a wedding; not now—not ever!

Maybe she wasn't the marrying type. It happened to some people. There was nothing wrong with staying single, but there were times when she thought too much about getting married, and the whole thing made her sick to her stomach.

She'd been dodging him ever since she'd gotten back from seeing Carla a couple of weeks ago. "Whatever," she mumbled and deleted his message. "Is he nuts or something? Does he really think I'll forgive him and things will just go back to the way they were? No chance in hell that's ever going to happen," she said into the empty room.

She flicked the switch on her phone to vibrate, set it on the nightstand, turned the volume on the TV down low, and closed her eyes.

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Ashley sprang to a sitting position, her eyes searching the room. The TV had gone black. She reached for her phone and touched the power button to give her some light. Another sound came from the direction of the bathroom, like a hammer hitting a nail.

Clank, Clank, Clank.

She tapped the flashlight icon and aimed the light towards the sound. Stepping out from under the blankets, she made her way to the bathroom. She shined the light from the floor to the ceiling and from left to right; there was nothing in the room. It wasn't like there were places to hide in a room that only had a tub, toilet, and sink.

She flicked the switch on the wall, not knowing why she didn't turn the light on in the first place, and still saw nothing. The sound stopped the moment she flipped the switch. No one had to twist her arm for her to know she needed to keep it on.

She walked back to the bed and sat down. She checked the time on her phone, 3:42 a.m. She clicked the TV off and reached her hand inside her purse, pulling out a book. She was wide awake now; no sense in trying to go back to sleep, and it was too early to leave—still dark outside.

She tried to read, but the *crackling* of branches outside the bathroom window consumed her attention. She kept tossing around the idea whether she should stay or leave. When she heard, something pawing at the ground, she hurried off the bed, threw on her clothes, and peeked out the window towards the parking lot.

The thought of the article she read weeks ago came flooding back to her. *Could this be happening again? Could this be a coincidence or maybe even be related somehow?* She didn't want to know, but also didn't want to stay and find out; and possibly getting herself killed in the process.

When she looked out the window to the parking lot, she saw nothing but darkness lurking outside her door. She grabbed her things and threw open the door. Ashley pressed the unlock button on her key ring and ran like mad to her vehicle. Once inside she touched the door panel, waiting for the *clunk* sound to indicate the doors were locked.

"Shit," she mumbled, remembering that she had left the motel key in the room. There was no way she was going back for it and started the vehicle.

She shifted into reverse. Gravel spit from the rear tires as she slammed her foot down on the gas pedal. She whipped the SUV around, slammed the gear into drive, and raced down the road.

She made a right turn and got back on the Interstate. She'd arrive earlier than she planned, but at this moment, she really didn't give a shit.

3

Reece Garran sat on the edge of the 3-inch thick cot, pulling the T-shirt over his head; his biceps nearly ripping the fabric around his arms. He'd put on more muscle since his time in prison, filling out the shirt that was once loose. He couldn't believe how nice it felt to be in street clothes again. He looked over at the orange jumpsuit now sitting in a ball near the foot of the bed. Yeah, he wasn't going to miss that God-awful thing.

He stood when the guard unlocked the door to the cell and walked through the opening. He didn't look back over his shoulder to see if he'd forgotten anything. He had nothing to leave behind; nothing to forget. He held the only thing that meant something to him in his hand.

The single thought made him wrap his fingers around the spine of the book. The guards allowed him to take it with him. "Consider it a gift. Something to remember us by," one of the guards had said as he howled with laughter. It wouldn't be them he'd be thinking about.

He had read *The Shawshank Redemption* more times than he could count. It was one of his favorite books. In fact, his father had given Reece a copy as a birthday gift a longtime ago.

He'd thought of his father all the time since he'd died on that unforgettable fall day. The fire had started in his parents' bedroom and by the time Reece could get the door open, the room had gone up in flames. Reece could still see his father lying on the bed, his screams filling the air around him. The firemen said there was nothing he could've done to save him; it was too late.

Reece had stood outside on the street and watched like everyone else as the house burned down to the ground. Everything he had ever owned was gone. His mother had died when he was four from cancer, leaving his father to raise him on his own. His father had never remarried, saying he could never love another woman the way he loved Reece's mother.

When Reece had turned nineteen, he joined the Marines just one week later. He fought in Afghanistan during the *War on Terrorism* and left after serving eight years for his country, learning things that he could only use in the military. Things that the government didn't want anyone else to know about. After leaving the military, he traveled around and did odd jobs wherever he could find them before ending up in prison where he'd spent the last five years of his life.

It had been five years since he'd been outside these concrete walls. That didn't include the two hours each day they allowed the prisoners out for yard time, as they called it here, but anything was better than sitting inside the 6x9-foot cell, day in and day out.

He had been looking forward to this day, finally getting out of this hellhole he didn't belong in. As far back as he could remember he just always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He'd left the last town he was in and was arrested four months later for almost killing a man. The judge gave him five years with no parole in the Lancaster Correctional Center in Lancaster, Ohio.

He didn't have a wife or a girlfriend that he had left behind. The last woman he was with was before he ended up in this place—most would call it a one-night stand, but she was more than that to him. There was just something about her that grabbed ahold of his heart and wouldn't let go. She'd been on his mind every minute of every day. This woman didn't know it, but she was the only thing that had kept him going. He was going to find her if it was the last thing he did. He had to find out if she felt the same.

He walked down the corridor with one correctional officer in front of him and one behind him, both armed with Taser guns that would shoot a bolt of electricity through your body faster than you could tip over a cow.

