

Abatement

by Benjamin Hanson

Chapters Thirty One through Thirty Five

Statement and Disclaimer

I present for your enjoyment the next to last installment of Abatement. I would like to thank everyone who sent me comments about the last installment, and beg you to please keep sending them. At this point I am beginning to feel the reality of finishing this story, and I have to say, it's pretty darn emotional for me. It's amazing how attached you get to your own characters when you write a story like this. I sincerely hope that everyone likes the ending, and that this installment leaves you on the edge of your seats! At any rate, keep those emails coming! You can email me at benhanson1980@yahoo.com

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Chapter Thirty One

I lay in bed, still dressed, staring up at the ceiling above me through the darkness. The covers around me were more for show, and as much as I wanted to get in a nap before our departure, sleep found itself aloof. My mind raced with the dangers of what we had endeavored to do, and I knew well what could go wrong. For the moment my mind remained fairly mature, but it had slipped before and doubtlessly would again. Despite the level of maturity I held, for the moment, I couldn't help but fear the possibilities that could exist. I felt remorse for leaving, for leaving David, for leaving the home I had found. The child in me didn't want to leave home, but the adult in me knew that I had to because this wasn't my home, not really.

I turned over, staring at the wall blankly. I wasn't sure how much longer it would be until we left, but I was certain I wouldn't have long to wait. After we returned from the woods, Peter and I didn't say much to one another. We knew what would transpire; there was no reason to speak it. I shut my eyes, trying to will sleep that wouldn't come. My hands absentmindedly played with a string that had frayed from the edge of my comforter. Just as I began to entertain the idea of getting up to see what time it was, I heard my door knob slowly turn, as the light of the hallway flooded my small room. I turned over,

propped my head up on my hands, and just gazed at the silent form of Peter. He closed the door behind him and walked over.

I smiled gently as he bent over, pressing his lips against mine and kissing me wordlessly. I could see his love for me in his eyes, and that was enough. I pushed the comforter down to the end of the bed as his right hand encircled mine, squeezing lightly. As I sat up, my hand still locked in his, he sat next to me. He placed his arm around me, squeezing me gently, his left hand attempting to make sense of my messy locks. I inclined my head towards him when he had finished, staring deeply into his eyes. We both nodded in unison, and stood together. As we exited the room, closed the door behind us, and walked to the bottom of the stairs, I stopped for a brief moment. I turned towards the stairs that led to the basement, to where David was doubtlessly sleeping. I felt a pang of regret.

Peter's hand rose to gently squeeze my shoulder. I knew that he wanted to comfort me, to tell me it was alright, but we couldn't speak just yet. I sighed, allowing a single cheer to escape my eye and cascade down my cheek. Peter once more wrapped his hand in mine, and we quickly slipped on a pair of shoes, opened the door, and escaped into the cool night air. Our steps were quick as we made our way towards the woods. By the time the grass gave way to the dirt floor beneath, our pace quickened into a run, and the sounds of the trees rustling in the midnight breeze encircled us. With each pounding of my foot against the earth, I felt my fear intensity.

Would they know that we were gone just yet? How long would it take them to figure it out? Where exactly were we going to go? There were a million unanswered questions, but only one thing that I felt for sure. I knew that I loved Peter, and being apart from him was just not an option. Even if escaping with me endangered his life, I felt it was worth it. I didn't feel guilty for having him come with me on this journey, because we were one, we were soul mates. Without Peter I could hardly breathe, without him life had no real reason. What other option was there than to be with him? There wasn't one that I could ascertain.

My youthful energy in the face of how long we had run, and the exhaustion that racked my tiny frame, had been spent. Each stride of my legs was driven by fear, by worry, by necessity. My breath was quick and ragged, and my legs tingled with pain. We had run for what felt like hours, but I was fairly certain it had only been twenty, thirty minutes at most.

"Where are we going?" I asked, finally breaking the silence. If we weren't far away enough to escape the ears of Purity, then we never were going to be.

"I don't know, we'll think of something," Peter said comfortingly, squeezing my hand as we continued to run. His own breath was certainly quickened, but perhaps not as ragged as my own. Had he been able to nap? Was he not as worried as I was? I felt somewhat comforted, somewhat betrayed by the concept. I decided to push it from my mind.

"My side hurts," I whined suddenly, realizing that a stitch had begun to form in my side. My legs flailed, struggling to keep up with Peter's longer stride. I began to feel tears of pain form in my eyes.

"We have to keep running; can't you last a little longer?" Peter asked, a concerned but insistent tone to his voice. I shook my head, biting my lower lip and feeling the stitch grow stronger. My legs were spent, and they felt as though they were made of jelly. All I wanted was to stop, to rest, and none of the urgency of what we were doing seemed to combat the urges of my body to give out. I let out a shout, my tears flowing freely, as I tripped on a limb and sailed to the ground beneath us. I lay there for a moment, my hands entangled in weeds and twigs, and felt my knee burn as dirt mingled with blood.

"Are you okay?" Peter asked urgently, stopping and bending down to check on me. He turned me over and lifted my leg into his lap, examining the wound.

"It's not too bad, I think it's going to be okay," he spoke gently as he used the edge of his shirt to dab at the wound, to collect some of the blood that had flown down my leg. I merely sniffled, fighting my tears from continuing on.

