



**S. DAVID
ACUFF**

**HIGH SCHOOL
MASQUERADE**

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A novella by S. David Acuff

based on the Screenplay by

S. David Acuff and Jeremiah McLamb

About 34,877 words

Prologue

Long chestnut hair, uncoils from a bedazzled curling iron.

Welcome to my house, my world, my pain.

Diamond studded earrings fasten into place.

I honestly wish I could say I have fond memories of growing up here, but I can't.

Mascara tip draws across long, beautiful lashes.

I can only remember darkness...

Lipstick glazes perfect lips.

...suffering...

A little black dress zips into place.

...and in the end, relief.

Sleeping pills pour into a dainty palm.

My name is Ashley Stewart. I am eighteen years old, and I died today.

An empty prescription bottle lands on the bed beside her as she

slowly

slips

unconscious...

Three weeks earlier...

Chapter 1

Fayettenam.

There are twelve cities throughout the United States named Fayetteville. Only one of those bears the savage nickname cobbled together from a controversial war in the seventies that epitomized the mother of all lost causes: *Fayettenam*.

This town might have wasted away long ago and become just another stop on the Southern back-alley dogfighting circuit, except it was wrapped like poison oak around dual world class military installations: Fort Bragg and Pope AFB. This kept a steady stream of new money, fresh faces, and world-wise travelers rotating through. And while this fostered many strange blends of exotic eateries and unique fashions, there were also

pawn shops and strip clubs and used car lots and many, many broken hearts that were the result of a here-today-gone-tomorrow pop-up culture.

Now, on a scale of dirt poor to filthy rich, the Kinwood neighborhood off Ramsey Street nestled behind Methodist University scored absolutely middle class. No question. At least that's where it had begun in the seventies. More recently the neighborhood's two hundred or so homes declined as time weathered them because of the recession. The houses remained under-repaired: more lived in and less loved on.

To make matters worse, with the recent downsizing at the Kelly Springfield Tire Plant four minutes up the road, even more families had no choices; between hot pockets or roof repair, groceries won every time. The vinyl siding was neglected and dingy concrete driveways retained their dark greyish ochre with knobby tufts of grass pushing through the cracks. Foreclosure signs had crept in, pockmarking the overgrown lawns of abandoned homes like tombstones.

And yet the tragic end to one family's struggle on occasion could be another family's happy beginning. Such was the case of the modest home at 5809 Danville Drive. A SOLD! magnet covered the sobering foreclosure sign, and in the driveway was an equally understated seven-year-old Chevy Impala. Although immaculately maintained, the color wasn't a flashy red, or classic black, but plain old grey. Beside it, a twenty-year-old beater leaked oil onto the dirt patch that served as the second driveway. It was a powder blue Ford Escort Wagon held together by duct tape and wishful thinking. Even the handful of bumper stickers, more than just inspirational churchy one-offs and

humorous epithets, were Band-Aids that held the bumper together in some places and covered old gashes and scrapes in other places.

The Hartleys were the proud new homeowners. Tom Hartley was a big ole teddy bear who didn't have an enemy in the world, except maybe high cholesterol. He was a hard, honest worker and everyone loved him, which is why he was one of the few employees able to keep his job down at the plant. Of course, it meant moving to night shift and downsizing their nice home in College Lake, but that was a fantastic blessing considering the rest of his former department.

Tom stepped over some U-Haul boxes and slipped out the kitchen side door and picked his way carefully through the unfamiliar darkness then dropped a bulging trash bag into the overflowing bin out by the garage. He peered back into their curtain-less windows which spilled their glowing light onto the shrubs and fence outside. His wife was nowhere to be seen so he bent down, lifted the head off the garden gnome, and pulled out a cigarette and a lighter. There, tucked back into a shadow, he lit it up. The red ember dotted the night like a tiny beacon and Tom dragged deep and exhaled slowly.

