

## Chapter One: End of the Summer

The weather in the Northwest has always been a mixed bag for Carson; some days he loved it and other days he loathed it and wished he could crawl under a rock. Today was just like all the other days toward the end of summer and beginning of fall, overcast with a chance of rain. It seemed ironic when he thought about it, around here when they said chance of rain it always meant it was a sure thing. It was a different story at the upper elevations of course, usually it meant lots of snow which Carson always enjoyed.

Carson seemed to thrive in the cold and snow he wasn't sure if it was the cold air, the darker skies, or even the shorter days that he enjoyed, but something about winter just made him feel alive. Its why he always got excited when the end of summer came along as it usually meant that there were only a few months til winter. Owen his best friend since his freshmen year of high school on the other hand didn't seem to mind the rain or overcast weather let alone the snow or cold, he seemed to enjoy all kinds of weather.

Of course Owen didn't let Carson off the hook and would always tease him about hating the summer, he would tell him if he hated it why didn't he to somewhere where the weather was more to his liking like Canada or Alaska or at least someplace nice and cold. Carson's mother, Cynthia would also join in by blaming it jokingly on his father's genetics and love for the extreme weather, but she stopped soon after his father died. Carson's father Richard was in the military and died roughly 3 years ago while he was on deployment. It was supposed to be his last tour before he retired from active duty so everybody had been looking forward to him spending more time at home especially Carson.

Carson always looked forward to the long trips that he and his father used to take when they both had time. Even before his father would come home on leave they would already have a backpacking or camping trip of some kind planned out, usually to some far away remote place they had never been to, out in the middle of nowhere. These trips could often last several days or even weeks if given enough time. These outings eventually stopped of course, and things around the house also changed, the place was quieter than ever, but not everything changed for the worst. Carson's relationship with his mother grew stronger as they relied on each other for support instead of coping with the loss on their own.

As Carson lay in bed he attempted to will the rest of the rainy overcast day away though his attempts were soon disrupted by the expected yet still annoying ring of his cell phone; he didn't have to look at the caller ID to know who it was. Every morning at this time it was always the same person. His best friend Owen made it a ritual to call him every morning to make sure he was ready for school, work, or whatever else they had planned that day, though deep down Carson thought it was his way of annoying him. Now that they had finally graduated Carson had hoped the ritual would stop or at least get pushed back an hour or two giving him enough time to maybe sleep in, unfortunately that wasn't the case and only reinforced Carson's belief that he did it on purpose.

With a groan Carson rolled over and grabbed the phone from the nightstand next to his bed, and with a quick flick on the touch screen he put it on speaker phone and sat it back down so he could hurry up and get dressed. He knew he was running late and the fact that Owen was calling meant he only had a short time to be ready.

*"I'll be ready in a minute!"* He said with a loud rough voice not even waiting for Owen to give his usual cheerful greeting.

*"Well good morning to you too."* Owen replied with a chipper tone to his voice. Owen was always the more cheerful one in the morning unlike Carson.

*"Sorry, you know how I am in the mornings."* Carson grumbled as he struggled to get dressed.

*"I know."* Owen replied back taking a second before continuing *"Well, don't forget your uniform this time, I think they might actually write you up this time if you forget."*

*"Ugh I know, I know!"* Carson responded slightly annoyed by the reminder. He knew Owen meant well, and he knew he had asked him to remind him, but it annoyed him just the same. Carson hated the work uniform it always left him feeling all itchy, but rules are rules and he definitely didn't want to get fired, especially when his mother worked at the same place.

*"Well I'm almost there, I'll meet you outside."* Owen said.

*"Alright I'll see you when you get here."* Carson responded before reaching over to swipe the screen ending the call.

Within a minute or two Carson managed to finish getting dressed only stopping to look in the mirror to make sure his short brown hair wasn't in too much of a mess. A mess probably isn't the right term to use; it really depended on who you asked. His mother would always nag him about combing his hair every time he tried to leave the house with his *"Just got out of bed look"*, but he loved the look, and Owen said it looked okay so Carson saw no problem with it.

Well luckily his mom had already gone into work early, so nothing was stopping him from leaving with whatever hairstyle he wanted. As he finished looking himself over in the mirror he heard that unmistakable sound of Owen's VW Bug pulling up outside, and knew it would only be a matter of time before Owen would start doing something to get his attention, even if it meant ticking off his neighbors. So with a sense of urgency Carson made sure his work shirt was tucked in and buttoned up before heading toward the staircase leading downstairs.

When he managed to reach the staircase he took a big leap making it over halfway down the landing was a bit noisy and normally he would have taken only a couple of steps at a time, but he was in a hurry and there was no one to annoy with the noise. Quickly reaching the bottom of the stairs he turned to head toward the door, but before got there he noticed the note his mother had left for him on the nearby table next to the end of the stairs. Picking up the paper from the table he started reading.

