

Independence Day, Book One
The Beginnings

By Bex Aaron

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To learn more on this series, visit its website at
<http://bcd.sitesled.com/haven-park>

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Introduction:

“Something is wrong with this town...”

On the surface, Haven Park seemed to be the perfect picture of Americana. Nestled in the heart of Wyoming, its 517 residents were close knit, hard working and God fearing people. The city had never known major scandal, and the last violent crime committed was over ten years ago. Normal, right and honorable were upheld and all seemed to be quite harmonious...until the night of July 4, 1966, when the walls came closing in and the secrets could not be kept any longer.

It started with a murder. Carol Mathison, a lifelong resident and the only daughter of retired police chief Stanley Rogers, was found strangled in the park on the morning of July 5, leaving the community stunned. By all accounts, Carol was vibrant, well liked, outgoing and cheerful – making her murder all the more senseless. However, as the days drug by, more and more began to be revealed about Carol’s darker side...and the many, many people who might have wanted her dead.

The killer is closer than they know...

More information can be found on the official Independence Day website, at <http://bcd.sitesled.com/haven-park>. Included are character biographies, a more detailed background on Haven Park, Wyoming, story reviews, bonus features and much more.

Prologue:

July 4, 1966; 9:30 p.m.

“Did you honestly think I wouldn’t find out?”

Carol Mathison stood before her fiancé, unable to conceal the fact her entire body was shaking with rage. All this time, all these lies...this was the final straw.

“This town only has about thirty people in it, Jeff!” she continued, struggling to keep her voice down so not to wake the children. “Didn’t you realize that eventually someone would find out? That eventually I would hear about it? And don’t you know how humiliating that is? Do you? Do you know how hard it is to hold your head up when the entire town knows that your fiancé is sleeping around with that – you’re not even listening to me, are you? Damn it! Damn you!”

Jeff Howard took his eyes off the fireworks display on television just long enough to nod in Carol’s direction. “I’m listening to ya, babe,” he affirmed. “But I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t you play dumb with me!” Refusing to be ignored any further, Carol positioned herself between Jeff and the television. She could see the disgust in his eyes, and made no effort to hide the fact it gave her pleasure. “I’m tired of your lies! I’m tired of your cheating! I’m tired of you!”

“You smell like a winery, baby,” Jeff said softly. He attempted to reach out to her, but Carol violently jerked away before he could touch her.

“No! Don’t touch me! Never touch me again!”

“Baby...”

“No, I’ve had it with you, Jeff! I’ve had it with you!” Carol reached a hand up to her forehead, then stepped back and began to pace. “My God, everything I told Terri today... every single thing. I should listen to my own advice. I should...I should...”

Mutely, Jeff sat there while she wandered around the living room and mumbled to herself. These sorts of outbursts were far from uncommon, especially when she’d been drinking. He saw so many over the past year he could predict (with around 95% accuracy) where each would lead.

In a letter to his brother (one of very few venues where Jeff felt he could truly speak freely), he’d likened Carol’s tantrums to a three-act play. Act one: Accuse him of cheating. Pace the house like a mad woman. Scream and threaten him. Act two: Allege that she too was cheating, in an effort to upset him. Throw something when that didn’t work. Inevitably bring David into it, saying he would never dream of doing these things to her. Act three: Dramatically storm upstairs, with nary a parting shot, to sleep it all off. Apologize profusely in the morning.

Per his calculations, Act Two was set to begin any second now.

“Well, you know, Jeff,” Carol announced, turning back toward him. Her words were slurred, if only slightly, and her balance was a bit off, but her eyes were sharp with fierce anger. “You know what? I have a surprise for you! I - I have a big surprise for you!”

He knew precisely what was coming, so Jeff did little more than sit there and stare at her, all the while wishing he was somewhere else...anywhere else.

"I'm..." Carol paused for a moment, to collect her thoughts, then reached for her overcoat on the rack by the door. "I'm - I'm - I'm leaving you!"

Truly surprised, Jeff jumped out of his chair. "Whoa. Whoa, babe. What? You can't leave me. Not like this."

"What do you care?" Carol shot back. "Consider this a gift. You want that bitch? Fine. You can have her. See if I care!"

"Baby, come on," Jeff pleaded. "Don't do this. Come on. It's late. Calm down a little bit, get some rest and then we can talk about this in the morning, okay? Don't just... leave."

"There's nothing to talk about. There's nothing. Nothing..." Rather than cry in front of him, Carol hurriedly threw on her overcoat and opened the door.

"Baby..." Not knowing what else to do, Jeff moved in front of her. "Come on. Think about this. Think about what I'm saying. Think about this, okay? Don't leave. Come on. We can talk about this, baby. We can..."

"No, we can't." Carol looked up at him, allowing a solitary tear to fall. "We can't."

"Baby..."

"I'll be back for the children in the morning."

"Baby..." Jeff realized he sounded like a broken record, but there was nothing else he could say. My God, she really sounded like she meant it this time!

"Goodbye, Jeff."

Chapter One:

July 5, 1966; Daybreak

One shoe off, one shoe on. There were ants crawling up her slightly bent left leg. Her skirt fell in an awkward way that most ladies would find very inappropriate. She was lying on her back, with one arm stretched outward and the other bent, her hand loosely lingering over her throat. Her slightly pursed lips had an unmistakable bluish tint to them; her face contorted to reveal the agony she'd endured.

Kneeling down, Shane Marcette shook his head sadly. Carol Mathison was dead.

"Hey, isn't that..." Brinks, a three year vet of Haven Park PD, allowed his voice to trail off. He knew precisely who it was. Every officer on the force knew who it was.

A chill encompassed Shane's entire body as he surveyed her once-beautiful features and he fought back a flood of emotion as he stood. In his entire career with the Haven Park PD, he'd seen countless dead bodies - but never before had he come face to face with a murder victim. Things like that just didn't happen here...and especially not to people like Carol Mathison.

She was beautiful. She was vibrant. She was so young...and this was what she was reduced to. Lying near the duck pond, lifeless, her skirt raised to reveal her underwear. It honestly made Shane sick...yet, he could not take his eyes off her.

Brinks cleared his throat. "We're gonna canvas the area and talk to the one who found her, okay, boss?"

Shane could only muster a weak nod, eyes still locked on Carol's broken body. For what felt like an eternity, he just stood there, staring at her. Maybe it was not the most professional behavior, but Carol Mathison was more than just a random victim. Carol Mathison was a friend...a sister...someone Shane watched grow from a music-loving teenager into a young wife, a frightened new mother, a devastated widow, an unhappy fiancée.

Shane remembered when Carol accepted Jeff's proposal quite vividly. Stanley called him in disbelief to share the news. To be honest, no one could really believe it. The two weren't exactly a match made in heaven - and most believed that Carol could have done a lot better than someone who didn't bother even trying to take care of her basic needs. For as long as Shane had known Jeff Howard, the guy had never had a decent job, something that made him angry to this day. It was up to Carol to support the household, support the children...children Jeff then had the audacity to say he wanted to adopt.

Just last month, Shane ran into Jeff, Carol and the boys at a restaurant. The encounter was friendly enough, but the underlying tension between Jeff and Carol was evident even to the most casual of observers. Shane attempted to talk to Carol about it on the phone a few days later, but she cheerfully wrote it off as "a bump in the road," thanked him for his concern and hung up.

As he stood there, rage encompassed Shane's entire body. Bump in the road indeed. There was no doubt in his mind who'd done this...he just had to prove it.

Shane glanced over his shoulder to ensure he was not being watched, then knelt down again. This was a major break in protocol, but he could not in good conscience leave her lying there like that. Gently, he reached down to lower her skirt to a more conservative position. "Carol," he whispered, blinking back tears, "I'm so sorry, doll. You deserve so much better. But that bastard is gonna pay for this. Believe me, that bastard is gonna pay for this."

July 5, 1966, 9 a.m.

Terri Englund frowned at her reflection in the mirror. She did not look very good today - and after that fight with Lance last night, she didn't feel very good either.

She awoke groggy and confused this morning, memories of the bitter war of words still ringing in her ears. He said so many hurtful things last night, things a loving husband should never say to his wife of almost five years. But, Terri considered grimly, as she attempted to style her short blonde hair, it was quite possible she deserved such a vicious verbal assault.

Things just weren't the same. They hadn't been for some time. As much as Lucas liked blaming Lance for the unraveling of their marriage, Terri knew that a large portion of it was her own fault. She gave herself a makeover of sorts late last year - and the reinvention of herself she'd created with Lucas' help was a far cry from the innocent virgin Lance married all those years ago.

Terri couldn't really explain the metamorphosis that took place, except to say she just snapped. When her parents died, any shred of normalcy she'd hoped to achieve shattered. Brett did the best he could to hold her together - and to a lesser extent, so did Lance - but there was little anyone could do to stop the descent. Terri just woke up one morning not caring anymore. In a week's time, she transformed her waist-length raven hair into a

bleached blonde pixie cut. She began wearing makeup and lots of it - something she'd never done before. She took 20 pounds off her already slight frame. She started spending less and less time at home, often forging off on solitary pilgrimages at dawn and not returning until dusk...leaving Lance angrily waiting for his wife (and his dinner) sometimes up to two hours.

And then, when she met Lucas in the park, things really went insane. Terri now considered that chance encounter in February the point of no return...and the point in which she knew she could not delude herself into believing she was happy being nothing but Mrs. Englund anymore. There was more out there. So, so, so much more.

Awkwardly, Terri pulled the sleeves of her cardigan down over her wrists. Yes, it was a bit hot for such attire, but there was no way she could meet Brett with those things showing. He would never forgive her - and she would never forgive herself for such blatant disregard for what he stood for...what the whole Woodward family once stood for. For a moment, Terri was overcome with emotion, remembering what was and never likely would be again, before wiping at the smudges in her heavy eye makeup and pulling herself together. She had to focus on the matter at hand.

It was going to take a lot of courage - courage Terri wasn't entirely sure she possessed. Still, something had to be done about this situation. She couldn't handle it on her own. She just had no idea what to do. But Brett would. Brett always knew what to do.

The usual suspects (Brett and Marnie) were at First Baptist of Haven Park when Terri arrived, but oddly enough, no one was stirring in the church office when she used her key to come inside. It was quiet. Way too quiet. Marnie was not at her desk. There was no radio on, no ringing phone, nothing but chilling silence. Terri felt a bead of sweat begin to dance down her neck, as a flood of worried, paranoid thoughts invaded her mind. "Brett?" she called, upon noticing that the door to the pastor's study was slightly ajar. "Brett, it's me. Are you in there?"

Before Terri could open the door, Marnie Blake emerged from the pastor's study. The dramatic eye makeup she wore on a daily basis was steadily running beneath her eyes and her nose was blood red, but she still mustered a warm smile. "Terri, darling, good morning. How are you?" she greeted.

Terri reached out to her friend. "What's the matter? You look like you've been crying! What's happened?"

"Oh, dear, I..." Marnie hesitated. She did not want Terri to hear this news from her.

"Marnie!" Terri hugged her. "Oh, come here. Talk to me. What's happened? Is it something with Evan?"

"No. No." Marnie's answer was instant. "Evan is fine."

"Peaches..." Brett Woodward came out of his study and immediately grabbed his sister in an embrace. His eyes were red-rimmed, and his usual smile was replaced with a look of utter sorrow. She began to feel a cold numbness creep up over her entire body. She'd only seen Brett look this way one time before...when he had to tell her that their parents were dead.

She withdrew from the embrace to stare at him, eyes wide. "What? What's going on?"

In that moment, he realized she didn't know. "I don't know if you should hear this from me," he begged off, his voice somewhat unsteady.

"No," Terri insisted. "I want to know. Something's happened, and I want to know what. I need to know, Brett. I need to know!"

"Peaches..." Brett paused for a long time, then sighed. "Carol's dead."

Terri shook her head emphatically, blinking back tears. "No. No, she can't be. There must be some mistake. I only talked to Carol yesterday afternoon. She can't be dead."

Brett reached out to hug her again. "I'm so sorry. There's no mistake. I wish there was."

"But - but - but...how?" Terri reached a hand up to her suddenly pounding head. "How? How does a 26-year old woman go from just fine one day to dead the next? How? How does that happen, Brett?"

"I think you should sit down," Brett suggested. He attempted to guide his sister to the chair facing his desk, but she violently turned back toward him, tears flowing freely.

"How did it happen? I want to know how it happened."

"It...it appears to be..." Brett looked to Marnie, hoping she would step in with an easier way to state the facts. She only looked on sadly. He cleared his throat. "Terri, it appears to be...murder. I...I'm so sorry to have to be the one to tell you." Seeing the look of horror on her face, he grabbed her in another tight embrace. "I'm so sorry..."

Terri, unable to speak, only clung to him. She just couldn't believe something like this would happen.

"I'm so sorry," Brett whispered again.

"Who?" Terri finally asked, pulling back to stare at him in the eye. "Who could do that to Carol? Who would do something like that? What kind of monster...?"

Brett shook his head sadly. "I don't know. That's what the police are trying to find out."

"I can't believe this!" Terri cried. "I just can't believe this!"

Brett ran his hand down her back slowly. "I can't either. May the Lord have mercy on their soul..."

July 5, 1966, 10:30 a.m.

"So you saw Carol leaving the house last night?" Officer Brinks stood in the doorway, taking careful notes as Mrs. Maryellen James spoke. She was no stranger to the Haven Park PD. As the across-the-street neighbor to Jeff and Carol she'd called the cops at least three times in as many months to report their violent arguing, but swore there was no major altercation last night.

Picking up her poodle, Mrs. James nodded. "Yes. She left at about 9:30. Maybe ten."

"Was she alone?"

"Yes. Jeff wasn't with her."

"Did she leave on foot? Which direction did she head?"

"She didn't have the car. And, um, she went that way. I don't know what direction that is." Mrs. James pointed.

Brinks continued to take notes. "Did you see Jeff Howard at any point in time?"

"Yes. I was outside walking my dog and I saw Jeff come back from somewhere."

"Was this before or after Carol left?"

"Oh, this was way after. This was probably around two or three in the morning. Little Muffin here woke me up and I took her out and there he was, coming back."

Brinks stared back at her. "And how did he look?"

"He looked in a mad rush, to be honest," Mrs. James confided. "I waved at him, but I don't think he saw me. He just went straight to the house, looked behind him a few times, then went in."

Immediately, wheels began turning in Brinks' head. "He looked behind him a few times? Like he thought he might have been followed?"

Again, Mrs. James nodded. "That's what it looked like to me."

"And you said there was no fighting last night?"

"None that I could hear. Oh, this is just a terrible tragedy. Carol was a lovely young woman! I just can't believe it!"

"Yes ma'am," Brinks agreed. "This is a terrible tragedy. Thank you very much for your time. We may need you to come down to the station to give an official statement."

"That would be no problem!" Mrs. James insisted. "I will do whatever I can to help."

"Yes ma'am. Thank you very much, and have a good day."

July 5, 1966, 11 a.m.

The knocking on the door jarred Jeff out of a fitful sleep on the couch, and he stumbled toward it just as Mickey, the older of Carol's two sons, came out of his bedroom.

"Is that Mom?" the four-year old asked.

"Yeah, buddy," Jeff answered with a nod. "This is probably your mom. Why don't you go back to bed and let me talk to her for a while, okay?"

Times like this made Jeff glad that Carol was such a good mother. Without a single word of protest, the child good-naturedly obliged. Jeff ran a hand over his face, as the knocking on the door grew louder and more persistent. "Okay, okay, okay!" he called. "I'm coming, Carol."

Though Jeff hoped to see his apologetic fiancée when he opened the door, he was instead greeted by Shane Marcette and Officer Brinks. "Good morning, Jeff," Shane began. "Hope we didn't wake you. Mind if we come in?"

"Shane? Huh? Uh, yeah. Okay. I guess." Jeff stepped back to allow them entrance. "What - what's going on? Is there a problem?" Immediately, he turned toward Shane, fear evident in his eyes. "Is this about Carol?"

"Why do you ask?" Shane met his frightened gaze with a challenging one.

"This is about Carol, isn't it? Did she get herself in trouble? Oh God, I told her not to leave last night! Oh God!"

Shane could not remain professional any longer, reaching forward and violently pulling Jeff toward him by his t-shirt. "Don't play games with me, Jeff. We both know what this is about!"

"What? What are you talking about?" Jeff wiggled free, staring at him. "What's going on?"

Officer Brinks stepped up at that moment, and moved between Shane and Jeff. Something was about to escalate here, and that was the last thing anyone in this town needed. "We're gonna need you to come down to the station," he informed.

Jeff blinked repeatedly. "And why's that? What's going on?"

"You know damn well what's going on, Jeff!" Shane yelled.

Brinks turned around and gave him a sharp look. Emotions were running high right now, no doubt about it, but Shane needed to get a grip. He couldn't accuse this guy of anything yet – not without solid proof, or a confession. And he wasn't gonna get either of those if he kept acting like this.

Clearing his throat, Brinks turned back to Jeff. "We just need to ask you a few questions about last night."

Jeff took a step back. They didn't even need to tell him. He already knew. "She's dead, isn't she?"

Shane's eyes widened at that question, but Brinks only nodded solemnly. "Yes. I'm afraid she is."

Jeff raised both hands to his face. "My God. Oh God. What happened? Oh...oh God!"

Brinks turned immediately to Shane, to silently warn him against another accusation, before turning back to Jeff. "We are hoping you can help us answer that question. We need you to come down to the station with us, okay?"

"I - the kids. I can't leave the kids...Let me...Oh, God, Carol!" Jeff felt tears well up in his eyes, but rather than break down in front of them, he closed his eyes and nodded. "Okay. Okay. I'll do whatever you need me to do."

Chapter Two:

July 5, 1966; 2:30 p.m.

"For the last damn time, I have no idea what you're talking about!" Jeff Howard threw up his hands. This was ludicrous. He didn't know how many times he had to recount the events of last night - or how many times he had to be accused of lying - for this idiot to get the message. He had nothing to do with any of this. Nothing at all.

"And for the last damn time, you know exactly what I'm talking about. And we're not leaving here until I get some answers." Shane Marcette stared across the table at him, challenging his every word.

"I already gave you answers! What the hell else do you want? A confession? You're not gonna get one! I don't have a damn thing to confess! I didn't do anything."

Shane stood and began to pace the room. "You and Carol didn't have the best relationship in town. Everyone knew that."

"That doesn't mean I killed her! My God, Shane! My God!" Jeff felt tears welling up in his eyes and buried his head in his hands to hide them. "Don't you think I'm going through enough without this? Don't you think this is hard enough to deal with? I watched her go last night, Shane. I let her go. And now she's dead. And you're standing here, trying to imply I did something to her." Looking up, Jeff clenched his teeth. "I didn't do anything to her. I loved her. I loved her, damn it. Don't you understand that? Don't you understand?"

Shane nodded, as he lit a cigarette he'd pulled from his jacket. "I understand perfectly, Jeff. That's exactly why you're here. So what we're gonna do is start over. How about that? We start all over on what happened last night, and you're gonna tell me what happened, and we're gonna get to the bottom of this."

"I already told you what happened. Over and over again."

"Carol was drinking, you said?" Shane consulted the notepad in his hand. "And you had a fight. What did you fight about?"

"I already told you that wasn't your business."

"See, that's where you're wrong, Jeff. It became my business when I saw Carol lying there, in that park. When I had to look at her lying there, when I had to see the ants - "

Jeff buried his face in his hands again. "Don't. I don't wanna hear this. I can't hear this."

"I didn't want to see it, either. But it was there."

"You're..." Jeff shook his head slowly, his face still hidden from Shane's view.

"You're an asshole."

"And you're a con-artist." Shane saw the way Jeff's eyes burned with anger when he said that. Obviously, he'd struck a nerve. "We all know. You're not fooling anyone, Jeff. You've conned almost everyone in town already. Anything for a quick buck, right? You'd do anything. You'd use anyone. You used Carol for months, didn't you?"

Jeff pointed an angry finger in Shane's direction. "I never used anybody! The relationship Carol and I have is none of your business!"

"Had," Shane corrected, slowly making his way around the room. "The relationship you and Carol had. She's dead now."

Silence prevailed for what seemed like forever. Jeff only sat there, with his head buried in his hands, while Shane paced a confident circle around the room a few more times. Finally, he came to a stop right behind Jeff and cleared his throat. "Why don't you tell me what the fight was about last night?" he suggested.

When Jeff gave no reply, Shane began offering up his own theories. "It was about the money. That's what all your fights were probably about. About the money. She knew that you were using her, and she told you she wasn't going to put up with it anymore." Standing there, Shane admitted to himself it was a complete shot in the dark. If anything, it was probably wishful thinking. He'd been hoping Carol would say something like that for months.

Still, Jeff said nothing. "And what did you do, Jeff?" Shane persisted. "Were you gonna let her talk to you like that? Were you gonna let her stand up for herself, for once? No. I bet you weren't." Again, Shane began to pace, watching Jeff intently for any sort of reaction. "You weren't gonna put up with that. So what'd you do, Jeff? Did you follow her? Did you find her in that park? Did you put your hands around her neck and..."

"God, no! Stop! Stop it. My God!" Jeff couldn't contain himself any longer and literally leapt up from his chair. "Stop! I didn't fucking kill her, okay? That's not what happened, okay?"

"Oh, really? Then what did?" Shane's smirk was so smug, so self-satisfying. If he didn't know for a fact it would do more harm than good, Jeff would have gladly wiped it off his face.

"We had a fight," he began, through gritted teeth. "We had a fight, and she left. And the fight wasn't about money. We never fought about money."

"Then what was it about?" Shane prodded, as he came closer.

Jeff closed his eyes. The last person he wanted to tell this to was Shane, but he knew that the only way to get to the bottom of this was to be entirely truthful – no matter how hard it was. "She said I was cheating on her."

Shane's whole body stiffened, but aside from his eyes narrowing, his face showed no visible emotion. "And then what happened?"

"I told you!" Jeff sighed. "She left. And that was the last time I saw her. I have no idea where she went or who she saw or who hurt her, but I know it was not me."

Casually, Shane flicked the ashes from his cigarette on the floor and began to pace in the other direction. "Where'd you go last night?"

Jeff blinked repeatedly. "What? I didn't go anywhere."

Shane turned back around to face him. He was smiling. "And that's a lie. A witness saw you coming home at three in the morning."

"Oh. That." Jeff eased back down into his chair, then began to nervously rub his arm.

"Yeah. That. So where'd you go? And why'd you look so nervous when you came back?"

"I – I went looking for her. It was late and I was worried. And – "

Shane leaned down over the table. "So you left the kids at three in the morning, alone in the house, to look for Carol? That's what you're telling me?"

Jeff nodded slowly. "Yeah."

"I thought you couldn't leave the kids. That's what you said earlier, when we asked you to come down. You said you couldn't leave the kids alone, and that was in the middle of the day. So..." Shane put out his cigarette in the ashtray on the table and began to pace again. "Tell me, Jeff. How is it at all acceptable to leave two children under five years old home alone in the middle of the night, when you won't do the same thing in the middle of the day? That doesn't add up."

"I – I wasn't thinking," Jeff stammered. "It was late and I was worried and it wasn't like her to be gone this long and I just wasn't... I wasn't thinking. I wasn't gone long. I didn't leave them alone long. I just... I wanted to see if I could find her somewhere."

"At three in the morning?" The skepticism was evident in Shane's face. "At three o'clock in the morning?"

"I can't make you believe me, Shane – "

"And I don't believe you, for the record."

Jeff threw up his hands again. "And that's fine. Don't believe me. That's fine. But you can't keep me here if you aren't gonna charge me with anything. I gotta go home and I gotta be with my kids, okay? So, if you're done accusing me of something you can't prove, I'm gonna just do that, okay?"

Jeff stood and attempted to exit the room, but Shane moved in front of the door just as he approached it. "You're full of shit, Jeff. I know you are," he sneered.

"You don't know anything," Jeff fired back. "And you can't prove anything either."

"Maybe not now," Shane conceded. "But I will."

"Yeah? Well, good luck on that one." Squeezing past Shane, Jeff opened the door. "Good day to you, detective," he said sarcastically.

Shane shook his head slowly, then took a seat on the edge of the table as he watched him go. "Yeah. Same to you," he mumbled back.

July 5, 1966; 3:15 p.m.

Terri spent much of the morning at the church office, still reeling from the news of Carol's death. Marnie seemed equally shocked, while Brett was the usual pillar of

strength, alternately consoling both his sister and his secretary and pondering the senselessness of it all.

Just after lunch, Terri pulled herself together long enough to drive home, but once she got there, the emotional purging continued. It was just one thing too many right now! She didn't know how much more she could take! And sitting in that house, with nothing but unhappy mementoes and memories was making everything even worse, so she went for a drive. For a while, her direction was aimless. She just needed time to think; to reconcile this latest blow to what used to be her perfect life. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. She and Carol were supposed to grow into cantankerous old women together. Raise their children as cousins. Rejoice in the birth of their grandchildren. Live next door to each other out in the country, with nothing but cats and each other for company. And now, Carol was dead. The best friend she'd ever had was dead.

As she drove, Terri's mind kept flashing back to her final conversation with Carol, yesterday over lunch at Hazel's Diner. They each spent a fair amount of time complaining about their respective other halves, but the conversation soon turned to Lucas...and the dilemma Terri was facing.

"I know you're going to hate me for this," Carol began, as she stirred sugar into her coffee, "but I just don't like him."

"No one likes him," Terri replied sadly.

"Did you ever stop to think there might be a reason for that? Honey, come on. You know me and you know I'm not going to pull any punches with you. What you have with Lance is a little messed up right now..."

"A lot messed up," Terri interrupted with a sigh.

Carol nodded knowingly. "A lot messed up right now, dear...but that doesn't mean you should just throw it all away to chase after a man you barely know."

"But I do know him, Carol. I know him on a level deeper than anyone could ever possibly understand! Lucas and I relate on a level that's deeper than the human race itself."

Carol stared across the table at her incredulously, then down at her arm. Terri moved it into her lap, suddenly conscious that her track marks were showing. "You're messed up right now, aren't you?" Carol asked quietly.

Terri couldn't bring herself to answer, only staring down at the table. She was too ashamed of herself to even look at Carol right now, even though she knew that Carol knew about it and didn't judge her. It was just the magnitude of how far she'd fallen, just in the past few months.

Carol reached across the table to gently take her hand. "Terri, dear, listen to me. Listen to me, please. You have got to stop this. You have to stop this, okay? Look what you're doing to yourself. Look at what's happened to you. It's just going to get worse and worse if you don't do something about it now."

Terri blinked back tears. "I fail to see how it could possibly get any worse than it is now."

Carol nodded. "Honey, it could. Believe me. It could, and it will. Listen, okay? You can't keep doing this. You know what's right. You know that this is not what you need... that he is not what you need."

"This isn't his fault, you know," Terri insisted, looking up at her. "It's not."

“Terri, look what he’s done to you!” Momentarily, Carol’s voiced raised, before she took a look around the diner and apologized. “I’m sorry, dear. I know it’s not something you want to hear, but I wish you could see what I see. He did this to you, Terri. None of this happened before you met him. And if you leave Lance and take off to Hippierville with Lucas, don’t you know it’s just going to get worse? Terri, please...please, honey. Please just think about this.”

The words played over and over and over in Terri’s mind, until she found herself at the door of Lucas’ rented apartment on Haven Park’s far west side. She was doing the very thing Carol told her not to so many times, but there was just nowhere else to turn. Lance would never understand. No one could. No one but Lucas.

When he opened the door, Terri leapt at him, overcome with grief in an instant. She couldn’t even speak. All she could do was cling to him and cry.

“Baby?” Lucas pulled back to look at her. His eyes were so kind. So filled with concern. He reached out a hand to her face. “What happened, baby? Come in. Come in.”

“Lucas...help me,” was all Terri could manage to muster between sobs.

Gently, he took her arm and pulled her inside, closing the door behind him. “What happened, baby? What happened? What did Lance do to you?”

Terri shook her head. “No. No.”

Directly in front of her, Lucas leaned down, and their eyes locked. “What happened, Theresa Jean? Talk to me.”

Terri took a moment to collect herself, then cleared her throat. “Carol’s dead.”

Though she expected a reaction out of that, but Lucas didn’t flinch. All he did was continue to stare into her eyes. “She’s dead!” Terri continued. “Just like that, she’s dead! And Lucas...” She sank down onto the ratty couch behind her. “Someone killed her. Someone killed her! They killed her!”

