Prologue

We were duly warned that our friendship wouldn’t last forever, but neither of us could fathom how dramatically it would fall apart. It started off as any normal summer might, warm temperatures and cool breezes. College starting in the fall makes this the last of the carefree days and I intend to make the most of my time, at least in theory. My best friend, Susan, has the greatest sister in the world. She’s letting us stay in her house while their family goes on vacation at the family’s lake house. It’s near the college we’re both attending so it will give us a chance to get used to the area.

 Naturally we wanted to spend every day shopping and learning where all the best deals were. Unfortunately, while there are plenty of places to shop they are basically the same. Worse yet, the shops are utterly dull. Even the shoppers stuck to each other and didn’t wave or smile. It has a bit distressing, honestly. Is it always going to be like this? Okay, it’s been 3 days. Perhaps tomorrow will surprise us.

 Chapter 1

The sun glares through the window in the early morning waking me up long before I desire. While I appreciate the longer, summer days, I still appreciate the comforts of lying in bed sleeping. The fact that it takes hours to fall asleep doesn’t help. What I wouldn’t give for a full night’s rest. It wasn’t always like this. Here, I am thinking again instead of trying to fall back asleep. I suppose I might as well get up.

 “Susan, are you up yet!” I knock on her door, loudly.

 “Go away, Anna. It’s too early and I want to stay in today. Please don’t make me go.”

 I open the door at that. “I’m sorry, what? Like you haven’t dragged me out the past few days, all of sudden you don’t want to go out and I want to? What has happened to us?” I asked exasperated as I lay down next to her on the bed.

 “Nothing has happened to us. You’re just finally ready for life and I’m tired. Why don’t you go ahead today without me. I want to call my sister and see how the lake house life is faring. I miss being there with them.”

 “Would you rather go there? I could go back home if you’d rather?”

 “Goodness no, Anna. I am thoroughly enjoying myself. This is just new. Now would please go so I can go back to sleep?” she pleads.

 “Alright, alright, I’m going. Don’t burn down the house while I’m out. You remember that incident a couple…”

 She throws a pillow at me as I scurry to the door, laughing. Once I close the door softly behind me, I feel a frown forming on my face. I do not often go out adventuring alone, let alone in a place I’m not familiar with, but I know Susan and I won’t always be together once school starts so I had better get used to it. I put on some comfortable shoes, grab my purse, and head out into the world.

 I drive down the road to the park where the parking is free. Normally, I wouldn’t leave the car parked far away from where I’m headed, but it’s too nice a day out not to walk. Now I have to remember which shops we left off at. It would be pointless to revisit, especially when nothing was impressive, except that diner. I may have forgotten to eat before I left and I’m starving. Well, not starving, but I am hungry and there are no set rules here.

 The bell above the door jingles as I enter and I cringe. I hate bringing attention to myself like that. I understand the reasoning, but the noise drives me crazy all the same. Scanning the room for a place to sit, I spot at the counter. It’s as good as anywhere else and I take a seat and pick up a menu.

 “Back already, Miss Anna?” the waitress asks as she reaches me.

 “Oh hi, Maisy! I couldn’t resist your good charms or the crepes,” I respond smiling.

 “One order of crepes and chocolate milk coming right up,” She notes my order on a pad and walks away before I can order something else, not that I would. While I wait, I gaze around and take it all in.

 The Moonlight Diner has been a staple here in Jasper, South Carolina since the 1940s. It has the classic trailer look to the outside, though the building itself was expanded a decade back to allow more space for seating. The seats are covered in the typical red and black coverings. The floor and table tops are checkerboard. There’s a neon clock above the window separating the kitchen from the serving area. The jukebox in the corner plays music from the 50s and 60s, though occasionally a 40s song sneaks its way in. A whole day could be wasted here. I sigh. The cook dings the bell at the window and Maisy picks up my order and brings it over.

 “One order of crepes and a large glass of chocolate milk,” she says as she places it in front of me with a bit of flair.

“Thanks, Maisy.”

“You’re welcome, dear. Can I get you anything else?”