Ohhh, that's the stuff. He smiled, savoring the stolen moment. This was definitely going to be his last pack of smokes. Even though he'd been saying that for the last fourteen packs, but he for sure meant it this time. Anyway, he'd quit before and he could do it again. He just missed being able to—

“Jaime!” Sarah Hartley hollered inside, drawing their daughter's name out in more syllables than necessary in typical Southern fashion.

Tom jumped. Even though he was well concealed like a cigarette ninja, he tamped out the incriminating evidence, replaced the Gnome head, and hurried indoors.

Looking around, he made sure the coast was clear. Then to be extra careful no one was on to him he threw out some cover conversation. “When does the garbage man come, again,” he said loudly to no one in particular. “Yeah, our bin *can't take much more of this, Captain,*” he said imitating a Mr. Scott line from an Old Star Trek movie.

“Tomorrow, I think,” Sarah answered as she walked around the corner and set aside some picture frames she was unpacking from a mid-sized U-Haul box. And then she shuffled off up the hallway. Sarah was a mom’s mom. Not the trendy, hipster, Lululemon wearing, latte-drinking, LaCrosse mom, like her sister in Chapel Hill. No. She didn’t have time for such nonsense, like counting Fitbit steps and sipping kale smoothies, much less have the bank account for such extravagances. Her world was a good pair of second-hand mom jeans and some Payless crocks.

“With a TJ Maxx ten minutes away, there’s no excuse for looking *frumpy,*” her sister would chastise her, but Sarah had made peace with that unflattering label long ago. And for that reason she had been vastly underestimated at more than one PTA or town council meeting. She was a force to be reckoned with underneath the Palin haircut and the Marshall’s track suit.

Sarah listened for a moment at Jaime’s door and then knocked gently, “Jaime, honey, the game is starting any minute. You’re gonna be late if you don’t hurry!”

“Okay, one second, Mom. Just gotta get my jacket and stuff.”

Sarah smiled and walked back up the hallway.

Inside the bedroom, Jaime sat on the sleeping bag bed in the middle of the floor, since none of the furniture had arrived yet. Jaime wore too many dark colors to be “perky popular” but was way too pretty and sweet and not-pierced to be “goth outcast.” Her half-Latina complexion was the casual observer’s first hint that there was more to this otherwise white-bread family than met the eye.

Jaime was actually very okay with her adoption. Eight years ago, at first? Not so much. But more recently she felt increasingly comfortable with it all. Safe, even. The weird part was she couldn’t point to one pivotal road-to-Damascus, apocryphal moment that had changed her mind. It was a thousand little moments with Sarah and Tom in what she called her second-chance family. The thing was, she now looked forward to the stranger in the Piggly Wiggly or at church saying something to Sarah about Jaime’s “*real* parents.” That was Jaime’s Fourth of July. And, oh, the fireworks that followed, as Mama Bear Sarah raised up to set the record straight.

Anyway, it was very evident—there on the floor—that, unlike she’d led her mother to believe, Jaime was *totally* ready to go. Her hoodie was already on as well as her small Forever-21 backpack-purse and her knit cap. She had neatly placed before her a game ticket, a man’s watch, her car keys, and a stick of gum.

Her left hand jostled nervously on her knee as she sat poised like a gunslinger.

The second hand on the watch finally lapped the twelve, and it beeped twice signaling seven o'clock high and Jaime sprang into action. She grabbed the ticket, popped the gum in her mouth, scooped up the keys, and slid the watch over her wrist.

Clicking off the bedside lamp on the floor, she rushed out.

In the kitchen, Sarah smoothed shelf liner paper into a drawer and Tom sliced it cleanly with a box cutter. They made a good team.

“Bye, Mom,” Jaime kissed Sarah on the cheek as she walked past.

“Have fun, sweetie.” Sarah gave her back a little scritch-scratch in passing.

Jaime couldn't squeeze by Tom without some contact so she patted his arm awkwardly. “Oh, and, uh...later, Tom.”

“Uh, okay... have fun, sweetheart,” Tom said. He wanted to say something more, but knew better than to push.