Although he'd read it was against the law to use a Taser gun on inmates, it was at times used as a precaution while transporting a prisoner from their cell to the outside world. Just in case they got the idea in their head to run, but his six-foot-three-inch muscular build intimidated most people more than anything.

He passed the other inmates shouting their obscenities as he walked slowly by. He hadn't flinched or cared really what they were saying. He was getting out of this place and they had years left behind bars.

A buzzer sounded, echoing around him; then, the door clicked open. They walked through the opening and the door shut behind them. He retrieved the items that had been taken from him when he came to this place—a Rolex watch and a small black velvet box. He slipped the watch on his arm and slid the box in his pants pocket.

After gathering his things, he went through three more doors before the last door slid open and sunlight pierced his eyes, blinding Reece until he shielded his eyes with his hand. He was finally outside. Finally leaving the place that had consumed his world all these years.

He ran a hand through his shoulder-length black hair, and walked straight to the vehicle that would get him out of this God-forsaken place.

A small off-green bus sat idling outside the gate entrance, waiting for him to climb aboard. Waiting to take him to the bus stop where he could catch a ride to wherever he wanted to go.

The ride into town went faster than he thought it would. Thoughts occupied his time and before he knew it, the bus pulled up to the depot and opened its doors. Three other people besides him got off the bus.

He stepped off the last step and made his way down the sidewalk. He saw a sign across the street that said, *Welcome to Craven Falls, Population 2,800*. That was more than he thought there'd be when the bus drove through town, just moments ago.

He spotted a café and his mouth began to water. It had been a long time since he had a home cooked meal. Anything was better than the prison food they'd fed him.

A bell jingled above the door as he pushed it open. Reece looked around the restaurant and saw several empty seats at the counter. He sat down, placing his book on the counter and waited for the waitress to acknowledge him.

"How can I help you today?" a dainty brown-haired woman asked.

He could tell she was a local and probably had lived here her whole life. "I'll have a cup of coffee and a menu, please," Reece replied.

The waitress reached under the counter in front of her and handed him a menu. "I'll go get your coffee while you look it over," the brown-haired woman said.

He had noticed that she was pretty, but he wasn't here for that. In fact, he hadn't thought of anyone except for the last woman he'd been with. He had no clue where she lived, only her name. The way she had looked at him was never far from his mind. He couldn't get that smile, that face, out of his head.

The server set his coffee in front of him, and he gave her his order of three eggs over easy with a side of bacon, wheat toast, and four buttermilk pancakes.

The bell rang behind him, and he looked over his shoulder. A white male, maybe a few years younger than him, walked in wearing an Army uniform. The man eyeballed the place and then headed to a seat near the back.

Reece shouldn't care what this guy was doing. He should mind his own business, but there was something odd about him that just gave Reece a red flag. He didn't need to get involved or attract any attention to himself. He was not going back to prison.

Reece turned back around just as his food arrived. He inhaled the scent and started eating. When the clacking of dishes in the kitchen stopped, he could have sworn he heard the man in the booth talking to himself. No, not talking, more like arguing with himself.

A few minutes later, the guy in the Army uniform stood, walked outside, and got into a black convertible. Reece watched as the car drove away, but not until after he saw the two white men kiss. Not that he hadn't seen two men kiss before. Hell, he'd seen it his whole time in prison. *To each his own*, he thought, *to each his own*, and went back to eating his breakfast.

4

Catherine Teodora wiped her hands and placed the dishtowel on the counter. She and her granddaughter Lily Rose had spent the morning baking peanut butter, sugar, and snicker doodle cookies. After they finished, Catherine laid Lily down for an early afternoon nap and went back to the kitchen to clean up their mess.

She couldn't believe how exhausted she'd felt after baking cookies with her granddaughter, something she loved to do. She left the kitchen and walked into the living room. She would lie down on the sofa for a little while and then she'd feel better.

No sooner had she closed her eyes, there was a knock on the front door. She mumbled, "For the love of Jesus." She quickly sat up and threw her legs over the side of the couch; although she was nearing seventy, she would sometimes forget that she wasn't a spring chicken anymore. She'd put on some extra weight with having six children. When she got to her feet, she hurried to the door before the person knocked again and woke up Lily.

She opened the door and gasped, "Daniel."

"Hello, Mother," said her son Dan.

"Oh, Daniel, it's so good to see you again," Catherine chimed.

"Mom, you know I hate it when you call me Daniel. It was okay when I was eight or nine years old, but now that I'm twenty-nine, it just isn't manly."

"Oh, son, don't act so grown-up now." She batted her hand in the air. "Come in, come in," she said, stepping back to make room for him.

He opened the screen door and stepped inside. He stood in front of her, hesitated, then took a step closer and slowly wrapped his arms around her, giving her a hug.

She was tense at first, but after he made the gesture, she relaxed and hugged him back. When it came to her youngest son Daniel, there was uncertainty. He was the only one in the family that seemed to have a bad streak of luck, as she called it. He was always getting into some kind of trouble, at least until he joined the Army.

She pulled away and held him at arms-length. He was dressed in his Army Combat Uniform with a Patrol Cap resting on his buzz-cut hair.

"I'm speechless. I can't believe you're here. How long are you staying?" she asked.

"I have a two-week leave, then I'm off to Texas for a couple of years," Dan replied.

"Oh," Catherine whispered. "Then I guess we should spend this precious time God gave us to enjoy one another," she concluded.

He nodded in return.

She let go of his arms and padded to the kitchen. "Are you hungry? Do you want some milk and cookies? Lily and I just made them this morning."

"Lily?" he questioned. "I don't remember anyone named Lily in the family. Is it someone that comes to the house and helps with the cleaning and baking?" he asked.