“No, this is more than enough. It should last me the entire day,” I reply rudely with food in my mouth.

“Alright, I’ll be back around in a few minutes.”

Maisy walks off to attend to other customers and I greedily dig into my food. Crepes aren’t always on diner menus, but I always take advantage when they are. Perhaps I’ll see about applying for a job here once school starts. I know I won’t want to work too many hours, but a little money towards books and a future apartment never hurts and I like it here, it feels safe.

As I finish, Maisy comes back around with the check and a refill. I give her my thanks, place some money on the counter, and head back outside full and ready to take on whatever the day brings.

 Chapter 2

Checking my phone, I see that nearly three hours have passed already. Shopping without Susan is not my style. Perusing each store for endless amounts of time seems like a waste. It does not take long to decide if a shop is worth my time. It is either going to have the stuff I prefer to buy or not. Susan on the other hand, well let’s just say she’s hard to bore.

I consider calling her to see if she wants to join me for the afternoon, but knowing Susan she was not wondering about her family. She was simply waiting for me to leave to call up that cute boy we met a couple days ago. Although it could also as easily be the girl she said she met yesterday while I was checking the post office board for apartments to rent.

Instead, I put my phone in my back pocket and shift my bags to balance my weight. Not that I’ve actually bought much, but it feels like I bought more if I need both my hands to carry the purchases. Standing there, I find I’m sick of shopping and decide to call it a day, aside from lunch. Trying to avoid repeating myself too much, I grab a sandwich from a local café and proceed to the park and my car.

After I get my bags into the car I find a nice, shady tree to sit under. The sun has definitely decided to work today. As I eat my sandwich, I close my eyes and listen to world around me. The birds sing their songs and the breeze whispers softly through the leaves. Children are running around the playground and moms and dads call out to be careful. The air smells of freshly mowed lawns and the chlorine of a nearby pool. Leaning against the tree, I nearly fall asleep. Before I can though, I hear some sort of quiet chanting. I cannot tell if they’re being quiet or if they’re further away. I open my eyes and scan around.

Soon I locate the group about half a football field away. There aren’t very many of them, only a dozen or so. I’m too far away from them to truly understand what they are saying, but it almost seems to be a prayer of some kind. I’d almost guess some sort of yoga, but they aren’t in any funny looking poses. Closing my eyes again, I strain to make out what they’re saying, but it’s impossible to decipher anything. Unfortunately, I don’t even need to go in that direction to get to my car. The curiosity bug has got me in its grasp and I cannot let it go unsatisfied. Perhaps I’m not done shopping today after all.

 Getting up, I gather my things and take my garbage to the bins. Then, I casually head in the general direction of the gathering. It’s not like they know where I parked, right? I snake my way across the park following the sidewalk. As I approach, I slow my pace just a fraction so I can eavesdrop. I mean if they didn’t want to be heard, they shouldn’t be in the park. I also notice I’m not the only outsider looking on. There are a handful of others around the fringes. Being new here, there’s no one to recognize. Shaking my head, I turn my attention back to the gathering.

“My friends listen to my words. I have been given the task to bring forward the truth,” declares the apparent leader of the group, “there is darkness present and we must purge it from here, purge it from inside yourselves.”

The others with them begin to mumble inarticulately to themselves as the leader looks to the sky in a silent prayer or plea. I’m not sure I’ve seen such a display outside of a church setting before. It’s a spooky thing to witness and yet I feel a bit drawn to it.

“You cannot contain the light within if you are filled with darkness.”

The leader goes on some more, but by now I’ve been staring for longer than I should. Quietly, I walk off back towards where I came from. With as many witnesses as there are, it would seem ridiculous to continue the charade of pretending to be headed the other way. I cannot help but run what I’ve seen through my head as I walk along. Lost in thought however, I almost run into someone and I come to abrupt stop and nearly fall backwards. Thankfully, I catch myself before I embarrass myself anymore.

“Woah, are you okay there?” the person asks. I lift my head up and reply.

“Yes, sorry. I was a bit lost in thought there.”

