

Don't Let Me Go by Jamila Mikhail — Chapter One

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The water splashed up against the rocks as I looked at the civilization in the distance. On the other side of the river there was a small factory and a water treatment plant on the industrial lot next to it. Passed that there was a lot of greenery with only the tip of the skyscrapers poking the distant skyline. The water was especially blue considering the fact that it passed through industrial land, but then again the town wasn't called Bluepond for nothing.

There wasn't a single cloud in sight and it was a beautiful day but I lacked the capacity to appreciate it. The cars going Nascar fast on the highway behind me were nothing but a dissonant hum in the background of the day. Some birds sang somewhere in the full scope of things too, but I couldn't see them as I kept on looking at the buildings in the distance. I couldn't believe that things had gotten to the point they were currently at. I couldn't wrap my mind around my own life anymore, if I had ever been able to understand it in the first place.

I got down from the railing I had been sitting on for hours and hours and walked back towards town before my mother got some idea in her head that I ran away because I hated my stepfather and stepbrother. I wasn't exactly on good terms with any of them, but I also had nowhere to run away to. I didn't really know where I was going to begin with, and I didn't want to get lost either. I especially wasn't looking forward to starting school in a new town either, albeit not a completely unfamiliar one. I'd spent a couple of my summers in Bluepond with my grandfather when I was younger, before he passed away. I also knew that a few former schoolmates from Redmont had also relocated to Bluepond but that brought me no comfort. I hated school and I'd never made any friends there.

My only friends were my dolls. The only friends I'd ever had were my dolls. I began making action figures a couple of years ago after venturing out into a flea market being held in the basement of an old church and finding arbitrary parts. I thought it might be fun to recycle neglected and unwanted action figures and turning them into handsome little men again and it certainly was endless creative fun. What started out as an experiment became a steady hobby, and that hobby eventually turned into a passion. I ended up crafting everything from movie characters to soldiers of the Second World War to real people in my daily life.

As sad as I had been to be forced to sell most of them during the move, my talent had made me a small fortune. My stepfather thought it was stupid that a thirteen-year-old girl

would want to spend all her time in her room playing with children's toys as he called them instead of going out and having a social life and my mother always took his side. My actual father was nowhere to be found after the divorce and my stepbrother was the equivalent of a ghost. I literally only had my dolls, and even they seemed to be in jeopardy. Aside from them I only really had myself, and I wasn't good at being all by myself. Ironically the only person you really have your whole life is yourself. That was abhorrently depressing to say the least. All you'll ever have is yourself, but what if you aren't a good person? What if you're good for nothing and nobody likes you? What if, no matter how hard you try, nothing ever changes? What if you're just a dunce and there's nothing you can do about it? What was the whole point of living then?

Thinking about such things brought me no comfort as I approached nearby civilization. I dreaded walking into that tiny pink house on a hill by the outskirts of town regardless of anything else. It didn't matter what I felt inside or what was going on around me, I simply didn't want to go. No more, no less. I was only a pawn in a game of chess greater than I, or so it seemed to me. The worst part was that it seemed like I couldn't even do a damn thing about it, and that feeling of powerlessness was probably what upset me the most in the entire thing.

The lawn was pretty much evergreen as my mother took great pride in that and her huge flower garden. There was a little paved driveway leading to a small shed in the backyard and my mom's little green Ford Fiesta was usually backed up all the way over there but there didn't seem to be anyone home despite that the lights were on in the kitchen and it was still daylight outside. The sun was just starting to set over the valley, beautifully illuminating everything in various shades of red, orange and pink. I sighed loudly and walked in through the side entrance.

In front of the side entrance there was the spiral stairwell to go upstairs and underneath on the other side there was the stairwell to go downstairs hidden behind a door. Then there was the living room taking half of the first floor, and right next to it on the left side there was the kitchen mingled with the dining room. And that was the entire main floor. That small.

My room was on the second floor along with my mother and stepfather's room as well as the bathroom that was no bigger than a closet. My stepbrother lived in the basement and he didn't just sleep there, he lived there in every sense of the word. Aaron was supposed to be my sibling, but he was really nothing more than a stranger living with the rest of us.

My existence was consumed with sadness and grief as I walked up to the bathroom to clean up a little bit. There had been a certain degree of mud involved with going to the waterside to clear my thoughts but it turned out that I hadn't cleared out anything from my head at all. The bathroom was small and claustrophobic but it was cute. The ocean blue walls were decorated with paintings of fish and seashells and other aquatic things that my mother had made in order to create a little life in the place.

The shower, the toilet and the sink were all incredibly white and shiny without a single stain. The bathroom floor was of a light golden brown, kind of mimicking sand, just making the small room even more beautiful. On the east side of the room there was a large stained glass window covered with a blue and white chevron curtain that was handed down to my mother from an old relative, among other things she had received. Over the sink there was a large mirror with bare bulbs over it of various colors spicing up the room just like my mom liked it. She had always been so vibrant and eccentric but her artistic side had declined since the divorce, and I greatly missed that about her. Nowadays she was an entirely different person. Since she shacked up with Mike she had become a stranger to me. The bathroom was the only indication that she was still in there somewhere, or at least I believed that she hadn't vanished completely. I looked at my ugly face in the mirror and pushed my hair out of my face. I had never like my auburn hair too much so I had tinted it red, which was more to my liking, but I still wasn't completely satisfied.

