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# Redemption

Brittany Boone

*East Tennessee State University*

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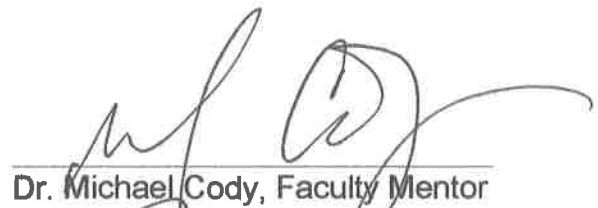
# REDEMPTION

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

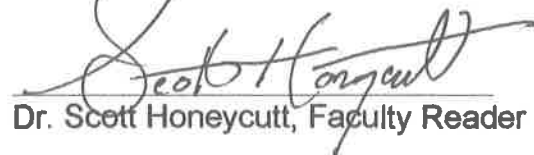
By

Brittany Boone  
The Honors College  
Midway Honors Scholars Program  
East Tennessee State University

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Dr. Michael Cody, Faculty Mentor



Dr. Scott Honeycutt, Faculty Reader

Dr. Huili Hong, Faculty Reader

## **Redemption**

## Introduction

When I sat down and began writing this story I wasn't sure in what direction I wanted to go. I just knew that I wanted to write something about domestic abuse, and that I wanted to have a strong female protagonist. I wanted someone like Katniss Everdeen from Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, Melinda from Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, and Jane from Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. It is my hope that I have accomplished this. I have always been interested in domestic abuse because it an important issue within the families of our nation today. Domestic abuse can be a cycle, and one that is difficult to end. It can also be a difficult situation to escape, and not everyone manages to do so.

At first I wanted to write a piece about Edgar Allan Poe because he is one of my favorite authors, and his works have always interested me. Therefore, I started reading some of his short stories, and other works. While I was reading these I became more and more interested in the violence that he writes about. In some of his works this violence is often paired with intoxication, usually by alcohol. Often there is some form of spousal abuse in his works as well. Poe's "The Black Cat," for instance, demonstrates these two characteristics, and was the story that I was reading when my own work started to take form. The narrator of the story is questionable from the first page of the work, mostly because he makes statements about his own sanity from the beginning. As the plot progresses, the readers learn that the narrator becomes an alcoholic and suffers from mood swings that cause him to have violent reactions to things. Because of these mood swings that his alcoholism brings on, the narrator brings harm to those he most cares about. He mistreats his favorite cat, and then hangs it. He mistreats his wife, and then in a fit of rage, kills her as well. Throughout the story readers can see that the narrator loses his sense of right and wrong, as well as his feelings of remorse.

Because of this story I became very interested in the correlation between alcoholism and violence. I knew that I also wanted to write something in which there was a correlation between the two. I started doing research about women who had survived domestic abuse, and about a connection

between violence and alcoholism. I found evidence that alcohol could in fact influence people to do things that they normally wouldn't, which, of course, most of us know already. As I was reading stories that women had published about domestic abuse, I learn that many of their husbands or boyfriends were in fact alcoholics or used some other form of drugs. There were also cases in which women were being abused and there was no form of substance abuse in their situation. For the plot of my story though I wanted there to be a correlation between substance abuse and domestic abuse. Most of the research that I did for this project came from reading online articles published by survivors. There were two blogs from which I read most of these stories. One blog is called *Violence Unsilenced*, and the other is a blog published in the UK called *Hidden Hurt*. These were true stories told by survivors, and some of the things that I read were truly terrifying, yet inspiring. One woman had been in an abusive relationship for over 15 years and had four children. She managed to escape with the help of her family. My favorite articles to read were those in which the women overcame the self-depravation that they felt because of their husbands. There are also novels that I have read that gave me some ideas for my work. Nicholas Sparks's *Safe Haven* is a tale of domestic abuse. The main character, Katie, manages to escape her husband by sheer will and intelligence.

I was also interested that Poe's narrator had a descent into madness that we as readers were able to see. I wanted my antagonist to demonstrate this same kind of mental instability. There are many aspects that can lead to this, and alcoholism is just one of them. The antagonist in my work also suffers from PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), but refuses to receive proper care. This is also a significant cultural influence on my work. PTSD is an important issue in our world today, and for the first time is really being diagnosed. Soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are getting treatment that soldiers from Vietnam and other past wars did not get. I felt like this should be an important aspect of my story, and a good one to point out to readers. Many soldiers returning home pass the tests and requirements to forgo further treatment for PTSD. Soldiers are often too proud to ask for help, do not want to seem

weak, or do want the help that is freely offered to them. They often find other coping mechanisms to get through the day. Many times it is up to the family of a soldier to know that something is wrong and that they need treatment. I decided to use a scenario like this one for my antagonist. Malone, the story's antagonist, doesn't get help for his PTSD. He goes to counseling a couple times to satisfy his wife, but instead of facing his problems head on in therapy, he turns to alcohol to help him cope. The mix of PTSD and alcohol results in Malone's bringing about his own self-destruction.

Other cultural influences include various movies and TV programs that deal with domestic abuse. *Safe Haven*, *Enough*, and *Army Wives* are just a few examples from today's popular culture that gave me some ideas about domestic abuse as well. These helped to provide visual aid to the biographies of victims that I had been reading.

My story takes place in two different places. It opens with Scarlett, the protagonist, working in a nursing home in a small town in the mountains of eastern Tennessee. The name of the town is Ripshin Mountain. The bulk of the story takes place here. Scarlett finds Ripshin Mountain because the driver of the bus that she is riding loves to stop in the small town. Ripshin Mountain is a typical small southern town in which everyone knows everyone. Aside from small town gossip most people are very hospitable. The people that live in small towns are the kind of people that take care of each other and stand up for one another no matter what. I chose this setting because it is what I know. I live in a small town, and have seen Ripshin Mountain with my own eyes. It is the kind of place in which people feel safe. Most small towns are just dots on a map. To me, this was the perfect place for Scarlett to hide. A bonus point is, as Scarlett says, Ripshin Mountain is beautiful. There's a peaceful lake, and land that is surrounded by the open silence that is the outdoors.

The other setting for the story is perhaps the polar opposite of Ripshin Mountain. Washington D.C. is quite different from a small town in Tennessee. I wanted Scarlett to come from a city and to have

lived through the lifestyle that a big city often presents. Scarlett faces different experiences and learns life lessons during her time spent in D.C.

As I stated earlier Scarlett is the protagonist of the story, and she is a strong female character. I wanted a woman who manages to escape an abusive relationship and come out stronger because of it. Scarlett begins as a woman who seems scared and not in control of every aspect of her life. As readers learn that she was in an abusive relationship they also learn of her lack of confidence and self-esteem. As the story and Scarlett develop, readers see how she grows and becomes a stronger person. Scarlett provides the story with a strong lead, and a character that is relatable. She is the character that narrates the much of the story and tells readers of her experiences.

Malone, like Scarlett, develops and changes throughout the story. He is at first a noble character, and readers can identify with him and his care for Scarlett. It is not until after he develops PTSD and turns from help to alcohol that he becomes a true antagonist. He slowly descends into an unstable mental state. Malone narrates certain sections of the story, and readers get to see his state of mind. Malone is a very complex character with many issues. He demonstrates PTSD and alcoholism, which drive his personality change. I wanted Malone to show readers that it is easy for someone's life to be altered because of alcohol abuse and poor decisions.

The character of Joda, Scarlett's wise friend, is an interesting one. I wanted someone to help Scarlett work through the things that she has experienced in life. Joda turned out to be just the right person. She knew things that Scarlett didn't want anyone to know, but she gained Scarlett's trust by being the sweet person that she is. Joda is the moral center of the story. She is goodness and kindness embodied. The story needed a character like Joda to ground it. Most of the story is told through Scarlett narrating her life to Joda. Joda gives Scarlett a reason to tell her story and someone to trust.

These three characters make the story what I wanted it to be. I hope that readers take away what I wanted to accomplish with this piece of work, and that they learn something about domestic abuse and PTSD along the way.

All of these things came together to help to create the story that you are about to read. Modern and pop-culture takes on domestic violence influenced my writing, as did literary influences like Edgar Allan Poe and all of the research that went into this project.



# Scarlett

## 1

Every few seconds I look over my shoulder, I can't seem to shake the feeling that someone is behind me.

"It can't be him Scarlett; he has no idea where you are. Stop being a scaredy cat," I whisper to myself.

The shadows that the foggy street lights cast over my path make me jumpy, every rustle of the wind, or creak that sounds through the night air makes me antsy; I feel like I'm waiting for something. I'm afraid he's behind me, lurking in the shadows and hidden alleyways waiting to pounce on me and drag me back to that house that looks so perfect on the outside. My heart starts racing as I hear my name whispered in the wind. I start to sprint, my old faded Converse sneakers smacking the blackened pavement. Suddenly he jumps out and chases me; he jerks my long brown hair and pulls me down till the rocky edges of the asphalt are prying into my back. He wraps his big thick veined hands around my throat. Then, I wake up.

Screaming, gasping for air, and clawing at my throat I sit upright in bed. After several seconds I start to calm myself. I throw the old faded patchwork quilt off of my body and spring out of bed. My feet hit the peeling hardwood floors and I fly to the bedroom window, then the one bathroom, and the kitchen; checking the locks. I race to the wood chipped and scratched front door and re-do the dead bolt. Finally, when everything is secure I take a deep breath, and walk back to the small bathroom. I look at myself in the cracked mirror and see my too big blue green eyes, thin lips, petite nose, and strong chin staring back at me. I look frightened and shaky, but no worse for the wear.

"Maybe if the nightmares would stop I'd lose these dark circles," I mutter to myself.

After three months here my face has finally filled back out. When I first started running I looked gaunt, my cheeks hollow, a haunted being.

I turn and look back through the doorway into my small bedroom and see the clock sitting on the night stand. The red numbers glare at me saying its 7:32. I have to be at work at nine, so I should probably just go ahead and start getting ready; sleep is beyond me now anyway.

I splash water onto my face and pat it dry with a soft gray towel, making one last attempt to shake the jitters that the nightmare brought with it. I take quick shower—I don't have time to solve all of the world's problems in there today—and go to the small closet. I pick out a pair of worn khaki pants, and a nice white button-up shirt, both of which came from the local second hand shop on Main Street. The only negative about my job is the fact that I'm supposed to dress professionally every day, and well honestly, dress clothes are expensive, even second hand. It was hard letting go of the money to buy that first pair of dress pants. I knew it was either eat or buy the pants, but I also knew that if I didn't buy the pants that I'd never get to keep my job. After all, dress code is very important.

I get dressed and move to the kitchen. This kitchen was probably a beautiful room at one time, but now its yellow walls are faded and peeling, its appliances older than I am. At least they still work, I remind myself. I turn on the old rickety stove, making sure to get the burners just right, and start to boil some water. I walk to the grimy looking refrigerator and get an egg out of the green carton. No matter how many times I scrub that fridge it still looks that way. I know it's clean though. It's just stained. I drop the egg into the boiling water, and get the red Folgers coffee can down from the cabinet. My hands are still shaking, despite the fact that I'm trying my best to not let the nightmare rule my day. Think of something else...one day when I collect just a little bit more money I'm going to paint the cabinets in this kitchen. The beautiful white cabinets would look much better if they were in fact white, instead of the yellow gray color they have turned with age. I turn on the coffee pot and scoop in some Folgers. It really is the best part of waking up. I couldn't live without my morning caffeine fix. Next, I start some toast to go with the egg and coffee. This is breakfast every morning so I've got the routine pretty down pat; which is good, considering that my mind isn't on making breakfast.

The toast pops up, the coffee pot dings, and it looks like my boiled egg is ready for peeling. I get a plate, and eat my breakfast. I clean up my mess and look at the clock. 8:28. Time to go. I slip my feet into beat up loafers and start the mile-long walk to the Ripshin Mountain Nursing Center.

The nursing center has been a great place to work while I've lived here in Ripshin. It's nestled back in the Appalachian Mountains and is the perfect place for older people to retire to. As a matter of fact many of the inhabitants on Ripshin Mountain moved here from Florida to retire in the Tennessee Mountains. They all say that it just feels like home, and I find that I must agree.

## 2

I reach the center, and go in the door at the side of the building. The time clock tells me that it's 8:55. Perfect timing. I made it to work with five minutes to spare, but I know that it's okay to go ahead and clock in. I rest my hand over the key pad and punch in my employee I.D. number, 8274. My fingers hit the keys out of habit now. I then lay my hand flat on the hand punch reader. The screen lights up:

SCARLETT RATLIFF

--ACTIVITIES ASSISSTANT--

SUCCESSFUL CLOCK-IN

I lift my hand and proceed through the door into the facility. I'm greeted by Timothy Porter. He's always smiling up from his wheelchair, and of course the first words out of his mouth are "Miss, can you get me some coffee?"

"Timothy, how many cups of coffee have you had this morning?"

With a sly grin, he replies, "Two-ish."

"Let's wait awhile then, okay? How about some juice instead?"

"Juice would be fine, apple."

“I’ll get it on my way back from checking in and bring it back to you, okay?”

He smiles big and says, “See you soon gorgeous.”

I just shake my head at him and walk on. I reach the receptionist area, walk past the receptionist’s window, open the side door, and walk on into the office.

“Good morning, Scarlett,” says the receptionist Margaret.

“How are you this morning, Margaret?”

“Oh I’m fine sweetie. Julie wanted me to tell you that she should be in her office, if you’d just deliver these two newspapers to Kevin and Dennis.”

“Thanks Margaret, have a good day!”

I grab the two newspapers and make way to the dining room to get Timothy’s juice. I bang on the door to the kitchen so that the cooks can hear me over the clatter of the pots clanging and the dishwasher running as they prepare to feed 80 residents lunch. I look around the dining room and see nothing has changed since the day before yesterday. The old piano sits in one corner, the big screen TV in the other. Green square tables with four chairs around each take up most of the expansive floor. Marci, my favorite cook, opens the door with a smile and a good morning.

“Hi Marci, Timothy would like some apple juice, if you have any.”

“Sure, hon’, I’ll grab that for you. You talked him out of coffee, huh?” Marci chuckles.

I laugh and say, “Yeah, I didn’t think the CNA’s would enjoy it if he were to start vomiting all day long again.”

“You’re probably right. Okay, here’s your juice. Have a good day sweetheart, don’t work too hard.”

I smile to myself thinking everyone calls everyone sweetheart in this part of the world.

I almost sweetheart her back, but instead I say, “Thanks, I’ll see you later!”

I start back down the wide green and white tiled halls passing the huge activity wall calendar and spot today's activities:

10:45 BOWLING

2:45 AMELIA EARHART  
DISCUSSION GROUP

"Ah, bowling, Julie is trying to kill my back."

"Talking to yourself again gorgeous? You better watch that. They'll have you in a bed in here pretty soon."

I laugh as I turn around. "Timothy, you're hilarious. Here's your juice."

"—Apple, right—?"

"—Yessir, I didn't forget."

"Good."

I pat his shoulder and start around the corner passing the sitting room with the blaring TV, and the nurse's station.

"Hello Nancy."

"Morning Scarlett."

I wander on down 200 hall searching for 213—Dennis Smith.

I knock on the already open door and shout, "Dennis! It's Scarlett, may I come in? I've got your morning paper!"

"What?"

I step in the room, and repeat myself as I take the paper out of its plastic wrapper and hand it over.

"Why thank ya. Now I can see who shot who."

I smile, "You sure can."

“Well I don’t see my name in the obituaries, so I guess I’m still kicking.”

I laugh, “Well Dennis, I guess you are. I’ll see you at 10:45 for bowling, right?”

“Bowling? In the dining room?”

“Yessir, in the dining room, 10:45.”

“You’ll remind me?”