“No worries. It looked like you might be, especially after that display back there.”

“It was a bit unusual or at least so for me. And my name’s Anna,” I say as I put my hand out. He shakes it.

“Andy. It’s nice to meet you. So are you new around here then? I’ve been here forever and that was new for me too. I’d heard about that group meeting there on occasion, but I’d never witnessed it before.”

I look him over before answering, trying to determine whether he appears trustworthy or not. Although, I’ve already given my name so what’s the harm.

“I’m starting college here in the fall and am trying to get a feel for the place. I should probably get going pretty soon before my friend wonders if I’ve been kidnapped yet or not.” He laughs at that.

“Alright, I won’t hold you hostage here. But just in case you’d like a tour guide, here’s my number,” he responds as he tears a piece of paper from the notebook he’s carrying and writes his phone number on. He hands it to me and says, “See you around, Anna.”

With a wave goodbye, he’s off before I can muster up the courage to ask him to show me around now. Of course, he likely has other things to do. C’mon Anna, get it together. Now comes the question of whether to tell Susan or not. No, I probably should not. I would have to be totally out of my mind to say anything. Maybe she’ll have invited someone over and won’t even give me another thought. Let’s hope for that. With that plan in mind, I climb into my car and drive back to the house. Chapter 3

 “You have to tell me everything! What does he look like? What color are his eyes? And his hair? How tall is he? No, wait how old?” she asks faster than I can process each question. I stay silent as I start taking my new purchases out of the bags. “You can’t ignore me Miss Davis. This is important.”

 “Certainly you know by now that tone will not get you anywhere. And besides I never said it was a boy. I simply said I’d met someone new today,” I reply in an effort to skirt around all the other questions.

 “But you had that boy-struck face, Anna.”

 “I do not have a *boy-struck* face,” I say with disdain and she just gives me an uh-huh look. I gently push her away in playfulness.

 “See now that’s what I mean. Now answer my questions and then I’ll tell you about my day, so far. I might have plans tonight so you’ll be on your own for dinner.”

 “I suppose you’ll never leave me alone if I don’t answer them so here’s the short end and then I have things to do. His name is Andy. He’s slightly taller than me and a couple years older I think. I didn’t exactly ask him. Those are the only details that pertain to you at the moment. I am going to put my things away and take a shower. Have a good evening, Susan.” With that said I walk towards my room as I hear her behind me.

 “We’re not done here!”

She leaves it at that but I know she’s mumbling under her breath in frustration. I simply smile and keep moving. If I stop, it will give her a chance to follow me and beg for more information. The truth is there simply isn’t much more to give her. It was only a brief conversation and it wasn’t very extraordinary. He seemed like a nice enough person, but it’s hard to tell in 5 minutes. Chances are I’ll only see him again to please Susan.

The prayer group has me more intrigued. At least, I think it was. There was something in the way the leader was drawing us in that has me curious. What he was saying sounded good. I felt connected to his words, like I could feel the dark parts of my mind stirring wanting to rebel against him. At the same time, for a brief moment, I could almost believe that same darkness could be driven out so easily.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts, and turn on the water. I sit on the edge of the tub to wait for the water to heat up. After a couple minutes, I get in and let the water run over me. There’s nothing quite like a good shower to relax all the tense muscles. Standing here, I let go of all that’s happened today and shift my focus to what I need to do to prepare for the start of school. I realize it is still a couple months away, but it’s more important than whatever happens this summer.

Tomorrow, I think I’ll head to the campus and find the bookstore and maybe see if there will be any tours. I haven’t been to the campus in a couple years, so it would be nice to reacquaint myself. Maybe I’ll have lunch in the park, just in case that group shows up again. Probably not though, the way Andy made it sound. Perhaps I should give him a call after all. Maybe he knows more than he was letting on.

I shut off the water, wrap a towel around, and get out of the shower. Standing there, I stare at myself in the mirror. Most of the time, I am not sure who I’m looking at. It’s not simply about my physical appearance either. I’m not sure what it is exactly, but I can’t stand to see my reflection. It tends to make me unreasonably angry.