My hair extended down just passed my shoulders with my overgrown bangs going down just passed my ears. Letting my bangs grow out was a futile attempt at hiding my cheeks which I thought were too chubby for the rest of my face. In the middle of that my nose was too small and my big round eyes were placed too closely together. My olive eyes were nothing more than something else I didn't like about myself on top of the mountain of things that would've been different if I could rule the world.

My face was too round and my top lip was too big for the bottom one. I wasn't morbidly overweight, in fact my BMI said I was normal, but my stomach could still have been flatter. All in all, I had absolutely no self-esteem and even less with my stepfather constantly being on my case about my appearance along with just about everything else.

I tied up my hair into a ponytail since it had been a victim to the wind by the shore during the last few hours and went into my room to work on a doll I'd started a few days ago. I was almost done but couldn't really decide which military uniform he was going to wear. I knew he was a soldier and I instinctively knew that he was a good man but I kept on going back and forth on other details. Was he going to be an American or a British soldier of the Second World War? Or maybe a German. If so he would've been part of the German Resistance. Or, alternatively he could be half British and half German, I already had a few American soldiers standing twelve inches tall. I didn't really know what I wanted to do with him so I went downstairs and got a snack before resuming my work on him.

Eventually I decided that he would wear a Wehrmacht uniform and gave him the rank of lieutenant. I added a few finishing touches to his face and gave him sparkling stereotypical blue eyes and sandy hair. I also put some miniature 1940s round glasses on him to give him an extra touch of elegance and to stand out from my other soldiers standing on my shelf.

One of them had a missing hand that I hadn't been able to repair after finding him in that condition at the thrift store so I'd added an eyepatch to him to give him more of a hero

returning from battle type of look. He had been my favorite until I'd just finished my first German, a good German. He had been a savior to the most vulnerable during one of the worst times of their lives. He was sort've a metaphor for what I wanted in my own life, or more like who I wanted to enter my life.

"Welcome to the world Adler," I whispered to him as I placed him on the night table next to my bed, "welcome to war."

My new home was indeed a war zone. My mother and stepfather fought constantly and I could not understand at all the appeal of staying with a person who always disrespected you and put you down. My stepbrother was seventeen and there was no telling him what to do or not do, he did what he damn well wanted and he was always in trouble both at home and at school. I sort've simply fell in the shadows but I also got my dose of being yelled at for not doing chores on time or not doing them according to standards.

Mike also thought I was stupid when I asked for help with a homework question that was supposed to be easy. I'd resorted to not doing my homework anymore which caused an entirely separate truckload of troubles and I'd made it into high school hanging by a hair.

As I looked through my bedroom window I saw my mother pulling into the driveway so I decided to go downstairs and have her be the first person, and probably the only person aside from me, to meet Adler. Unlike Mike, she never had a problem with me making dolls and action figures and before she divorced my dad she had actually taken great interest in my collection. Together we had spent many hours imagining the lives of the little men and women I made. My dad had even helped me make a little military base for the soldiers and a little beauty parlor for the divas so I could put makeup and accessories on them while I played. I missed those days so much.

"Hi there Joanie," my mother greeted me as I came downstairs.

"Hi mom," I replied joyfully, "I want you to meet someone."

"Oh?"

"His name is Adler."

My mother took him in her hand and examined every detail carefully and smiled as she did so. It had been a while since I could show her something I'd made that I was proud of and that she could be proud of too. I knew that she liked him from the obvious look on her face when she gave him back to me.

"He's very handsome honey, good job."

"Thanks mom."

"Mike and Aaron will be home soon so I'm going to make dinner. It'll be ready in about half an hour."

During that time I went back up into my room and I dug into my box of arbitrary doll parts to see how I would recycle them and what I would make next. Maybe I would make one of my grandmother that I'd never met, or maybe dolls in the likeness of both my grandparents on their wedding day in 1953.

I had so many good ideas swirling around my head but not enough materials to make exactly what I wanted. I'd either have to get some more or make something else with what I had. I ended up pondering for a while because before I knew it my mother called me down to come and eat. Once again I brought Adler down with me because he had turned out really good and I hoped that for once Mike might realize my talent.

Adler was by far the most beautiful and most detailed action figure I'd ever made. He looked just like a real person, had he really been one. I imagined him being a tall and strong man with big arms but gentle hands and a good heart. He was intelligent, charming, fluent in many languages and multi-talented. He was in his mid-thirties but the war had made him look older despite his good looks. He had been a brave man and was highly decorated even if he wasn't a high-ranking officer. He had also helped save people during the war, and I somewhat wished that he could miraculously come to life and save me too.

My mother had made pork chops despite that she knew very well that I absolutely hated any and all pork products with a passion. But of course they were Mike's favorite so Mike had whatever he wanted regardless of what everybody else thought. When she was around him she was a completely different person. She almost physically changed too. He had convinced her to give up our previous house even after my dad had voluntarily given it to my mom before he moved out of province.

I missed my big old room and the big bookshelf I had in there. I barely had any books at all left and the library was too far away for me to go by myself so the most I read was the newspaper during the months that I was out of school. I really liked the crosswords section and had learned a lot of new words that way.

The sky was now pitch black outside once I sat down in my usual spot at the dinner table. We often ate late but it generally wasn't that late nonetheless. My mom worked long hours as a nurse and usually didn't come home early and Mike never cooked no matter what.

He would have preferred to go without food than to actually have to make it himself. Aaron always ate takeout and I didn't have very many cooking skills myself so I mostly ate delivery or junk food I bought from the corner store until my mom arrived to feed all of us.