"I wanna go home," I said through red, puffy eyes. I selfishly wanted nothing more than to return, than to end this futile effort to escape. In my moment of exhaustion, my mind had begun to regress, and I sounded more childish than I had wanted.

"You know we can't do that..." Peter's voice trailed off as he let his blood stained shirt return to his side. He stood, reaching down to grab my hands and help me to my feet. My hands turned into fists and wiped away some of the tears that sat solemnly against my cheeks, leaving a trail of mud behind. Peter sighed, positioned himself in front of me, and bent down.

"Hop on, I'll carry you."

I sniffled and nodded, wrapped my arms around his neck, and jumped a little so he could catch my legs beneath his arms. As the skin of my knee stretched, the stinging returned full force and I shouted out once more. Peter began to run as quickly as he could with my weight bearing against him. Despite the size difference, Peter was only physically twelve, and only had so much strength. Within a short period of time, his running turned into a hastened walk, and I found myself resting my face in his hair, inhaling his scent.

"I think we're just going to have to walk..." Peter said finally, stopping and letting me slide off his back. He turned to face me, hands resting on his knees as he fought to catch his breath. I was impressed that he managed to carry me as long as he did. I wrapped my arms around him, hugging him tightly.

"Thanks..." I whispered into his ear. He didn't have to carry me; we were both in as much danger at this point. I had been the one that had fallen, not Peter. Despite that, he loved me enough to try, to push his body beyond its own limits.

"It's fine, but we really need to get going." Peter nodded, taking my hand once more as we began to walk together. Thankfully my ankle seemed to be fine, and aside from an occasional breeze causing my knee to sting, I found it fairly easy to walk. From the thickness of the trees that surrounded us, I was fairly certain that we had already traveled a great distance. Even though I didn't really know the woods all that well, I was sure that I had never been in this part before.

“Do you know where we are?” I asked, looking over at Peter’s face. It was pale, illuminated by the moon as it shone through the canopy above.

“Nope, I’ve never gone this far before. I figure if we’re lost, it’ll be harder for them to find us... At least I hope so,” he breathed a sigh as the last words escaped his mouth. I knew he was uncertain, uneasy. Strangely enough, I found it comforting. It was nice to not be the only one without any idea as to what to do.

“I think we’ll be okay. I mean, yeah we’re lost, but we have each other,” I smiled happily, squeezing Peter’s hand. Even if we had to spend the rest of our days wandering the forest and rummaging for food it would be fine, as long as he was there.

“Yeah we’ll be fine, as long as THEY don’t catch up with us anyway.” Peter replied. The look on his face was fairly blank. I had expected to see worry, exhaustion, anything really, but there just didn’t seem to be anything there. I wondered if he was trying to stay strong for me, or if it was just a coping mechanism.

“Do you miss David?” Peter finally asked after a particularly quiet space of time. My eyes had been staring at the ground, my mind so spent that it simply couldn’t think anymore. A vision of the tiny red haired child immediately surfaced. I felt a pang of regret once more.

“Yeah...” I whispered. I felt bad for missing him, but I just couldn’t help it. I loved Peter will all of my heart but David was my friend, the first friend I had made after I regressed. I silently wondered if he would miss me, and whether he would be alright.

“You’ll forget about him eventually. Just try not to think about it, he’s going to be living with a new family soon and he’ll be really happy.” Peter’s words were encouraging, but final. I immediately realized that I would probably never see David’s face again. The last experience we shared was painful, and that would forever be his memory of me. I bit my lip, trying to force the thoughts from my mind.

The sounds of the various insects chirping and calling around us had begun to fade, and the once dark sky gave way to colors of orange, red, and midnight blue. The sun was beginning to rise, and with it came a new sense of exhaustion that seemed to cover both of us. Peter finally stopped, staring at a particularly large tree to our left.

“I think we’ll be alright to stop for the night, we have to get some rest.”

I nodded, looking at the tree as well. The collective of leaves beneath it seemed more inviting than I could express. As I stood there, my legs tingled, and I knew that sleep would come all too easy. We both walked over to the tree and plopped down, Peter spooning me from behind and offering his arm as a pillow. As I stared at the endless collection of trees around us, the thoughts of the unknown faded into oblivion. I was too tired to think, to feel. The only thing that mattered was Peter’s arms around me, and that I was free. My eyes closed and I fell away into a deep slumber, warm in Peter’s embrace.

Chapter Thirty Two

My eyes opened dimly to the harsh afternoon sun as I felt shivering coming from behind me. My hands grasped Peter's arm, holding it close, as I collected myself for a moment before speaking. I was still warm, exhausted, but warm. Apparently Peter had kept me in his embrace throughout the morning.

"Are you okay?" I asked, breaking the silence of our awakening.

"Yeah I'm just cold." Peter shivered, wrapping his arms tighter around me and burying his face in my hair. The once long summer days had given way to an early autumn as was typical for Maine.

"How long have you been awake?" I asked, turning around and embracing him, my hands flying across his back in an attempt to warm him.

"A couple hours." Peter's teeth chattered as he spoke. I froze, feeling bad. He had wanted to let me sleep, to rest, and had sacrificed his own warmth to see that accomplished.

"I'm sorry..." I whispered, grabbing his shirt tightly with my left hand. Peter merely laughed, his shivering subsiding a bit.

"Don't worry about it, did you sleep well?"