She stopped, turned, "No, don't be silly. I don't need help around the house. She's Ashley's daughter," she said, knowing he hadn't known. *This was actually the first time he'd been home since he signed-up for the Army, six-years ago*, she thought.

"My sister has a daughter?" he asked, his eyes wide.

“She just turned five years old last month.” She could see the surprise in his eyes. *He would’ve known sooner if he had written letters to his only mother, but he hadn’t. So now, he had to find out almost six years later. Not my fault,* she thought.

“Please, sit and I’ll pour you a glass of milk. We made snicker doodles today,” she smiled and turned back towards the counter to grab one of the containers full of cookies.

She placed the tin on the table and walked to the cupboard for a glass. Once she finished pouring the milk in the cup, she sat down across from him.

“Thank you,” he said before grabbing a cookie from the container and taking a bite. He finished the cookie and grabbed another one.

She could tell by the look on his face that he missed her homemade cookies. It was as if she’d known he was coming to visit her today and made his favorite. He had been on her mind a lot lately, but that wasn’t unusual. She always worried about her Daniel.

She could tell that he wanted to say something to her, but was hesitant. Catherine smiled, then spoke, “So, how’s the Army treating you? Do you have any stories to share?” She thought she’d ask questions to get him to talk about whatever was bothering him.

“Mom, please. Please don’t start with all the questions. You know I don’t like a lot of questions,” Dan told her, then took another bite of his cookie.

“At least tell me where you’re stationed after your leave here is up.”

“I told you, Texas,” he replied.

She pressed her lips together and nodded.

“Grandma Cat,” the little voice said from the doorway of the kitchen. Lily shoved her little thumb back in her mouth and held her pink blankie tight in her other hand.

“Hey, Lily Rose,” Catherine said as she stood and went to her granddaughter. “Did we wake you?” Lily shook her head. “Come here,” Catherine opened her arms and scooped Lily up. “I want you to meet your Uncle Dan. He’s your mom’s youngest brother.”

Catherine placed Lily on her lap still gracefully sucking her thumb.

She watched as Lily’s eyes traced over Dan’s face, not sure what to think of him. She knew Lily hadn’t met him before and was sure Ashley had never mentioned an Uncle Dan to her. If she had, Lily would’ve remembered something like that, maybe. Her daughter was always making sure to tell Lily how smart she was for her age when she was around.

Catherine looked up to see Dan smile at Lily, but noticed Lily didn’t smile back, probably because she’d have to take her thumb out of her mouth and she didn’t like to do that. She’d tried many times to get Lily to stop sucking her thumb, but nothing seemed to work.

“That’s a pretty name you have,” Dan said. “Is your mommy here with you?”

Lily slowly shook her head from side to side.

Catherine watched as he smiled back at Lily’s response, thinking there was something more behind that mischievous grin. Leave it to Catherine, she’d find out what he was up to, she always did. That look on his face meant he was up to no good.

5

Several hours later, Ashley arrived in Illinois. She stopped at the first restaurant she saw that was open and parked. She needed a pot of coffee and something to eat. She took her time, knowing that it was only after eight in the morning. She didn't want to show up too early, but didn't know what else to do.

When she decided she'd stayed long enough, she paid her bill and got back in the car, heading towards Carla's house. She hoped her friend would be awake when she arrived, but if she wasn't she'd wait outside on the porch swing if she had to.

Instead of pulling into the driveway next to a red Prius, Ashley parked on the side of the street and dug out her phone. She gave her mom a quick call, letting her know that she'd arrived and asked how Lily was doing. She finished the call and stepped out of the car. She locked the car, crossed the street, and walked up the stone path towards the ranch style home.

She rang the doorbell and waited as she gazed around the porch and then off into the yard. She could see that the Daylilies and Irises were coming into bloom, which made her think of her mother who loved working in her flower garden. Catherine would work in her garden all year round if the weather stayed warm, but that doesn't happen in Ohio. So, that's why Ashley's father had built her mother her own greenhouse; she didn't have to worry about the weather anymore.

The door opened behind her; she turned to see a woman with blonde hair who stood about five-five, maybe five-six at the most. The woman smiled, "Can I help you?" she asked.

"Hi, I'm Ashley, Carla's friend from Ohio..." Ashley was interrupted.

"Oh, my God, yes, please come in, come in. I'm so sorry," the woman sputtered. "I'm Veronica, I work with Carla at the school. I'm so glad you could make it. Carla will be so happy to see you, well..." she paused. "Considering the circumstances, I'm sure in her heart she'll appreciate the gesture," Veronica said.

Ashley smiled, "I'm sure she will. Is she here right now?" Ashley asked.

"Yes, but I'm having a bit of trouble getting her out of bed. Though I honestly can't blame her, seeing all that she has lost," Veronica said.

They walked into the family room by the front door and sat down on the sofa. Ashley placed her purse on the floor next to her and glanced around the room. She couldn't remember ever coming into the room the last time she was here. They always seemed to sit in the kitchen and talk or on the back porch.

There was a flat screen in the corner facing her, with photos of Carla and Tim's wedding on the wall. It was the first-time Ashley had gone to Florida. She loved the beach the most, especially watching Carla get married on one. It was a beautiful sunny day, but it usually is in Florida.

This was going to hit her friend the hardest, and she didn't know what she could do or say to make it better. Nothing could make this better. Her friend's husband and child had died and she didn't know what to say to her or how to comfort her.

"Is she in her room?" Ashley asked.

Veronica nodded, "I'm sure she'll be happy to see you. Go on up and sit with her for a while. I have some calls to make anyway."

