A Taste of...

Chelle Cordero

Combining Passion & Suspense







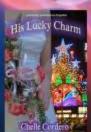




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Vanilla Heart Publishing

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Karma Visited

Do you believe in karma? Annie Furman has a gift that allows her, while she sleeps, to visit people in their time of need – but who will be there for her when she needs help? Undersheriff Dave Turner is investigating a series of home invasions and homicides. He has no idea that solving this case will lead him to the woman of his dreams.

Bartlett's Rule

Bartlett's Rule shares the story of Lon and Paige's love affair; a romance filled with hardship, emotion, danger and triumph. Falling in love was never the challenge; being there for each other, knowing just what to say and making it work is the real test. Paige and Lon are real; they are human, they cry and they laugh. Paige has to learn to trust. Lon has to learn to be patient.

Hyphema

Hyphema: Bleeding in the eye caused by trauma... Matt Garratti, a paramedic from New York, moves his wife and son to North Carolina to work at his dream job as a flight medic. Pakistani born Sudah, his wife, receives frosty stares and insensitive comments from their new neighbors... Matt wonders if he is pursuing his dream or bringing his family into a nightmare from which they may never wake.

<u>Final Sin</u>

Deputy Sherriff Commander Jake Carson has his hands full... investigation of a brutal multiple homicide, a troubled son and a vindictive ex-wife. He meets young, free-spirited paramedic Julie Jennings. When Julie becomes the subject of an obsession, it puts both of them in danger...

His Lucky Charm

What happens in Vegas doesn't always stay in Vegas... this time it follows Brandon and Caitlyn across the country and into a world of espionage and danger. The one thing that Brandon knows for sure is that he can't afford to lose his lucky charm, Caitlyn.

Common Bond, Tangled Hearts

Layne Gillette's world is turned upside down when a man she has never met shows up to lay claim as the father of her 6-year old son. When Layne's abusive "ex-husband" shows up, they are torn apart by danger, kidnapping and lies.

A Chaunce of Riches

Ben Johnson was hired as a bodyguard for a rich widow and her kid, but he never expected to be working for the woman who had abandoned him just when he had needed her the most. Damn it all, he still wanted her. Samantha Chaunce never thought she would have to explain why she married the rich man instead of Ben. Or that her husband had been murdered...and Ben was the prime suspect.

Hostage Heart

Life was hard after the hurricanes swept through, destroying her parents' home and livelihood... An errand for her boss - a chance encounter with a crew of bank robbers - a kind man who tried to help her ... a man who isn't all he seems...no, he is so much more.

Courage of the Heart

Courage of the Heart shows us that sometimes love is the only cure for the very deepest of emotional wounds. The story of the two lovers takes a series

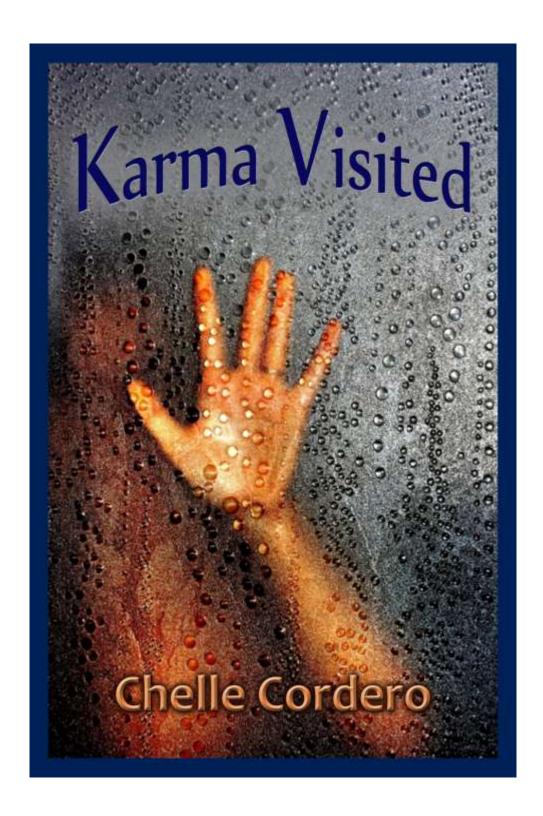
of unexpected and fast paced turns where lives, sanity and love are put in jeopardy. Their commitment to one another results in a spirit that binds them together and helps them to overcome physical and emotional dangers.

Within the Law

Tom gave up on ever falling in love again the day that he buried his high school sweetheart and fiancé. He started a career in law enforcement just so that he could find her murderer and rapist. Just when he is about to see justice done, he meets Alli Davis-the defense attorney for the murdering rapist who took his love from him.

and

Chelle's <u>60+ Days to Live</u>, <u>Breathe</u>, <u>& Write</u>



Karma Visited by Chelle Cordero

My life changed after I died.

It's not like I had any special powers.

They just didn't understand me.

They underestimated me.

I had a gift.

Prologue

"Sonovabitch!" He hissed the expletive out loud. It was another dead end. It might have been more palatable if he didn't know how much fun the fuckers were having at his expense. This was the second home invasion in less than a month, each time the perps left clues. The clues were too obvious to be of any real value, it was more like a game to the intruders, but they had to waste time checking them out just the same.

Dave looked around the small office. It didn't look like his foul language had even jostled his partner. Tim could sleep anywhere leaning back in his chair with his head flopped back. It was a good thing the guy snored, at least you could tell he was still breathing, mused Dave.

Only two of the four desks were currently occupied, his and his partner's. Two patrol cars were out in the small town. The day shift was the largest staff. It was a small squad room, their boss, Sheriff Ryder, had his own office and the secretary sat out in the lobby. Once upon a time he thought he had found heaven on earth, a nice small town where he could continue his law enforcement career without all the ugliness he saw as a detective in Chicago.

After eleven years he found himself becoming apathetic and detached after dealing with junkies, abused wives who kept going back to their husbands, missing kids that turned up dead on the side of a road, hookers who were terrified of disappointing their pimps, thieves and arsonists. His indifference became a way of life even when he wasn't at the job.

Indifference destroyed his marriage too, although he had come to realize that while he missed the idea of being married, he certainly didn't miss the woman he was married to. She had done him a favor the day she got fed up with missed dinners and cancelled social plans because of some case or other he was working on. Rose walked out and never looked back. He thought of going after her and then realized she really wasn't that important to him after all. For a very brief few days he felt a bit like a heel. He didn't have much of a chance to miss her or feel guilty for long, not the way she had her lawyer come after him. She wound up keeping most of what he used to own and it made leaving his old life behind a lot easier.

Maybe there was something wrong with his wiring to allow his marriage to dissolve so easily. His sister tried to convince him that with a fresh start maybe he would find the woman who would truly win his heart. He wasn't exactly holding his breath. Dave had no plans to look for anyone special. If, and that was a big if, and when it happened, she would probably just drop from the sky anyway, It was that unlikely.

Meanwhile he had more important things to think about. These invasions. A trio of masked assailants broke into three area homes, so far nobody had been killed, but the home owner at the last one fought back and was pistol whipped pretty thoroughly in exchange. Catawai was normally a nice sleepy town, a bedroom community. It wasn't too far a drive to Denver and Boulder where a lot of folks worked. Only a handful of folk actually had employment in the town, like him, in the Sheriff's Department or one of the local small shops.

Fingerprints were collected at each of the homes that were broken into and neighbors were questioned in case anyone saw anything. The only fingerprints belonged to the family and no one had the foresight or curiosity to be looking out their window to keep watch over their neighbor's home. It was a small enough town though for outsiders to stand out, which was odd because no one really had any recollection of strangers in the town.

Dave inspected the plastic evidence bag containing a garage door opener. It was a universal opener and stolen from a local resident to boot. Of course it was wiped clean. A clue with a serial number, only the direction the serial number took them held no relevance to the case. It wasn't even one of the previous homes that had been broken into; it was taken from a car left unlocked at the local shopping center. The owner wasn't even sure if it had been lifted or simply fell out of the car unnoticed. In the long run it just took valuable time that other clues might have been found. Dave assumed it was left behind as a tease, part of the usual nose-thumbing these home invasion perpetrators were doing towards the local law enforcement. They seemed so sure that they wouldn't get caught.

Chapter One

Tears streaked down her cheeks and left lines on her soot stained cheeks. I rested my hand on hers and hoped she felt at least a little bit of comfort. The children were safe, she made sure of that. I let her know I admired her bravery. She appreciated the compliment, for just a moment, and then fear grabbed her again.

She stood again and tried to shake the bars free from the window. Safety bars. Those bars were meant to keep evil out and now all they did was trap her in. Luckily the little ones could squeeze between the wrought iron rods and she dropped them to horrified bystanders on the street. She understood that there was no way she could escape, but she was determined to save the children.

One by one she made sure that her charges would be alright, they were safe. And now it was time for her to die, but now the fear of how she would suffer terrified her.

Coughs seized her body as she sank back down to the floor and cried some more. Flames were licking the walls. There wasn't much time left. We were both scared, but I knew I had no reason to fear for myself.

We could hear the sirens of the approaching fire trucks, but there wasn't time. Her eyes were haunted as she looked at me and I prayed that the smoke would claim her before the flames. My prayers were answered. I sat still and stroked her limp hand and felt so sad that the girl's last minutes were filled with terror.

As the burning ceiling above us sent flaming stalactites raining down, I knew she was at peace.

Annie bolted upright in bed and gasped as she tried to catch her breath. There were no flames and no smoke, but the smell still assaulted her nostrils. Her throat felt raw.

Scott muttered a curse word into his pillow. Her gasp disturbed his slumber. Thankfully he turned over and went back to sleep. She held her breath until she was sure that he hadn't woken enough to demand his usual wham-bang-thank-you-ma'am anger sex.

Annie slid quietly from the bed and padded barefoot down the hall to the guest bathroom. She needed to be quiet so she wouldn't wake her mother-in-law and be subjected to her belittling comments. Of course Dianne would be only too happy to complain to Scott and make sure that he reprimanded his wife appropriately.

She locked the bathroom door behind her and drank three bathroom cups of water. Then she sat on the closed toilet seat. Annie hugged herself and thought about her nightmare. Only it wasn't just a nightmare, not her nightmare anyway, she knew that. Somewhere some young girl had just died in a burning apartment. And there was nothing Annie could do to save her.

Annie had these types of dreams ever since she was a little girl, she just didn't always understand why. There was a time when she was normal and happy. There was a time when she had the love of two adoring parents and she felt like a princess. Then there was a night she was napping in the back seat of the family car, her parents' lively laughter and conversation soothed and comforted her. Suddenly her mother screamed, her father yelled, and Annie was tossed in the back seat. She remembered sobbing and screams... and pain. There was heat and crackling and then nothing.

Sometime after she woke up in a hospital bed she heard the nurses talking about how she was pulled from the wreckage by the rescuers just before the car exploded. She arrived close to death because of burns and damage to her smoke-filled lungs, a minor head injury and other cuts and bruises she had just added to the pity everyone looked at her with. She was in the hospital for weeks.

Annie went home, not to the childhood home filled with happy memories of her parents, but to her mother's elderly aunt and uncle. It was an old but comfortable farmhouse and Annie would play with her dolls while hiding behind the furniture. Her aunt always made sure she was taken care of before she would tend to her chores. There were days her aunt would offer coffee and donuts to friends in the country kitchen. One day when Annie was playing close by, she overheard her aunt whispering to a neighbor that Annie actually did die on the operating table and, through the grace of God, the doctors managed to bring her back.

She was so young and couldn't understand why she had been able to come back from the dead but her mommy and daddy couldn't. Annie believed it was absurd that her whole life since then was just borrowed time.

When her nightmares first started and no one understood why she woke up screaming so often, hospital counselors told her aunt and uncle that she was reacting to the loss and it was normal. When the dreams continued the doctors suggested that the minor head injury she suffered and the brief lack of oxygen when she coded might have left lasting problems. Soon everyone was convinced that her nightmares were all spawned by the trauma of her parents' fiery car crash and they not so patiently dismissed her concerns for the strangers she claimed were in danger.

