

Before, And After By Scribblesinink

Ashley let her car roll to a stop along the curb and switched off the engine. She remained seated for a moment, looking out into the tree-lined street. Sunlight streamed through the canopy, creating a dappled mosaic of light and shadow on the blacktop. Across from her, an old man was walking his dog, while a couple of teenage girls skipped by on the sidewalk next to her: tank-topped and mini-skirted, their heads close together while they whispered and giggled. Ashley didn't need to hear them to know they were talking about boys.

With a wistful smile, she watched the girls disappear around a corner. She'd been like them once: happy, untroubled, and her biggest concerns which heels would go best with her red skirt, or whether Jason would call to ask her out.

Yes, she'd been like those girls. *Before*.

Funny, how that worked. She'd never believed that one's life could be bisected in a *before* and an *after*. But then she learned differently: she was living in *after*, now. And though it appeared she was the same person, with the same life, as *before*, everything had changed. It was just that nobody else saw it.

Over a year had passed since the Three Rivers bank robbery had ended with the remaining hostages finally tumbling out onto Market Square and into the arms of worried loved ones. Her dad hadn't been among them; he'd been sitting in a jail cell, waiting for news of her release, no longer able to do anything about it.

Since that day, she hadn't talked about the siege to any of the others. Not even Cass or Mary-Kim. She'd barely talked about it at all, in fact. In the first couple of weeks, there had been plenty of medical checkups and psychiatrists and inquiries and police interviews. But with only dead bodies and no arrests, there had been no trial. Horst Cali had been commended for bringing the hostages out alive, then later, after the inquests, castigated for having helped Wolf and his men escape in the first place.

That didn't seem fair to Ashley, just as it wasn't fair that her dad had been the only one to actually see the inside of a court room. His trial had been symbolic, of course; there wasn't a jury in the world that would convict Alan Beck for trying to save his daughter. Her testimony about those days in the bank had also been the only time she'd spoken about it in public, telling the jury how horrible it had all been, and how frightening.

What she didn't tell them was that holding a gun, her finger on the trigger, a hair's

breadth away from shooting someone, had been the most horrible moment of the entire three days. And as for fear...? Sure, she'd been scared. But not as badly as she'd made out to the jury. And not all the time. Maybe it was stupid, but she'd never really thought she might die until after Mouse got shot, Wolf disappeared, and Rabbit took charge.

She shivered at the memory, although the sun beating down on the roof meant the air inside the car was no longer cool.

If not for Albert, Rabbit would've killed her for sure.

And that was, more or less, what had brought her here, wasn't it?

Pushing the memories away, she got out of the car. The heat that washed over her was almost a physical burden as she walked down the path to the small bungalow hidden in the cool shade of tall oak trees. Pressing the bell, she listened to it chime a faint melody somewhere inside.

Seconds passed, stretching into a minute, and Ashley was about to turn away when she heard footsteps approaching the door. A moment later it opened, and Chloe was looking out at her.

She seemed well. She'd changed her hair: cut it shorter, and styled it differently. It looked good.

"Yes?"

"I'm..." Ashley was at a loss for words; she hadn't expected the other woman not to remember her.

Then recognition sparked on Chloe's face. "Ashley?"

"Yeah. Hi."

"Wow. You look.... Why don't you come on in, before all the cold air escapes?" Chloe stepped back and pulled the door open wider. "I was just about to have some iced tea. Would you like some?"

"Please."

Ashley followed Chloe down the hall to a shadowed living room. As she waited while the older woman went to fix the tea, she glanced around curiously. The room was cozy, with an overstuffed couch, bookcases full of paperbacks, and a lazy red tabby curled in on itself

on a chair. Ashley stroked it, and it began to purr without fully waking up.

A few minutes later, Chloe returned with a tray holding two tall glasses, a bowl of lemon slices, and a full jug of tea beaded with water droplets. She poured Ashley a glass and gestured for her to have a seat.

"It's so good to see you." Chloe filled another glass for herself. "How've you been? Have you spoken to anyone?" She didn't have to explain who *anyone* were.

Ashley shook her head. "Not since... then. Only Cass. You know, my friend." Cass had been shot by accident, and from what Ashley'd been told, it had been touch and go for a while. She'd tentatively tried bringing up the subject with Cass once, but she had shut down on her, and Ashley hadn't tried again.

"How is she?"

"She's okay, now. She barely even has a scar."

Chloe gave a nod. "It's good to hear that." She fell silent and the room turned quiet, the soft hum of the air conditioning the only noise that broke the silence. Ashley sipped from her tea. It was cold and sweet.

"Hey, I read you got engaged!" Chloe smiled. "Congratulations."

Ashley smiled back wanly. "Yeah. Thanks." The engagement was another of those things that had been expected of her, and never mind *before* or *after*.

Chloe caught Ashley's mood and her smile faded. "What is it?"

Ashley gazed down at her hands holding the glass of tea and muttered, "This is gonna sound crazy." There was no way to say it subtly, so she took a deep breath and met Chloe's eyes. "I think I saw him."

"Saw who?" Chloe set her glass down on the table, heedless of the circle of dewy drops it made.

"Albert."

"Oh, sweetie, you know that's not possible. He's dead."

"No, he's not." Ashley scooted forward until she perched on the edge of the sofa. "They lied to us. He got away. He picked up the money in Canada, too."

Chloe straightened, her face aglow with something Ashley couldn't name. "If that's true, then maybe—?"

"No," Ashley interrupted, identifying Chloe's expression as hope. "No, Wolf's dead. I had some of my father's people look into it, that's how I found out. I'm sorry."

Chloe bit her bottom lip for a few seconds before she got up and walked over to the window. Staring out into the street, she said, "I keep telling myself it ended the only way it could have. Like it was supposed to. But it feels wrong, somehow, and I can't help wonder if he'd done what I asked...." Her voice trailed off.