"What the hell is that?!" Mike grumbled angrily when he saw that I had Adler in my hands at the dinner table and violently ripped him away from me.

"His name is Adler! Look how great he turned out to be!"

"If your doll hobby wasn't stupid enough for someone your age now you had to go and make a doll of a Nazi!"

"He's not a Nazi! He's just a Wehrmacht officer and he's with the German Resistance just like Claus von Stauffenberg! He saved people during the war and he's one of the good guys!"

"You dumb cluck don't you remember that my great-uncle gave his life fighting these damn Germans? I never want to see another one of these things in my house again!"

Just as he said that he began to dismember Adler in a belligerent yet so trivial rage. I protested and begged him to stop but that only seemed to fuel the fire. I got up and tried to physically take back Adler but all I managed to get were half a leg and a few torn pieces of fabric from his uniform before Mike positioned his elbow in front of me and turned away so I couldn't get to Adler which in turn hit me right in the ribs and I went down on the dirty floor immediately and hit my head.

It was a legitimate accident, he hadn't tried to hit me but he wasn't sorry that he did either. My head was spinning as I hit the cold hard floor but I clearly saw him destroy the doll that I'd been the most proud of by crushing it with his boots he never took off so I wouldn't be able to glue it back together. I hated those boots and the sound they made when they crushed the plastic and little pieces of what used to be Adler scattered everywhere across the floor.

Mike always wore those dirty old cowboy boots in the house and only took them off to take a shower and go to bed. It didn't matter how filthy they were, he didn't take them off and it was my chore to clean up whatever traces they left behind when he came in. I had politely offered to clean the boots themselves so they wouldn't look so faded and disgusting but I was accused of being judgmental and lazy.

That was the first and last time that I'd ever made a suggestion to Mike but I still wanted his approval so badly. I wanted to feel like he was proud of me and that he loved me. I wanted that from everyone; mom, Mike and Aaron. They were my family and families were supposed to be united by love.

I cried profusely when I saw Adler, or whatever was left of him at least, sprawled out on the floor like that. He who had been so beautiful was now completely unrecognizable and beyond repair. Nobody at the table had any sympathy for me and nobody uttered a single word once Mike's outburst was over.

The three of them ate quietly at the table and once I managed to collect myself a little bit I got up and I ran upstairs without eating anything or saying a word to anyone. I ran into the bathroom as soon as I made it all the way up and threw up whatever was left of the junk food I'd eaten earlier in the day. I was too stressed and filled with agitation and despair to keep the food down despite my best efforts.

I was sweating profusely just by thinking and having a full-blown anxiety attack about what had just happened and despite my best efforts to keep my cool I was losing my

battle. When Mike tuned in to his evening TV shows my mother came up discretely and asked me if I was okay in the bathroom. I dismissed her saying that it was just diarrhea and that I was fine. She left and went back downstairs without incident and I laid on my back on the bathroom floor looking at the ceiling blankly.

The more I tried to think the less I could function and the less I tried to think the more I wanted to puke again. I needed my mom so badly in that moment. I didn't just want the mother that lived with me now, I wanted my mom. One second she wanted to be close to me and the next she pushed me away and I didn't understand why. What had I ever done that was so bad to deserve that? I felt like only a pawn in a game of chess without any voice of my own. I felt worthless to put it mildly.

After about an hour of being borderline passed out on the floor I collected myself and went to my room which was just a few footsteps away at the far back of the top floor of the house. The only thing on the second floor of the little house was the bathroom, my tiny room, my mom and Mike's slightly bigger room and a small closet in the hallway.

The walls were painted a dark blue with a dark brown imitation wood floor. It was a beautiful little top floor. My room was a little more wacky with my walls painted a mixture of red, yellow and white with a black carpet covering the whole floor. There were road signs on the walls everywhere mimicking a racetrack or a highway. When we moved in I had insisted that the room stayed that way because I loved it and my request had been granted. Why not? It saved both mom and Mike a ton of work and money having to repaint it anyway!

There was only enough space in there to fit my small bed, a black children's dresser that matched the wall and a small square table to place junk on it along with several shelves mounted on the walls. Under my bed I had some colored plastic containers with drawers holding my clothes that didn't go in the dresser or the closet. It was claustrophobic but that little room had really become my own personal sanctuary over time and I would honestly have no idea what to do with a room that was any bigger.

There was a little window on the side with no curtains through which I could see across the valley. I could see the top of buildings in the distance, about a fifteen minute walk away on foot. As I looked outside I noticed that it had rained a little bit since I'd come in and the atmosphere had cooled down considerably.

I knew that my mother and Mike would be going to bed soon so I decided to wait a little bit before going to venture outside at night. I climbed into bed and hugged my Pokemon plushes for a while until I knew that everybody was sleeping soundly and then I put on some warm clothes and tip-toed downstairs.

I took a shoebox and a checkered cloth and wrapped Adler into it like one would do with a dead house pet, put everything in my green backpack and walked outside quietly into the darkness. The night air was cool but not particularly cold, it was just the kind of weather that I liked actually. I walked over to the bus stop not too far from the house and hopped onto the bus that would take me down by the water.