Ashley stood, “Thank you so much for calling me and letting me know about Carla and...” Ashley choked up. “Well, you know the funeral and all.” Before Veronica could reply, Ashley left the room; she didn’t want to start crying in front of this stranger.

She climbed the same familiar stairs she’d climbed weeks ago, but this time felt different. It was almost like walking to your own doom. She knew that going into Carla’s room would be like entering a morgue, and in these circumstances, it wasn’t any different than attending a funeral.

Once at the top, she walked to where Carla’s room was, stopped, took in a deep breath, and tapped on the door before entering.

The room was dark from the shades being closed. She waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness before walking to the bed where she saw a mound of blankets Carla was hibernating under. She felt for a spot on the left side of the bed and sat down.

“Carla, it’s me Ashley,” she whispered. The blankets moved beside her, she heard a moan. “I’m here for you, sweetie, and I’m so so sorry about everything that has happened.”

Carla pushed the blankets from her face and looked up at her friend. Tears escaped from Carla’s eyes and Ashley took her in her arms. “Everything will be okay,” Ashley whispered, knowing it was probably the wrong thing to say and not something Carla would want to hear at this moment. What else could she say to help comfort her friend when there were no words for something like this? No words to take the pain away. She did the only thing she knew to do; she held her friend in her arms and let her cry.

6

After leaving his mom's house, Dan walked the three miles back into town. As he rounded a bend in the road, he spotted a young girl who looked almost like Lily and about her height and age, but as he got closer, he noticed that she had long brown curly hair, not black. The little girl slipped quickly into the woods, but he kept on walking. It wasn't his business to follow her, even if she did intrigue him. He had other things to take care of right now.

As he walked, he decided that by the end of the day he would have a car. All this walking was for the dogs. Yeah, sure, he did a lot of walking and marching in boot camp, but that was a long time ago.

When he reached the corner of Breacher and Kale, he spotted the old café he'd been in earlier this morning and the one he'd spent most of his time in growing up. That and the local bar, which was another block away. But he wasn't in the mood for a beer or to hang around the people that would probably piss him off and then he'd get into a fight and so on and so on.

Nope. He wasn't going to make that mistake twice, or three times. To be honest, he couldn't remember how many fights he'd gotten himself into over the years; maybe that was the cause of the voices in his head. Too many blows to the head rattled something loose, but part of him doubted that theory. Even as a kid, he had secret friends that he talked to.

Dan looked both ways, crossed the street, making his way towards the diner. He knew as soon as he pushed the door open the bell above would notify the people inside that someone was there. He didn't want people to look at him or to know that he was walking in, but there was nothing he could do about it. It was just one other thing that brought the voices out.

"I told you he wouldn't be here," the first voice said.

"Yeah, ya' stupid moron," the second voice replied.

Dan shook his head. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. The voices at times had their own agenda.

He had lied to his mom about the two-week leave from the Army and about going to Texas. He actually had no clue where he was going from here; he thought he'd play it by ear. He didn't want to tell his mother, but he'd arrived two weeks ago and had just went to see her.

He hadn't wanted to hurt her feelings by telling her he wasn't going to be staying with her like he had always done in the past. No, he had other plans, but even those plans seemed to be falling through the cracks. Everything seemed to be going to shit since he'd been discharged from the Army.

He walked to the back and sat down in a booth near the far corner, away from the other people. People that would hear him if he were to talk to himself, and that was something he didn't need right now. He didn't need folks looking at him. No, he just wanted to keep a low key and finish what he had planned to do, and then leave.

After ordering a cup of coffee from the petite redhead with artificial breasts, because there was no way they were real at her age, which she looked to be near her fifties, and who seemed to be flirting with him. Too bad though 'cause he wasn't interested in her. Nope not his type, instead his thoughts went to the little girl named Lily Rose.

The redhead set a cup down on the table and poured the coffee, "Anything else I can get for ya'?" she asked, snapping her gum between her teeth.

Dan shook his head, "No, thanks, ma'am." She left and went back behind the counter.

He was surprised when he walked into this diner yesterday that someone hadn't recognized him. The town wasn't overly populated; mostly everyone knew everyone, but Dan didn't know the woman who served him coffee. Nor did he remember anyone one else he'd passed by through town.

He had been gone a long time, but he would have to admit that he didn't look the same after all these years either. Or, maybe he was just losing his mind. He chuckled to himself. That was an understatement.

His mind wandered back to his sister. He couldn't believe that Ashley had a child, "*A beautiful one at that,*" the voice in his head said. "*You'd been gone so long, she'd gone out and got herself knocked-up.*" Dan shook his head. The voices were getting worse since he'd left Pennsylvania. He'd been able to keep them at bay when he was around other people, but now they seemed to be getting louder. As if they were trying to escape his head and become their own person.

Dan heard the bell jingle from behind him, which meant that someone had entered the café. That someone slid in the seat in front of him. Dan didn't lift his head or make any kind of eye contact with the person; he just sat there drinking his coffee.

"I thought I told you not to stick around town," Rob said.

"Yes, you said that," Dan replied.

"Yet, you're still here?"

Dan held his cup to his lips, took a sip, and then looked over the edge of the coffee cup, right into the eyes of the man across from him. His dark blond hair was combed neatly back, away from his forehead.

"Are you going to make me ask you again, why you're still in this town?" Rob tapped his finger on the table.

"I think you already did," Dan stated matter-of-factly. "I won't stay long. I just have one more *thing* to do; then, I'll leave and you'll never see me again."