“I’ll remind you, don’t worry. I’ll be back by.”

I give him a pat on the shoulder and walk out of his room. I look at the remaining paper and I know it’s for Kevin. Kevin’s room is over on 400 hall so I start walking that way. The halls in this building are strange. They don’t exactly go in order. Coming from the front of the building past the reception window, and the dining room, 300 hall is to the left and the nurse’s station is to the right. The two rooms that make up 100 hall are to the right of the nurse station, and straight ahead is 200 hall. At the end of the 200 hall, where I am now, the only way to go is left, which leads to 500 hall. At the end of 500, you take a left at the second nurses station and voila, 400 hall. I’ve gotten lost so many times in this building; I still curse whoever designed it. They were not thinking logically.

409—Kevin, just who I wanted. I knock on the clean white door and say, “Hey, Kevin, it’s Scarlett. May I come in? I’ve got your paper.”

I crack the door open and poke my head in. He’s out like a light. He is softly snoring, and his wrinkled weathered mouth is hanging wide open. I smile to myself as I unwrap his paper and lay it on his bedside table. I adjust his blankets, and head out the door, sticking my hand under the automatic Purell Hand Sanitizer dispenser as I go. I rub it in, and now hopefully my hands are mostly germ free.

I make my way back to 500 hall where the activity office and the activity room is located. I step inside and see the old wooden table taking up the center of the room is laden with bingo chips and paper towels. Julie must have washed the chips in preparation for tomorrow’s big Bingo Game. I turn to the sink, turn on the water, get some soap, and start scrubbing my hands, and forearms. All the while

I'm muttering the lyrics to Happy Birthday under my breath. I notice the scar on my right forearm, and try not think about how it got there, and the pain that accompanied it when my arm was broken. I scrub through the lyrics twice, making sure I wash for the full suggested 20 seconds. One can never be too careful when working in a medical facility. One can never be too careful in general. My arm had been broken for days before I went to the hospital, and the scrape, which had left the scar, had become infected as well. I rinse my hands, and try to send my wayward thoughts down the drain with the soapy suds. I dry my hands, and walk to Julie's office, knock, and open the door to the small cluttered office. There's a beach ball in one corner, a hay bale stacked on top of the filing cabinet, a cardboard cutout of a deer leaning against the wall, along with a desk and two swivel chairs. Julie sits behind the desk that is weighed down with papers, filing folders, a rolodex, computer, and stray pens.

She's chewing on a granola bar while talking on the phone. She probably didn't eat breakfast...again. She's going to wither away one day. Of course, who am I to talk? I've missed more meals than I can count over the past few months, and I've definitely withered away. I am just now getting to the point of not being too scared to eat. The fear of not having enough money to make an escape was greater than the hunger. Julie motions for me to hold on and sit down. So I push those thoughts away and sit in the chair across from her. I fiddle with my hands, and jiggle my legs. A habit of not being able to sit still. After what feels like forever Julie finally hangs up the phone.

"Sheesh, she just kept a blabbin'. So how are you this morning? Did you deliver the newspapers? Are you ready for the activity?" Julie asks in rapid succession.

"Well I—"

"Oh! You just got here. You haven't really had time to do much yet."

"Well, no I—"

"Joda asked about you. I think she missed you on your day off yesterday."

"Aw that's sweet." I'm amazed I finally got a complete thought in.

“Anyway, bowling this morning. I’ve got a ton of paperwork to get done. We got two new admits. One in 211 and the other in 510.”

“211? That’s Millie’s room! What are you trying to say Julie?”

“Oh no, oh no, no, no. You haven’t heard yet. “

“Heard what?”

“Millie passed late Tuesday night, and you were off yesterday.”

“So of course Joy already has someone in her room.” I state angrily. I can feel my blood pressure rising. Everything that had happened at work up until this point was making me feel so much better about my nightmare. Work always helps to soothe my disgruntled nerves, but now Julie throws something like this into the mix.

“Yes, but Mary is a really nice lady, you’ll like her, and remember don’t let Joy keep you from enjoying Mary. You know we only have a brief amount of time with most of the residents here. Make the most of it.”

Millie. The first friend I made here. My first day I helped her play bingo; she wasn’t so bad then. She was sitting at a table just chatting away with friends and she looked up at me with the brightest blue eyes that I had ever seen. Those eyes knew things; she was a very intelligent lady. That much I could just tell even on the first day. That was only two months ago. It is amazing how fast people change, how quickly their health can decline, and how they just fade away one day. Time and Alzheimer’s disease wait for no one. I wish I could have said goodbye. It seems like I will never stop losing the people that I care about in life. Millie was a good person, and I can remember her that way. The man from the nightmare, I lost him in a completely different way, and use to find myself wishing him back the way he used to be. However, now my only wish is for him to never find me. All of these thoughts together make tears spring to my eyes.

I will not cry, I will not cry, I will not cry. My new mantra.



Julie breaks the silence and interrupts my thoughts when she says, “So anyway you’ve got about twenty minutes to round everyone up and get going. Gather the usual crew, and I’ll announce it over the intercom.”

“Will do, boss lady,” I reply with a weak smile.

### 3

I head out of the office with my melancholy thoughts, down 500 hall, and back towards 200. The best route to take so that I don’t forget anyone is to just start at the beginning. I stop by Dan’s room, Louise and Esther’s, and Jack’s room.

I say the same thing at each stop: “Hey! Bowling in the dining room at 10:45, and that’s in about fifteen minutes.”

I start down 500 and decide to gather everyone up on 400 first. No one ever comes out from 300 hall because most those residents are bed ridden. We see them for one to one visits.

“Oh I gotta remind Dennis.” I think to myself.

I invite Dennis, Janice, Nora, and Karen. Then, grab Helen, Angie, Charlie, Joda, and Cleo from 500 hall.

Finally it’s time to go to the dining room. I scoot tables and move chairs, ignoring the sound of them scraping against the tiled floors as I navigate them to around. The scraping reminds me of my life in the nightmare. He hated the scraping sound of the dining room chairs on the hard floor. I automatically pick up the next chair that I start to move. Once that’s done I look about the room, and then it hits me.

“Shoot, you guys! I forgot the bowling stuff!”

They all laugh.

“You and Julie I swear, always late, and always forgettin’ things,” Joda chuckles.

I smile. I know you aren't supposed to have favorites, but Joda is mine. While Millie is the first friend I made here, Joda is the one that I can talk to about anything.

"Now Joda! We don't always forget things...just occasionally."

"You see she didn't disagree about being late."

Every one laughs again.

Once the chuckling calms down, I say, "I'll be right back. I'm going to go grab the stuff."

As I walk back to the activity room my mind wanders again. He would not have been happy if I had forgotten the bowling stuff. If I were living the life that I had before this one, I'd probably be holding some part of my body in agony right now. I try to make the thoughts dissipate as I open the door to the activity room, go to the bottom shelf of the cabinets, and spot the gray vinyl bowling bag. I quickly walk back to the dining room, trying to make my hands stop shaking as I go.

"Got it!" I say as I walk back into the dining room.

I start setting up the blue, yellow, and orange plastic pins.

"Hey guys line up there in the middle okay? Just straight across. Stay in your chairs. You can bowl from them, I promise!"

Luckily, Helen sits back in her wheelchair just in time. She forgets that she can't really walk anymore.

"Okay you all, I think we are ready to start bowling! Dennis, you're the first in line, so that makes you the first to bowl. You can do it!"

I hand him the small plastic bowling ball and as it rolls from his hand I can tell that it isn't anywhere near going to hit the pins. I'm right. The ball rolls under the tables that were pushed to the side and stops spinning right under the piano.

I chase after it and say, "Ah, that's alright, Dennis, it takes some getting used to. Besides, this ball is really light weight. You get one more try."

Dennis just smiles. "Don't worry. I'll get it this time."

I hand him the ball, he rolls, and SMACK! Down all the pins go.

"Woo hoo!!" I shout. The whole room erupts into "yeah!" and "good job!"

We all clap for Dennis.