I was the only one on that particular bus going down to the riverside and it was a somewhat eerie experience to be completely physically alone despite that I was a professional at being emotionally alone. When the bus came to a halt, I got off and went to sit back on the wooden railing by the water, looking at the illuminated industrial establishments shining dimly in the skyline in the distance. At night it was beautiful to look at the water. All the industrial lights reflected on the surface of the water creating flickering patterns that almost looked like liquid fire. I caught a chill and for a moment I looked back almost like I could feel somebody behind me but there wasn't anybody. Nobody was there. It was just me. Just me and my thoughts amidst the darkness and the lights in the distance somewhere I couldn't reach.

Once I gathered my courage I got down on my knees and started digging in the dirt with my bare hands until I made a hole big enough to bury the box that contained Adler's remains. I wanted to cry but I couldn't bring myself to do so. The tears simply didn't come out. What had I done to deserve that? Once upon a time I'd had a happy family but now it was like I was surrounded by strangers.

Strangers who didn't have any consideration for me. My relationship with my mother seemed like a tug-o-war that I could never win because I was the rope. One minute she seemed to be on my side and the next I was worthless in her eyes. How could she love a man like Mike? She had become a completely different person since he'd come along. I gingerly deposited the box containing Adler into the hole and covered it with dirt. It took me a long time to cover it completely because I couldn't bring myself to do that either. By the time I was done the starry sky had become covered with clouds and I saw occasional flashes of lights in the distance.

A thunderstorm was rolling in. I knew from watching the forecast that one was supposed to pass during the night, how long had I really been out? I did not feel tired. I did not feel the need to sleep either. Generally I enjoyed sleeping, it was sort of an escape and I probably would've enjoyed sleeping for eternity on your average day but I felt different for some reason unknown to me. Something inside of me had changed.

I walked over closer to the water and carefully crawled in between the fragmented barbed wire fence so I could rinse off my hands in the current. The water was freezing cold as I dipped my hand inside and chills ran through my entire body. I hadn't needed to be woken up as I was running on my second wind at that point but the sensation certainly made me more aware. For the first time I felt the humidity by the water and the added dampness brought on by the incoming storm.

I had to come to terms with the thought that I'd have to go back home soon even if I didn't want to. I hid my freezing cold hands inside my pockets and carefully went through that fence that was falling apart again. I randomly noticed a single drop of water hanging from the wire just above me, waiting to fall. The moonlight reflected in it in an explicable beautiful way. It seemed so insignificant but heavy at the same time. It was so small but carried so much weight.

I stayed by the waterfront and sat on the wooden railing again until way passed midnight because I'd missed the last bus at eleven o'clock. I didn't mind walking back home though, the night didn't scare me. I wasn't scared of what lurked in the shadows. I was truly apathetic to everything really. Somewhere along the way I had become that way.

Not only had everyone around me turned into strangers over time, so had I. I had become a stranger even to myself. It started to rain shortly before I had started to make my way back home slowly. I was soaked by the time I got there but at least the most of the storm had gone and dumped itself elsewhere. Thunderstorms didn't scare me but I hated them anyway.

I crept back into the house and tip-toed back into my room, hoping that I wouldn't leave a trail of water for someone to find out exactly what I had done. I had successfully slid into my bedroom unnoticed by anyone, mission accomplished! I took off my wet clothes and jumped into bed.



"Joanie!" my mother's voice echoed from behind the door, "Get up, it's time for breakfast!"

"Okay, it'll be just a moment," I muttered and rolled over to the other side of my bed.

I felt unbelievably homesick as I sat up in my bed, and I really meant sick. I put my head between my knees and took a series of deep breaths to calm myself down. I zoned out and thought about a happier time, back in Redmont, with my entire family happily together.

I even longed for the little old lady that lived next door to my friend Andrea's farm. We hung out all the time since our moms were friends and I loved being out in the country and riding horses or even running after chickens.

One specific cow from the elderly couple's ranch next door always wandered off the land and came to eat in Andrea's family's garden. It actually did very little eating but a lot of shredding plants and that was particularly upsetting to my friend who dedicated so much of her time to caring for beautiful flowers that she'd planted and grown all by herself.

Finally, one day we decided that it was time to put this to an end once and for all and we both angrily went stomping over for the old couple's house about to yell at them to build a darn fence or at least do something to stop the cow from coming over but when we got there we couldn't possibly be angry at the sweet old lady who opened the door.

We politely asked her to deal with the cow in a soft whisper and before we left the old lady had even given us a blueberry pie to take home. Whatever had been done about the cow, it never came back to destroy Andrea's beautiful garden. All the pretty flowers and the delicious produce had been intact since that day.

"I made you some bacon and eggs!" my mom went on to say, faking a joyous tone and bringing me back to reality.

"Thanks," I muttered, not really knowing what else to say.

I didn't like bacon, that was never a secret but apparently it was never a factor either. How I wished for a piece of that old lady's blueberry pie in a moment like that! I would've loved to share it with Adler and all of my other dolls had they been real people.

If I had the chance I wanted to go to the thrift store later in the afternoon to see what I could find for my next masterpiece. I wanted to make a little guy in the likeness of Bernard Law Montgomery, or simply Monty for short. I still had a bit of money left and still plenty of time to kill before school started again. The days seemed to drag on forever in my life and I needed some entertainment.

For the moment I concentrated on getting dressed and gathering my strength for whatever hell I was going to face once I got downstairs and force-fed myself bacon mostly against my will because I didn't want to stir up any trouble by complaining that I didn't like it or by refusing to eat it entirely.