"I'll give you until Sunday to get your "*thing*", " Rob said as he made air quotes, "taken care of; after that," Rob lowered his voice almost to a whisper as he leaned forward, "then you are to leave and never come back here again. Do I make myself clear?" Rob sat back in his seat. "I helped you out and now it's time for you to leave."

Dan looked him square in the face. "What about yesterday?"

"Yesterday was a mistake," Rob replied. "So was earlier today."

Daniel set his cup down. *He should have known that this was how it was going to end. He'd been so stupid to think that anything would happen between him and Rob. Fuck him! Who needs him anyway?* Dan thought. "Sure, yeah. You'll never hear from me again. I'll leave and never come back," he replied, knowing that he wasn't leaving at all. Not while Lily Rose was still here.

After Rob left, he thought of his sister, Ashley, but only for a few seconds. He was glad that she wasn't at his mother's house because if she had been, she'd no doubt stir up a can of shit, especially after what happened two weeks ago. It didn't matter anyway; he wasn't planning to stay long. He didn't give two-shits about his sister, never had, never would. He was just here to pay a visit to his mother, then hit the road, and never come back to this run-down piece of shit town. There was no reason to stay.

Or was there?

7

Lily hopped down the last step and landed on the green grass in Grandma Cat's backyard. Lily saw her friend Sierra walking out of the woods by her swing-set and started running towards her.

When Lily reached her friend, they both fell to the ground and lay there staring up at the bright blue sky. Springtime and summer were her most favorite seasons. She loved playing outside, especially with her new friend Sierra who lived on the other side of the woods.

Lily wasn't allowed to go into the woods without an adult. Sometimes when her mom was here, she would go with Lily down to the river. Lily smiled at the thought as the sun warmed her face, making her giggle.

"What do you want to do today?" Sierra asked.

Lily turned her face towards Sierra. "Want to play on the swing? I'll push you first and then you can push me," Lily said, sitting up.

"Okay, sure," Sierra replied.

Lily gave her friend a push and then another one. As soon as Sierra came back, she pushed her again, and then again. Sierra laughed louder the higher she went, and then she jumped through the air and landed on her feet.

"That was awesome," Sierra shouted, giggling.

When it was Lily's turn to swing on the swing, her friend pushed her so high she felt like she was flying. She had to be careful because last year she broke her arm when she jumped off the swing in mid-air, and Grandma Cat had cried as she drove Lily to the hospital. Lily didn't want to make Grandma Cat cry, nor did she want to break her arm again.

She remembered being in pain all the way to the hospital, which had made her cry too. The only good thing that had come out of it was the bright pink cast the doctor had put on her arm.

Lily waited until the swing wasn't moving as fast before jumping off the seat. She jumped and landed on her feet, and then rolled on the ground laughing.

"Lily Rose, how many times do I have to tell you not to jump off that swing while it's moving?" Grandma Cat hollered as she stood outside the greenhouse door.

Lily sat up and looked at Grandma Cat. "I didn't jump that high up," Lily protested, folding her arms against her chest, almost pouting.

"That doesn't matter. Your mother and I told you not to do it. Do you remember what happened last year?"

Lily nodded and then answered back, "Yes, I remember."

"You and Sierra go find something else to do that won't get you hurt," Catherine said before turning and going back inside the greenhouse.

"Do you want to go down by the river?" Sierra asked.

"I don't know, Grandma Cat doesn't like me to go into the woods without her or Mommy. She said it can be dangerous and if something happened, she wouldn't know where I was to help me."

"It'll only be for a few minutes. She won't even know you're gone."

Lily thought for a minute, and then said, "Okay, but just for a couple of minutes." She looked over her shoulder to see where Grandma Cat was. She noticed a movement in the greenhouse and took off running with Sierra into the woods.

It only took a couple of minutes to run to the cliff and then climb down to the bottom where the water was. Once down the hill, both Lily and Sierra ran over to the huge rock and climbed up on it. They would sit there and look at the water flowing down the river. Sometimes, they would gather stones and toss them in.

Lily wasn't sure how much time had passed since they had come down here when they heard Sierra's name being called. They both walked up another path instead of climbing the hill.

Once at the top, Lily said goodbye to her friend and walked back towards Grandma Cat's house. When she saw the swing-set, she sighed a sigh of relief. She always got nervous walking back by herself even though it was still light out. That's why her and Sierra had marked an X on the trees with yellow paint.

She stepped into the yard and started running towards the house.

"Lily!"

Lily stopped in her tracks and turned around. Grandma Cat was standing by the swing-set and she didn't look happy.

"Did you just come out of the woods?"

Lily swallowed and then answered, "Yes."

"I thought your mother and I told you to stay out of the woods. You are not to go in there without one of us with you," Catherine said as she walked towards Lily. "What if something happened to you? Do you realize how hurt and lost I'd be without you? It would crush my heart to have something happen to you, my sweet child," Catherine said as she knelt down in front of Lily who was now crying.

"I'm sorry, Grandma Cat," Lily sniffled. "I won't do it again, promise."

"Well, okay then. Let's go inside and make something for dinner and then watch some television," Catherine said as she pulled Lily into a hug. "Your mama would never forgive me if something were to happen to you"

8

Reece sat on the bench across the street, watching the café. He had been minding his own business, walking down the sidewalk when he saw the same guy from earlier. That was enough for Reece to take a seat and see what the guy was up to. If it looked like he was just having some coffee, then he'd leave it at that, but when this other man stormed in, he could tell something was off. He could tell the guy was pissed!

The man he had seen this morning who had entered the restaurant and sat down, the one who'd been arguing with himself and then left, getting in a black car, was back in the café having coffee by himself until this other man came in the restaurant and sat down in front of the guy he'd been watching. They spoke, but of course, Reece couldn't hear them, but he'd learned how to read people's lips and knew by piecing some of the words together what was being said, "*I thought I told you not to stick around town,*" the angry guy said as the other man drank his coffee.