When I first started this job the administrators told us at orientation that it is very important to encourage the residents. I was told to always make a big deal when a resident achieves something. Because of this we always try to make our activities as fun and as exciting as possible. When dealing with the residents I am often reminded of my life before: teaching. This job is so much like teaching. Encouragement and guiding in the right direction are teaching techniques that I often used in my classroom. Some activities even involve flashcards. Like many times before, I remind myself to push the memories back. I need to get back to bowling I think.

~~~~~

"Dennis won the bowling match, and my back is ready to fall off." I say as I walk into the office.

She laughs, "Why Scarlett, is that you complaining?"

"Me? I never complain."

We both laugh.

"I'm going to the log the activity. Will you hand me the book?"

"Yep, here you go."

I sit down and open the book in my lap. Then, I start logging who was at bowling and how much each resident participated in the activity.

"You know it's really your fault I'm complaining"

"Oh?"

"Yeah, you only ever schedule me to do bowling. Your back doesn't have to hurt!" I laugh.

Julie laughs too. "I'm old Scarlett, my back always hurts!"

Between six one-to-ones and preparing for Amelia Earhart Trivia, the rest of the day flew by.

“Hey, it’s 4:00 on the dot. That means you’re free to go.”

“Thanks Julie. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sure thing!”

I walk back to the time clock and clock out. Then, I turn around and head back for 500 hall to Joda’s room, as I do every day after work.

#### 4

Joda Collins. She’s really something. That woman is 98 years old. No trace of Dementia, no Alzheimer’s, and she walks three laps around the building every day. She amazes me. The only sign that old age has affected her is her eye sight. She often says that she just doesn’t see as well as she used to. Joda is one of those people that can see into your soul, good eyesight or not. She is sweet, kind, and funny. I smile just thinking about her. She reminds me of child-hood summers spent at my grandmother’s house. She’s so smart too. She’s 98 years old and she writes poetry. She says that she fixes the words to the poems just right in her mind until everything is perfect, and then she asks someone to write them down for her. She manages to remember every word, and her poems are so well written. They speak of simple life, long days, and an older generation that has somehow been lost through the past couple of decades. They are easy on the ears and warm on the heart.

I remember the very first time I met Joda. She’s been in the facility for three years, and is one of the very well known residents. I imagine that this has something to do with her attitude, and an amazing outlook on life. Julie knew she would be a fast friend for me. I walked into her room that first time and instantly it was as if Joda had always known me. Julie got called away after introducing me, so I sat and talked for a while. We started off with just small talk that soon turned into a 45-minute conversation. Yet, before I got up to leave things turned serious. I’ll never forget what she said to me.

“Well, Joda, it has been really nice meeting you and I have really enjoyed talking with you, but I had better go get some work done.”

“Okay Ladybug, But first let me you one more thing. I can tell that something bad has happened to you, but that you’re doing a lot better now. Don’t think me forward, but I hope next time you hold your own, and don’t you worry sweetheart, I’ll be praying for you. Now, scoot along before you get into trouble.”

I remember just sitting there in silence for about thirty seconds almost in shock that someone had read me so easily. I finally got up to go to work but even today, almost two months later, my mind is still reeling from that little conversation.

How did she know? What did she mean? Pray? Does that even work? If Joda was a lady that I could get mad at, I probably would’ve been mad. Yet, she said all of that in such a gentle kind way, so how was I supposed to be angry?

I looked up and I was at 400 hall. I completely passed Joda’s room. When my thoughts wander, they really wander, and my feet in turn just take me wherever they want to go. I back track to Joda’s room, 512, and knock on the door.

I hear her audio Bible playing. Because she doesn’t see very well anymore she listens to her Bible every day. Today it’s something from Romans.

“Miss Joda? It’s Scarlett. May I come in?” I shout over the audio player.

“Get your hind end in here and stop asking to come in. You know you’re welcome anytime,” she yelled as I walked through the door.

She turns off the audio player, and the man’s voice reading the scripture is silent.

“Hey, Joda,” I say with a laugh. “You know its employee rules that I knock and state my business before I enter your room, right?”

“I know I know. Doesn’t mean it doesn’t drive me crazy.”

I chuckle.

“So how’s my Lady Bug today?”

“I’m doing well, glad to be off of my feet.”

Joda chuckles. “How’s your back?”

“I swear Joda I feel like I’m the one who should be in here, not you.”

Joda full out laughs. “Oh, Lady Bug, you’re young. Trust me you don’t need to be in here. If I didn’t love you so much I’d be telling you to go home right now, get ready, and go out and find you a man.”

I feel myself automatically stiffen a little, but I force a laugh anyway.

Joda continued, “But because I do love these little afternoon talks with you, I’ll not say that.”

“Good, because trust me I don’t need a man. All they are, is trouble.”

“Not all of them.”

She glanced over at her bedside table and my eyes follow hers, but I already know what we both would be looking at. Stokes. Joda’s late husband. They were married fifty-one years and nine days. They spent a lifetime together. They traveled the country. Stokes built highways and bridges; he and Joda traveled near and far building highways and their life together. Joda’s only regret...no children. They didn’t want that life for a child but she still wishes she could have had just one. It’s the fifty-one years and nine days that amaze me. That’s an eternity together it seems. How do two people last that long? Why couldn’t I have met a man like that? Or at least have kept the man that was like that?

“That’s a once in a lifetime kind of love,” I say aloud.

Joda just smiles.

“Once in a lifetime, you’re right. What about you Scarlett? Do you think you’ll ever find your once in a lifetime love?”

I clear my throat. I’m not really sure how to answer the question.

“Uh well...I don’t...uhmm...” I laugh nervously. “I believe in a once in a lifetime love, but I don’t believe it’s for me.”

“Well at least you believe in love.”

“I believe in independence.”

“Oh, Lady Bug, you know we’ll just argue if you start on independence again.”

I laugh. “Joda, I think you live to debate. You should’ve been a lawyer.”

Joda smiles. “It was my job to be a wife, but my husband was the best sparring partner.”

“Don’t you ever wish you were more than just a wife?”

“Oh, Scarlett, just a wife? I don’t think you realize how much I did as a wife.”

A flashback starts to take hold, me doing dishes, cooking pot roast...

I push it away. I need to change the subject fast. I do not like where this is going.

I clear my throat, “So Joda, guess what’s on the schedule for tomorrow?”

Joda gives me that knowing smile. Like she knows that I am too haunted by ghosts to continue the conversation.

“No ,dear, what’s going on tomorrow?”

“Monthly birthday party,” I smile.

“Oh, tell me we’re having the Red Velvet Cake again!”

We go on to talk for about an hour before it’s time for Joda’s supper and for me to finally head home.

As I walk out of the building I start thinking about supper and the book waiting on me at the cottage. Spaghetti, that sounds really good to me. I think to my cupboards. No sauce I’m quite certain that I’ve no spaghetti sauce.

“Hmm... I’ll just stop by the store,” I think to myself.

It seems I only talk out loud to myself at work, in front of Timothy. And now I'm grinning like an idiot. I laugh at myself, and think, "Well I'm glad no one's driving by right now, or they'd think I'm walking while intoxicated."

I love my job though. The residents are so great. They're just precious, and they definitely help to make my days easier. It's usually hard to have such negative and wayward thoughts when I'm surrounded by such wonderful people.

Joy, however, is a thorn in my side. She's the woman in charge of the entire facility, so I guess she's supposed to be, but jeez. The woman picks on me, I swear. I know that sounds so high school, but I can't stand hypocrites and boy howdy is she a hypocrite. My second week I wore sandals to work. I noticed that everyone else that wasn't a C.N.A. had on flip flops and sandals. So I thought I'll wear mine, they're comfortable. Bad idea. Joy stopped me in the hall.

"Scarlett, dear, can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Sure, what can I do for you, Joy?" I smile sweetly

"Well, you don't need to be wearing those shoes. That's a huge ... uhm ... safety precaution. You're just going to have to leave the heels at home and get some flats."

"Oh, okay." I reply.

She then walks off, but not before I notice that she is wearing sandals. It still burns me up to think about it. My shoes didn't even have heels! The woman just tries to get under my skin.

I shake the thoughts away. At least these thoughts don't leave me quaking in my loafers. I've finally made it to the store. I pick up a basket and make my way through the aisles. I can remember the first time I came in the market. I had just arrived in town by bus. This little store is a popular tourist stop. It was built in the late 1800s. One of the first stores built in this area. Isolated back into this mountain, I'm really surprised people know about it. The driver came over the speaker and told us all that we were going to get a special treat. Not everyone gets to see this little village, but he always takes this route on



the way to Charlotte. The driver said he wanted to retire here one day. I was anxious to see the town. So when we pulled into this little store and I hopped out. The small white building looked like one of those old timey general stores that you see in magazines. It has a huge sign on the front that says:

RIPSHIN MARKET 4

ALL YOU NEED

At first I thought that was kind of corny, but when I walked in I realized two things. They really did have everything you could possibly need, and that it's a lot bigger than it looks on the outside. That first time I bought a cup of coffee that was \$.99. I decided I wanted to stay there with that first sip of coffee. So I just didn't get back on the bus. I decided to stay, stay and see what happens. I walked back into the store and asked about housing and employment. Used half of the amount of money I had and rented the cottage. Then applied for my job, and bought dress clothes. Now, months later here I am.

I've saved more money than I can imagine. In a sock in my top dresser drawer I hide my cash for just-in-cases. I would have never imagined I'd make it this far and be so successful.

Yet, it is never far from my mind that this could all come crashing down at any moment. Everything that I have worked so hard for can be torn to pieces by one person. I like to believe that he will never be able to find me here, but I know better. It's what he does, he finds people. I move to twist the ring that isn't on my finger, and instead end up just rubbing my ring finger. While that shackle is gone, all of the memories associated with it are not.

Jeez, I think too much when I walk. I'm really going to have to buy a bike, or scooter, or something.

I scan the shelves for spaghetti sauce. *Prego* with meat, there it is, just what I needed. I walk by a freezer and spy pre-prepared garlic bread. Perfect, this will make a nice meal. I take it up to the register. The young girl, Brooke, rings up my stuff. Her grandmother, Esther, is one of my residents.

"How's Mamaw?" Brooke asks.

She's doing well, you should stop by sometime." I smile genuinely.

Due to HIPPA and our regulations I'm not allowed to say much more.

Brooke seems to realize this because she says, "Yeah, Scarlett, I might do that."

"Well I know she'd love to see you."

Brooke smiles and gives me back my change.

"Scarlett did you need Phillip to give you a ride? With that stuff it might make for a long walk."

Brooke asks this every time. Phillip is her much older brother, but trust me, I'm not interested.

Plus it's just small town generosity.

"No thanks, hon', I'll be fine, I need the exercise. I'll see you around!"

I walk out with the handles of the grocery bags looped over my arms, and start for home.

## 5

"Well it's been really great talking with you, Joda, but I've got a meeting with John and I need to go change."

"Oh, okay, honey. Tell John that his favorite aunt said hello, and to show you that round house kick!"

I laugh, "Okay Joda I will, I'll see you tomorrow."

John is teaching me martial arts, and self-defense. Somehow Joda knew that was just what I needed. She introduced me to John at work one day and told me that he knew martial arts and taught classes at his own center here in town. Joda gave me a slip for free classes for a year. At first I didn't want to accept her generosity without some form of payment. But as she kindly pointed out, every woman should know self-defense, and we both knew I couldn't afford the classes on my own. So two nights a week I take classes with John. He's taught me a lot. At first I didn't really trust him, but when I learned that he has four daughters and a loving attitude, it was hard not to like him. He also firmly

believes in using violence as a last resort, and has the most easy-going personality. It's almost impossible to make the man angry. That's probably why so many kids look up to him. The classes go a long way in helping to ease the fear of what could happen. At least with what I am learning in class I have hope that even if he does find me maybe I can get away again before something bad happens.

We always meet at the center, but first I walk home, eat a little left over spaghetti and change into soft gray pants and a T-shirt. I pull my hair back, and I'm ready to head to the center.

We always start out by doing free weights and strength building exercises, then move on to cardio. Here lately it's just been John and me. His adult classes have been empty, but he says luckily the children's Tae-Kwan-Do classes have been cram-packed lately. I open the heavy glass door and step inside. There's John dressed in sweats and a white tank. It's just me and him today, but with John I'm comfortable alone.

"Hey, John."

"Hey, Scarlett, let's stretch and start running."

"Sounds good."

After we run one mile on the indoor track, it's finally time to start a little boxing. I wrap my hands and pay special attention to my knuckles before putting on my black leather boxing gloves. These aren't gloves like one would expect from Muhammad Ali or anything. They're just made from a light basic material that goes over my knuckles for protection, but leaves my fingers free to wiggle.

John holds the punching pads, one slipped over each hand. Over and over again, alternating sides, I punch the pads.

"Harder! I want to feel your anger, Scarlett! Don't hit like a scared girl. Hit like an in-charge capable grown woman. Cause that's what you are. Now show it!"

I hit even harder, visualizing *his* face and punching the mat.

"Whoa, Whoa, okay, Scarlett, much better." John smiled. "Okay let's move on to sparring."

“Your favorite aunt said to tell you to show me your round house kick.” I laugh.

John laughs too. “I will.”

We sparred for the rest of class, and I never did get my round house kick down as well as I would have liked. I’ve come a long way though. I realize that I’ve put on muscle and built up stamina, which I definitely needed. It was hard at first; John took a frightened and naive young lady and turned her into someone who is now more confident. I’ve never been able to swat a fly, let alone use self-defense against someone, but I’m tired of being a victim. I won’t do it anymore. That’s why I let Joda give me the slip in the first place; normally my pride would have demanded I reject it.

I pack up my gym bag. I know we’re done for the day.

“Thanks John, I really appreciate the lesson. I’m still working at home too, so I’ll be ready for next week when we start new training exercises.”

“Scarlett,” he said patting my shoulder, “no matter how hard you work at the physical stuff you know it’s really the mental that you need to work on.”

I school my facial features blank.

“I didn’t mean to offend you, Scar, but you’ve got to talk to someone about it. I know you don’t want to, and I know you didn’t really even mean for me to know. But listen, it’s going to drive you crazy, you’re going to have to vent. There are people you can trust here. People who would never say or do anything to hurt you. Okay?”

I open my mouth and close it. I probably look like a guppy.

“Trust, Scarlett, it’s the most important thing.”

Before I can even reply John picks up his gym bag and walks toward his office, at the back of the center.

Just keep the shocks coming. I’m not really sure I’ve ever heard John talk so much—at least real talk anyway. He does that pump-up, motivation, mumbo-jumbo all the time.

Once again on the walk home, I'm plagued by my brain that seems unable to make itself be quiet. Maybe I could trust someone here. Maybe there is someone I can talk to. I didn't really mean for John to find out about what really brought me to Ripshin.

My first day at the center John asked me what I wanted to get out of the experience and out of the class. I didn't really know what to tell him, so I stuck as close to the truth as possible. I simply said, "Well, because I think every woman should know some sort of self defense, in case they're ever in a bad situation."

John didn't have to know that I'd already been in a bad situation and that I had no clue how to defend myself.

He just kind of looked at me as if he didn't really believe what I'd said or that he knew I wasn't really telling the whole story. John just seems to know things.

After I answered the question we got down to business. John showed me basic kicks, how to hold my hands when I punched, I felt like he taught me everything there was to know that first day, but there was so much more. It was my third class when we started sparring. John was being gentle and just showing me a move, but I'd had a nightmare the night before and I was still kind of creeped out. John always commented that I was a fast learner and because I had been doing so well, we got a little carried away while sparring. Before I knew it John had me on the ground with his hand at my throat, he wasn't even applying pressure, but I can't stand for anything to touch my neck, not even a necklace.

It was like my mind went somewhere else, back in time to my nightmare. It wasn't John's gentle hand on my neck, but someone else's. Suddenly, I'm choking and I can't breathe, my eyes even water. I hyperventilate and panic.

John shakes me and just says my name over and over again.

"Scarlett! Scarlett! Scarlett, you're fine. You're okay, okay? Scarlett, look at me."

It's like I finally snap out of it, and look.

“I-I-I’m Sorry, I don’t know what happened.”

“Come on let’s get you up, I’ve got some chocolate in the office, that’ll get your sugar back up.

Do you think you can stand?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine really.”

We walked back to the office, and John got me a Hershey Bar out of what appeared to be his secret stash hidden away in a desk drawer. I remember his sheepish look, when he shut the drawer and said, “My wife doesn’t allow sweets in the house. She’s always on a diet.”

I gave a shaky laugh. “Oh, okay.”

“Now Scarlett, tell me the real reason why you’re here, and don’t try to tell me some junk about self-defense.”

He just appeared so stern, I opened my mouth to say there was nothing more when his gaze softened and he said, “Scarlett, you can trust me, I promise I just want to help you; but I can’t do that unless you tell me what’s really going on here. What are you afraid of? And don’t tell me that you aren’t.”

“I’m really sorry that I freaked out on you John. It’s just the nightmares. I just need to get over them.”

“What are the nightmares about?”

“He finds me.”

“Who finds you?”

“My Husband.”

I don’t know what else to say so I just start rambling.

“I should have never gotten married, but I didn’t know, I just didn’t know.”

“It’s okay Scarlett, you’re out of there now, okay? And it’s good that you are. It was very brave of you. I just have one question. Is he still alive? Looking for you?”

I just nod.

“Okay, well then we’ve got work to do.”

We never spoke another word about it.

Once again my feet have brought me back home without my mind realizing I’ve made it this far. That’s probably a bad habit to have, especially in my circumstance. I need to be alert and aware of my surroundings, but I feel so safe here. It’s really hard not to. This is just a good place in the world. I really like it here. I hope I get to stay.