I’m starting to feel that way now, so I turn away and walk out of the bathroom and into my bedroom. Well, it’s temporarily mine. I forget that sometimes and I’ve only been here a few days. It feels like forever already. Since I am on my own this evening, I put my comfy pajamas on and head to the kitchen. I am in no way hungry, but I should check to see what is available. It would be annoying to have something planned in my head only to discover no way to make it.

Susan is not in the kitchen when I enter the room, so I strain my ears to listen for movement. Not hearing anything, I shrug and assume she’s left though it’s still early yet. Opening the fridge, I search the shelves for inspiration. There’s not much in here. If there’s one thing we’ve forgotten to do, it’s unfortunately grocery shopping. I’ll try to remember to pick up a few things on the way back tomorrow. I better make a list of necessities like milk, eggs, and bread. For now I better find some place that delivers and place an order.

While I wait for food to be delivered, I search through Susan’s sister’s DVD collection to find a movie to watch. Nothing is sticking out. I’ve seen most of what’s here and the rest look either scary or dull. Possibly a nap before the delivery person gets here? I lie down on the couch and watch the fan go around in circles and soon fall asleep.

A half hour later a loud knock at the door drags me out of sleep. Groggily I head to the hallway to grab my purse and go to the door. I’m searching my purse for money as I open the door.

“One medium cheese pizza, extra cheese,” the delivery boy says. I lift my head payment ready in hand. “Anna?” he asks.

“So, uh, you deliver pizzas then, Andy?” I ask, a bit in shock.

“At least for the summer. All bets are off once school starts back up.”

“Well, while you’re here I might as well ask. Are you working tomorrow? I was planning to check out the campus. Did you want to show me around?” I’m shaking slightly nervously.

“I have to be at work at 3, so I’m all yours until then. Meet you in the park at 9?”

“That sounds good to me. I’ll see you then,” I reply a bit more confidently. Giving him money for the pizza, I end the conversation and send him on his way. He waves as he drives off. I do a small wave in return as I turn back inside and close the door. Dropping the pizza on the coffee table, I sit back down on the couch.

“Is that a date?” I ask out loud to no one. Opening the box, I take a slice. As I chew, I ponder this new situation. “Who am I now?”

 Chapter 4

In the morning, I take extra care with picking out what to wear and doing my hair. It’s kind of hard to create intricate hairstyles by myself, but Susan didn’t come home last night, so I am on my own. I do a quick curl and pull a little on the top back and secure it with a clip. I choose a simple top and jeans paired with a pair of ballet flats. Glancing in the mirror, I decide it’s likely too much, but it’ll have to do. I go downstairs, grab my purse, and proceed to the park.

We didn’t finalize a place to meet here and the park isn’t small, but there’s only one spot I can think of. Having arrived early, I should get to the location and have time to catch my breath before Andy shows up. My face turns red easily and I’d like most of that gone when he gets here. At least I hope I’m first to get here. I have no way to know his habits.

My pace slows as I reach the area where that group was meeting yesterday. Goosebumps form on my arms as I enter the space. I close my eyes and feel the warmth of the sun on my face. As I stand there and can hear the whisper of footsteps moving across the grass towards me. He can wait a moment while I soak in the light.

“The power of light is refreshing, isn’t it?” a voice asks and it’s not Andy. Slowly, I open my eyes and wait for my vision to clear from the intensity of the sun. I blink a couple of times and take in the person before me. After a moment of memory loss, I recognize him as the leader who was speaking to the group. He speaks again before I can say anything, “I like to come here in the morning sometimes and soak up the spirit of nature before I truly start my day. I remember seeing you yesterday during our group gathering, yes?”

“You did, yes. Sorry about that, it was rude to watch like that,” I sheepishly answer.

“Nonsense, if we were that worried about being watched we wouldn’t have met here. I’m John Stuart by the way, though my close friends call me Jack. It’s nice to meet you, Miss..?”

“Anna, Davis. I have heard you meet here occasionally. Do you have a regular meeting place?”