Jaime closed the door behind herself, and Tom turned back to Sarah. “Why do you get ‘Mom’?” he whispered. “When do I get ‘Dad’ or ‘Father’...or ‘Poppy’—”

She pulled him close and kissed his shoulder.

“Just give her some time, honey. She's come so far these past eight years.” She gestured to the window. “When's the last time she ever wanted to go...be *social*?”

Tom let the idea sink in. It was true, this was a pretty landmark occasion because up to this point, all of Jaime's best friends were literary characters and a well-worn rag doll. Tom was much more okay with that, actually.

“Should I follow her?” he asked only half-joking.

“Tom—” Sarah shook her head as she pulled up some liner paper and handed the roll to him.

He let it fall into his hand and watched her smooth it into another drawer. “You know,” he added, “to make sure she’s safe and all! I won’t even bring the shotgun.”

“I think *someone’s* trying to get out of some manual labor. That’s what I think.”

Tom pursed his lips together. He didn’t like being over-ruled but there was no pushing it further. He would just have to wait patiently like every other parent before him who had let their child go out into the vast unknown, praying they’d return. And return unharmed. He had to keep reminding himself it was just a high school basketball game. He wasn’t sending her off to Afghanistan with the 82nd Airborne, or worse down Murchison Road.

Still, he knew Jaime was not alone. Tom offered a silent prayer that the Lord’s angels would surround and keep her safe. And a sense of peace settled over him.

Outside, Jaime opened the *passenger* door to climb through to the driver seat; one of the many elegant perks to this gem of a ride. She slammed the door twice before it latched, then slid over to the driver side and cranked the engine.

Well, “cranked” is misleading because the car sputtered and clanked and gurgled. With a carefully timed pump of the gas pedal on the upstroke, the engine finally caught, blowing a plume of smoke out the exhaust.

“Yes!” She smacked the steering wheel and threw the car into reverse. Jaime couldn’t understand some of her GenZ peers who had no interest in getting their driver’s license. Jaime had her permit as soon as it was legal. Driving was freedom. Picking your own music, finding your own way, it was Adulting 101. She loved it. Even though, to be honest, this Escort Wagon was less like a car and more like a cranky old man which grumbled and complained all the way down the road. But even that was an easy fix! She punched a tape into the deck and Skillet’s “Feel Invincible” blasted through the sound system.

See, Jaime thought drumming the steering wheel, no more rattling sounds!

Chapter 2

The largest church in Fayetteville was easy to recognize. Northwood Temple. Its super-sized dome structure on the outside and its ritzy Pentecostal crowd on the inside earned it a more common, sometimes derogatory, nickname: Hollywood Temple. Long before the waves of mega churches and media centers sprang up across the country, Hollywood Temple was the it-church. Black, white, Military, Civilian, old and young flocked to its modern services. Attached to this affluent community was the coveted K-12 private school, Northwood Academy.

The Academy was honored to educate some of Fayetteville's most elite students as well as a hand full of degenerates who had been kicked out of every other public school; kids who had no other academic options left.

Jaime was neither of those but *was* eligible for a minority scholarship and so her parents jumped at the chance to have her enrolled. She was as excited as she was nervous to be attending her first school event tonight.

It didn't help that the parking lot was completely full. Her pulse quickened at the cheers bubbling up in waves from the belly of the large gymnasium where half the city came to cheer on the Northwood Eagles and the other half for the Westover Wolverines. Jaime found out later that private schools rarely competed against public schools but this exhibition game was a long standing tradition.

Jaime's junker smoked its way up one aisle and down the other as she searched for an empty parking spot. The trick with the Escort Wagon was to control the speed of the car with the gas pedal in a lower gear so you wouldn't have to ride the brakes, which squealed like a wounded banshee whenever you pressed down too hard. Sometimes the alternator belt would chime in, too, and provide automotive harmonics that had every hunting dog in a mile radius howling, woefully. Jaime, the poor driver/conductor, crouched low so as not to be identified by anyone that may recognize her. In fact, truth be known, it was all part of this "fashionably late" game she played with her parents; to arrive without an audience.