I walk into the cottage and look around. This place really needs a paint job. It would make it look so much better, and a lot homier. Maybe I could even find some rugs and throw pillows. Tomorrow is my day off so I think I’ll go to the thrift store in town and see what I can find. I’ll spend my four-day weekend re-decorating. That out to keep me busy, and my mind from wandering; maybe I will be too tired to dream.

## 6

“I re-decorated my cottage! It looks so good now. I got some new – well new to me – rugs and curtains. This weekend I think I’ll paint. I’ve already picked out the colors and everything.”

“Well don’t you just sound excited.” Joda chuckles.

“I am!” I laugh too.

“Well it sounds to me like you’re finally starting to feel at home here.”

“Oh, Joda I love it here. The town, the people, it’s all so nice.”

“Then why haven’t you fixed that dump up before now?”

I feign shock. “Joda! I’m appalled that you’d call my cottage a dump!” I try not to laugh, but I can’t control myself. Joda’s face is just too funny.

“I realized after John’s class the other night that I was ready to stay put for a while. I wasn’t really sure how long I’d be staying, but now I’ve decided that maybe a long stay here will do me some good.”

“Well, Lady Bug, I think it will. Plus, I’d like to keep you around for awhile, I kind of like you, ya know.”

I smile. “Yeah, Joda, I know.”

“So I talked to John on the phone for a while last night. He says that you have improved tremendously.”

“Considering I almost cried the first time I hit him, yeah I think I’ve improved.”

“You aren’t one for violence are you, Lady Bug?”

I start to get a little nervous. “No, I’m not, that’s for sure.”

“Your wringing your hands, Scarlett, are you okay?”

“Yeah, Joda, I’m fine. Sorry, it’s been a hectic day.”

“I bet. My momma used to always wring her hands when she was nervous though.”

“Oh put your eyebrows down, Joda, I’m not nervous, just tired.” I lie.

“Uh-huh.”

“You talk about your mom a lot; she must’ve been a special lady,” I say, trying to change the subject.

“Oh she was, sweet and caring, but mean with a hickory switch when I did something that was not to her likin’.”

I laughed, “You got in trouble? Why, Joda, I never pegged you for a trouble maker!”

We both laugh.

“Smarty pants!” she muttered. “Now, Scarlett, tell me about your mother. What was she like?”

Not really where I wanted this conversation to go either, but it could be worse.



“Well both of my parents passed away when I was young, but I still remember them almost perfectly. I look so much like my mom, Joda, it’s unreal. I’ll bring you a picture some time and show you.”

“I’d like that.”

She smiles and pats my hand.

“My parents were those parents that you see on sitcoms. They were always so happy together. They held hands everywhere they went. I can remember thinking that they were so crazy about each other that they were like teenagers. I swear, Joda, they stole kisses in department stores when they didn’t think anyone was looking. It was really sweet. When I was younger, a teenager, I always said I wanted a love like theirs. There was just something special between the two of them. They met in college at freshman orientation, and they were instant friends. They always told me that they didn’t even realize they were in love with each other until their junior year. My dad was in a really bad car accident the summer before they graduated, and my mom said that’s when they realized their feelings for each other. My dad almost died. He was in a head-on collision. A drunk driver. He was wearing his seatbelt and driving a truck. Everyone said he was really lucky. My mom, she stayed by his side for days. When my dad woke up, he proposed. They got married six months later. My mom said they always knew they were meant to be. It just took them awhile to get it together.”

“That’s an amazing story, Scarlett. It reminds me of my husband. You know our story, Lady Bug. We were happy for so many years. How long were your parents been married?”

“They were together nineteen years, almost twenty. Mom had me when she was twenty-four years old. I used to love to listen to my dad talk about how happy she was when she was pregnant. She always said it was the happiest time of her life. When I was a little girl they did everything with me. The zoo, Disney World, Washington D.C.—we traveled a lot. My parents loved seeing the country, and I did too. I was so amazed by the Washington Monument. I think I was probably seven or eight the first time I

ever saw it. My parents got us there early enough to go inside and ride the elevator up to the top. It was the most amazing view I'd ever seen. I think it still might be, although the view of the mountains from my kitchen window is pretty close in that competition. I loved the Capitol Building too. But while I was in college a boy said that every time he looked at that building he saw corruption. I had never thought of it like that, ya know? I just remembered how awesome it looked from the view of the top of the world. I've always been naïve Joda, ever since I was a little girl. I just like to believe the best in everyone, but I know better now. I got lost from my parents once at Disney World. I got in line to ride Dumbo, and they didn't realize what I'd done. I swear I can still hear the panic in my mom's voice, even after she found me. That's when we had the huge talk about strangers, which of course I couldn't comprehend. Why would anyone steal a child, right? Everyone is as great as my mom and dad. They wouldn't take anyone. Of course the world didn't really work like that.

"I was only sixteen when they died, but their lessons still stick with me. I went to live with my aunt, who is a nice lady, but she just wasn't my parents. After I graduated from high school, I moved out. I got a scholarship to George Washington University in Washington D.C., and so I went. I got a job working on campus and I was happy. I stayed in touch with my aunt though. She never got married or had kids, so we were the only family each other had. She passed away my senior year and then it was just me."

"So many losses at such a young age Lady Bug, I'm so sorry." Joda says sincerely.

"Yeah. Me too," I say with my eyes downcast.

"My parents take care of me every day. Even though they aren't here they are still finding ways to watch out for me."

"What do you mean?"

Well for starters my real name isn't Scarlett." I say with a little hesitantly.

Joda gives me a knowing sly smile. "What's your real name, Lady Bug? I promise not to tell anyone, and you know your secret is always safe with me."

"My name is Chelsea." I say with a weak grin.

"Well, Chelsea, I think that you look much more like a Scarlett. It fits you better.

"Funny you would say that."

Joda gives me a questioning look.

"My mother's name was Scarlett."

We both smile.

"So what did you do after everyone in your life had passed away?"

## 7

"I decided to stay in Washington D.C. though. I mean, like I said, to me it was amazing there. Everything I could ever want to see was there. I loved it. I started my senior year of college and moved out of the dorms and into an apartment with my best friend. I was ready to get my life going. We lived in a nice apartment in an area downtown. It's called Crystal City, and we lived in the Crystal Clear Apartment Complex. Real original, I know."

We laugh.

"Anyway, so Taylor, that was my best friend's name, she picked out the apartment. We loved it so much more than the dorms on campus. Of course, catching the Metro was a bit more difficult than just walking to class every day, but it was worth it. We both got jobs at a nearby restaurant and we were happy. Two independent, young women, living on their own; we thought we were unstoppable. Once again, that was probably me being naïve, but we never felt threatened, and we lived in a good neighborhood. My parents, gosh, they probably would have had a fit if they were alive and knew what I was doing. I always thought they were overprotective, but they just cared about me. They would have

never let me live in that apartment. They would have said campus was much safer, and they were probably right. But Taylor's dad was a police officer and she grew up shooting guns. She had her carry permit. I always felt safe with her and the gun she carried. Like I said, we thought we were well prepared and unstoppable. And we were fine for that first semester, everything was really great. No one ever bothered us, and living in D.C. was like one great big adventure. Taylor and I spent every weekend studying for classes while looking at the view from the steps of the Jefferson Memorial. We tried to never stay out after dark though. We knew we shouldn't push our luck unless we absolutely had to. I was more careful than Taylor. I guess growing up with her father she didn't feel as paranoid as I always did. I blame my parents for that. I was an only child and they were always so overprotective. If those child leashes had been invented when I was a small child, my parents would have bought several of those to match various outfits, I swear. They just didn't want to lose me, ya know? But that was a good thing, especially since I now lived in a big city; it prepared me. I was always aware of my surroundings and things going on around me. I never walked and listened to music. I listened for people following me and those around me. But Taylor, she never did things like that, she was completely opposite. She always worried me, but nothing bad ever happened to her."

"But something bad happened to you didn't it?"

"How?..."

"I can see where you're going with this Lady Bug."

"Well, you're right something did happen."

## Chelsea

### 8

I stayed at school way later than I normally do. I had a huge paper due in one of my classes. The professor was really picky about our work, so I wanted my paper to be perfect. I worked really hard on it, but I couldn't get the file to save right on my computer at home. So I thought I could just do it after class. The paper wasn't due until midnight so I knew I'd have time. It didn't take me long at all to get the paper submitted. The computers in the library were very compatible with the format that the teacher requested, so it was easy. There were other students in my class doing the same thing and we all ended up in a study room together, sipping coffee, and talking about our papers, school, and just everything. Before I knew it I had lost track of time because it was nice to just have a conversation with some of my peers. But I shouldn't have stayed out so late. I should've watched the time and gone home. We all left the library together, but most of the people I had been talking with lived on campus. There was one other girl that rode the Metro, so we walked together to the station. We boarded different trains and went on our way. There weren't many people headed to Crystal City; only a handful including me. Two stops before mine a guy around my age got on the train. He looked around before sitting in the seat beside of me. I couldn't figure out why he sat next to me when he could have sat anywhere on the train. There were plenty of options. But honestly, I wasn't going to complain because he was pretty good looking, and tall. I've always been a sucker for tall guys.

The guy from the Metro, he talked to me and was really friendly. I didn't think much about it. I just assumed he was being nice, ya know? The train came to my station, and I went to get off the train. I realized that it was his stop too so we got off together, and then went our separate ways. I started walking home, but because it was so dark I was paying extra attention to all of my surroundings. So much so I was making myself a nervous wreck. My adrenaline was pumping and I was all but running to my apartment. I still don't know how I knew something was off and wrong that night, but I just did.

Instinctively I knew it was a bad situation. I tried so hard to hurry home, to just get to my building. I stayed in the light and on the side walk, I didn't go down any alleys, I even tried to keep other people that were walking in my sight. It was so late that night that hardly anyone was out on the street, so it made it hard. The street light right before my building was burnt out that night. There's a dark driveway that is attached to the neighboring building that is right behind that street light. The light always made that area a little less creepy, except for tonight. I just knew there was something bad in that alleyway.

As I'm hurrying past I look over and see the guy from the Metro. For a moment, just a second I feel a sense of relief, until he starts walking towards me, with what I recognize now as the gait of a predator. Then, I realized he wasn't just being nice. It's like he had marked me. I was so close to my apartment building. I couldn't believe that I'd made it this far only to be attacked at my own apartment. I started to run. I was sure that I could make it to the building. That's when he grabbed me, he was so strong, and there was nothing I could do. I screamed, I kicked, but he threw me onto the asphalt and told me to shut up or it'd be worse. I continued to fight and scream, as he sat on my body. I remember thinking, this is not happening, this cannot be happening to me. I decided that I was not going to let it happen unless I was unconscious. I bit his hand. He had it over my mouth and I bit hard. Then, I screamed as loud as I could and he was screaming too. I had bitten him after all. Someone finally heard us, heard me. He was my knight in shining armor, my rescuer. This man, he seemed larger than life. He pulled the man off of me and punched him. One punch, that's all it took, and I stood there thinking, why couldn't I do that?

My rescuer was a soldier from Fort McNair. He had been walking by after attending a dinner meeting. He was wearing his ACU's, combat boots, and as he says was just doing what he's trained for. He promised he wouldn't leave me, and he didn't. He helped me through talking with D.C. police and answering all the questions he could.

Later that night once I had settled down some he took me for pancakes at the IHOP right down from my apartment. Apparently, food would help to combat the shock that I was going through. He also gave me his number saying that if I ever needed anything just to call. Then he walked me back to my apartment. He was a perfect gentleman, and so kind. I was so afraid to go anywhere. I didn't even want to go to class the next day. I, of course, told Taylor everything that night when I got home and she said that I couldn't let fear run my life, and I knew she was right. She walked me to class the next day, but I was so jittery I'm not sure I remembered anything that we talked about. I do remember that there Fort McNair was to walk me home. I didn't know how he knew what time my class was over, but every day he walked me home that week. He even carried my bag and my books. He was so good to me and so kind. He was reassuring and gave me a sense of stability that I thought I needed at the time. At the end of the week he asked me to go out to dinner with him on Saturday, and I agreed.

He was charming, charismatic; he was well traveled, smart. So very smart, probably the most intelligent man I have ever met. I learned so much about him at dinner that night. He'd been in the military ten years, but had never had to serve a tour overseas. For six years he worked his way up the ladder in military police before getting his degree and commissioning as an officer and becoming part of Army Central Intelligence. I remember thinking that he was so smart that he seemed to be in the right position. We dated recklessly after that. I told him secrets from childhood, what normal college is like, since he went to online school, and about how excited I was to be a teacher. I shared my hopes and dreams with this man, and I felt like we were meant to be together. And I think that he thought so too.

We had only been dating six months when he proposed. It was over Christmas break. D.C. is the most beautiful city during the winter; especially during the holidays. We had gotten tickets to the Christmas tree lighting and even though it was down into the teens that night and snowing heavily he insisted that we still attend. Of course, I wasn't going to object. I was too excited. I had always wanted to attend the tree lighting. It was there under all the twinkling lights that he got down on one knee and

said that even though it had only been a short amount of time, he felt as if we had known each other forever. He said that while being in the military he's learned to never let an opportunity pass him by. And that he wasn't going to let me slip through his fingers because he knew a good thing when he saw it.

## **Scarlett**

### **9**

"So he asked me to marry him and of course I said yes. And the ring, Joda, oh my gosh, the ring. It was absolutely gorgeous. Later I would find out that he didn't do mediocre in any aspect, and that's especially true in regards to the engagement ring he placed on my finger. It had a very antique and vintage look to it. The band was sculpted by pave diamonds while the center stone was a two carat princess cut sparkling diamond. My jaw dropped. It was the most amazing piece of jewelry I'd ever seen. Little did I know that diamond ring would soon become my own personal shackle. Everyone cheered as we kissed in the twinkling lights and I went home to immediately start planning a wedding."

"So you started planning your wedding? What date did you pick, and what happened?" Joda asks earnestly.

## **Chelsea**

### **10**

We set the date for May 20<sup>th</sup>. I was graduating in May and planning to submit applications to various school systems all over the city. It just seemed so right. I was becoming an adult, getting a job, getting married, and on my way to starting a family.



I wanted a simple affair for the wedding, but it didn't really seem to go that way. We just kept coming up with people to invite. As I told everyone at the time the groom knew too many people. I guess being in the military you make a whole lot of friends. Our guest list grew and grew and by the time our RSVPs came back we had 100 people more than I had originally planned. I didn't know what to do. I didn't have enough of anything. I needed more centerpieces, flowers, table cloths, tables themselves! Not to mention chairs and chair covers! It was a disaster.

The only solution was to go and buy more stuff. This wedding cost way too much. I would've never spent so much money. But he wanted it, and it was his money. I didn't really care about having a big wedding and after planning one, I really wish it had been a small affair.

Finally the day arrived, May 20<sup>th</sup>, it was a Saturday, and it was beautiful! Blue sky, big white fluffy clouds, and 72 degrees, a slight breeze blew through, blowing the decorations and flowers, a perfect temperature and a perfect day. There were many people who told me I wouldn't remember a thing from my wedding, but they were wrong I remember everything. I was so nervous, anxious, and my stomach was full of butterflies.

## **Scarlett**

### **11**

"Even though it was a beautiful day? You were still nervous?"

I smile, "Oh yeah, a beautiful day definitely took some stress off, but I was still a ball of nerves. I felt like I was a hot mess. It was a really crazy day. We got married in front of a gazebo at a historic home in Washington D.C. It was astonishing. The house had been remodeled and the finery; it was unlike anything I'd ever seen before. There were crystal chandeliers, Persian rugs and a grand staircase, and that's not including the wall paper. That house, that mansion was surreal. The grounds were just as

extravagant. We held the reception in the garden. The azaleas were in bloom, a fountain was splashing water, and soft music filled the air. It was spectacular. Truly, the loveliest garden I've ever seen.

When the tables and chairs filled the garden it was a miraculous sight. The various colors of pink that we chose for our colors looked perfect. It was hard work getting those tables set up. I almost thought that Taylor and I weren't going to make it to our hair appointments on time."

"Taylor, your roommate?"

"Yes my roommate." I grin. "She was my maid of honor. We had a really good time. The flower arrangements were made from hydrangeas, roses, daisy's, and greenery. Real flowers and they were beautiful. They smelled so sweet and perfumed the atmosphere perfectly. While the centerpieces looked amazing, the table cloths not so much. The company sent the wrong thing to start with. The table cloths were a very dingy white instead of a bright white. The table cloths looked old, but that wasn't the worst part. They were dirty! They had stains, they were wrinkled; they just looked really bad. Taylor and I just kept saying over and over again what are we going to do and luckily the venue had rental table cloths, so it was a problem easily fixed, but we were almost late."

"But you did it and you got yourself all prettied up for your soon to be husband."

"Aw, you're getting all misty eyed Joda." I tease

"I do love a good wedding." Joda laughed "So what happened? How did it go?"