She knew early on that her dreams of devastation and calamity were more than mere memories or imagination, but she never had proof. As she grew older she found newspaper articles here and there that bore uncanny resemblance to her dreams. Most times she had to hunt for the articles, something the local library came in handy for; but then her aunt and uncle dismissed the similarity to her "dreams" by stressing how hard she had to look for the stories.

She didn't understand how or why she was dreaming of actual events. No one believed her when she tried to tell them that people, unknown strangers, needed help. Annie was frustrated when she couldn't find the details that could have proven that she wasn't crazy. She learned at an early age that most of her dreams didn't need to be spoken about, especially not the ones she couldn't connect to actual events. She always hoped that the less she talked about the phenomenon, the more she would be believed when there was something she couldn't let go of. Annie also hoped for the day people wouldn't look at her with apprehension and pity.

She got older and the dreams continued. Some of the dreams were so intense that there was no way of hiding the effect they had on her. It was bad enough to see people suffering and dying, but she couldn't do anything to help and she was frustrated. Without control and without the ability to help, her nighttime was filled with devastating nightmares.

School counselors suggested that her aunt bring her to a psychologist, he merely repeated the earlier diagnosis and prescribed mood enhancing drugs. The pills made her woozy and weepy, and the dreams still didn't stop. Annie flushed the pills, she refused to take them and her uncle complained about the expense of the doctor and they implored her to try to help herself get better.

"Little one," no matter how old she got, her uncle still thought she was just a 'babe'. "You have to start by admitting that these dreams aren't real."

Whether they thought she was purposely making them up or she was just subconsciously looking for attention, they worried that the losses she suffered as a child had her living a fantasy. They told her that even special powers would not bring her dear parents back. She had to find a way to get along in the world without pretense.

Her aunt and uncle were really her dad's aunt and uncle. They were kind and they loved her. They never had children of their own and suddenly they had this little girl thrust into their home. Annie never really faulted them for not knowing her better but she regretted that they never seemed to understand her.

Without their belief in her and their help, she felt powerless. Annie cried because she never knew what she could do to help the people she dreamt about. Most of her dreams were vague – what city was the burning building in? What highway did that car run off of? Where was the crying child hiding?

She had no way of knowing who to go to for help or who would believe her. She couldn't do anything about it the terrible ordeals these people were living through and she couldn't do anything to save them. All she could do was put up with the ridicule of her fellow teens that were not as compassionate as their parents who made excuses and whispered about her mental problems.

Annie sat on the edge of the tub and cried quietly knowing that once again all she had been able to do was hold a young girl's hand while she suffocated from the thick, dense smoke. She hoped she gave the poor girl some comfort; she didn't have to die alone. Like the victims in many of her dreams, the young girl had been able to see and hear her. She sniffed and was thankful that the girl hadn't suffered from the flames consuming her body.

"What were you doing up in the bathroom all night?" Scott bit into his English muffin and chewed loudly. "You on the rag or something?"

She noted that there was no concern in his voice, just annoyance, as usual. He was annoyed that she had disturbed him when she first woke and then again when she came back to bed.

"I... had a bit of a stomach ache," she lied.

It was shortly after they were married when she had one of her nightmares. She woke shaking and crying and panicked by what she had seen. Scott held her and tried to calm her, it felt good to be comforted by his strong arms. He kept telling her it was just a nightmare, she was safe. He offered comfort up until the point that she finally told him what she had experienced and she trusted him enough to tell him about her belief that the dreams were real, and then he laughed at her instead of listening. He called her a fool. He made fun of her for days. His taunts reminded her of the ridicule she suffered in middle school. She was humiliated and decided she would be better off never to share her dreams with him again.

His mother moved in with them a few months later. Scott never discussed it with Annie, he just told her that his mother would be moving in with them. He just announced it one night. It was his mom, Annie never would have objected, but it still would have been nice to have her feelings considered. Aside from a few brief moments the day of their wedding, she had never really spoken with her mother-in-law and Annie was actually looking forward to having Scott's mom live with them. She was hoping to enjoy a mother-daughter connection that she never was exposed to.

She was quickly disappointed; it was never a warm relationship. And then a few weeks after Dianne moved in, Scott got annoyed with Annie for something minor and he decided to retaliate by humiliating her. He turned to his mother and told her all about the psychologist Annie had to see as a teenager because of 'mental problems'. He mockingly mimicked how Annie sounded after one of her nightmares, he exaggerated her crying and the halting way she told him about her dream. She watched in horror as they both laughed at her and her 'psychological disorder'. The humiliation stung more than Annie had ever experienced before.

He looked at her over his coffee cup. "You better not be coming down with anything. I expect you at that fundraiser tonight no matter what."

"I'll be there." She sounded resigned.

Scott decided to run for a seat on the town council. He started planning his political career around the time Dianne moved in. There was no doubt that he would win the election with the friends he had in high powered places. He expected his wife to stand by his side in front of his potential constituents. He made it clear to her that anything that went on between them never made it into the public eye. As far as his future constituents, all they were to see was an ideal marriage, a devoted family man and adoring wife. He demanded she participate in this deception or he would reveal her mental problems and have her institutionalized.

"Don't forget to make those cupcakes."

He told her she needed to bake cupcakes to bring to town hall. He expected her to obey without question. His demands were coming more and more often, he seemed to enjoy taunting her and watching her act submissive. Town hall meetings were social events in the small town and the councilmember wives always provided homemade refreshments. With the surety of Scott's position, Annie was included in the cadre of bakers.

Scott drained his cup of coffee and then made a face. "Damn, I'm lucky no one expects you to make the coffee. This is crap." He stood and wiped his mouth with the kitchen towel. "Just make sure that you're there on time."

Annie made breakfast for her mother-in-law after Scott left for work, it was a chore that Scott let her know was expected. Dianne didn't even pretend to say thank you, she was too busy criticizing Annie's cooking. The eggs were too runny, the coffee too weak and the toast too dry. Annie was treated like unpaid help who waited on the woman without complaint.

Annie did her best to act eager to please and catered to the woman. Dianne had no idea that the silly smile on Annie's face was really the result of the mental images she had picturing the woman wearing the runny eggs and cold coffee.

She kept reminding herself, silently, that she was just biding her time. She would eventually leave him, leave them. She just had to find a way out before he could stop her and lock her away. If she failed she knew she would never get another chance. But she was determined to make it work.

Scott used to make her happy, in the beginning she really felt loved and secure. The changes were subtle, she couldn't remember when he stopped kissing her cheek and holding doors for her. Was it the day he announced he was going into politics after a late night phone call from his mother? Or was it the day his mother came to live with them? No, she thought, it started the night she trusted him enough to confide in him. She was so sure that she knew him, she loved the man she thought he was. Now Annie knew that the man she thought she married never really existed. How did he manage to hide his true nature, his mean nature, so well?

It wasn't long after Scott told his mother about Annie's dreams and history of mental illness, that she overheard them talking in whispered tones and supposedly out of her earshot. Dianne was very clear that she didn't like Annie and was disappointed in Scott's choice of a wife from the beginning and then to find out that the girl was 'damaged' with mental illness was even more disappointing. Scott laughed and said if he had known about her problems he never would have considered her. The only reason he married her was because she was pretty and polite and he felt she would make a good appearance as a politician's wife.

"So why bother staying with her?" His mother asked.

"In this business I need to be married and this community frowns on divorce. So I'm stuck."

"Please tell me you don't love her."

"Don't worry Mother, I never did. So long as she keeps up appearances though, I'll keep her around."

Annie could never forget the sickening feeling she had hearing him say that he didn't love her, that he never loved her. With the losses she suffered at such an early age, and moving away from the only family she did know, thinking she was loved by Scott meant everything to her. Losing that feeling of security was almost more than she could bear. Annie felt alone again. She continued eavesdropping even though she knew it would only bring her more pain.

"And what happens if little miss psycho gets out of line?"

"Then I have her committed and snatch up the sympathy vote." He laughed as he spoke.

"You could always do that anyway."

"Hmm,' he thought about it. "You're right. It definitely could give me a boost. Besides, family values, I can be a devoted husband standing by his sick wife. Yeah, it could work. And it would actually leave me free to have a real life without making any commitments."

Annie knew then what she had to do. She had to save enough money to be able to afford to leave. Scott told her he would never let her go, at least not until he was ready to get rid of her There was no one in town who would help her and no where she could go, he had already convinced several of the folks in town that she was suffering from mental illness. Ironically these were the same people Annie might have tried to go to for help in escaping his stranglehold. He elicited their cooperation in keeping an eye on her for him, for her own safety of course. Even the local minister called Scott the day she went to the church looking for help. She needed money to get away and a plan that would work quickly and quietly, and she had to do it by and for herself.

Dianne left for her weekly manicure and pedicure and Annie had the house to herself. She had time before she had to start the house cleaning she knew Scott expected from her. And she had to get to her baking for the town hall event that night.

Annie closed her eyes and pictured the burning room again. She could see the poor girl's face. She tried to remember what she saw in the room and the view she saw beyond the window bars. It looked like a city but there was nothing that she recognized from any of the few places she'd been or TV shows and magazines.

Annie sat at Scott's desk and woke the sleeping computer screen up by tapping the mouse. Half an hour later her internet search led her to a firefighters' forum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. There was chatter of a fatal fire, one fatality, the babysitter. One posting mentioned the two kids she saved by squeezing them through the window bars and dropping them two stories to waiting arms below in the crowd that gathered on the street. The teen-age babysitter couldn't get out and the firefighters couldn't get to her in time. Annie already knew that.

She wiped away the tears that fell and got up to go start her baking. She now knew the girl's name, but it didn't mean anything, it was too late to do anything.

Chapter Two

Dave missed having fully equipped crime labs right there at hand. It was always a hassle to convince the mayor to spend the money to ship evidence to the city for processing. Not that it cost a lot to have the work done, but they had to pay an officer to accompany it and keep the chain of custody clean or it wouldn't stand up in court. The mayor never thought it was a priority in a town where crimes were rarely more serious than a youngster shoplifting bubble gum. The townspeople had grown complacent and comfortable in their safe, secure community. That's why the current home invasions were so unsettling. Before this most people didn't even think about locking their doors.

Tim came down the stairs carrying a plastic bag with a button in it. "Must have missed this last night. It was under the dresser." He held the clear bag up to look at it. "Doesn't match any of the family's clothing from last night. Think it might be from one of the perps?"

"Maybe," Dave mumbled back. "We'll see if we can find a match."

"That's a big 10-4."

Dave rolled his eyes but made sure that his partner didn't see him do it. Tim was a decent guy and he really did try to be a good cop, but he was small town all the way, thought Dave. Ever since he was paired off with the "big city cop" he tossed around phrases like perp, wore sunglasses for all but the darkest night and tried to impress Dave with a slew of ten-codes. He had a romanticized image of who Dave was back in Chicago. Meanwhile Dave couldn't look at a caricature of Barney Fife without thinking of Tim.

Dave shook his head and sighed quietly. Most law enforcement agencies had dropped ten-codes years ago because there were too many

variations. Tim thought it made him sound more important and seemed sure it would impress Dave. He wished was that his partner would stop trying to impress him and just get all of the evidence collected.

His cell phone rang and he answered it before the second ring. Dave listened to the excited voice on the other side and exhaled slowly. He nodded, muttered a few words into the receiver and hung up.

"There's been another invasion," Dave looked grim. "The homeowner fought back and he's in the hospital this time."

Tim forgot all about bravado and grabbed his jacket. "Are we going?"

The first two families were bound with duct tape and locked in upstairs bedrooms before the houses were ransacked for valuables. Generally only smaller items were taken. There was a lot of jewelry and other stuff that could be fenced. Of course it wouldn't be disposed of locally, the town was too small and the stuff would be recognized.

During the third break-in, the wife and kids were bound and locked upstairs when the husband stopped cooperating. He was beaten. Dave was disturbed by the sudden escalation in violence; he hoped it wasn't an indication of more brutality to come. The wife and teenage daughter were bound and locked upstairs, just as in the other invasions. Then the husband was pistol whipped repeatedly, he was outnumbered and unarmed, there was no reason to beat him so savagely. The jewelry the wife and daughter were wearing was taken along with the guy's wedding ring. A few of the downstairs rooms were ransacked, the thieves never bothered going through the bedrooms. Cash that was stored in a cookie jar was pocketed and a few small expensive collectibles were gone. There were also a few smashed Lladro figurines, although those may have been knocked over during the struggle.