Lucas took a seat beside her, still devoid of any emotion. “What happened?” he asked again.

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I just know she’s dead and...” Terri buried her face in her hands. “I need you! I need you.”

“You have me,” he replied, placing an arm around her. “You have me.”

For a very long time, there was silence, before Lucas cleared his throat. “Someone killed her, you said? Do they know who it was?”

“No,” Terri answered with a sniffle. “I don’t think so.”

“Okay.” He leaned down to kiss the top of her head. “Okay.”

“And I just don’t know who could do something like that!” She reached up to dry her tears. “I just don’t know...”

“Well,” Lucas began quietly. “It would have to be somebody that was very angry with Carol...”

Terri pulled out of the embrace to stare at him. “But who was angry at Carol? Who could be that angry at Carol?”

“I don’t know,” Lucas shrugged. “Could have been anybody. She had a nasty habit of putting her nose where it didn’t belong, so...”

Terri’s entire body stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“She had an opinion about everything,” Lucas explained flatly. “Including you and me. She was too involved in other people’s affairs for it to not come back to her at some point.”

"I - I don't like where this is going."

"I'm not trying to upset you, baby. I'm just saying that there are a number of people who could have done something like this. Carol didn't know when to keep her mouth shut. That's bound to catch up with a person sometime."

Terri stood, as a horrifying chill came over her. She grabbed her keys. "I - I think I should be going now. Lance will be home soon."

Lucas stood too. "What's your rush, baby? I got what you wanted for you. You wanna relax with me for a while?"

Knowing precisely what he was referring to, Terri's pace only quickened as she headed for the door. "No. I really...I just need to go."

"Baby, I didn't mean to upset you..."

"You didn't. It's just been a very upsetting day. I think I just need to go home and get some rest."

"Okay, well, don't forget about me, okay?"

"I won't. I promise." Hastily, Terri saw herself out, without even a kiss goodbye. She didn't stop running until she got to the car. Her entire body was shaking. She knew that man, better than she even knew herself. And she knew.

Locked safely in the 1965 Falcon Lance bought her for their anniversary, Terri slumped toward the steering wheel and sobbed. She knew.

July 5, 1966; 5:30 p.m.

Marnie Blake came in the door with a heavy sigh and set her keys on the table. As she removed her earrings, she shook her head disapprovingly at the mess Evan left behind in the living room. Obviously, he'd been drinking. He never scattered the photos out like that if he hadn't.

She'd always known he was a bit eccentric, from the moment he brought her to his home for the first time. The entire house was a shrine to his late first wife Francine, something Marnie could understand to a degree, but had to admit was a bit odd for her tastes. Photos of the pleasant blonde lined every wall of the house (and were now arranged in a circle on the living room floor). It was Evan's wont to sit in the midst of them, with his trusty bottle of scotch, loudly mourning that there was just nothing he could do. It was a sight that horrified Marnie at first, but she'd grown somewhat accustomed to it by now. There was little she could do either, only observe carefully, and offer him comfort when he asked for it. He rarely asked for it.

This evening, however, Evan was not in the living room. From the noise, Marnie deduced he must be in the downstairs guest room - another room he dedicated to Francine's memory. Standing at the door, she debated whether or not she really wanted to go in. Bad things tended to happen when she interfered in these evenings...like the time she got hit with a picture frame he threw. Of course, he didn't do it on purpose. It was probably all her own fault, for just bursting in on him like that...but she still had a suspicious black eye for days and every single person in town concerned with just what was going on behind closed doors.

Marnie told no one, not even Brett. Evan's emotional turmoil was always kept a closely guarded secret, because she knew how fiercely protective he was of his privacy and knew he would never permit her to discuss how awkward, uncomfortable and

emotionally draining these evenings were. No, this wasn't quite what she was expecting when she first fell in love with the charming postman who promised to show her the world, but she didn't have a whole lot of other choice, except just live with it. After all, it could have been a lot worse. Evan was never cruel to her intentionally, he treated her quite well when he was sober...he was just still shaken up after Francine's death...ten years after the fact.

After thinking through her options, Marnie deemed it best to at least let him know she was there. With a light knock on the door, she cleared her throat. "Evan, darling? I'm home."

At once, there was complete silence in the guest room, and the door flew open immediately thereafter. Evan's red-rimmed eyes were the first thing Marnie noticed, along with the look of relief on his face. Instinctively, she reached a hand out to his face, but he quickly enveloped her in a tight embrace. "Francine!" he cried. "Francine! My Francine!"

"No..." Marnie reminded gently. "No, Evan, it's me. It's Marnie."

He acted as though he hadn't even heard her, pulling back and surveying her features. "Francine, you came back to me! Oh, let me look at you! You're beautiful! You're so beautiful! Never leave me again!"

With that, he hugged her again. Marnie closed her eyes. This was hardly uncommon either, though she had to admit the first time shook her to the core. That night, Evan drunkenly clung to her for a full three hours, begging her not to jump and promising to be a better man if she would just stay. "Evan," she whispered into his ear, "honey, it's me. It's Marnie. It's not Francine. It's Marnie."

He pulled out of the embrace immediately, blinking repeatedly. Then, he ran both hands over his face and began to pace in the other direction. "Marnie," he said quietly. "I...I'm sorry, darling. I'm sorry. I thought you were..."

She nodded sympathetically. "Yes. I know. It's okay."

"It's not okay," he argued. "It's not okay. I...I...I'm sorry."

She came up behind him and put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "It's alright, Evan. Everything's going to be alright."

"Sometimes I think I see her everywhere..." he whispered. "I must be going crazy. I do the strangest things, Marnie. Things I just don't understand..."

"We all do," she sympathized. "We all do sometimes. It's alright."

"Do you love me?" he asked, eyes pleading. "Please tell me you still love me."

"I do love you, Evan. I love you very much."

"Even knowing who I am? What I am? Are you sure about that? I don't think anybody could ever love me knowing who I really am..." He continued to pace the room before coming to a stop in front of the mirror on the dresser. "This is who I am," he announced, pointing an angry finger at his reflection. "This is who I am, Marnie. How can you love this? How can you love me after what I've done?"

Marnie was speechless for a moment, then stepped toward him. "What have you done?" she asked quietly

He turned back to face her. His expression was almost incredulous. "You don't know? You honestly don't know?" He walked toward her, and took her face in both his hands. "Marnie, look at me," he whispered. "Look at me. You're looking at a murderer."

Chapter Three:

July 5, 1966; 6:15 p.m.

Julia Woodward eyed her husband suspiciously. He'd been home almost an hour, but had yet to really say a word. He didn't even touch the dinner she spent an hour preparing. Granted, solemn silence was not really that unusual for Brett, especially after a difficult day such as this one, but the look on his face was more than enough to warrant her concern.

"Do you want to talk about it, honey?" she offered quietly.

He looked up for a minute, then down at his plate. "No, not really." Noting the look of skepticism on her face, he sighed, amending, "I mean, there's just not that much to say, is there? It's something none of us really saw coming. And it's something you can't just...you can't shake it."

She nodded sympathetically. "I know."

"And death is a part of life," he continued quietly. "I know that. Ashes to ashes and all of that other stuff. It happens. But it's not supposed to happen to young women in the prime of their lives, Jules. And...and I don't know why she would have been targeted. What did she do that was so bad she deserved what happened to her? What kind of person can do that? It just doesn't make any sense. It doesn't make any damn sense."

"It really doesn't," she conceded. "I really feel for her family, especially her boys... and Jeff."

"Jeff," Brett repeated. "Lord forgive me for this, but I just have this weird feeling that..."

"Don't say that!" Julia immediately reprimanded. "Don't say that. We don't know that for sure."

Brett stared at her for a moment, surprised she'd be so quick to jump to Jeff's defense, then nodded. "You're right. We shouldn't. But I just get this feeling that there's more to it than it appears."

Julia stood hastily. "Are you going to eat that now, or do you want to have it later?"

"Jules?" Brett took her arm as she reached for his plate. "Calm down, baby. You look like you're upset."

"I just don't like speculation on things when we don't know anything yet," she informed, setting about clearing the table. "It's not right. And as people in our position, we really shouldn't even think such things. It's just not right, Brett."

He smiled. "You're an angel. You really are. You're right, baby. I apologize. I shouldn't have said anything."

"All we can do is just be there for the family, and try to comfort them the best way we can. The rest is up to Shane and the police." She turned back to face him. "Have you talked to Shane today?"

"No. I did call, but he wasn't in. I would imagine he's got his hands full with all this. But I did leave a message that said I'd be around if he needed to talk. I know he has to be pretty shaken up, but you know Shane. He'll never admit it."

"Probably not," Julia noted. "But it's good that you're there for him."

"Well, I try to be. As much as he'll let me."

“How’s Terri taking this? I’m sure she’s pretty broken up. I know she was very close to Carol.”

“Broken up isn’t even the word,” Brett mused sadly. “She’s just heartbroken. And I feel terrible for her. She has enough going on already. She didn’t need this too.”

Julia busily wiped down the countertops, with her back to him, so he would not see her roll her eyes. She knew exactly what was coming next – a long rant about how life was so cruel to poor Terri (or "Peaches", as he often preferred calling her), how poor Terri never got what she deserved, and how poor, pitiful Terri needed his help, now more than ever.

Though it sounded extremely un-Christian, bordering on harsh, even...Julia had had just about enough of “poor Peaches.” It was Brett’s favorite subject to discuss, and she could not for the life of her figure out why. Yes, it was his sister. Yes, she wasn’t having the best of luck lately. But come on. Terri largely brought all of that on herself. Whether or not he wanted to believe it, she was not the innocent victim she usually made herself out to be.

Silently, she chided herself as he continued to lament Terri’s poor choices – I mean, her shoddy lot in life. She really never should have brought this whole thing up.

“It’s just not fair. Nothing about her life is fair anymore.”

Though it was her wont to keep silent, Julia couldn’t help but tersely remind, “Nothing about anyone’s life is very fair, Brett.”

“But Jules, things have just been so...bad for her lately. It’s like she’s cursed or something. I need to pray for her. We need to pray for her.”

Julia shook her head, her back still toward him. “Indeed we do.”

July 5, 1966; 6:30 p.m.

“Wow. You’re here. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

The sarcasm in Lance Englund’s voice made his wife shudder. She was not in the mood for this tonight.

“So happy to see you,” he continued, as he walked toward the kitchen. “And what a lovely meal you’ve prepared for me, after a long day at the office! Oh, Terri, you’ve truly outdone yourself! I don’t deserve a fine wife like you!”

“Lance, stop it,” she said quietly. “I’m not in the mood, okay?”

“You’re never in the mood, dear. You’re not in the mood to talk to me. You’re not in the mood to spend time with me. You’re not in the mood to cook for me. You’re not in the mood to sleep with me. You’re just not in the mood for anything.” He walked back toward where she was seated on the sofa. “And I guess you’re not in the mood to clean the house either, because it’s filthy!”

She pulled her knees up to her chin and began to slowly rock herself. “I was out today. I didn’t have the time. I’ll get to it tomorrow.”

“Right. Sure you will.”

“Carol’s dead,” she announced, as though that might distract him from his anger.

He only nodded. “I heard. That’s terrible.”

Terri felt tears well up in her eyes. “That’s all you have to say about it? That was my best friend, Lance!”

He threw up his hands. "What do you want me to say? What can I say? She's dead. It's terrible. That's all anyone can say!"

"You have no idea what I'm going through! Why can't you have a little sympathy for me? I'm your wife!"

Lance stood there silently for a moment, before starting toward her, head down. This usually meant he was going to explode. Terri tensed involuntarily.

"My wife wants me to give her some sympathy, huh?" he asked. "Well, my wife might have a little better shot at getting my sympathy if she acted more like a wife! When's the last time you slept with me, huh? When's the last time you did anything besides shoot up your junk and fuck around with that worthless boyfriend of yours? Huh? Huh, Terri? Yeah, I don't remember either." He gripped her arm, examining the fresh track marks. "Disgusting. You are disgusting, Terri! Look at what you've done to yourself! Look at this shit! You want me to treat you like my wife? You're nothing like my wife! My wife would never do something like this! I don't even know who the hell you are anymore!"

Unable to take anymore, Terri broke down in sobs before him. She raised both hands to her ears. "Stop! Stop it! Don't do this to me!"

"Hold your ears. Real mature," he taunted. "You know you can hear me. And you know what I'm saying is true. Everything's shambles. Everything's shit. The whole life we had together? Gone. It's all gone because you ruined it. You didn't stop until you ruined it." Lance took a step back and a deep breath. He was so angry he could shake her, but he couldn't let his fury get the best of him. In five years of marriage, he never laid a hand on her, and he wasn't about to start now.

"You ruined this, Terri," he began again, calmer. "You ruined everything when you decided that this life just wasn't good enough for you anymore, whenever the hell that was. I tried to give you the world. I bought you a house, I bought you a car, I bought your clothes, I treated you like a princess...you had everything a woman could ever hope for. And it wasn't good enough for you. You threw it all away. And now – now! – you want me to show you some sympathy because you're my wife. It's amazing how self-centered you are. I'm the one that deserves the sympathy!"

"Stop, please stop," Terri whimpered. "Please, Lance. I know you hate me, but for one night, please just don't do this."

Silently, he stared at her. She was a blubbering, drug-addled mess – a true shell of her former self. Watching her, he was genuinely devastated. Theresa Jean Woodward, the vivacious (if a little spoiled), wholesome girl he fell head over heels in love with... reduced to this. On instinct, he reached out to pull her into him, but realized what he was doing almost immediately, and crossed his arms instead. "I'm sorry about Carol," he whispered. "I'm sorry about a lot of things. Mainly, I'm sorry about us."

With that, Lance shrugged his shoulders and started for the stairs. "If you wanna talk about anything...well, you know where I am," he said, without turning around. He just couldn't look at her anymore. It depressed him way too much. "Good night, Terri."

July 5, 1966; 8:45 p.m.

Seated on the edge of the bed, Marnie expelled a heavy sigh, as she absent-mindedly played with the telephone cord. "Yes, Mother, I heard," she affirmed calmly. "Yes. It's just terrible. Yes...I know."

Though every fiber of her being was screaming that this was the last thing she wanted to talk about, especially after this entire fiasco of a day, she knew she could never be rude enough to tell her mother that. Things like this just didn't happen in Haven Park, after all. It was only natural that the former First Lady would want to talk about it...extensively.

"Oh yes, Mother...I can imagine..."

"Can you believe it?" Helen Adams asked, a hint of both wonder and worry in her voice. "Your father would be rolling over in his grave if he knew about this!"

"Oh yes," Marnie agreed quietly. "He probably would be."

"And Stanley Rogers' daughter, at that! Isn't that terrible, Margaret? Didn't you go to school together?"

"She was a little older than me, actually..."

"She grew up with you!" Helen continued dramatically. "I remember when she was just a little thing. And now this! Can you believe something like this has happened? And Margaret, I heard on the news that it was...oh, my goodness, I can't even say it! They're saying on the news that someone murdered that poor girl!"

"Yes, I heard that too. It's awful." Marnie took a sip of water and nodded. This conversation could not be over soon enough.

"She was living with Jeff, you know. I just find that very..." Helen hesitated, "interesting."

Marnie wasn't sure she really wanted to know, but curiosity got the better of her and she heard herself ask, "Why is it interesting, Mother?"

Helen laughed lightly. "Besides the obvious, you mean? This is the same Jeff you told me you were going to marry."

Marnie raised a hand to her suddenly flushed face. "Oh, Mother. I never said I was going to marry him...did I?"

"You certainly did! I remember that day quite well. We were all having lunch and he got up to use the phone and you leaned across the table - "

Suddenly remembering, Marnie broke into a broad smile. "Mother, I was only 21 years old. You can hardly hold me to that statement."

Helen continued laughing. "I'm actually quite relieved it didn't work out the way you planned! That could have been you they found this morning!"

Marnie's smile immediately faded. "Mother!" she reprimanded sharply. "That was a terrible joke!"

"It's no joke, Margaret. There's already talk that Jeff was the one that did it."

Marnie almost dropped the glass in her hand. "What? Why would anyone say that?"

"Well," Helen began, as if it should have been obvious, "their relationship wasn't exactly perfect. We all knew that."

"But that doesn't mean he killed her!" Marnie argued. "Everyone always gossips about something in this town. You know that, Mother. I refuse to believe that Jeff would do something like that. I just...I can't even think about it."

"Margaret, calm down, darling," Helen advised softly. "I'm sorry to have upset you."

"I know Jeff, and he would never do that. I don't believe it."

“Alright, dear.”

From there, Helen continued to prattle on about other, more mundane happenings around town. Marnie did her best to sound interested, though her entire head was spinning. Jeff? Why would anyone even think such a thing? She could not profess to be Jeff’s very best friend, nor could she say she knew him better than anyone, but the one thing she was certain of was that he loved that insufferable harpy. It was no secret how miserable she’d made him, but he continued to stay with her, and he continued to assume responsibility for two children that weren’t even his.

It was just last week when Marnie last saw Jeff. It was Wednesday, if she wasn’t mistaken. He dropped by the office to bring her lunch, and just visit for a little while. It was something they did every so often, and something Carol was eternally jealous of, though nothing improper ever happened during any of those lunch “dates.” They just sat and talked, listening to and supporting one another. Marnie was glad to be able to provide Jeff with an outlet to vent how he felt about a number of things, and last Wednesday was no different.

“She is making me absolutely nuts,” Jeff confided, with a heavy sigh.

“What’s going on?”

“I don’t even know anymore, that’s the problem. One minute, things are fine, then she’s all crazy and yelling at me and saying I’m cheating on her with this one and that one and even you, for God’s sake and – ”

“Me?” Marnie interrupted, with a chuckle. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I’m dead serious. It just gets crazier and crazier. All we do is fight anymore, and I don’t know what to do anymore. It’s just nuts.”

Marnie played with her straw, carefully choosing her words. She wasn’t sure if she should be the one to point this out, or how Jeff would react to it, but she really did have his best interest at heart. “Sometimes,” she began softly, “it’s best to just cut your losses and move on, if things are really that disastrous.”

Jeff shook his head. “I’ve thought about it. Believe me, I’ve thought about it. But here’s the craziest part of all: I love the bitch, Marnie. I love that crazy bitch.”

Marnie broke into a smile. “Only you could get away with saying something like that, you know.”

“It’s true,” Jeff insisted. “And the good times, when we have them, are really, really good. They make the bad stuff seem unimportant. It’s just...we’re not having that many good times lately, and that’s the problem.”

“Maybe, if you think it’s worth saving, you could have a talk with her about all of this, and explain to her how you’re feeling?” Marnie immediately took note of the incredulous look Jeff gave her, and amended, “Okay, maybe not.”

“It’s hard to talk to her,” Jeff admitted. “Everything turns into a fight, especially if she’s got a bottle in her hand.”

“Oh, alcohol makes everything worse! It’s the root of all evil in relationships, I’ve found.” Marnie felt her face turn red the second the words escaped her lips, and she prayed Jeff would be too preoccupied with his own relationship woes to pick up on the fact she just let some of her own slip out.

He was. “Love is supposed to be able to overlook bad stuff, right? Isn’t that in the Bible? You know it better than me. It says something about that, though.”

She nodded. "Yes, it does. Love is patient, kind, self-sacrificing, and many other wonderful things, according to the apostle Paul."

"The apostle Paul didn't live with Carol Mathison!" Jeff laughed. "But we're making it work. I'm making it work, if only for those good times. You know? I'm holding on for those good times, and we're gonna have them again. It's just a matter of time."

Marnie remembered being struck particularly by his optimism, and good humor, though his personal life was easily a mess. That was the Jeff that she knew – easy going, charming, eternal optimist – not the scheming opportunist the local gossips (including her own mother, sadly) tried so hard to make him out to be...and certainly not a murderer! Oh, my goodness, the thought was just inconceivable!

"Margaret? Are you alright?"

Her mother's concerned voice snapped Marnie back to her surroundings. She cleared her throat. "Yes, Mother, of course. I'm sorry."

"Everyone is so up in arms about this sort of thing happening here! I can imagine you're quite shaken up about it too."

"Yes," Marnie admitted, as she eyed Evan's sleeping pills on the night stand. They were looking better and better all the time. She could certainly use a good night's rest after this day of turmoil! "What I think I'm going to do is just try and get some rest, okay, Mother? Have a good night. I will call you tomorrow, as soon as I get a chance."

"Oh. Yes. Okay, Margaret." Helen sounded disappointed, as she always did when Marnie came up with a reason to get off the phone. "Sleep well, dear. And give my very best to Evan, of course."

"Yes, absolutely, I will. Good night, Mother."

Chapter Four:

July 6, 1966; 9:30 a.m.

Jeff was on the phone with his brother when the knock came - and, annoyed by the interruption, he almost didn't go to the door. It was probably just another well-meaning, but terminally nosy, neighbor who'd come by to give "condolences." There'd been a steady stream of them since last night, and all they wanted to do was bait him into saying something that could have been incriminating. It sounded incredibly paranoid, but it was true.

They were saying things like, "I can't imagine who would do such a thing...can you?" then casting suspicious glances in his direction. This was hard enough to handle graciously, but it got worse. Mrs. James, from across the road, gave him the once-over a few times, then boldly remarked, "Well, you really don't *look* like a murderer. And I guess you couldn't have done it, otherwise the police never would have let you go so soon."

Then again, Jeff considered, the visitor could have been that crazy bastard Shane Marcette, which was even more reason for him not to open the door. He had no idea what that guy's personal vendetta against him was, but he was acting completely irrationally. Hauling him down to the station for some "questioning", which turned into a full-on interrogation, and more than one accusation of lying and basically being a murderer?

What right did he have to say those things? What proof? He couldn't prove a damn thing - there just wasn't a damn thing to prove. If you wanted the truth of it all, the guy had absolutely no business being involved in this investigation to begin with. His personal ties to the victim were way too strong.

"You could file a lawsuit about that," his brother Steve had advised. And yeah, he probably could, if he really wanted to...which he didn't. All Jeff really wanted to do was put the whole thing behind him and focus on what was most important: getting through the grief of losing Carol, and helping the kids do the same, in whatever capacity Stanley and Mona were willing to let him.

Another, louder knock resounded through the living room, and Jeff groaned. "Hey, listen, there's somebody at the door right now and they're not going away, so let me go see what they want and I'll call you back later, alright?" Jeff asked.

"You got it," Steve agreed. "I'll be here all day."

With a heavy sigh, Jeff hung up the phone and started for the door. *Stay calm*, he told himself. *Don't let them get to you, no matter who they are.*

Still, that was a lot easier said than done, wasn't it? So much for innocent until proven guilty in this town. They really needed to be worried about their own damn selves rather than him. After all, there was some psychopath out there, murdering people at random. Instead of hounding someone that had nothing to do with it, Shane and every other busy body in Haven Park needed to be worried about finding the real killer...before they struck again.

Shirtless, unshaven and wild-haired, Jeff swung open the door with a scowl on his face...and was immediately greeted by Marnie Blake's radiant smile. "Hey," she greeted quietly, as she surveyed his disheveled appearance. "I hope this isn't a bad time."

Suddenly self-conscious, Jeff reddened a bit. "Well, I wasn't really expecting company," he admitted sheepishly. "But I'm always happy to see you. Come on in."

"I can't really stay long. I have to get to work soon," she insisted, as she stepped inside. "I just came by to tell you how deeply sorry I am about Carol and..." Hesitantly, she extended out the Tupperware container in her hand. "I wanted to bring you this. It's not much. I mean, you know how awful of a cook I am, but I did want to at least bring something for you and the kids."

Jeff took it, as a slow smile crept onto his face. "Yes, I remember your adventures in the kitchen. But thank you. That's very sweet. Thanks a lot. You, uh, wanna sit down? The place is a mess. I haven't really had a whole lot of chance to...you know, clean it...but..."

"I'm not worried about how clean your house is," she informed, as she started toward him. "I'm worried about how you and the children are doing."

"Me?" He shrugged. "I've seen better days, that's for sure. But I'm alright. I guess I have to be. You know? And the kids...well...I don't think they understand this whole thing yet. They're...yeah. Pretty young. So...yeah. You want something to drink? Coffee or tea or something? I might have some juice..."

Marnie lifted her head, and in that moment, their eyes locked. She could read that man a lot better than he realized, and despite his claims to the contrary, it was painfully evident how hard this was really hitting him. Her heart literally ached for him as she stood there, but she knew there was very little she could really do to ease his pain. Nothing but be there, or try to, at least.

Before giving her a chance to answer, Jeff was in the kitchen, searching the cabinet for a glass. Marnie followed him. "Jeff?" she began gently.

"It's around here somewhere," he insisted. "We have a bunch of them, actually. But they must all be dirty. Or something. Hell, I don't know. I don't know."

Marnie bit her lip. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine. I just can't find anything in this damn house. Carol always left everything such a mess. I just...fuck it!" Frustrated, Jeff slammed the cabinet door.

She watched from behind as his shoulders slumped and he expelled a heavy sigh. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. Everything that Marnie needed to know had been clearly communicated through silence...and it broke her heart.

Stepping forward, she gently placed a hand on his bare shoulder. "I'm so, so sorry," she murmured.

He spun around quickly to face her, and ran both hands over his face to hide the fact he was on the verge of breaking down. "Hey, you need to get to work, huh? I don't wanna keep you."

"Jeff..."

He could read her mind, and he wanted no part of it. "No, no," he dismissed, with an awkward smile. "I'm fine. Don't worry about me. You need to get to work." With that, he took her by the arm and began to guide her toward the front door. "I appreciate you coming by, Marn. Don't be a stranger, okay?"

Marnie began to protest, but Jeff quickly quieted her. "I'm okay. I'm really okay. And you don't wanna be late. So..."

"Jeff, let go of me." The force in her voice surprised them both. He immediately dropped her arm and stared at her. She took in a deep breath, then turned, to look him in the eye. "Stop this. You aren't fooling anyone, least of all me."

"I'm not trying to fool anyone," he maintained calmly. "I'm okay. Yeah, it's rough, but I'm making it. I'm gonna be okay. You don't need to stay here all day and comfort me. I'm gonna be fine."

"Please don't shut me out. I just want to help you."

Her eyes were so sincere he had to look away. It wasn't that he didn't want to, or that he didn't trust her...it was that he just couldn't. There was no way he could let himself be that vulnerable with her, or anyone. Not right now.

Breaking down and feeling sorry for himself was a luxury he just couldn't afford. Instead, he needed to focus on other things, such as where he was going to go from here. Carol's death meant that life as he knew it was completely over. It wasn't as simple as just losing his fiancée...he'd also lost his place to live, his means of support, his only real tie to the children that meant the world to him, his good reputation (as far as Shane Marcette and Haven Park at large were concerned)...more than anything, he had to figure out what he was going to do now. He could, and would, grieve later, but right now, there just wasn't time.

"I'm okay," he replied finally, after what seemed like a decade of silence. "I know what you're trying to do, and I appreciate it, but right now, I just need to be alone, okay?"

"Jeff..."

"Hey, listen to me." He cupped her delicate face in his hands, and stared directly into her eyes. "Marn, I'm okay. I'm gonna be okay, babe. I have to be. Don't you even worry about me, okay?"

She closed her eyes, having no choice but to concede. What else could she do? She couldn't exactly hold him down and force him to talk about it! "Okay," she resolved quietly. "But if you need anything - "

"You'll be the first person I call," he promised, with a half-hearted smile.

She nodded. "Okay..."

"You're one hell of a woman, you know that?"

"Oh..." Shyly, she raised a hand in dismissal to his praise. "I'm really not. I just care about my friends."

He opened the front door, and caught a glimpse of Maryellen James watching from the safety of her lawn. "And that's more than I can say for the rest of the assholes in this town," he announced, purely for her benefit.

Marnie shook her head and started to go, then turned back to embrace him. "You take care of yourself, okay?" she whispered into his ear. "And if you need anything, call me. Day or night, I don't care."

Jeff locked eyes with an all-too-curious Mrs. James across the road. "I will," he said quietly.

Marnie pulled back and smiled at him. "Give my love to the children. And Jeff?"

"Yeah." He returned his gaze from Mrs. James to her.

Marnie kept smiling. "Ignore her. She's just an old biddy with nothing better to do."

Jeff nodded knowingly. "Thanks, babe."