"Well we got back to the mansion and started getting ready. I know I said I wanted a simple wedding, but I wanted an incredible dress and I got one. It did take 45 minutes to get me into though."

We both laugh.

"It was gorgeous, Joda, elegant, simple, and breathtaking. It was strapless with a sweetheart neckline. It was an a-line silhouette and very flattering covered in lace, and a beautiful train. It had a cream colored sash with rhinestones that tied around my waist. Taylor added a small tiara and I felt like a princess straight out of a Disney movie. It was the most amazing day. We laughed, cried, danced, and

had the perfect wedding. The night was magical, the perfect back drop for my fairy tale. I was so happy, I thought my life was perfect, and in that moment maybe it was. We went to London on our honeymoon. He knew that I always wanted to go. It was such a surprise. I saw so many iconic places! The Globe, Canterbury Cathedral; my literary heart was in heaven. I got to see King Lear performed in London, at the Globe! Nothing can ever match that experience. I can't even describe what it was like. We had such an amazing time I didn't want to come home, but I knew that we had to."

"So what happened after the honeymoon? Where did you all live? I'm a gossiping old woman, and I need the details!"

We both giggle at that statement.

"We rented an apartment together in D.C. We didn't see any reason to live anywhere else. He was still stationed there, and I loved the city, so we stayed. I got a job at an elementary school teaching second grade. It was my dream job. Even though we were in a big city, it was a small school with great kids. I loved it. Second grade is one of the best age groups. I was happy with my job. He was happy with his job, and we were doing really well."

"Why do I feel like there's a 'but' in here somewhere?"

I smile. Joda can always read me; even when I'm just recounting a memory.

"You probably feel like that because there is one."

"Continue on then, Lady Bug."

## Chelsea

### 12

One day, not long after we had gotten settled in, he got a notification stating that he would be deploying. They didn't tell him where yet, but then again sometimes the Army doesn't until a couple

weeks before. They didn't tell him an exact date either, just sometime in April, and this was in December. We had time to prepare, but as newlyweds it's hard. Especially considering that we had hardly been apart since he came to my rescue that night. I was a new military wife. It was a really scary thought. My husband going to a foreign land, being gone for a year, and the constant worry. I was worried and he hadn't even left yet.

Do you have any idea how hard it is getting a soldier ready to deploy? There's a checklist and a million items he needed washed, bought, or fixed. It was a huge list, but we had time to prepare. Sometime in late January he came home wrapped me up in a hug and told me he'd be leaving for Afghanistan on April 16<sup>th</sup>.

We just had a few months left together, but we made the most of it. We toured the city and took weekend trips to Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia Beach. I didn't want April to come. My husband was a good man then. If I knew how the man I got back from the war would be I would have done anything to keep him from going. But the day came, the buses pulled up, we kissed good bye, and he rode away. I didn't know it yet, but that would be the last time I saw the man I married.

Life went on while he was gone. Waiting on his emails, his letters, and the occasional phone call was all I could do. Those first few weeks I didn't have a very good support system. While we lived on base I didn't know very many people, and I didn't have anyone to talk to.

Then, the school hired a new 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher, Mrs. Jenkins, but I called her Beth, which was her first name. She was also an army wife with a deployed husband, and we became very close. We bonded over the next year and I really needed that. We were there for each other, for everything.

My husband didn't get to take leave halfway through his deployment. He was really discouraged, but he always stayed positive. His letters, emails, and phone calls were all always sweet, positive, and full of sentences saying how he wanted to come home. So I thought everything was okay. I

mean I knew there were certain things he couldn't talk about, but I thought my husband would come home almost the same man as when he left.

Beth's husband had been deployed two times before so she had some knowledge that I didn't. We would talk for hours about our husbands, what they were doing, and if they were okay. Beth gave me excellent advice during one of these talks.

We were sitting in her living room in front of a blazing fire with two cups of tea, when our conversation turned from a light-hearted topic, to a much more serious tone. I'm not sure who started the conversation, me or her, but we started discussing what life would be like when our husbands returned. I'll never forget what she told me.

"I wonder how Thomas will act when he gets back this time," Beth said.

I remember being puzzled as I asked, "What do you mean?"

She said, "Well every time he comes home from a deployment the first few weeks or even months are different than before he left. His first deployment he came back and couldn't sleep with the lights off. And when we slept he would hold me so tight to him I couldn't breathe. But it slowly wore off. He started turning the hallway light out at night and he started sleeping on his side of the bed again. Months later he even told me of some of the things he saw and events that took place. I didn't really know what to say. But the second deployment that was a lot different. He got back home and didn't want to talk, didn't want to touch, didn't sleep well, and he was just quiet. He eventually snapped out of it, but even now he doesn't really talk much. He's never told me one story about his second tour. Which is okay, but I just think it'd be bad to keep everything bottled up. He was okay though. We've survived two deployments and going strong, so don't worry, dear, your marriage will too. Your hair just might have a few gray strands that weren't there before."

Beth always made me laugh. She saw the positive in every negative. We made life bearable for each other while our husbands were away. Finally, a year had passed. It was closer to May before I

actually got to see my husband, but I knew he was out of danger when they started home in April. It was a gloomy day, dreary, gray rain clouds hung in the sky, although it never really rained. It was more like a light mist that fell from the sky and coated everything. It was so cold. Beth and I bundled up in warm clothes and jackets to wait for the buses to arrive.

## **Scarlett**

### **13**

“What happened we he got there Scarlett?” Joda asks with a serious tone.

“When he finally stepped off of that bus, it was the most amazing moment. I was so happy to see him. He smiled and I smiled. We were both so goofy. It’s odd seeing someone again when you haven’t seen them in a year. I think I thought that we’d pick right back up where we left off. Our first kiss didn’t lead me to believe any different either. It was like a real first kiss all over again. All magic sparkles and butterflies. Then, we started normal life again.”

“How did that go? You all getting back into your normal routine?”

## **Chelsea**

### **14**

We got settled back into our apartment and our lives. Beth was right though. Everything was different now. My husband was a different man. At first I told myself that things would get better, but later I knew we’d never be the same. The first few weeks he was back home he didn’t want to spend any time with me at home. He always wanted to be out with his friends, his brothers from battle, which I understood. Those were the men that he did everything with for an entire year. It was okay until I learned that the men were bringing their wives, it was just me who wasn’t invited. I know it sounds

childish on my part but he avoided me like I had the plague or something. He didn't talk to me, wouldn't eat at the table with me, and he always came to bed after I was asleep. I thought maybe his feelings had changed, I mean he'd been away for a long time. I tried to ask him about it once and he just screamed at me. That was the first time he had ever raised his voice to me. I didn't know what to think. We just kept on living separate lives. I went to work, taught my sweet second graders, and he went to work doing training and paperwork. I made dinner, ate alone, and left a plate in the microwave for him to warm up once he got home. He was in bed after I went to sleep and up before I awoke in the mornings.

After two months I finally broke down and told Beth about it. She suggested counseling. I didn't know how to bring that suggestion up without starting a huge fight though. But at this point I was willing to try anything. I took a day off from school, and decided to stay and talk to him at lunch. I knew he always came home for lunch and I thought that'd be a good time to catch him.

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For once he didn't yell. "What are you doing here?" He asked.

"I was waiting for you, I didn't know any other time that we could talk, and we really need to talk."

"What is it now?"

"Listen, I'm not fussing, and I don't want to get into a fight. I just want to talk. We haven't spoken in more than two words to each other since you have been back. I just want to be able to spend time with my husband, I've missed you. Haven't you missed me?"

He just stood there and stared at me. I wasn't sure what was going to happen, but I was preparing for the worst.

"Babe, I'm sorry, I don't know what's been wrong with me lately. I'm just not myself, but I want to be. Let's go out tonight, just us. It'll be a date. You come home and get dressed up and we'll see if we can get me and us back to normal, what do you think?"

"I..I..I think that sounds wonderful." I said as I threw my arms around him.

“I’m so sorry babe.”

“It’s okay, you’ve had a hard year, I just want us to be okay.”

“We will be.”

## **Scarlett**

### **15**

“It wasn’t the answer I wanted, but how could I argue with him, Joda? He said he wanted to work on us and I thought he did.”

“Well how did the date go? And things after?”

“The date was amazing, dinner and dancing. He was a perfect gentleman. For a brief moment I got a glimpse of the man I used to know. It was our last good night together. We come home and we actually went to bed together. Just to sleep, but it was nice to lie down at the same time.”

## **Chelsea**

### **16**

I was sound asleep when it happened. I was dreaming about our wedding, in my dream the day was just as perfect as it was in real life. When suddenly all of my air was cut off, I couldn’t breathe, my eyes flew open. My husband was on top of me holding me down with his hands wrapped around my throat. Squeezing the life out of me with his bare hands. I begged him to stop through short breaths. I tried to pull his hands off but he was a lot stronger than I was. Once I realized that he really wasn’t going to let go, I knew I had to do something. I wiggled until I had my knee positioned just right, and then I swung it up into his groin. He immediately loosened his hold and rolled off of me.



That's when I noticed that my husband was sound asleep. Even the knee to the groin didn't wake him. He was still out cold, snoring, and seemed content. I scrambled up from the bed, and ran down the hall to the couch. I wrapped myself in blankets, and hours later managed to fall back to sleep.

He woke me the next morning by shouting goodbye as he walked out the door. I inched open my eyes, slipped out from under the blankets, and slowly walked to the bathroom. I stood in front of the mirror staring in horror at the black, blue, and purple rainbow handprints that spanned my entire throat. With trembling legs I walked to my closet and pulled out a turtle neck and a cardigan sweater. Luckily, it was cold out so I could go to work dressed as I was. Once I got there I realized that I would've been better off staying at home. I was completely useless to the students at school, and all I did all day was worry about going home.

I was terrified of going to sleep, especially in our bed. That night I stayed up really late, and then slept on the couch. I had a robe wrapped around me. I wasn't sure how my husband would react when he saw what he had done. I didn't know what to expect and I didn't know how to tell him that I was afraid of what he'd do next while he was asleep.

The next morning he shook me awake. He said my name over and over again until I coherent. Of course my hands immediately went to my throat.

"What's wrong?" I asked as I scoot away from him.

"Why are you sleeping on the couch? You never came to bed last... what happened to you neck? Move your hands! Who hurt you? Who did this to you? You can tell me sweetheart, I'll make it better, just tell me who hurt you."

My eyes filled up with tears as I struggled to say, "You. You hurt me. You did this."

His eyes widened and he looked at me with absolute horror.

"You didn't mean to. You were asleep. You did this in your sleep."

“I-I did this. Oh, honey, I didn’t mean, how could I do this to you?” he cried. “Please forgive me. I don’t know what’s going on with me. I’m so sorry, so so so sorry.”

“It’s okay, but you are going to have to get some kind of help okay? Counseling, therapy, whatever it takes. Promise me. “

“Okay, I just don’t want to be like this anymore. I’d never hurt you.”

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I had never seen my husband cry before. I think I was in shock. He seemed so sincere in his apology and I really thought that the therapy or counseling would help. I thought that his problem was some sort of sleep disorder stemming from PTSD. I thought he could beat it. I honestly thought it was just a phase. I was wrong.

We went to counseling and at first it seemed to help. I thought that there was some improvement, and maybe there was. After all, he never attacked me in his sleep again. But then, he didn’t have to.

Pretty soon everything I did was wrong, everything I suggested was wrong, I couldn’t do anything right anymore. My husband started drinking. He loved to get lost in the bottle. Unfortunately for me, he wasn’t a very funny drunk. He was just mean. He didn’t drink all the time, not in the beginning anyway. He didn’t start drinking until after he stopped going to therapy. To me, he was taking the easy way out. He didn’t want to cope with his problems, and so he didn’t. Instead of this helping things to get better they only became worse.

My husband started looking at porn on the internet, and he was always talking to girls in online chat rooms. He couldn’t bring himself to touch me so I guess that was all he could do. Listen to me; I’m still making up excuses for him. I didn’t know what to do. I felt inadequate, but it’s not like I could make him want me. So I developed low self-esteem, and blamed myself. I thought maybe that way of blowing off steam would help him. I didn’t stop hoping that the man I married would come back to me.”

Then he started cheating on me in the literal sense. I never caught him the act, thank goodness, but I will never forget the day I found out that the internet wasn't his only extracurricular activity.

He left his phone at home when he went to work one day. I was out of school that week for Thanksgiving break. His phone rang and rang. I finally looked at it, and decided that I should answer it, and tell whoever was calling that they would need to call back later. I was kind of suspicious because the name on the caller ID wasn't one that I was familiar with. Well, when I answered it was a woman's voice.

When he came home that evening I asked who Charlene was, and then let him know that she had called about ten times throughout the day. I'll never forget the eerie grin he gave me when he said that she was just a friend and that I didn't need to worry. I pursued the matter just because of that grin. There was something unsettling about it. I knew he was lying, so I pushed. And so did he, literally. I flat out told him that I knew he was lying and for him to tell me who she was. I may have raised my voice, but I was so tired of it, just so tired of him and his crap.

Then he smacked me, right across the face, and calmly, too calmly, said for me not to question him, and not to accuse him of things. I remember he told me that Charlene helped him ways I never could. Yeah, he actually said that to me. That statement hurt worse than the bruised cheek.

Pretty soon I wasn't allowed to leave the house. I had to quit my job, and he sold my car. If I dared to question his motives he made sure to silence me. Even though he didn't want me anymore, no one else could either. I still don't understand why he didn't just let me leave. Why he didn't divorce me; I just don't understand it. I had to be dressed to kill just to cook dinner, which had to be cooked to perfection. I wasn't allowed to move the thermostat above 70 degrees and everything had to be cleaned spotless.

I couldn't see Beth, and I couldn't go to the grocery store alone. I was afraid to do anything. I knew one wrong move, and the repercussions would be horrendous. He hit me for the stupidest reasons. If I left a spot on a plate, if my hair was too straight, if I had to go to the grocery store, even if I talked too little during dinner; anything would cause a blow. He beat me even though the spot was tiny and I hadn't finished washing the dishes yet, he said he liked my hair straight, and he yelled if I talked too much at dinner. He always planned the grocery store trips for Saturday, and then would complain if he missed a game on TV. I didn't know how to please him. I had to walk on egg shells every day, afraid what would happen when one cracked.

I tried to run once. I didn't get very far. It was snowing and I ran out in pumps. He caught me right outside the city. When we got home he beat me so badly I stayed in the hospital overnight. Of course he told them that I had fallen down the stairs. Too bad they didn't know that we lived in a one story house, that didn't have stairs. I know what you're thinking. Why didn't I call the police, right? You forget; he was the police. Every military police officer that had ever been to our house listened to what he had to say, not me. I never received any help; not from the military anyway.

I knew if I was going to escape that I'd have to do it myself, and I would actually have to have a plan. I needed a real plan, not one that consisted of me just running.

Lucky for me he had forgotten that I had a separate account with some money that parents left for me. I'm so glad that I only mentioned it once in passing, and he never asked any questions about it. The main account holders were of course my parents; my name was just added on. I had wanted to save the money for my children's college fund, if I ever had children that is. But I knew that getting away from him, and that situation was the most important thing.

After I established that idea, I had to think long and hard about everything else. It was difficult because I could not go anywhere or talk to anyone. It was hard trying to come up with something, anything, a way for him not to be able to find me.

I was really scared. I didn't know if I was smart enough to create an escape plan, let alone carry it out. I was at a really low point in my life, but deep down I knew that I couldn't continue to be treated worse than an animal. I had nowhere to go but up.

A few months later, I had finally thought of a general idea, and then the perfect opportunity presented itself. My husband came in one evening and said that in the following week he would be going on an overnight trip to New York. I knew I wouldn't have much time, but it would have to be enough.

I knew that the phone would be a problem. It was the first thing on my list to take care of. My husband always called when he got to work, a few hours later, and before he left. He came home for lunch and called several times throughout the day. My husband didn't know very much about the electricity breaker box in our home, but I did. I cut the power to the phone and messed up the jacks while he was in the shower the morning he was supposed to leave.

He came down to a breakfast that consisted of eggs, bacon, and toast all prepared to perfection. We ate mostly in muted silence, and then he went to check the phone only to find it not working. I knew he would get angry so I quickly suggested that he use his cell to call the phone company. He called and they gave him some story about having outages in the area, but that they were working diligently to fix it. Companies are known to give excuses, I'm just glad that the excuse worked in my favor for once.

He decided then to leave his cell phone with me so that he could call to check up on me. He would use a colleague's phone, and all was well. I cleaned the dishes and started the dishwasher while