Reece knew the moment he saw him walk in the café yesterday that something wasn't right with him, but then he'd left and that was that.

He thought about going inside and sitting at the counter. Listen in on their conversation, but he knew better than to get involved. It was in his best interest to just walk away and pretend nothing ever happened. It was a small town, people knew people. Locals watched out for each other, and him sitting here, looked suspicious.

A few minutes later, the guy who'd just entered, left. He got in his black convertible, the same one from earlier and drove away. He didn't look happy.

Reece stood, still staring at the man in the café, and then turned and started walking down the sidewalk. He knew he should just walk away, but there was just something about the guy he didn't like or trust. He decided that he'd stay a little longer, see what the man was up to before taking a bus to somewhere else. He needed to retrace his steps back to the night he met the woman of his dreams so he could find her, but he couldn't remember where that place was.

Last night he'd slept in the woods, and it looked like he'd be doing that again tonight as long as the weather stayed nice. Maybe when he decided to leave this unpopulated town, he'd go somewhere warmer, somewhere where he could find work. Eventually he'd run out of money, and he'd have to make more in order to eat; everyone had to eat.

He stopped in front of Bailey's Pub, opened the door. Music and stale cigarette smoke spilled out as he went inside. It wasn't completely dark. There were small light fixtures by each booth along the east wall and slot machines on each table.

Near the back where the pool tables sat, there was more of a translucent lighting. To him, it looked like every other bar he'd been in. On one side of the room was a long bar with mirrors along the wall and hundreds of different liquor bottles on the other side of the room, there were booths and tables for the social drinkers or people that came to eat.

He walked over to the wood-paneled bar, swiveled the chair that was screwed into the floorboards and sat down. The bartender came to him, possibly the owner of the place. "I haven't seen you around here before," the bartender stated.

Reece wasn't much for talking; he'd keep it short and sweet. "Probably not," he replied.

The bartender gave him a cold stare. "I don't want no trouble here."

"I'm not here for trouble. I just want a whiskey on the rocks," Reece said.

The bartender didn't move his eyes from Reece as his left hand placed a glass on the bar, threw in a couple ice cubes, and then grabbed the bottle of whiskey from behind him and poured the drink.

"Thank you," Reece said before picking up the glass and knocking the drink down in one swallow. He set the glass back down and nodded for another one.

~ ~

Couple of hours later, Reece finished his third whiskey on the rocks and was about to leave for the night when a man sat down next to him and ordered a drink.

From the corner of his eye, Reece knew exactly who it was and he was about to learn the man's name.

"Hey, how's it going for you?" the bartender asked.

"Not too bad, I guess," the man replied.

Reece knew that was a crock of shit and was surprised this guy didn't start complaining about it. Reece had seen how upset the man had been when he'd seen him at the coffee shop earlier.

Everyone knew that when you walked into a bar, had a few drinks, then you usually ended up spilling your guts to the person next to you, telling that person your whole life story from beginning to end, even the embarrassing moments. Especially the embarrassing parts. Something Reece was a little curious to find out about this guy.

Either that or Reece should just stand up, walk out the door, and not look back. But Reece wasn't one to walk away, even if he should. Besides, Reece didn't have anything else to do, at least not right away until he could find the girl he'd dreamed about for so long, but he didn't even know her name. For now, he needed to know how much the world had changed while he'd been incarcerated, and he was intrigued by the drama that had been going on all day as well.

It didn't take more than an hour before Reece got the man talking, and since the man was buying the drinks, Reece wasn't going to stop him. The man was going on and on about his fiancé. Said she wasn't answering any of his calls, not that Reece could blame her.

It wasn't so much the woman that intrigued him, but the little girl named Lily the man mentioned. Said that he really loved her and that she was like his own daughter, but he would no longer be a part of the child's life, unless he stopped his fiancé from leaving him.

"I could kidnap her and no one would know," the man whispered close to Reece's ear.

"Then you'd get caught and go to jail," Reece said, looking straight into his eyes. "You don't want to go there. I've been there. They'd chew you up and spit you to high heaven. It's not a place for boys like you."

"What are you trying to imply? Do you think I'm not strong enough to be in prison? You think I'd get my ass kicked or something?" The man slurred his words, getting upset over Reece telling him he was weak and not prison-worthy.

"I think you've had too much to drink," Reece stated. "You should go home, get some rest. I think you're just upset and don't mean a word you're saying."

It was easy to get the information out of him. Reece had asked the man a couple of questions, and he fizzed like Alka-Seltzer in water.

Plop, plop, fizz, fizz.

Reece had gotten all the information he needed and left the bar, making his way down the road.

9

Ashley had stayed in the spare bedroom. The same one she'd slept in when she was here last. She tossed and turned, listening to the faint cries coming from Carla's room all night. She wanted to go to her. Comfort her friend like she did earlier, but was exhausted from the drive and what the day had brought her.

Carla wouldn't get out of bed. She wouldn't eat any of the food Ashley carried to the room. She tried to persuade her to eat, but she wouldn't budge. So, Ashley left the food that wouldn't spoil and took the rest back downstairs.

She rolled over and stared at the clock on the nightstand, 4:36 a.m. She debated on whether to lie here or just get up. Coffee did sound good to her.

She threw back the blankets, slid her legs off the bed, and stepped onto the cold wooden floor. The coolness made her hot feet feel like ice melting on a hot day. She slouched her way to the bathroom, flushed, and washed her hands. She went to the closet in the room she was staying in and slipped her feet in the slippers she'd forgotten to retrieve last night.