July 6, 1966; 9:40 a.m.

Julia Woodward tapped the pencil in her hand nervously and once again consulted her watch. Seated at what was usually Marnie's desk, she had a pile of Brett's scribbings to make sense of and a concerned citizen on the telephone. Given how shaken the community was in the aftermath of Carol Mathison's murder, Julia volunteered to come up to the office today to lend a hand until Marnie came in, and hopefully get a few of the more frightened residents calmed down. What she hadn't been counting on, however, was Marnie's tardiness...or the vile things coming out of this particular parishioner's mouth.

"Jeff Howard needs to be hung!" Mrs. Webb exclaimed, to Julia's horror. "How could he do something like that to sweet little Carol? I held her when she was just a baby, and she's been like a daughter to me ever since! I just can't believe that something like this would happen!"

"Mrs. Webb!" Julia reprimanded. "None of us have any way of knowing who killed Carol, and to not only accuse Jeff, but say he needs to be hung is extremely out of line!"

For a moment, there was silence on the other end of the line. Julia hoped that she'd somehow gotten through to the close-minded old bat, but Mrs. Webb soon rebounded. "I know he killed her," she swore. "Who else could it have been? Who else wanted her dead?"

"And how do you know that Jeff wanted her dead in the first - " Abruptly, Julia stopped herself. Arguing Jeff's innocence with a 70-year old was extremely unprofessional and unbecoming of a woman in her position. No matter how ridiculous the allegations became, Julia had to first remember that her obligation was to support Brett's flock, in whatever means necessary. Still, she caught herself cast a few curious glances in

the direction of his study. This was probably a conversation he would be better off handling himself.

"Mrs. Webb? Dear, I think the pastor's free now. Would you like to speak with him?" Julia proposed sweetly.

Predictably, Mrs. Webb jumped at it. "Yes, please!"

"One moment."

Julia had no sooner finished passing Mrs. Webb off to Brett when the back door of the office opened noisily. Expectantly, she turned toward it, a wicked smile playing across her lips. "You're late, Marnie," she teased.

Only, it wasn't Marnie. It was Terri, dressed in an oversized blue sweater, a black mini skirt, and earrings that hung down past her shoulders. "Good morning, Julia," she greeted quietly. "Is Brett in?"

Julia's mouth hung agape for a split second, still reeling from the ridiculous way Terri was dressed, before she managed, "Yes, he's in, but he's on the phone right now."

"Oh. Okay, then. I can wait." Without an invitation, Terri took a seat in the chair facing Julia. She smiled. "You look very pretty today."

Julia did her best to smile back convincingly. "Thank you. You do too. But really, a sweater like that as hot as it is?"

Terri began to nervously rub her left arm. "Oh, well..." she stalled, "I wanted to make a statement, I guess."

Julia kept the pasted on smile. "Well, you have certainly done that!"

For a few moments, there was silence. Terri fumbled nervously in her purse for her cigarettes, while Julia only continued to stare at her before mentally slapping herself. She'd no sooner gotten done chastising Mrs. Webb for her snap judgment of Jeff without any real reason, and here she was, doing much the same to Terri. *I'm sorry, Lord, she thought. But come on! Who in their right mind would wear something like that to a church? Anything to get attention! That girl was all about attention!*

"So is Marnie's late this morning?"

Terri's question snapped Julia out of her mental judging spree, and she felt her face redden a bit. "Oh, yes," she replied briskly, "but just a little."

"That's kind of strange, don't you think? She's almost never late."

"She probably had a rough night," Julia explained. "A lot of people are upset about...you know."

Terri nodded, as she lit a cigarette. "Yes. I know."

"I did want to tell you how deeply sorry I am. I know you were very close to Carol."

"Thank you. Thank you very much." Terri felt tears spring up in her eyes and fanned her face furiously. "I was hoping I wouldn't cry, damn it!" she said, with a forced laugh. "I'm sorry."

Before Julia could say anything, the door to the pastor's study opened. Brett sighed deeply, and grabbed the door frame. "Oh, I see why you were so quick to send Mrs. Webb to me. You have company out here!" His tone was teasing, his smile wide.

Julia turned back toward him. "Actually, I ran out of things to say to her, so I thought it might be best if she talked to you. Terri happened up sometime after that."

"Either way, good to see her." He walked over to his sister and greeted her with a warm hug. "How are you doing today?"

"I'm..." she hesitated, as she leaned close to his ear. "Well, I really need to talk to you...if you have the time," she whispered.

Brett backed out of the embrace to stare at her. "Everything okay, Peaches? You don't look so good this morning."

He raised a hand to her face, as Julia rolled her eyes with her back to them. *And here we go again. Poor Terri. Poor Peaches. Poor, poor girl.*

"I just really want to talk to you," Terri murmured. She really didn't want Julia to hear any of this. As it was, Julia bristled at the mere sight of her. She didn't want to give her even more reason to hate her with what was sure to be the bombshell of the century.

"Okay," Brett agreed calmly. "Hey Jules? You don't mind catching the phones until Marnie comes in, do you? It shouldn't be that much longer."

"I've got it," she replied, sounding cheery enough, but rolling her eyes behind his back.

"Okay, then. Come on in, Terri." He held open the door to the pastor's study.

She waited for him to close the door before she sank down in the chair facing his desk and nervously began to rub her arm again. "So Julia was a little nicer to me today than usual," she remarked with a smile. "That was a nice change of pace."

Brett began to say something, but Terri held up a hand before he could. "I know. We've been over it. Julia doesn't hate me, she doesn't dislike me, she's just reserved. Even though she's not reserved with anyone but me. But that's okay." She laughed. "That's okay! That's not what I came here to talk about anyway. I'm just trying to make small-talk so I can calm down a little and not be so nervous about telling you this."

"Telling me what?" Brett asked, as he searched his messy desk for an ashtray for her.

"I almost don't even know where to start. So much to say. Wow." Terri took his proffered ashtray and leaned forward in her chair, to look him in the eye. "I want you to know I've really thought about this. I've been up all night thinking about this. I've prayed about it. I've cried about it. I'm just at the end of my rope about it...and I really need you to help me."

His voice was soft and concerned. "Help you with what, Peaches?"

Terri shifted around in her chair, unsure how to say it. Funny thing was, she'd rehearsed it the whole way here, but the second she actually had her chance to say what she'd been wanting to say for weeks, her mind went completely blank. "Well..." she began. "It's about Lance..."

July 6, 1966; 11:25 a.m.

"Marcette." Distracted, Shane picked up the phone. It was supposed to be his "lunch hour," but that usually amounted to little more than blindly picking at whatever he could scavenge up from his benevolent co-workers and continuing to pour over the files before him, in the vain hope something of substance might pop out at him.

"Shane! What the hell is going on?"

He straightened up in his chair and set his files down immediately. "With what, sir?"

"This whole mess!" Stanley Rogers exclaimed, as though it should have been obvious. "I got all kinds of people at my door, I got reporters calling me, from places I've never even heard of, and everyone wants to know what the hell is going on. And since I

don't know, I'm asking you. What the hell is going on? Have you come any closer to getting that bastard that killed my daughter yet?"

Shane sighed. "I wish I had good news for you..."

"I heard you had Jeff in for questioning yesterday, and you let him go. That can't be true, right? You wouldn't do that, would you?" Stanley's voice was almost pleading.

Shane felt his heart sink. He could not imagine the pain that Stanley and Mona were going through right now...the only solace they might have had in the end was that their daughter's killer would be brought to justice in a swift and timely fashion. "Jeff Howard?" he asked quietly.

"Who the hell else do you think I mean?" Stanley snapped. "Do you have any other suspects? Any ideas? Anything?"

As much as Shane didn't want to admit it, he did. "No. Not right now we don't."

"And you let the one suspect you do have walk right out of there? What the hell is the matter with you? Why aren't you out doing something? What the hell is wrong with you? Don't you understand - "

"I had to let him go, Stan...there just wasn't enough evidence to keep him. We can't prove anything yet."

"Search the house! Search the car! Ask questions! Call in bloodhounds! Call President Fucking Johnson if you have to! Anything you have to do, Shane! Don't just sit there waiting for someone to come to you! Jeff Howard or not! You don't know who the hell it was right now and instead of trying to find out, you're just sitting there! What the hell? My God, that was my daughter!"

"I know. I know. I know."

"Don't sit there and tell me you know, Shane. If you knew, you'd be out there doing way more than you are."

"I'm doing the best I can. We all are."

"Well, it's not enough," Stanley informed, and with that, he hung up the phone.

Shane stared off into space for a moment before shaking his head. Stanley's words hit harder than he'd expected...mostly because they were true. Something needed to be done here – and Jeff Howard needed to pay.

Chapter Five:

July 6, 1966; 5:20 p.m.

Lucas Brady peered out his window cautiously. He was not expecting company...not of the male variety anyway, and from what he could tell from this sideways obstructed view, his visitor was decidedly male. All Lucas could really see clearly was a tan sport coat and a watch. A very, very nice watch.

Who the hell was that? He certainly didn't know anybody that was able to afford something like that. Oh shit – maybe it was a cop.

Lucas felt his heart begin to pound, and his paranoia quickly took over. As he raced through the house to hide the drugs, the knocking on the door grew even louder.

"I know you're in there, Lucas. Open the door!" commanded a male voice.

Fuck, they knew his name! What the hell was going on here? Maybe it was a setup. Maybe somebody ratted him out. But who would do that? Nobody even knew about the stuff that happened in Cheyenne...nobody but Terri, that is. But Terri? She wouldn't do something like that, would she?

"I'm coming, okay?" Lucas replied, voice only slightly shaking. "Just hang on a minute."

Oh shit. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. What was he gonna do? Lucas spun around the living room aimlessly for a moment, trying to spot anything he might have missed. Nope. Looked clean enough. Nobody would know without digging just what was going on in here. He just hoped they wouldn't see fit to dig.

Okay, calm down, he told himself. *Open the door, act cool and nothing will happen.*

Still, that was a lot easier said than done. Lucas caught his hand shaking as he reached for the door knob, but he willed himself steady as the door swung open...and he found himself face to face with Lance Englund.

"You," Lucas whispered, letting out an obvious sigh of relief.

"Me," Lance repeated. "I was probably the last person you wanted to see, right?"

"Actually," Lucas admitted, as he leaned against the doorframe, "you're quite a pleasant surprise."

Lance surveyed his competition for a minute. He was visibly shaking – and was probably wasted. And to think, Terri wanted to leave the comfortable life he'd provided for her for this freak. Unbelievable.

"So what brings you here?" Lucas was still struggling to catch his breath.

Lance eyed him incredulously. What a stupid question! "I think it should be pretty obvious why I'm here."

"Oh. Yeah. Right."

"So are you gonna invite me in, or would you prefer we discuss this right here on the steps? It's your call." Lance didn't mean for that to come out as condescending as it probably sounded...but it was becoming more and more obvious to him that Lucas was stoned out of his mind right now, and he had absolutely no patience for that.

Lucas held the door open. "Sure. Come on in. Make yourself at home."

Lance had no intention of that, though he did take a seat on the couch Lucas probably fished out of the garbage. Lucas stared at him intently as he sat down. Little did Mr. Golden Watch know, he was sitting on top of about five syringes, all shoved under the cushion. Despite himself, Lucas grinned.

"What's so funny?" Lance asked, a scowl on his face.

"Huh? Oh. Well, irony. Irony is funny." Lucas shrugged. "At least to me."

Lance raised an eyebrow. "And what's so ironic about this?"

"Well..." Lucas plopped himself down, Indian style, on the floor. "I don't really know how to explain it to you. You just see it or you don't."

Lance rolled his eyes. "You're just stoned or you're not is more like it."

Again, Lucas shrugged. "Yeah, that too."

Unable to even look at this mongrel any longer, Lance ran a hand over his face and sighed. "Alright, look. I didn't come here for small talk and I didn't come here to listen to you ramble on about things that don't make any sense. I hear enough of that at home. What I came here for was to tell you point blank that I know what's going on with you and my wife – "

“I hoped you did. I never intended for it to be any kind of secret.”

Lance went on, as though he hadn’t heard the interruption. “And I want it to stop. Okay? I want it to stop now.”

Lucas sat in silence for a moment, processing this whole thing. Lance wanted it to stop? What authority did he have to say that? What right did he have to demand something like that? It wasn’t something that he could control – it wasn’t even something that Lucas or Terri could control. What they had was way stronger than this whole town put together. It was an attraction of epic proportions. A love affair for the ages. It was something orchestrated by the universe itself! How could Lance come in here and tell him to stop. Didn’t he understand?

Lucas laughed, shaking his head at how naïve Lance sounded. “You can’t stop a freight train, brother.”

Lance stood angrily. “I am not your brother, for one! And a freight train? A fucking freight train? Alright, look. I’m not gonna ask you this time. I’m gonna tell you.” The nearer he got to Lucas, the angrier he got. Looking down at him, as he casually smirked like this whole thing was a huge joke, Lance wanted to snap his neck, but instead only snarled, “You stay the hell away from my wife! I mean it!”

Lucas didn’t flinch, and he maintained his smirk. “I wish you could see that it just doesn’t work that way. I also wish that you could see that I’m not that easily intimidated. You can stand over me all day long if you want to, brother. It’s not gonna change a thing.”

Lance didn’t know what came over him in that moment. It was a purely primal reaction that caused him to jerk Lucas up by his skinny little neck and shake him. “Now you listen to me, you little punk,” he warned. “I’m not fucking around with you! You ruined my marriage and you ruined Terri’s life! She’s too damn stupid and blind to tell you this, so I’m gonna be the one: leave her alone! Stay away from her! Forget you know her! Because I swear to God, if you bother her again, I’m gonna – ”

“What?” Lucas challenged, breaking free. “What are you gonna do, Lance? You gonna come back over here and throw me around some more? Like you do her? Huh? You think I don’t know about that?”

Lance stopped dead in his tracks, horrified. “What did you just say?”

“You heard me.”

“I have never, and I mean never, laid one single hand on my wife! But that doesn’t mean I won’t do it to you!”

“You may be able to intimidate her, but you will never intimidate me.” Lucas stepped forward, eyes narrow and cold. However, his voice was barely above a whisper. “And I’ll tell you another thing, brother. You better stay out of my face, or you’re gonna be sorry.”

Lance stared at him, undaunted. “Was that supposed to be some kind of threat?”

Lucas nodded. “Indeed it was. But unlike you, I don’t level empty threats at people.”

Neither man said a word for what seemed like forever. All they did was stare each other down. Lucas felt as though he could see right through Lance – right down to the pathetic coward he really was on the inside. He seemed to get off on intimidating people, which made him little more than an overgrown bully...and that overgrown bully had finally met his match.

Lance, meanwhile, was struggling to contain the rush of emotions unleashed inside him. Obviously, he was furious, both at this sniveling little punk and at his wife for ever bothering with him in the first place. Then, he was sad that their relationship had deteriorated so badly that she had to seek solace in someone like Lucas to begin with. He was also incredibly confused about why Lucas would ever dare accuse him of “throwing Terri around.” Where the hell did he get that? Nothing of the sort was true! Was this something Terri told him, in a misguided effort to get sympathy? Was it something Lucas just assumed in his drug-addled state? Whatever it was, Lance could not set it straight fast enough. What complete and utter bullshit.

“I’d appreciate it if you would leave now.” Lucas finally broke the silence, in an even and confident tone.

Lance glared at him fiercely, but said nothing more, only walking out the front door and slamming it behind him.

Alright. That didn’t work. He was going to have to try another method, but he wasn’t about to give up. Come hell or high water, he was going to get Lucas Brady out of Terri’s life – and Haven Park as a whole – for good. No matter what he had to do to do it.

July 6, 1966; 6:15 p.m.

“This was lovely, but truly, it wasn’t necessary, Evan.” Marnie Blake put down the glass in her hand and stared in wonder across the table at her husband. This was the second night in a row she came home exhausted – and halfway expecting him to be making a spectacle of himself in the living room. Instead, a romantic dinner awaited her, complete with candles and soft music.

Evan reached across the table to take her hand. “I felt I owed this much to you. I haven’t really been myself lately.” He shook his head. “I actually think this has been progressing for a while, but it’s gotten a lot worse in the past few weeks.”

“The anniversary,” she provided. It was something she’d been keenly aware of for a month now.

Evan looked down at the table. “I think there’s more to it, actually. I...I really don’t know how to say this, Marnie...but I think I might be losing my mind.”

“No. No you’re not. It’s just been a very difficult few weeks, and the anniversary always upsets you. It always has. You’re not losing your mind.”

“I think I am,” he argued, as he ran a nervous hand over his face. “Too many strange things are happening. It’s easy to write off one or two as stress, but this many? This isn’t stress. There’s something more going on here.”

Startled, Marnie only stared at him. “What do you mean, exactly?”

He hesitated. “I’ve done some...very...bad things.”

“Like what?”

“Well...” He closed his eyes, unable to admit the truth – at least, not yet. “The fiasco last night, for one.”

She continued to stare at him warily. “That? I told you that was fine. I told you I understand.”

“But I don’t!” he yelled, as he rose from the table and began to pace the room. “I don’t understand. I think I need help. I think I need to see a doctor before this gets even worse than it already is.”

“Evan...” She turned around in her chair to face him. “I really don’t think that you need to see a doctor. I don’t think this is that severe. What I think is you are under a tremendous amount of stress, that the circumstances of Francine’s anniversary have gotten to you, and that you have been drinking way too much lately. I think that’s the problem more than anything, actually. Bad things tend to happen when you drink, darling...we both know that.”

Immediately after speaking, Marnie wondered if she should have been so bold. Granted, she’d never really been one for holding her tongue, but she’d learned to hold back a lot for Evan’s sake. A lot of the time, he just couldn’t handle it. It wasn’t what he wanted to hear, and it almost always started a fight.

This time, however, all it did was make him sigh. “Yes. I know that. I’ve been drinking way too much. But that’s not the problem. There’s all this...so much...” He threw up his hands. “I don’t even know!”

She stood. “Why don’t you calm down a little, finish your dinner and then we can talk about it.”

“What is there to talk about? I haven’t been myself. I’ve been doing terrible things. I’m losing my mind. I think that pretty much covers it, don’t you, darling?”

I’ve been doing terrible things.

As much as she tried to ignore it and look at the bigger picture, something about that line kept sticking in her head. What terrible things could he have done? He said he meant things like last night, but that was far from terrible. Maybe he was just being very hard on himself...or maybe there was more to this story that he wasn’t telling her.

She wasn’t sure she really even wanted to know, but she heard herself ask, “Evan, what have you done?” nonetheless.

He didn’t say anything for a minute, then walked toward her and cupped her face in his hands. “Don’t ask me that,” he whispered. “It’s better that you don’t know.”

Her eyes widened. That sounded ominous...way too ominous, especially juxtaposed against his “murder confession” last night – and the talk of the town right now, poor dead Carol Mathison.

Marnie felt her pulse begin to race. She shook her head. No. No, it couldn’t be. Evan was a lot of things, but he was definitely no murderer. And besides, what reason would he have to kill Carol in the first place? They barely knew each other. Evan was never the type that got involved with the neighbors. He enjoyed keeping to himself. Therefore, he knew little to nothing at all about Carol. He wouldn’t have a reason to kill her.

Unless...no. No. That only happened one time, and only to her. Evan never did that sort of thing outside the house. He was far too private for that. Still, Marnie’s mind couldn’t help but wander back to that night a few months back, when Evan’s visions of Francine turned violent.

He’d held Marnie against him so tightly she found it difficult to breathe. Had she not literally forced her way out of the embrace, she might have passed out. Of course, it was not Evan’s intention to hurt her in any way...he was just so excited to see...“Francine.”

But, Marnie acknowledged, it was much easier to mistake her with Francine than Carol. Their features were similar. They were both blondes. Both of the same height. They both walked the same way. At times when Evan insisted on it, Marnie even wore Francine’s clothes...despite the fact they didn’t quite fit. But Carol? She wouldn’t even

look like Francine with a wig and complete makeover. It would be impossible to mistake the two. That could not possibly happen.

Mentally, Marnie shook herself. She had to stop this. Evan could have meant anything when he said he did some bad things – things that would not even qualify as bad to anyone else. He was always incredibly hard on himself. This time was probably no different. She had to stop thinking like this.

Evan searched his wife's eyes frantically. He could see the wheels turning in there, and he shuddered to imagine how close she was to the truth. She couldn't know. She could never know.

"I need to lay down," he abruptly announced, ending the painful silence between them. "I don't feel well."

Marnie opened her mouth to say something, but instead only nodded. Evan leaned in to kiss her forehead. "I love you, darling. And I'm sorry."

"I know. So am I."

July 6, 1966; 9:45 p.m.

"You know, Jesus did ask us to meet people where they are. But I'm not really sure how He felt about people that are supposed to know better." Brett Woodward smiled as he approached the barstool.

Shane Marcette let out an audible groan as he set his drink down. "I didn't call you down here to be Rev, okay? I called you down here to be my friend. Just for one night. Please?"

"Sorry," Brett apologized. "It was just a joke."

"I know. I'm just...you're gonna have to excuse the language here, Rev, but I'm pretty fucked up right now."

"Um, yeah. I can tell." Brett sat down next to Shane and leaned over. "What are you drinking there?"

"Vodka, on the rocks." Shane knew he logically should have felt some shame calling Brett down here to watch him get more and more drunk...but he just really needed a friend right now. This had been one hell of a few days.

"Ah. Been a while since I had that."

"Want one? I'm about to get another round myself."

Brett smiled. "Now I know you're not drunk enough to think I'd take you up on that."

Shane shrugged. "Never know."

"So what's the matter? I mean, besides the obvious. I did call yesterday, but you were busy. Just wanted to let you know that I'd be around if you needed me."

"Yeah. I got the message, obviously. Thanks." Shane finished off his drink and set the glass down with a thud, all while Brett watched intently. "I know what you're thinking," he slurred. "I know. I should know better than this. I shouldn't be sitting in a bar, I should be trying to solve this case and –"

Brett held up both hands. "Hey, I never said that, did I? Remember, this is the one night I'm not being Rev. I'm just here being your friend."

Shane laughed, though nothing about that was really very funny. "That's right. I remember now."

“So...you wanna talk or what?”

“I honestly don’t even know what to say,” Shane admitted sadly. “What am I supposed to say about this? Something like this doesn’t happen here. You know that. And for it to happen to somebody like Carol? On my watch? No. That’s not supposed to happen.”

“It’s not your fault,” Brett reminded calmly.

“See, I think it is. I think it is because I should have been out there. I should have seen the signs a long time ago, and I should have protected her!” Shane shoved his glass away and rested his head in his arms for a moment, before looking back up at Brett with tears in his eyes. “It was my responsibility to protect her and I fucked it all up and now she’s dead. Don’t tell me that’s not my fault.”

Brett began to say something, but thought better of it. There just wasn’t much he could say to this. Having been Shane’s counselor more than once, he knew that his best option was to just let him talk it out. Shane didn’t like the idea of someone solving his problem for him. Instead, he wanted you to be around to watch while he solved it himself.

“That’s why I got into this whole thing to begin with. To protect people! I had all these stupid fantasies about saving everyone from the bad guys and being this hero and someone kids could look up to and all that stupid shit!” The more Shane spoke, the louder he got, though he did not seem conscious of that fact. “And look what happened. The one time I might actually be able to do that, I fuck it up! I’m not there when she needs me! I ignore every single red flag I get about that guy! And aren’t I supposed to go on those? Isn’t that what we go on?”

Shane looked to Brett for affirmation, and he nodded. “Yeah. Yeah.”

“Yeah! And what did I do? I just ignored it. I said it wasn’t my business! And now she’s dead! She’s dead, Brett! And that bastard is sitting in her house and laughing about how he’s gotten away with the whole damn thing, because I can’t prove anything! I can’t fucking prove anything!”

By this time, Shane had the entire bar’s attention. Brett took a look around and leaned down. “You’ve got an audience. May wanna keep it down.”

“I have an audience?” Shane glanced around him, then stood. “Good. That’s just what I needed.” He climbed atop the bar much quicker than Brett could stop him and announced, “Haven Park, I owe you an apology. I have let you down, and I let Carol Mathison down, may she rest in peace. I ignored everything I should have been watching for, and she’s dead now because of it, and I am sorry. I’m so very sorry.”

The bar patrons all glanced at each other, then back at Shane, quizzically, before going back to their drinks. Shane, either completely spaced out, or observing a moment of lengthy silence for Carol’s memory, stood motionless on the bar until a humiliated Brett literally forced him down. “I really don’t think you know what you’re doing right now,” he whispered into his ear.

“You know what?” Shane asked, as he collapsed dramatically back onto his barstool. “I probably don’t. I just don’t know what to do anymore. I was supposed to protect her...”

“But you can’t hold yourself responsible for this...”

“Stanley does.”

Suddenly, Brett realized the magnitude of this. It wasn't just that Shane felt he dropped the ball by not personally protecting Carol, it was that he felt his good friend and mentor somehow held him responsible for it. "Don't listen to him. He has no right to blame you for this. He's just upset. He lost a child. But that doesn't mean he needs to take it out on you."

"I know. But it's true. I should have known that something would happen with them, and I didn't do anything! Don't you see? It was up to me and I didn't do anything!"

"But that is not your fault. You had no way of knowing what was gonna happen." Brett chose to carefully avoid the issue of Jeff being the culprit here – partly because neither one of them were absolutely certain of it, and partly because it would probably only work Shane up even more.

Shane closed his eyes. "And I saw her there and it was like...God, you just don't have any idea what that's like, Brett! To see your friend lying there and there's nothing you can do for her and...I can't get it out of my head. Every single time I close my eyes, it's there. She had kids. She had two little kids. And what are they supposed to do? Kids aren't supposed to lose their mom that young. It's just fucked up. Everything about this is completely fucked up."

Brett honestly had no idea what he could say, so he only reached out to pat him on the back. "I know it is. I know."

Chapter Six:

July 7, 1966; 3:25 a.m.

"It's positively moving, isn't it?"

An unseasonable chill pierced the air as the words escaped her lips. She stood with her back to him, arms outstretched to the open water before her. She looked so beautiful...so free...so alive. A few steps behind her, he only looked on, as this was something he'd witnessed a million times before. For her, it was the very first time - and it was nothing short of magical.

The last, fleeting glimpses of sun danced over the water, while her blue and white polka dot dress swayed gently in the breeze. She raised a hand to stop her blonde hair from whipping about, and the giggle she let out resonated for miles. So carefree. She turned around to face him and smiled. "It's time to go," she announced abruptly. For a moment, he was puzzled by that statement. Go where? Back to shore? Home?

Before he could question, however, she took a deep breath in and pivoted back toward the water. His heart sped up, and in an instant, he knew precisely what she was about to do. "No!" he cried out. He wanted to leap forward. To grab her. To hold her in his arms and keep her safe....but he couldn't move. He couldn't do anything but stare helplessly as she turned to face him one last time.

Her smile was gentle, her expression pleasant. "I'm already dying," she said simply.

And then she was gone. It wasn't a dramatic or purposeful jump, as far as he could tell. It was more as though she just casually stepped backwards off the boat...and he couldn't do anything to stop her.

Frozen in shock and terror, he studied her face carefully as she fell, searching for any clues as to why...but suddenly, it wasn't her face anymore. It was Carol Mathison's. I'm already dying...

It was half past three when Evan awoke, sweating profusely and whispering Carol's name. He surveyed the darkness in the bedroom, then took in a deep breath. A dream. It was only a dream.

He closed his eyes and reached for Marnie, who slept peacefully beside him. This wasn't the first time. Since that awful night almost eleven years ago, Evan had been reliving the events in his dreams at least once or twice a month. This time, however, shook him to his very core.

Carol Rogers Mathison. You know, when you thought about it, she was not that much different from Francine. Both were beautiful, idealistic people. Loved by the community. Poised for greatness they would never get a chance to realize. Only difference was, Carol had her future cruelly snatched away, while Francine gladly surrendered hers, for reasons Evan would never understand.

But he tried to understand. He tried his best to wrap his mind around precisely why someone as vibrant, alive and cheerful as Francine would choose to end her life in such an abrupt, inconceivable way. The questions haunted him for years, long after most of Haven Park moved on with their lives. What could he have done? What could anyone have done? Did she confide in anyone the despair she had to be feeling? What caused it? "I'm already dying." Did that mean she was ill? Why would she have kept an illness from him, when they'd shared the happiest moments of their lives? Why, if she felt she absolutely must resort to such horrific measures, did she have to do it in front of him? Did she instinctively know that he wouldn't be able to stop her in time? Did she realize what massive fallout there would be from this decision? Did she even care?