he gathered his briefcase and overnight duffel. We said our goodbyes, I endured his kiss, and he was gone. I waited 30 minutes to make sure he didn't return and then gathered what I absolutely needed in order to leave. My grandmothers' jewelry, some clothes, hair brush, Converse, and toothbrush were all I needed.

I grabbed a hooded sweatshirt followed by a jacket and made my way to the door. I swung the bag over my shoulder and as I started to turn the knob the cell phone rang. My heart was pounding through my chest, but I flipped it open and said hello. I thought I had been caught, I didn't know how, but I just knew he knew what I was up to. But he didn't he just said they were boarding the plane, perfect timing.

I ran one mile to Beth's house. Even though I haven't seen her in what seemed like ages, I knew she would help me. When I got there I banged on her door, and when she opened it her facial expression told me that I must've looked awful. She didn't know why I was there to see her after all this time, but like a true friend she didn't ask and questions. She just offered her help and needed to know what I needed. I told her I know I had to escape but I know I could never make it on foot. She gave me a ride to the bus station in Virginia. We were hoping that he wouldn't realize I had traveled so far to buy a bus ticket. I bought a ticket that would take me to Maine, it was the cheapest ticket and I needed to go somewhere that I would be safe for a few days before I traveled further. I forgot about the cell phone. He called later that night and I meant to throw the phone away the very next morning, but by the time I got settled into my roach infested motel room I forgot. He tracked the phone, but luckily I had an escape route planned out. I had an uneasy feeling when I woke up that morning. For one think I woke up really early, it was 4:30 AM and I was wide awake. I started packing up my very few belongings and I just felt like I had to get out of there I got dressed and threw on my old Converse sneakers and grabbed my bag. I started for the door but first I looked between the yellowing curtains to the parking lot below and I saw his car sitting in the lot. He didn't realize I was awake yet, but that's when I realized the only link

between us was the phone. I dug it out of my pack and threw it under the bed. Then I opened the window on the other side of the room and climbed out. I asked for a first floor room just in case something like this happened. I started to run. I picked a motel close to the bus station so I could move quickly from one place to the other. I ran down the street and I heard his footsteps behind me. I don't know how he saw me, but he did. My Converse pounded the pavement as I tried to figure out a way to lose him.

## 19

I knew that I had somewhat of an advantage because I had scoped out the area last night, but I couldn't discount that he might have done the same thing. I cut down an alley and took a quick left turn down a small street and then circled back to the bus station. I bought the cheapest ticket that was offered, and I left just like that. I had managed to escape again. The first stop the bus made was in Connecticut. I got off at the station and immediately went to buy another ticket. I was tired of the upper coast. My time in the upper east part of the country had so far only brought me bad circumstances and events. I thought it was time for a change. I booked a ticket to take me to Florida. Sun, sand, and palm trees sounded like the best place to be. The bus that I took from Maine was scheduled to have its final stop in Missouri, needless to say that isn't where I ended up, but I was hoping that he would think I traveled there and then further west. In reality I took a bus from Connecticut to Florida; with many stops in between. Some of the stops we made were in Kentucky and then here in Tennessee.

## Scarlett

## 20

"And you liked it so much that you decided to stay?" Joda asks with a smile.

I grin, "Yeah. I think it was the mountains. I would've never found Ripshin Mountain if it hadn't been for the bus driver though. Apparently he travels here often, and he wanted to show us how beautiful it is here. Normally the buses don't stop at the market for a quick snack, but he always stopped there. I took one look around and I just knew that this was where I am supposed to be. I am so thankful that my parents saved enough money for me to be able to make it here. It was the only way I was able to make my escape. It wasn't very much money, and I didn't always eat, but I had enough to get away from him. I spent the last of the money on the first month's rent for the cottage, two sets of second hand dress clothes, and a few meager staples to eat. I didn't eat for two days before my first pay check."

"Oh, Scarlett, no wonder you're so thin."

"Scarlett was my mother's name. When I went and got the money out of their bank account I found their Social Security cards, birth certificates, and driver's licenses tucked away in a lock box. My parents lawyers must have had them stored there for safe keeping. My mother and I look so much alike that it was easy to assume her identity. They haven't been gone that long, and no one said anything when I started using her Social Security number again. I was really nervous when I had the background check done for this job, but it all turned out okay. Or at least it has so far. I'm just crossing my fingers and my toes that he doesn't think to look into my parents records. I never talked about them, and he never asked; hopefully I am safe."

We smile softly at each other.

"Thank you, Joda."

"Whatever for?"

"For listening."

"Just one more thing, Lady Bug."

"What's that, Joda?"

"What was his name? You never said, and I need to know to look out for this man."



“Oh,” I laugh, “I suppose it’s silly but I hate saying his name out loud. I just want to forget all about him, but I will tell you his name. His name is....

## **Malone**

### **21**

“Malone Truman, reporting for duty, sir.” I say as I enter my office on base.

“Good morning, Lieutenant,” says Lieutenant Colonel Sharp.

I walk around the corner and sit down at my desk and begin the tedious work that military intelligence requires. Analyzing data, configuring strategic battle moves, and which soldiers the army needs most in certain areas of the war. All I can think about is Chelsea. I just have to wait until the weekend and I can put in a pass and search for her further. I have to get her back. She’s mine. Doesn’t she realize she’s mine? Who does she think she is just leaving my like that. I clutch the pencil in my hand and SNAP, it breaks in half. I have got to control my anger. I breathe in and I breathe out. I am an intelligent man, I can find her, it is my job to find people, to figure out where they go. I can do this, and when I get her back I am going to hug her, and kiss her, and....beat her black and blue. She makes me so angry, so so so angry! Where would she go? Why would she go? Where did she get the money? I have watched her bank account, the credit cards, and her driver’s license. It is as if she disappeared into thin air, but that isn’t possible. She has to be using a fake name, but whose? Someone has to be helping her. There is no way she could have made it this long without using any of her resources. I’m going to figure it out, and I am going to find her.

“Truman! Are you getting any work done in there? I needed that brief yesterday!” Sharp barks.

I hate that man. He thinks he knows everything, but I am much more intelligent. Maybe when I get Chelsea back I can get his job, it’s about time for a promotion.

“Yes, sir. It’s almost done, sir.” I try not to sneer.

## 22

I unlock the door to the white house that Chelsea and I live in. Chelsea thought it was the prettiest house on base, and I knew she had to have it. I gave her everything. She wanted this white house with its navy shutters, and a red door, so I got it for her. I pulled some strings in command and the previous tenants were moved to a new home a couple blocks down the street. As I step inside I imagine seeing the house as it is when Chelsea is home, and she has cleaned and cooked dinner. If she were here right now the house would smell of laundry detergent and the clean scent of Febreze, because she always sprayed it throughout the house. Instead I am greeted by the dank smell of some musty odor. The house hasn’t been cleaned in weeks, months even. I don’t pay very much attention to it because Chelsea will be cleaning up the mess she has made when she returns.

I walk to the kitchen, and wish that the aroma of a pot roast greeted me, but instead I open the fridge to finish off the left over pizza from last night’s dinner. The refrigerator is dirty. There is some kind of slime covering the bottom vegetable drawer. There’s moldy cheese lying on a shelf, sour milk in the milk pitcher, and left over take out boxes litter the remaining shelves. I don’t have any sandwich meat because Chelsea left. She knows what to buy at the grocery store, and the kind of bread I like. There is no honey mustard, no Hellman’s Mayonnaise, and no pickles to be found in this refrigerator. It is all Chelsea’s fault. I don’t know what she was thinking when she left me like this, but after all I have done for her, when I find her, and bring her home, she will pay. I take the pizza, box and all, carry it into the living room and turn on the TV to *Sports Center*. Chelsea used to watch *Sports Center* with me, but then she left. I take a swig of my Heineken, and think about how much she used to hate it when I drank.

She makes me do it though, and nothing I ever do for her is good enough. I got her this house, I

feed her, and I even saved her from that jerk on the night we met. Is she grateful? No, she just runs off, and leaves our house in this mess.

Maybe I should have been a better husband. If she would just come back she would understand. I will do better, I can be better, but I can't do it without her. I just want us to be a family again, but I have needs, and she will have to understand this. Maybe a visit to Charlene would help me tonight. I've been feeling a little strange today. I take another sip of my beer and before I know it I have burned through a six pack, and I am not even tipsy. Chelsea used to say that I could hold more alcohol than any person she had ever met. I just know my limits and how to drink appropriately. She used to tell, in that nagging voice of hers, that I was becoming an alcoholic, but I'm not. I know when to quit and I can anytime. I open another Heineken and prop my feet on the coffee table that is littered with Chinese takeout boxes, old beer cans, and brown paper bags. Chelsea really needs to clean this place.

I've seen enough *Sports Center* for tonight. I pick myself up off the stained couch, and start upstairs. Maybe I drank a little too much; it's difficult for me to make it down the hallway to mine and Chelsea's bedroom. Chelsea loved these hardwood floors. They are made from dark cherry wood, and lead to the master bedroom. Now, blood mars their shiny finish. Where did the blood come from? But I know the answer. It's Chelsea's blood. I pushed her around and beat her down this hallway the night before she left. She didn't make the bed up correctly. There were wrinkles in the sheets. She had to sleep on the couch, and I helped her get there. I wouldn't treat her like that anymore if she would just come back to me. If she didn't make me so angry, then I wouldn't have to make her see the error of her ways. I fall into bed with these disturbing thoughts, and wish for Chelsea to come back to me again.

## 23

Saturday morning dawns, and the sun is shining through the windows. Chelsea forgot to close the blinds again. She didn't forget, she isn't here, I have to remind myself. I need to get up, I need to find

Chelsea. My head really hurts, and my stomach is rolling. I think I may vomit. A hangover, great, just what I need to deal with. The best thing to cure a hangover, is to just drink some more. I push the blankets back, and slowly roll over to put my feet on the hardwood floor. The world spins so I reach over and grab the bottle that I carried upstairs the night before, and take a slow sip. The world instantly rights itself and my stomach feels better. I go into the bathroom, and I am stunned by the mess that I find. Chelsea would never let it get this bad. She would be disgusted by the mess that I am living in. I'm even disgusted. She would never want to come back home if she knew what our home looked like. The home that I made sure she had. When I find her if I bring her back here she will just leave again because she will not want to live in this filth. I have got to fix it. If I clean the house, then Chelsea will come back, she will come home, and we will be a family again. Whenever I bring her home I will make sure she gets pregnant. Then we will have a family, and she will never be able to leave me again. This is a good plan, and now that I've got a plan I can start cleaning up this awful mess.

I make my way down the blood stained hallway, and realize that this should be the first thing that I clean. I mix up soapy warm water and grab the mop. I used to clean all the time. For years I lived in the barracks, and every Sunday was barracks-wide cleaning; every soldier had to participate. I know how to clean, but it was Chelsea's job. After all, I gave her everything. Cleaning was what she could do for me in return. I'm starting to get angry just thinking about all I did for and she left me, so I throw myself into scrubbing the floor harder. I never meant to make her bleed, but she makes me furious. I ask her to do one thing, one thing, and she can't do it correctly. How hard is it to make a bed? She stays home all day, she has all day to get things done, and she can't do it. I will never understand what the woman does all day. I dip the brush back into the red-stained soapy water, and scrub my way towards the end of the hallway. There, the hardwood planks are back to their original cherry-stained finish.

I make my way to the kitchen to rinse the water out of the pan. Next thing on the list is to clear out all of the pizza boxes and takeout food. Chelsea would never have let me eat out so often. We would

have nice home-cooked meals. I throw all of the boxes into a black trash bag, and tie the top with the red plastic strands. I wipe down all of the counter tops, and toss the empty beer bottles into a new trash bag. Next I move on to the refrigerator, and start scrubbing the dried-on grime out of it. How did I let it get this bad? It's Chelsea's fault I remind myself. She wasn't here to clean.

I finally finish cleaning the entire house. I even dusted, and changed the sheets on the bed. Now I am at the grocery store, and I am shopping for stuff to make home cooked meals. Just like Chelsea used to make. I'll make dinner and maybe she will come home. I push my cart over to the beverage section of the store, and head straight for the Heineken cases; I am down to the last few bottles.

"Do you think you could use some help drinking those?" asks a very attractive red head across the aisle.

I grin. "I don't know. This is my favorite, and I'm not very good at sharing."

The red-head laughs, "Not even with me?"

I end up drinking with Charlotte, the red-head, at Pete's, a bar a few blocks from the grocery store. We agreed to meet after I returned my groceries home. Charlotte is funny and care free; she reminds me of Chelsea. We talk as we nurse our beers nice and slow. I know I shouldn't be doing this, I should be looking for Chelsea, but lately it seems that I am unable to say no to a pretty girl. That's why she left me. I know it is. I don't know what she expected though. Chelsea was so naïve, gentle, and innocent. That is kind of woman that you marry, and settle down with, but not the kind to have fun with. Chelsea didn't understand that I need both of those types of women in my life. Chelsea is my public figure, an appropriate officer's wife, and a family woman. She is someone that I can control, and I like control. The other women in my life are not, and I like that too, but only for a night or two. Charlotte is just what I need on a night like tonight. I can look for Chelsea some more tomorrow. I am sure she won't be going any farther than where she already is. Once she finds a place, or a town that she likes, she will

stay there. I am really good at reading people; I have to be for my job. I know her inside and out, so I know I have time. I leave the bar with Charlotte and follow her to her place to spend the night.

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It's Sunday. That means watching football on TV, and if Chelsea were here we would be having a very nice dinner. She would prepare and cook a Pot Roast, maybe Lasagna, or a honey glazed ham. Chelsea could cook really well, but sometimes she let the food get cold before serving it. When we first got married that never bothered me, but now it does. I lived an entire year without hot food, an entire year with barely warm meals, and I think that I deserve a hot decent meal. I have done so much for her, and she can't even keep the food warm. Of course, she isn't here anymore. She left because I hurt her because my food was cold. She should have done better, and she will when I find her. I just have to find her. Instead of Lasagna or any of those other dishes I am eating a sandwich on the berry wheat bread that I bought at the grocery store yesterday; it's the same kind that Chelsea used to buy. I finish my game, and my sandwich. I flip through the channels and nothing good is on, so I decide to turn in early. PT first thing in the morning is rough to get through on little sleep. I turn off the TV, the lights, and make my way up the winding staircase to the bedroom. I pull back the comforter and slide in between the sheets. The bed is lonely without Chelsea, but I will find her soon. I will find her. This is my last thought as I drift off to sleep.

## 24

There's sand everywhere. There's sand in my boots, sand in my clothes, sand in our guns, and sand in my eyes. Sand. Sand. Sand. I'm really starting to hate that grainy stuff. To make it worse, we're in the middle of another sand storm right now, and these tents do little to keep the grains from sanding our skin down to bone. We are often hit by these storms, usually once a week, so you think we would all be used to it, but we aren't. I honestly do not know how anyone could live here, or why the Afghan

people are fighting so hard to keep this country corrupt. We all dream of home, and our families, that's what keeps us going. Chelsea. I can't wait to get home to that woman. She really is something, and we didn't have enough time together before I left. I think about her often, especially in times like these. We were supposed to run a mission today, but this storm has left it impossible. Mack and I just sit around trying to keep our eyesight from being ruined by sand.

"I wish this damn storm would stop. I need my eyes to see that new baby of mine." Mack grins.

"Are you kidding me? Sarah had the baby? When were you going to say something?"

"I just did." He chuckles, "When are you and Chelsea going to start having little ones?"

"Ah, man, I don't know about that. Can't we just borrow yours for a couple hours, and return it?"

We both laugh. It's good to find something to laugh about over here. Laughter and shooting the bull is probably the second thing that keeps us guys from losing it over here.

"So what'd you all name the baby?"

"Elizabeth Rose, but I think Sarah wants to call her Libbie."

"Libbie. I really like that man, congratulations."

"She's supposed to be sending me some pictures in the mail, hopefully I get them within the next couple weeks, I'll show them to you."

"I can't wait."

Mack has been my best friend for years. He's the kind of man that you want at your back, especially in country. He's trustworthy, can fight like hell, is good with a rifle, and is just a good man. We are in the same platoon, and always go out on a mission together. He's the one guy that I always want at my back. Now that I work in intelligence I don't go out on as many missions, but the ones that we do go on, are extremely important, and vital to helping to end this war. Every scrap of intel that we get can

saves lives, and Mack and I know it. We work extra hard at taking precautions, and gathering information.

“When are we going out again?” Mack asks.

“You ready to see some more of this forsaken desert?”

He grins, “Not really, but I would like to get the hell out of this tent.”

“You wouldn’t right now, I would bet on that. I have a feeling that our skin would be stripped from our bones if we ventured outside of these flimsy tent walls. Our next mission is in two days time. I don’t have many more details than that.”

Things shift and it is two days later and we are on our way out of the wire, and into enemy territory. We are not well liked here, and it will do us all good to remember that. I was briefed this morning that we will be returning home within the next couple weeks, and I haven’t gotten a chance to tell the men yet. I will let them know after this mission. I want their minds in the game, and they will have something to celebrate after this last mission is done.