Don't Let Me Go by Jamila Mikhail – Chapter Two

www.books2read.com/dontletmego

Tossing and turning brought me no comfort. The voice of the wind moving through the trees brought me no consolation. Cars passed by and for a brief moment their headlights made the ceiling of my room just a little brighter. I felt as if the walls of my room were closing in around me as my breathing accelerated. My body ached with stress and despair, my mind felt like a bomb about to blow and my heart was crying out for help.

I wished that the sheets could just have suffocated me in my wake. My whole world seemed like it was coming down, crashing hard as it hit the ground. My soul shattered under the fire of pain and the absence of momentary hope. I buried my face into my pillow as I started to cry because I didn't want anyone to hear me. They couldn't help me anyway. I didn't feel like I could be helped in the first place. I felt like nothing but a problem and a burden and although I knew intellectually those were corrupt and untrue feelings, that didn't stop me from feeling them.

I didn't know how to deal with what I was feeling so I stumbled into the nearby bathroom that was just down the hallway from my room and grabbed a razor from the room's junk holder cabinet behind the door. I brought it back to my room so I could have some privacy and I contemplated doing something that I hadn't done in over two months; cutting myself. I had been a cutter in the past. I hadn't adapted well to my new life in a new town with new people but I had met a girl named Rachel who had also been a cutter in the past.

She told me very gently about how she had found hope and had come to give up that bad habit and I found truth in her words so I began to listen. Quitting the cutting was something I was always proud of because it had been the first step in the right direction for me in my life. The ironic thing about that though is that that girl had ended up committing suicide a few weeks later. Looks like she hadn't found much hope after all. My conscience was telling me not to cut myself again but my pain and my anger was telling me to do it. That desperate voice at the back of my mind was louder than a thousand hurricanes and I couldn't shut it out so I removed the blades from the razor and sliced my arm in a couple of places.

I then let the razor drop to the floor and shoved the blades on my night table as I buried my face in my pillow again and cried until I had no more tears. Only the streetlights in the street below gave off a faint glow just bright enough for me to see the fresh wounds on my arm. As more tears escaped from my eyes everything became a blur of faint

colors as the dim light could not penetrate through the tears obstructing everything in view. Each vertebrae in my spine seemed to throb, begging my mind to cease the pain and my heart seemed to shake my entire core.

The cuts on my arm burned as the blood coagulated and sealed my skin together again. I thought it would've helped me forget the emotional pain but it didn't; my whole body was declaring a state of emergency.

One by one all of my hopes had vanished just the same. My erratic breathing seemed to slow as my mind gradually shut down. I felt like my pain resonated throughout the entire universe, maybe it did. I let out a sigh of relief as my tense body seemed to relax. It was almost like a hand touched my every aching bone and filled it with the essence of serenity.

I couldn't move onto my back, but I felt a presence behind me. As my mind became more aware of my surroundings I realized that something was indeed touching me, it wasn't just in my head. But I wasn't afraid, I felt a sense of calm and pure bliss sweep over me. The pain was gone for a moment and I indulged in the feeling for a while. Eventually I managed to find the strength to turn around and could not have been more shocked and surprised at what I saw.

It was Adler! Not just doll Adler either, but full size man Adler. He was just like my doll, but human. I turned on the lamp next to my bed so I could take a better look at him. Could he really be human like me? As I examined him further I noticed that he was breathing just like anybody else and that a certain warmth radiated out of him.

I admired every little detail that I'd put into making that doll, it was my masterpiece and now it had come to life. Everything I'd worked so hard on had materialized right in front of my eyes and he was the most beautiful person I had ever seen. I didn't understand how all of that could be but that didn't matter because I was in complete awe at him.

"Don't be afraid," his voice was just a soft whisper.

"Oh Adler, I'm not afraid," I responded, my voice cracking with a surge of mixed emotions.

I wasn't afraid of him, not after the good vibes his presence let off, but I was curious and thoroughly confused. How was that even possible? How could you go from being an inanimate object that was savagely torn to pieces and got buried inside a shoe box to being seemingly fully human and letting off such good energy? I reached out and touched his hair just to prove to myself that he was real, and indeed he was! His hair was the softest thing I had ever touched and so was his flawless skin as I let my fingers trail down his perfect face and onto the collar of his uniform.

He was a masterpiece of a man, exactly like how I imagined him, yet I hadn't imagined the part where he would actually come to life and find me during a difficult time to comfort me. That part I never could've imagined in a million years.

There were also other questions, such as how he could've possibly gotten into my room. I'd buried a doll in the soil but now a person well over six feet tall was right here in my room. There was no way he could've walked through the locked door of the house or climb through my bedroom window on the second floor without being noticed at all! I let my fingers trail down the buttons of his uniform and as my hand passed over his chest I couldn't help but feel his heartbeat. I let my hand rest there a little bit as I tried to make sense of the situation but all of my questions would have to wait because I got lost in his blue eyes that almost sparkled in the dim light as he looked at me compassionately.

Needing to be comforted and reassured, I latched onto him and he took me into his big strong arms. I laid my head on his chest and let some more tears escape from my bloodshot eyes. I was exhausted and worn out but his gentle touch relaxed my racing mind and brought it to a peaceful place.

The rhythm of his heartbeat soothed me and brought me to a place almost beyond this world. And that touch, it wasn't human, it was something else entirely. I'd always believed that only angels could take away your pain by simply stroking your shoulder with one hand.

He was a godsend! He was exactly what I needed, specifically what I couldn't get from anyone else in my life. I tightly latched on to him, never wanting him to leave. I let my mind drift away to the steady beat of his heart and eventually dozed off in his arms with my pain completely gone from my heart and soul, almost like it had never been put there in the first place.