“Currently, we have no true place to call our own, but we have graciously been given space to meet at an outbuilding of the St. Lelia Catholic Church. It was the only available building in town that could hold our small group, at least for the moment. We meet on Sundays at 9am and Wednesdays at 6pm. Are you interested in joining us?”

“I was intrigued by what I witnessed here yesterday, so possibly,” I reply hesitantly and quickly add, “no promises though.”

“Understandable, but I’m sure we’ll be seeing you around. Have a lovely day, Miss Davis.”

He makes a gesture as if to tip his cap to me although he isn’t wearing one, turns and walks away. Why does everyone keep running off before I can get a good conversation started? Before I can think too long about it, I spot Andy coming around a bend in the sidewalk. I wave to let him know I see him and start walking to meet him.

We exchange hellos and head towards the campus. It’s a ten minute drive from the park and we ride in his car since he was parked closer and had more gas in the tank. The trip is mostly made in silence, neither of us knowing exactly what to say. Once we arrive at the campus, we locate the main building with the bookstore and head in there first. He goes to one section knowing what he needs already and I go to the other and work my way through aisle by aisle. Already I can tell this is not going to be a cheap venture. I’ll definitely need to consider that job at the diner.

For now, I’ll buy a t-shirt and a notebook with the school’s name on it. I have to show my pride right? Slowly it’s dawning on me that this is happening. I find Andy chatting with some other students just outside the store. He introduces me to them, saying they were in a couple of his classes last semester. I feign interest in what classes they were in. I ask advice about registration to make it seem more like I care about them, but honestly I’m ready to move on.

I noticed the library building on the way in here and I am anxious to check it out, if I can. I’ve heard some college libraries are picky about letting outsiders in. Since I haven’t registered as a student yet, I’m not sure if I can browse yet. After standing there for another five minutes, I get frustrated and take off towards the library without Andy. I don’t away angrily, just merely start walking. I make it about halfway to the library before I hear footsteps behind me.

“Anna, wait up!” Hearing his shout, I slow but don’t stop completely. “You could have said you were ready to go, you know.”

“You were busy catching up with your friends,” I reply simply.

“That doesn’t mean you had to leave without me. It was a little rude, he says with contempt. That pulls me to a stop. I turn to face him and retort.

“Oh I’m sorry, that’s rude? What about ignoring me instantly for your friends and talking around me? Can we just go?”

I change directions and head towards where we had parked. I don’t feel like walking all the way back to the park, so I’ll at least try to guilt him in to driving me back to my car. I hear him sigh behind me and also hear him start walking. We drive back caught in an uneasy silence neither of us knows how to break. When we arrive back to my car, I get out and thank him for the ride. I shut the door before he has a chance to say anything. I watch him drive off and then I go back to that spot in the park. Sitting on a bench, I mull through my thoughts and cry just a little.

 Chapter 5

Hours later and I’m still sitting here. I check my phone to see if there are any messages and discover somewhere along the way the battery died. It’s just as well really. I suppose I ought to head back to the house, but that means facing Susan and I’m not sure I want to do that yet. Instead I get in my car and find a place to eat. I do not go back to the diner. I cruise the streets while I eat my sandwich. There are plenty of people, but no one seems to be doing much of anything, but they all seem content in that. It’s maddening.

Driving wherever the roads leads, I find myself driving by an elaborate church. Locating the sign, I see it reads St. Lelia Catholic Church. Turning the corner, I search for the building that Mr. Stuart was talking about. It takes a few times around the property before I find it, I think. There aren’t any other cars parked so I decide it’s safe to explore. I park close enough to the building that I could make a quick getaway, but hopefully not close enough to draw attention to the car.

It doesn’t look like much. A couple of the windows are broken and there’s ivy climbing along the walls. It does not look well maintained. Perhaps they haven’t occupied the space very long. I try the door, but it appears to be locked. I sigh and try to find a clean window or a hole big enough in one to see inside. Finally finding one behind some thick ivy, I peer in. All I can see in the dark are a few chairs and books of some kind scattered about. Honestly, it seems like no one has used this building in years.