We pack up the humvees and cross from the safety of our walls out into where danger lurks. We are all on edge. Something isn’t right here. Call it gut instinct, or whatever else you’d like, but the men all know that something is going on today. Something big is about to happen. In most life altering situations you don’t even realize that your life is going to change, but in the military, you know that every time you step out of the wire, you are faced with situations that will change you from the man that you once were. Everyone is wary, and on the lookout for anything strange. As we travel down another sandy street we keep our eyes open for anything out of the ordinary. The guys are all trigger happy. Hell, even I’m feeling a little trigger happy. I have a feeling that if so much as a rabbit poked its head out of a bush it would instantly be facing a firing squad. Our convoy finally comes to a stop in a local village. There are kids with dirt-stained faces playing in the streets, and women with no skin showing chasing them. Strangely I don’t see any men. Mack pats the back of his helmet, letting all of the



men know that we need to be watchful and observant. I talk with a few people, and try to gain any sort of information, but it isn't going to happen today. I think that we have learned all that we are going to from this outing. I look to Mack and his face tells me what I already know: it's time to load up the humvees and get these boys back to the base.

The soldiers, Mack, and I gather our guns, and walk back to the convoy and start back for camp. There's still something in the air though. We still haven't been able to shake the feeling of negativity. It's like we are experiencing the calm before the storm.

"It's eerie today, isn't it?" Mack asks.

"Something weird is going on that's for sure. I don't think any of us will relax until we get back inside camp walls. "

"The men are jumpy as hell. Even the calmest of the calm are showing some signs of strain."

"I don't blame them, something just doesn't feel right today. But look, man, we're almost back. Just a little less than a mile, and we will be back into our territory. Then, we will be done with this mess, and ready to get home to our families."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying Truman? We're going home?" Mack looks jubilant.

"Yeah man, I just got word this morning. But don't tell the guys yet, okay? Especially with whatever is going on today. I don't want to get their hopes up only to tell them we have to stay for one more mission, okay?"

"Yes, sir. I just can't wait to get home. To be able to see that little girl of mine. It is going to be amazing."

"I know man. I feel the same way about seeing Chelsea."

All of a sudden I hear someone at the front of the convoy bellow, "Whoa, Whoa!"

I look out the window and see an Afghan man standing in the middle of the road.

"Don't get out of the humvees!" someone ahead shouts.

The man just stands there, looking blatantly at the convoy. I can hear our translators trying to get him to move, or at least that's what I assume they're doing. Considering that I can't speak the language I'm a little unsure. Everything is always translated for me. Whatever they are saying works because the man moves aside. Not one of us is really sure what to make of this spectacle. We don't trust this man, and we don't believe for a second that he was just standing there for the fun of it. No one really knows what to do. Finally they send a soldier specialized in uncovering and disposing of explosives down to look for an IED or other bomb threat. He steps out of the humvee with the rest of team backing him up. He sweeps the road looking for anything and everything that could be an explosive. Finally he clears the road, and gives us the okay to move forward.

Our humvee inches forward a little at a time, and we are all relieved that perhaps the man was really just strange. However, we all know to remain vigilant, just in case. Suddenly I hear the sound of gun fire, and the next thing I know our convoy is under direct fire from Afghan forces. I look up and see that Mikey, our humvee gunman, is firing back rounds.

"Mickey! Can you see anyone close enough to get shots from the ground?" I shout.

"No, Lieutenant." He screams back.

"Mack, get these men in fighting order, we have got to do something. We can't fight out in the open like this. We will be slaughtered. They can see us, but we can't see them."

"Uhm, boss man, think again." Mack states as he points behind me.

I look out the window and I see troops coming right towards our humvees. I start firing out of the openings in the windows, and the rest of the guys follow my lead. Pretty soon we have most of the Afghani forces pushed back. All of a sudden I hear the boom of an IED exploding. One of the humvees in front of us must have hit one from out of nowhere because it immediately blows up. The soldiers in my humvee and I all scramble to get out of the humvee. The Afghan soldiers are right on top of us. We shoot, punch, and claw our way out of there. Mack dropped his gun, and he is attempting hand-to-hand

combat. I shoot the man he is fighting with and give him my pistol. Pretty soon most of the enemy is gone, and only a few remain. I stumble upon a soldier, and he kicks my feet out from under me. My gun goes flying. We grapple around on the ground, like we are in a wrestling match. He is on top of me, and then I'm on top of him. We roll around on the ground like this for what feels like an hour. I'm finally on top of him, and I wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze as hard as I can. The life drains from his eyes, and I slide off of him in shock at what I've done. I look at my hands back to his face. He had a family to go back to and now he isn't going anywhere. I have a family too, and he was trying to kill me. He was trying to kill me. I have to justify my actions that have to make sense. I have never been so up close to death. I look around hoping that no one has seen what I have just done. There is nothing but death, tarnish, and black smoke billowing around me. I look for Mack, I know I have to find him. Mack will make everything okay, he will tell me that everything is okay.

"Mack! Where are you? Mack!" I shout. "Have you seen Mack, I ask the nearest person."

He just shakes his head.

I search and I search and finally I find him. He's been shot, or hit by a mortar or IED, something. He just isn't right, and he's not moving.

"Mack, get up buddy, get up. Come on man you've got to get up. Mack! Mack!"

I keep shouting his name, he doesn't wake up, but I do.

I dreamed the whole thing, and I woke up on the bedroom floor. I was dreaming. It was just a dream. My breathing finally slows, and my blood pressure starts to return to normal. It was all a dream. A true dream, but a dream nonetheless. It's a dream in which I relive the worst day of my life over and over again. Mack never made it home, he never got to see his new little girl, and it's all my fault. All of it, my fault.

I haven't had a dream like this one in a very long time. I used to have them right after I got back from my tour, but I thought they had gone away. I pick myself up off the floor and walk into the bathroom. Its back to work today, but there is no way that I can go like this. I'm still shaking. I get into the shower and hope that the hot water clears my head. Once I get out and dry off I am feeling a little better, but I'm still not at my full potential. This is nothing that some Vodka can't cure. I can't go to work smelling like beer, but Vodka has no smell. And I can even put it in my water bottle and no one will notice. I'm in intelligence for a reason. This is a great idea.

I go into work carrying my water bottle and no one thinks anything of it. I am feeling so much better. This is going to be a great day. I sit down at my computer and start analyzing the data for the case that I am working on. It is very important that I get this information just right because this information can make or break the next unit that gets sent into Afghanistan. The placement that I am working on is crucial to the war effort. If the guys going into Afghanistan open a new base in an area where it isn't safe to do so then many lives will be lost. It is my job to decipher the intel and information that was gathered during my deployment and decide where the best area will be to place a new American camp. I continue looking over the data, sipping as I pour over maps trying to decide where to best place a new camp. I look from the computer to the manila file folder that holds key information that was gathered in Afghanistan. I think I have found the perfect spot. A piece of land that is very close to another American camp, but that is far enough way that our forces aren't on top of each other. This looks like the perfect place for a new camp. I copy down all of the information, print out the map, and put everything into a manila file folder. Then, I take it to the commander's office and drop it off for review.

Finally, it's time to go home. I have spent all day analyzing this information, and I think I deserve a good meal and a drink. I drive to the local bar and grill. It's just about three miles from my house, and I

know that even if I drink a little too much I can still make the drive home. It's the perfect place to blend in. Everyone is drinking, smoking, and listening to the country music. The smoke wafts through the air, and no one's face is really visible through the smog. I don't think that anyone I know would be here, but if they are they won't recognize me. I don't want the guys at work to know that I enjoy a cold one every so often. They, like Chelsea, have called me a border line alcoholic, but I know I'm not. The waitress comes over and I order a Heineken, a steak, and a baked potato; this is the perfect celebratory meal. I flirt with the waitress a little as I wait for my food to arrive. The waitress is a cute little blonde, and she is very friendly. She brings my food and I taste the most delicious steak. Of course I haven't had steak in awhile so maybe that's why it tastes so good. I finish my meal, and drink the rest of my third bottle. When I stand up to go, the world spins, and I feel like my feet are disappearing out from under me. I shake my head, and try to clear it. I feel a little bit better; maybe I did overdo it today. Tomorrow I won't drink so much Vodka, that's where I went wrong today. I'm feeling really good about what I accomplished at work. I keep thinking about how well I managed to choose the perfect location for our new troops. The blonde waitress offers to call me a cab, but I turn her down. I slowly make my way to my car, I know I can still drive, I'm not that intoxicated.

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"Excuse me, sir, may I see your license and registration? You were swerving all over the road; have you been drinking this evening?" asks a very burly police officer.

I fish my registration out of the dashboard of my car, and start to get my license out of my wallet, but the light of the police officer's flashlight is barreling into my eyes, and I can't think or see straight.

"Can you please point that light in a different direction; I can't see to get my driver's license out of my wallet."

“Sir, I think the problem is that you aren’t even trying to get the correct thing out of your wallet  
Will you please step out of the vehicle?”

“Is there a problem, officer?”

“Just step out of the vehicle, sir.”

I get out of the car, and step onto the black asphalt. I’m still feeling a little woozy, but I’m not going to tell the police officer that.

I must’ve stumbled a little because the officer reached out as if to steady me.

“Sir, please walk to the front of my car, and back.”

I walk to the end of the police cruiser and back to my car. I know that I have just successfully walked the line, and I smile to myself.

“Sir, I am afraid that I’m going to have to arrest you. Please put your hands behind your back, and--”

“Arrest me! What for? I haven’t done anything. Don’t you know who I am? You can’t arrest me!”

## 26

I get to work early in hopes that I don’t bump into anyone that may have seen me last night. I know that Jones can keep a secret, mostly because I have dirt on him, but still people may have heard. I don’t want anyone to know that I got a DUI. A DUI can cause serious issues here at work. I can be demoted a few ranks, and further action may be taken. It just happened this one time though, and it isn’t going to happen again. I start the work day early. I’m hoping to get some more information about where Chelsea is. So far I have only run into dead ends, but with this big project out of the way at work, I can now focus on finding her. I am going to find her; I have to. I work on my computer for awhile, and follow every bus route from the last time I saw her. I was so close; I can’t believe she slipped through my fingers. I can find the information. I know I can. I just have to figure out where to look. As I am running

searches through various databases, Colonel Major pops his head through the door, and asks me to accompany him to the commander's office. I smile as I get up from my chair. I am certain that he is about to congratulate me on my awesome plan for a new camp in country. I am about to be praised, and honored. I have a feeling. Today is going to be a good day, and I am sure that the commander knows nothing about last night.

I walk around the corner and walk into the commander's office. After formalities are established, he asks me to sit.

"Truman, I don't know how to say this other than bluntly and honestly."

I wonder what he is getting at, this doesn't sound like the reception I was expecting.

"You see Truman, the information you gave us was faulty, and it's a good thing we had others look at it. I can't imagine what would have happened if we had used the intelligence that you spelled out for it. Truman, are you feeling okay? There is no way that what you submitted could have ever happened. The territory that you suggested is heavily armed by rebel troops. I don't know what you were thinking. Actually what I think happened is that you were looking at the map wrong. Errors such as these can cost millions of lives. I will not stand for it. I know that you've been having a hard time. I also know that you got a DUI last night, and that you were drinking on the job when you submitted this faulty information. I'm not stupid. You are suspended and there will be an investigation pending. I suggest you clear your things from your desk and go home."

"You can't do this. It isn't even military protocol!"

"Trust me. I think this is the best thing for you. You need to take some time, decide what you want, and get you act together. I know this isn't military protocol and I am trying to stick my neck out on a line for you. I'm not turning this in yet, I am giving you a chance to show me that you aren't as dumb as you look right now. So I suggest that you take my offer before further action is taken by someone of higher authority than me. "

I storm out the office. This just can't be right. I don't understand how or where I went wrong, but I do know who is at fault. Chelsea. This is all her fault, if she hadn't left I wouldn't be thinking about her constantly, and then my mind would be on the work that it is supposed to be on. I'm going to find her, and when I do she will wish that she never left, and that she had never caused me so much trouble. I walk into my office and gather what few things I have. I glance at the computer; my only way to find Chelsea. I slip it off of the table and into my briefcase. I have to have it. There's no other way for me to find her. I hastily leave the building, walk to my car, and go home.

## 27

I sit down at the desk in my study, and pull the laptop from my briefcase. I fire it up, punch in my ID code, and start searching government databases again for Chelsea. I wrack my brain, trying to think of any possible tie she might have with someone else. All I get is the same information over and over again. Family names, past work places, college information. I know all of these things. It is as if she has disappeared, her driver's license, credit card, social security number, none of them have been used in months. How is she surviving month to month? I don't understand how she has been completely independent, and not used her own name. She has no way of obtaining a fake identity, and if she had changed her name I would know it. I just have to think harder. I have got to gather more information and spread it all out. Maybe when I see everything presented I will know where she is and how she got there. I print out page after page of information; bus records, family information, possible places, and everything else I can think of. I spread the pages out on my desk, and evaluate the information. My stomach grumbles, and I look at the clock. I have been looking at this stuff for over 4 hours. I think I'll take a break and grab a bite to eat. I walk down to the kitchen, open the fridge, and grab a beer. I twist the top off, and set about making myself a sandwich. Roast beef, Swiss cheese, a little spicy mustard, and my sandwich is ready. I walk over to the pantry, open it up, and scan my chip options. Barbeque or



plain...I think I'll go with plain. I walk back upstairs to my study, and once again start looking at the paper scattered around me. I take a bite and savor the roast beef. Read, chew, read, chew. I have to just be overlooking something, but I'm not sure what. Think, Malone, think. I pound my fist against my forehead. I'm missing some vital clue, something right in front of my face probably. What is it though?

I finish my sandwich and look at the clock; another hour has passed. I can't shake the feeling that the answer to this, to everything, is right in front of my face. Maybe I should look at her family history again. Looking in depth into her past might give me a glimpse about where she is right now. Maybe there's an aunt, uncle, or cousin that is hiding her. She always said she didn't have any family, and I thought that odd. Yet, her parents did die before I met her so maybe she lost track of people, and didn't catch up. I shuffle some paper, and a sudden thought hits me. How could I have forgotten? Her parents. That's where the answer to this lies. Before her parents passed away she went to them for everything, and anything. They took care of her, and even in their death maybe they still are. Scarlett and Jeff Ratliff. I know somehow Chelsea has been able to survive because of them. I always told Chelsea I was more intelligent than I let on. I type furiously into the computer; pulling up old records, social security numbers, bank account information, and anything else that seems important. I print out the information, and laugh to myself. She is using her mother's name. God, is that girl creative, but she won't be for much longer. No wonder she's been able to elude me, and buy bus tickets, and other things for so long; her parents had a trust fund for her. One she never bothered to tell me about. That makes me so angry I think I might break the keyboard. We could've used that money a few years back and she never mentioned it. Too bad she used all of it in her escape. She's going to pay when I find her. Ripshin Mountain, TN. I type that into Google and search. What a Podunk little town. I wonder how she found this town because none of the bus routes even go through there. It doesn't matter the how; all that matters is that I have found her. I cannot even believe she is living there though, and how did she even

find a job there. Oh yes, I know she found a job, some nursing home. She's probably sitting around laughing about me right now. Making fun of me, and how she duped me to old people. She'll regret that.

I start throwing things into a duffel bag. A couple t-shirts, an extra pair of jeans, a baseball cap, and a pair of sunglasses all go into the bag. I am going to go bring her back home, where she belongs. I walk to our bedroom closet, and pull out the lock box. I get the Glock out, some ammo, and put both into the duffel bag, and lock the box back. Chelsea hates guns. She's afraid of them, which is perfect for me. I will have no resistance in bringing her home. I turn to the cherry dresser, open the top drawer, and remove the duct tape, and rope from inside. I put everything into the duffel bag, and make my way to the kitchen. I look at the clock on the stove and see that it's one in the morning. I don't care though. I'll drive all night and I'll get there sometime in the morning. I know where Chelsea lives, and where she works. I'll have no trouble finding her when I get there. I'm so giddy, and excited. My adrenaline is pumping. I'm going to find her today. I open the refrigerator and get out the six pack of Heineken and then grab the bottle of Vodka. This will keep me awake so that I can make the drive, and keep my senses sharp. I always feel better with a little drink; it helps to keep me calm.