I nodded despite myself. I had slept remarkably well. Although considering the level of exhaustion I had reached the previous morning, I probably could have slept on a bed of nails.

"I think we need to get moving if you're awake." Peter said, finally sitting up and rubbing his hands together. I nodded, sitting up as well and staring at his face. We were both dirty, and small particles of dead leaves clung to Peter's oily hair.

"I'm hungry." I suddenly commented, becoming increasingly aware of the rumblings in my stomach. We hadn't eaten since yesterday, and it was mostly likely the afternoon by now. I knew there was little hope for eating anytime soon, but I couldn't deny the feeling just the same.

"I know; me too. We'll find something." Peter comforted as he stood and offered his hand. I grabbed it and rose, and we began to walk once more through the woods towards an unknown destination. I looked down at my knee which had dried over the course of the morning, and had begun to scab over. I kept my strides to a minimum, trying my best not to stretch the skin anymore than I had to.

"I think we should try to find a town, maybe we can get a bit to eat and figure out what we're going to do next," Peter spoke urgently, trying to regain his resolve. I nodded, squeezing his hand tightly. It was better than any ideas I had. It was beyond me to know how we would find a town, but I hoped that something would become apparent. After about ten minutes we happened upon a stream, and for the first time since our journey began, I saw a look of delight cover Peter's face.

"If we follow the stream, it might lead us to a town! Come on!" Peter's voice quivered with excitement as his own pace began to quicken. I followed next to him, wincing as the skin on my knee stretched, but was pushed on by the feelings of hunger in my stomach. The sound of the water as it traveled down the stream was calming, but made me aware of how parched I was. I tried to will saliva to appear in my mouth but it was of no use, it was as though I had swallowed a desert.

We walked for what felt like an eternity, and I began to lose hope concerning Peter's plan. All that I could see around us were woods, and while the stream continued to stretch out into unforeseen distances, it didn't appear to be getting us any closer to a town. I glanced over at Peter, prepared to voice my concerns, but his face was still hopeful, still happy. I bit my lip, unwilling to break his mood. I stared at the ground beneath us, trying my best to avoid the various rocks, branches, and dips as they came. Just when I was about to suggest we rest for a bit, Peter suddenly stopped, dropped my hand, and jumped gleefully into the air.

"Look! I knew it would work!" Peter exclaimed. My eyes fought hard to look beyond us, and suddenly became large. Sure enough, I could see a few buildings in the distance, along with a road. Peter had been right all along. I smiled toothily, genuinely happy, my hand falling to rub my stomach.

"It won't be long now!" I giggled, speaking to my stomach, but also partially to Peter's as well. Peter giggled as well, grabbed my hand, and began to bound towards the buildings beyond us. I found it hard to keep pace, but managed despite the pain that racked my knee. It gave me intense pleasure to see Peter so happy, and I wasn't going to steal that from him. Below the buildings and the town above was a rather steep hill, and as we began to climb it, I found myself fall behind Peter quite quickly.

Peter turned, laughing impishly as he did, and grabbed my hand, attempting to pull me along with him. I managed to keep up, maintaining my footing despite there not being much to work with. When at last we crested the hill, Peter finally stopped, grabbed his knees, and caught his breath. I joined him, happy to see civilization, but duly exhausted.

"So what do you want to do first?" Peter asked after finally collecting himself. I laughed, realizing how awkward it would be for two young boys to just walk into any building and demand services. Peter was most likely well aware of the same, but the hope we both shared in making it this far was impossibly tangible.

"I, uh, well I had an idea." I scratched my arm nervously as I waited for Peter to reply. I knew that my idea wouldn't be what he wanted to hear, but with little hope remaining, it was better than nothing.

"Sure." Peter said, grinning from ear to ear and waiting to hear it. My fingers fell to my side and prodded at my pocket, the familiar sliver of paper containing Wesley's number crinkling in response.

"I think we should call Wesley." I said simply, my cheeks turning red beneath their dirt covered façade. I watched as Peter's once gleeful expression turned into one of annoyance.

"That perv? No way!" He exclaimed, turning and crossing his arms. I sighed, I knew he wouldn't be terribly keen on the idea, but he was really the only adult we knew that wasn't under Purity's thumb.

"Do you have a better idea?" I asked, crossing my own arms and feeling somewhat superior.

"We can go steal some food and keep walking in the woods." Peter said simply, his stubbornness remaining strong. I rolled my eyes.

"Do you want to get caught and end up being sent back to the orphanage? Maybe we can get some food, some sleep in a real bed, and then head out with a better plan." I said, attempting to justify my idea. Peter groaned, his right index finger and thumb pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Fine, call him, but if he tries to touch you again I'm gonna kick him in the balls."

I giggled, glad that he had listened to reason. I hugged him tightly, his arms lay lazily at his sides.

"It'll be great, I promise." I remarked as I grabbed his hand and we began to walk between the buildings and towards the street.

At the sight of people I began to feel my heart quicken, and worry wash over me. Would Purity be looking for us? Would there be any missing person's reports? I felt fairly certain there wouldn't be any contact with the police, considering our illegal nature to begin with, but I wasn't so sure what Purity was capable of. My eyes managed to fall on a phone booth nestled next to a gas station, and I grinned happily.