I ponder this as I leave. Maybe I have the wrong place. There could be other hidden buildings around here, but I’m not going to look for them. I’ve had enough adventure for one day. Sunday will be here before I know it. I just have to figure out if I want to come back and find this mysterious group or not. Perhaps I’ll drag Susan along with me. She owes me for a few favors in the past. This one thing can’t be that much of a sacrifice.

Once I finally get back to the house, I find Susan talking with someone in the kitchen. I call out to let her know I’ve made it back and she comes running out to meet me in the hallway.

“Where have you been? I was this close to calling the police,” she gestures with her thumb and index finger just how close she was. Granted it’s a pretty small space and she does seem worried, but normally she wouldn’t have been so worried for at least a week. It hasn’t even been a day.

“I was out exploring. I didn’t realize I needed permission?” I ask suspiciously.

“I’ve called I don’t even know how many times and I *never* call. Andy’s here. He’s been here for ages now. How could you just run off like that? Why didn’t you come back here?” she rambles on.

“Andy’s here? Super,” I say as sarcastically as I can muster.

“Yes, he’s here. He wanted to talk to you about what today. We didn’t go into too many details, but Anna, dear, you know boys are dense when it comes to things like that. Give him a chance. He actually seems nice.” As she finishes her speech, Andy joins us in the hallway and waves shyly. The nerve…

“Why are you here?” I ask trying to keep my voice in check.

“I wanted to apologize for hurting you when you felt I wasn’t paying attention to you.” He says it so plainly, like he’s had to do this a hundred times.

“I don’t believe you, but thanks. I’m home safe and sound. You may go now.” He hangs his head and moves towards when Susan interjects.

“Anna, come on. He called in to miss his shift because he was worried something had happened because you weren’t back yet. You’re better than this,” she scolds as if she’s my mother. “Andy, please, stay for dinner. I think we must have something we can whip up around here.” By ‘we,’ she means me. She can’t cook to save her life. She almost burned down the lake house once. He looks back at me for my approval. I say fine and stalk off to my room to change.

When I return downstairs, Susan and Andy are sitting on the couch going through old photos. Instead of joining them, I turn towards the kitchen and rummage through the fridge. Only now do I remember that I was supposed to buy groceries. Sensing the looming failure, I pick up my phone that I charged for a few minutes and try to find a store that delivers groceries for a decent price.

After about ten minutes I’ve found a store and ordered the essentials plus the ingredients for fried chicken. It’s relatively simple and definitely worth waiting for. Unfortunately, I have to share. I could always make them something else, something less amazing, but I don’t want to go to the extra effort to come up with another meal. Here’s hoping his highness isn’t vegetarian. I send Susan a text saying I’ve ordered groceries so it’ll still be awhile before we eat. I don’t feel like reminiscing over times that right now I’d rather forget.

She sends back a frowny face and a thumbs up. I sneak out the backdoor and sit by the fire pit. It’s too hot to start a fire, but I can close my eyes and pretend there’s one going. The good news is, there are trees blocking the view from the kitchen so unless she tells him where I am, I should be safe out here, alone. Alone is better. Alone leaves you less likely to be hurt and less likely to hurt others.

 Chapter 6

A couple hours later, I have put away the groceries and have delivered food to the other people in the house. I eat with them in silence as they go back and forth. It’s as if I’m not even here, which is fine. I tune them out and my thoughts drift back to that unloved building. Certainly they’ll fix it up and make it more presentable. If they want more people to join them, they ought to make their usual gathering place more hospitable. I might simply go to make that point. I’d like to ask Susan to join, but he’s still here. I’m not sure I want to ask while he’s here, although his answer might help me judge his underlying character.

“So, Susan, Andy, would either of you like to join me in a sort of church-like prospect on Sunday?” I ask, interrupting their flow of conversation. They both stare at me like I’ve either interrupted something of grave importance or like I’ve lost my mind.

“Anna, darling, since when did you become interested in religion?” she asks with a slight hint of disdain.

“Are you talking about that group we saw in the park?”

“I’ve always had some interest in it. I just don’t talk about it with you. And yes.”