Ashley kept silent, not sure how to respond. A moment later, Chloe turned back around. "Have you told anyone about this?"

Ashley uttered a wry laugh. "Who would I tell? They don't want me talking about the bank at all; everyone says I should forget it ever happened. If I told them about this, they'd lock me up in a mental hospital, or make me talk to the police. Possibly both. No, you're the only one I could think of who might understand."

"If he got away... what's he doing back?"

Ashley shrugged. "No idea."

"But you think it's really him."

Ashley nodded. "I've caught a glimpse a couple of times: in the park, down by the river. On an escalator in the mall. Once in the street, after a lunch date with my fiancé. It's him." She shrugged. "Freaked me out, the first time. But now...." She shrugged again.

"You're not afraid?"

"No. Not at all. To the contrary, it's like...." Ashley heaved a sigh. "I don't know. Like he's keeping an eye on me, you know?" She gave another humorless chuckle. "God, that *does* sound crazy." She looked up at Chloe. "Why would he do that? Why come back? That's kinda dangerous, isn't it? I mean, if someone recognizes him...."

"Why don't you ask him?" Chloe suggested. She said it calmly, like it was a most reasonable thing to suggest.

Ashley stared at her.

It took her nearly another week to find a way to be alone. People surrounded her constantly: her fiancé, her mother, the wedding planners, the florists, the dress makers. And if she did manage to go out by herself, her dad would send someone to follow her, thinking she wouldn't notice. Her visit to Chloe, far from being a secret, had raised a few eyebrows, though she'd refused to tell anyone why she'd gone to see the woman.

Finally, she'd managed to shake off the trail of followers, and even the unwanted bodyguard—though that had required sneaking out of a ladies' room window. And here she was, sitting alone in a quiet, secluded café not far from Market Square. The bank, Abe Shelton still manager, was just down the street, and that was fitting in a way she couldn't quite explain.

She was on her third cappuccino, starting to worry she might have given Albert the slip along with the bodyguard, before he finally showed up, sliding into the booth across from her without so much as a by your leave. "Hey."

She glanced up, and her breath caught. To try and hide it, she folded the newspaper she hadn't really been reading and put it aside. "Hey."

His gaze traveled from her face down and back up. "You look great. I'd forgotten how pretty you are."

She gave a little shrug, willing the blush to go away. Even in the bank, his rather clumsy attempts at gallantry had made her feel special. And guilty, for trying to use it against him. Not that she wasn't accustomed to flattery. As the eldest daughter of the richest man in Pittsburgh, she'd heard it all since she was eleven and started growing boobs. But Albert had always sounded like he meant what he said. His delivery wasn't smooth enough to be a lie.

"Thanks. You're not so bad-looking yourself." He cleaned up nicely, she thought. He wore a white shirt and light summer jacket that fitted him well. And—. She squinted and dipped her head. "You had it removed."

"Yeah." He lifted a hand to rub his neck where the spider tattoo had been. "Didn't want that to give me away. I had it lasered off in Canada."

"Did it hurt?"

He rolled a shoulder beneath the jacket. "I've felt worse."

She looked away, gazing out at the cars slowly going by in the street. Outside, life went on as usual, like she wasn't having coffee with one of America's most wanted. Although the general public didn't know that, only the police —and, God, she hoped *they* hadn't been tailing her too.

Suddenly anxious to get the meeting over with, she turned back towards Albert. He was still looking at her, with that mildly curious expression she knew well, as if he couldn't quite believe his eyes. "Why did you come back?" she asked. "Why are you following me?"

He sat back. "You saw me?" He gave her a wry look. "Guess that explains why you're not more surprised."

She snorted, very unladylike. "You weren't exactly inconspicuous. Of course I saw you." Although, truth be told, he'd been careful enough that she suspected she'd been the only one to notice.

He grinned, a little abashedly. "Hope I didn't frighten you. I didn't mean to do that."

She shook her head. "You don't scare me, Albert. Not any more."

The waitress approached. He waited until she'd put down fresh cups of cappuccino and left before he said, "It's Jake now." Ashley lifted an eyebrow. "Jake Henry."

She smiled at that. "For Wolf, and your brother. That's... sweet."

He offered a light shrug. "I had to pick something. Got a new life, new ID and all. No more fixin' cars for me."

"That's good, I guess," she said, stirring sugar into her coffee absently.

"Anyway," he finally answered her earlier question, "I came to see how you were. To make sure.... You know, after.... I'm sorry you had to go through all that."

She gave a shake of her head and looked up at him. "Doesn't matter anymore. And I'm fine."

"Good. I hear you're gettin' married?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Yes, I am."

He leaned forward. "He good to you? Because if he's not—."

She smiled and reached over the table to rest her fingers on top of his hand. "He's good to me. I'm happy. Honest."

He considered her for a moment, head cocked slightly to the right. "Okay, then. That's all I wanted to know." He got up, dropping a few bills to pay for his untouched coffee. "Take care, Ashley."

She knew that she wouldn't see him again, and, strangely, that made her sad. She followed his path out the door with her eyes and watched him through the window, hailing a cab and getting in. The cab's brake lights flared for a moment before it drove off.

"You too... Albert," she whispered. "You too."

oOo

The next morning, the Pittsburgh society pages were all agog with the latest gossip: Ashley Beck had broken off her engagement to Jason C. Cummings III. No reason for the breakup was named, giving rise to much speculation.

Chloe shook her head slowly after reading the news. She leaned over to scratch her cat under its chin, finding small consolation in the way it lifted its face, yellow eyes squinting up at her while it enjoyed the attention.

Before. And after.

They all had to figure out how to deal with it.

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