

CHAPTER 2--TWO BEARS

It was Stephanie's old stuffed animal, a large, several feet tall, rotund panda bear. The sight of Haley's panda transported Amanda back toward a childhood memory nearly twenty five years ago. A memory that stood out above many others.

Her eyes opened wide that morning long ago. It was her sixth birthday present. She rubbed her eyes over and over and wondered if the creature in front of her was real. It was the largest stuffed animal she had ever seen. The creature was sitting upright in the living room on the love seat sofa, motionless, and imposing in stature. A few moments passed before she mustered up the courage to approach the giant white polar bear. It was as if it might come alive at any moment. It was the best present she had ever received.

When it was time to take the new stuffed animal into her room, lifting her new friend off the couch turned out to be more difficult than she thought it would be. He was so big and heavy.

She was even more excited that day to learn that her best friend Stephanie, who shared the same birthday, also received a new stuffed animal, a big panda bear.

Haley walked back in the room holding her toothbrush. “Ok, I’m ready.” Her soft voice knocked Amanda back into the present.

The momentary recollection was Amanda’s first positive thought of the night. Ignoring Haley for a moment, she walked up to the stuffed bear and patted her on its head. She looked around Haley’s room to see how the bear was living, not too shabby. Various other stuffed animals sat in different parts of the room. A poster of a tiger was tacked up prominently in the room. There was a lot of competition for attention from other animals. “That’s one big panda bear you have.”

Haley smiled, a welcome sight at a grim time. “My mom gave her to me.”

“Does she have a name?”

“No, my mom said her name is just Panda Bear.” She paused. “Is mommy going to be alright?” Haley started to cry softly.

“Did you know that I have a bear like yours too?”

“No.”

“When I was younger, whenever I got sad or needed a friend, I gave my polar bear a hug.”

“You did?” Haley asked as if surprised while fighting her tears.

“Do you have a favorite animal?”

Haley picked up a bright white, stuffed tiger.

“Bring it along. He can keep you company.”

Whole-heartedly embracing Amanda’s idea, she grabbed the tiger as they left for

Amanda's home.

It was after midnight and Amanda was getting tired. Too many thoughts, emotions, and adrenaline were running through her body. Maybe it would all go away soon, like waking up from a bad nightmare. She needed a cup of coffee. Haley slept in the car until they arrived at Amanda's condo.

They walked in, Haley and her backpack, and Amanda holding the tiger. Amanda led Haley to the bedroom, and then turned around to go hang up her coat. "Don't forget to brush your teeth."

Haley had already closed her eyes and tucked herself under the bed covers when Amanda came back to check on her. It was as if Haley had used up the last of her reserves of energy. She was thankful that Haley hadn't asked about the polar bear she mentioned earlier, for it had been consigned to closet storage for several years.

Gazing at Haley blissfully sleeping, she changed into some pajamas and fell fast asleep next to her.

Amanda woke up to the sound of her phone ringing, her eyes sprang open as if she had been expecting it. She looked at the clock. 6:04 a.m..

"Hello."

"Amanda?"

"Hi, Jack."

A long pause. "She's gone."

Amanda held the line, motionless as she sat up and stared out the bedroom window. She

turned and looked over at Haley.

“What happened?”

“She didn’t make it out of surgery.”

Another long pause.

“What happened?”

“They said she might have survived had it not been for a fatal post-operative bacterial infection.”

Amanda’s thoughts instinctively turned toward Haley. “Should I tell Haley or do you want to?”

“You’re her godmother, go ahead. I’ll talk to her after you break the news.”

She set the phone down.

Amanda gently shook Haley’s shoulder. She mumbled and pushed away Amanda’s hand.

How was she supposed to break this news to Haley? She hadn’t exactly taken a course on how to do such a thing. Did children even understand death? “Haley, I need to talk to you about your mother.”

The young girl opened her eyes and sat up. It seemed as if she had already sensed something wrong, a child’s intuition.

“Your mother tried really hard, but she just suffered too many injuries in the accident. It was time for her to go to a better place.”

A few tears streamed down the girl’s face, but she said nothing.

“I think your father wants to talk to you.” She handed the phone to Haley, who

grudgingly grabbed it.

Amanda zoned out in shock for a moment as Haley and her father shared this moment that would define Haley's life forever. As she came to, she realized the phone was lying on the bed and that Haley had pulled the bedcovers over her eyes. She composed herself to talk to Jack again. The silence of the room disturbed only by Haley's whimpering. Grasping the phone, Amanda gently stuck her ear up to it.

"It's me again."

"I'll be by later today to pick her up. I need to go home by myself for a little bit. Thanks a lot for your help. Haley's grandparents and Stephanie's brother are flying in later today."

"We'll be here, take your time."

The line went dead.

Amanda sat up and thought for a few minutes about a few of the things that she and Stephanie had experienced and shared together. The thoughts only brought forward more pain.

"Haley, Haley."

Haley came out from under the covers and sat up. She had stopped whimpering, but tears were in her eyes.

"Your mother was my best friend. No matter what happens, I'll always be here for you."

Amanda sobbed hard as she hugged Haley as hard as she could.

To the casual observer, it might not have been clear who was crying more. Amanda was surprised at how Haley was taking the news so far. She expected a far greater outburst, but she knew better, looks could be deceiving. Amanda tried to hold herself together better, but she

couldn't, she cried harder. They held each other tight for several minutes before letting go.

Then, unexpectedly, Haley managed a few words through her now silent tears. "Thanks for taking care of me. But – who will take care of you?"