“I don’t know, Anna. It didn’t sound like a very good prospect. You seemed a bit too interested in it and I know you. You tend to get into things way over your head.”

“Well, I don’t know you so count me in.”

“Oh alright, if you’re serious, I’ll go just to support you this once, but you owe me.”

I watch both of them for other thoughts or judgements, but they go back to whatever it was they were talking about before. I pick up the dishes and take them to the kitchen. There’s a dishwasher, but I need to do something to occupy my time, so I do them by hand instead. After finishing, I return to the living room to see both of them standing.

“Thanks for dinner, Anna. It was good and I appreciate you taking the time to make it and for giving me a chance to apologize for earlier.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. And thanks for the apology. There was a bit of miscommunication on both sides I guess.”

“Awww look at you two, so cute making up,” Susan adds a little too sweetly. I glare at her and she laughs. “Thanks for sticking around Andy. It was good getting to know you some more. See you on Sunday.” She hugs him goodbye and I wave. He waves back and takes his leave.

“Must you be you all the time, Susan?”

“Must you be you all the time, Anna? Honestly, give the guy a chance. You always make a big deal out of nothing.”

“And you always push.”

She looks at me apologetically and gives me a hug. It feels too comforting for me to be mad at her too long. With one last squeeze she pulls away and goes off to her room, leaving me all alone, again. I turn off the lights and go to my own room where I pull out my phone. I flip through the pictures of my family, missing them all of a sudden. I send Mom a quick text telling her I miss her and put the phone away.

I put my headphones on and start up my music. I lie down on my bed and lose myself in the songs. As I lay there, I think about what it’ll be like on Sunday. Will I enjoy myself? Will Susan just torment me forever afterwards? Could I be friends with Andy? Am I just crazy? More than likely it’s that one. I clear my thoughts and try to focus solely on the music, but I circle back around to the same questions and a dozen more like those. It ends up frustrating me and I shut off the music and lie there in the silence. I’m not sure why I thought that would better.

The silence increases the thoughts tenfold. I start playing conversations in my head. I start trying to plan what to say, what to do, and even what to wear. Tossing and turning I try to fall asleep, but it’s not working. I get up and go into the bathroom. I open up the medicine cabinet and find something to help me sleep. Sleep has never come easy to me. My brain doesn’t seem to know when to stop. Even trying to tell myself to think about nothing leads me to think about nothing. What is nothing? Does it have a color or a start or an end? It’s a never ending cycle. How I ever fall asleep, I have no idea.

I lie back down and start the music back up. I play some more instrumental pieces hoping I won’t get stuck on the words. Slowly, I feel my body relaxing and eventually I fall asleep and become victim to the realm of dreams. I dream of Susan abandoning me and of Andy getting punished for doing or saying something. I see Mr. Stuart standing around wearing a scheming face. I dream of pulling my hands away from my body covered in blood. I dream and I dream and I can’t seem to wake myself up.

Somewhere else in the town, someone else cannot sleep. Too much has happened the past couple days. The prospect of the future is spinning in their mind. It’s as if everything is becoming clear and falling into place, as though all they’ve been wanting might be finally becoming a reality. They pace their room in impatience and anticipation the grin on their face refusing to vanish.

 Chapter 7

When I wake in the morning I try to process the terrible dreams that I had, but none of them make any sense. I shake it off and drag myself out of bed and into the shower. It should be a cold shower to wake me up, but the hot water calls to me. Suddenly I can see the blood on my hands and I scrub my hands raw trying to get it all off. My hands burn as the water hits them and I come back to reality and quickly shut off the water.

I stand then and try to breathe. Dreams don’t usually work their way into the daylight like that. Sure, I think about them sometimes, but they don’t cause me to see things that aren’t there. Clearly I’m having some sort of anxiety attack, at least that’s what it seems like. I’m not sure what else to call it. Glancing at my hands, I try to decide what to do about them. There’s no way to hide them unless I hide them in my pockets until they’re healed, but that doesn’t seem realistic. Maybe, no one will notice and I won’t have to explain anything. That’s what I’ll hope for. I check to make sure the shampoo is all out of my hair and get dressed.