Witness accounts from the three families all described three individuals wearing black clothing and ski masks, but the violence at the third house didn't fit the earlier two cases.

Dave wanted to go over the descriptions again; he needed to be sure if it was the same team or some copycat coincidence. The families were already traumatized and he didn't want to badger them, but maybe they could remember something new if they were questioned again. Maybe he should let another sheriff speak to them, maybe even the unit's sole female member. Women were always viewed less threatening and they might feel a little safer talking to her.

Annie saw Scott huddled in the corner with George 'Old Man' Hunter. She was sure she saw Scott slipping an envelope into Hunter's jacket pocket. She mentioned to Scott that it looked like he was giving some sort of dishonest payoff to the man, he told her to mind her own business. He wasn't interested how it might have appeared.

It was no use telling Scott if he had been witnessed giving an envelope to the man who thought he ran the town, it could hurt his dreams of being elected to the town board. She understood that the town board was just the first step towards politics on a much larger scale and that was what Scott really yearned for. For some reason even she couldn't understand, a small part of Annie still wanted to see Scott happy. She didn't want him to destroy his chances. He wouldn't listen.

Old Man Hunter was one of the good old boys in the town, he always sat in on town meetings harrumphing loudly whenever someone tried to introduce a new idea and he never hesitated to voice his opinions. He always had something to say, usually a complaint, even about matters that never concerned him. Annie didn't trust Hunter and she was unhappy that Scott and he were so close. It was odd that Hunter even liked Scott, he never had much respect for carpetbaggers, the title Hunter used for anyone who wasn't born in the town. She was sure that Scott had to be doing something underhanded to curry the man's favor. Could the envelope have contained money? That didn't make sense, Hunter was already rich, and it would have had to be far in excess of what Annie thought Scott could get his hands on.

Thankfully the town board meeting moved along quickly. There was talk of replacing the town's main traffic light, honoring the school's football team after a win with another school, some discussion about a proposed mall, and local businesses sponsoring holiday lights for the end of the year seasonal decorations. Two of the residents got into a squabble about the overhanging limbs of a tree and who had the right and the obligation to trim it back.

She tuned out the raised voices and thought about her life up to that point. Her aunt and uncle never taught her to stand on her own; they even raised her to believe she needed a man to take care of her. Uncle always said he preferred the good old days when women enjoyed being the weaker sex and he treated his own wife like a queen. Aunt was always happy and was always comfortable being taken care of. Annie always hoped to have that same kind of relationship and know that kind of love one day for herself.

Scott had seemed like a good man when they first started seeing each other. They met at a church social and when he asked her to dance she was convinced her prince had arrived. When Scott showed up it was the answer to everyone's prayers. Uncle liked the idea that Annie would be well taken care of. Scott seemed to be the perfect candidate for the job.

It came as a surprise when Scott voiced his plans and told everyone about the distance they would be moving away, all the way to the other side of the state. Annie could see how sad her elderly relatives were, but even Uncle said that sometimes sacrifices had to be made to take care of the future. Annie was upset when she found out that Scott already purchased a house and made plans to move without speaking to her first, but she had been raised to be dutiful and she didn't argue.

Uncle died suddenly shortly after they announced their engagement. No one expected it, one morning he just didn't wake up. It was devastating to Annie that the one father figure she had grown up with wouldn't be there to walk her down the aisle. The dream she had to be a princess in a fairy tale wedding was squashed.

Annie married Scott in a judge's private chamber. His mother and the court clerk were their only witnesses. Scott told Annie that the trip into town would be too much strain for her frail aunt. Her aunt had been so depressed after burying her husband that she didn't protest. Then Annie and Scott moved away. Scott was busy setting up his real estate office and his schedule didn't allow for extended trips back to see her aunt. Six months later Annie got a note from her former town doctor; her aunt had also passed away peacefully in her sleep. She never got to see her again or to kiss her pale, wrinkled cheek. She would never again get to see her aunt's happy eyes when Annie told her how much she loved her.

Scott was all she had after that, she was totally dependent on him. Annie promised to obey him in her wedding vows. She had promised her dear uncle that she would be a good wife. She had to go where he said and do what he said. Scott promised to take care of her and she needed that. She really didn't know any better. That was the way she had been raised.

"I hope that you are not really thinking of serving that to company," Dianne scowled at her in the kitchen.

She continued shaping the Salisbury steak patties for the broiler tray. "Yes, I don't have any other meat defrosted. Besides, Scott likes these."

Scott surprised her with a last minute and unannounced dinner guest. Annie was able to stick the package of chop meat in the microwave. The chops she had sitting in the fridge wouldn't be enough to make for company, she had to save those for the next night. The chop meat was in the freezer, Aunt always said that a good housewife could always make something with anything at hand.

"Will you be joining us for dinner?" Annie asked her mother-in-law as sweetly as she could manage. She knew the old woman would be there even before she asked. Dianne gladly inserted herself into her son's life at every opportunity, with or without invitation. Annie still wanted to sound polite or she would hear about it later on, and she didn't want to give Dianne any reason to voice more complaints.

She overheard them plotting every night about ways to increase his chances for the election. More than once she heard them joking and laughing about the sympathy vote he could get by using her mental illness at an opportune time. Annie remembered how he said he could always put his poor, sweet and ill wife in an institution. He would stress what a painful decision it was and show everyone how committed he was to getting her well. He told Dianne that the sympathy vote would be enough to put him in office if necessary.

She knew she had to escape and feared she would give herself away if she ever acted too cavalier. Annie stood in front of the bathroom mirror many mornings and gave herself a pep talk to try to build her courage. There was no way that Annie wanted Dianne or Scott to guess what she was planning. Annie worried that she was running out of time.

Dianne snorted. "What are you making to go with those hamburgers?"

"Salisbury steaks," Annie gently corrected her. Salisbury steaks were mixed with peppers and onions and then breaded and broiled, they were fancier than hamburgers. "I've got a macaroni and cheese casserole in the oven. Scott said that he likes my homemade macaroni and cheese. And I'm serving a fresh salad." She cut Dianne off before she could enter another complaint. Once upon a time, Scott actually did compliment her on her cooking. Not bad for a pulled together in a hurry meal she thought.

Their dinner guest was very complimentary. The young man, Bill, had recently returned to the town although Annie suspected that his absence for the past two years wasn't completely voluntary. She was oddly fascinated by the artwork on his arms, that wasn't something she was used to seeing among the people she socialized with.

After the meal was over, Scott took Bill into his home office for brandy and to continue the private conversation they conducted during the dinner. Their heads were huddled together as they whispered back and forth. She wondered if Scott had recruited him to help plot some nefarious way to institutionalize her.

Annie cleared the table and wished she could hear what they were talking about. Bill grew up in the town. There were rumors that he was related to Hunter although no one ever openly acknowledged it. Annie had overheard Dianne earlier on the phone whispering that Bill's time away wasn't totally voluntary.

Dianne watched Annie closely. Annie was sure that Dianne was making sure she didn't go near the office. Each time Annie even glanced in the direction of the office door, Dianne demanded something else from the kitchen. She could practically feel the old woman's eyes burning into her. Dianne's diligent surveillance made her even more sure that whatever was being said in that room was wrong, just plain wrong. She wondered just how involved Dianne was or if she was only blindly following orders her son gave her, as well. Even if she was just following orders, thought Annie, he treats her a hell of a lot better, so Annie had nothing to feel sorry for her about.

She needed something to use against Scott for insurance if she was ever going to get out of there. She had to know what they were talking about, anything they were up to. Annie scraped the scraps into the trash and watched Dianne as she spoke to a friend who had just called her on her cell phone. She took the filled plastic bag from the wastebasket and opened the kitchen door quietly. She was quiet as she dumped the bag into the outside garbage can and then continued walking towards Scott's office window. She was thrilled to see that it was open a crack.

"...now we can go ahead with the project." It was Scott's voice. "With the money the pipeline is going to bring us, we can cash in."

"I'm gonna make sure nobody else is going to stand in our way. This may only be a small town now, but this place is going to be big once that mall opens. And we're going to own a big piece of it." Annie heard the clink of glasses. "We're on our way brother."

"Just try to be subtle, okay?"

Bill chuckled. "I'll be subtle right until we have what we want. We'll own this godforsaken place."

"I'm going to enjoy sitting there making all those decisions." He paused and Annie heard Scott chuckle. "Hopefully she's got coffee ready..." His voice began to trail off and Annie didn't take the time to listen. She had to get back into the kitchen quickly.

The coffee maker finished dripping just as she returned to the kitchen. Her timing was near perfect. She put cups on the tray next to the creamer and the sugar bowl and carried it out to the dining room. Then she ran back to get the coffee carafe and brought that to the table as well. Annie heard Scott's office door open and the men's voices.

Dianne was still seated at the table. Her phone call was finished and she was grudgingly looking through a women's magazine. "Took your time outside." She stared at Annie suspiciously. "What were you doing out there?"

"I took the garbage out before it started to smell." Dianne didn't look convinced. "I took my time coming back," Annie gave a little shrug. "I needed some fresh air to clear my head. I made dinner in a hurry over a hot oven."

Dianne snorted. "Yes, it looked and tasted hurried. Certainly not anything to be proud of."

She was used to her mother-in-law's blatant insults and bit her tongue to keep from responding. Protesting wouldn't be any use anyway, Dianne would find some way to make a scene and get Scott angry at her... never angry with his mother, thought Annie. Scott and Bill entered the room.

Annie didn't sit with them while they had coffee and homemade banana cream pie. After serving the three of them she went back to the kitchen to clean up. And to think. Why was Scott talking about a mall? He was a realtor, but he had never mentioned this kind of property development in the town before. It would certainly change the flavor of their community, but it had to be good for their tax base, she thought. And what was that about a pipeline? Why was Scott being so secretive about it? She imagined that a project like that had to be good for the town, why wouldn't he publicize it? What else was going on?

Bill came to the kitchen before he left for the evening to thank Annie for a wonderful meal. He stepped closer and Annie felt terribly uncomfortable. He had a smirk on his face and Annie had a case of déjà vu. She had seen that smirk before and recently, and it wasn't just from seeing the man around town. Had she dreamt of him? She knew that some of her dreams were lost, there were times she felt like she popped in on things happening but wasn't there long enough to get involved. She knew that she had seen him though and heard somebody crying in the background. That was all she could remember.

"I had a really great time. You are a wonderful hostess. Scott is very lucky to have you." He stood directly in front of her. "You're also a very pretty woman."

She tried to sidestep him. "I'm glad you enjoyed the meal. And, and thank you."

"I know Scott sprung me on you last minute." He leaned forward and Annie thought he was going to kiss her cheek. Instead he captured her face in his hands and kissed her on her lips.

Annie put her hands on his chest and pushed against him while she stepped backwards. "Bill, that's..."

"Ssh," he placed a finger over her lips, "it's all right. You taste delicious, you know." He looked towards the doorway.

Annie's eyes followed and she was surprised to see Scott standing there silently watching. And he wasn't saying anything. He was frowning and yet when Bill walked toward him, there was only a momentary hesitation before they shook hands. Then Bill left.

Before Scott left the room, Annie called out to him. "Why didn't you say something?" She was annoyed. "What the hell was that?" He laughed again and walked away. As far as she was concerned, he had reached a new low with his disrespect of her. "Scott!"

She was alone.

She watched as the car rolled down the embankment. Annie was frustrated as usual because there was nothing she could do to stop it. She was next to the car and could see inside. The man who was driving was dead; she was able to tell even without touching him. She could see the life as it drained from his body.

The woman sitting next to him was dying. "Help them, please." The woman's lips barely moved, she didn't move. But Annie knew she motioned to the backseat. "Save my babies..." She looked expectantly at Annie.

Two children were in their car seats, an infant and a toddler, both boys by the clothes. The toddler's head was slumped forward, there was blood. The baby was crying and reaching for her. Annie knew there was nothing she could do for the parents, but she had to help the children. She had to. They were just babies and she remembered the horror of another toddler in a car while her parents died.