"There!" I called, grabbing Peter's hand tighter and running across the empty street. As soon as we approached I removed the phone and pressed it to my ear, noticing its weight at once. I extracted the paper containing Wesley's number from my pocket and sat it on the ledge, suddenly realizing that I was without change. I glanced at Peter who stared at me blankly.

"I don't have anything." He said, suddenly grinning in an evil sort of way. I grumbled, turning to the phone and dialed '0' for the operator.

"Operator, how may I connect your call?" The voice immediately replied on the other end. I gave the lady Wesley's number, and the phone began to ring. Within moments I could hear Wesley's groggy voice on the other end.

"You have a collect call from Ben, do you accept the charges?" The woman asked, to which Wesley accepted.

"Hello?" Wesley breathed, finally sounding more aware.

"Hey!" I shouted out, glad to hear his voice.

"Hey kiddo! I was worried you wouldn't call me so soon. What's up?" He asked. I could hear him moving in the background.

“Look I don’t have a lot of time to explain, but I was wondering if you could pick me up?” I asked, my hand gripping the phone tightly. I didn’t have time to answer a flurry of questions, and I only hoped that he would just do as I asked. After a moment of silence, Wesley began to speak.

“Are you at the orphanage?” He asked. I sighed, shaking my head no as I spoke.

“No, I don’t know where I am.” I said truthfully.

“What’s around you?” Wesley asked; his voice emotionless. I was just glad it wasn’t angry.

“We’re at a gas station called... called...” As I stared at the sign I began to feel my heart race once more. I saw the name, but my mind couldn’t wrap itself around the correct way of pronouncing it. As I fought for my adult reading comprehension, it failed me. I felt like crying, like running away, but I knew I had to fight. I turned and stared at Peter in terror, who smiled reassuringly, patting my shoulder.

“Marjorie’s.” He said simply. I nodded thanks, and spoke the name into the receiver.

“And across the street there’s...” Before I could continue I was cut off.

“I know exactly where you are, stay put. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Wesley immediately hung up the phone on his end as I returned mine to its home.

“He said he’ll be here soon,” I told Peter, speaking as reassuringly as I could. My mind immediately returned to my difficulty in pronouncing the name of the gas station, and I grabbed Peter’s arm, looking into his eyes with concern.

“The name...” I whispered. He knew exactly what I meant as he sighed.

“It’s a part of the regression; you start to forget things after awhile. Since I’m older than you it’s not a problem for me, but I can’t remember everything all the time.” Peter said simply. His tone was apologetic, but the fact worried me just the same. If regression’s effect was not only limited to the way I felt and reacted to the world, then what else did it change about me? Could I even trust my own judgment?

“Okay,” I said, unwilling to ruin the good news of Wesley’s impending arrival. It was the first bit of good hope we had. We sat down on the curb and waited, both of us lost deep in our thoughts. After a fairly lengthy portion of time, the silence was broken by the sound of a horn, and we both looked up to see Wesley coming to a stop across from us. I smiled, jumped to my feet, and ran to the car with Peter close behind me.

Chapter Thirty Three

If Wesley was angry or concerned, he hid it remarkably well. I had half expected him to scold us, to assail us with questions concerning why we were so far away from the orphanage all alone, but it simply never occurred. I stared out of the window as we drove, watching the people and being

cautiously optimistic that our contacting Wesley wouldn't reveal where we were. I knew it was a somewhat dangerous idea, but it was the best idea we had.

"So what's your name?" Wesley asked Peter. I glanced at him through the mirror above and noticed that he was staring at the floor, a disgruntled expression crossing his face. Since I knew he wouldn't soon answer, I took the opportunity.

"That's Peter, don't mind him, he's grumpy," I giggled, trying my best to lighten the mood. Peter shot me a slightly perturbed look.

"I see. Well it's good to meet you Peter." Wesley smiled into the mirror, turning around the block and circling around.

"So are you guys hungry?" He asked, maintaining his genial demeanor.

I nodded quickly, finally remembering my stomach. I was absolutely starving, and at this point I would eat anything.

"How about the diner?" He asked, turning once more and heading deeper towards town. Peter and I spoke in unison, apparently having the same thought on our minds.

"No!" We both yelled out. If having contacted Wesley hadn't already given away our whereabouts, then parading around in public certainly would. We had only made it to the town down the hill from the orphanage, and that wasn't nearly sufficiently far enough away.

"Alright..." Wesley's voice trailed off as he turned into a parking lot and turned around, starting to drive into the opposite direction from whence we came.

"Can we go to your house?" I half pleaded, half asked. I wasn't so sure that being in the car was safe. I wanted to get away from civilization as soon as was humanly possible.

"Sure," Wesley said simply, patted my leg, and quickly removed his hand. Peter's eyes remained glued to his hand the whole time, only causing me to giggle.

After a few miles the car turned onto a long dirt road that caused the car to bounce unnervingly with each rotation of the tires. It seemed as though each pot hole, dip, and rock was amplified throughout the body of the car. I held my stomach, willing it to calm, as I tried to focus on the trees outside instead of the sick beginning to rise within me. Just when I thought I was going to barf all over the place, Wesley turned onto a gravel driveway that led to a small cabin nestled on a hill. Upon reaching the top he put it in park, and swung open his door. I gazed at the long porch that encircled the cabin, and the relative plainness that surrounded it. There were trees everywhere and no sign of civilization. I smiled a little, it was almost perfect.