Even now, eleven years later, Evan couldn't make sense of it. Francine's uncharacteristic act of selfish, reckless behavior had scarred him in ways he'd never even thought possible. But the craziest part of all of it was, he still loved her. He tried to resent her for what she put him through. The shame, the questions, the anguish...but he couldn't. More than anything, he wished he could go back to that night. To the days beforehand. Talk to her. Listen to her. Help her. The fact he knew and did nothing was what he could not forgive, even though he knew that logically, it was not his fault. He couldn't do anything about something he was not even aware of...but again, that begged the question of why she would keep something like that from him.

With a sigh, Evan pulled the covers over his head. This was not going to be another one of those nights. He couldn't do that to himself anymore, and he couldn't do it to Marnie. She had the patience of a saint, and he could not allow himself to put her through any more embarrassment than he already had. Living up to Francine's legacy was certainly a challenge – made more difficult by the fact Evan constantly compared the two. It was wrong, and he knew that it made Marnie feel bad, but sometimes, it just came naturally. What he and Francine shared was so strong, so deeply rooted. It wasn't something you could just let go of overnight. And to her credit, Marnie handled it with a lot more class and patience than many other women would, which was precisely why Evan loved her so much...and why she could never, ever know.

July 7, 1966; 7:20 a.m.

As he stumbled into the kitchen, Lance Englund rubbed his weary eyes. What a long night. As much as he would have liked to, he still couldn't get the encounter with Lucas Brady (and those strange insinuations he made) out of his head. He also couldn't reconcile a way to talk to Terri about these things. Was there a way to approach it without another huge fight? Though she might have good reason to believe otherwise, Lance really didn't wanna fight with her anymore. He was too tired for that...and too hurt to really jump head-long into another battle.

Thus, he didn't say a word to her, and only made a beeline for the coffee she'd been kind enough to prepare. For it to be this early, Terri was already up, dressed and fully made up. She also appeared to be in what could be considered a good mood, smiling at him as he approached. "Morning."

"Morning," he mumbled back.

"Are you going to come to the service today?"

"Yeah. I got a meeting this morning in Cottage Cove, so I might be a little late, but I'll be there."

She nodded. "Good. Thank you."

Those were the last words spoken for about five minutes. He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table with this morning's paper. She, meanwhile, busied herself rinsing off the dishes from the night before. Finally, she turned around and took in a deep breath. "Lance, we need to have a talk."

He sighed. "Right now?"

She wiped her hands on the dish towel, then placed it neatly next to the sink, all the while carefully debating her words. "Yes. It's very important. Please."

He didn't look up from his newspaper. "Okay. What is it?"

Terri cleared her throat. "I'd like your full attention, please."

"Alright. Fine." Lance put his newspaper down, shoved his coffee cup aside and sat straight up in his chair. "Happy?"

"If you're going to be so hateful, then I'd rather not talk to you at all." Hurt, Terri turned back toward the sink.

"I'm not being hateful. I'm trying to give you what you want," he argued quietly. "And again, I guess that's just not good enough, is it?"

"This is exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. This is it exactly."

"What? It not being good enough?"

"No..." As she stared out her kitchen window into the back yard, Terri sighed deeply. She wasn't sure how to approach this, especially knowing how he felt about Brett. But she really felt it was the best (and truly, only) option they had – if they wanted to save this thing, and obviously he did.

Sometimes, she had to wonder why he would bother. Obviously, their marriage was over. It had been for some time. It wasn't really his fault, or her fault, or even Lucas' fault. It was just something that happened. Something that had been brewing over time that no one really paid attention to until it was too late. Granted, they each did their part to ensure a bad situation only grew worse, but none were wholly to blame.

Still, trying to make that point to Lance was next to impossible. He seemed convinced that whatever the obstacle, they could get through it – as long as they remained

together. What he failed to realize, however, was that remaining together was what was making this so unbearable.

But, Terri reasoned, as she took a deep breath, this was it. Her last attempt to do things his way. It wasn't going to work. She knew this already. But she had to make the effort, so he could not later whine that she didn't try.

"As you know, things are not really...ideal right now," she began, turning back to face him.

He nodded his acknowledgement, but said nothing.

"And we've fought and fought and gone around and around and no matter what we do, nothing gets fixed. Nothing is changed. Everything just gets worse. So..." Terri bit her lip. She was starting to lose her nerve. "So I was thinking...I really wracked my brain about what to do here, because let's face it, Lance. All of this fighting is getting us nowhere, and it's really only making us resent each other more in the end."

"I don't resent you, Terri. I never have," he interrupted. "But I'll tell you what I do resent – and that's that punk you're sleeping with."

She held up a hand. "Please. Can we just not argue this morning?"

His voice raised considerably. "I'm not arguing with you!"

So did hers. "You're raising your voice at me! Could you please just let me talk? I'm trying to come up with a solution."

Lance sighed, extending out his arm. "Fine. Go ahead."

"Okay. So I was really wondering what we could possibly do about all of this, and what might stand a chance of working. And one thing stuck out to me, above everything else."

Skeptically, Lance stared at her. "And what's that?"

Terri closed her eyes and took in several deep breaths. Okay, here goes nothing. "Would you be agreeable to counseling?"

After asking that, Terri felt her face redden. She looked over at Lance, searching his eyes for any cue as to how he might react, but got nothing. He only sat there, blankly staring back at her.

"Counseling?" he finally asked. "I never really thought about that before..."

"I know it's – it's sort of a last ditch effort, but I think that's what we need," she ventured, voice still quivering a bit.

A slow smile began to creep onto his face. "Well, if you think it might work and you want to try it, then sure. Sure. We can try that."

Her eyes widened. "Really? You wouldn't mind that?"

"I don't see the harm in it. It's a little extreme, but maybe extreme is what we need right now. In fact, yeah. Extreme probably is what we need right now. When did you want to start this?"

"Uh, I guess as soon as possible," she murmured. She really hadn't been expecting him to agree so readily to it, and thus, was completely unprepared for his reaction.

Lance took a sip of coffee. "Have you found a counselor? I'm sure I could, if you haven't."

Once he asked that, Terri braced herself. The subdued reaction to the whole idea of counseling was about to turn into the screaming match of the century.

Still, the amount of rage that came over his face once she whispered, "Brett said he would do it, actually," surprised her.

“Oh, no!” Lance yelled. “Anybody but him!”

“But Lance – ”

“I don’t want that crackpot that already thinks I’m some heathen in sheep’s clothing getting any more involved in our marriage than he has to be, Terri! No! It’s bad enough you have to run crying to him every single time you don’t get your way, and then I have to deal with him, preaching to me about how I should honor and respect my wife. No. No, no, no. We’re not doing any more of that! No!”

“Lance. That crackpot is my brother. And I never run crying to him when I don’t get my way!”

He pointed an angry finger at her. “Yes you do! You always do! And I should have known! I should have known when you suggested counseling that you had an ulterior motive in mind! That was so unlike you! I should have known something more was behind it!”

Shocked, she took a step back. “Ulterior motive? What are you talking about?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know!” he spat. “You had this planned all along. Counseling with Brett, who just so happens to automatically be on your side, no matter what is going wrong.”

“I chose Brett because he is my brother, and I trust him more than I trust anyone!”

“Oh is that right?” Lance asked, in a taunting fashion. “So that’s why you’ve yet to tell him anything about you sleeping around on me? That’s why you’ve yet to tell him you’re on drugs? That’s why you’ve blamed every single problem we have on me, conveniently forgetting to mention anything that might denote any responsibility on your part?”

“Lance, I said I didn’t want to fight this morning!”

“And I said that I didn’t want another thing to do with that lunatic brother of yours for as long as I live, and I see just how well you listened to me!”

Terri threw up her hands. “I knew you would do this.”

He pointed at her again. “You just admitted it! You knew I would do this! You did this whole thing on purpose! Then, you try to say you don’t want to fight! This is all part of your little game, isn’t it? Baiting me into reacting so you have something to tell Brett. Lying to people about me hitting you, when we both know nothing of the sort has ever happened!”

“What? Hitting me? I never said that, Lance.”

He laughed. “Oh really? Well, that’s not what I heard. But why should I believe a single word that comes out of your mouth anymore? Why should I? It’s all a cleverly plotted little game, to make yourself out to be the victim, just like always.” Gripping his coffee cup, Lance began to walk away. “And you can forget about counseling with Brett!”

“Then you can forget about me!” Terri really wasn’t intending that to come out as forcefully as it did, but this was really enough. The fighting and the intimidation tactics that Lance tried were one thing, but calling her brother’s integrity into question – when he was the most upstanding, well-balanced person she knew – was the last straw. “No counseling, no me. Bottom line.”

Lance turned back abruptly. “What did you just say to me?”

“I will pack my things and I will leave right now, if that’s what you want...but I don’t think that’s what you want, Lance. You don’t want the humiliation of a messy

divorce. You don't want the whole town knowing about what's going on between us. You couldn't stand to have Haven Park know that their favorite furniture salesman has failed!"

Without thinking, Lance threw his coffee cup into the wall. It shattered in pieces and fell, contents and all, onto the freshly mopped floor. "You know how to get to me!" he yelled. "And you do it on purpose!" With several deep breaths, he attempted to calm himself down. He could not believe the fact she would hold something like this over his head, knowing very well that he would do anything to save their marriage. Even concede to the stupidest idea he'd possibly ever heard. "You want counseling with Brett?" he finally whispered.

Wide eyed, Terri only held a hand to her mouth. She had no idea what to say. She didn't think Lance would exactly leap for joy over the suggestion, but she hadn't anticipated him having this violent of a reaction to it.

"Do you want counseling with Brett?" he asked again, voice somewhat unsteady. "Answer me. Is that what you really want?"

Without a word, she nodded. He closed his eyes, sighing. "Fine then. We'll do counseling with Brett. But Terri, you have to promise me something, okay? This is a big concession, and if I do this, you have to do something for me. You have to promise me that you won't make a huge public spectacle of this, okay? I can't handle that. I can't have that. I won't have that. Do I make myself clear?"

Their eyes locked in that moment, and Terri could tell that he was serious. She nodded again. "Yes."

"Good." Lance turned around and started to leave the room, but stopped to point out the mess he'd made a few moments earlier. "Clean that up."

July 7, 1966; 10:05 a.m.

Jeff Howard scowled at his reflection in the mirror. What a hellacious last few days – and he couldn't imagine how much worse this one was going to be. He wasn't even sure if he should be going at all, but he knew the talk that would circulate if he didn't. Shane, especially, would be sure to presume that his lack of attendance implied guilt.

Shane. Of course, he would be there today. Like the dutiful cop, church deacon, crazed superhero that he was. Jeff shook his head. He wanted nothing to do with Shane at this point, especially since he knew that everything he did was under a virtual microscope, as far as the detective was concerned. Still, there were no feasible ways to avoid him. And, Jeff resolved, as he straightened his tie, he wouldn't avoid him. He would walk right in front of him. Look him in the eye. Shake his hand. Thank him for coming. After all, a reaction was likely what he wanted in the first place – and it was the last thing he was going to get.

A timid knock came on the door at ten after ten. After all the different crazy people that had come to his door in the past few days, Jeff gave serious thought to ignoring it, but knew that he couldn't hide from his adoring public forever and walked confidently toward the door.

He squared his shoulders, took in a deep breath and opened the door...to find Julia Woodward standing there.

"We need to talk."

Interlude: Wonderful Christmastime

December 25, 1965; 7:15 a.m.

The tree looked especially obnoxious this year, Carol Mathison noted, as she took another sip of wine. That had a lot to do with the fact that Jeff and the children insisted on decorating it themselves. It was a complete mess. The boys fumbled with the ornaments, and broke far more than they actually hung, while Jeff actually managed to electrocute himself with the lights and teach Mickey and Roger a whole new set of words that would probably get their mouths washed out later. Apparently, Jeff was hoping she'd get caught up in the gooey sentiment of it all, but she was absolutely livid...and she'd been on the warpath ever since.

"The tree looks like shit, Jeff," she reminded again, as she watched him crawl around on his knees beneath it, distributing presents to the screaming monsters that woke both of them up far too early this morning.

He glanced over at her briefly, with a goofy smile on his face. "Awww, come on now. You need to turn that frown upside down, baby! It's Christmas!"

"Yes, I'm quite aware," she replied tersely, with another sip. "Not like you'll let me forget or anything..."

He went back to playing Santa Claus. "Who'd wanna forget Christmas? Not me! What about you, Mickey?"

Predictably, the child squealed, "Nope!"

Jeff turned back toward her. "And there you have it."

"You just think you're so cute, don't you?" she sneered. Her head was pounding, she was exhausted - this was not exactly how she'd envisioned spending her Christmas morning.

He blinked a few times, then sighed. "Not this morning, okay? It's Christmas."

"I know it's fucking Christmas, Jeff!" she erupted, as she leapt out of her chair. "All I have to do is look at the ridiculous way you've decorated my house to figure that out!"

Everything stopped. The children both sat on the floor, completely frozen, while Jeff glared daggers at her for a moment, before giving each child a reassuring pat and stalking toward her. "We need to talk," he whispered.

"You're damn right we need to talk!" Carol agreed.

She began to raise her glass for another sip of wine, but Jeff ripped it out of her hand before she could, haphazardly spilling it all over the floor. This only seemed to piss her off even more, and her eyes narrowed. "Look what you did!"

"No," he replied, in a quiet, if unsteady tone, as he drug her into the kitchen. "Look what you did. It's not even eight in the morning and you've already ruined Christmas, so way to go, Carol. Proud of yourself?"

"Oh, spare me your melodramatic bullshit! Christmas was ruined long before this morning, and that had nothing to do with me! It had everything to do with you coming in, taking over everything like you have a damn right -"

"Somebody had to!" he insisted angrily. "It's not like you were gonna actually set the bottle down long enough to do something for your kids!"

"My kids," she repeated. "My kids, Jeff. And how I raise them is my own business."

He leaned toward her, close enough to become nauseated by the alcohol on her breath. "They deserve so much better than this! God, so much better than this! Think about your kids for once, okay? Would it kill you to put your own stupid crap aside for a few hours to think about your kids, Carol? That is all I ask."

"And let me ask you something, Jeff. Just why do you have such a vested interest in the Christmas my kids have? What the hell does it matter to you?" Before he could say anything, though, she held up a hand. "And don't tell me that sad story about how one Christmas, you had to go eat out of other people's garbage cans because your folks couldn't scrounge up the money for a dinner. I didn't believe it then, and I sure as hell don't now."

Jeff closed his eyes and expelled a heavy sigh. "You have to actually ask me why it matters to me? Can't you tell that I love those kids? That I love you? That I want this to be something those kids remember for the rest of their lives? The first Christmas that we spend as a family..."

"We're not a family, Jeff," Carol informed, through gritted teeth. "We're far from a family."

"But..." he hesitated, fumbling in the pocket of his pajamas. "But we could be."

"What? What are you - " Before Carol could finish her sentence, Jeff revealed what he'd hidden: a ring box "Is that - oh my God, Jeff! Is that an *engagement* ring? You're *proposing* to me?"

For some reason, she seemed to find it hilarious. He nodded solemnly. "That was the plan, yes."

"No. No." She shook her head. "No. You don't wanna marry me. You do not wanna marry me."

Honestly? At this point, he didn't think so either. But he didn't flinch. "Don't tell me what I want."

"You really mean this, don't you? Oh my God, Jeff..."

A knock came on the door before she could say anything more, and Jeff started toward it, handing over the ring box. "Think about it, okay? Just...think about it."

Carol opened her mouth to say something caustic, but lost her nerve when she actually opened it. As she studied the ring he'd picked out, she broke into a broad smile. Okay, so that guy left a lot to be desired in the common sense department, and he knew how to push her buttons quite possibly better than anyone else, but he really did know how to please a woman. She had to give him that one.

"Hey, Lance, good morning!" Jeff greeted, as he opened the door. "Merry Christmas!"

Lance England extended out the two shopping bags in his hand and smiled. "Merry Christmas, Jeff."

"Wow. Thank you." Jeff took them, then stepped back to allow him entrance. "Come on in."

"I can't stay long. I just wanted to - " Lance stopped mid-sentence to kneel down and hold his arms out for the boys, who ran toward him wide eyed.

"Uncle Lance! Look what I got!" Mickey proudly announced, holding up a new toy fire truck.

"And me!" Roger, not to be outdone, proudly showed off his slinky.

Lance acted as though he'd never seen such a wonder. "Wow. Those are some really nice gifts! Looks like you two were very good this year, huh?"

"Well, relatively speaking," Jeff whispered into his ear, as he pulled two wrapped gifts out of a bag. "Hey guys, look at this!" he announced.

"Those are from your Aunt Terri and I," Lance told the boys, who took them with gusto.

"Lance?" Carol emerged from the kitchen. "I thought that was you! Oh..." She stopped in her tracks at the sight of her children ripping into their latest gifts. "Oh, you didn't have to do that!"

"No trouble," he insisted, moving toward her for a hug. "No trouble at all. Merry Christmas."

Jeff studied Carol intently as she approached. Much as he thought she might, she looked like a completely different person. All the rage from just five minutes ago was long gone, replaced with a look of pure concern.

"How is Terri doing?" she asked quietly, walking into Lance's embrace.

"Well," he whispered, "she's okay, I guess. I...I don't know. She won't really talk to me about it, and she keeps insisting that everything's fine, but..." He shrugged. "With Terri, it can be hard to tell sometimes. You know that."

"I do know that." Carol nodded solemnly. "But tell her that if she needs anything at all, my door is always open. My heart just breaks for her. I can't imagine going through something like this at Christmas! How is Brett?"

"Well..." Lance stalled, as he shifted his gaze to the floor, "I really wouldn't know the answer to that. I haven't talked to him much."

"Oh...right."

"They're coming by for dinner later. Him and Julia," Lance informed, then extended out his arm. "You guys are invited too, if you have a few minutes and wanna come by."

Jeff looked to Carol, who honestly appeared to be considering it. "We're going to go by my parents' place, actually," she admitted, "but I think we can spare a few minutes, don't you, Jeff?"

"Uhh...yeah. Sure."

Lance smiled. "Great. I know Terri will be really happy to see you."

December 25, 1965; 7:30 a.m.

Terri Englund lit a cigarette and pulled Lance's overcoat a little tighter around her as she took in an early morning snowfall on her front porch. The turkey was in the oven, the house was already cleaned for the company they were expecting later in the day...there really wasn't anything left to do but wait. And agonize. And reflect. She got Lance out of the house for a reason; she could sense that a major breakdown was coming. She'd been putting it off and pretending that nothing was wrong for...ten days now. Yeah. Today made ten days. Ten days that really felt a whole lot more like ten years.

The first few were still somewhat of a blur, what with the condolences and the visitors and the funerals...but the closer that Christmas drew, the closer the loss hit to home. Everything about the holiday (once her all-time favorite) just seemed painful and empty this year. Decorating lost all its magic, and she left the majority of it up to Lance.

As a result, the tree looked a bit naked and the wreath was crooked, but, she reasoned, it was better than nothing at all.

Wrapping the gifts also proved to be a chore, especially after she found the gift she'd painstakingly picked out for her father. That was another thing that was left to poor Lance, who completed it poorly, at best. Of course, it was sweet that he'd even try, since she knew he wasn't very gifted with those sorts of things, but she still had to find the end result amusing.

And last night's fiasco of a Christmas Eve service? Oh Lord. It was horrible! The very second she walked in, all eyes in the place were on her. Those people wouldn't leave her alone! And their eyes were all so sympathetic and their words were so heartfelt and their smiles were so sincere... Terri just couldn't take it. It wasn't like her to ever walk out of church in the middle of the service, but she just couldn't take it anymore. The whole thing just made her uncomfortable.

She sighed. They all probably thought she was just this ungrateful witch who didn't appreciate their outpouring of support, and that truly wasn't the case. She did (and so did Brett, she was sure), but... did they really have to remind her of it every single time they saw her? She knew quite well that her parents were dead. She also knew that it was a horrible tragedy to have to deal with that at Christmastime. And yes, she also knew that Christmas would probably never be the same again, as long as she lived. Did she really need these people telling her so? Was that really necessary? All it did was just make her feel even worse.

Standing there, Terri hugged herself. She'd never felt more alone in her life, even though she knew that she wasn't. Lance provided as much support as he possibly could, given the fact that he was Lance and all. To his credit, he really tried. He just didn't understand, and Terri couldn't really expect him to. It was something that nobody understood until they went through it – and even then, there was still a host of unanswered questions.

Then there was Brett. Wow. Not that she'd ever really doubted it before, but he was so much stronger than people gave him credit for. She couldn't even begin to imagine what a nightmare these past ten days had been. As elder child and only son, it was his responsibility to not only identify the bodies (something that Terri knew she could never do), but also make all the arrangements and preach the joint funeral of his parents – and he handled it with the same quiet dignity and resolve that he handled everything else.

Terri knew that he had to be suffering right now, but as he often did, he put everyone else's needs ahead of his own. He must have called her twelve times a day to make sure she was okay. He even put Julia up to it, which was a wonder in and of itself. And every single time, she lied through her teeth and told him everything was okay. Everything had to be okay. She couldn't burden anyone with this, even the one person that probably did understand. Brett was so good and so kind and so generous. She couldn't be another one of those people who took advantage of that, even if she was his sister. She just couldn't do it.

She didn't notice Lance pulling back into the driveway until he got out of the car yelling. "What are you doing out here like that? You're gonna get sick!" he exclaimed, as he rushed toward her.

Startled out of her daze, Terri only looked up at him blankly. "I...it's...it's pretty out here, isn't it?" she managed quietly.

Okay, that sounded ridiculous. He probably thought she'd lost her mind. Great.

"Well, yeah," Lance drawled, as he took her in his arms. "But I bet it's even prettier from inside. Why don't we go inside?"

Without a word, she agreed, and followed him in. "I'm okay," she insisted, after he forced her to have a seat on the sofa and took both her hands in his to warm them up. "I'm really okay, Lance."

"I know you are," he assured gently.

Just the way he said it made her cheeks redden. She jerked her hands back. "I am. I am okay. I'm okay. Stop fussing over me like I'm going to go insane any second now, okay? I'm fine! Everything is fine!"

He sat there for a minute, seemingly shocked. She immediately raised a hand to her face. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you."

"Terri...baby..." Again, he pulled her into his arms. "It's okay," he whispered into her ear. "It's all going to be okay. We're gonna get through this together, just like we always do, okay? Everything's okay. I'm here."

If only she could believe that...

December 25, 1965; 9:20 a.m.

"We really don't have to do this, you know," Marnie Adams cautioned gently, as she gave her boyfriend's gloved hand a light squeeze. "In fact, if you don't want to, we can just forget the whole thing..."

Evan Blake bit his lip, as though he were truly considering it, but ultimately shook his head. "No, I'm fine. We're spending Christmas together, remember?"

"Well, I do, but...I know that sometimes, this sort of thing makes you uncomfortable..." She allowed her voice to trail off, unsure if she should have pointed that out. Immediately, she apologized. "I'm sorry."

For a moment, he only stood there, staring vacantly at the wreath on the door. Then, he glanced over at her. "What? Don't be sorry, darling. It's fine."

"Okay. Okay. Are you sure you want to - "

He interrupted her by leaning forward to knock on the door, then grinned over at her. "Does that answer your question?"

Despite all the nervous energy buzzing around inside her, Marnie also smiled. "Yes. It does."

Within mere moments, Julia Woodward opened the door. Her eyes were wide with surprise, but she said nothing of it, only holding open her arms. "Marnie! Evan! So good to see you! Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas, Julia!" Marnie greeted, as she reciprocated her friend's embrace.

"Merry Christmas, Julia," Evan repeated, with an awkward smile. Julia moved forward, as if to embrace him, but he offered up a stiff handshake instead.

She seemed to take the hint, but she did not lose her smile. "Come in, come in! Would you like some coffee?"

"Oh, no thank you," Marnie insisted. "We really can't stay long. We're having lunch with Mother. But I did want to come and wish you and Brett a merry - " She stopped herself mid-sentence, then turned back to stare at Julia. "Your tree is gorgeous! I love it!"

"Isn't it?" Julia beamed with pride. "Brett picked it out." She leaned toward Marnie, a wicked smile playing on her lips. "He would have you believe he cut it down himself and hauled it home on the back of a truck, but nothing of the sort actually happened."

"Of course not," Marnie laughed.

"Actually..." Brett Woodward appeared in the doorway. He'd yet to change out of his bathrobe, and his eyes revealed a weariness that Evan knew far too well, but he did his best to smile. "My dad and I picked out that tree..."

Silence fell over the room for what seemed like forever. Immediately, Brett regretted even saying anything. Much like Terri, he'd been the subject of many sympathies over the past few days, but if anything, they were a little harder to handle graciously when you were speaking from a pulpit you weren't even entirely sure you believed in anymore. The inner battle that took place over the past nine days was intense, the likes of which Brett had never really known. The anger, the disbelief, the regret, the emptiness, the utter despair - they came over him in intervals, alternately making him miserable, one sleepless night at a time. Hours in prayer, hours studying the Bible, even a three-day fast...nothing he tried brought him any closer to closure or peace. Nothing could make him understand it. If anything, those useless avenues only served to confuse him even more, though he could never tell anyone that. He was expected to smile through even the darkest personal tragedies and continue to be what this community needed him to be...as much as it was killing him.

Before anyone could say anything, Brett pasted on a smile and motioned toward the sofa. "Have a seat. I'm sorry I'm not dressed. If I'd known you were coming, I probably would have..." He stopped himself right there, forcing a laugh at the mere embarrassment of it all.

"Oh, it's fine," Marnie assured, as she took a seat beside him. Attentively, she turned her body toward his and took a deep breath. "I know that you hate this question," she began quietly.

He held up a hand dismissively. "Then how about we don't ask it at all?"

She ignored him. "Brett, are you okay? Is there anything that you need? Anything at all?"

Julia moved in on the other side of him. Apparently, she was interested in this answer too. Evan, meanwhile, only continued to stand in the doorway. Brett focused on him for a moment, trying to read what was going on behind his eyes. He was a man of few words, that was for sure...but the fact he would dare venture out in public, especially to the home of a couple he barely knew, spoke volumes for his true character.

"That man really loves you, Marnie," he informed, the delight evident in his eyes. It was a welcome distraction. Love was like a new beginning...and more than anyone could have ever imagined, Brett was desperate for one of those right now.

Marnie paused, then looked back to Evan. She felt her face grow red. "Well, yes...I believe he does."

"That's great. That is really great. I'm happy for you, both of you."

"Thank you," Marnie whispered.

Julia, all too aware that there was usually a reason when Brett abruptly changed the subject, gently took his hand. Her quiet assurance did not go unnoticed. He leaned back into the sofa, then rested his head on her shoulder briefly. "I'm okay," he finally said, in a

slow and easy tone. "I appreciate everyone being so concerned about me, but I'm okay. I'm really okay."

From the foyer, Evan debated whether or not to speak up. He didn't really feel it was his place to say anything, especially as he was a guest in the man's home, but what a fucking joke. Okay? Okay? Was that even possible after such a traumatic loss? No. Evan knew from experience that it wasn't. Normalcy wasn't even possible after ten years, much less ten days.

He had far more in common with Brett Woodward than he ever thought, Evan realized sadly, as he watched the pastor lean forward, with his face in his hands, completely broken but trying his best not to let it show. Evan remembered the stance well. Far, far too well.

December 25, 1965; 12:45 p.m.

Finally, he told himself. It took three hours, but somebody finally stopped. He rushed toward the worn down pick up truck, with all his worldly possessions on his back. The driver, a man somewhere in his sixties, flashed a mostly toothless grin at him. "Merry Christmas!"

Though the very idea of small talk made him sick to his stomach, he did his best to smile back. "Merry Christmas to you too, sir."

"Where you headed? Going home to your family?"

"Uhh..." he stalled. "Yeah. Yeah."

Better than admit the truth, he reasoned inwardly.

"Well, hop on in." The driver leaned over to open his passenger side door. "I'm not going too far. Hope Haven Park is in the right direction."