Annie woke abruptly. Scott was sleeping soundly next to her. She stared at the ceiling and tried to remember everything she had seen. The license plate on the crashed car was the same color as hers, and it was nighttime... there was a number by the highway. She closed her eyes and focused on the memory as hard as she could. When Annie was sure she had enough information, she got out of bed and left the room to use the computer.

It worked. Annie was elated. It was the first time Annie had been able to do something to help.

After she made the phone call she forced herself back into her dream and watched while the first responders removed the parents' bodies from the car. They had to in order to reach the children in the back. The toddler was still unconscious. The baby reached towards her again, but no one else could see her standing there.

Dave stood up on the roadway overlooking the scene. The kids were carried to the ambulance and the crew jumped in. The flashing lights shone brightly as the vehicle pulled away from the scene and rolled down the highway. Now it was just a recovery attempt, no one needed to hurry anymore, both adults were dead and the medical examiner was on his way. Dave ran the plates and registration. One of the EMTs handed him the man's wallet and the woman's purse – identification was easy on this one. He hoped they'd be able to find relatives for the kids so they wouldn't have to go into the system. Dave was glad it seemed that the two kids would be okay. The baby definitely was fine. His older brother would recover in time, at least physically.

As he watched the fire department volunteers that were left to bring the bodies up to the roadway, he realized he hadn't seen all of them come up the embankment. There had been a woman next to the car, he noticed her because she wasn't in uniform like the others. Who was she? He asked one of the firefighters about her.

The guy shrugged. "Who?" He was busy helping the tow truck operator unwind the winch to haul the car back up.

"There was another woman down there, next to the car. Where is she?" He looked around. "I wanted to ask her if she saw the accident. She wasn't in uniform."

The firefighter frowned. "Sorry, never saw her." The man went back down the embankment and guided the hook from the town truck.

Dave shook his head. Someone had to have seen her. He asked one of the state troopers and got the same blank reaction. He was confused.

Chapter Three

The mayor called members of the local high school football squad up to receive plaques. It was another championship year. Annie watched as Scott edged himself closer to the photo opp and timed it perfectly to shake the coach's hand just as the camera clicked. She knew that any press photo would be incorporated somehow into his campaign. The headline would most probably read something like Scott Furman gives his support to local athletes. Scott didn't do anything generous these days unless it was going to benefit him down the road.

During public input, the mayor called out the names of a few people who signed up. The first person who spoke had a question about a permit to put a shed on his property, the second asked about changing the school bus route. Annie noticed Scott's bored expression change to a frown when the third name was called. The woman was a local and outspoken ecology activist, and very involved in the welfare of the town.

She went to the podium and started talking about a proposed pipeline that would cut through a section of the town. Sherry Pulaski complained that the plans would encroach on personal property and endanger some family homesteads; the homeowners would be forced to sell. It was even planned to cut across a historical Native American burial ground. As soon as she questioned how the town powers allowed the transaction to get approved, there were a lot of uncomfortable glances between the town board members. She went so far as to intimate that someone was paid off and Old Man Hunter stood and loudly bullied her from his spot in the audience. The mayor had to rap his gavel several times and ask for order. The police officer acting as sergeant-of-arms looked ready to step in if things escalated. Annie noticed that Scott managed to look both disgusted and bored at the same time even while nodding in agreement to everything Hunter had to say.

Public input was closed and the rest of the meeting was filled with the normal humdrum reports that made up most of the monthly town board meetings. A few items received almost heated discussion among the council members, but in the end everything was passed without major fanfare. As the meeting came to a close, Scott turned to Hunter with a questioning look. Hunter shook his head slightly and Scott looked away again. This time, Annie thought, he looked like a child who had just been

denied a toy. As soon as the meeting was closed, Scott hurried out. Hunter followed soon after.

"...because I told you that we have to let everything else fall into place first." Annie entered the hallway just in time to hear Hunter admonishing Scott. He was waving a fat finger in Scott's face when he saw her and motioned that the conversation was over.

There was no conversation in the car during the ride home. Scott turned the radio louder each time Annie tried to say anything. She didn't want to shout louder than the radio so she kept her mouth shut.

Dave was lying there awake. The sun had long ago come up and he was trying very hard to ignore it. It bothered him about the vision he had seen of the mystery woman. It had been a long time since he thought he saw folks that weren't really there, of course that had been when he was married to Rose and comforting himself now and then with a bottle. It sure would have helped him in his police career if he really did have some kind of super power.

Finally the clock alarm sounded and he couldn't ignore the need to get out of bed anymore. He had barely gotten his feet onto the floor when the cat started meowing loudly and demanding his breakfast.

"You'll wait. I've got to take a leak." He closed the door on the protesting cat. When he was done he splashed some cool water on his face before opening the door again.

The cat kept wrapping himself around Dave's feet and he was getting annoyed. "Damn it Mauszer, give me a chance." He had tossed and turned all night and couldn't shake the sleepiness from his head. "I'll feed you in a moment."

All he really wanted was a cup of coffee, but he took the cat's bowl and opened a can of food. "Here are your meager rations to get you through your hard life. Just let me know when you're ready to call the ASPCA and I'll dial it for you." As he knelt to put the food down, he patted the head of the fat orange tabby that came with the house. He never was as angry with the feline as he pretended to be. He was grateful for the cat, at least the cat kept him from coming home to an empty house every night.

He set a pot of water on the stove to boil. While he waited, he went to the front door to pull the newspaper in and spotted a photo on the front page. Great, he thought, the accident was in the paper. Maybe the reporter caught a picture of the mystery woman. Dave spread the paper on the table and was disappointed. The reporter must have taken the photo from the wrong angle, Dave didn't see her. He really needed to know that she was really there and not some figment of his imagination.

"It's none of your goddamn business!"

"But this pipeline sounds like it is going to do more damage than good. Besides, Sherry said it wouldn't even benefit us. They're just using our land to bring the cables through. We won't see any of that power. It's not even going to benefit our state. She said it would ruin that old cemetery and some people would lose their homes."

Annie watched his face carefully to see if anything she said raised a reaction. She didn't want Scott to know her real reasons for asking questions, to discover something she might use on him to get away. She needed to know what Hunter was lecturing him about. "Look, you want to run for office, I would think it would help if your family was involved in the community. But you have to let me know what is going on so I can help."

Scott scoffed at her.

"Look, you said you want me to act like a model wife. I don't want you having me committed. So I am willing to play the part, but you have to give me the information I need to be convincing."

"I don't need and I don't want your help. Just do the things I tell you to do and keep your mouth shut otherwise."

Annie put her purse down on the counter and tried not to raise her voice. She didn't like arguing with him, she didn't trust him anymore and the last thing she needed was an angry confrontation. "But..."

"But nothing!" He slammed his fist on the counter and her purse fell to the floor.

Annie saw the cell phone tumble out with the other contents and bent to scoop everything back into her purse before Scott could see it. He made no moves to help her... and then he saw the phone. He grabbed it from her hand.

"What the hell is this?" He immediately hit redial and frowned when he heard the Catawai Sheriff's office pick up. Scott hung up immediately, "Why are you calling the police?"

"I just have the phone for emergencies. It's a pre-pay."

"I never told you that you could have a phone."

"I thought it was a good idea the last time I brought some to the church."

"So you lied to me. You told me that you were buying cell phones for the donation. But you bought for yourself instead. Why did you call the police?"

"I didn't." She blurted out the lie before she could think. "I lent the phone to a stranded motorist the last time I drove to Penny-Wise." She was hoping that he wouldn't remember the last time that she took the grocery list to the bulk discount store just outside of town.

"You don't need this." He dropped the phone on the floor and stomped on it. "The last thing I need is for you to make one of your stupid phone calls and start rambling to the wrong person. Nobody needs to hear anything you have to say and the last thing I need is for anyone to know I'm married to a psycho."

"Scott, if you hate me that much why don't you just give me a divorce. I'll go away quietly. I'm not looking to hurt you."

He laughed in her face. "You will act like the loving and devoted wife in front of the town. There will be no divorce. You will not bring me any shame. The only place I will ever send you away to is an institution where I never have to worry about anyone ever listening to your stupidity. The sooner you realize you have no options but to do what I tell you, the better off you will be."

"Why did we ever get married?"

"I thought it would be nice to have a family, a wife and a kid or two to show off, but you couldn't even get fucking pregnant." He shook his head. "You've been a disappointment since day one."

Annie kept her mouth shut. His words still managed to sting. She knew that she needed to forever hide the fact that she had been on birth control for most of their marriage. A few days after he made fun of her psychiatric history with his mother, she contacted the one childhood friend she was still in touch with. Her friend sent her birth control pills when she asked for them. She could never willingly bring a child into the world with a man who held her hostage and threatened her with institutions. Fortunately she was able to convince him that she couldn't get pregnant before she ran out of the supply of birth control pills her friend sent her. She assumed he was having an affair, a discreet one; it wouldn't help his political career if he wasn't circumspect. As far as Annie was concerned, so long as it kept him away from her she was okay with it and she really didn't care who he was sharing his affections with.

"I am going to bed, it's late. I suggest that you get your ass there, too. I have things you have to get done tomorrow and I don't need you wasting the day away." He left the room.

Annie sighed. Unfortunately Scott still insisted on maintaining the pretense that they were an average married couple that still shared a bed – fortunately their bed was Queen-sized and there was enough room to stay away from him during the night. Certainly neither one of them ever reached out for the other in their sleep.

Annie finished putting everything back into her purse. She stared at the crumpled cell phone in her hand and felt like a lifeline had just been cut off. There was no way she could chance replacing it and facing his fury. He would manage to find out somehow, especially now he would tell his spies to be watching closely. "Sometimes a little paranoia can be healthy," she whispered for her own ears only.

He massaged his eyebrows while he listened to her ranting away through over the phone. "Look Rose, you've got a... friend living with you. Why don't you ask him to contribute to the household?" Dave pulled the phone away from his ear when she started screaming curse words through the receiver.

"No. I am not looking to get out of any responsibility, but I am already paying enough alimony. Your boyfriend is not my responsibility." His jaw tightened while he let her finish her latest tirade. "Fine. I'll look forward to hearing from your lawyer. Good bye." As much as he wanted to, Dave refused to slam the phone receiver down.

He wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of knowing that she could still get his blood boiling; she would think it was love when it was really disgust.

He took a deep breath in and sat back in his seat. There was no way a judge would up the alimony to pay for her live-in-lover's expenses. At least he hoped there wasn't. He sure as hell couldn't afford it. She got the house he paid for, the car that he bought, and a healthy monthly stipend. Why should he have to pay for the living expenses of the guy sleeping in bed, his bed, with his ex-wife? He didn't want her back, it was just that he couldn't seem to extract her claws.

Tim came into the squad room, he seemed anxious. "We've got a missing girl." Tossing a folder onto Dave's desk, he planted a hip on the corner. "Her car was found abandoned a few miles southwest of here. She's changing jobs and traveling through."

"To where?"

"The new job."

Dave gave Tim a sharp look and motioned questioningly with his hands.

"I think it's just outside of Denver."

Dave flipped open the folder to take a look at the photo. "And why do we think she's headed this way?"

"She left a copy of the route back at her old place. The roommate found it when she got a call from the new employer. The kid never made it to a meeting."

His interest was aroused. "This, uh," he read her name off the folder, "Gayle, when was she supposed to make this meeting?"

"Last night."

"Traveling alone?"

"As far as we know."

Dave stood and reached for his jacket. "Where's the car now?"

They made a cursory inspection of the car and its contents; her clothing was still in a suitcase in the trunk along with a box of books and framed pictures. It was obvious she was planning on settling in at her new job.

The roommate found a fax machine and sent over Gayle's itinerary for her trip. They began retracing her steps. Several hours later, thanks to eyewitnesses, they discovered that she met up with a man outside of town. They sat in the diner together, and the waitress on duty said they seemed engrossed in conversation. Was he a stranger? The waitress didn't seem to think so. She commented that they seemed very comfortable with each other.