I decide to wear a shirt that’s a shade of red to help disguise the redness of my hands. I don’t know if it’ll actually work, but I figure it’s worth a shot. I skip the makeup party and put my hair up in a ponytail. By the time I’m finished getting ready, my hands are throbbing with pain. I’ll just say the water was too hot when I did the dishes yesterday. I take a deep breath and head downstairs to see if Susan is up yet. I don’t have plans for today and I owe her, so we’ll see if she has anything in mind. Hopefully, I won’t need my hands for whatever it is.

Again, I can hear her talking to someone as I make my way down the steps. At this point I have no guesses as to who it is. I brace myself and follow the sound of her voice. It sounds like she’s headed outside, so I hurry to catch up with her. I reach her just before she goes out the door and then see she’s on the phone. She sees me and puts up a finger and goes out the door. I do not follow her; I know she’ll be back. In the meantime, I help myself to some breakfast.

A half hour or so later, she finally makes it back inside. She pours a cup of coffee and sits down with me at the table. For the first few sips, she doesn’t say anything, as if she’s trying to plan the speech all out in her head first. I sit there patiently, sort-of, waiting for the onslaught. Eventually, she lifts her head up from staring at the coffee and begins.

“Now, hear me out. I know you and Andy got off to a rocky start, but after talking with him all yesterday afternoon, I think he might be the best thing that’s happened to you since Mark. I was skeptical at first, but the more I got to know him, the more I think he’d be good for you.” She states it very plainly as if try not to leave room for argument, that she knows what’s best and that’s all there is to it. I contemplate what she’s said for a few minutes before I give her my reply.

“If I promise not to judge me about the religious group thing, I promise to give Andy another shot, for *you*, deal? It’s her turn to ponder before answering,

“Deal.”

And so the truce had been set and all was right in the mind of Susan York. She refills her mug with fresh coffee and goes to do something else about the house and I’m left to think about what I’ve agreed to. Andy doesn’t seem like a terrible person and I think he could make a good friend, I just don’t know about Susan’s ideas about it being more than that. I’d rather be cautious. I certainly don’t want things to end up like they did with Mark. So I’ll set no bar so I can’t be disappointed if things go south.

A little while later we decide to go hit up the shops, again, and we hope to pick up where we left off. I won’t lie, I feel like there’s a bit more tension between us now that we’ve had our little conversation. You might have thought it would’ve relieved it, but I think it may have made it worse. It’s unusual for either of us to let such silly matters come between us and it has me kind of worried.

I’m sure in the end, I’ll have felt this way for nothing, but for now it feels very real and I don’t know what to do about it. She hasn’t said much about what she’s been up to or how her dinner went the other night. Judging by how she’s treating the Andy thing, I have a feeling it didn’t go well. Perhaps the shopping will help both of us. I won’t bring it up, because I know she hates talking about stuff like that, when it comes to her. She has her own issues she working out.

“Anna? Hello? Did you hear what I said?” She holds my arm to stop me from walking. I just look at her in confusion and she sighs. “I said we should probably buy some nicer clothes for Sunday. I’m not sure we have anything appropriate. Well, I don’t. You probably do.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, we should do that. I’m not sure anything I have that is appropriate fits anymore.”

“Alright, there see now we have a plan.”

A plan, yes, but I don’t think it’s what she wants me to think the plan is.

 Chapter 8

We eventually find a store that sells more formal type clothing; it only took an hour to find and that was without window shopping at other things along the way. The store is mostly empty and there’s some sort of jazz music playing only it sounds a little off-brand. It’s hard to make out exactly what it is, but it’s not that appealing. Susan and I share a look and then begin our search for something that will suit our needs.

We each pick a few things to try on and we take turns walking a fake runway. For a few moments, we put everything else aside and just enjoy each other’s company. In the end, nothing we picked out felt like us and so we had to move on. Hours and many stores later, we finally make it back to the house and collapse on the couch letting our bags fall where they may.