Peter opened his door first and I quickly followed, both of us closing them in unison. We followed Wesley to the porch and waited patiently as he unlocked the door, sliding it open. When we stepped inside the smell of vanilla and cedar reached our noses, and the warmth of a dying fire still filled

the room. I sighed contentedly, and plopped down on an overstuffed red sofa that sat across from the fireplace. Peter sat next to me, took my hand in his, and held it firmly.

Wesley shut the door, placed his keys on the mantle, and sat in a tall winged back chair facing us. He sat in silence for a moment, a contemplative expression covering his face, and we waited. I knew that the long awaited questions were going to come, but I was hopeful that he wouldn't pry too much.

"I won't ask why, but..." Wesley's voice trailed off for a moment before he continued. "Did you run away?"

Peter looked at me for a moment as I fought for a fitting reply. Should I lie? There really didn't seem to be a reason to at this point.

"Yes," I finally replied, returning my gaze to Wesley. He didn't seem to be angry, and he didn't seem to have very many more questions to ask. He sat back, rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and stood up.

"I'm going to go make you some sandwiches... Do you want anything to drink?"

"Pepsi... please," I said. Peter sighed, replying the same. Wesley simply nodded and walked deeper into the home, presumably towards the kitchen. I looked at Peter who had sat back, crossing his arms across his chest.

"Maybe we should tell him the truth, you know, about us being who we are." I said, to which Peter's eyes became large.

"Are you crazy? Even if we could trust this guy, it's not like he'd believe us!" Peter exclaimed, apparently appalled by the idea. I sighed, accepting that he was probably right. Why would he believe us? I hardly believed it, and I had experienced it firsthand.

"Listen, I know you like him and everything but there's something about him I just don't like. I say we ask him for money and leave." Peter spoke with a definitive tone to his voice. My face contorted into one of shock.

"He's being so nice to us! How can you say that?" I attacked, despite my better judgment. I was grateful about how nice Wesley was being, and no amount of stubbornness on Peter's part would take that away from me.

"Trust no one." Peter murmured as we were both stricken silent by Wesley's return. He sat down two plates containing cut up bologna sandwiches, chips, and two sodas across from us. He returned to the winged back chair across from us and simply watched as we both dove into our food. We were ravenous, as was apparent, and it didn't take long for our dirty hands to clutch the sandwiches and hungrily deposit them in our gullets. Each bite felt heavenly, and as the chewed up meat and bread slid down my throat, I felt a bit of joy return to me. Peter and I managed to keep a relatively similar pace, and within a matter of a few minutes, we had both finished off the contents of our plates.

“I’m glad to see you liked your sandwiches so much!” Wesley laughed, having watched the whole process of our eating with mild amusement. I grinned up at him, wiping my mouth on my hand.

“Thank you!” I said. Peter remained silent so I prodded him in the ribs with my elbow, causing him to mumble a silent word of gratitude.

“Don’t mention it.” Wesley said, smiling at the two of us and letting out a sigh. He propped his feet up on a mismatched ottoman as the tone of his face turned serious.

“I really think you two should go back to the orphanage.”

Peter’s hands balled into fists as I felt him tense beside me.

“That isn’t an option,” Peter stated with a callous tone. I reached my hand over and grabbed his shoulder, squeezing it lightly.

“I can’t really tell you what’s going on, but I promise we can’t go back. Please don’t call anybody and tell them.” I pleaded, looking into Wesley’s eyes with the most desperate expression I could muster. Wesley looked momentarily uncomfortable, but finally sighed, shaking his head.

“Against my better judgment, I won’t. You’re more than welcome to stay here as long as you need, but you know you can’t be here forever... as much as I’d like that.” There was a slight delay as he spoke those last few words. I felt an aura of remorse fall over him as he did. I blushed, looking at Peter who seemed calmer than before.

“Look, can we just get some money from you? We’ll be out of here tonight and you won’t have to worry about it anymore.” Peter spoke with a cold tone. I glared at him, a look of scolding crossing my face. Wesley laughed a little, not because he was amused, but because there really wasn’t any other response to be had.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, but like I said, you can stay here all you’d like. I can even give you a ride somewhere if you need.”

Peter groaned and stood, looking down at his dirty clothes.

“Can we take a bath?” He asked, looking at Wesley with the same look of distrust from before. Wesley nodded, stood as well, and smoothed a few wrinkles out of his pants.

“Yeah both of you come on, I’ll get you some towels and some clothes to change into while I wash what you have.”

We both followed Wesley deeper into his home, down a dark hallway, and into a surprisingly large bathroom with blue tiled walls, a large tub, and a pedestal sink. He made quick work of grabbing a couple towels from a linen closet across the hall, and took two t-shirts from a separate room and laid them across the sink atop the towels.

"If you leave your clothes in the hallway I'll make sure to get them in the wash as soon as the door is shut. I know the shirts are a little big, but it's the best I can do for now."

I thanked him quietly as he left us alone. We slipped out of our clothes, into the tub, and washed as quickly as we could. Neither of us said much to the other. I could tell that Peter was deep in thought, and I was slightly perturbed at him for the way he was treating Wesley. When at last we rinsed, dried, and pulled the shirts over our heads, I collected our clothes and deposited them outside the door. We began to walk down the hallway and were greeted by Wesley halfway.