There was one spot up close where a flashy H2 Hummer was parked just crooked enough so the space beside it was virtually unusable, but Jaime pulled her car in because she didn't have to leave room on the driver's side. Only inches. She coasted in with a loud grinding halt. After she climbed out, she didn't bother locking the doors because she

figured the more opportunities for someone to steal the thing, the better. She was tempted to even leave money on the dashboard and keys in the ignition, but surely someone would just smash the window and grab the money. Besides she had seen Tom's duct tape window jobs before and wanted to avoid it at all costs. A loud roar from the gym signaled a basket for one side or another, so Jaime gave the door a little hip bump and hurried across the parking lot.

Inside the gym there was standing room only. The energy level was palpable as both sides worked their emotional mojo to spur their team toward victory.

Jaime walked in as a ball was rebounded by the Eagles and passed down court to "Number 34, Jason Hall," the announcer said excitedly.

Jason grabbed the ball and was at the basket in a flash. The spectators paused, with baited breath, as Jason flew gracefully through the air and slam-dunked the ball bringing the crowd back to its feet.

As he was congratulated and high-fived, Jason threw a million-watt smile and winked toward the cheer squad who, as if on cue, started their chant.

Their flawlessly put together cheer captain, Ashley Stewart, led the squad.

Clap. "Eagles are the best and we show it, Wolverines. Yeah, yeah, you know it."

Clap. Cheers. High kicks. Spirit fingers.

Never far from Ashley's side was her best friend and co-captain, Mary Pearce. Ebony and Ivory. Standing together, it was as if the Bratz dolls had come to life.

“Ash, I think that wink had your name *all* over it, gurl.” Mary huddled close.

“Beeeeeep Beeeeeep, special delivery for Ashley Stewart!”

She started to make a crude sexual gesture with her fingers, but Ashley grabbed her, laughing. “Please, Mary! What would Jason Hall be doing winking at me? He’s with Amy, remember?”

“Because you’re drop-dead gorgé and Northwood Academy’s most eligible hoe. Who wouldn’t wanna wink you? Shoot, I’d wink you...all night long!”

“Staaaahp!” Ashley laughed pushing her away.

Mary kept winking obnoxiously at Ashley as they returned to the cheer bench giggling.

“You know I don’t care about Jason,” Ashley said. “He’s just a number to me. Thirty-four.”

“Well,” Mary replied, “you may not care about thirty-four, but I do. The least you can do is hook a sister up!”

They took advantage of the timeout on court to sip from their customized sports bottles—equal parts Gatorade and Hawaiian punch, and a splash of RedBull and Southern Comfort.

“Bee-beep!” They clinked their Bloody Roadrunners together, giggling some more.

On the side court the basketball team huddled with Coach McLure. He may have been an overweight Jiffy Lube mechanic during the day, but on nights and weekends, he

transformed into a fiery sports figure. And though this was just a high school team, he was convinced he was coaching the Chicago Bulls during the Jordan years.

“All right,” Coach said wiping his sweaty brow, “we’re in reach of winning this thing. We’re two down. It’s a percentage game. And I don’t want anyone taking chances here. Bishop, you get in there and drive to the basket and give me a good solid lay-up and we’ll win this in overtime!”

Jason butted in. “Coach! Gimme the ball. I’ll hit a three and we’ll be woofin’ Cook-Out burgers by 9:30!”

Coach shook his head. “No dice. You’ve been missing your outside shots all night, Jason. Now stick to the plan.”

Jason glared at Coach and then over at Bishop. White Bishop. School Superintendent’s son, White Bishop. With all those college scouts rumored to be sneaking around, of course, Coach wanted to make sure White Bishop got all the glory.

But this game was Jason’s ticket outta this racist, backwoods town. One day he’d be playing for the Lakers, and some reporter would ask where he got his start and he’d answer, “Out on the streets of Fayetteenam.” He’d emphasize the ‘Nam part like he was spitting it from his mouth. He had this whole thing worked out.