*Sorry I won't be home tonight after work. Ill be working a double tonight so I won't see you til Saturday.*

*-Love Mom*

Too bad Carson thought to himself, he was looking forward to spending Friday night with his mother and Owen watching movies and playing games. Owen would definitely be disappointed as well, for the last several months Owen had started crashing over at Carson's house more and more so it only felt right to invite him in the Friday tradition he and his mother had started instead of going out and partying like you would normally expect Owen to do. Putting the note down Carson headed toward the door, just as he was opening the door though he heard Owen revving the engine up steadily increasing with each press of the gas pedal. Carson knew by the amount of revving Owen was doing that he was a few seconds away from hearing that obnoxious horn that Owen's car had. Not wanting to hear it he ran to the door and headed out to Owen's car.

Owen's car was anything but new it could almost be considered an antique or a classic considering its age, and who you talked to. His car was one of those old Volkswagen Bugs, like the ones from the 70's, were you could use duct tape and a paper clip to fix just about anything that went wrong with it. At first glance this thing looked like something you might find sitting broken down in someone's back yard with a weather worn, and rusted paint job, worn flat tires, and grass sticking out of any crevice it can find. But inside and under the hood everything looked practically brand new. Owen had managed to clean up the interior quite a bit, and between the new stereo he put in and the engine upgrades the thing was extremely loud.

As Carson made his way to the car he could make out Owen's short dark hair, and that amused expression he would get when he was about to start messing with him. Owen was always amused when it came to messing with Carson sometimes it seemed to be his mission in life. Owen continued to rev up the engine but the closer Carson got the longer Owen would press the gas pedal making the engine rev louder and louder, he eventually stopped revving when Carson was close enough that Owen could see the expression on his face.

*"What's up, looks like something is wrong."* Owen asked with some concern as Carson opened the door and got in.

Carson wasn't to surprised by Owen's comment as usually he could read Carson like he was an open book. *"Ya, you're not going to like it but we are going to have to cancel the whole Friday thing this week. Moms pulling a double so she won't be home."* Carson said with a bit of disappointment.

*"Really? Well that's a bummer."* Owen replied with a look of dismay on his face.

*"Sorry, I know you're always looking forward to it."* Carson said apologetically, Owen once confided in Carson and explain why he never stayed home longer than he had to. His family was

a bit dysfunctional to say the least, or at least that's all Carson had to go on since he had never met any of Owen's family.

*"It's okay, I'll find us something to do tonight."* Owen said before pulling out into the street and accelerating.

*"I'm sure that won't take you very long, you probably already have a backup plan."* Carson replied with a slight chuckle.

Owen scowled briefly *"What is that supposed to mean?"* he questioned Carson.

*"Really? You're going to play dumb on this one? You always have plans and if you don't you usually make a phone call and wammo were off to wherever."* Carson explained.

*"True."* Owen said as he let a smirk break through. He knew what Carson was saying was true, but he just didn't want to admit it in front of him.

There was a brief pause before Owen continued the conversation still wearing the smirk on his face. *"You know what this means right?"*

*"See this is what I'm talking about."* Carson responded as if he had caught Owen in some heinous lie of some kind. *"Just like that you already have a back of plan, and it took all of what 2 seconds?"* he continued.

Owen's smirk got bigger and turned into a smile as he responded, *"Okay, you got me. So I'm guilty of knowing who's who and what's what. You just can't let that go can you?"*

Owen continued on before Carson had a chance to respond *"You know if you were more sociable you would know who's who and what's what just like me."* Shrugging his shoulders as if to make a point of it.

Here we go again Carson thought to himself, the old you should get out more and socialize pep talk. He knew Owen was right to some degree, but Carson really didn't care about all that stuff. He was more than content with just sitting back and watching everything happen around him instead of getting caught up in all the drama.

*"I know I know you don't have to remind me again!"* Carson replied with a bit of rudeness.

Owen quickly turned to Carson, *"Whoa where did that come from?"* He responded quickly before turning back to watch the road.

*"Sorry."* There was a brief pause before he continued. *"You know how I hate being nagged about that."* Carson replied.

*"I do... You know I'm just looking out for you and all right?" Owen said. "You can't just hide away from everybody and the world, and before you say it, spending all your time with your best friend and your mother doesn't count." He added*

*"Anyways I know where we are going tonight after work, and yes, you are going. No wussing out this time." Owen said firmly.*

Carson knew that fighting Owen on the whole going or not was a lost cause so he was stuck going whether he liked it or not, but where were they going was the question. *"Okay, well where are we going then?"* Carson questioned. If he didn't have a choice to go or not, he at least he wanted to know where they were going.