One of the officers back at the station called the number of the friend back home and asked if she said anything about meeting up with someone. Aside from the business meeting which the friend thought was scheduled in the corporate offices, she didn't know anything about any meetings. Dave nodded as Tim quietly voiced the hope that they would find the girl alive and she'd be able to answer their questions by herself.

Based on the waitress's description of the guy, he looked like more than half of the men still sitting in the diner. There was nothing that made him unique. He paid cash when they were done with their meal. No one noticed if they arrived together or just met there, but they both left in Gayle's Toyota. Tom insisted on trying to lift prints, but the dishes were already run through the dishwasher and the tables were wiped clean after every customer.

The last destination entered on Gayle's GPS was the diner. Her route otherwise seemed pretty direct with only a few fuel and meal stops. The car was almost spotless; there was only one empty plastic water bottle on the floor. Dave checked the glove compartment and under the seats, hoping to find some kind of a note or physical map, anything that might give a clue as to how and why she met the man in the diner and who he was. Everyone said the two looked friendly and unhurried. It appeared that she left the diner with him willingly.

Could he have been someone from her past, maybe even a past her friend knew nothing about? Dave and Tim explored the possibilities.

"Her pocketbook and wallet were still in the car." The undersheriff who found the car rambled off a list of his findings to Dave. "Her cell phone wasn't there, but the car has Blue-tooth, and I downloaded a list of phone numbers she dialed. There are two that are local."

"Really?" He was encouraged. "Do we know who they belong to?"

"The first belongs to that company she was planning to work for. The other one is a cell, one of those prepaid things. There was no answer when we tried it. I asked them to find out where it was sold, see if they can find out who bought it."

"Okay." Dave took the two numbers. He was going to contact the company and find out what her last conversation with them was. Maybe they sent someone out to meet her. Everything he was hearing about the girl suggested she probably didn't pick up some random stranger.

She heard a girl sobbing and a loud angry male voice. It was dark. Annie shivered. This was different from all her other dreams. She couldn't understand any of the words, but loud, thumping noises sounded like slaps or punches. Each time Annie heard the sharp sounds, the female cried a little harder.

Annie wanted to run back to the safety of her bed to feel the security of her blankets and pillow, this felt malicious. She wasn't supposed to be here. The man was yelling again. He scared her, but she couldn't understand what he was yelling. Then she heard sobbing again and she knew she had to be there for the girl. She forced herself forward.

"No, please, I want to go home."

The sound of a slap.

"Don't you ever say no to me again."

Sniffling, weeping. "I... I'm sorry."

The room was no more than a tiny cubicle, dark and musty. It came into focus as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Annie could see the young woman that was sobbing. Her cheeks were tear-streaked and her eyes were puffy from crying, her clothing ripped and disheveled. Black duct tape bound her hands to a wooden beam that ran along the exposed wall. She was seated on the floor; her feet also bound together.

A man stooped over the girl. Annie couldn't see his face. He was big with broad shoulders. He was wearing a dirty T-shirt and smelled like bad beer and sweat. He was yelling something. Annie couldn't focus. He left the room and slid the door, really just a panel in the wall, shut. She could hear the sound of a padlock clicking on the other side.

The girl sobbed and Annie looked at her again. The girl was staring back at her. Her eyes were wide with fright.

"Can... you... see me?" Annie's voice was shaky. Her dreams had always taken her to accidents, disasters, and the victim was always ready to die. Annie hoped this girl wasn't going to die. This wasn't an accident, this was evil. "Where are we?"

The young woman just continued to stare. Confused, Annie wasn't sure the girl actually saw her, but when she moved she saw the other woman's eyes following her. Then she wondered if the girl could hear the things that Annie said, maybe that was the problem.

"You do see me." The girl still wouldn't answer, she just cried. "Tell me what you can and I will try to get you help."

No answer.

"I need you to tell me something, anything. Who are you? Where are we?" The girl cried harder. Annie was frustrated. She looked around the room, it began to spin. She closed her eyes and held her head.

Gunfire. The noise startled Annie. She froze and cautiously looked around. She had left the room with the imprisoned girl. She was outside and there was a commotion. Nearby there were two police vehicles by a tree about ten yards away, both units were empty. There was an ambulance parked beyond the police cars. Annie found herself standing next to a building with grey wooden slats, some kind of shack or barn. The morning sun was just rising and the sky above still looked inky like a storm moving in. She stepped closer to the building looking for cover even knowing the bullets couldn't harm her.

Annie watched as a man running from the back porch fell right after another shot sounded. He was sprawled motionless on the ground between the tree and the house he

had been running away from. The sun flashed off of an object that flew from his hand as he fell. An officer ran to the motionless body. He touched the man's neck to check for a carotid pulse, and then he looked up at another officer and shook his head. Using a latex glove he pulled from his pocket, the officer picked up the shiny object, a large butcher's cleaver with brown stains on the sharp edge. Another officer brought over a bag and the cleaver was dropped into it. They turned the dead man onto his back and patted down his body looking for ID.

"There's nothing." One of the officers called out to another member of their law enforcement team.

Someone said a curse word behind her. It came from somewhere around the corner of the shed.

"We have no clue where the girl is. Or why he took her." Dave was coming around the shed and shouting the information to the other officers.

Annie tucked herself even tighter against the wall of a weathered shed. She looked at the face of the man lying on the ground. "That's not him." She said aloud and shook her head as she stood next the wooden structure.

"What did you say?" Dave stopped short when he saw her. He cleared the corner of the shed just in time to hear her words. Dave looked puzzled.

Annie looked at him terrified. He was looking directly at her.

"Who are you? How did you get in here?" He pointed the handgun he pulled from his side holster at her. "What are you doing here?"

Annie stared back at him. Her eyes were wide.

"I asked you a question." His words were curt.

She paused and looked at the gun in his hand. "You can see me?" She sounded surprised.

He frowned. "Of course I can see you. What the hell?" Dave raised his handgun. "Where is the girl?"

"I don't understand..." Annie shook her head. "How can you see me?"

"Don't play games. I asked you a question." He paused deliberately between each word wondering who this girl was. He only knew from Gayle's driver's license that it wasn't her.

"Hey Boss, there's no one in the house." One of the police officers ran from the back door of the house to Dave. Dave's partner, Tim, followed. They looked at his raised handgun curiously. "Everything okay, Boss?"

Dave realized that neither man acknowledged the woman he was speaking to. "Yeah." He slowly lowered the handgun. "Any sign of the girl?"

They both shook their heads.

He was puzzled that no one else questioned how she got past their cars without anyone seeing. He was skeptical but it seemed as if no one else could see her.

"There... there's another guy." Annie said the words out loud.

Dave heard her, the others didn't. "Look for another guy." Dave felt compelled to repeat her words.

"In here." Annie motioned to the shed they were standing next to. "There's a secret room."

Dave hesitated. Then he turned to the other officers. "Check the shed out. Look for a hidden door or something." He looked at his partner, "Make sure there's no other way out." He looked back at Annie.

Dave and the other officer stood on both sides of the front shed door, both of them drew their guns in anticipation of danger. Dave nodded and his partner went to kick the door in. Before he could touch it, the door exploded outwards in splinters and the man with the dirty T-shirt that Annie had seen berating the girl burst out and attacked the two lawmen.

The three men scuffled. Dave quickly had the man pinned face down. He yanked his hands behind his back and cuffed him. "Where is the girl?"

Tim ran back around the shed when he heard the commotion, but stood back when he saw that Dave had everything under control.

"Fuck you." Angry man spoke into the dirt.

"No, fuck you, dirt bag." Dave pushed the suspect's face into the ground. Dave spoke to his partner. "Look for some kind of a secret room," he glanced back at Annie.

She remembered the musty odor; it reminded her of the root cellar at her uncle's farm. "It's underneath the shed."

Dave sighed, he felt like he was losing his mind and then he repeated her words again, "Check underneath the shed. Look for a trap door in the floor."

The officer that had checked the other man's pulse came to take the cuffed man to a waiting patrol car.

Dave stood next to the shed and stared at the mystery woman that no one else seemed to see. He wondered if everyone was just playing a big joke on him and pretending. Maybe his eyes were playing tricks on him. Maybe his ears were, too. How could he be the only person to see this lady standing there? I haven't had a drink in over twenty-four hours, maybe it's time to get another one, he mused. How come nobody else could hear her? She seemed genuinely shocked that he could see her and that confused him even more.

One of the officers yelled from inside the shed that they found the girl. EMS was requested and both Annie and Dave watched as the ambulance crew rushed in carrying their supplies. Then they just stared at each other in silence.

As the EMTs rolled the kidnap victim past on a gurney, she stared at Annie, but she never said anything. Dave glanced between the apparition and the young woman on the gurney. He thought the beautiful specter he spoke with looked concerned for the victim while the young woman looked scared of this otherwise invisible presence. Except for the girl being wheeled to the ambulance, and she never really acknowledged the mystery woman, no one else seemed aware of her presence.

The victim was a small girl and it didn't take long until the crew lifted the stretcher into the back of the ambulance and closed the doors. The crew jumped in and the rig began to roll away shortly after. Tim checked with the other two officers in one of the squad cars with the angry man was sitting cuffed and cursing in the back seat. They drove off. Doc Burns, the county coroner, had already arrived and was busy bagging the body of the man who was shot. Tim helped the coroner and his assistant lift the black body bag into the morgue van.

Tim began walking back towards Dave. "You coming?"

Dave glanced uncomfortably at Annie and then looked back at Tim. "Can you hitch a ride back with Doc Burns? I've got to... make a phone call before I head back."

Tim shrugged. "Sure. Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You seem kind of preoccupied."

"Nah, everything's okay." He didn't sound like he believed his own words.

"Hey, it was a good job." Tim looked curiously at Dave.

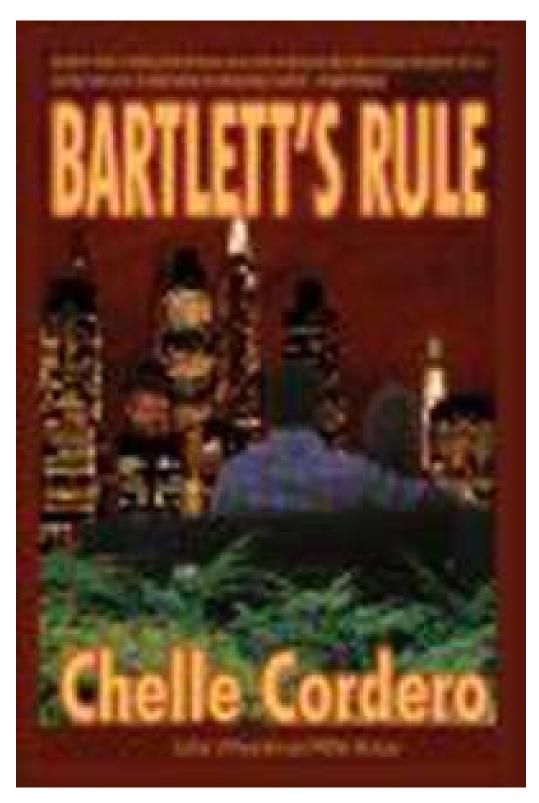
Dave nodded. "Yeah." He felt uncomfortable that Tim was watching him and even more uncomfortable that he was seeing something no one else did. "Do me a favor and start the paperwork. I'll be back in a little while."

Dave waited until everyone else left before he turned to Annie.

"Tell me," he scratched his head, "why the hell can't anyone else see you?"

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Bartlett's Rule by Chelle Cordero

Prologue

"He is a pompous ass!"

"I agree. But he is also a big name and he has to be kept happy if we are going to pull this acquisition off successfully."

Paige sat and fumed. She couldn't believe that Jeanmarie was asking her to charm and entertain this male chauvinist pig who penned a weekly column on how men were God's gift to women.

"Why can't you just buy him dinner and tickets to a Broadway show for him and one of his many adoring hordes?"

"Excuse me?" Jeanmarie grinned mischievously.

"I said hordes." Paige emphasized the "D" sound. "Seriously, I'm sure that Lon Bartlett would prefer to choose his own company for the evening."