Jason looked over to his best friend Mike to see if he had his back, and Mike nodded.

Coach put a hand into the center of the ring of players and every other team member stacked their hands on top. “All right,” Coach continued. “Eagles on three. One, two, three...”

“Eagles!” the team yelled and broke to their court positions.

The referee blew the whistle, and the ball was thrown into play with seconds left on the clock. Terrence made a long pass to Bishop who was positioned bottom of the key. But Jason swooped through and snatched the ball in flight.

“What’s he doing?” Ashley grabbed Mary’s arm.

“What he does best,” Mary said, playfully tugging Ashley’s ear lobe. “Peacockin’. And winning!”

Jason could hear Coach scream in the background, but he let all that noise fade out. With a pivot, he faked out his Wolverine defender, thanks to a pick set up by Mike. Now wide open, Jason stepped back across the three-point line and let the ball fly as the buzzer sounded.

Swish! Three points! A buzzer-beater! The Northwood Academy Eagles won by a point!

The crowd roared and stormed the floor, hoisting Jason up on their shoulders. As Coach neared, congratulating everyone along the way, Jason yelled from his human throne, “I told you I gotcher back, Coach!”

Coach beamed, “You’re giving me a heart attack is what you’re doing! You’re a lucky SOB, son!”

Jason threw a smile and a wink at him as his fans encircled them. Off to the side, Bishop received plenty of congrats, too, but he was keenly aware that he should have been the one up on the shoulders of his peers, not Jason.

One might imagine it would take hours to empty out that gymnasium, but it cleared out pretty quickly as everyone rushed out to their favorite hangout spots—of which Cook-Out and Waffle House were the most traditional post-game hangs. Within twenty minutes, the entire parking lot was almost cleared. Except for that shiny Hummer, which had pulled curbside.

Ashley's mom, Rebecca Stewart, sat inside the car, clutching her expensive purse nervously in her lap. She sat in silence, no radio, no music, nothing. And she kept looking back, very tense. Outside the car was the source of that tension, her husband, Henry.

Henry was way over-dressed for the event. Ever the successful businessman, he always understood that he and his family were constantly on display. It was a nuisance and drained his patience faster than anything else. His salt and pepper hair blew gently in the cool breeze as he checked his watch, a TAG Heuer Carrera, for the tenth time—and cursed under his breath. Finally, he heard footsteps behind him and Ashley approached.

She was still high on the afterglow of the big victory, but her smile faded as she discerned her father's angry face.

“You sure took your precious time getting out here,” Henry hissed. “What took you so long? Your mother and I have been waiting for fifteen minutes!”

“I’m sorry I was—”

“Rhetorical question, Ashley. Get in the car!” Henry opened the back door, snatched Ashley’s gym bag, and threw it in.

Ashley shrank back. “Hey! Stop it!”

“What are you doing? I said get in the car!”

Ashley refused to be bossed around in “her” world. She glared at her dad defiantly, but there was something just beneath that look, too.

Fear.

Henry loomed closer. “Are you sure you want to push me tonight?”

Ashley could smell the alcohol on his breath. Typical. She shifted her gaze from her Dad’s rabid eyes to her Mom who just turned her head away as if she could just ignore it and everything would be okay.

Henry closed in and jerked Ashley’s arm. “Get in the car. Now!” He growled.

“I—I’ll find another way home,” she stammered, struggling under his vice grip.

“What?” He gripped harder.

“Ow. I said I’ll just get a ride with Mary,” she said even more softly.

“Yeah, you do that.” Henry pushed her loose, almost knocking her over. He slammed the back door and opened his own. “Your little slut club has to stick together doesn’t it?”

Henry took half a second to check beneath the car and then climbed in and slammed his car door shut. The Hummer squealed away and Ashley exhaled a sigh of

relief. Fighting back tears, she stood there alone in the parking lot; at least until she looked over and finally noticed Jaime, standing there by her beat-up junker.