She paused at Carla's door, listened, and then walked down the stairs to the kitchen. She'd let Carla sleep a couple more hours, then take her some coffee and try to get her out of bed.

She knew it would be a process, but Ashley had to be back home on Sunday. She hated to leave her friend in her time of need, but she also had a daughter to care for.

Ashley discarded the old coffee grounds and searched the pantry for what she needed to make a fresh pot. Ten minutes later, she poured herself a cup and sat down at the kitchen table.

There were several newspapers still rolled up, sitting on the table. She grabbed one and scanned through it. Nothing held her interest, but once she saw the obituaries of Mya and Tim's picture, she knew she should cut it out for Carla.

Ashley glanced at the dates on the other newspapers and decided to throw them out. Carla wasn't going to read them. She couldn't even get her friend to come downstairs, let alone open the blinds in her room. It was like she was dormant like a bear in the winter.

Her stomach growled; she stood, went to the refrigerator, and opened the door. Every shelf was packed with containers of food. Food she knew friends and neighbors had probably brought over. It was the only thing people knew to do when someone died. No one feels like cooking when they're mourning.

Ashley moved a few things around, but nothing appealed to her. She went to the pantry, found a box of honey nut cheerios, and hunted through the cabinets for a bowl. She placed them on the table and went to the fridge for milk. There wasn't any. "Great," she mumbled.

She put everything back and poured another cup of coffee. *At least there was cream for her coffee*, she thought. She opened the back door and stood in the doorway looking out into the backyard. The early morning was brisk, but if it was anything like yesterday, she knew it would warm up to the mid-seventies again.

It was starting to get light outside. She went to the hall closet, grabbed a sweater of Carla's, and stepped out onto the back porch. She didn't feel like swinging on the porch swing so she sat down on the steps.

The birds were singing their morning song. She knew they were hiding in the branches of the trees; though you couldn't see them, they were there.

By the time she finished her second cup, the sky was covered in a brilliant blue. She stood and went back inside. She grabbed another coffee cup from the cabinet and poured Carla a cup. She walked upstairs, tapped on the door with the knuckle of her forefinger as she juggled the two coffee cups in one hand. She listened; there was no sound coming from inside the closed room, but she wasn't surprised.

She opened the door and went inside. After placing the cups down on the nightstand, she shuffled to the window, pulled on the cord, opening the blinds just a hair. A little light was good, and all she needed to get Carla at least sitting up. She peered around the room, clothes were scattered all around the floor and on the bed.

Ashley sighed, "I brought you some fresh coffee." No sound. "As much as I don't blame you for wanting to stay in bed, you will have to get up for the funeral later today. We have calling hours at eleven and then the funeral afterwards." Still nothing.

She saw a bottle sitting next to the bed, and for a split second, her heart stopped and then sped faster. Would her friend really try to take her own life? She remembered the conversation they had just a couple of weeks ago. Carla had said she had tried a year ago to end her life.

Ashley quickly grabbed the blankets and pulled down on them. Carla's hair was mangled around her face. Ashley brushed her hair away and placed two fingers on the side of her neck. There was a pulse. She exhaled a breath, "Thank God," she mumbled. "Carla honey, you need to wake up."

Carla moaned and rolled over onto her side.

"I know you don't want to get up, but you have to. Here, I brought you some fresh coffee."

Carla opened her eyes and quickly closed them. "It's too bright in here," she moaned.

"No, it's not," Ashley whispered. "You can do this, I know you can. You're strong enough, Carla."

"I don't think I can." She went to pull the blankets back up to cover her face, but Ashley stopped her.

"Yes, you can." Ashley picked up the bottle next to the bed and read the prescription. *Percocet*, she remembered it was what the doctor had given Carla for pain when she left the hospital after having Mya. She pushed down and turned the lid, spilling the contents in her palm. The quantity said 30, and there looked to be close to that still in the bottle.

"I only took one," Carla said, breaking the silence.

Ashley blew out a breath, feeling relieved. "Okay," was all she said. All she knew to say. She placed the lid back on the bottle and dropped it into the pocket of the sweater she was wearing.

She helped Carla sit up and handed her the cup of coffee. "Umm, this tastes good. Thank you for making me some," Carla said.

"You're welcome," Ashley replied.

They sat in silence for a while, and then Ashley suggested that Carla take a shower. She could smell the body odor coming off her, but didn't want to sound rude by telling her friend that she smelled. According to Veronica, Carla hadn't taken a shower since she'd found out four or five days ago that her husband had died. She'd kept herself in bed, mourning his loss.

"Come on, I'll help you get ready," Ashley said, and pulled the covers the rest of the way down. She positioned Carla's legs over the edge. She hadn't been aware until now, how much weight Carla

had lost since the last time she'd seen her. Once she knew that Carla was up, Ashley went into the bathroom to turn on the shower.

"Okay, let's get you in the bathroom, and you can start washing yourself. Do you want me to pick out your dress and place it in the bathroom?"

Carla shook her head, "I can do it, but thank you."

Ashley nodded and left the room, making her way towards the guest room.

~ ~

Once in her room, she walked to the bed, sat down, and leaned her back against the headboard. She reached for her phone that was sitting on the nightstand beside the bed. She decided to take this time and call her mom.

After hanging up, she arched her head back and closed her eyes. Her mom sounded happy and not stressed out from being with Lily these past couple of nights. Why Ashley always thought her mother couldn't handle Lily was beyond her. Her mother had given birth to six children, Ashley being the fifth child and only daughter. Before getting off the phone, her mom mentioned that Rob had called several times and that she had told him that she would have Ashley call when she talked to her the next time.