"Paige that would be fine if we were just sending some executive a simple holiday remembrance but we need to court this publication. And if we want the publisher happy, we make his star writer happy." She looked down at her phone as if trying to hurry the young woman from her office. "This requires a more personal touch. Take him out, wine and dine him. Do whatever you have to and make him happy."

Slowly a frown settled on Paige's face. "I hope you're not suggesting..."

Jeanmarie laughed suddenly. "Oh gosh no! All I want you to do is schmooze with him a little bit. Make sure his evening is pleasant." She stopped and stared at the young woman pensively. "You know Paige, a lot of the women in the secretarial pool would die for this chance to spend an evening with a man like Bartlett. This is a great opportunity for you... professionally."

Paige bit the inside of her cheek to keep from retorting. She spent two years in the secretarial pool waiting for a promotion into the public relations department of this company. Of course though, she thought to herself, the first time she was given an opportunity to prove herself it had to be with someone whose ethics she couldn't tolerate.

"I just need to know that you can do this Paige." Jeanmarie had taken a huge personal gamble by pushing Paige's name when this opening came up.

"I'll make sure he's happy." She nodded even though she was filled with all kinds of self-doubts. In reality, Paige wasn't worried about refusing the man's possible advances, she was afraid she would be tempted to accept them.

Chapter One

He couldn't help staring at her through much of dinner. This young girl was an enigma to Lon. She certainly did not seem to fit into any of the stereotypes in his personal rulebook. She was certainly pretty the way the girl next door is with long brown tresses and big chocolate brown eyes.

Lon Bartlett had long ago assigned a ranking system to the women he encountered in his life and had often alluded to that in his weekly column. He was looked up to by the multitude of male readers who bought the magazine where his column was featured for his no-nonsense approach to handling the weaker sex. His draw was strengthened by the fact that he spoke from a reputed vast stockpile of experience.

At first Lon thought her reserve might be fear so he asked her to dance at the club almost as a

challenge. He was surprised when she accepted without hesitation. She even allowed him to hold her close, but she was still holding back. It wasn't often, and certainly not recently, that a woman seemed impervious to Lon Bartlett's charms. Paige Andrews frustrated him and intrigued him at the same time.

"So, tell me a little about yourself, Paige." He smiled for her benefit. The entire evening had passed and he knew very little about her. There was no way Lon was willing to get out of the limo, say good night, and still feel so empty. "Personally, I mean. Not business."

She had done her best to court him for her boss and their conversation through much of the evening had been both relaxed and non-committal. But she felt much more comfortable not including any personal details about either one of them. The tabloids had already provided too much personal information about him. And she already considered him far too dangerous. "There's not much to say. There's certainly nothing that's relevant." She looked forward at the window that shielded their conversation from the limo driver. The young man was sitting patiently while he waited for a signal from her to open the door for their guest.

"Come on, I know this evening was all a show to keep me happy so your company can buy the magazine." Lon knew that this purchase would benefit the new publisher even more than it would him so long as he remained on board. "It would make me very happy to know a little bit more about the woman Paige Andrews."

This was what she had promised Jeanmarie. "And if I tell you my life history, will I be able to tell my bosses that you will remain on the masthead?" She found herself getting lost in the depths of his silvery grey eyes.

He chuckled. "Wow, you really do stay focused. Just how far would you be willing to go to keep me happy?" Lon noticed that Paige suddenly looked guarded. The smile she had been wearing, even if a bit reserved, faded. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to pressure you into anything improper. I didn't mean it that way." He didn't understand why her retreat bothered him so much.

It took a few moments before Paige was able to meet his eyes again. But even Lon could see she was wearing a mask. She sighed. "I grew up in upstate New York on a farm. I have two older brothers. I also have a baby sister. I went to a community college here in the city and studied business. Until six-weeks ago I worked in the secretarial pool at By-Lines Publishing. I just earned a promotion into their Public Relations department. And when my boss called me into her office yesterday to tell me I had to wine and dine you, I balked."

Lon laughed. "I take it you are not a fan." Not many women were quite that frank around him.

"No." There was no hesitation. "Did I make you happy?" She smiled for his benefit.

He just smiled back at her. "I like your honesty although I am wounded that you aren't an adoring fan." She looked away again. "Why did you decide to move to the city?"

Paige swallowed. "I got engaged and my fiancé wanted to live here."

"Oh." He looked down at her left hand and didn't see any ring. "Are you still engaged? Or married?" Lon was hoping the answer was no and he was pleased when she shook her head. "What happened?"

"That's none of your business." Paige hadn't meant to snap. She caught her breath. "I'm sorry. I just would rather not discuss that."

"I'm sorry if I intruded. But I am still happy the answer was no." He noticed the surprise in her eyes. "May I see you again?"

She wasn't prepared for his request. "Uh, I'd have to speak to Jeanmarie and..."

"No." He cut her off. "You misunderstood me. I wasn't asking about business. I'm asking you out on a date. Me man, you woman, we go out."

"IIh'

"A simple yes would be nice." Lon smiled teasingly as he ran a finger along her cheek. "I like you and I would like to get to know you better." He leaned forward and placed a very light kiss on her lips. "Friday night... dinner and maybe a movie. I'll call you tomorrow at your office to get your address."

It wasn't until Lon had swung the door closed behind him that Paige realized she had never

signaled the driver to open the rear door. She also realized that she had never told him she would go out with him. But she knew she would.

The next morning when Paige entered the modular cubicle she called her office, there was a very large bouquet of daisies on her desk.

"Bravo." Jeanmarie appeared right behind her. "You obviously charmed him quite nicely." She smiled in approval at the vase of flowers. "I got the call this morning. So long as the numbers crunch right, Bartlett is staying on board. I knew you could pull it off."

Paige shrugged. "I'm glad, but I really don't think I did anything." She noticed a note card sticking out of the bouquet and reached for it. As she opened the card she looked towards Jeanmarie inquisitively. "Did you?... Oh." She refolded the card as soon as she saw Lon's name scrawled across it.

"Secret admirer?" Jeanmarie's curiosity was piqued.

Shrugging nonchalantly, Paige tried to ignore the anxious feeling she felt in her stomach. "Mr. Bartlett just sent a note to say he enjoyed himself last night." She didn't tell the other woman that the note really said, "Looking forward to Friday, Lon".

It was just after lunchtime when her phone rang. Paige reached across her desk to answer. "Paige Andrews, may I help you?"

"I hope so." The velvet timbre of his voice was unmistakable. "I can't stop thinking about this young lady I met last night. I needed to know if she's thinking about me at all."

It took her a few seconds to catch her breath and collect her thoughts. "It's hard not to think about you with this huge bouquet sitting on my desk."

He chuckled and the sound sent ripples of excitement along her spine. "Did you like them?"

"Like? Oh, the flowers. They're beautiful." She gazed at the bouquet that was the source of office gossip that day. "But you didn't need to..."

"You seemed so nervous last night when I asked you out. I wanted to offer you some refuge." She was confused. "I don't understand."

"It's a Roman myth that a beautiful nymph caught the eye of a god, but she wanted to escape. So she turned herself into a daisy and hid amongst the flowers in the forest." He paused. She heard him take a deep breath. "I'm glad you didn't turn into a daisy."

Paige was very happy that she never stopped to take lunch, her stomach was doing flip-flops. "I guess I missed my chance to escape then."

"Most definitely."

She got the feeling that he was challenging her. In defense, she tried for a bit of brevity. "Of course you're not egotistical at all comparing yourself to a god."

He laughed. His laughter sounded so delicious to Paige and she was totally confused. How could a laugh sound delicious?

"I think I really like you Paige Andrews. I know I'm going to enjoy your company."

No matter how many times she told herself he was too dangerous for her, Paige couldn't manage to refuse to see him that Friday night. She offered to meet him at the restaurant. At least, Paige figured, she would manage to keep some distance between them by arriving and leaving separately. But Lon explained he was looking forward to a chance to use his car. He usually kept it garaged and enjoyed it when he got to drive it.

She had barely hung up the phone when Jeanmarie paged her into her office. Paige was given the task of helping to announce the upcoming merger and Bartlett's arrival at By-Lines Publishing. The first order of business was researching Bartlett's personal history for a feature story to introduce him in the magazine.

Every detail that Paige unearthed convinced her even more that he was the kind of lothario that she had learned to detest. His reputation for seduction was unnerving. Even though he was adored by women and celebrated by men for his sexual expertise, Paige was convinced that his renowned exploits were no more admirable than any other dog in heat.

Friday night she made sure to greet Lon on the sidewalk when he drove his BMW coupe to pick her up for their date. His look of surprise should have felt victorious but instead she felt his disappointment. Lon stepped around the car to open the door for her.

"I'd like to think that you were just anxious to see me." His rough voice felt like a caress. "But I get the feeling that... that you were wary of being alone with me."

She refused to let him know how close he was to the truth. "Nonsense. I have no reason to be scared of you. I just know how difficult parking can be some nights."

He wordlessly glanced at a few open parking spaces along the block. Shifting his eyes back to her, he simply nodded. After he was once again seated in the driver's seat, Lon turned to her and asked earnestly, "I hope you like Japanese food." He actually looked worried until she nodded. "I've got a favorite little restaurant downtown I'd like to take you to."

"Sounds good." She wondered if his concern was only an act, just part of his seduction technique. "So long as I can use a fork and knife. I haven't managed to master chopsticks yet." She smiled to cover her nervousness.

He looked at her quietly for a moment. Then he spoke softly. "I'd like to teach you." His eyes lingered for a moment more and then he turned his attention to pulling the car away from the curb. "Japanese chopsticks are actually smaller than what most people are used to... but I'll make sure you get a fork so you can enjoy your food."

Lon felt confused. Paige was a pretty young lady but he'd seen more beautiful women. So why couldn't he stop thinking about her ever since their business dinner date? Every time he closed his eyes, all he saw was Paige Andrews. He'd had the opportunity to date many attractive women, some of them were set-ups by his agent designed to boost his image. He really wanted to get to know this woman. It wasn't enough just to be seen with her in public.

They were both silent for the ride to the restaurant. The only conversation in the car was between Lon and the female voice of the GPS navigation system. He stopped in front of the restaurant and handed his keys to the valet.

At the entrance to the restaurant, Lon explained the significance of the restaurant's simple name, O-Tei. "The story of O-Tei is about two lovers who were fated to be together, even after she died. The girl O-Tei was reincarnated and met her betrothed seventeen years after he promised to wait for her. They married and lived happily ever after and she never even remembered her former life." He gently cupped her elbow and ushered her into the restaurant.

Paige was intrigued by his knowledge of folklore. She was also discomfited by the romantic ambiance and solitude of the semi-private room they were seated in. Even though Lon was a big man, he sat gracefully on pillows at the low Japanese style table set with woven placemats. The hostess brought a pair of wet face towels to them to freshen with before eating. Cups of steaming green tea were set before them. With her consent, Lon ordered for the two of them rolling traditional names off his tongue as if it were his native language.

Sipping from her cup of green tea, Paige looked at him.

"Is everything okay?" She nodded. "What are you thinking?"

She took another sip of the hot brew to fortify her and put her cup back on the table. "I was wondering who you really are? Somehow your reputation as a playboy doesn't fit with the man who recites Japanese tales and Roman mythology."

"And why not?"

She suppressed a chuckle. "It's too deep."

He frowned and then sighed. "Is there anything I could do to help raise your opinion of me?"

"Ouch." Paige grimaced. "I'm sorry. I'm being too critical."

He was surprised by her apology. "Maybe my publicist has done too thorough a job. Trust me Paige, it's all image. I'm not really a player."

"Lon, you're known for the art of seduction..."

"Are you afraid I'm going to seduce you?" He couldn't deny that he had thought of it.

She paused and answered him with more bravado than she actually felt. "I'm convinced you are going to try."

He laughed gently. "How about I make a promise to you?" Lon reached across the table and took her hand in his. "I won't even try any moves until our... our third date."

She glanced briefly at their joined hands. "Does this mean you are asking me out again?"

"It means I hope you will accept again." He gently caressed her hand; it felt so small in his own. Paige finally nodded and he smiled.

The waitress served their soup and appetizer before Paige could answer. She was quietly grateful. She gingerly tasted the steaming bowl of miso soup that was placed before her.