Jaime seemed a little shell-shocked over what she'd just witnessed.

The two shared an awkward silence. "You okay?" Jaime asked.

Always on display. Ashley wiped away the tears, quickly. "Mind your own business."

Ashley pulled out her cell phone, "Call Mary!" and the phone complied. She held the phone in front of her on speaker mode, but the call went quickly to voice-mail.

Jaime looked around the expansive, empty parking lot, but couldn't leave well enough alone. "You need a ride?" she asked cautiously.

"Pssht, in that thing?" Ashley redialed. "Thanks, but I don't think so."

Jaime waited patiently while Ashley swore softly and redialed a third time.

"C'mon, Mary, Pick up!"

"Look," Jaime said, "I don't live far from you and—"

Ashley wheeled on Jaime. "Creepier girl! Who are you and how do you know where I live?"

"I'm...I'm Jaime. And, uh, everyone knows where you live. You're Ashley Stewart, Henry Stewart's daughter."

"Ugh, don't remind me," Ashley said, softening a bit.

"What?"

"Nothing. And why aren't any of my friends *answering their stupid phones*?"

Ashley slammed her bedazzled cell phone case shut. It was her turn to look around the empty parking lot.

Jaime followed her gaze and shrugged. “Like I said, I can drop you off. It’s not a problem. I guess you could walk. Not a lot of options.”

Ashley looked from Jaime to her tragedy of a car and made a gagging sound.

“I know, right?” Jaime smiled for the first time. “It’s not gonna win Best of Show or anything, but”—she imitated Tom’s voice—“it’ll get you from point A to point B and back again!”

Jaime moved over to the passenger door and opened it. “Come on. I’ll get the door.”

Ashley rolled her eyes, “How *sweet*.”

“Uh, yeah, actually,” Jaime confessed, “it’s the only way in. Other door’s been broke for months now.”

“What a fantastic freak fest,” Ashley said, nonplussed.

Ashley noticed one of the many Jesus stickers holding the bumper together. The “Jesus Saves” one was more prominent than the others. “Why’s it always the garbage cars with the Jesus stickers?” she mused aloud, but Jaime was focused on the climb-through.

“What?”

“What?” Ashley echoed and slid in after. The car started with a choke and a cough and shuttered out of the parking space. Ashley covered her face and slid lower into the seat. “Gawd!”

Jaime beamed, proud of herself for sticking around and getting this chance to be a Good Samaritan. Especially after seeing how Ashley’s dad treated her. That was – that was – what *was* that?

“You know, your dad... Is he always—”

“A little nosey aren’t you?”

“I’m sorry, I just—”

“Just what?”

“Just thought I could maybe help. Sometimes it helps to talk, you know, to someone about... stuff,” Jaime said losing momentum under Ashley’s intense glare.

Ashley sighed, “Listen, Julie—”

“Jaime.”

“Whatever. I really appreciate what you’re trying to do. I appreciate the ride home, but let’s get one thing straight. I don’t need your help, and most importantly, none of this”—she gestured wildly at the whole car—“*ever happened*. Got it?”

Ashley reached over before she could answer and twisted on the radio.

“...and I’m Kathy Klaus, and you’re listening to W-C-I-E where Christ is everything—”

“Oh gawd,” Ashley snapped off the radio and grabbed the tape sticking out of the deck. “Skillet? Is this a frikkin’ Christian cooking show?”

“Uhhh,” Jaime snorted, happy to educate her, “Skillet is a Christian Rock band with a *girl drummer*,” she paused for effect but Ashley just looked at her like she had three heads. “Anywho, I don’t even think you could handle their awesome sound.”

Jaime reached for the cassette from Ashley, but Ashley tossed it into the back seat.

“Christian Rock,” she spat. “If that’s anything like Christian movies, it’s just music that sucks.”