"Do you want to take a nap?" He asked, looking at the two of us with wet messy hair, and shirts that were obviously too big for us. Peter's shirt stopped just above his knees, and mine came down a bit further. I had to push the right shoulder back up as it kept trying to fall down my arm. We both nodded, glad to have the opportunity to get a bit of decent rest, and Wesley led us into a spare bedroom. After bidding us a good rest, he turned and shut the door. I listened intently as I heard him scoop up our clothing and head back down the hallway. By the time I had turned around, Peter had already pulled the covers down and was crawling underneath.

"I guess we'll figure it out after we sleep a bit." Peter said, finally resigning himself to accepting Wesley's hospitality. I smiled, climbed into bed with him, and clung tightly to him. The bed felt nice and the warmth overtook me quite quickly. Within moments we both fell into a much deserved slumber.

Chapter Thirty Four

When my eyes finally opened, the once bright sun was replaced by darkness, and I stretched in contentment only to not find Peter there. I turned over, sitting up at once, and finally settled my eyes on his form as it sat perched on the end of the bed. I crawled forward, wrapped my arms around his torso, and sighed, laying my chin on his shoulder.

"You alright?" I asked, silently kissing his cheek. Peter was rigid, seemingly unfazed by my act of affection.

"If he isn't going to give us money, then we need to make some ourselves. We can't get out of town without anything." As Peter spoke I became aware of the fact he had probably been awake for some time. I sighed, buried my face in his back, and squeezed him tighter. I was safe and warm in a bed, and I wanted so desperately to just ignore our problems for a bit more.

"What do you suggest?" I finally asked, wanting to support and realizing ignoring our problems wouldn't make them go away.

"Well, we prostitute ourselves," Peter said with a very matter of fact tone. I immediately released him, slid to the edge of the bed, and stared at him in horror.

“The whole point of this is so we can be together! I thought we were trying to avoid having to do that anymore!” I half yelled, half whispered so as not to wake Wesley. Peter’s face contorted into one of slight anger.

“Listen, I know that, but it’s the only thing we can do. It’s not like we’re old enough to get jobs. I promise it’s not that bad after a few times...” His voice trailed off as his face fluttered from angry to remorseful. I knew that at his core there was no way he wanted to ask me to do it, but at the same time it seemed the only option he had.

“Look, I know it seems like a good idea, but we don’t have Purity here to protect us. Anything could happen.” I said with words that were wiser than my present years. Peter turned a little, his face turning into one of rage, his hands balling into fists.

“You have no idea! You’ve never been out on those streets; you’ve never had to turn tricks! I know what I’m doing damn it!” His voice quaked with each word, and the level of anger that rose up within him was penetrating. As upset as seeing him in that state was, my own anger began to boil and I just couldn’t hold it back no matter how hard I tried.

“I know I haven’t, okay? I know I have never been out there. I’m so sorry that I haven’t had to do that yet, but I’m not stupid enough to think that a twelve year old and a nine year old can fight off an adult!” I said, completely enraged. I knew deep inside that he was doing what he felt was right, but I knew I was right. I knew that it would be dangerous just going out there and soliciting sex without any real plan or protection.

“Why don’t you just go back to the orphanage and wait to go live with Mr. Terrance? I’m sure he’ll be more than happy to take care of you! You don’t want to do anything I want to do you... you... you dummy!” I could tell that the anger and desperation inside Peter had caused him to regress a bit, and the final words confirmed it. Before I had a chance to respond, he had already risen to his feet and grabbed his freshly laundered clothes from the dresser across the way, apparently having been placed there while we were sleeping. He quickly slipped into them, throwing the oversized t-shirt across the room, and started to slip on his shoes.

“Where are you going?” I asked in fear, my eyes beginning to fill with tears.

“Away from you!” Peter said, finally managing to slip on the last shoe and standing back to his full height. Before I had a chance to protest, to beg him to stay, he had already cleared the journey to the door, slammed it behind him, and the sounds of his feet could be heard quickly moving down the hallway. I wanted to yell out, to beg him to stay, but the sound of the front door opening and closing behind itself met my ears. I immediately burst into tears, fell onto the bed, and bunched the blankets up in my fists. I had no idea what to do, I had pushed him away. I knew I was right about the dangers, but at what cost? The whole point of our escaping was so we could be together, and now Peter was gone. What was I going to do?

“Ben...” Wesley spoke as he opened the door, apparently having been jarred awake by Peter’s less than quiet departure. I didn’t look up as I sobbed uncontrollably into the comforter. Wesley sat down, laying his hand gently on my back to comfort me, and remained silent for a moment. Desperate for someone to cling to, I sat up, and immediately wrapped my arms around Wesley, burying my face into his chest. Wesley remained silent, simply wrapping his arms around me and rocking me slightly, trying to console me.

“He’s gone!” I managed between sobs, my arms wrapped as tightly around Wesley as I could muster. I didn’t know what to do, and all I wanted was for him to come back. I knew there was no chance of that now, he was angry, and even if he returned it wouldn’t be for awhile. Wesley gently ran his fingers through my hair, his strong arms feeling warm and comforting in my time of need. When at last I managed to calm my torrent of tears into sporadic sobs, Wesley began to speak.

“What happened?” He asked with a tone of genuine interest. I knew he was worried, and I knew that he would help in any way he could.