He gratefully climbed into the truck and slammed the door behind himself. "Haven Park? Huh? Where's that?"

Skeptically, the driver stared at him for a moment, before getting back on the road. "Oh, about forty miles from here. Just before you get to Laramie."

He faked recognition. "Oh. Laramie. Great. Yeah. Great."

"Going to Laramie?"

"Yeah. I have...an aunt. An aunt that lives in Laramie." He pondered his words for a moment. Not necessarily a lie, but not quite the truth either. In all honesty, he had no idea if he had an aunt in Laramie or not. Given the way his family scattered out in all directions over the years, it was highly possible.

"I'm Jim. What's your name, son?"

The driver's question jolted him out of his moment of reflection and he extended a hand, oblivious to the fact his fresh track marks were visible. "Uhh...Lucas. Lucas Brady."

Chapter Seven, Part One:

July 7, 1966; 10:15 a.m.

Haven Park had come out in droves for Carol Mathison's service. As he mingled with them, Brett couldn't help but marvel. He hadn't seen some of these people in ages – and he couldn't remember the last time the modest sanctuary was this full. Ironical that this sort of circumstance served as tragic catalyst to bring them back to church...but at least they were back.

There was a little controversy a few years back, when Brett took over as pastor. Well, maybe controversy was the wrong word, but a few of the church elders didn't necessarily agree with the choice, and rather than make a big fuss about it, they just stopped coming. Seemed the universal complaint was the church was becoming too youth-oriented. Too modern for their tastes. The music being incorporated might have actually sounded melodic. The sermons might have done more than preach fire and brimstone. The pastor might have been under the age of 60.

That one was especially upsetting to the aged congregation of First Baptist, and to a degree, Brett could understand their reservations. A lot of them had known him from the time he was a mere bulge in his mother's belly, and the idea of him all-grown-up and leading the church was a bit...unsettling. They didn't understand his informal approach, mainly. A pastor that actually got out from behind the pulpit, mingling with the congregation in the middle of a sermon? A pastor that didn't really like being addressed as "Pastor" or "Reverend" and would correct you fast, telling you to call him Brett? A pastor who preached primarily on love and acceptance, rather than the rough consequences of sin? They blamed it on his inexperience. They blamed it on pie-eyed optimism. They blamed it on his past as a children's pastor, and insinuated he should have stuck with that.

Bottom line: A guy like Brett Woodward was the very last thing First Baptist of Haven Park needed. They made that one loud and clear. But the funny thing? How quickly some of them were able to put all the negative things they'd said about him behind them, when they arrived to pay their respects. Not that Brett necessarily expected them to give him the cold shoulder...he just wasn't really anticipating the warm reception he got.

"Well, look at you!" Elton Frazier, Haven Park police chief and one of the many defectors, exclaimed, as he stepped inside the sanctuary with his wife Jackie. "Brett! Been a very long time. How are you, son?"

"Doing just fine, sir," Brett affirmed, as he extended a hand. "Good to see you both again."

"This is an impressive turn out," Mrs. Frazier remarked, taking a look around the room. "The whole town must be here!"

"Yes," Brett agreed. "It's nice to see that so many people have come to pay their respects."

Mr. Frazier also surveyed the sanctuary, then turned back to Brett and raised an eyebrow. "But aren't we missing someone?"

"I'm sorry?" For a moment, Brett was thrown, before he realized what the man was referring to – Julia's conspicuous absence. "Oh, Julia? She'll be around shortly. She was held up a bit. She's coming."

"Good!" Mrs. Frazier replied sweetly. "Such a lovely girl! I can't wait to see her again."

Brett consulted his watch briefly, then looked toward the foyer, where Julia was supposed to be helping Marnie pass out programs and greet the mourners. "She'll be around shortly," he promised again. "Excuse me for a moment, please?"

He didn't give the couple a chance to reply and rushed back toward the foyer. He didn't realize Jules was this late. The service was supposed to start in forty-five minutes.

Marnie, conversing with the Blackthornes about the church bake sale that would be occurring the following month, knew precisely what Brett wanted, before he even approached. She'd been fielding a number of questions about Julia's strange tardiness all morning herself. Still, she was a bit surprised when he motioned her over to him. "Mrs. Blackthorne, would you excuse me for a moment?" she asked, reaching out to gently pat the older woman on the shoulder. "I need to speak with the pastor about something."

"Oh certainly, dear," Mrs. Blackthorne agreed, waving cheerily at Brett, who curiously did not return the gesture.

"Where's Jules?" he whispered into Marnie's ear as she approached.

"I don't know," she whispered back. "I would have thought she'd be here by now. She didn't mention anything about being late to you, did she?"

"No, and that's what's worrying me." Brett fished his keys from the pocket of his jacket. "Give me just a few minutes to call the house and at least see if she's still there. Can you handle this by yourself for just a few minutes?"

Marnie nodded. "Of course. I've got it. Go on."

"Thanks. I'll just be a minute."

July 7, 1966; 10:18 a.m.

"Margaret! Darling, come here! You just look beautiful!" Mayor Clayton Pierce, escorted by his wife Elaine, pulled Marnie into a tight embrace. He was an older man, considered charming by many, an unrelenting flirt by a select few.

Marnie did her best to weasel out of the embrace as classily as possible. "Mayor Pierce, Mrs. Pierce, wonderful to see you today. Thank you very much for coming. Would you like a program?"

"Yes, please," Mrs. Elaine Pierce, seemingly oblivious to the fact her husband was leering at Marnie right in front of her, smiled widely as she took it. Her smile soon faded, however, as she looked down at Carol's photograph on the front. "Such a lovely young woman," she lamented. "Such a tragedy."

"Yes, dear, it certainly was," Mayor Pierce agreed, reaching out to Marnie once more. "How have you been, Margaret? Where's Evan? Is he coming today?"

Again, Marnie was quick to weasel away from his touch. Her mother kept swearing that "good old Clay" was harmless, but his unwanted advances, however subtle, were what drove her out of City Hall in the first place. Something about him had always made her incredibly uncomfortable, and today was no exception. "No, unfortunately, he had to work."

"Well, that's a shame." Mayor Pierce hardly seemed disappointed, allowing his eyes to travel from her face to somewhere below her neck, then reluctantly back again. "He'll be so sorry that he missed it."

"Yes," Marnie agreed, face red, "I'm sure."

Elaine Pierce, still relatively oblivious, waved to a friend seated in the sanctuary. "Clara! Hello, dear! How are you doing?" she asked, as the two women met in the foyer, only feet away.

Mayor Pierce leaned down in that moment, to whisper in Marnie's ear. "Your job's still open, you know. You were the heart and soul of City Hall, and any time you get tired of this place and you want to come back, you let me know."

"Mayor Pierce, I don't think..." Marnie attempted to argue, but he put a finger to her lips.

"Don't argue. Just think about it." With that, he winked at her, an action that gave her the creeps, and went to join his wife.

However, she did not have much time to dwell on it, as Brett came back out of his office at that moment, looking worried. "No answer," he informed quietly. "She must be on her way. At least, I hope she is."

Marnie began to say something, but Shane walked in before she could. "Brett, Marnie, good morning."

Brett turned abruptly, and the smile he plastered on his face fell immediately. Shane looked like he'd been run over by a bus. Brett held out both arms to him. "Shane. How are you?"

Without hesitation, Shane walked into them, though he managed to keep his composure. "I'm making it," he whispered. "I'm just...making it."

Sympathetically, Marnie nodded, then enveloped Shane in an embrace of her own. "I can't imagine how difficult this must be for you. You have my very deepest sympathies."

"Thanks," he replied with a nod. "I really appreciate that." He then turned his attention back to Brett. "Are Stan and Mona here yet?"

"No, I haven't seen them."

"Okay..." Shane glanced around the room for a moment, then down at the floor. "If it's okay with you, can I talk to you for a few minutes? In private?"

Brett looked to Marnie, who again nodded that she could handle the crowd herself for a little while longer, then again grabbed his keys. "Of course. Come on in."

"This won't take long," Shane insisted, as soon as the office door was safely closed behind them. "I know you're busy. But I just wanted to tell you thank you for being there for me the other night. And I'm sorry that I made such a drunken fool out of myself."

Awkwardly, Brett chuckled. "Well, it wouldn't be the first time..."

"No, but I'm still sorry. I made a huge fool of myself, and I'm sorry that you had to see it. But thanks for being there. This..." Shane kicked some imaginary dust on the carpet, his hands in his pockets. "This has been a really rough week, you know...and I need all the help I can get. I know I don't say it enough, but you've always been there, and I really appreciate it. I really do."

July 7, 1966; 10:20 a.m.

Julia Woodward's eyes darted around wildly, as she stepped into the church foyer. She knew she was late, and apparently, so did everyone else. Their gazes were somewhat unsettling, though Julia couldn't be sure if this was merely perception on her part. Still, she could not side up to Marnie fast enough. "I'm sorry," she apologized immediately. "I was held up and..."

"It's okay," Marnie insisted, as she hugged her. "I'm just glad you're okay. Brett has been very worried!"

"Oh no...I really hoped that I wouldn't be this late. I should have called. I'm sorry."

Marnie handed her a stack of programs. "It's fine. Take these."

"Okay." Julia took them, and quickly began fanning herself with them. She reached a hand up to her hair. "Does it look alright?" she asked Marnie, though she was acutely aware that it did not. She looked frightful, and she just knew that this would be the talk of Haven Park for the next two weeks, a thought that terrified her.

"You look fine," Marnie assured, though she was lying through her teeth.

"Mrs. Wilson, good morning." Julia greeted, handing over a program. "Here you go. Thank you for coming. Lovely to see you. Have a nice day."

With only a quizzical glance, the middle-aged woman took her program and seated herself. Marnie watched this strange, impersonal greeting take place three times more before leaning over to whisper into Julia's ear. "Are you okay?"

Julia seemed stunned she'd even ask, continuing to fan herself with the programs in her hand. "Of course I am."

"You're acting very strangely. Not like yourself at all. Is something the matter?"

"I've just..." Julia sighed, shrugging her shoulders. "I've been in a mad rush all day, I'm embarrassed that I was held up, I'm rather upset over having to be here today at all, I know that Brett is probably not very happy with me and..." She glanced around the room to ensure no one was eavesdropping, before leaning in so close Marnie could feel her breath on her neck. "I've just begun my cycle and I don't feel well at all. I just don't feel it today, Marn. I'm sorry."

Though her eyes still seemed a bit wary, Marnie nodded. "Why don't you go splash some water on your face and fix your hair up? Calm down, get yourself together, and then we can talk about it, okay?"

Julia smiled. "You're a wonderful friend. Thank you."

"Just...just get yourself together," Marnie advised slowly, as she took the programs back. "Get yourself together."

"I will," Julia promised, already halfway to the ladies room. "I'll be right back!"

July 7, 1966; 10:25 a.m.

Helen Adams certainly knew how to make an entrance. As used to it as she really should have been by now, Marnie still had to roll her eyes at the dramatics. She burst in like she owned the place, took it upon herself to greet each and every mourner there so far, then positioned herself next to her daughter, taking Julia's place in handing out programs. When told that she didn't need to worry with such things and really should just take a seat, Helen adamantly insisted that as the former "First Lady" of Haven Park, it would be a slap in the face to all the citizens if she did not get involved.

"And besides," she pointed out, "they left you up here by yourself with all these people and I know that you don't enjoy entertaining as much as I do."

The mourners continued to trickle in, little by little, familiar face after familiar face, and Helen greeted them all warmly, taking it upon herself to thank them on behalf of the family. Her behavior bordered on being embarrassing, Marnie thought, but knew better

than to say anything about it. All she could really do was hope that Julia got herself together, fast, so she did not have to endure any more of this.

"Do you know what this reminds me of?" Helen asked, after helping long-time parishioner Mrs. Gardener to a seat.

Marnie did her best to sound interested. "What's that, Mother?"

"Well, I haven't seen all these people all in one place since...well, since Francine's funeral."

Marnie lowered her eyes to the floor. "Oh."

"Not even your father's service got such a turnout!" Helen chuckled. "Which I could have been upset by, but you know. Francine was incredibly beloved in the community, and so was Carol, obviously. And you want to know something sad, Margaret?"

No, she really didn't, but she nodded anyway. "Yes. Sure."

"Poor little Carol was front row center during Francine's service! Do you remember that?"

"No...I don't, really. I think I might have been in school that day."

"No you weren't!" Helen argued. "You were there. I know you were. And poor Carol sat in the very front row and cried her little eyes out! It was the saddest thing I'd ever seen. Poor thing was just inconsolable!"

Marnie had to admit that one took her by surprise. "I never knew Carol was that close to Francine."

"Oh, of course she was! Everyone loved Francine! But Carol..." Helen sighed. "Carol looked on her as sort of the big sister she never had, I think. They were very, very close. She would even help Francine cook dinner for Evan a couple of nights a week! Can you believe that? How funny!"

Clearly, Marnie did not think it was very funny at all, as she shifted around uncomfortably and wholeheartedly greeted the next mourner to walk in: Jeff Howard. "Oh Jeff! So good to see you!" she exclaimed, wrapping her arms around him. "How are you doing? Are you okay?"

"I've seen some better days, but I'm making it," he admitted, with a heavy sigh. He then turned to Helen. "Mrs. Adams. Good day."

"Good day, Jeff," Helen replied, handing over a program. "My absolute deepest condolences for your loss. You are in my prayers."

Jeff seemed genuinely touched by that, smiling broadly. "Thank you. That means a lot to me."

Just then, the door to the pastor's study swung open and Brett, followed by Shane, emerged into the foyer. Before anyone knew what was even happening, Shane and Jeff's eyes locked and Shane lunged forward, grabbing Jeff by the collar. "You son of a bitch!"

...to be continued...

Chapter Seven, Part Two:

July 7, 1966; 10:27 a.m.

Every conversation taking place in the sanctuary seemed to come to an abrupt, screeching halt. You could've heard a pin drop in the church foyer as Jeff wiggled free from Shane's fierce grip, dusting off his jacket. "If you ever touch me again..." he began.

Shane took a step closer. "You have got your nerve showing up here! What the hell do you think you're doing? Don't you know people are suffering enough without you showing up to basically laugh in their faces? I oughtta..."

Jeff's eyes darted around the foyer, then to the sanctuary. He could clearly see Stan and Mona standing there, and he could clearly see his boys right beside them. This was the last thing he wanted to do today, especially in front of them, but enough was enough already. The rage that bubbled over at that moment was almost indescribable. The next thing he knew, he had Shane backed up against the door of the church office, much to the horror of everyone who'd crowded around to enjoy the show.

Jeff's mind raced, acutely aware that everyone was watching...and that anything he said or did could become fodder for later. There was so much he wanted to say to Shane - to all these fucking hypocrites. Yet...the only way he found to accurately display his disgust in this whole situation was to spit right in Shane's face, an action that immediately got Brett involved.

He looked like he could sense what was going to happen next, and immediately grabbed Shane's arm to restrain him. Jeff almost wished he'd just let the bastard go. Let him haul off and hit him. Let everyone see it and let Shane look like the damn fool for once.

"Okay, settle down," Brett advised, as calmly as one could possibly be in a situation like this one. "Everybody settle down. Jeff, just...settle down."

Shane didn't appear to hear a single word he said, only lunging for Jeff again. "You're nothing but a murderer, and you don't belong here! You have no place here and...and I oughtta just do to you what you did to Carol and do this whole damn town a favor! You - you're - oh my god, you son of a bitch!"

Hearing the commotion, Julia quickly emerged from the ladies room into the foyer, just in time to witness her husband jerk Shane back with a ferocity she'd honestly never seen before. "Whoa. Whoa, whoa, *whoa!* Settle down! Everybody just settle down, okay?"

Shane turned toward him, eyes seething. "Settle down?" he asked incredulously. "This son of a bitch killed her, then he has the balls to show up at her funeral, and you're asking me to settle down?"

"I didn't kill anybody!" Jeff yelled. It felt good to say it. Good enough that he repeated it three times more. "Do you hear me, Shane? I didn't kill anybody! Not Carol, not anybody!"

"Get the hell out of here!" Shane demanded, jerking free from Brett's grip to point an angry finger in Jeff's face. "Get out of here right now!"

Jeff's eyes narrowed as he surveyed the pathetic, shaking excuse for a cop before him. Again, so many things were racing through his mind...but none of them were really worth saying, anyway. All he did was shake his head and hold up both hands. "Alright, I'm going. But let me tell you something, tough guy - you didn't throw me out of here. You can't throw me out of here, you understand me? I am leaving because I want to leave!"

"You're leaving because you're guilty!" Shane sneered.

“That’s enough,” Brett interrupted, grabbing his arm again before he could make another move toward Jeff. “That’s enough. Just settle down. Jeff...Shane...just... everybody just settle down.”

There were a few things Jeff would’ve liked to have said to that guy too, none of which would’ve been very pleasant, but instead, he only backed toward the door, hands still raised as though it somehow indicated his dubious surrender. Before he left, though, he made sure to get in a final shot. “Go fuck yourself, Shane - because obviously, you never got your chance with Carol.”

That did it. Shane charged toward Jeff, literally dragging Brett behind him, as he still clung to his arm in a vain effort to restrain him. “You...you’re not even worth the bullet it would take to kill you,” he whispered, his entire body shaking with rage. “But you’ll get yours! Trust me, you will!”

Horried by the turn this had taken, Brett looked to Marnie, then to Julia, silently asking what in the world he was supposed to do. Marnie seemed to understand how quickly this situation was escalating and gently took Jeff’s arm, leading him outside. Julia was soon to follow.

Jeff said nothing as he walked back toward the car, but Marnie noticed immediately that his hands were shaking. “Jeff...that...”

“That mother fucker!” he yelled, turning around to point back at the building. Tears were forming in his eyes, but he did his best to blink them back. “That mother fucker just threw me out of my fiancée’s funeral and...and I actually left. I...I left.”

“Jeff...” Marnie reached out to him.

“Don’t. Don’t!” he insisted, holding up a hand. “Don’t tell me it’s all gonna be okay, because it’s not, okay, Marn? Julia, you listening to this back there? It’s not gonna be okay, so don’t give me that bullshit. This is not okay. This is not gonna be okay. This is...my *kids* saw that. This is...” Unable to find any more words, Jeff kicked the door of his car in frustration.

Marnie placed a hand over her mouth, while Julia only stepped forward. “Do you remember what we talked about? Do you remember what I told you?”

He glanced over at her. He honestly had no idea what she could’ve been referring to. They talked about a lot of things. She told him a hell of a lot of things - none of which he could really remember now. His mind was reeling from the encounter of a few minutes ago, and he wasn’t in the mood to decode what she didn’t want to say in front of Marnie, for obvious reasons. “What?”

“We talked about this sort of thing before,” she reminded, with insistent eyes. “Remember? And do you remember what I told you? Hold onto that. Please just...hold onto that.”

He closed his eyes, as he at once realized what she meant. Marnie turned to look at her, her gaze silently questioning, but Julia offered no answers, only going back inside to hopefully help Brett calm down the firestorm.

Jeff unlocked the car. “I gotta get out of here. I gotta get the fuck out of here.”

“Jeff, I...I wish you wouldn’t go.” It was truly all Marnie could offer up. She clearly understood his reasons for wanting to leave, but she hated to see something like Shane’s displaced rage drive him away. “That...that was horrible and that was uncalled for and you have every right to be there. And...and I’ll tell Shane that! I don’t care what people think! You can’t leave. Don’t - ”

He shook his head. "I gotta go, Marn. I just gotta go." As he slid down into the driver's seat, he buried his face in his hands. God no. Not here. He couldn't do this here, and he couldn't do this in front of her. My God, no.

Marnie knelt down in the gravel next to him, ripping her stockings in the process. It seemed to be the furthest thing from her mind, as she reached out a gentle hand to his shoulder. "If you're leaving, I'm leaving too. We can both leave, and we can talk and..." She sighed. "I can't promise you it's going to be okay, but I can listen. And I can care. And I can love you. And...I do love you, Jeff. I love you very much."

Face and tears still hidden from her view, he shook his head. "Babe...no. I just...I gotta be alone. I'm sorry."

Without another word, he shut the door and started the car, leaving her to kneel there. It was an abrupt exit, and one he knew he'd eventually regret, but the most obvious choice at the time. He just had to get out of here. He had to get out of here.

July 7, 1966; 10:35 a.m.

After taking a moment to collect himself (and clean himself up), Shane emerged from the men's room to find Stanley standing there, arms crossed. It was a stance Shane had seen a few times before, and it was never anything very pleasant. "Stan, listen," he began.

"What the hell was that?" Stanley interrupted. "What the hell did you call yourself doing? That - that was insane!"

"That was - "

"How could you embarrass me like that? How could you embarrass us like that? What the hell were you thinking, boy?"

Shane immediately knew without being told that by "us", Stan did not mean himself and Mona. He meant the force as a whole, which, of course, he probably had. But at that point, all logic and reason just completely went out of his mind. There was no other way to explain it. It was a primal reaction, one he probably shouldn't have had, but one he honestly didn't regret.

"He has no right being here," Shane maintained.

"And who are you to decide that?"

Shane took a step back, shocked he'd say such a thing. "That son of a bitch killed your daughter - "

"Shut up!" Stanley yelled, unable to contain himself any longer. "Just shut the hell up! You don't know who killed my daughter anymore than I do!"

"You - you can't honestly believe he's innocent, can you? Stan, my God! Don't you get it? Don't you see?"

"All I know is my daughter..." Stanley paused for a very long time, the emotion visible behind his eyes. "My daughter is dead," he continued, voice slightly shaking. "And all you've done so far is make a fool of yourself and chase after Jeff. That's unacceptable, and you know better and I just can't believe you'd do something this damn stupid. I just..." Stanley turned and began to pace back in the other direction. He couldn't even look at Shane right now, and there was absolutely nothing else he could say.

Shane took in a deep breath as he watched him. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I just...I can’t stand to see him running around, knowing what he did to her. And I know what he did to her, Stan. I may not be able to prove it right now, but I know.”

“Every single night this week,” Stanley began, his back still turned, “I’ve sat up, wondering what the hell I could’ve done. How come I wasn’t there. What she must’ve been going through. If she...” He closed his eyes, silently allowing a tear to fall. “If she was calling out for me. And every single night, I’ve had to watch my wife go through the same thing. I’ve had to watch my grandchildren try to figure out why they don’t have a mother anymore. I’ve had to try and keep a brave face around everyone, because I have to hold it together, being who I am. And then, the one day I think I might actually be able to find a little closure and a little peace, you come along and you fuck it all up, over some stupid vendetta. You’ve hated Jeff from day one, Shane, and we both know it. This has nothing to do with Carol’s death. This has everything to do with the fact that she chose him instead of you. Admit it.”

“That – that’s not true,” Shane swore slowly. “That’s not true.”

“Bullshit!” Stanley erupted, turning around and pointing at him. “Of course it’s true! You just ruined my daughter’s funeral and you just kept someone who obviously loved her and loved those kids from being here and...” Unable to say anything further without emotionally collapsing like a house of cards, Stanley only brushed past Shane. “I can’t do this right now.”

“Stan, I’m sorry!” Shane apologized, from behind him. “I would never hurt you or Mona or the kids for the world. I just...” His shoulders slumped, and he sighed deeply. “I’m sorry.”

Stanley acted as though he hadn’t heard him at all, only returning to his grief-stricken wife’s side. Shane turned to glance at Marnie, who’d just reentered the foyer, her eyes burning fire. However, before she could say anything, Mayor Pierce approached. He didn’t look very happy either, though he did his best to smile, most likely for the sake of his image. “Shane, can I have a word with you, son? In private?”

July 7, 1966; 11 a.m.

With the crowd effectively calmed down and Julia’s tardiness somewhat explained (something about having to pick something up for the wake), Brett mentally prepared himself for taking that podium. Giving eulogies was never something he looked forward to, for the sheer impossibility of it all. Summing up a person’s life in a five-to-ten minute speech was a tall order, especially when someone had obviously touched many lives. He was up until three in the morning the night before laboring over what to say before finally scrapping the pre-written script altogether and deciding to speak spontaneously. It was the only thing he could do – and something that Carol no doubt would’ve approved of.

“Good morning, Haven Park,” he greeted, as he often did when he got behind the pulpit. “You know, I stayed up almost all night and I wrote this really elaborate speech, with all these scriptures, and it was all very Biblical and very serious and I was really proud of it. I felt like Shakespeare. And then...I woke up this morning, read it and asked myself what Carol would say about something like that...”

He glanced down at Stan and Mona, who despite themselves were smiling. “And no doubt, there would’ve been a lot of profanity involved,” he laughed. “So I thought maybe

it would be better to ditch the speech and just say what's on my mind about this. A lot of the time – and this was actually something I discussed with Carol a few times – someone in my position is expected to have the answers. And you know what? I just don't. I don't have the answers. It took me a long time to realize that so much of my life was out of my own control. I wanted to know and fully understand every single thing, but the longer I know the Lord, the more I realize that I just won't. We don't understand why things happen the way they do. We don't understand why people have to go, when we're just not ready to say goodbye to them yet. But, this is the one thing I'm here to tell you, Haven Park. God had a plan for this. He had a purpose for this, just like he's got a purpose for you and you and you and you, and yeah – even you in the back. I can see you back there, you know. We don't know what it is.” He shrugged. “We might never know what it is, but friends, there is a reason. When all is good and when all is gone, God is still there, holding everything together with his strong and mighty right hand, and that is the main thing we can all take comfort in. Everything changes in this life, but God does not change, nor does His grace, His mercy and His peace. And everything, no matter what it is, all happens according to His greater purpose and plan.”

Brett took a step back. “Woo. Got to preaching there. The Lord just took me in a totally different direction than what I planned, but I know He wouldn't want to see so many sad faces sitting out there today. No scripture I can quote is going to bring Carol back, and nothing is going to diminish her loss to those who knew and loved her, but the Lord wants you all to understand that there is life on the other side of this. There is a future and there is a hope, and His name is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only peace you're going to find in a time like this one. He is the only one with all the answers to all your questions, and right now, He wants to take you in His arms and comfort you. He doesn't want you to be upset. He wants you to know that Carol is safe, she is happy and she is at peace. Thank You, Lord.” He bowed his head, whispering, “Thank You, thank You, Lord.”

From the looks on most of these people's faces, they found his brand of comfort a little unsettling, especially since he did it with such a pleasant expression on his face, but it was something he just felt so strongly. The Lord was good – all the time, even in times like these when there were so many questions. “I knew Carol for a long, *long* time,” he continued. “And I know there's very little that I can say about her that could even come close to telling you who she really was. If you knew her, you just...knew her. She had this essence about her that not very many people have. She had a fierce tenacity. What she wanted, she got – no matter what was in her way. She found love, she lost love and then she found it again. She could've let life's little pitfalls get her down, but she kept going. She was a mother, a daughter, a friend...someone that exemplified courage, in the face of some really amazing odds. And just speaking from my own personal experience, when she had something to say, boy, did she say it – no matter how much it might've hurt your feelings!”

He surveyed the crowd, focusing on the people who knew Carol best. “It was about four years ago that I first stood up here, shaking like a leaf and trying to give my first ever sermon. I'd been preaching to eight-year olds before that - little did I know, that was a much easier job.” He paused, laughing. “I remember Andrew called me on a Wednesday, saying he had a family emergency and he had to go to Idaho; could I give the message on Sunday? And I just...I had no idea what to say. I was so nervous. I was

just shaking. And I remember after I got done, I actually made the mistake of asking Carol what she thought of it. Jules, you remember what she told me, don't you? Peaches, I know you remember this too. She looked at me, she kind of laughed and she said, 'You talked way too long, your jacket's two sizes too big for you, you looked like a lost little boy up there, and you mispronounced the name of that prophet. But other than that, I guess you did okay.' And that, friends – that was Carol."

As he often did, Brett opted to make his message more personal, moving out from behind his pulpit and into the sanctuary, stopping directly in front of Mona Rogers in the front pew. "Life is a learning experience. We learn from our pasts, we learn from our mistakes, we learn from each other. And I'd like to think that we all learned something from Carol Rogers Mathison. I know that I, at the very least, learned never to ask her something if I wasn't really prepared for her answer!"

With that, he knelt in front of Mona and took her hand. "Your daughter was someone that we will never, ever forget. Thank you for sharing her with us, and may the peace of Christ envelop you in this very difficult time."