As I closed my eyes and drifted away to another world my mind went completely blank and only woke up again early the next morning from a dreamless, exceptionally peaceful sleep. Adler was still right there beside me, still letting off an overwhelming aura of calmness and inner peace. In the early morning sunlight he looked more like a regular person instead of the luminous supernatural creature I had seen the previous night, however I knew full well that he was something more than a mere mortal.

"Good morning Joanie," he spoke with a German accent in a voice that was like music to my ears, "I reckon that you slept well?"

"Yes," I replied in a groggy voice as I rubbed my eyes, "it was absolutely heavenly."

"You didn't move an inch!"

"It's no wonder that I'm sore this morning! And now you've gotta tell me, what in the world are you?"

"So, I'm a what instead of a who, huh? Well, my name is Adler as you know and it looks like I'm your keeper."

"My keeper? What's that?"

"Pull out your laptop and I'll show you."

My body ached for a few moments as I sat up on my bed and stretched my legs but within a few moments all of that went away and my body felt very relaxed and all the

pain disappeared. I bent down and reached under my bed to grab my old laptop that I'd gotten from a relative several years ago after they'd bought a new one. It was slow and outdated but still one of my most prized possessions. I fired it up and waited for it to connect to the internet. That wasn't something I did very often because my machine couldn't handle high-powered video games and I wasn't allowed to go on social media. I then let Adler connect me to a page about keepers.

Keepers are said to be souls of various different existences who come into the metaphysical world to provide guidance for fellow humans. Keepers are not guardian angels; they have not descended from heaven nor have they even been there. Keepers are unknown beings similar to childhood imaginary friends who may have several human-like attributes including bodies, hearts and minds.

The legend says that keepers can come in many forms; a faint presence, a glowing orb, or even in the form of a human being with flesh and bones. Not much is known about keepers apart from ancient legends written thousands of years ago. It is said that every person has a keeper, but many are unaware of this as keepers manifest themselves in various different ways and some people never acknowledge them at all.

It is also believed that each person creates their own keeper, much like they would create an imaginary friend as a child, and after being birthed out of pure love and genuine need stemming from a person's innermost being, keepers take on a life of their own depending on the aura of the person they belong to and the circumstances under which they enter this realm.

The legend says that keepers come to this dimension to guide us but are able to retreat to their vortex beyond this universe since their souls are not bound by mortal flesh and the binding laws of nature. Since the atomic energy that composes their souls can vibrate at two places at one time, they are free to come and go as they please. Energy cannot be created nor destroyed, and our dimension is nothing but a transition phase for the soul; we come from nothing and we are nothing when we die.

"That's amazing!" I exclaimed. "But how is this possible?"

"You tell me Joanie," Adler replied softly, "you're the one who created me."

"But I didn't create you like this. Where am I gonna hide you once I go to school and things like that? You're a big man, you don't just fit in the closet!"

"Here's the thing Joanie, you're the only one who can see me."

How was that possible? I was both in awe of him and thoroughly confused and was further perplexed after learning that he was also invisible to everyone except me. I reached out and grabbed the edge of the collar of his uniform, Lieutenant Adler's uniform, just to make sure that I wasn't dreaming or having some insane delusion. Adler wasn't invisible to me. He was angelic to me, some kind of flesh and bones ghost with a warm body and a heartbeat. He could not possibly be invisible!

“On the bright side Adler,” I said as my more humorous side surfaced, “you can watch people in the shower and they won’t even know.”

We both cracked up laughing for a few moments but then reality came creeping back in all too soon and it was all too real.

“You can literally walk through walls and look at people right?” I asked with a more serious tone. “I mean, how else did you get in here?”

“Yes,” Adler’s voice was deeply thoughtful, “but I’m not exactly interested in doing that.”

“That webpage still doesn’t say much, and I still have so many questions. So, do you have some kind of supreme understanding over the universe?”

“Nope, no divine understanding of any kind and nothing beyond traditional human wisdom and what I can observe now, but with added clarity.”

“Added clarity? What do you mean by that?”

“I suppose that those things were already inherently there when I was created,” Adler was deep in thought and it was obvious that he too had many questions about his own existence, “like they are my factory default settings. In our human lives we get so distracted by everything that this clarity eventually becomes foggy. Since you created me and our souls are forever linked together in this way, I do have some insight into your life though.”

“Can you read or hear my thoughts?”

Suddenly a cold chill ran through me. I didn’t want anyone to know what I was thinking. My thoughts were shameful and depressing and I didn’t want Adler to know any of the things that went through my brain. What would he think of me? Would he still care about me? Would he still want to be my keeper? I swallowed hard. I didn’t want to lose him under any circumstances.

“No, Joanie.” Adler replied in his usual gentle voice. “I cannot hear anything that goes on inside your head but I can feel every single thing that goes through your heart and I know you’re hurting.”

Hearing that didn’t exactly made me feel any better. Okay, so, he couldn’t hear me telling myself that I was worthless and better off dead but obviously he would still still figure it out because he felt it. Which one was worst? Either way, knowing that another person now also felt worthless because I felt worthless inside only made me feel even more worthless. Everything was worthless.

“I’m sorry to feel that you don’t like the idea of sharing everything that passes through your heart.”

“Do you have any emotions of your own that you can share with me instead? You know, Adler, I could really use to feel better inside.”