I walk out to the car, unlock it, and open the back door. I put the duffel bag and my beverages into the seat, and then unzip it. I fish around in the bag, take out the gun, and zip the bag up. I open the driver's side door, and get into the car. I reach into the back and get a bottle of beer. That's how I'll start my drive, I'll nurse a beer. This is going to be a great night. I twist the top off, and then start the car. This is going to be about an 8 hour drive, but once I get there it will be worth every minute, every mile. I put the car in drive, and pull away from the curb. I know that tonight is one of those nights in which everything changed, and I can't wait to see how this change ends.

## Scarlett

28

It's been two weeks since I told Joda everything. I feel like a little bit of the world has been lifted off of my shoulders, at least for a little while. Joda doesn't look at me any differently, although she certainly hugs me a lot more often now. I think we both realize how amazing it is that I am here in the first place. That's how I feel this morning anyway. I haven't had a single nightmare since telling her about everything. I think maybe I am getting better. I need to stop thinking and get my lazy bones out of bed. The sun is streaming through the windows into my eyes, and I know that it is time to get up without even having to look at my clock. I need to get going. I know that today is going to be a big day. Its homecoming in a small town, and even though I haven't experienced it yet, everyone says that it is really enjoyable. Everyone in the town gets together and creates floats for a parade. Then, the kids at the local high school plan and prepare for the parade. I'm sure Julie is still laughing about my facial expression when she told me I would be on a float in said parade. Joda and I are going to be riding together I remind myself as I finally roll out of bed. It's time to get ready; that's enough looking at the ceiling.

I walk into work, and everyone is in a frenzy. I knew it would be a crazy day. Even in the midst of the crazy, I have an odd feeling. I can't shake the feeling that something bad is going to happen today. Everything just feels off. I'm not going to let it get to me though because today is supposed to be a fun day for our residents. We have a morning activity and play board games. Everyone is so excited all they can do is chatter. It's nice that we are able to give the residents a chance to get out and breathe some fresh air for at least a little while. After the activity Julie and I go around the building and make sure that everyone that is going to be on the float is ready. We check their clothes, their hair, and make sure that they have a warm jacket to put on. Most of our residents would be cold in 90 degree weather. Julie and I will be wearing company t-shirts, while our residents will be wearing heavy sweaters. We have to make sure everyone looks good, and is ready to go.

Finally, it's time to load everyone up into the van and make our way to where the float is parked. It takes a while to get everyone, their wheelchairs, and walkers into the van. I think that Joy forgets that the residents don't walk and move as well as they used to. She's trying to push everyone to hurry. She's running around, shouting, and being bossy. She is indeed the boss, but I think she needs to reconsider her tactics. I try not to roll eyes, as she walks by. I only have one resident left to load into the van.

"Helen, are you okay to get in?"

"Yes, dear, I just gotta get my legs a movin'. Tell Joy to keep her undies on." She laughs.

"Helen!" I giggle. "Don't let her hear you, or we will both be in trouble!"

Helen starts to climb into the van, and she makes me nervous. Her back is so hunched over that I don't understand how she even walks the little bit that she does. I get her in, and wait for everyone else to climb in. Finally, we are ready to go to the float.

Once we reach our spot in the lineup, I see the float, and the only thing I can think is wow. Joy really outdid herself on this one. She has the float ordered and brought in from an outside company. Employees and residents never create or decorate the float on their own. Compared to all of the other handmade by different groups in the community we look like we belong in the Macy's Parade or something. The float is long, with blue and gold stars, and three platform tiers for us all to sit or stand on. I look at the other floats that have so much heart and hard work put into them. All of the posters taped to the side of the trailers that are attached to the back of dusty pickup trucks are blowing in the slight breeze, and I just think that is what a float should look like. Of course Joy wanted a show though, just to prove that she can.

We start unloading the residents, and help them walk over to float and up another set of stairs so that they can get on the thing. All of the residents are going to sit on the bottom platform. There are

benches screwed down to the platform so that the residents have a place to sit. Joda gets out the van and whistles.

“Woo, Scarlett, I’d hate to be on that top platform.”

“Shew. Me too, Joda. I don’t really like heights, and look, there’s nothing to hold on to up there. What would you do if the float started moving too fast? I won’t be sitting up there that’s for sure.”

We both laugh, “Me neither, Scarlett, me neither.”

I help Joda onto the float and get her situated then move to help another resident. I get back off of the float to double check the van for anything forgotten, or any other residents. There’s nothing left so it is time for me to take my place on the float.

Some employees take up seats on the bottom platform or the second one and sit with the residents. Of course, I am the second to last one to get on the float, right in front of Joy. I start to walk over and sit on the edge of the float beside of Joda’s bench, just like we had planned. Joy shouts my name, and I turn around.

“Scarlett, you can’t sit there, dear.”

“Why not?”

“Because we need someone on the top platform, and who better to do it than our little beauty queen?” Joy sneers.

I hate that woman. I get myself under control, and say, “If that’s where you want me.”

“It is, so climb on up,” she says as she waves her hand towards the platform of death.

I walk by Joda, and mumble an apology under my breath. She just shoots me a look of pity.

I slowly climb my way up to the top of the float, and while I know it isn’t but probably 12-15 feet off the ground, it feels like a hundred.

“I can’t believe she put me up here.” I mutter under my breath.

The float starts to move and I know that the parade has started. As we move those first few inches I decide just to own what I'm doing. Nothing will rub Joy worse than if I act like I'm having the time of my life on this stupid platform. I'm just going to have to make sure to keep my balance. Although if I fall off maybe I'll get worker's comp, and Joy fired for putting me up on this death trap in the first place. I plaster a big fake smile on my face, and start waving like I am a princess. Pretty soon I'm actually starting to have a good time. The float moves much smoother than I thought that it was going to. As long as I don't look directly at the ground I'm okay. The whole town showed up for this it looks like. Main Street is surrounded on both sides by families. The children are catching candy, and throwing it into bags held by their parents. Everyone is smiling and laughing. It warms my heart to see it.

As I'm gazing out towards the crowds something catches my eye. There's a man in a baseball cap, and jacket who is standing off to the side alone. I don't know why he's catching my attention. Maybe because it's strange that he is wearing a jacket and because he doesn't have any children; all I know is that there is something unusual about him. I look down at Joda, and I see that her face has gone kind of pale, like she's seen a ghost or something. I hope she isn't starting to feel bad. She turns around and starts throwing out more candy, and I return to my princess wave.

## **Malone**

### **29**

I can't believe what Chelsea is doing right now. Standing on top of that float, showing off herself for everyone to see. What is she thinking? She will never do anything like that again. I want to jerk her off of that contraption, and cart her home, but I know that would cause a scene. I have got to be as inconspicuous as possible. She doesn't know I'm here yet, and I don't want her to. I got here early this morning, and found the house, if you could call it that, she is living in. I watched her leave and walk to

work. She looks really good. God, have I missed her. After she got to work I found out about this dumb parade. What a perfect opportunity for me to scout the area, and make a plan to snatch her, and take her home tonight. The last float passes by, and the masses start to thin out. I walk back to the shade tree that my car is parked under, and I drink the last bit of the Vodka. Everything that I brought with me is gone. Maybe I can find something else to drink in this small hell hole. It's warm, too warm for September. How does she live down here? I'm sweating so badly that I take my t-shirt off, and put on one of the extra ones that I brought with me.

I get in the car and drive until I see a store. It's some kind of a mom and pop market, but maybe they sell what I'm looking for. I step out of the car, and walk into the store. As I turn the knob and walk into the store a bell over the door chimes. That's annoying. I hate small towns. I meander around the store for a few minutes searching for a cooler holding Vodka, or anything else to drink. I don't see anything so I walk back to the front of the store to leave. There's now a cashier at the front. Her name tag says her name is Brooke. She's pretty cute.

"Hi, sir, is there anything that I can help you find today?"

Small town generosity, maybe I'll find what I need after all.

"Yes, actually, I was looking for some wine. My wife and I are on vacation and we wanted to celebrate tonight. Do you know where I can find anything like that around here?"

"There's a store is couple streets over, and I know they have some alcohol. I don't think the wine selection is very good though, but it couldn't hurt for you to check it out."

"Thanks for your help, I'll check with them."

Perfect, I think as I walk out and get back into the car. I drive around until I find what she's talking about. I go inside and find the perfect selection of Vodka. I buy that and a bottle of water. When I get outside I pour the water out of the bottle, and the Vodka in. I'm ready to go. It's starting to get dark as I drive to Chelsea's house, and I wait for her to come home.

## Scarlett

### 30

I walk into Joda's room to tell her good night. It's much later than I thought it would be, and it's already dark outside. I knew I shouldn't have attended the football game with Marci, but she insisted. Now it's 11 o'clock and pitch black dark. I really hate walking home in the dark. I knock on Joda's door, knowing that she doesn't to sleep until after the 11 o'clock news, and walk in.

"Scarlett! There you are, thank goodness. I've called John; he's coming to get you."

"Joda, I know its dark out, but I'll be fine."

"Scarlett, honey, that's not what I'm talking about. Didn't you see?"

"See what Joda? What are you talking about? Are you okay?"

"I saw him."

"You saw who?"

My mind flashes back to the parade, I thought her face looked like she had seen a ghost.

"Joda, who did you see?"

"He's here, Scarlett, he has found you."

The wheels in my mind are whirling. The man, the one at the parade, he seemed so out of place, because he was.

"How? How do you know?"

"I know it's him. John's coming to get you, he's going to take you to the gym, and get you situated. If I were a betting woman, I'd bet that he will be waiting on you when you get home."

John knocks on the door, "Scarlett, Joda, it's John, I coming in okay."

"Be careful, Scarlett, I know you can do this okay," Joda says.



John and I spend the next hour or so trying to get Joda calmed down enough for me to leave. She is too indecisive. One minute she says that I should just call the police, and let them handle it. The next minute she is back on the band wagon that if I want any form of closure, then I must do this myself. Finally, we convince that I have to do this.

“Scarlett, are you ready?” John asks.

“Good bye, Joda, I’ll come check in on you in the morning, okay? Its Saturday so I’m not working, but we will do something fun.”

“I love you, Lady Bug.”

“I love you too, Joda,” I say as I hug her neck.

John and I walk to his car, and drive to the center. Once we get inside we go back to his office, and I get my bag that I store here at the center. John and I made a plan weeks ago for what would happen if Malone ever found me. I go to the bathroom and change clothes. I come out and rub lotion with oil into my skin so that I’m harder to grab and hold on to. John wraps my hands, taking special care to cover the big bulky rings on my knuckles. While we are doing this, John is going over specific moves with me, specific scenarios, and reminding me what to do in each case. I’m trying so hard to remain calm, but it’s much different actually thinking about protecting myself from someone than it is doing it. I just can’t let him get to me. I’ve prepared in every way I can, and John has told me everything that he can think of. This has taken another hour. I keep thinking that maybe he will just be asleep, and I won’t have to face what I know is coming.

We drive to my house. I look at the clock—3:00 am the glowing green numbers say. It’s very late now, and I’m nervous about what I am going to walk in on.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come in with you?”

“No, John, thank you, but I have got to do this on my own. Maybe I can talk him down and it won’t come down to violence.”

“Whatever you do, do not get into a car with that man. I’m going to park over here out of sight, but I’m not leaving. I’ll be right here if you need me. If I hear anything that sounds like you’re in trouble, I’m coming in though. I promised Aunt Joda.”

“John, you don’t have to do that. You have a wife and kids at home. They probably need you tonight, and I’m sure that your wife is wondering where you are.”

“Scarlett, hush. I’m not going anywhere.”

“But this could take a couple of hours, who knows? I going to try to talk to him, remember?”

He just gives me a stern look that tells me to drop my argument. “Time’s a wastin’.”

“Okay. Okay.” That’s all I know to say. He obviously isn’t going to budge.

## 31

I walk into the house, and turn on the light. I am instantly greeted by the face from my nightmares.

“Hello, Chelsea.”

“Malone.” I pause for a second, trying to think of the best thing to say. “What’re you doing here?”

“Isn’t that obvious? I’ve come to take you home.”

“I am home, Malone. I’m not leaving.”

“Oh yes you are,” he says as he pulls out a gun.

He knows I hate guns. I skirt around the couch trying not to get too close to him, but I know that I have got to get the gun out of his hands.

“Okay, say I do go home with you, Malone. Then what? We just keep on living like nothing has happened? With you hitting me, taking things out on me all the time? You think you’re so big and bad with that gun, but you can’t beat me with your hands anymore. I know how to punch too.”

He laughs, but I know his ego is bruised. I can see it in his eyes. This is just what I was hoping for.

“Chelsea, is that what you want, a fight, man-to-woman, fist-to-fist? You know I’ll beat you to a pulp, and I’ll enjoy it.”

“Ha!” I laugh at him. “We’ll see about that. But you’re going to have to get rid of that gun. I think it’s safe to say I don’t trust you.”

His face blotches. A vein in his forehead throbs, and I wonder just how much he’s had to drink. But ultimately his ego wins.

“Okay we’ll do this your way,” he says as he slides the gun across the living room floor. I pick it up, engage the safety, and set it down out of his reach.

I turn back to face him and breathe a sigh of relief, this I can handle. He’s drunk, and he’s cocky, I can do this.

He stalks me like prey, but if John taught me anything, it’s that defense is the best offense. He takes a swing at me, but I anticipate it. I move to the side and his hand hits the side of the kitchen cabinets. Score for having a small house. This only angers him more, he’s really drunk and his aim is off, like he’s seeing double. We continue to this routine swing, dodge, miss. Until my foot slips on the rug, and it gives him an opportunity to get his hands around my throat. I start to panic, but then I remember what John taught me. Right arm up, don’t exert my breath or so much energy, twist and bring my arm down at a slant over his, and I’m free. I can’t believe that really worked, and it looks like Malone can’t either. He goes to push me and I move, he falls through the basement door. I knew the wood was old, but I didn’t know it was that bad. Some of the wood shards cut my face, and I’m sure my neck is bruised.

I peek through the door, and I see him lying at the bottom of the stairs. I carefully walk down the steps to the basement, and I lean down to check his pulse, when he grabs my throat, pulls me down, and rolls me underneath him. Now I don’t know what to do. I close my eyes and I slow my breathing. John said he will think he has beaten you and he will try to kick you while you’re lying there. It’s what

the weak do, but you will be prepared for it. Don't let him do it. I control my breathing and sure enough he thinks I'm unconscious. He lets go of my throat, and I concentrate on not sucking in gulps of air, and on where his foot is going to land. I barely crack my eyes open, just enough to see through a little slit, and I see him swing his foot back, as it comes forward, I grab it, and twist, his leg pops, and he falls face forward onto the banister. It looks like his face is shattered. Instead of feeling sorry for him, I only feel angrier. I stand over him and I know that he's still alive for now. I have to end this. I pick up a shard of the banister and think of ways that I can make this look like an accident.

I stand there, glued to the spot, hand raised, ready to plunge the shard into his still beating heart. I don't know how much time passes as I just stand rooted to the spot. I'm trying to decide what to do. My mind is moving in, what feels like a million, different directions. I see the sun start to rise through the tiny dusty square window. I sink to my knees, still clutching the wooden shard, and in my mind I keep hearing words that seem to come from long ago,--but it really wasn't that long ago-- words that I have heard in passing. Words that I stored in the back of my mind somewhere. The words brought from the back of my mind to the surface with the rising sun. I'm on my knees over his body, and I'm trying to remember where I heard the words in my head. I lean over him whispering the words again and again. Saying them so quickly that I'm almost hyperventilating.

"The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light..... The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light."

I stand up and I don't even hear the thump of the wooden piece as it falls to the floor next to Malone. All I can hear, think, and see are the words from so long ago. I slowly walk back up the stairs, through the dismantled house, out of the front door, and into the sunlight. I turn my face to the brightly shining rays of the morning sun, and think, something from Romans. Redemption.

## Epilogue

“So? Tell me, Lady Bug, what happened after you walked outside?” Joda asks as we sit together in her room.

I give a small smile. “I walked outside, and there was John. He looked like he was just getting ready to come inside. I guess the whole thing took much longer than it felt like it did.”

“I imagine,” Joda adds with a wry smile.

“He had his cell phone out, and he had called the police. They arrived in just a few minutes. They asked some questions which I was more than willing to answer. They told me that Malone was facing some military charges back in D.C., and that given this he would more likely than not be behind bars for a very long time.”

“I thought you didn’t trust police or the justice system, Scarlett.” Joda asks slyly.

I grin, “I didn’t, but they came through this time. Of course, I did most of the work myself.”

We smile.

“After that an ambulance arrived, and Malone was taken to the hospital. Most of the injuries that he received in the cottage weren’t life threatening.”

“So does that mean that he’s going to be okay?”

“Actually, he died later that day.”

“What? How?”

“Alcohol poisoning. They said that his blood alcohol content was so high that they couldn’t understand how he was even in an upright position. Let alone able to fight with me. It’s a miracle he didn’t kill someone while driving here.”

“I can’t believe that, and I can’t believe everything that you have been through.”

“Me either, but I do feel like life is about to start for me. I’m going to legally change my name to Scarlett, and go back to using my own information. There’s no reason not to now.”

“Like I said, you look much more like a Scarlett,” Joda says with a smile.

“Oh, and because Malone and I were still married, I get everything.”

We both laugh.

“Now that’s justice,” Joda giggles.

I laugh too.

“You know I have a great nephew coming to visit tomorrow...”

“Oh, Joda, we’ll see.”