Mona seemed genuinely touched by his statement, reaching forward to hug him. "Thank you," she whispered. "That was beautiful. Thank you."

Tightly, Brett returned her embrace, his emotion getting the better of him for just a moment. "I am so, so sorry."

July 7, 1966; 11:15 a.m.

With Brett's upbeat proclamations of victory over death through the power of Jesus' name, the tone seemed to be set for a service that was more light than darkness. Memories were shared from friends, coworkers, those that knew Carol for years and those that only knew her in passing – but they all basically shared the very same thing: Carol's presence was one that would be sorely missed in Haven Park for years to come.

Knowing that her turn to speak would be coming shortly, Terri wondered what more she could possibly say. So far, everyone had done such a wonderful job of celebrating Carol's life...what more could she really say about her best friend, without completely falling apart in the process? Much like Brett, Terri labored long and hard over what to say at the podium, and she took her three page eulogy with her when she was introduced, though she'd memorized a large majority of it already.

As she approached the podium, Brett reached out to hug her, whispering into her ear, "Are you gonna be able to get through this, Peaches?"

It was a question Terri didn't quite have an answer for. She just didn't know. She realized that in comparison to some (particularly, Carol's immediate family), her loss was relatively minor, but it was still a huge, gaping hole...something she just didn't know if she was ready to discuss publicly just yet. Still, she owed this much to Carol, if only to say thank you for all those times she just forgot.

"Good morning, everyone," she greeted quietly. "It's nice to see you all. I just wish it could have been under happier circumstances." Awkwardly, she fumbled with the papers in her hand, as she willed herself not to completely crumble. "Carol. Well, most of you know that she and I were very close. She was like my sister - closer than that. She was like my twin, born a few years apart...if such a thing were possible..."

Terri raised a hand to her face, aware that she was rambling. She glanced down at the speech she'd prepared, then ripped it in half in front of the assembled mourners. "I wrote something, but I can't say it. It's not enough. It will never, ever be enough."

Tears filled her eyes, and she tried desperately to blink them back. However, her best efforts were futile as she studied the crowd of Haven Park's best and brightest, brought together once more at the funeral of her very best friend. "You're not supposed to be here today," she whispered. "You're not supposed to be here today, because Carol is not supposed to be dead. This wasn't supposed to happen. And the more I think about it, the more I hate it. I hate that I don't have my best friend anymore. I hate that those babies don't have a mother anymore. I hate that someone had to do something so...so disgusting and so *vile*. I hate that...I hate that it wasn't me." She reached up to dry her tears, before taking in a deep breath. "This should be my funeral, not Carol's - because so much of myself died when she did. She was my best friend. Sometimes, she was my only friend. And nothing could ever replace her to me...or any of you, really. She...she..."

She stopped herself right there, as the door to the church opened noisily and Lance stumbled in. His unfashionably late (and ironically timed) entrance caused many in attendance to turn around and stare, before looking back at Terri with such...judgment in their eyes. She felt her cheeks begin to burn as she locked eyes with her husband. "See, Carol was one of a kind," she continued. "She knew everything there was to know about me. All those things that people whisper about...all those things that you're not supposed to tell people. I told Carol, and she never, ever judged me. She always told me I was a damn fool, and you know what? I was. But I was a fool who had one hell of a best friend and..."

Again, she raised a hand to her face. "I sat there and I listened to all of you talking about her, and how wonderful she was, and how she was so beloved and so good and so kind and...and you didn't know her at all. Not to say that she wasn't all of those things - she was, and then some. But you didn't know the half of it. You didn't know how wonderful she was to me after...after I miscarried my babies. When I couldn't even bring myself to get out of bed, and when *nobody*," she intentionally emphasized that, locking eyes with Lance once more, "was there. She cared for me. She held me. She talked to me. She told me that it wasn't my fault..."

By the looks on some of these people's faces, they weren't too happy with the turn this eulogy had taken. "What is life if not to see the seasons passing by?" she continued. "And what is love if not to leave the imprint of its touch?" Thoughtfully, Terri appeared to consider that herself. "Carol touched me in ways that none of you will ever, ever understand...we had a connection deeper than any of you will ever, ever know. And I can't in good conscience stand up here and tell you all some hilarious story about our Lucy and Ethel escapades. I'm sorry, but I can't. There's just no humor to be found in this. My world is shattered, and so are so many other people's. And that's a hurt that doesn't go away. To the Rogers family, I'm so sorry for what you've had to go through. Please know that you have my very deepest sympathies, and...I'm sorry that I was never able to be to Carol what she was to me. I'm sorry that I'll never get that chance. And...I'm just so, so sorry that it wasn't me."

Her shoulders slumped and she began to openly weep in front of the congregation. It was something she initially felt horrified by, but something she soon realized was inevitable. This was, in many ways, the funeral for her entire life as she'd known it. Her

parents were gone, her marriage was clearly over, her best friend was dead...there was nothing left for her to really hold onto. No one she could fully put her trust in. No where she could conceivably turn. This was the end of it all...and the finality of it hit her like a ton of bricks.

For a few moments, no one moved. It honestly felt like time stopped for Terri, but she quickly got a hold of herself. She wiped at her eyes and removed the set of false eyelashes that had come unglued in her grief, then squared her shoulders. "I'm trying to think of something Carol would say...but nothing could do her justice, so I'll just say thank you all for being here, thank you all for your time, and...I love you, Carol. Thank you."

Quietly, she began to walk back to her seat, but Mona stopped her before she could get far, grabbing her in an embrace that hardly felt comforting at all. "You are such a beautiful girl and Carol loved you so very much," she whispered. "Thank you for speaking."

Terri pulled out of the embrace, again wiping at her tears. "She meant everything to me," she whispered back.

"And she knew that," Stanley assured, as he placed an arm around her. "She knew that."

July 7, 1966; 11:45 a.m.

"I just don't know if I can thank you all for all your kind words, and for your great support during this very, very difficult time." Mona's voice was shaking as she addressed the crowd and she clung to Stanley's hand, as though it were a lifeline. "So many beautiful things have been said today, so many wonderful memories of a life well lived. Carol wasn't just my daughter, she was my friend, and she was a role model to me. She had so many amazing qualities that so many of you have touched on, and I don't know that I can add anything to what you've already said. But please know that Carol loved each and every one of you, and from the bottom of my heart, I thank you for...loving her too."

Stanley moved in to speak, noting that his wife was becoming too emotional to continue. He surveyed the crowd and he wondered, was one of them the one? Was it the guy in the back, who seemed uncomfortable even being here? Was it the guy who seemed more interested in scanning the hymnal than listening to the tributes? Was it the young punk who had the nerve to smirk and snicker at most everything that was said? The questions were making him crazy, and for just a moment, he visibly cracked under the pressure.

Quickly, though, he regained his composure. "My daughter was a treasure," he began slowly. "We always knew we had something very special on our hands, even from the time she was just a little baby. She was always so vibrant, so curious, so alive...and that's something she passed on to her boys. It's something that lives on and..." He paused for a very long time, as he looked down at his grandsons. They were so young, and they were still coming to grips with all of this themselves. To children, it was inconceivable that one day they had a mother, and the next they did not. Honestly, it was inconceivable to Stanley too.

“She was my only daughter, and her entire life, I did my best to protect her. I killed bugs and chased off dogs that tried to attack her. I kept boys we didn’t approve of away from her. I did all of those things that a father was supposed to do for their only little girl...but when it counted, I was not there. And...”

Mona began to interrupt at that time, knowing exactly where this was going. “Carol was - ”

“And I can’t live with myself knowing that I could have done something.” He spoke over her, intent on making sure this was clear to everyone in attendance - even the killer, should they be brave enough to show their face. “For the rest of my life, I’m going to regret not being there when it counted, and I’m going to grieve for my baby girl. This was senseless and this was unnecessary and...I just want to say right now that if you’re here right now, you sick bastard...I hope you rot from the inside out for what you did to my daughter. I hope you suffer and burn in hell for doing that to my daughter and...” He stopped right there, unable to continue without completely breaking down.

Mona put her arm around him. “Carol was a strong girl, and she was a beautiful girl and...when she loved, she loved with all of her heart. She gave everything she had, and I’d like to challenge you all to carry on her legacy by living the same way. Don’t take anyone for granted, and live every single day as though it were your last with those you love, because...because you just don’t know.”

She wiped her eyes, then nodded to the sound tech in the back. “Thank you all for coming, and thank you all for your support. We truly appreciate it so very much. And now, I’d like to dedicate this to Carol and to David, together forever, in everlasting peace. Thank you.”

Many in the congregation expected an old style hymn to play at that moment, and got the shock of their lives as The Beatles peppy “Love Me Do” began resounding through the sanctuary as Mona and Stanley returned to their seats. Yes, it was quite an unconventional choice, but it was a very deliberate one. This was one of Carol’s favorite songs, one that she also requested be played at David’s funeral, to symbolize all the good times they had dancing to it.

Together forever, in everlasting peace.

Chapter Eight:

July 7, 1966; 2:30 p.m.

Carol’s wake was held, as wakes often were, in the reception hall at First Baptist. Friends, family, even relative strangers all gathered to share their memories of the deceased and gorge themselves on every sort of dish imaginable. Terri, meanwhile, sat in the corner, by herself. She wanted to draw as little attention to herself as possible, to spare herself a little embarrassment. She could read the looks on those people’s faces when she was up there. They were all asking the same question that Lance was...that she even was: What the hell happened to that girl?

Absently, she stirred her coffee and sighed. Carol probably would have smacked her if she were here. The whole idea of anybody making such a blubbery fool of themselves on her behalf would horrify her...unless, of course, it was a male. Despite

herself, Terri smiled. Carol had this amazing way of melting guys, no matter who they were. It gave her so much pleasure that she referred to it as her specialty.

As she surveyed the reception hall, something interesting caught Terri's eye. Julia and two older ladies from the church, huddled around the green bean casserole. Terri couldn't really make out what they were saying, but she did catch her sister-in-law utter something along the lines of, "Carol was such a dear woman! She will be so missed!"

Suddenly, Terri felt nauseous. It was just like Julia to spout off pious things like that, especially to people who didn't know the truth. Carol couldn't stand that woman, a fact she made known to almost anyone who would listen long enough. She saw right through her, right past the pristine facade she often tried to fool people into believing.

"How in God's name do you possibly put up with her?" Summoned Hazel's Diner, Carol was supposed to be helping Terri sort out her complicated marriage woes, but instead, she bummed cigarette after cigarette and bitched about all the faithful attendees of First Baptist. However, the majority of her ire was saved for Julia, whom she called "the most insufferable, phony piece of shit there is."

"I mean," Carol elaborated, with a sigh, "how can you look across the table at her during holidays and not want to pull her hair out?"

Terri laughed, unable to deny that once or twice, the thought had entered her mind. "I don't know," she replied. "I guess I've just gotten used to her? Not like I have much of a choice."

"Poor Brett. I mean that. Poor Brett."

Terri shrugged. "He loves her."

"He's a damn fool," Carol spat.

Terri chose to say nothing about that. While she was more than comfortable listening to Carol trash Julia (and even joined in a time or two), bringing Brett into it was over the line, though she'd never dare say so.

"I mean it," Carol persisted. "Your brother is a damn fool. And he's married to a cheap hussy."

Carol's words rung in Terri's ears, as if she'd only just spoken them. She'd always had this amazing way of seeing past all the various masks the people in this town tried to wear. She didn't like very many people, but Terri could honestly say that the chosen few she did like were good people indeed. Carol was, in fact, an excellent judge of character...she only wished she'd listened to her a little more often.

As she watched Mayor Pierce go for his fourth helping of Mrs. Patterson's meatloaf, Terri broke into a broad smile. Oh, if only Carol were here. She would have had a field day at the expense of all this shameless gluttony, as well as the overblown displays of grief exhibited by relative strangers.

"What is it with funerals and food?" she'd asked once, as they shared a cigarette in this very room after the uncharacteristically festive funeral of a First Baptist parishioner. It was something Terri didn't quite have an answer for, but found amusing nonetheless.

"I'm serious. Somebody dies, the whole town shows up, everybody acts like they just lost their very best friend ever, and then they break out the food and everything's magically okay again. Food has this amazing curative power, evidently. Makes you forget the dead guy that you never really knew in the first place and bonds you with all the other idiots in this town at the same time. Isn't it wonderful?" Carol surveyed the

crowd, then rolled her eyes. "Obviously, they know something we don't, wouldn't you say?"

"Well," Terri reminded quietly, "the Bible does say that man should not live on bread alone."

"But on the word of God!" Carol finished the scripture for her, with a throaty laugh. "I'm surprised they haven't tried to eat that too. You know, just sprinkle a little salt on it. Put it in some Tupperware. Bring it to a funeral. They don't have any damn class. None of them. They don't care about that poor woman - "

"It was a man," Terri corrected immediately. "Mr. Anderson."

Carol waved her hand dismissively. "Whoever it was. They don't care about him. They just came for the food. And let me tell you right now, nothing makes you look like more of a fool than a drumstick in each hand. Disgusting. All of them."

Sitting in this damn reception hall with Carol's running commentary about what slovenly idiots everyone else in the room was just seemed...wrong. So very, very wrong.

"I, uhh...I brought you a plate. I didn't know what you wanted, so I just got a little of everything."

Terri, a million miles away, didn't notice Lance at first. She was only alerted to his presence when he took a seat beside her. Nervously, he shoved the plate toward her. "I...I hope you like it."

"I'm really not hungry," she replied quietly. "But thanks."

With a swift motion, Lance shoved the plate even closer to her. His eyes were insistent. "You need to eat or people will talk."

"People are already talking about me, Lance. Didn't you see the way they're all looking at me?"

He leaned toward her, moving her obtrusive earring out of the way so he could have a clear shot at her ear. "Maybe if you wouldn't act like such an outcast, they wouldn't treat you like one," he hissed.

She closed her eyes. "Why does everything have to be a fight?"

"I'm not fighting with you," he maintained quietly. "Especially not in public."

"Then just leave me alone, okay? Please?"

"We have to sit together or - "

"People will talk, right?" she interrupted. "Well, you know what? I don't give a damn if they talk, Lance! I don't care! They're already talking, so why not just let them talk some more? They just wanna sit here and feel better about their own screwed up lives by talking about mine, and you know what? That's fine. That's fine with me! Might as well give them something to say, huh?"

Terri immediately felt her face redden after her outburst, then she let out a deep breath and smiled. Carol would have been proud of that, she was sure of it.

Lance, on the other hand, looked as though he might just go through the floor. "What did I tell you about a public spectacle?" he whispered angrily.

"Why do you care so much what people think? That's what I wanna know. Who gives a damn, Lance? If they talk, let them. If they know, good for them. I don't care. I just don't care anymore."

With that, she stood and began to walk out the door. Lance, acutely aware that everyone in the room was watching him, chased after her. "Baby, don't be upset! Come on! Talk to me!" he called, purely for their benefit.

She didn't stop until she was out of the building entirely, then turned around viciously to stare at him. "That – that was pathetic. That was just pathetic. Like you give a damn either, Lance. You don't care. You don't care about me and you don't care about how I feel. You just wanna make sure you don't lose a little face, and that's pathetic. That is pathetic!"

"No," he argued, gripping her arm fiercely. "You're what's pathetic!"

"Hey! Let her go!" Across the parking lot, Lucas appeared. He was sweaty, somewhat out of breath, but obviously on a mission. Head down, his eyes narrowed as he approached, but he said nothing.

Terri couldn't mask her surprise. "I - I didn't think you were coming."

"I had to see you," he explained. "I ran all the way here to see you, and then I find something like this."

Lance, hand still gripping his wife's arm, groaned. "Not you again! What did I tell you yesterday?"

The closer Lucas got, the more angry his eyes became. "And what'd I tell you yesterday, brother? You can't intimidate me, and you can't keep me from the woman I love."

"Oh, for God's sake!" Lance threw up his hands. "You just never learn, do you?"

Terri, caught silently in the middle, only watched as Lucas stepped toward Lance and gave him a mild shove backwards. "Put your hands on my girl again and you're gonna be -"

Before he could finish his sentence, Lance hauled off and sucker punched him. It appeared to be quite the punch, too. Lucas stumbled backwards into a parked car, holding his jaw, while Lance massaged his hand for a minute. "For the last damn time, stay away from me, and stay the hell away from my wife!" he demanded. "Do you understand me?"

"That...that wasn't smart," Lucas warned, as he regained his bearings. "That was not smart, brother."

"And just what the hell do you plan to do about it?" Lance challenged, taking a step forward.

Terri, knowing precisely what Lucas could do, positioned herself between them. "Lucas, no! No!"

He completely ignored her. "You just made the last mistake of your life, brother!"

"Lucas!" she yelled again, grabbing his shoulders and staring straight into his eyes. "No. Don't do this. He's not worth it. Let's just leave, okay?"

"Yeah, let's just leave," Lance repeated, grabbing her arm, with the intention of escorting her back to her car.

Violently, she jerked away, putting her full attention on Lucas again. "Listen to me. Don't do this. Don't do this, please. Let's go."

Again, he ignored her, pointing an angry finger at Lance. "You don't know who you're fucking with!"

Lance only rolled his eyes at that. Obviously, he didn't take him very seriously. Terri, turning back toward him, held up a hand. "Stop. Just let it go. We're leaving, okay?"

"Good." Lance took her arm again. "Let's go."

"She's leaving with me," Lucas informed, "so you better take your old ass home before you get hurt."

"You really need to stop threatening people," Lance replied coldly. "That could get you in a lot of trouble."

Lucas actually seemed amused by that. "Really? Well, you really need to stop starting fights you can't finish, because that one's gonna get you in a lot of trouble too, brother."

"Let's go, Lucas," Terri pleaded again, desperately. "Let's just go."

Lance took her arm again. "No! You're not leaving with him! If you leave with him, I swear you'll be sorry!"

Lucas completely lost it. Before Terri could even realized what was happening, he was right in Lance's face. He had a switchblade in his left hand, while his right gripped Lance's jacket. "If you don't wanna die, you'll shut the fuck up right now! Do you understand me?"

Lance's eyes widened, but he said nothing. Lucas grinned, giving Lance another mild shove backwards. "That's what I thought. Let's get out of here, baby."

With only an apologetic look back in Lance's direction, Terri began to follow him. "Terri!" he called after her. "If you leave with him, don't bother coming home! I mean it!"

Again, she stopped, feeling tears come to her eyes. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I'm so, so sorry."

July 7, 1966; 2:40 p.m.

"I don't know what happened. I don't know what came over me. It was just this... this...this *rage*." Shane Marcette briefly glanced up from his plate and sighed. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I really am sorry."

Across the table, Brett Woodward nodded. "I know you are. But really, you don't need to be apologizing to me."

"I know. And I plan on talking to Stan as soon as I see him again."

"Maybe give him a little space right now. This is a pretty tense day for everybody. I just saw..." Brett stopped himself right there. It didn't matter what he saw. It wasn't his business. Still, from the way that Lance stalked after her, he had to wonder if Terri was okay.

Quizzically, Shane stared back at him. He knew precisely what he was alluding to, but didn't know whether or not it would be his place to say anything about it. After a few moments of silent debate, Shane opted to shift the conversation back to his encounter with Jeff. "Tell me something. Honestly."

Brett looked up at him. "Tell you something honestly as Rev, or as your friend?"

"Both. But mainly, as my friend." Shane took a few deep breaths. "Was I wrong? Was that wrong? I mean..." He looked to Brett, and in an instant, he could read his mind. Shane buried his face in his hands. "I was, wasn't I?"

"Well..."

At about that time, Mr. and Mrs. Phelps, longtime parishioners, came by to say hello. Brett, grateful for the momentary distraction, greeted them warmly, but noticed they barely even acknowledged Shane sitting there.

After they were gone, Shane sighed once more. "And I think that tells me all that I needed to know."

Brett played dumb. "What does?"

"The fact they didn't even speak to me. They're not the only ones, either. Lots of people are pretty pissed at me right now."

"Well..." Again, Brett stalled.

"Just say it, Rev," Shane prodded. "I was an ass, wasn't I?"

"It wasn't something I'd do," Brett finally admitted, after what felt like five full minutes of hesitation. "But that's neither here nor there. You do a lot of things that I wouldn't do."

Knowingly, Shane nodded. "That's true."

"As for whether or not it's wrong, who am I to say that?" Brett shrugged. "Like I said, it's a pretty intense day for everybody. And..." He paused. He wasn't sure if he should say this. "And...you know."

"What?"

Brett rattled the ice in his tea glass around for a minute, as he deliberated the best way to voice it. "I don't know. I just think - no, I know this has gotten way too personal for you. We all know how close you were to Carol. And now, thanks to what you pulled this morning, we all know how much you hate Jeff. So..." He paused for a moment. "I really don't wanna say this. I hope you know what I'm getting at."

Shane did, but he still heard himself whisper, "Say it."

"I want you to know that I really am saying this out of concern for you - "

"Just say it," Shane repeated, his cheeks already beginning to burn.

"You're too close. You're way too close, and...I just don't think this is the best case for you to work on, with how personal you've made it." Brett looked up at him. "I'm sorry. I...I'm sorry."

Shane ran both hands over his face. There were a million things he wanted to say to that, things he knew better than to spout off to Mayor Pierce, but again, he decided to hold his tongue. It wasn't worth pissing off the last friend he seemed to have in town. Abruptly, he stood.

"It's fine. I just need to...breathe. Excuse me for a minute."

Shane didn't give Brett a chance to reply to that before darting out the door. He wasn't the first one to say that. He wasn't even the first one to say that today, a fact that only made Shane feel worse about all of it. They were right, damn it. This whole thing was way too personal...but Shane still couldn't let it go. He felt he owed this much to Carol, for all the times that he let her down.

"You're really gonna marry that guy? Really?" Shane couldn't hide the shock in his voice.

"Well," Carol teased, "you never made any moves, so what was I supposed to do?"

"Was I supposed to make a move?" Shane raised an eyebrow.

"You know how these things go. It's the classic romance. The girl meets the boy that she's determined she's going to marry one day. She falls madly in love with him, despite the fact he barely notices she's alive. He moves on, with a thousand other girlfriends, and breaks her heart. And then," she smiled, "then, fate brings them back together, they realize they were always meant to be together and they live happily ever after, the end. You know. That sort of thing."

Shane said nothing, only staring at her open-mouthed. Carol shrugged. "I watch a lot of movies, okay?"

"Did I break your heart?" He reached out to her. "My God, I had no idea. Wow."

"The older I got, the more I realized that," Carol admitted. "And I really should have known better. You know...it was silly. It was just silly. Would you like some more coffee?"

"I'm...I'm sorry. I had no idea." It was truly all he could think to say.

"I know," she assured softly. "I know you didn't."

The thing that upset Shane the most about that conversation? He really didn't know...but he wished he could have, because it wouldn't have been one-sided in the least. The older she became and the more she blossomed into a young woman, the more he began to take notice of the treasure right in front of him. However, he was careful to never act on such urges. After all, she was so much younger than he was. She was like a little sister to him, someone he'd known since she was still in high school, and someone he could honestly count as a best friend.

For every compelling reason Shane could come up with to "make a move," as she'd put it, he came up with five more not to. It just seemed all wrong. The age difference, the fact they were such great friends, the fact that he was so close to her parents – it just never would have worked. Thus, he convinced himself that he'd have better luck elsewhere and put it all out of his mind, suffering through failed relationship after failed relationship and trying to forget about Carol altogether.

But he couldn't. He just couldn't, which was never more painfully evident than back in May, when a night of heavy drinking proved to be disastrous.

"Marry me." Shane's words were slurred, but his eyes were achingly sincere. He shifted around in his barstool to face her, and reached out to take her hand. "Marry me. Tonight. We'll run off. Leave this town. Forget about all these people. You, me and the kids. We can make it work."

"What?" Carol seemed incredulous. She looked to the bartender, who only shrugged, then back to him. "I knew you were getting pretty drunk over there, but I didn't think you were that drunk! Damn, Shane. Are you crazy? I can't do that."

"Yes we can. We can leave right now and start over. Don't you wanna start over, doll? Don't you think we deserve a chance?"

"I think you need to go home and lie down," she dismissed, with a laugh.

"I'm serious," he insisted, emoting each word dramatically. "You yourself said you always wished that I would make a move. Well, I'm making a move. Right now. Marry me."

She knocked back her drink, then set the glass on the bar, with a loud thud. It was obviously the courage she needed to shatter his expectant heart in a million pieces.

"That was a joke! My God! This...this is crazy. I can't marry you! I'm already engaged to Jeff."

"You deserve better than him!"

Carol rolled her eyes, much as Shane thought she might. She always did when you caught her dead-to-rights on something. She'd roll her eyes or say something sarcastic, because she knew she couldn't argue with you about it. There was just nothing she could possibly say.

Nothing but, "That's not for you to say, is it?"

Again, he clumsily reached for her hand. "I love you. I have always loved you. I just - I just never knew how to tell you. I just...I love you."

She raised a hand to her face. "Oh my God. Shane, honey...you really need to go home and lie down. Sleep this whole thing off and I promise, I won't look so appealing by morning. I promise you that."

"I don't wanna lie down!" he yelled. "I wanna get the hell out of this stupid little town, and I want you to come with me!"

"And I want a million dollars and a night with Paul McCartney. It's not going to happen, Shane." She sighed. "It's not going to happen. I'm sorry."

Damn, he really needed to quit drinking in public. It seemed like every single time he did, he made a damn fool of himself. For weeks after that particular fiasco, Shane avoided Carol like the plague, humiliated that could spew out something like that, in front of so many people. She always insisted that he had nothing to be worried about; she knew it was merely drunken babble, she promised, and even said she was shocked that he remembered it the next morning.

Yeah. Drunken babble.

"Shane! Just the man I wanted to see!" Lance Englund stalked toward him with purpose. His eyes were burning with rage, and he was noticeably without Terri.

Shane extended a hand. "Lance. Good to see you."

Lance shook his hand vigorously, then drew in a quick breath. "We have to have a talk."

Shane squared his shoulders and immediately put all his remorseful thoughts out of his mind, forcing himself back into dutiful officer of the law mode, which he really should have been in all along. "What's the matter?"

"Lucas Brady is what's the matter," Lance sneered. "That bastard just pulled a fucking knife on me."

July 7, 1966; 5:10 p.m.

The first thing Jeff did after he came in the door was start packing. No way could he stay here. First and foremost, it wasn't even his house, and he was sure that Stan and Mona would come and forcibly throw him out soon enough – especially if they shared Shane's opinion that he was a murderer not even fit to attend his own fiancée's funeral. But the second, more underlying reason, lied in memories. There were so many memories in this house, bittersweet recollections of the happiest and shortest chapter of his life.

Without much thought, Jeff went through each room, claiming what was his, and even a few things that weren't, such as photos of the boys. And then, once everything was thrown into a bag, he collapsed onto the living room couch and wept. He just fell apart. It all felt so final, like this was the elusive closure everybody talked about. Away from the prying eyes of Haven Park, alone in this house for what was probably the final night, it all came bubbling to the surface. The pain, the guilt, the anger, the shame...they all came flooding out at once. Jeff had never experienced an emotional purging quite that powerful before, but then...he'd never experienced anything quite like this before either.

Losing Carol was the most crippling blow he'd ever been dealt. Granted, their relationship wasn't always ideal. And yes, he admitted that recently, he'd fallen under the spell of another woman...but he never imagined anything like this would ever happen. Jeff seemed more of the opinion that eventually, one of them would just give up and walk

out on the whole thing, even though he tried his best to keep everything together and make it work for the best, if only for the sake of those kids.

Those kids. They didn't have a mother now, and they probably wouldn't have a (step) father anymore either. Honestly, that hurt worse than knowing that his fiancée had just been lowered into the ground. His entire life, all Jeff had truly wanted was a family. Not that his birth family wasn't good enough, or not even that they were really lacking... he just longed for something of his own. A stable life, children he could be proud of, that would fare far better than he ever imagined, a chance to right all the wrongs of his past and contribute something positive to the future. When he met Carol, and more importantly, when he met her boys, he knew his day had finally come. Everything just felt...right. The transformation was startling to everyone, even to Jeff himself. Overnight, he went from a two-bit hustler, just trying to make a quick buck to a devoted family man, who would have gone to hell and back for those kids. He even made his plans known to adopt those kids, after he and Carol married later this year. They became his world – his family. Something that was finally his. And now, all of that was gone.