Somehow Lon knew that he should be quiet so he simply smiled. The appetizer of tuna roll, sushi and sashimi for two was served in delicate little dishes and arranged like a piece of expensive artwork. He chuckled at her vain attempt to use chopsticks but before he could reach over the table to help her, she put them down and picked up her fork.

After dinner, he took her to a small theatre where they saw a newly-released independent film. Their conversation was comfortable and, he noticed regretfully, not entirely personal. At the end of the evening, he walked her to her door, waited while she unlocked it, then just leaned over and gave her a very chaste and light kiss. Then he told her he would call her the next day.

Before the end of the week, Lon's office was set up at By-Lines Publishing and they saw each other nearly every day. Paige insisted on keeping their dates a secret in the office. The following Friday he took Paige bowling. The Friday after that he took her to the theatre to see a musical comedy. She invited him up to her apartment that night when he brought her home.

Surprised and delighted, he wanted to be sure he wasn't misunderstanding her intention. "Are you sure?"

Paige paused and took a moment before she looked up at him. "You were good to your word. You didn't make any moves and this is our third date."

He gently caught her arm and stopped. "Hey, we didn't have any... business arrangements. I admit, I want to come up to your apartment and I would love to spend the night. But you aren't obligated." He frowned when she looked at his hand on her arm. "Is this what you want, Paige?"

She took a breath in and avoided looking into his eyes. "Are you prepared for us to... you know."

Lon let go of her arm. He wanted her, he wanted her badly. "I'm prepared." But was he prepared to be altruistic enough if this wasn't what Paige really wanted? "Let's go upstairs." He was ashamed of himself as he realized he was going to take what she was offering.

Paige forced a smile for his benefit but even he could see it wasn't real. She wordlessly turned and started up the stairs to her apartment. He followed her quietly.

As Paige put her key in the lock, Lon rested his hand on her shoulder. His voice was gentle. "Paige, are you sure this is okay?"

She paused with her hand on the key and still facing the door, she nodded. Then she opened the door and let him in.

Lon glanced briefly around the living room. Paige had left a dim light on near the door so she wouldn't return home to darkness. She put her purse and jacket on a chair and took his hand. She led him into her bedroom.

Chapter Two

He reached for the switch on her night table lamp.

"Leave it dark." Paige left the door to the other room open so a faint glow illuminated the outlines of the things in the room.

The glow silhouetted her figure as she removed her clothing. Lon watched quietly. His desire for her was nearly greater than his sense that something was amiss. When she was naked she approached him and began to unbutton his shirt.

He drew in a deep breath and put his hand on top of hers. "Paige, I want to be with you so much." He drew a second ragged breath. "You are making it extremely difficult to... be rational. Sweetheart, I won't be mad if you say no, but I need to be sure you are doing this because you want to."

He could feel her eyes on him in the dark. She barely whispered. "It's okay."

Trembling as she slid his open shirt off of him, Lon felt his control waning. He tried to convince himself that it felt wrong only because it wasn't the usual seduction he always initiated. Paige was the one in control. It was almost too automatic. There was no foreplay, no passion. But when he felt her slide his zipper down and felt the soft caress of her hand against him, he felt a total loss of control.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him for a kiss. The feel of her silky skin against his hair roughened chest delighted him and he held her tighter. She smelled like vanilla. Vanilla was certain to become his favorite.

The strength of his embrace surprised Paige and she tried to take a step back. He plunged his tongue into her mouth and she pushed against his shoulders for release.

Releasing her, he frowned in the dark. "Did I hurt you?"

"No... No." She quickly caught her breath. She took his hand again. "Let's get on the bed."

Lon expected to lie next to her, to take his time caressing her. He had planned to explore her body. He wanted to satisfy her before he took his own enjoyment. Instead, Paige lay on her back and guided him to lie on top of her. She wiggled under him and felt his arousal against her.

"Why don't you put the rubber on?" Paige whispered again.

His eyes were becoming accustomed to the dark and he looked down into her face. She wasn't looking at him. "No. I'm not ready... You're not ready."

"What do you..." Paige gasped as she felt him touch her intimately. Before she could catch her breath to say anything, he covered her mouth with his own and plunged his tongue inside. She squirmed and turned her head to the side. "Lon..."

"Dammit Paige," he didn't raise his voice but he sounded perplexed. "I want this to be more than just feeling like I'm using you to jerk off." He gently held her wrists above her head and nipped at the side of her neck. "Let me show you how nice it can be." His fingers parted her, he heard her panting. "Just relax..."

He thought she was being playful as she turned her face away from him. He felt the gentle tug of her arms as he continued to hold her wrists.

"Lon... stop."

"What?" He raised his head to look at her and was puzzled to see tears in her eyes. "What's the matter? Am I hurting you?" His fingers had stilled but he still held her beneath him.

Her breathing became more rapid. "Get off of me."

He realized she wasn't panting, she was panicking. "What's the matter Paige?"

"Get off of me." She sounded terrified.

Lon released her and rolled to his side. Paige scampered off of the bed and slid down against the wall. Her knees were drawn to her chest to hide her nudity. She whimpered.

He snapped on the light and looked at her. "What the hell just happened, Paige?" It hurt to sit in his still aroused state as he watched her curiously.

She mumbled something through her tears. The only words he could make out were "I'm sorry."

"What did you say?" He took the bed sheet with him as he stood to go to her. Lon saw her trembling and stopped short. "Paige? What's the matter? What did I do?"

Grabbing her knees in front of her tightly, she looked up at him. Her cheeks were streaked with tears. "Why couldn't you just put the rubber on and do it?"

"What!" He sat heavily on the bed when she didn't answer him.

She jumped at the sound of his anger. "I'm sorry. I thought it would be okay."

Lon was completely confused. "Just tell me what the hell happened?" He didn't yell but he sounded frustrated.

"Please, don't be angry. I'm sorry... I am so sorry." Her voice faded and she trembled.

Lon stood. His intention was to go to her and reassure her. He saw her flinch. Sighing, Lon reached for his pants and sat on the edge of the bed as he put them on. He took his time while he watched her. She had her arms wrapped around her knees and looked down. She was uncomfortable under his watchful eyes.

After a few more moments, Lon stood again and brought the sheet over to her to cover herself. She seemed grateful as she pulled the fabric around her body.

Lon carefully squatted in front of Paige. "Please tell me that you're not a virgin."

She looked at him in surprise and swallowed a laugh. "I am not a virgin." Then she hid her face.

He shook his head in wonder. "So why were you so scared of me? You're still scared. I told you we didn't have to go to bed if you weren't ready."

"I wanted to. I really did." Tears welled in her eyes. "But you held me down..."

"I didn't." He shook his head. He had held her wrists but he had never used any strength. "I wasn't going to hurt you."

She sniffled. "I know. I am so sorry, Lon. I panicked... and then I just couldn't stop." Paige wiped her eyes with the edge of the bed sheet. "I know you think I'm crazy... maybe I am."

He wasn't sure what response he should make. Something told him she wasn't crazy although that would have been a lot easier to deal with. Instead he couldn't understand why he wasn't just walking out of there, why he didn't just walk away. His long legs were cramped from squatting so he stood. Maybe he should just go. If she was reacting like this, maybe he should just protect himself and get out of there. But he didn't want to go.

"Do you have a robe or something in your closet that you could put on? Something tells me we need to have a talk." At her nod he went to her closet and pulled out a flannel robe that was hanging there. He handed her the robe and then turned his back while she put it on. When he faced her again, she was standing with the robe held tightly around her. "Let's get out of the bedroom. Do you have any instant coffee in the kitchen?"

She swallowed hesitantly. "De-caf."

He rolled his eyes, "Just great." He walked out of her bedroom and stood just outside of her door until she followed him.

Lon poured boiling water into the coffee mugs on the table. Paige sat quietly with her hands clasped around her mug. He topped off the two mugs with milk and offered her sugar before taking for himself.

"Okay. We need to talk." Lon sat at the table. He was still shoeless and shirtless. "Why did vou... panic?"

She took a scorching sip of hot coffee before she answered. "I felt like I couldn't move. You were holding my hands, my arms." She couldn't escape his inquisition.

"Did you think I was going to, I don't know, force myself on you?" He saw that she looked away and tears stained her cheeks again. He imagined all kinds of responses. "Paige? Did someone once force himself on you?" She squeezed her eyes shut and bit her lip. He could barely find his voice. It was unimaginable. "Were you raped?" There was no gentle way to ask.

The pain in her eyes was all the answer he needed. He was indignant. "When did this happen? Did they catch the guy?" It always angered him when he heard of a man hurting a woman.

Paige felt as if a long time passed before she could answer. "It was almost three years ago. It was my ex-fiancé." She tried to escape his stare.

"Your fiancé raped you? Why?"

"Ex. And I don't know why." She answered him sarcastically. "I don't even know why I'm telling you. Why should I expect that you would believe me?"

"I didn't mean..." Lon shook his head. "It doesn't matter what sick reason he had. He had no right to do that to you."

Paige looked at him and uttered a confession. "We had been lovers." She expected to hear him scoff. He didn't.

"So? Did you have him arrested?"

She was embarrassed again. "I never went to the police."

He was incredulous. "Why not?"

She nervously swallowed some of her coffee. "Hal and I were engaged for about a year. It wasn't the first time I had caught him cheating but when I came home to our apartment and found

him in our bed with someone else... I told him to get out and I gave him back the ring."

"You shared a place? Here?"

"No. I moved away from the memories." Paige found that she was more comfortable talking to Lon than she thought she would be. "We lived together. I paid most of the bills. Hal had trouble holding down a job. He had a gambling problem. So, I threw him out of our apartment after he soiled our bed with an affair."

"...but if he raped you, why didn't you have him arrested?"

"Not if. He did rape me." She was indignant.

"I wasn't questioning you. I didn't mean it that way." Lon was trying very hard to hide his exasperation.

"Sorry." She looked down.

"Paige," Lon reached across the table and gently took her hand in his. He was thrilled when she didn't pull away. "Stop apologizing." After a while, she looked back up at him. He still held her hand. "Tell me what happened. If that's okay I mean."

"Actually, I think it would be cathartic to talk about." A therapist had told Paige she needed to share her story but Paige hadn't even been able to tell her everything. "But it could be uncomfortable for you to listen to."

He smiled gently. "I can be a good listener."

Paige stared at their joined hands for a moment and then she took her hand back. She missed the feeling of his touch but she also didn't want to let herself become too used to it. "You have to promise me this won't wind up in one of your columns."

"Never." He shook his head earnestly. "This is too personal. I would never betray you like that." Could she actually trust a man not to betray her? Paige was terrified of the answer. She was also confused because she felt the tiny niggling of trust for him.

"Tell me what happened." He gently coaxed her.

She nodded. Memories flitted through her mind as if the event had just occurred. She swore she could feel the shock and disbelief... and the pain. "Hal was distraught. He begged me to take him back... again. But I couldn't. He kept calling me but I kept saying no." She paused unsure whether she could continue, but when she looked at Lon and saw his compassion staring back, she felt stronger. "He was waiting in the apartment one day when I got home from work. I hadn't thought to change the lock. I didn't realize he still had a key. He was crying and he begged me to talk, just talk. So I said okay."

Lon saw Paige glance at the clock over the stove. Her courage seemed to falter. "Take your time. There's no hurry."

"We argued again. I asked him to leave. He refused. So I said I was going out for a while and would he please be gone by the time I got back." She felt the sob build inside her. "I finally went to walk out; he grabbed me just inside the door of the apartment, pushed me to the floor, held me down covering my mouth, pulled my clothes off and entered me. Hal said he was showing me he loved me. It was painful. I must have formed a mental block because although I remember being scared about pregnancy, I honestly couldn't remember or figure out if he used a condom or came in me."

He suppressed the ripple of anger he felt. "You were in shock."

"I never thought he would really hurt me and believe it or not, I was afraid in the beginning of the attack to fight back and hurt him. So in some ways, I almost feel as if I let him do what he did because by the time I did start to fully fight, he had me pinned down. I couldn't get him off of me."

He waited. She was quiet and just stared at the table top. "What happened next?"