“While I don’t have any emotions of my own the same way you do, this is something that always makes us feel better.”

He signaled me to scoot over to closer to him and he wrapped me up in his arms. Of course hugs always made everything better, plus a keeper's touch filled a person with sublime electricity that made all the negativity dissipate. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing after all that he could feel my emotions. Maybe he could prevent me from feeling them to begin with or at least make them disappear in a heartbeat.

"Another question." I said after Adler let me out of his miraculous hug.

"I'll answer to the best of my abilities," he replied calmly.

"If I buried you, well, doll you, in a field far away from my house how did you find me?"

"That's the interesting thing about feeling your emotions. I may not know what's going on inside your head unless you tell me, but I can feel your heart from a world away Joanie. Finding you was as easy as following your aura of energy all the way here."

"That's amazing!"

"Now you should get dressed, you have a big day coming up today."

"Is that so?" I was curious to know what Adler had in mind.

"Yes, we're gonna go watch people in the shower!"

We both cracked up laughing again as I got up off my bed and dug around in my dresser for clothes that weren't too wrinkly because I knew I'd get a speech from Mike about that.

"Okay," I said giggling, "but now you can't look while I'm getting dressed."

"I won't, I promise," Adler replied in a serious tone of voice.

Once I picked out my clothes I looked around the room and saw that he had left so I took off my pajamas and put on a white Pokemon shirt with Pikachu on the front and some stretchy blue jeans. I dug out a dark gray zip-up hoodie from the closet and completed my outfit with it. I looked normal and presentable and it was comfy for the entire day so it would have to do.

I specifically needed to wear long sleeves even if it was going to be a hot day because nobody could know that I'd cut myself the previous night. I then proceeded to try to fix my hair as I looked at myself in the long mirror behind my bedroom door but once it registered that it wouldn't work I decided to tie it up in a ponytail and fix up my bangs with a few flower-shaped hair clips. When I was finished I was expecting to be able to show off my look to Adler but as I looked around everywhere in my room for him he was nowhere to be found.

"Adler?" I called out suddenly feeling deflated about the situation, "Where did you go?"

"I'm right here Joanie," he said as he suddenly reappeared right next to me.

"Oh! You're right back here with me again! So can you simply disappear and reappear at will?"

"Yes. I must now explain to you how my aura of energy works so you can properly sustain it once it starts to get low. This energy can do truly amazing things, like wash away all your pain, but the downside is that it doesn't last forever. The energy needs to be sustained and renewed periodically if you want to keep me around."

“I’m listening.”

I was enthusiastic to learn more about preserving the aura of energy that Adler let off because I never wanted him to leave. Part of me honestly still couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe that he was here and that he was real. I had my very own keeper. He was mine and mine alone. In truth I would never really be alone as long as I had Adler by my side. I looked up at him in awe again for the millionth time just to remind myself that everything was indeed real because it still felt so surreal, so sublime, so divine. Adler’s perfectly oval face didn’t look like it belonged to a man weathered from war. Maybe he hadn’t actually gone to war, but that was the backstory behind the original doll. Unfortunately the doll had lost the battle. His sandy hair was also immaculate, his undercut hadn’t gone out of style. His round glasses were a little dated but they still made him look very handsome.

“Admiring your creation,” he said with a grin in the corner of his mouth.

“This is just amazing,” I responded in complete awe at him, “unfathomable I could even say.”

“Now let me tell you about the energy. Right now I’m completely replenished on it but when it runs out you’ll have to summon me if you still want me around this way.”

“And what happens if I can’t or I don’t? Where do you go?” I asked, now with a worried and sad tone in my voice.

“I go right back to where I came from originally: nonexistence. When I’m not in this dimension I literally don’t exist, I can’t feel, I can’t see, I have no idea what’s going on here. I don’t die and it doesn’t hurt, there’s no concept of time or anything whatsoever. It’s basically limbo. From the moment I disappear to the moment you bring me back there’s absolutely nothing in between. You can be without me for extended periods of time but for me it’ll only seem like a moment.”

“That’s amazing! So, does that mean you’ll be with me forever?”

“That’s the thing Joanie, I have no idea how long I have here. I don’t know if keepers hang around forever or if they are only here for a little while. What I can promise you, however, is that you can open up to me about absolutely anything and I will always do whatever I can for you. I’ll console you, guide you, comfort you, anything you need.”

“And what if you want to leave? Can you leave on your own?”

“I can dematerialize, like this.”

In that moment Adler disappeared and immediately reappeared in the other corner of my room.

“That’s amazing!” I exclaimed.

“Dematerializing isn’t the same as disappearing, listen carefully,” Adler went on.

“Yes, sir!”

“I’ll still be within this dimension even if I’m not technically in human form so I in that sense I can leave at will, yes, but that’s completely different than when the energy runs out and I disappear into nonexistence. Then there’s nothing I can do. The energy you need to feed me if you want me around is called agape but it’s not the same kind of agape that you’ll find in the dictionary. It’s the purest form of love that exists in the entire universe. Immerse yourself in it and my energy field will meet yours. Give it a shot right now.”

I closed my eyes and tried to find the most unconditional love that existed inside my heart and for a moment a burst of the most amazing feeling in the world swept over me but it came crashing down within only a few seconds. It merely lasted an instant and I felt greatly deflated when I couldn't sustain it.

