

Once I landed in Indianapolis, I had to take a shuttle to a little town outside West Lafayette, Indiana where Daniel was living. I'd gotten the address when I called his parent's home earlier, pretending to be Abby Duns mire from the reunion committee planning the five-year class reunion from our high school.

His mom had been more than willing to spill all available information on Daniel, candy-coating it a bit. She said he'd left college to pursue a career in agriculture. Translation: he worked on a farm. She said that he'd been involved on a major R & D project at one of the primary employers of large heavy equipment in West Lafayette. Translation: factory worker. She explained that this had led him to pursue agriculture, as he felt he could contribute more to that particular line of work.

I'd booked a night at a Marriott Hotel close by. I planned on getting up as early as possible and finding Daniel's rural address as I knew he must be a farm worker. He certainly wouldn't have had the funds to buy his own farm, unless my mother had invested my trust money in it, which I highly doubted. It was more likely that my mother had been sponging off of him for the length of time she'd been there.

I found the farm easily with the GPS on my rental car. I arrived there just after dawn, before he went out to do whatever it is farmers do at the break of dawn. The farmhouse was small and dumpy. I noticed my old blue Jeep Cherokee Laredo parked by the side of the barn next to the house. My heart quickened. What if Mom was here? That meant that Preston was here as well; or that I was totally off-base in my assertion that my mother had taken the baby. I had to know one way or another. If the abductor wasn't my mom, then I guess I'd be starting from scratch on this. I couldn't be wrong. My baby's quick return depended on me being right about this!

I walked up the short dirt path to the door. There was no doorbell, so I pounded on the storm door with my fist several times. I could hear someone moving about inside.

The curtain on the door moved a smidgeon and I heard a mumbled curse. He'd better open the damn door. I wasn't averse to kicking the glass in if need be. I heard the lock turn and the door opened. Daniel was standing there in a pair of grey sweat pants and a dirty tee shirt. His hair was in dire need of a trim, and it appeared he didn't shave very often these days.

I wasn't sure that he recognized me at first as his expression was simply impassive. "Daniel? It's me. It's Tylar," I said hesitantly, not sure if he was even awake enough to comprehend what I'd said.

"I know who the fuck you are. What do you want?" he asked, acidly.

"What I want is to know where my mother is," I commented, just as acidly. "More importantly, I want to know where the slut took my baby and what part you played in this, so that I can make sure you're charged as an

accessory.”

He attempted to shut the door, but my foot was planted firmly between it and the door jamb. “You know Daniel; you can talk to me or you can talk to the authorities. What you don’t want to do, though, is deal with my husband, who is likely finding out just about now where I am.”

He reluctantly opened the door allowing me to step inside the house. It smelled of whiskey and dirty clothes.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he asked, rubbing his unshaven face and looking totally clueless.

“Look, asshole,” I said plainly, “I didn’t travel here to listen to you feign ignorance about my mom and what she’s been up to these last few weeks.”

He cut me off abruptly, either out of stupidity or ignorance because I was going nowhere until I’d drained his mind of any information that might help me locate my mother.

“Get the hell out of here, Tylar. I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about and I don’t fucking care. I don’t want you or that slut that raised you in my house. Now get out unless you want the police here.”

“Go ahead,” I hissed, daring him to do just that. “I want them here so that they can question a potential material witness, at the very least, and a possible accessory to kidnapping.”

I had his attention. He finally managed an expression and there was a hint of fear in it. “Come on into the kitchen,” he invited. “I need some fucking coffee.”

I followed him through the closed-in back porch that now looked as if it served as a utility room. There was an old washer and dryer in it, as well as a mound of dirty clothing piled right in front of it. The kitchen opened up right beyond the utility room. I saw a stack of dirty dishes on the counter and in the sink. A ‘Mr. Coffee’ had some coffee pouring into the pot. Daniel rinsed out two dirty coffee mugs, pouring himself one and starting to pour one for me.

“No, thanks,” I said, taking a seat at the small kitchen table.

He brought his mug of coffee to the table and took a heavy gulp of it before he raised his bloodshot eyes to me.

