

It had already been the worst day of her life.

Lily hadn't slept in seventy-two hours. Whenever she tried to lie down, her heart would race and she couldn't seem to catch her breath. There were moments when she would be standing in the middle of a room, perhaps in the kitchen, reaching out to start a pot of tea, or maybe in the living room, intending to straighten the outdated magazines on the coffee table, when she'd suddenly start and realize she'd been unconscious, standing up and eyes open. There seemed to be things darting hither and yon in the corners of her vision, and more than once she'd spun around with a gasp, expecting to be assaulted by whatever specter lurked just out of sight. Her mouth was constantly bone dry, her eyes bloodshot and grainy, and as she sat mutely in the passenger seat of the detective's unmarked sedan, she decided that it probably wouldn't be a bad idea to take one of the sleeping pills her doctor had prescribed.

"Tough break, kid," Detective Ross said when he shut off the engine in the driveway of her modest two-bedroom ranch.

Lily could only stare at him, not possessing enough energy to snort derisively at what had to be the understatement of the century. He offered her a weak smile, oblivious to the fact that what he'd just said could be considered downright profane. Without a word, she opened the door and slid out of the car.

"You gonna be okay?" Ross asked before she could close the door. "I mean, I could stay with you. You know, for a while. If you want."

She took one last look at his face, which reminded her so much of that of a Basset Hound, and felt her gorge rise. Through all of the anger and tears and denial and anguish, she hadn't missed the way his droopy-eyed gaze would linger on the front of her sweater, the way his hand would drift a tad low on her back as he escorted her past reporters.

"I'm fine," she managed to say, and she shut the door before he could offer again. The sun was just rising as she fished her key out of her purse, and a wry smile played on her lips at the sound of the Ford's tires spraying gravel. Detective Ross, ever the gentleman, hadn't waited to see her safely inside her home before he pulled off.

Shoes were kicked off before she could even close and lock the front door. She ripped off her sensible navy blue blazer – the one she'd been photographed in countless times – as she padded down the narrow hallway toward the bathroom. Under the tepid spray of the shower, she cried for what she hoped would be the last time for a long time. What's done is done, she told herself. There's no turning back.

After she bathed, she lay on top of the coverlet on her twin bed, clad only in a threadbare towel. Though she tried to think of something else – *anything* else – her mind kept replaying the sequence of events that had led up to that moment.

She couldn't remember her real father, who had died when she was only three. Matthew remembered, but then again, he was five years older. Mama married Pete a few years after her first husband died. The abuse began almost immediately, though at the time, Lily had been too young to recognize the signs. All she knew was that Mama was sick in bed a lot, and that when she wasn't sick, she was awfully clumsy, bumping into doors and tripping down stairs more often than could be deemed normal. It wasn't until the age of eleven, when Lily witnessed a particularly caustic argument between her mother and stepfather, that it dawned on her what had been happening all along.

When she was in junior high, her stepfather told Lily that she could call him by his given name, if she so chose. She'd always called him "Daddy," as he'd been the closest thing to a father she'd known, and she'd conferred with her friends to see if their own dads allowed their children

to address them so informally. They'd all replied in the negative, and when she told her brother about it, he immediately became alarmed. Matt had dropped out of school and moved out at the age of sixteen, and was the most street-savvy person Lily had ever known. "Does Pete do anything else that's weird?" Matt, who had never addressed his stepfather as "Dad," asked.

She hesitated before answering, frightened by the fury in her eighteen-year-old brother's eyes. "He's been reading me bedtime stories," she admitted in a feather-light whisper. "And sometimes he makes me run his baths."

"Does Mama know?"

"Yes, but she – she doesn't say anything."

Lily had come home from school the next day to discover a disturbing scene: her mother's eyes were red and puffy and Matt was there, sporting a split lip and a black eye. Pete was nowhere around.

"You're moving in with me," Lily's brother informed her, and she'd complied without the slightest protest. Four years later, Matt would answer a life-changing phone call, his face somber as he hung up and turned to his sister. "Mama's dead."

A bad fall in the garage. She'd slipped in motor oil and hit her head on a toolbox at just the right angle to fracture her skull and break her neck. The sandwich and beer she'd been carrying out to her husband still lay on the concrete floor when the police, Pete's coworkers, arrived. The widower, of course, had been inconsolable. A freak accident, the medical examiner had decided.

But Matt and Lily knew better.

Now here she was, twenty-eight years old but feeling twice that, in what remained of her brother's legacy: a small near-shack of a house that looked as if a strong sneeze would knock it down. But it was all she had of Matt, and there was no way she'd ever leave.

He'd invariably been the strong one. Even in the wee hours of that morning, as he lay strapped to the table and was hooked up to the IV, he never once trembled or cried or begged for mercy. He just locked gazes with his sister, and as a lethal dose of drugs was injected into his veins, he'd mouthed the one word that meant the most to her.

Always.

As in, he'd always protect her, comfort her, look out for her best interests, no matter what. And it was because of that promise that the state had ended his life that morning.