Gone in one second. One moment of time that Jeff wished to God he could take back. He wished he could go back to that night and to the months beforehand, and make better decisions. Resist the temptations. Guard his heart. Realize and fully appreciate that he finally had the life he'd always wanted. But instead, he decided to roll the dice, gambling every single thing he'd worked so hard to earn on a married woman. Jeff shook his head at his own stupidity. He should have known that it would come back to haunt him. They both knew full well that it was a mistake and even vowed early on that it would just be a one-time thing, never to be spoken of again...but they couldn't contain themselves. It sounded crazy. It sounded ridiculous...but they just couldn't contain themselves.

They couldn't contain themselves. They dug themselves deeper and deeper and deeper into disaster with every single kiss, every single touch, every single sideways glance. They knew it was wrong – more specifically, Jeff knew it was wrong, but he foolishly thought that Carol would never know. They were so careful to cover their tracks, after all...but somehow, Carol found out. She confronted him on it, and he adamantly denied such a thing. It came up again and again and again, and he denied it every single time. He told her she was crazy, that he loved her, that'd never do anything like that to her...but she knew. She knew the truth, and when she'd finally had enough of his lies and endless denials, she walked out...and never came home.

She didn't come home. The guilt over standing there and watching her leave the house they shared for the very last time was overwhelming. It was all his fault. She wouldn't have died if she hadn't gone out that night. She wouldn't have gone out that night if he hadn't been doing something so unspeakable. He held himself directly responsible for the circumstances that led up to her death – but that in no way made him a murderer, nor did it give Shane Marcette the right to accuse him of such.

Shane Marcette. Jeff's sorrow turned to unbridled rage at the very thought of him. In his day, Jeff had seen (and done) more than his fair share of pretty rotten, shitty things – but nothing could have possibly topped Shane's spectacle this morning. Attacking him like that, saying those horrible things in front of everyone, barring him from attending his fiancée's funeral – and why? To try and look cool for his little buddy the pastor? To try and act macho and on top of things in front of the mayor? It was senseless, to the point of

being insane. No matter what angle you looked at it from, it still didn't come close to being justified, and looking back on it, Jeff really never should have left. He had just as much right to be there as anyone else. Still, the humiliation proved to be just one thing too many, and he felt it best to just cut his losses and get the hell out of there before he really lost it. But, he realized far too late, by doing that, he probably on spurred Shane on even more, because now he really thought he'd won. Crazy son of a bitch. He hadn't won anything, but maybe a lawsuit before all was said and done.

With a new resolve, Jeff sat up. A lawsuit. That really wasn't such a bad idea. Filing a formal complaint, hiring a lawyer, contacting every single public official that might listen, from the police chief to the mayor to the governor to even the damn president if he had to. Sure, there was a lot of work involved in that, but the odds were, if Shane thought he could convincingly lead a witch hunt like this against Jeff, he'd do it all over again the next time a crime hit far too close to home. That was why, no matter the cost, he just couldn't win.

"Fuck you, Shane," Jeff whispered bitterly. "You're not getting away with this."

Chapter Nine:

July 9, 1966; 11:15 a.m.

"I – I don't think he's coming." Terri Englund checked her watch for what was probably the twentieth time, then slumped forward, to rest her head on her brother's desk.

Brett glanced up from the sermon he was piecing together to calmly remind, "He's coming. Marnie called him this morning to remind him, and he didn't say anything to her about canceling. He's probably just running late."

"I really don't think he's coming," Terri maintained, with a sigh. "And why should he? He hates me right now."

She didn't realize she'd said that last part out loud until Brett set his notes aside to reach a reassuring hand across the desk. "He doesn't hate you. He wouldn't have agreed to this at all if he hated you."

As much as she wanted to believe that, Terri knew the truth. The more time she had to consider her actions at Carol's wake, the more she grew to regret them...more specifically, she grew to regret the implications they had. When she left with Lucas, that was it. Her choice was made once and for all. She just could not imagine how difficult that must have been for Lance to digest. She really didn't want it to end this way...she wanted a more peaceful solution. One where they both looked at each other, shrugged and said, "Hey, we did our best," then moved on to whatever awaited them next.

Overwhelmed with shame, Terri's shoulders slumped. She did her best to pass it off, say it was mutual, say it was bound to happen – all the various excuses to used to placate herself...but this was her fault. Even if a peaceful solution had been possible prior to the embarrassing parking lot encounter, she really didn't work that hard to achieve it. She just threw up her hands and gave up on the whole thing. She went out of her way to openly defy him, to rub her affair with Lucas in his face, to generally make him miserable. She was wholly to blame for the amount of resentment he was bound to harbor for her...and that was the worst feeling in the world.

“I – I did some really terrible things,” she confessed quietly. “I know he’s bound to hate me.”

“Peaches, look at me.” When she didn’t reply right away, Brett reached out to gently lift her chin. “Look at me. No matter what terrible things you’ve done, that man loves you. He would never hate you. You’re just having a hard time right now, but you can get through it, I promise you that. Just calm down. Everything’s gonna be okay.”

Terri shook her head. She knew better. Even if Lance did show up, the damage was already done. She didn’t even want to do this anymore. There was just no point. “This was just a bad idea,” she whispered. “Even if he does come, it’s not going to do any good.” She raised a hand to her face, in the hopes her blush wouldn’t be visible. “I’m sorry, Brett. I wasted your time and everybody else’s on this foolishness. I – I should be going.”

She stood to leave, and he jumped up too. “Whoa there. Not so fast. You didn’t waste my time and you didn’t waste anyone else’s. This is the best option you have right now, you said so yourself. If you give up now, it’s just going to get worse. Nothing will ever get fixed if you leave right now.”

“It’s not going to get fixed if I stay either,” she argued half-heartedly.

“You don’t know that.”

She did. My God, she did, but how could she admit that? “I just know...” she began, obviously deliberating over each word.

Abruptly, the door to the pastor’s study flung open noisily and Lance stormed in. Initially, Terri was relieved that she didn’t have to elaborate any further, but her relief was short lived once she got a good look at her husband. This was the first time she’d seen him since Carol’s wake, and he looked terrible. He looked as though he hadn’t slept in a week, he moved slowly, with an irregular gait (which indicated to her that his knee was bothering him again) and his clothes weren’t even pressed. However, the most telling was his facial expression...and the fact he didn’t even look at her.

“Lance, hi. Thanks for coming in,” Brett greeted, as he extended a hand.

He showed no interest in a hand shake, only settling slowly into one of the chairs facing Brett’s desk. Terri wanted to ask him how his knee was, but she knew better. She’d probably get a caustic response, which would only humiliate her further. What she really needed to do was get out of here, before things got heated.

“We’re gonna have to make this fast, because I have somewhere I have to be in,” Lance consulted his watch, “less than an hour.” It was a lie. He had nowhere to go...nowhere but back to an empty house. Still, he figured it was best to get out of this as quickly as possible.

Terri only inched closer to the door. “I – I don’t know if this is such a good idea anymore. Maybe we should just forget about this...”

At once, Lance turned around to stare at her. His eyes were seething fire, and she felt her blush deepen. “This is what you wanted to do, so this is what we’re going to do,” he informed, in a surprisingly even voice.

“Have a seat, Peaches,” Brett suggested gently. “We’ll just give this a try, and if it’s not working for you, we’ll stop. How about that?”

Lance rolled his eyes. Ridiculous, this whole thing. She was the one that insisted they do this in the first place – she even threatened to walk out if he didn’t agree to it! And now she wanted to back out? Somehow, he wasn’t surprised at all. She held all the

damn cards here, and she knew it. She could play this for all the drama it was worth, and Brett would mindlessly go along with the whole thing, just like he always did. The guy's loyalties were clearly drawn. Lance had no idea why he was even here. He shouldn't have bothered. He should have just let her go, let all of this go, moved on from here...but he couldn't, damn it. He just couldn't.

As much as he wanted to – and as much as he willed himself to – he just couldn't give up on her that easily. She was the only woman he'd ever loved, the only one he probably would ever love. He couldn't imagine how empty his life would be without her, even though he was pretty much already experiencing it now. He hadn't had a wife for months, ever since she took up with that bum and he somehow coerced her to put a needle in her arm.

Terri, after a few moments of silent deliberation, appeared to reconsider, much as Lance knew she would. She nodded, then whispered, "Okay. We can try it."

She felt as though her legs were made of stone as she made her way toward the empty chair next to her husband. Lance offered no visible support, only shifting around in his chair to face Brett square on. "Okay, can we get started here?"

"Well, I thought we'd open with a prayer," Brett began.

Terri seemed all for that – she needed all the prayers she could get at this point – while Lance only snickered. He wanted to say something along the lines of, *Last rites is more like it*, but managed to hold his tongue. Still, the idea of praying for wisdom and a blessing over this meeting was ludicrous. Prayers wouldn't change a damn thing. Lance knew that one from experience.

"Okay," Brett resolved, after the prayer was over. "I want to start out by saying that I don't want you to think of me as your brother," he looked to Lance, "or brother in law right now. I really just want you to think of me as an objective third party, just trying to help you talk it out. In fact, just completely ignore me. How about that? It's a completely open forum, so say whatever you need to say to each other, and I'll just moderate. How's that?"

Lance sat in silence for a moment, before smiling. "Great. That's great. Can I go first?"

Terri froze. No! No, she couldn't let him go first! He was way too eager to go first, and she could only imagine what terrible things he wanted to say. Yeah, okay, so she deserved them...but not here. Not in public. Not a "huge public spectacle"!

Abruptly, she stopped herself. A huge public spectacle...just like the one she caused at the wake. Oh my God, no. It couldn't be. He wouldn't do that to her, would he?

"No," she managed to whisper. "No. I'd really prefer to go first."

Lance noticeably said nothing to her, instead directing his response to Brett. "I bet you've already heard quite enough out of her. Haven't you?"

"Objective third party," Brett reminded.

"In other words, 'don't drag me into this.'" Lance broke into a broad smile. "Sorry if this sounds rude, but it's a little late for that one, don't you think, Pastor?"

Terri stared over at him, her eyes wide with horror. "Lance, stop it. Please."

Furiously, he turned toward her. "I'll say whatever I damn well please. My days of keeping quiet to suit you are long gone."

She closed her eyes. "Turn it on me if you're mad at me. Don't turn it on Brett. It's not his fault, it's mine."

He laughed. "Oh, I know it's your fault, dear...but I don't think he does."

At once, Terri felt sick. Evidently, he would do that to her. He would stoop that low, probably in the name of ultimate revenge. She buried her face in her hands. My God, no. No, this could not be happening.

Terri valued nothing more in this world than Brett's opinion of her. He was the only family she had left, the only person she could really count on anymore...he would hate her if he knew what she'd been up to. He'd never have another thing to do with her! "Please, please no," she whispered, desperately.

"Why not?" Lance argued. "You trust him more than anyone else! You said so yourself!"

"Objective third party," Brett reminded again, a little louder this time. He didn't like the direction this was taking, not one bit.

"I heard you the first damn time!" Lance spat. "Even though, for the record, you're full of shit. Objective? How the hell is that possible when good old *Peaches* here has already filled your head with her side of the story?"

"Lance!" If such a thing was possible, Terri's blush grew even deeper. "Please, please don't!"

"What? It's true, isn't it? He already knows all about how terrible I am to you, the way I neglect you, the way I yell at you – you probably told him the same damn lie about me hitting you too, didn't you? Why not? You told everyone else!"

"Calm down," Brett advised. "Just calm down. There's no reason to get this upset."

Lance pointed an angry finger at him. "Who the fuck do you think you are telling me how to react to this? Fuck you! You're nothing but some crackpot who stands behind a pulpit and thinks that gives him the right to judge other people! You don't know a damn thing about my marriage, pal! Not one single thing, so don't get on your damn high horse and tell me I don't have a reason to be this upset! You don't know shit!"

Brett said nothing, only nervously tapping his fingers on the desk. "Are you done?" he finally asked.

"No! No, I'm not done!" Lance erupted. "I'm just getting started, buddy!"

"My God, Lance!" Terri looked over at him, with tears in her eyes. "Please."

"No, it's fine," Brett dismissed. "It's fine. Go ahead, Lance. Is it making you feel any better to yell at me? Because if it is, that's great. I'd rather you yell at me than her, anyway."

Lance didn't appear to have anything to say to that, thankfully. Terri couldn't believe this. How Brett could remain so calm, she had no idea, but it was a trait she envied desperately.

Sitting there, Brett didn't know how he could remain so calm either. He just felt this...overwhelming compassion for Lance. Obviously, there was a lot of conflict here, and obviously, the man was deeply hurt. He wouldn't be lashing out like this if he weren't. "Why don't you tell Terri how you feel?" he suggested quietly.

"Why don't you go to hell?" Lance snapped back. He ran both hands over his face. "She knows exactly how I feel – and she doesn't care! She doesn't care about anything but herself and..." He finished his sentence internally, and that punk and those drugs.

Lance shook his head sadly, as he glanced over at her. Oh, he wanted to say it. My God, it was so damn tempting. More than anything else, he wanted to show her exactly how it felt to have your whole world ripped away from you in one split second...but he

just couldn't do it. It just wasn't worth it. It wasn't going to change anything. It wouldn't even make him feel better.

For some crazy reason, unknown even to him, he couldn't bring himself to hurt her. By rights, he should have been going for the throat here, but he only sat in silence and watched as she began to cry. Whether they were genuine tears or just a sympathy ploy, he wasn't sure...but they made him feel terrible. Obviously, she was expecting the shit to hit the fan right about now. He closed his eyes. He'd probably regret this one day, but he just couldn't do it, no matter how satisfying it might've been. He just couldn't do that to her.

Without a word, he stood and began to walk toward the door. Terri turned around in her chair to watch him, while Brett sat there, seemingly stunned. Quickly, though, he was right behind him. "Hey, don't leave right now. Come on. We might just be getting somewhere. Don't leave yet."

Lance didn't say anything, and he didn't turn around, leaving Brett to continue his appeal from behind him. "Lance? Come on. Think about this. If you walk out right now, it's like giving up. Do you want to do that?"

More than anything, Lance wanted to turn around and just deck that guy. He'd been nothing but a thorn in his side for years, and it would have been completely justified. Still, he managed to refrain, only walking out of the room and slamming the door behind himself.

The second he was gone, Terri completely broke down, both out of relief and utter shame. If she didn't feel like a fool before, she certainly did now. He had his chance – the chance to get even in the cruelest of ways...and he didn't take it. If that didn't convince her once and for all that he truly loved her, nothing would.

Brett didn't say anything for a moment, before kneeling in front of her. "I'm so sorry it didn't work out. Maybe...maybe we can try this again another time?"

Terri, oblivious to the fact he was even there, only buried her face in her hands. Lance's unexpected kindness and compassion for her, even after everything that went on between them, hurt quite possibly worse than any revenge tactic he could've tried. "He held back," she whispered. "He held back because he loves me...my God, what have I done?"

July 9, 1966; 11:50 a.m.

"You wanted to see me?" Shane Marcette walked into the Police Chief Frazier's office confidently, but his confidence soon turned to dread when he found Mayor Pierce seated in one of the chairs.

"Yeah, come on in." Elton Frazier was an powerful man, and he lacked any of the kind, fatherly qualities that Stan exhibited in the same position. His eyes were cold, his demeanor stern. When he talked, you couldn't help but listen, because he yelled most everything he said. He was overbearing and crass, but for the most part, he was pretty fair. Shane did have to give that much to him.

"Shane, good to see you." Mayor Pierce stood and extended a hand. "Come in, have a seat."

"What's this about?" Shane asked, his eyes traveling back and forth between both men. "Is there a problem?"

“Yeah, actually, there is.” Never one to skirt around an issue, Elton Frazier didn’t even wait for Shane to sit down before announcing, “People are complaining about you, Shane. Nobody really likes your attitude, and honestly, I don’t either.”

Shane sunk down into the chair. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Couple of nights ago, you went to a bar, correct?”

“What does that have to do with any – ”

Before Shane could finish, Police Chief Frazier interrupted, “You made a drunken jackass of yourself, brought down the whole police force with the way you acted and publicly accused Jeff Howard of something you have yet to prove he actually did!”

“Whoa, wait. Just wait.” Shane’s eyes traveled from Police Chief Frazier to Mayor Pierce, then back again. “Who the hell told you this?”

“It doesn’t matter who made the complaint,” Mayor Pierce informed. “What matters is whether or not it’s true. Is it true, Shane? Because, really...I would think someone in your position would have better sense than to do something like that.” He thought for a moment. “But then...we do remember what happened at poor Carol’s funeral.”

Elton Frazier took that one and ran with it. “I have never been more embarrassed than I was that day! You didn’t just make yourself look like a jackass, you made the entire force look like a jackass when you did that! What the holy hell were you thinking?”

“That...” Shane leaned forward and rested his face in his hands briefly. “That was a momentary lapse in judgment. One of those heat of the moment things. I apologize.”

The police chief was far from done. “You proved something to me that day. You proved that you’re not a detective. You’re nothing but a hot headed punk, who isn’t worthy of this case! And I think – ”

“Now Elton, settle down,” Mayor Pierce interrupted. “Let’s not go crazy here. Shane, we all know that you’re one damn fine cop. You’re one of the best we’ve got, you give it all you got and you don’t quit, and that’s what this city needs. But sometimes, that doesn’t work out so well, like what happened at the funeral.”

Shane began to say something, but the mayor held up a hand. “We already talked about this, you already know how I feel about this, and the final decision isn’t even up to me. But I want you to know right now that I understand how you feel. I know where you’re coming from, but that does not make it right, son. Do you understand? It doesn’t make it right.”

Mayor Pierce had this wonderful way of making a person feel all of five years old. Shane almost expected him to reach out and pat him on the head, then offer up a lollypop from his pocket. However, it was a nice contrast from the pit bull Frazier had become all of the sudden. So much for fair.

“What have you got on Jeff Howard?” he demanded. “For that matter, what have you got on anything? Have you made any kind of progress at all?”

“Well...” Shane hated to admit it. All he had was one witness that saw Jeff return home late at night, and a strong, strong suspicion.

Elton Frazier nodded. “That’s what I thought. You haven’t done anything but sit on your ass and wage a personal vendetta against Jeff Howard, ignoring the fact there’s a goddamned murderer on the loose in this city and it’s your job to find him!” He leapt out of his chair, enraged. “My office got a fucking call from a lawyer this morning about you! Jeff Howard is threatening to sue the whole damn city over you! With all due

respect, Clay, that is not what I think one damn fine cop should be! That's an overzealous, hotheaded, pain in the ass little punk! You're an embarrassment to the badge, you have no idea what the hell you're doing, and you're off the damn case, as of right now!"

Chapter Ten:

July 9, 1966; 11:55 a.m.

It seemed like time stopped at that moment. All Shane could really do was sit there and stare at Frazier, his heart racing. "You can't be serious," he managed quietly.

Elton Frazier glared down at him, practically daring him to argue about it. "You and I both know that you probably never should have been involved in this in the first place," he growled. "It's far too personal. We all know that now."

Too personal. Shane was beginning to loathe that phrase. "Okay," he conceded, after a lengthy stare down with Frazier. "Alright, so it is a little personal. Carol was my friend. I cared about her. I especially care about putting the son of a bitch who killed her away. How is this a bad thing? I just don't see how this is a bad thing. I messed up, I did some stupid things – I admit that. But if nothing else, that should just show you how dedicated I am to this case! Hell yeah, it's personal, but doesn't that make me the best person for the job, because of the ties I have to her?" Desperately, he glanced from Frazier to Mayor Pierce, then back again. It was a long shot, but he just couldn't let this go. He owed Carol this much. He owed Haven Park as a whole this much. "I mean," he ventured, "doesn't that make the most sense in this situation?"

"Marcette!" Frazier began, but Mayor Pierce held up a hand to stop him.

"In theory, yes, that would make the most sense," he admitted slowly. "But Shane, you really can't expect anyone to believe that, can you? You've made this into more of a witch hunt than anything. The way you're going about all of it is questionable at best. I think we can all agree on that. Your actions are embarrassing – not just to yourself, but to the force and to this whole city."

Shane began to interrupt, but again, the mayor held up a hand. "Just listen for a minute, son. Listen. You know me. I'm a man who demands answers. Don't give me rhetoric, don't give me excuses, just give me answers. And so far, you haven't provided any answers at all. Just questions – mainly about your own sanity. This is taking a toll on you, son. We can all see that."

"Clay, you were far more diplomatic than I would be," Frazier complimented. "I'd just say he's acting like a dumbass who's never worked a case before in his life!"

"I think your best option right now is just back away," the mayor advised, with a weak, placating smile, the sort you would give a wayward, crying child who's been caught in his mischief. "Let someone else take over, leave the innocent alone –"

"Jeff is not innocent!" Shane declared adamantly.

"As far as I'm concerned, he is – until someone can prove otherwise." Mayor Pierce had yet to really even raise his voice, but Shane could tell that his patience was running thin. "Leave him alone. Stay away from him. Do you understand? It's best for everyone involved if you just leave him alone."

Shane stood. "So that's it? He kicks up some sand, he comes up with some shit about a lawyer – and by the way, the Jeff Howard I know couldn't afford a damn lawyer, anyway – and then you get nervous and take me off the case? My God, don't you see? Don't you understand? He's grasping at straws here! He's desperate! He knows that I know! Can't you see that?"

Elton Frazier was silent for what seemed like an eternity. He just stood there, eyeing Shane up and down. "You got balls. You know that?" he finally asked.

Whether or not that was a compliment, especially coming from Frazier, Shane wasn't sure. Mayor Pierce was quick to clarify the intent, as he stood. "Leave it alone, Detective Marcette. That is not a request, that is an order."

"And get the hell out of my office!" Frazier added, for good measure.

Shane didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but he did know that there was nothing left to say. This was not a battle he was gonna win. "Yes sir," he mumbled. "Whatever you say."

July 9, 1966; 3:25 p.m.

"So how did the counseling go this morning?"

All it took was one look over at Brett for Julia to realize she never should have asked. He shoved his still-incomplete sermon aside, leaned back in the chair and ran both hands over his face. "It was a mess," he whispered.

Beside him, Julia did her best to sound sympathetic, though she'd figured as much. She reached out a comforting hand and rested it on his knee. "I'm sorry."

"It might've lasted ten minutes, all told," he noted sadly. "And at least five of those were Lance yelling at me."

Somehow, that one didn't surprise her much either. It was sad. Julia had to admit that her opinion of her sister-in-law was far from favorable, but at least she made the effort to be subtle about it. When it counted, she knew how to make nice and put pettiness aside for the sake of unity. Lance was completely incapable of such a thing.

His resentment was open, his hostility bold. He badmouthed Brett to anyone who would listen. He had a sarcastic, snide comeback for almost everything Brett said. He referred to him as "crazy" and "a liar," though he certainly was not and he'd never lied to Lance about anything that Julia was aware of. And, the ultimate, Lance decided to abruptly boycott the church and resign as head deacon when Brett took over. It wasn't so much the action itself...it was the very public way in which it was carried out. Lance went to the deacons to protest Brett's new position and made many of the same hateful, unfounded allegations he made to everyone else. It was incredibly embarrassing, and damaging to Brett's reputation at the time. And there was absolutely no reason for Lance to have done such a thing...aside from some petty resentment that he himself probably could not explain.

"I'm always amazed at how a man his age can act that immaturely," she mused, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, honey. I know that's probably the last thing you needed today."

Brett sighed. "Sad to say, I've gotten pretty used to getting yelled at when Lance is around. But you know what bothered me the most? The way he just stormed out of here."

He wasn't even here fifteen minutes. It's like he doesn't even want to try. And you should have seen Terri after that, Jules. She was just a wreck. It was horrible."

Julia began to dig through his disorganized desk drawer for a distraction. This could go on a while.

"She thinks this whole thing is her fault," he explained. "I feel terrible for her."

She retrieved an emery board she'd stashed in his drawer months ago and waited for him to elaborate further, nodding sympathetically.

"I just don't know, Jules. I mean...I wanna help, but sometimes, I just don't know what I could really do. I don't know if this sort of thing could even really make a difference at this point, you know what I mean?"

"Well," she resolved quietly, "the most you can really do is try to bring them together. The rest is up to them."

He reached out to gently brush some hair behind her ear. "I know. It's just hard to see them going through that. They don't have what we have. You know?"

Julia looked up at him in that moment, then quickly looked away. "I know. I know."

"I don't know what's going on," he continued. "It's one of those things I'm not really sure that I wanna know. But..." His fingers still loosely lingered in her hair as he spoke. "There's a lot wrong, baby...and I just don't know if it can be fixed. And that is probably the thing that bothers me the most about this whole thing. I just get this feeling that it might be too late and I would hate to see that happen. You know? I really don't wanna see that happen. Not to her."

She noticed how he completely left Lance out of the equation, but said nothing of it. "I know. None of us do."

"And of course, Terri thinks all of this is her fault. You know how she is. She sat here and cried for an hour. And that's hard. That is really hard to hear. She keeps saying this stuff about how she's done all these terrible things and how he'll never forgive her and all this other nonsense. And Jules..." He shook his head. "Listening to that is probably one of the hardest things in the world to do. I don't wanna hear that from anybody, but I really don't wanna hear it from her. You know? I hate that this is hurting her so much, and I just get the feeling that --"

Abruptly, the phone on his desk rang. Julia, grateful for the momentary distraction, looked over at him. "Should I get that?"

"I got it." With a sigh, he reached toward the phone. "First Baptist. This is Brett."

The caller was Mrs. Blackthorne, in a flux over her only son's impending deployment to Vietnam. She was very upset about it, and Brett dutifully talked and prayed with her for almost half an hour, while Julia searched his Bible for scriptures she thought might be of help to Mrs. Blackthorne in this difficult situation and silently prayed for the best.

This - this was what it was all about. This was the very definition of a true crisis. She couldn't imagine the fear, anxiety and agony that family had to be going through right now. In comparison, Terri's constant woes (that she largely brought on herself) seemed meaningless and trivial - yet they ended up with the lion's share of Brett's attention. Once again, Julia just didn't understand it. She was a grown woman, for God's sake! It was time to let her make her mistakes, realize that she wasn't always right, innocent or victimized, and tell her that she needed to work certain things out for herself, instead of involving him at every turn.

Julia sighed. It would probably never happen, and she knew that...but it was still nice to fantasize about.

After he got off the phone, Brett looked even more shaken up than before, but he said very little. Bible still open to the 91st Psalm, he went back to writing his sermon. Under the guise of filing her nails, Julia studied him. Over the years, she'd gotten quite good at detecting when the stress of things was becoming unbearable...and right now was one of those times. She watched him read the passage, write a couple of sentences, cross them out, then repeat the entire process again with another randomly picked psalm before looking up at her. "Remind me again why I always wait till the last minute to do this."

"Well," she began, as she peered over his slumped shoulders to read what he had so far, "you've always said that you hate to sound rehearsed..."

"Sometimes..." He paused for a moment, then shook his head. "I don't know. Sometimes I just run out of things to say."

Her voice was gentle. "That can happen sometimes, but for what it's worth, I really like this so far."

"I didn't actually mean the sermon..." Brett stood and began to pace his small study. "I don't know, Jules. I'm supposed to have the answers, you know? People look to me to have answers and I wanna help them. My God, I do. But there's just some things I don't have an answer for. I don't know what to say, and I know that's letting people down and..." He came to a stop right in front of her and sighed, his frustration evident. "Baby, sometimes I just wonder what I'm doing here and if this is really where I need to be. Obviously, I'm not doing much good."

"You are!" Julia argued immediately. She jumped out of her chair and threw both arms around him. "Don't ever doubt that! Do you hear me? You are just where you need to be, and you are doing the absolute best that you can! You can't be expected to have all the answers all the time. Sometimes, there just aren't any. But I think that people like Mrs. Blackthorne appreciate very fact that you try. That you're there to listen, to talk with them and pray with them. I think that's what really matters here, Brett, and Mrs. Blackthorne knows that."

He pulled out of the embrace and took to pacing again. "And Terri?"

Julia caught herself about to say something along the lines of, *What about her? She doesn't appreciate anything you do for her, and she probably never will.* She switched her gaze down to the floor. "You're doing the very best you can in that situation too."

"It's just not enough," he sighed. "I don't know, Jules..."

"Brett, I'm going to say something that you probably don't want to hear – "

"If it's about Terri, then I probably don't want to hear it, you're right."