Ashley sighed in relief that her mother didn't ask her any questions, though she could sense the concern in her voice and knew she would have to tell her everything when she got home on Sunday. The last thing her mom had said was that she was taking Lily to the zoo, just in case they weren't home when she got there on Sunday. Ashley had asked her to take some pictures of Lily for her to see when she got back home.

Ashley was surprised that her mother hadn't mentioned her brother Dan visiting. Who, she knew for a fact would stop and pay a visit to his own mother, wouldn't he? She also knew that if he did stop there, he wasn't going to tell her what had happened between the two of them. Shit, no! That would have shattered her mother's heart, knowing what he had done.

Ashley wished she could talk to Carla about the whole Rob thing and get another perspective on the matter. She already knew she wasn't going back to him, but she still needed to meet with him and give him his things back.

She was actually surprised how well she was handling the whole thing. She had cried but a couple of times after it happened; and then, it was like it didn't matter anymore. She couldn't understand why she didn't feel sad or even angry with him. She loved him, that she knew, but was she in love with him? That was something she'd have to think more about.

10

The following morning, Dan finished his coffee and asked for a refill. He thought back to yesterday when he was sitting in the same seat in the same café when Rob sat down. He wasn't intimidated by the guy; the thought made him laugh. No, that was something he never got with other people.

Dan was a brute to most people. He was six-foot and weighed two-ten. In the first year of the Army, he did nothing but workout by lifting weights, just like most of them did when they weren't on duty at the Army base. Then after that, he had to find different ways to strengthen his muscles. Working out on his off-time with all the other guys on the base eventually wasn't a choice he could pursue after they found out about his voices.

Dan left the café and crossed the street. He needed to find a set of wheels. Walking wasn't an option for what he had in mind. He needed a car to complete the idea he'd gotten last night while he was sitting in the woods watching his mother's house.

With the money he'd accumulated over the years from being in the Army, the available cash he had could get him something doable, something that could get him out of town. "Four wheels and a full tank of gas," he mumbled.

Tonight, he would head back towards his mom's house and perch himself near a tree so he could see into her backyard and into the house, just like last night. He wanted to keep an eye on the little girl named Lily Rose, a pretty name at that, and make sure she didn't leave with her mama. That would ruin everything! No, he needed her to stay right where she was; at least until he came up with a good solid plan, but he knew he was on borrowed time. His sister would come back for her soon.

At the next block, he stopped and looked into the parking lot. There were several automobiles for sale, but the prices stickered on the windshield were more than he wanted to spend. If he couldn't get the owner to sell him one in his price range, then he'd just have to think of something else; maybe even have to steal one. Nah, he'd never done that before. He didn't know the first thing about stealing a car, and even less about hot-wiring an engine. He'd have to swindle a deal with the owner, scare him or something.

"Ya', man, scare the asshole!" the voice in his head said.

Dan shook his head, trying to dislodge whatever was causing him to hear these voices.

"Oh, no you're not getting rid of me that easy," the voice laughed.

"Ya', you ain't getting rid of us!" another voice shouted inside his head.

Dan turned and hid between two buildings, holding his head in his hands. Besides the voices, there was pain. Sometimes the pain would get so bad that he thought his head would explode. Sometimes he wished it would, then he wouldn't have to listen to them anymore. He wouldn't have to hide them anymore.

Normally, the voices spoke when he had one too many drinks in him, but when he was in the Army, they came when he was alone in his room, but not always. He just had to keep himself from talking back to them. Lately, he would always have pain when he heard the voices.

When the pain subsided, he leaned his back against the wall and closed his eyes. He needed a couple more minutes of peace before making an offer with or without a threat to the owner at the car dealership.

Dan weaved in between the cars, looking for something he could afford. He saw the owner step outside, looking right at him. The salesman came over and introduced himself.

“Hey, I’m Clay Blocken. If you’re looking for a ride, I can help you with that,” Clay said.

Dan nodded, thinking what an ass this man was making of himself. Why would he be in this parking lot if he weren’t buying a fucking car?

Clay stuck his hand out. Dan hesitated and then shook it.

“What kind of deal can you give me on his one right here,” Dan asked, pointing to an old Honda Civic. The price tag said \$2,500.00, but he knew it wasn’t worth that much.

“Well, it’s got a brand-new engine in it. Can’t say I can go much lower than two grand,” Clay stated.

“Let me see the engine,” Dan asked, knowing that Clay was bluffing.

“Yeah, okay, sure. Let me go get the keys.”

Clay returned with the keys, but before popping the hood, he said, “Maybe you could give me eighteen hundred for it. I don’t know that I can sell it to you any lower than that.”

“*Sure, you could,*” the voice said. Dan tightened his jaw. “Just open the hood,” Dan demanded.

“Okay, okay. Fifteen hundred, no lower,” Clay squealed.

“Let me ask you this, if you’re lying about the new engine, does it at least run?” Dan asked.

“Sure, sure,” Clay said, and ran over to the driver’s side and jumped in behind the wheel. The car roared to life. Clay pushed in the gas pedal a couple of times, making the engine roar loud and steady. He climbed back out of the car. “Sounds good, don’t she?” he asked.

“Yes, she does, but I’m still not giving you fifteen for it,” Dan replied, looking Clay straight in the eyes.

“Seriously, man, you’re killing me here. Okay, I’ll make you a deal—one thousand, take it or leave it?”

Fifteen minutes later, Dan drove out of the lot, driving a 1992 Flint Black Metallic Honda Civic.