Amazingly, Lily managed to doze in her narrow bed, and bright sunlight flooded her bedroom when she awakened. A glance at the bedside clock confirmed that it was nearly noon, and her growling stomach reminded her that during the time she'd been unable to sleep, she'd barely eaten, either.

She dressed in slow-motion, still dazed after the day's events, and as she stumbled down the hall, it struck her that the house reeked of something mossy and swamp-like and unpleasant. She groaned, wondering how much it would cost to replace that temperamental sump pump, and was already trying to force her foggy brain to calculate how much overtime she'd have to work to cover it when she realized that she had a guest.

Pete was in her living room.

Lily's knees buckled and she sagged against the wall, dimly aware that her bladder had let go. I'm dreaming, she thought. I'm having a nightmare and I just pissed the bed.

"Afraid not," Pete said. "I'm real and I'm here and if you know what's good for you, you'll do as I say. So sit down."

Numbly, Lily managed to make it to the sofa across from him and sit without falling. Looking at him was horrible, but she was too terrified to tear her eyes away for one second. He was dressed exactly as she'd last seen him, in uniform, though the years hadn't been kind to the fabric. His shirt was moth-eaten and filthy, the pants so caked with dirt that she was certain they could stand up on their own. Despite it all, the trousers were still creased, and the shoes, though muddy, looked brand-new.

"What do you want?" she asked weakly.

Pete smiled, and the effect made the situation go from awful to ghastly. An involuntary moan rose in Lily's throat.

"I want you, my dear, sweet Lily."

"Are you here to kill me?"

Still smiling, he nodded, using both hands on the side of his head to move it up and down. Though she was sitting, Lily swooned, dangerously close to fainting.

"Stay with me," Pete commanded. "You don't want to miss the fun. We're just getting started."

"Please," she said, that one word shaky and frail, "just get it over with."

He shook his head no, again using his hands to maneuver his head back and forth. Without warning, Lily vomited on herself.

"Now my feelings are hurt," Pete said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Do I disgust you, Lily?"

"Yes." There was no sense in lying.

"You can blame your precious brother for that. And now he's not here to come to your rescue, is he?"

"No." She began to cry.

"Oh, you cry for *him*, do you? You cry for Matthew now that *he's* dead! But did you cry for me? DID YOU?"

No, Lily had not cried for him. All she'd wanted was to collect some of her mother's belongings, and she'd waited until Matt was at work to visit the old house, knowing her brother wouldn't approve. But Matt knew his sister better than she knew herself, and happened upon Lily and Pete in the very garage where Pete had murdered his wife. Pete had Lily pinned against the wall by her throat and was squeezing the breath out of her when Matt knocked him to the ground. As Pete lay on his back on the concrete floor, in almost the exact spot where his wife had breathed her last, Matt grabbed the closest thing at hand, a razor-sharp ax, and swung with all his might. The last thing Lily remembered before passing out was screaming at the sight of her stepfather's severed head, rolling almost lazily away from his body.

Matt had buried the body but eventually it was found and he was tried and convicted and sentenced to death. And now, on the day she'd lost her brother, the only family she had, the headless corpse of her stepfather had decided to pay her a visit. Pete's head rested in his lap, gazing amusedly at her as she shuddered in revulsion.

"You've grown into a beautiful young woman," Pete's head said. "You can't blame that detective."

"How did you..." she began, then shut up when she realized just how stupid it would be to question *that*, of all things.

"Maybe you should've taken him up on his offer." The corpse stood, cradling the head in one arm like a football. When he reached for her, Lily instinctively bolted, racing down the hall toward her bedroom. Behind her, Pete laughed. "You can't run from me, so you shouldn't even try. Though this does make it more fun."

She screamed at the sound of his lumbering footsteps coming down the hall and slammed her bedroom door, wedging her rocking chair under the knob. She went to the window, intending to climb out, but there was Pete in the yard, holding his head high about his shoulders, grinning triumphantly. Lily finally allowed herself to faint, hitting her head on the windowsill as she fell into the space between the bed and the wall.

It was dark when she awakened, pants wet and head throbbing. Groaning, she pulled herself up and turned on the light. The chair was still wedged under the doorknob. Lily put her ear to the wall, listening for any sign of movement. She cautiously peered out the window, expecting to see Pete waiting for her.

All appeared to be normal.

Scared spitless, but knowing she couldn't stay in her room forever, she moved the chair and peered into the hall. Her heart leapt into her throat at the sight of muddy footprints leading to her door.

So it *hadn't* been a dream.

There was a scrap of cloth on the floor where the hall opened into the living room, and Lily's eyes widened as she approached it, recognizing it immediately but still, even after all that had happened, in disbelief.

It was a sew-on name patch, the kind most commonly seen on the work shirts of mechanics or plumbers. This particular one bore the stitched numbers *5403861*. She had last seen

it attached to the right breast of the prison-issue shirt her brother had been wearing when he'd been executed.

She stooped to retrieve it, somehow knowing what she would find on the other side, but needing the proof all the same. Turning the patch over in her hand, she saw one word, written in Matt's cramped print:

*Always.*