What the fuck has happened to him?

“You’re probably wondering why I look like shit.”

“What I’m concerned about, Daniel, is where my baby has been taken since my mother abducted her and assaulted my mother-in-law.”

“Your baby? I didn’t even know you had a baby.” He said it very matter-of-factly, as if it was of no consequence. “You know,” he said, “I was supposed to have a baby, too. I lost mine. Maggie and I loved one other, Tylar. I know you probably don’t get that; it’s hard to understand, but it just happened. It started on our prom night...”

I interrupted him, not willing to relive that drama when more important

things needed to be discussed. “Daniel, I know about all of that. I don’t really give a damn. I flew here from Atlanta because my baby, my five-month-old baby girl, was taken from my husband’s and my home while my mother-in-law was interviewing babysitters. And I believe it was my mother who took her and assaulted my mother-in-law. What I want to know is how you’re involved?”

“Hey, I’m not involved in any way with what supposedly happened to you and your baby! I haven’t seen Maggie for about six months. She and I were living together after she’d quit her job and moved here from Radcliff. I was still in school, but I needed to be with her. I quit school and got a job in a factory. I thought everything was good. One day I come home from work and she was fucking gone. No note...nothing. She’d taken my Ford Bronco; left that piece of shit Jeep here for me. I didn’t hear from her for months. She finally brought her ass back home. She was more than six months pregnant. She said it was mine.”

He stopped and got up, walking to the counter and picking up a nearly empty pack of cigarettes, pulling one out and lighting it. He pulled a dirty dish from the sink, plunking it down on the table to use for an ashtray.

“I do believe the baby was mine,” he continued. “She claimed she’d been out and about, trying to earn more money so that our baby would be well taken care of since I’d quit college for her. I really believed her. She went into labor a few weeks early here at home. We had no medical insurance. She didn’t want me to take her to the hospital. She said women had delivered babies at homes for centuries. She said she’d instruct me on what to do. She’d read up on it.”

He got up from his chair at the table and poured a shot of Jim Beam into his coffee mug, then topped it off with coffee. “Don’t judge me,” he commented, noticing how I’d watched what he’d done. “You’ve no idea how much pain that woman has caused me.”

“Oh, I think that I have a clue,” I said sarcastically. “Please, go on.”

“I assisted her during labor. Man she was in a whole lot of pain. I finally couldn’t take her screaming anymore so I called the paramedics. By the time they got here and transported her to the hospital, our baby was stillborn. He’d strangled on his own umbilical cord, something that wouldn’t have happened if a doctor had been there.”

“What happened after that?” I prodded. I needed the whole story; everything that he knew that could help me figure out where the nut job had taken my baby.

“She kinda lost it. She said that had been her last chance to have a child, and that she’d always wanted one. I guess she had gone through an abortion years back, and after that, a doctor had told her that she’d have problems conceiving. I mean, she just seemed to go off the deep end. She didn’t seem to want me any longer...”

He broke off then, genuinely upset about discussing this with me. He seemed devastated about what had happened.

“What’d she mean about always wanting to have a child? What did she think I was, for Chrissake?”

“You don’t know, do you?” He paused, stubbing his cigarette out. “I didn’t think you did.”

He got up and poured more coffee into his mug. A sardonic smile passed briefly across his face. He shook his head as if he wasn’t all that surprised that I apparently was to be the last one to find out about what he was ready to tell me.

“She’s not your mom. She’s your aunt,” he stated simply. “Your birth mom died before you were a year old. They were sisters. Maggie took you in to raise. She wasn’t too happy about it, either. Said she did it because she’d promised her sister, your mother, she would. I think she did it for the money. It was always about the money with her.”

I was suddenly filled with raw emotion, some of it was relief knowing that I wasn’t a direct descendant of the duplicitous bitch; but I also wondered if my birth mom had been cut from the same cloth as "Aunt Maggie." If that was the case, it was a moot point.

“Speaking of which,” I interrupted, “what did she do with the fifty-plus thousand dollars she stole from my trust fund last year?”