"Don't worry," Adler reassured me, "it'll come eventually. That agape is what us keepers need in order to keep existing in this realm. It's what gives me that slight glowing aura that contours my shape. It's not easily visible to the naked eye but pay close attention and you'll see it begin to dim when the agape gets low. Remember that I have an energy field too so you won't be alone sustaining this once I'm replenished. We're in this together Joanie."

"So you promise to not disappear on me if you get sick of my troubles?"

Adler must've had some idea that I wouldn't be too much trouble for him because after all he wasn't just a doll or a puppet anymore, he was in control of himself. He could remove himself from the situation if he wanted to or if he got tired of my problems that according to some people, weren't real.

"I absolutely promise Joanie. If I'm gone it's because the energy is out, not because I want to be away from you. You'll never have to be alone as long as I'm here. Of course if you get sick of me you can cut off my energy though."

"Well, you won't have to worry about that Adler. I absolutely want you around. Just the idea of one day maybe being without you if keepers aren't forever is devastating to me."

"Don't worry about that right now. I'm firmly convinced that I wouldn't be here at this precise moment if there wouldn't come a time in the near future that you would absolutely need me. And who knows? I might come back someday in the future even if my time here runs out quickly. Remember that it doesn't hurt me to not exist for a while. It does nothing to me. There's already enough pain and suffering in this world so don't trouble yourself over me. It's my job as a keeper to worry about you Joanie."

Nothing about Adler's existence had really sunk into my brain yet and I was still completely blown away but so overjoyed at the same time. Having to live inside a house that was filled with practically a bunch of strangers, I was grateful to have someone whom, in one way or another, was on the same level I was.

One top of that, I couldn't ever get enough of the energy that he let off. It was contagious and addictive. I didn't remember the last time I felt that good about myself. I didn't remember the last time I felt like I could breathe and that taking a single breath didn't hurt deep inside.

"If there's one thing that I'm sure of Joanie, it's that there's no situation that is beyond healing. Sure, you can't turn back time, but that doesn't mean that there's no forgiveness and moving on towards bigger and better things." Adler spoke softly almost like he could read my thoughts even though he was adamant that he couldn't despite his supernatural existence. "I know it sounds cliché and it's much easier said than done, especially when you can't see passed the situation you're trapped in, but there's still much truth in that."

"I swear you can read my mind Adler, I swear." I muttered, completely floored.

“Remember that everything that goes through your heart goes through mine too.”
“I couldn’t forget that even if I tried.”

I walked over to Adler and gave him a huge hug. Standing well over six feet tall he was a giant next to me and my face was pressed into the many medals I’d delicately put on his uniform when I first created him. I’d made him a strong and brave soldier, but also a good man. A man who took a stand for the most vulnerable in the most appalling of circumstances. A man with a heart of gold. I put my hand over where his heart was supposed to be and felt it beat steadily in the palm of my hand. I could understand now what was meant when they said that keepers were a manifestation of something from deep within ourselves. Indeed, he was exactly what I’d needed.

“Oh, I’d almost forgotten about this,” Adler spoke matter-of-factly as he rolled up my sleeve and exposed the cuts on my arm.

I tried to pull away because I was deeply ashamed of what I’d done but my keeper had quite the grip on me and he wasn’t about to let me run away from my problems one more time. Adler brought my arm up to his lips and each cut disappeared with every kiss.

I watched in astonishment as the scars all faded away and completely disappeared one by one with no remaining evidence that I had ever put them there in the first place. He let me go and I touched where they had been because I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. The scars were gone and my skin had returned to exactly the same state it had been in long before I’d ever taken out those dang razor blades.

“That’s not possible!” I exclaimed in absolute shock.

“It is in my world,” Adler replied with a grin on the side of his face.

“Are they going to come back?”

“Not if you don’t make them come back.”

“That can’t be! This is unbelievable! You’re nothing other than an angel, there’s no other explanation.”

“No dear, I’m not an angel. Angels are from God, I’m not. I’m from within you. I’m a keeper. These things exist in my world. I know that you have a lot of questions and I may not have many answers right now but we’ll figure it out. We’re both still here for a reason after all.”

There were still so many unspoken things and so many questions but I had the comfort of knowing that Adler had my best interest at heart. He was probably the only one who did. At least he seemed to be the only one who still did.

“Why can’t we humans feed off of the same unconditional love that keepers do?” I asked blankly after a few moments.

“You tell me,” he responded in a voice equally devoid of emotion, “I’ve never figured that out. The things you see in a war make you want to give up on humanity but at the same

time there's still something inside of you that keeps pushing for you to do the right thing and make the world a better place."

"Did you die during the war?"

I was almost scared to ask that question because after all I was the one who had created Adler so I was also the one who had subconsciously written his life story at some point even if it was now highly out of my control, or so it seemed. Getting to know him was really like getting to know an unknown part of myself. A part that I didn't know existed. A part of me that had never been touched before.

"Yes," Adler spoke softly, "I was killed in combat."

"Is it scary to die?" I inquired after another long moment of silent contemplation.

"Yes, very." Adler responded in a low voice. "There's nothing pleasant about it, especially not under circumstances like that."

"I'm so sorry that I even put something like this on you," I grumbled as I removed a badge with a swastika on it from his uniform.

"Don't be sorry Joanie. I'm with the Resistance. I'm proof that nothing is black and white. Good and bad exist equally everywhere and it's usually in the greatest darkness that light shines the brightest. I wouldn't mind wearing civilian clothing though, it would probably be more appropriate for modern times despite that you're the only one who can see me."