*"You know that place where you always like to go hiking?"* Owen replied without taking his eyes off the road.

*"Ya, up near Burnam Meadow?"* Carson asked as he thought about the last time they had been up there.

*"That's where Sean is having that party tonight... At least that's if the weather holds up." Owen replied.*

Sean was just one in a long list of friends that Owen seemed to have, and one of the richest if Owens stories were to be believed. The way Owen described it Sean and his family were pretty well off and lived in one of the huge houses on the outskirts of town. Other than that Carson didn't know much else, and he gathered by Owen's lack of information regarding Sean and his family that he didn't either. Of course Owen had only met Sean a few weeks back and only briefly talked about him since most of the time it was regarding some kind of party or event they were throwing. As Owen paused for a second Carson thought about responding and talking his way out of going, but quickly changed his mind. He couldn't think of any particular reason why he shouldn't go, and to be honest he did mind the idea of visiting the that area again as it was one of his favorite spots to go hiking.

*"After work I'll drop you off at your house so you can get changed and then we can take off. Sound good?"* Owen asked giving Carson one last chance to bail out.

*"Sounds like a plan." Carson replied giving Owen some reassurance that he was fine with going.*

By this time the conversation was pretty much over and they were well on their way to work, and with the rest of the drive still ahead of them and nothing much to talk about Owen instinctively turned on the stereo filling the air with loud heavy metal. Carson sometimes wondered if the music choice Owen made was due to how loud his car was or if he really did enjoy the loud music. Either way Carson didn't mind he enjoyed most kinds of music anyway, and after a few weeks of listening to the music blaring in his car you tend to get used to it.

With nothing else but the sound of the stereo and the engine filling the air Carson found himself dwelling more and more on the whole idea of having to go to the party. It wasn't like Carson was the anti-social type or anything it's just as of late he had become more withdrawn, preferring to be alone rather than hang out with other folks. He had become so withdrawn that even Owen was starting to take notice, which may have been why Owen had started nagging him more and more about getting out and going to parties with him.

After an uneventful trip they eventually arrived at the main road going into the Hospital, Carson had been so caught up in his own thoughts that he didn't even notice. The only thing that broke him out of his deep train of thought was the sudden stop as Owen quickly pulled into the parking lot and parked.

The Hospital was fairly large consisting of several small office sized buildings and a couple of extremely large ones. Each of the large buildings had a cafeteria where Carson and Owen worked. Most of the time they worked together in one building or another, but once in a while they were split up and scheduled in separate buildings, luckily this week wasn't one of those. The outside of the buildings were surrounded by several large parking lots with grassy parks and garden like areas placed in between. These areas had trees lining it on all sides giving it a more natural and open yet gated feeling to them. The inside of both of the large buildings were a lot less open and consisted of a maze of hallways and rooms, making it very easy for the average person to get lost in. Even after working there for several months Carson would often get lost after turning down the wrong hallway.

*"We're here."* Owen said casually as he turned off the car and began unbuckling his seat belt. *"Don't get all excited and everything."* Owen continued with a teasing tone. Of course he knew Carson dreaded going to work which made rubbing it in all the more fun for him, at least it was just for the summer. *"I'll meet you inside, I need to make a quick phone call and let Sean know we're going to the party tonight."* Owen said with a hint of enthusiasm in his voice as both Carson and Owen exited the car and headed toward the building they were scheduled to work at today.

*"Okay sounds good. I'll meet you inside."* Carson replied back before turning and heading toward the building.

Work that afternoon and evening ended up being busier than Carson had anticipated, so busy in fact that he hadn't had much time at all to think about the party or anything else for that matter. Even Owen, who usually spent time wandering the halls and socializing spent most of his time in the back working. Things seemed to lighten up though as the end of the shift came and they were on their way home with the music blaring and the engine roaring before Carson realized it.

The ride home ended up being pretty uneventful compared to work other than the one or two off the wall comments about how busy it had been, and how Owen couldn't wait to get to the

party and have some fun. So by the time Carson realized it they were already turning down his street toward his house.

*"You sure you're up for going? Last time to bail out"* Owen asked as he slowed down and pulled up in front of Carson's house.

Owen waited for Carson to reply.

*"Ya, I said I would go, and you're right anyway, I do need to get out more."* Carson eventually replied.

*"Let's go to the party."* Carson said exhaling as if to expel whatever anxiety he had built up, he figured even if he didn't take part in the festivities he could at least take a short hike or something.

*"Okay then."* Owen replied. *"Party it is. I'll swing back by and pick you up once I get some things from my house. Sound good?"* Owen asked.

*"Sure, sounds like a plan."* Carson said.

As the conversation ended Carson got out and headed quickly for the house, he knew Owen would probably be back in no time leaving him very little if any time to clean up and get dressed so he did his best to hurry up and change.