It was Daniel’s turn to be blind-sided. I could tell he had no clue about the money she took from me. “She didn’t have any money to speak of that I knew about when she got here. She’d cashed her last pay check, closed her checking account, and came in her Jeep loaded down with her clothes and some personal shit. That was about it.”

“Did she have a job while she lived here with you?”

He snorted derisively, which answered my question. She’d devised a way to hide her tracks and stay under the radar after she’d robbed me of my trust. But why take the money if she wasn’t going to spend it?

Maybe she *had* loved Daniel in her own perverted way. Maybe she’d kept the money hidden away in case their relationship hadn’t worked out. It sounded as if her losing the baby had been the driving factor in her leaving Daniel and then taking my baby. But how could she have known where I was or even that I was pregnant? There was much more to be uncovered.

“Daniel, is there anything else that you can tell me? Did she call you at all after she left? Did she give you any indication that she was planning to leave?”

“My parents came up for the private burial of the baby. They hated Maggie for corrupting their only son as they liked to put it, but they were civil to her that day. They picked up the tab for the burial. We named him even though he was stillborn. Maggie said that everyone deserved to have a name they could be proud to carry, dead or alive. She named him Daniel

Renaud and I insisted he carry my last name, Henderson.”

“Daniel Renaud Henderson,” I repeated out loud. “Where did she come up with the middle name, do you know?”

“She said it was her name. I don’t know, maybe it was her maiden name. She did say that she’d been married briefly. It was supposedly her husband who had forced her to get an abortion.”

Except that, according to what Trey’s investigator had learned, Maggie had never been married. Of course, he would’ve been searching through court and vital statistics records under the name of “Preston,” and not “Renaud.” This might prove to be an important piece of information.

“Where did she get the name Preston?” I questioned him.

“How the hell should I know, Tylar? Most of everything she ever told me was a fucking lie! I only accidently found out that she wasn’t your mom. That slipped out after she delivered our stillborn baby. She was ranting and raving, blaming herself for not going to the hospital.”

“Why was she so against going to the hospital?” I asked.

“She said she needed to stay underneath the radar on account of you were harassing her about her involvement with me and that you had threatened her in some way. I pointed out that you were still her daughter and she needed to make things right. That’s when she slipped and told me. She didn’t provide any more details other than what I’ve told you, I swear.”

“Daniel, you said she took your vehicle. May I ask what type of vehicle she took?”

“It’s a 2010 white Ford Bronco. It was a present from my parents. It’s still registered in my name. I’ll write down the license plate number for you. She may have switched plates, though. I’ll get the VIN for you too. She transferred her Jeep into my name. She wanted nothing in her name. She said she simply needed to disappear, so that we could be together without complications.”

“Why haven’t you reported your vehicle stolen?”

“Shit, Tylar, I’m not looking for revenge. I loved her once, you know?”

“Did you buy this farm?” I asked.

“Yeah, I put \$15,000 of my college grant money on it. Maggie said we could plant corn, beans and wheat to sell at market; raise chickens and sheep and make our living off of the land. Right, the place is in foreclosure.”

“What about a cell phone, Daniel? Doesn’t she even have a cell phone?”

“She used those track phones, the disposable ones that you can change the number every time you buy a new one. She used mine for a while, but she racked my fucking bill up so high, I put a stop to that.”

“Who was she calling?”

“I don’t know. A bunch of calls to Mississippi, from what I remember. She claimed it was a business partner. Then some calls from Virginia. Those

were incoming; fucking collect calls from a goddamn prison!"

He shook his head, a look of pure disgust on his face. "Here I am working nights at the factory and she's accepting those fucking calls; probably having some hot and heavy phone sex with a fucking inmate. She's a freak, a fucking freak that's all I can say."

Just then, we heard someone pounding on the back door of Daniel's house. "Christ! What now?" he snapped.

He left the kitchen to go and answer the door. I glanced around the kitchen and peered into the living room to see if I could recognize any clues to show that my mother had been here recently. I saw nothing.

Suddenly, I heard a commotion coming from the back door. The voice was unmistakable.

"I believe you have something of mine, Mr. Henderson?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Trey Sinclair. I believe you have my wife inside."