Wow. This girl is intense, Jaime thought watching Ashley out of the corner of her eye. Ashley turned toward her own window, and they rode the rest of the way in awkward silence.

Jaime pulled up in front of the beautiful Stewart mansion. Actually, mansion wasn’t accurate because the smaller homes up the street were mansions. This one was more like a castle. Well, not that big, but somewhere in between, like a mansion-castle. A mastle.

“Never. Happened,” Ashley reiterated.

But Jaime was still a little upset by Ashley’s rude dad. “Ashley, your dad treating you like garbage definitely *did* happen!” she said.

“*Listen!*” Ashley’s temper flared and she grabbed Jaime’s arm, exactly like Henry had grabbed hers earlier.

Jaime flinched; it was a look of fear that Ashley was all too familiar with because she dealt with it every day. A particular flight response caused more often than not by some abusive history. Ashley caught her breath and quickly let go, instantly apologetic. “I’m— sorry, it’s just,” she continued softly, “none of your business. So lay off. And stay away from me.”

“Ah, yes,” Jaime said rubbing her arm. “Gotta protect the *reputation*.”

Ashley exhaled. “Look. I’ve lived with it all my life, okay? I’m used to it. You wouldn’t understand.”

“We have more in common than you think, Ashley.” Jaime looked over at her but it was no use, the wall was back up. The momentary connection was over. Ashley was all captain of the cheer squad again.

“Gawd, I hope not.” Ashley rolled her eyes. She forced the door open, slammed it behind her, walked across the lawn and up the front terrace, and into the gigantic front door, which completely swallowed her in darkness.

Inside the foyer, Ashley could hear her dad in his study on a phone call. Always business. All the time. She ever-so-carefully closed the front door and turned the lock; gentle, so as not to make a sound, she slipped off her shoes and tip-toed across the floor to the staircase. The study door was slightly ajar and she caught a glimpse of him pouring a large glass of scotch while berating an employee over the phone.

What a dumpster fire. She quickly made her way up to her bedroom and closed the door, locking it behind her.

Outside in the car, Jaime sat for a moment staring at the huge house, rubbing her arm. Wondering. Praying. There was a dark sadness about the place, as well as a dark sadness in Ashley. Yes, sadness buried under layers and layers of meanness and sarcasm and Chanel no. 5, but the sadness was there all the same. Jaime retrieved the Skillet tape from the back seat and blew some crumbs off of it. She tossed the tape in, fired up the car, dropped it into drive with a *kerplunk*, and rumbled away.

In the study, Henry slammed the phone down and drained his glass on the way to the window, weaving unsteadily. He looked out but no one was out there. Just some ratty, old car belonging to someone who was evidently lost. What was that a station wagon? He was of a mind to phone the police because this neighborhood didn't need more thugs casing their houses in the middle of the night. Opening the study, he spotted Ashley's shoes by the door. How many times had he told her not to leave her stuff lying around the house like that? His face clouded up as he nursed the anger.

He turned up the hall to the Master bedroom. Poking his head in, he let his eyes adjust for a second. His wife was sleeping soundly and resembled a Mad Max villain in her sleep apnea mask. The machine's steady hum drowned her deep, heavy breathing which would work its way into a full snore, despite the CPAP ads. Another black, silk mask covered her eyes, and although Henry couldn't see them, he knew she'd have those

yellow plugs in her stupid ears to block out the noise when the trash men came in the morning.

He sighed. He was tired. Of it all. Years ago he would have drawn up behind her in the bed, wrapped his arms around her, kissed her shoulder, and fallen asleep. But it had been a long time since any warmth of that kind sparked between them. Everything had been on autopilot since then. The job, the marriage, the sex. All of it. Robotic and emotionally void. He knew the exact moment it had happened too. That night. The night of— Henry shuddered.

But he couldn't worry himself with things beyond his control. No, he had to clear his head. He had a rebellious daughter upstairs who needed to be disciplined. Henry pulled the master bedroom door shut, gathered up Ashley's shoes, and in wobbly motion, headed upstairs.