“He got mad at me and ran away,” I said, sniffling and wiping my nose on the oversized shirt that draped over my shoulder. It was the truth, but I really didn’t feel like explaining the details at that moment.

“Listen...” Wesley began, still holding me tightly as I sobbed. “I really want to help you, but I am so confused. Please, please, just tell me what’s going on.” As he finished speaking the words were stressed, insistent, urgent. I sighed, knowing that it couldn’t be avoided. Whether he believed the truth or not was another story, but I wouldn’t hide it anymore. I sat back, on my knees, and stared up at him through my puffy eyes. Wesley’s hands rose and wiped the tears away, a comforting smile appearing on his lips.

“Do you promise, whatever I tell you, that it will be a secret?” I asked, knowing that he could handle that much. Wesley simply nodded, his hands resting on his knees as he faced me.

“And do you promise that no matter how crazy what I say sounds, you’ll believe me?” Wesley nodded once more, his face seeming genuine. I sighed once more; almost certain he would have to break that last promise.

“Here goes...” I began, speaking mostly to myself but also partially to Wesley. My hands grabbed the hem of my shirt and began to twist it nervously, as I fought for the courage to speak. When at least it arrived, I tried to explain myself as best as I could.

It became immediately apparent that whenever one was emotional, the regression worked against you the most. As I explained the details of my former life, that fateful night in the alley, my regression, Mr. Terrance, and Purity, I fought with my childish mind to formulate the words correctly. I kept going off onto tangents that really weren’t relevant to the topic at hand, and I always struggled to maintain coherence throughout the entire explanation. When at last I had managed to finish my

explanation, not entirely sure if I had succeeded in being able to be understood or not, I stared into Wesley's eyes for any sign of his believing me or not.

The look on Wesley's face was indiscernible, and the silence between us was almost deafening. I had expected complete disbelief, or confusion, but neither seemed readily apparent. As I waited for some kind of a response, I kept trying to think of ways to prove my actual age; my birth year, the company I used to work for, anything that only an adult would be able to immediately say. Before I had a chance to start, Wesley finally spoke.

"I believe you," Wesley said solemnly. I was struck completely silent as I stared at him. He seemed completely genuine, and I felt both glad and surprised. My hands released the shirt, allowing it to fall back down, and I stretched my legs out in front of me. As calmness retook my mind, so did my mental coherence.

"Thanks," I said, gazing out the window at the impenetrable night.

"Then the other day, when I..." Wesley's voice trailed off. I smiled a little, patting his hand.

"It felt nice, but unfortunately I can't help but fall into my childish mind at times. It's kind of scary having an adult touch you there when you're nine."

Wesley nodded, shook his head, and then planted his face in his hands. I scooted over next to him and wrapped my arm around him.

"You aren't a bad person Wesley, you aren't. Please don't feel bad about what you did." I tried to encourage him as best I could. Wesley sighed, finally allowing his hands to drop, and turned his gaze towards me.

"Thanks."

I nodded.

"Don't mention it."

"Listen, I'm going to help you. No one deserves to be enslaved. As for now though, it's one in the morning and there isn't a whole lot we can do."

I laughed a little, finally feeling at ease. I was now completely open with Wesley, and found an ally that I could trust. He was an adult, overcoming the one limitation that Peter and I had.

Peter... As the thought of him returned to my mind I began to become sad, but tried my best to push it from my thoughts.

"I really don't think I'm going to be able to sleep... Care for some milk? Err... coffee?" Wesley laughed nervously, still viewing me as a child in his mind. I simply smiled and nodded.

"Milk would be great."

Chapter Thirty Five

When at last the morning had come, Wesley and I had been awake all night. A few glasses of milk for me, and a few cups of coffee for him later, we had discussed the finer details of my predicament, and Wesley's plans to resolve our problems. He was already busy calling his friends and distant relatives, and had managed to get hold of a cousin in New York that had a cabin in the middle of nowhere. We would go into hiding there for a few weeks until things calmed down a bit, and then we would make our way out west, somewhere that Purity wouldn't think to look.

As much as I was pleased with the plans, and Wesley's selflessness throughout, I knew that despite his willingness to leave in haste, we couldn't leave without Peter. He was the primary reason that I had chosen to run away, and I couldn't begin to imagine my life without him.

"I really appreciate what you're doing, but I just can't leave without Peter." I finally said, finishing my last glass of milk and staring at the wood grain on his kitchen table. Wesley smiled, tapping his fingers on the table a bit.

"I figured as much, although we can't wait too long. Let's go into town and see if we can find him. Hopefully we can pick him up, come back here, pack some things, and hit the road before it gets too late. I really don't want to be leaving here any later than tonight."

I nodded, completely understanding even if I was willing to take the risk of waiting as long as was needed for Peter to be returned to me. I had constantly worried throughout the morning that he had already been caught, but I knew Peter well. Despite his regressed state he was still intelligent, and resourceful. If anyone could avoid being caught, it was him. Wesley took the empty glass away from me, washed it, and went into the back to get changed. I followed, grabbed my washed set of clothes from the room I had slept in with Peter the night before, and changed quickly. Just as I was setting about slipping my shoes on, Wesley walked in.

"Are you about ready to go?" He asked, observing me as I slipped the last shoe into place.

"Yep, let's go."