She squared her shoulders. "But you need to. Neither one of us know what's going on. This has probably been going on for a very long time, and I'm sorry, Brett, but honestly. One counseling session that only lasts for a few minutes is probably not going to make it all better. I'm sorry. I don't want to have to put it to you like this, but even you have limitations, and they need to realize that. You can't be expected to magically repair something they've taken years to break down to this point. It's something they have to figure out for themselves. I know you want to help them, but you can't do anything to radically change this, honey. The most you can really do is just be there to support them and try to guide them, the best way you can. The rest is up to them."

Julia took in a quick breath after saying that. It felt liberating to finally give voice to what had been raging through her mind all week, but as she watched her husband pace toward the door, his back to her, she wondered if she should have been so bold. She thought to backpedal, but he turned to face her before she could come up with anything remotely sincere to say.

"I'm all she's got, Jules," he whispered. "I'm it. It doesn't even seem like she's got him anymore, and I can't let her down. You know? I just can't do that to her right now. I know that this isn't something that I can fix, but I'm still gonna try. I have to try. I can't just stand there and let this happen to her. I can't – "

Before he could finish his sentence, the phone rang again. Julia sighed as she watched him walk back toward it. Obviously, he was very upset; she could tell by his eyes. However, in true Brett fashion, he said nothing of it, which only left her feeling even worse. He had such a gentle nature, and would never dream of arguing with her about it...but the disappointment and hurt that she would say such a thing were written all over his face.

She leaned across the desk to take his arm, just as he reached for the phone. "I'm sorry," she apologized quietly. "I was out of line in saying that. I'm sorry, honey."

"It's okay," he affirmed quietly, as he picked up the receiver. "First Baptist. This is Brett."

July 9, 1966; 4:50 p.m.

Her belongings gathered, Marnie was just about to let Brett and Julia know she was leaving for the day when someone knocked on the door of the church office. Startled, she took a step back. They really weren't expecting anyone else today.

She peered out the window, and her breath caught once she caught a glance at Jeff. He stood there rugged, unshaven and weary, his hands in his pockets. She rushed to open the door. "Jeff! Oh my word, what's happened to you?"

He looked from the threshold, as a slow smile crept onto his face. "It's my hippie look. You like it?"

"It's...different," she managed quietly, holding the door open. "Come in. I was just about to leave for the day, but..."

"Oh, I won't keep you then. I just came because..." He allowed his voice to trail off. There was really no way to dance around this. The best way was just to say it outright. Still, that was proving almost impossible. As much as he'd rehearsed the words on the way over here, they stubbornly stuck in his throat, as his more rational mind begged him to reconsider.

Marnie looked incredibly concerned, as she reached out to him. "Are you okay? You don't look very well."

Jeff's first instinct was to smile, lie and tell her everything was fine. Say something inane like he just came by to say hi, that he'd be on his way now and then make the hastiest escape possible. "Uh...well..." he stalled, then sighed. "My God, I hate saying this."

"Hate saying what?" she asked, as she gently guided him to a chair. "What's wrong?"

He closed his eyes, taking in several quick breaths, before looking up at her. "I have a favor to ask of you..."

She sank down in her chair. "What do you need?"

"Okay..." he began quietly. Immediately, though, he held up both hands. "I don't want you to get upset or anything..."

"Why would I get upset?" she asked, sounding very upset indeed.

"I moved out of Carol's house," he admitted quietly.

For a moment, Marnie stared across the desk at him, processing that information.

"Why?" she finally asked, in a throaty whisper. "They didn't...make you leave, did they?"

He shook his head. "No. No. Nothing like that. I left on my own. I just...I couldn't stay there anymore. Not after everything that's happened. It just doesn't..." He sighed. "I just couldn't do it."

By the looks of him, Marnie already knew the answer to her next question, but she still asked it anyway, her heart sinking. "And where are you staying now?"

He forced a laugh. "Uh, well...I'm kind of between places right now," he drawled. "I'm kinda just...staying in the car and..."

"Jeff!" She put a hand over her mouth. "Oh my goodness!"

"Hey, hey, I told you not to get upset," he advised, reaching out to her. "It's okay. It's just for now, anyway. Until I can find a job."

"How are you managing? Are you eating? Are you..."

"Well..." *Okay, here we go*, Jeff thought, taking a deep breath. "Not really. That's what I sort of came to talk to you about. Is there any way that I could maybe borrow some money from you, just until I can get things straightened out?"

He didn't give her a chance to answer, before launching into what he hoped would be a justification. He really didn't want her to think that everything Shane Marcette (among others) said about him was true, though he was certain she would not. Still, he could not stand for her of all people to believe he was a user, a con artist or that he enjoyed having to ask for charity. This was the absolute last thing he'd wanted to do, but really, there just wasn't any other option right now. She seemed to be the only person he could really turn to anymore.

"I hate to ask you," he insisted. "I really do. I wouldn't any other time, and I hope you know that and I'm sorry. I really am."

She hesitated, frowning. "I wish I could help you. I really do. I just can't right now. I'm so sorry." Marnie hated every word that came out of her mouth. Her heart was breaking for Jeff, but she knew there was no way she could slip him a loan without Evan finding out and having a fit. He was incredibly cautious with money, and the idea of her even spending a dime more than he'd allocated for her sent him into a tailspin. "I would. I really would," she swore, her eyes genuinely emoting each word. "But I can't. Evan..."

Jeff nodded. "Say no more. I understand."

"I'm so sorry," she apologized again. "I just...I wish there were something I could do."

Though he couldn't remember the last time he'd been this disappointed, Jeff tried his best not to show it. "It's okay. It's fine. Just thought I'd ask."

Marnie thought for a moment. She hated just leaving it like this. Jeff was one of her very favorite people, and the idea of him sleeping in his car was just unbearable. No one should have to endure that, especially not someone that was already grieving to begin with. "Maybe you could talk to Brett," she suggested. "I'm sure he could help you."

In an instant, Jeff grew noticeably uncomfortable. "I – no. I don't think that's a very good idea."

"Why not?" Marnie pressed. "It wouldn't hurt to ask, and that's what the church is for, really..."

"No," he said again. "I just...I don't think so. I mean...I'm not a...I don't even go to church. I haven't been to church since I was like seven years old and -"

"It doesn't matter," she promised. "He's in there right now. Let me just call him and..."

Before she could finish her sentence, and as if on some kind of divine cue, the door to the pastor's study opened and Julia, followed distantly by Brett, emerged. "Hey Marn, we're about to leave, so you can –" She froze, the shock evident in her eyes, but she did her best to play it cool. "Hello Jeff."

"Hey Jeff," Brett repeated, from behind her. "Wow, you're looking pretty rough. Is everything okay?"

Marnie looked to Jeff in that moment, silently urging him to speak up. He remained still, eyes locked strangely on Julia. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine, Pastor," he finally said. "Everything's fine. I...I was just leaving."

He stood, as did Marnie. "Jeff," she reminded, "I thought you wanted to talk with the pastor about something?"

He felt his face redden. No way. No matter how badly he needed the help, he just couldn't do it. It was awkward enough being in the same room with him, let alone begging for a handout. "I...it's okay, Marn. It's no big deal. I...I'll call you, okay?"

Brett stepped forward. "What's on your mind, Jeff? I've got a minute. Come on in."

Jeff felt as though the walls were closing in. He shook his head adamantly. "No. That's fine. It's really no big deal. Thank you, though. Really."

Without another word, and only a fleeting glance back in Julia's direction, Jeff hurriedly saw himself out. Marnie stared at the door for a moment, then sighed. That man was so stubborn sometimes.

"What was that about?" Brett asked, from behind her.

"Oh, well, it's a long story..." Marnie begged off, as she gathered her things once more.

Brett cleared his throat. "Jules, I was talking to you. What was that about?"

Interlude: Fireworks (part one)

July 4, 1966; 12:15 p.m.

It was mere coincidence that brought Marnie to Hazel's today. She was looking to try something different, and just get out of the office for a little while. The last thing she expected, or wanted, to see was Carol Mathison glaring daggers at her, from the moment she walked in. The hateful shrew appeared to be alone, and Marnie's entrance into the dining area immediately captured her full attention.

Carol's eyes burned, the contempt written all over her face, as she watched Marnie walk past. Even the most casual of observers could tell by just glancing over at her that she was dying to say something, but for once, Carol managed to keep her mouth shut.

However, she did move to the other side of the booth, taking what Marnie surmised must've been Terri's vacated seat, to watch her more intently as she awaited service.

Though it was somewhat of a tall order, Marnie silently (and repeatedly) stressed the importance of just ignoring her rabid audience. For a few minutes, she actually succeeded, deliberating over the menu, graciously greeting her waitress (a new member of the church) and trying her best to clear her mind. That moment was short lived, however, as she looked up to find Carol once again glowering at her. Marnie felt a deep blush come over her, and all of her inner resolve to just ignore it went right out the window. Before she could even take a moment to think about what she was doing, she'd marched over to Carol's booth, intent on pleading Jeff's case.

Carol attempted a smile, though her eyes were far from sincere. "Well, well, Margaret. What a surprise to see you."

"I want to talk to you," Marnie began quietly. She was determined to be as classy and dignified about this as possible, despite the fact that everything within her wanted nothing more than to reach out and slap that smug, satisfied grin right off Carol's ugly face.

Carol's eyes widened, in a ridiculous display of overblown surprise. "This is quite a come down for you. Dining with the common folk and all..."

Marnie invited herself to have a seat on the other side of the booth, clearing her throat. "I want to talk to you about Jeff."

"Really now? And why am I not surprised?" Carol's smile faded, and her true colors came out in an instant. She held up a freshly manicured hand. "Listen, Barbie. Before you go any further, I should probably tell you that I'm already onto you, okay? I know exactly what you're up to, and I have from day one." Carol observed the way Marnie reacted to that, then snorted her disgust. "Don't act so surprised, sweetheart! You didn't think you were actually being subtle about it, did you?"

"I will have you know..." Marnie began, before taking a look around, squaring her shoulders and consciously lowering her voice. She could not fall for this. She could not lose her cool. "You don't know the first thing about me, nor could you possibly know what I'm up to," she continued, voice barely above a whisper. "You would be well advised to keep the snap judgments to yourself."

"You're not fooling me or anybody else with this innocent routine, you know. I know way more about you than you think I do," Carol reminded coldly, as she took a sip of her coffee. "In fact, I already know everything you're going to say. You're going to intrude on my lunch to tell me that you've spoken to Jeff and he's *so* upset, and I'm *so* cruel, and I have *got* to start treating him better!"

Carol seemed oblivious to the fact that she could be heard across the diner, and unfortunately for Marnie, she was far from done. "Oh, yes, I've got to start treating him right, cooking for him, worshipping the very ground that he walks on, every minute of every day! Or else, he might walk out on me! He might leave me for...oh, I don't know...maybe you, Margaret! Oh, wouldn't that just be a shame?"

Marnie's eyes narrowed. "Just what do you think you're implying?" she hissed, her hands beginning to shake with rage.

"I'm not implying anything, sweetie," Carol assured calmly. "Just stating the facts." She paused, breaking into a triumphant smile. "I told you I was onto you! But really - *really*, Margaret. Do you honestly believe that? Do you really believe that he would walk

out on me and my kids – kids that he adores, by the way – for you?" She studied Marnie's expression for a moment before shaking her head sadly. "Oh my. Oh my, my. You really do, don't you?"

Marnie's blush returned with a vengeance, as her mind raced in a million different directions. She had no idea where to even begin to refute that, or if doing so was even worth it. Still, she heard herself dramatically maintain, "This has nothing to do with Jeff leaving you for me or anyone else!"

Again, Carol shook her head. "What a stupid little girl you are! Don't you realize that you're the very last thing on his mind? He's using you, dear - much like he's using me, and much like he's already used up and spit out pretty much everyone who ever gave a damn in this town. Men don't change, Margaret. Especially not that one." For one brief, incredibly fleeting moment, Carol almost felt compelled to reach across the table and comfort the poor girl. She looked so...hurt. So humiliated. Obviously, she had bought into Jeff's lies - and the sad thing was, she wasn't the only one.

For what felt like an eternity, Marnie remained silent. She could feel the tears beginning to sting her eyes, and she wanted no part of them. No way could she ever give this vile, hateful witch the satisfaction. "I have my hands full with my own husband, thank you! There's no reason for me to have any interest in yours!"

Carol raised an eyebrow. "Margaret. Don't bullshit me, honey. You and I both know that Jeff's a charmer. He brings you lunch - lunch he bought with my money, I might add! He tells you his problems. He tells you what a bitch I am, how much of a raging drunk I am, how much he wants to leave me...but he never will. Are you listening to me? I want to make sure you understand this. He never will! He's leading you on!"

With nary a parting shot, Marnie rose to leave, unable to bear one more unfounded allegation. She could hear Carol's laughter from behind her, and it only spurred her to walk even more quickly back to her seat. What a disaster.

Carol, likely grabbing one last chance to make a fool of herself, cleared her throat loudly and announced, "He's sleeping with Julia."

As much as she knew better, as much as she tried to convince herself not to fall for it, Marnie still whirled back around automatically. "What did you just say?"

"I said, he is sleeping with Julia." Coolly, Carol raised her coffee cup to her lips. "I take it he didn't tell you about that."

Marnie marched back over to the table, an irate finger pointed in Carol's direction. "Alright, you wanted a reaction? Well, you've got one! That is absurd! That is utter nonsense! *Julia*? What in the world are you talking about? Julia would never dream of doing something like that!"

Carol laughed in her face. "You've got shredded wheat between your ears, don't you? You just believe everything everyone tells you. Well, people do lie, Margaret, and you better wise up. You're getting played like a fiddle by both of those fools, and it's high time someone had the balls to tell you so." She paused, eyeing her up and down. "And you have the balls to put a stop to it. I'm only trying to warn you. Call it...friendly concern."

"We are not friends!" Marnie informed, through gritted teeth. "I'm not listening to any more of your nonsense, but for the record, no one is playing me! I know Jeff, just like I know Julia, and neither one of them would ever do such a thing. Julia is - "

"A cheap whore." Carol finished her sentence matter-of-factly. "She's nothing but a cheap whore. And I doubt you know her as well as you think you do, or you would've known that by now."

As a tear burned its way down her cheek, Marnie reached up to furiously wipe it away. No. No! She could not do this. She could not sink down to this woman's level, and she could not say something she might eventually regret. "I am not having this conversation with you!"

Carol shrugged. "Hey, you're the one that brought it up, cupcake."

Marnie, summoning what was left of her dignity after this embarrassing and very public encounter, turned and walked back to her table. Acutely aware that she had the attention of the entire diner, Marnie raised the menu to her face. She had to calm down. It was silly to be this upset over something that Carol Mathison (of all people) had to say, but she still couldn't believe she'd dare spew such hateful, unfounded things. Jeff was a good man, and despite all of his various faults and shortcomings, he loved that woman. He would never dream of cheating on her, especially not with Julia!

Julia was a very close friend; one of Marnie's absolute closest. Over the years, they'd shared a great many secrets, and there were plenty of things that Marnie had been privy to, and vice versa. They felt as though they could tell each other anything, and nothing was taboo. And never before (not even one time) had the subject of Jeff Howard even come up! Never! When it came to relationships and romance and feelings and yes, even sex, the only man that Julia ever talked about (ever!) was her husband. She was endlessly devoted to Brett. Only a fool would ever say anything to the contrary, or dare to call her integrity into question!

Marnie shook her head, as though doing so could shake off Carol's disgusting allegations. No doubt, this was just another one of her desperate bids for attention...and Jeff was going to hear about it.

July 4, 1966; 1 p.m.

"So guess who I ran into last night?" Shane had a wicked smile on his face as he leaned back in his chair. "You should get a kick out of this."

Brett hardly seemed interested, instead scanning the latest electricity bill in his hand. "Who?"

"Peggy."

At once, Brett could see why Shane was so amused. "Good old Peggy, huh? She finally found you."

"Well, it was more like I didn't manage to get away this time. She saw me walk in and she just...converged, in the blink of an eye." Shane used his hands to demonstrate. "She didn't even have the decency to yell my name or something to warn me. I looked up and there she was, right in my face, just like always."

"You speak of her with such love," Brett teased. "Is it any wonder you two didn't work out?"

Shane ignored him. "And you know how much she talks. She just talked and talked and talked about herself and how she's still single and I was inching closer to the door the whole time. She wanted me to have a drink with her. I think she probably wanted more than that, actually..."

Brett picked back up the light bill and pretended to give it his full attention, all the while carefully gauging Shane for a reaction. "What a shame that she's still single."

"Well, it doesn't surprise me!" Shane laughed.

Brett looked up at him. "Oh, come on. She's a nice girl. Just a little...strange. And possessive."

"And jealous and controlling and dramatic and immature..." Shane continued to rattle off her less-than-positive attributes.

Brett held up a hand. "Point taken. But you know...still a nice girl, all in all."

Shane pointed across the desk at him. "You're starting to sound like Julia!"

Though acutely aware that he was, Brett shook his head emphatically. "No I'm not! I'm just saying...she's a nice enough girl."

"Oh, I know what you're saying," Shane shot back, laughing. "You're saying, 'Marry her, because she might be your last chance.'"

"I would never tell you that," Brett swore.

"You're right; you'd only think it."

Before Brett could argue that, the phone on his desk rang. "That's probably Peggy calling now. 'Is Shane there? Is Shane there now? What about now?'"

Shane leaned forward to bury his face in his hands, as Brett mocked Peggy's unfortunate and irritating compulsion to keep tabs on his every movement. "Please God, don't even joke about that. That was horrible!"

"Such is love." Brett picked up the phone with a satisfied sigh. Tormenting Shane about his crazy ex-girlfriends was always a highlight of his day. "First Baptist. This is Brett."

Lance didn't bother with formalities, pleasantries or anything of that nature, only demanding, "Have you seen Terri?" as soon as his brother-in-law answered the phone.

Just like that, Brett's good mood was gone. It took all he had to suppress a groan, and the greeting seemed to stick stubbornly in the back of his throat. "Good afternoon to you too, Lance."

Inexplicably, Lance appeared to take great offense to that, as his voice raised considerably. "Well, excuse me for not dropping to my knees to give you the utmost respect that you so obviously deserve, Pastor!"

"I just – wow. Well, I was just..." Brett realized that stammering wasn't exactly the best response, but once again, Lance had reduced him to it. He was almost impossible to talk to, due to the fact that was almost always on the defensive. You couldn't say good morning to the guy without him immediately accusing you of being crazy, making fun of him or somehow wishing him ill will. His paranoia was legendary, and to be quite honest, Brett was more than a little sick of tiptoeing around it all the time.

"Look," Lance continued, quite irate, "I don't have time for your bullshit or your little smartass attitude or – or *anything* today! Have you seen her, yes or fucking no?"

"I guess that would be a fucking no, then." The second the words escaped Brett's lips, his face reddened. Across the desk, Shane's jaw appeared to drop to the floor. Brett raised a hand to his face. He didn't mean to actually say it! It was just the very first thing he thought of, primarily to show Lance how silly it was to phrase something that way... and now he was the one that looked like the fool. "Wow, I really misspoke there..." he began to backpedal.

Lance quickly interrupted. "Nice. Very nice. Good to know that you find all of this so humorous. I'm glad my life and my marriage can provide you with such comedic fodder, Pastor. Life well spent, if you ask me."

Shamed, Brett was silent for a moment, before clearing his throat. "I really, really misspoke there and I shouldn't have and I'm sorry. I can assure you that I don't find anything about this funny." It was true.

"Sure you don't."

"Is something wrong?"

Again, a completely innocent question set Lance off, and he started yelling again – so much so that Brett had to temporarily hold the phone away from his ear. He didn't catch everything that Lance angrily fired off in his direction, but the last part pretty much summed it all up: "Don't you *ever* fucking patronize me again!"

Brett opted to ignore his tirade, getting to the heart of the matter. "If something's wrong, then tell me what it is, and then I can see if I can track her down. That's the best I can do, sorry. I haven't seen her, I don't know where she is, and no, I don't find any of this funny at all. I'm sorry that you seem to think so but –"

"Thanks for nothing." With that, Lance slammed down the phone, but not before uttering a few choice phrases under his breath – curses that Brett heard all-too-clearly.

"Wow." Shane surveyed his friend for a moment, then shook his head. "I thought you were gonna lose it on him for a second there."

Brett took in a heavy sigh, reaching for the cigarettes Shane had left sitting on the desk. "May I?"

"Be my guest."

"You remember that time when you asked me if I ever got sick of having to be perfect all the time?" Brett lit his cigarette, took a long drag and leaned back in his chair. "Guess this goes to show you that I'm not."

"Well, you know..." Shane attempted to reason. "You're only human. And if anybody deserves it, it's that guy. Checking on her again, I take it?"

Brett sighed. "Every single day. He's always calling me, yelling and screaming about where's Terri...and I guess some days, it kind of gets to me. I still can't believe I said that. Lord..."

"Well, if it's any consolation, you still handled that better than I would have. I would probably tell him there's a reason why she keeps avoiding him." Shane thought for a moment. "Reminds me a lot of Peggy, actually...too bad he's already married. Those two might make a good couple."

While Shane hoped to lighten Brett's mood with that reference, it didn't appear to help much. Brett leaned forward to massage his own tense neck. "I guess I should give him the benefit of the doubt. It's just his attitude that bugs me."

Shane nodded his silent agreement and debated what to say for a moment before asking, "What's his beef with you? I never have figured that out."

"Me either. I have no idea. And I've always tried, you know? I've always tried to be nice and give him the benefit of the doubt and just shrug off all of his crap, but sometimes...I don't know."

"You're only human," Shane reminded again. "And dealing with Lance can make anybody crazy after a while." He stopped himself just short of tacking on, *Look at Terri*, and shrugged. "He's just so smug and...snide. I think that's the thing that always stuck

out to me about him. I just try to avoid him if I can...guess that's a little harder when he's married to your sister."

"Yeah." For a moment, Brett played with his cigarette absently, struggling with the best way to say it. He knew that he could always speak freely with Shane, but he just wasn't sure how in depth he really wanted to go about how deeply this really bothered him. "Every single day. You know? It gets old. And he just keeps implying that I know something or she's told me something and I have absolutely no idea what he's talking about, but he won't accept that. He says I'm lying to him, that Jesus wouldn't be very happy with me if He could hear the things coming out of my little smart-assed mouth..." He shrugged. "Which I guess He really wouldn't...but enough's enough. You know?"

Shane didn't say anything right away, only giving a slight grunt to denote he was listening, and thinking up a proper response. "He keeps implying that she told you something? Like what?"

"Oh, like if I ask if something's wrong, he'll always say something like, 'Well, I'm sure you already know all about it!' or something to that effect. And then it always comes back to, 'Are you mocking me? You think this is so funny, don't you?' Like I don't have anything better to do than sit around and laugh all day at whatever the hell is wrong with him on that particular day. How would I even know about it? He needs to give me a little credit, you know? He needs to give Terri a little credit too."

Shane dutifully waited for him to finish, then lit a cigarette of his own. "Well, Rev, I hate to sound trite here, but consider the source."

"I know, I know," Brett insisted. "And I'm crazy to let him get to me...but he just does after a while, you know? The whole thing just gives me a headache even thinking about it, so let's not."

Shane seemed all for a subject change. "Sure, let's not."

"Let's talk about..." Dramatically, Brett paused. "You. Poor single you."

Shane snickered. "Poor single me's getting along just fine, thanks. I'm telling you, you sound more and more like Julia every single day."

"I'm just concerned about you. Is that so wrong?"

Shane glanced back toward the door. "If you're gonna get started on this, maybe I should be going."

Knowingly, Brett nodded. "Right, because you've obviously got your hands full with all the crime in our fair city."

"All in a day's work, right?"

"Would you like me to go do something illegal so you have something to do? Maybe go jaywalking or something?"

Shane appeared to consider it for a moment, before shaking his head. "That's nice, but no. Knowing your luck, you'd end up getting hit by a car. And it would probably be driven by Lance."

Laughing, Brett had to agree. "Yeah, probably, but it's a sacrifice I'd be willing to make if it got you out of my office."

"You're in rare form today," Shane noted, with a wry smile. "Lance obviously brings out the best in you."

"Well...gotta take it out on somebody," Brett reasoned with a shrug. "Might as well be you."

“Really, really, really – you shouldn’t let him get to you,” Shane advised, in all seriousness. “He’s just not worth the trouble.”

Much easier said than done.

July 4, 1966; 4:30 p.m.

Lucas was busily preparing the evening’s delivery when the knock came. He rolled his eyes, raising his middle finger to the door. “Where the fuck do you people keep coming from? My God!”

It was a rather good question. Seemed that despite his desperate desire to keep a low profile, word had somehow gotten out to all the bottom-feeding addicts around here. They came by at all hours, day or night – in the past week, he’d lost count of how many he’d had to chase off – and it was really starting to piss him off.

Each one seemed a little more desperate than the last, begging and pleading and bargaining and generally making complete asses of themselves – it was just disgusting, but it taught Lucas a lot about the nature of true addiction, as well as give him a powerful testament to that which he never wanted to be. Seriously, if he ever became that damn pathetic, he’d just put a bullet in his brain and get it over with. They had no dignity whatsoever, no control of themselves...nothing but a misguided notion that he had anything they could actually afford and would happily hand it over if they just groveled enough.

“I don’t have the time for this,” he mumbled, to no one in particular. Truly, he didn’t. He had way bigger fish to fry right now – and a much bigger payday ahead than all of them put together could ever hope to provide. For a moment, he paused to marvel at his good fortune. Just a few more days...and then, everything he’d ever wanted would finally be his. Everything.

After it became obvious that this particular junkie was a rather persistent one, Lucas groaned, reluctantly leaving behind his task to go to the door. First, though, he made sure to get a good look out the window. The absolute last thing he needed was to open the door, knife at the ready and drugs everywhere, and find a cop standing there. No way. He was never going to make that mistake again.

“You have got to be kidding me,” he whispered, peering through the hole in his blinds. “Not you again.”

With a heavy sigh and an inner resolve to get this little visit over as soon as possible, Lucas cracked the door open just wide enough to see half of Carol’s smiling face. “She’s not here, okay?”

With that, he attempted to slam the door in her face, but Carol held up a hand to prevent it, laughing. “Well, that’s not very hospitable of you, Luke! Who said I even came here to see Terri? I actually came by to see you, if you can believe that.”

He couldn’t, a fact evidenced by the way he stared back at her. “Well, you’ve seen me, so I guess you can leave now.”

“Mind if I come in?” Carol didn’t wait for him to answer and shoved the door open, confidently stepping inside. She surveyed the living room briefly, then turned back toward him. “Oops. Looks like I’ve caught you *in the middle of something*. I’ll try to make this brief.”

Defiantly, Lucas crossed his arms, the front door still wide open. “Good idea. Now, what the fuck do you want?”

“You’ve really got to work on those people skills,” Carol admonished, taking a seat on the sofa. “No wonder you can’t get a job.”

His eyes narrowed, his patience growing dangerously thin. “What do you want, Carol?” he repeated. “I don’t have all day.”

“Aren’t you going to offer me something to drink?” Carol pulled a long, narrow envelope from her purse and began to fan herself with it. “And close that door. You’re letting all the heat in.”

For a moment, he only stood there, staring at her. Carol could clearly see the frustration building behind his eyes, and it gave her pleasure. She leaned back into the sofa and sighed. Yeah, this was going to be pretty easy. After all, she came prepared.

“Okay,” he resolved, slamming the front door, “you’ve got two minutes, starting now. What do you want?”

As soon as the front door was closed, Carol threw the unsealed envelope at him. It landed at his feet, its contents clearly revealed. Lucas stared down at it, then took a step back. “What the hell is this?”

Carol cocked her head to the side, a wicked smile playing on her lips. “What do you think it is?” Before he could ask any questions, or even really think about it, she stood, moving toward him. “I’ve come to make a deal with you. There’s almost a thousand dollars there, Luke...and it’s all yours, provided you do a very special favor for me.”

His eyes widened, processing just what she was asking, before he bent to retrieve the envelope off the floor. “Go on.”

...to be continued...

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About the Author:

Bex Aaron is a 28-year old writer living in the greater Houston area. She has been writing fiction since she was ten years old. This is her first ebook. She enjoys reading and music, as well as classic video games. She is married and the mother to a plethora of cats.

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