I slid off the edge of the bed and followed Wesley outside. As we piled into the car and made our way down the driveway, and back onto the dirt road, my eyes rapidly danced around us. Gone was any focus I had on the car's wild bouncing as it hit each imperfection of the dusty trail, causing me to nearly vomit the day before. It was now replaced by genuine concern, and a desire to find Peter no matter what. When at last we made our way to the main road without any sight of Peter, and the car calmed to a steady crawl, I sighed and sat back.

With each tree, home, and road that we passed, my eyes surveyed everything. Each person that I saw I found my breath getting caught in my throat, only to be met with disappointment each time. When at last we made it back into town, my concern was beginning to mount. What if we never found Peter? What if he had been caught? There was no way I could leave without him, no matter what

Wesley said. As we turned down another street and the sight of a few more people came into view, I felt my breath catch within my throat once more. It was Horace.

“Quick! Step on it!” I pleaded as I sunk into my seat. Wesley seemed confused, but pressed the accelerator pedal down a bit, turning down another street, and driving further into town.

“What’s wrong?” He asked with mingled concern and breathlessness. My urgency had obviously caused him worry.

“H.. H.. Horace! He’s here! I saw him!” I said, tears beginning to come to my eyes once more. I shut them tightly and willed them away; this wasn’t the time to get emotional.

“Are you sure?” Wesley asked with the same air of urgency from before. I swallowed deeply and merely nodded, not willing to speak the horror.

“Alright,” Wesley said as he turned another corner and began to speed up. Within moments we were propelled back onto the main road, and started heading out of town. As my eyes opened and I saw the buildings begin to fade into trees, I looked at Wesley aghast.

“What’re you doing?” I asked in horror.

“We’re leaving now, we can’t wait anymore. If they catch us you’re as good as dead.” Wesley said firmly, his eyes resolute and focused on the road. I began to shake, to shiver.

“No! We can’t leave without Peter!”

“Listen, I know you want Peter to come but we can’t wait anymore! If you really saw Horace then we’re in deep trouble.” Wesley’s voice shook as he spoke. My mind knew well that he was right, that if I was going to survive we needed to leave now, but my heart refused to listen.

“Stop the car!” I demanded, pressing my own foot down as though I had the pedals beneath me. Wesley ignored me, simply continuing on his path out of town. I began to feel the tears encroaching again.

“Please... Please stop the car!” I pleaded, feeling my lips tremble. Wesley, once more, did not respond. I swallowed deeply, my hands curled into fists. I felt bad before I did it, but I knew that it had to be done. I wasn’t going to leave without Peter. I leaned over, opened my mouth, and bit Wesley’s arm as hard as I could. He let out a yell, pulling the car over to the side of the road, and I took the opportunity to open the door and swing it open, tumbling out while the car was still moving, albeit it at a slow pace.

As my knee hit the dirt below, my wound reopened, and I gnashed my teeth in agony. It didn’t matter now; there wasn’t any time to wait or to focus on the pain. I managed to scramble to my feet as I started to run as quickly as I could back towards town. I could hear Wesley behind me, yelling my name, and the sound of his feet hitting the pavement quite a few feet beyond me. My arms flailed, fighting to

carry me faster and faster as I resolutely ran more quickly than I ever had before. Before I knew it, the sounds of Wesley's calls and of his feet became a distant memory. I had escaped, and I was alone.

I had no idea how far away I was from town, but it didn't matter. The only thought that permeated my mind was of finding Peter, and with each stride of my legs, I felt myself coming closer to that possibility. I wasn't sure how much time had passed, or how much ground I had covered, but as buildings began to come into view, I knew I had made it back into town. My mind mingled with fear of being caught by Horace, and of Peter already being caught. I had no idea what I would do in either of those situations, but the alternative of leaving and never seeing Peter again just wasn't feasible. Even if I was caught, even if Peter was already caught, then death would be a better alternative than never seeing him again.

As I passed several people, running deeper and deeper into town, I heard several adults yell out for me to slow down, or to watch where I was going. I didn't care, no one else mattered anymore. As I rounded another block, heading down a way that seemed familiar but whose actual location didn't immediately come to mind, I caught a stitch in my side and had to stop. As I bounded up to the side of a building, leaning against it, I fought hard to catch my breath as my hand gently nursed my side. I had never run so hard before, not even the other night, and my body had been run ragged by inconsistent sleep, rapid emotions, and desperation. I collapsed onto the ground, staring out at the area around me. There was no sight of Peter, and I had no idea what to do.

For the first time since I had escaped Wesley's car, I felt at a loss. As much as I wanted to find Peter, there was only so much ground I could cover, and my body was completely wasted. How could I find him in this town? Where would I look? It wasn't as though we had been here before countless times, with memories of favorite hangout spots. I wasn't even entirely sure whether Peter had ever been here before, or whether he knew where anything was. I began to lose hope, to feel as though I had lost Peter forever. Perhaps not listening to Wesley would be my undoing; surely he was through with me now. I stood, legs wobbling, as I began to consider just turning myself in to Purity and accepting my fate. What was the point if Peter wasn't with me anyway? I turned, facing the street I had just run down, and just when I was going to start walking and consider my options, a pair of arms flew around my back, nearly causing me to collapse. I yelled out, certain that I had been captured.

“Ben!” A familiar voice called, causing my body to freeze in place. I let out a gasp of surprise, tears cascading down my cheeks.

“Peter!”