"I... I got up and got dressed and I left. I went to a friend's house. I thought she was a friend. I was crying so hard. I remember her saying to me 'Well what did you expect, you never said no to him before.' The guilt really set in after that and I blamed myself."

Sighing, Lon realized how Paige had been betrayed twice, once by Hal and once by that so-called friend. "So you didn't think you had the right to report it as a crime."

She cried. "She convinced me it was my fault. And I knew I hadn't fought the way I should have. I waited a while and then I called my apartment to make sure he had gone. I went home and

showered. I douched. I tried to wash it away. I even threw out the clothes he had torn off of me."

Lon stood and started to go to her. Then he thought to ask first. "May I hold you?"

Paige choked back her tears and nodded. "I'd like that." She stood and went into his arms. It felt good to be comforted.

"Shh." He held her and soothed her hair away from her face. "None of it was your fault. Hal had no right to do what he did to you."

"But I didn't fight him."

"You trusted him. He betrayed that trust."

"I... I thought he loved me. He was the first man I had ever been with. We had been sleeping together from before we got engaged. My friend was right, I never told him no."

"Your so-called friend wasn't much of a friend. You didn't do anything wrong, Paige."

She cried into his shoulder and Lon just held her.

Several minutes later, after Paige seemed calmer, Lon suggested they go sit in her living room. He was thrilled when she cuddled next to him. He kept an arm around her shoulders.

"Paige, I hope you realize, I really do like you. I would like to continue seeing you." It felt important for Lon to say that. He had enjoyed their evenings out and still hoped that he might be able to build a relationship with her. "It's important that I know what I did to scare you so. I need to know everything I should and shouldn't do."

She sat back from him and looked at his lips, then his eyes. "You must think I'm crazy. You can't want to be with me after what I did before."

"But I do." A friend of his had returned from Iraq and still suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome, he imagined that was a bit of what Paige suffered from. "I'm willing to take things slow, but I do want to continue seeing you. And one day, if you would allow, I would like to make love with you."

"Why Lon? Do you think you can heal me?"

He shook his head. "Don't be so cynical. It's simple, I like you." He hesitated. "Paige, have you had sex since Hal hurt you?"

"Oh yeah." She laughed cynically until she cried. "Trust me, you don't want to be with me."

"Why don't you let me decide?"

Paige blew her nose into a tissue she found in her robe pocket. "When Hal and I first got together, my parents weren't very happy. They are very old fashioned. I don't remember if it was my dad or my mom who first called me a tramp..."

He was surprised. "In this day and age?" His own parents were retired and living in Florida. He knew he didn't go visiting them as often as he should, but they still had a pretty good relationship.

"After Hal raped me and I was convinced I had asked for it and that I was a slut..." she shrugged but couldn't look at Lon. "For the first few months I did my best to live up to my parents' expectations."

"Meaning?"

"The counselors say promiscuity is not an uncommon reaction after a rape. I made it a goal."

Lon sat back and looked at her. He wasn't sure what to say.

"I went into bars, drank and picked up strangers. I needed to drink so I... couldn't really think about what I was doing. I tried to convince myself it was just to make sure I was the one making the decision to have sex. But I think I had just begun to believe that I was what my parents and friends thought I was, a tramp. Maybe I thought humiliating myself was punishment for letting Hal do what he did."

He tried to choose his words carefully. "You said... for a few months. Are you still... uhm, do you..."

She laughed at his discomfort. "Am I still acting like a whore?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. That's what I called myself. I did everything but charge for services. I probably would have had more self-respect if I had been a working girl." Paige moved further away

from Lon. "Are you thoroughly disgusted yet?"

The increased distance didn't go unnoticed. Lon really wasn't sure what he was supposed to say. He just didn't think she needed anyone condemning her. "I think that you did the things you thought you needed to do. I don't think anyone knows how they would react after a trauma. And Paige, you were traumatized."

She stared at him unable to fit his compassion to the image. "Your publicist is really good."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because you aren't what I expected. You're supposed to be a notorious womanizer."

"Wow. It sounds like I moved up a notch or two on the opinion scale."

Paige sighed. "It's good that one of us did."

"Stop. I don't think less of you." He touched her cheek. "Paige, what made you, you said you changed after a few months. What happened?"

Paige pulled her knees up in front of her on the couch. "I woke up in a strange motel room one morning. I was alone. I picked up my clothes and took them into the bathroom to take a shower. Lon, there were empty packets from two different brands of condoms. And I couldn't remember anything. I had no idea who I had been with."

He grimaced. "Were you drugged?"

"I don't know. Maybe I was." She hugged herself tighter. "But I was making bad choices. I was taking risks. So I went to a crisis center. It was the best thing I could have done."

"You were able to speak to someone..."

"I finally got the help I needed. I learned that I wasn't the one who did wrong, Hal didn't have the right to do what he did. I learned that my friend didn't have the right to pass judgment on me, and I learned I didn't have to live down to anyone's expectations. I didn't have to keep trying to punish myself with my self-destructive behavior."

"It sounds like you went from being a victim to being a survivor." Lon had heard that expression once before and he realized how appropriate it was for Paige.

"Yes." Paige was deeply moved that Lon had listened and never condemned. "Lon, I've had two relationships since then. They were healthy and... pleasant."

He looked worried. "So, why did I scare you so bad? Did I do something to... trigger the memories?"

"I don't know. I did want to be with you but, I think I was afraid you were going to seduce me and take away any of my control."

Her admission stunned him. "I'm sorry." Lon was beginning to detest the image that led to his success. "I am so sorry."

She reached out to him for a change. "Don't be. It was me, not you."

"But if you can only see me as a womanizer..."

"I was afraid you could seduce me because I was so attracted to you. I was afraid of being controlled."

He stared at her in surprise. "Oh."

"The last time I was attracted to a man was Hal. I let him be in control." Her voice was quiet. "I let my guard down with him and I was hurt because of it."

"But you loved him."

"I loved the man I thought he was. In some ways I still do, but that man never existed. I know that now." She rested her hand gently on top of his. "I'm so sorry Lon. It isn't that I think you are like Hal, I don't even think you are a bad person even with your image. I just have to protect myself."

"I understand that. I meant what I said before, I really like you. And I am willing to be as patient as necessary so you can feel safe with me. I want to be with you."

"Even after everything I told you about... the things I did?"

"What did you do? You survived. And you are here now sitting in front of me. And... you are beautiful." Paige leaned forward and gave him a tentative hug. "May I spend the night with you?" At her sudden look of worry, he quickly added, "I want to sleep with you. The operative word being sleep. I would just like to hold you and wake up with you in my arms."

"You're willing to spend the night in bed with me and not get..."

"Yes." He saw Paige glance nervously back at her bedroom. "Have you ever just slept with a man? I mean, since Hal?"

She mouthed the word no as she shook her head.

"Tell you what, if at any point during the night you wake scared because I am next to you, just wake me. If my presence scares you, then I will get up and finish the night on your couch. You have my word. I know trust is a lot to ask for, but please Paige."

"And you would really leave the bed if I woke you? You wouldn't argue?"

"I would be disappointed, but I wouldn't argue."

"And we wouldn't have sex?"

He smiled. "If you molested me, I probably wouldn't refuse you. But it would have to be your decision. And it would always remain your right to say no and stop."

He made it sound so tempting. Could she really believe him? If Hal had left her unable to ever trust again, then she was letting herself be a victim all over again. She nearly jumped when she felt the gentle touch of Lon's fingers on her cheek.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

She took his fingers and put them back on her cheek. "It's okay. Lon, would you mind if neither of us was naked tonight?"

He smiled.

During the night, Paige woke and realized how comfortable it was to be sleeping in Lon's arms. She snuggled spoon-fashion against his chest. Lon placed a light kiss on the top of her head and she fell back asleep.

Chapter Three

He made sure to stop in front of her cubicle entrance just long enough for her to look up and catch him smile and wink at her. Paige was on the phone dealing with an advertising client when she spotted him and she was only able to respond with a smile. But that was enough for Lon. They hadn't brought their relationship into the office.

Paige and Lon had grown closer and they had even shared several sleepovers after their dates. Even though they had progressed to rather heavy petting, Lon was wary of pushing anything further. Some nights after she had fallen asleep, Lon had to leave her bed to spend some time alone in the bathroom. He was doing his best to maintain control and not appear impatient. It was a surprise even to him how long he had been seeing her without having sex. But he had no doubts that she was worth the effort.

The managing editor had summoned him to the office. Lon figured he already knew what it was about. He had been preparing his speech since he handed in his latest column the night before. He had changed over the last few weeks and so did his perspective. It was definitely reflected in his writing.

One of the things Lon had started to struggle with in his mind was the fear that one of his columns may have ever inspired some sick mind to hurt a woman. In the beginning of their relationship, even Paige had referred to him as a womanizer and had been scared that he would seduce her, or worse. Lon didn't like his image and although he knew that image had led to his success, he had hoped to alter it at least a bit.

He was definitely taken aback when he walked into the editor's office and was tossed a folded newspaper. It was on page eight, but there he was in black and white and so was Paige. They were having dinner at their favorite Italian restaurant. The caption under the photo was "Is New York's most eligible bachelor/writer losing his edge and his eligibility?"

"I guess this explains why you've been getting soft." Noah Wilson tented his hands and looked hard at Lon. "How long has this thing with Andrews been going on? Don't try to deny it, the article mentions it's not the first time you've been seen with her."

"It's been a few months, but I don't understand why I have to explain it. There is nothing going on here at the office." He hoped he'd get the chance to show the article to Paige before anyone else got to her.

"We bought your image Bartlett. And your image didn't include a steady girlfriend. And it certainly didn't include the kind of garbage you're spewing in your last column here." Wilson brought Lon's column up on his computer screen. "Men look up to you. They like how you deal with women. Our male readers want to be Lon Bartlett. You're almost as good as James Bond."

"The playboy image gets old. Everyone has to grow up eventually."

"Hefner has done okay..."

"Women aren't toys and I never tried to imply that. They are beautiful creatures and they deserve beautiful treatment." There had been a number of articles written about Hefner's life. "Even Hef is a romantic and enjoys relationships. He's had his special ladies."

"Men want to get laid. Simple. And the readers liked being able to live vicariously through your sex-ploits." Newman closed out his computer screen. "If you are going to continue seeing this girl then I want details. Let your readers enjoy her too."

"That's sick!" Lon felt his temper rising.

Newman laughed at Lon's reaction. "That's not the kind of details I meant. I want to hear about the relationship and her devotion to you. I want to hear how she treats you like a king. And if she's part of a harem, I want to hear about that too. Let us know what she does to keep you interested."

"You want... relationship advice?"

"Why not? Not the sappy kind women usually pen. Let's hear it from the man's perspective, a real man."

Lon glanced back down at the paper. Bemused he thought that the photograph of Paige with him was a good one. He'd have to get a copy for himself. "I have to speak with Paige before I come up with anything. May I borrow this for a few minutes?"

She was busy making entries into her date book when he knocked at the cubicle entrance. "Got a moment?"

"Sure." Paige put her pen down and smiled.

He came in and headed to the chair next to her desk. He wanted to kiss her but they had agreed to remain entirely professional at work. Besides, they weren't advertising their relationship not that keeping a secret was important anymore. "Have you seen today's paper?" He extended the folded up paper he held in his hand.

She glanced at the tabloid briefly without touching it. A slight blush tinged her cheeks. "Jeanmarie called me into her office this morning to... congratulate me. She seems to think the magazine can capitalize on our relationship."

"Apparently she's not the only one. Actually I think Noah prefers to think of it as damage control." Lon ran a hand through his dark hair. "He wants me to write about our relationship, kind of a tell-all advice type of thing."

"Oh." Jeanmarie had only suggested that she and Lon make a few public appearances, just enough to fuel the media's attention. "Does Noah really think you need damage control?"

Lon grinned and shrugged. He knew he would have to do something to maintain his column's popularity, at the same time, he refused to invade Paige's privacy if it would cause her discomfort. "I've kind of adopted a slightly different style in my writing anyway. I really didn't like the way I was perceived as a player. Noah seems to feel that I'm not living up to the image they purchased."

"What does your publicist say?"

"I haven't spoken with her yet. I wanted to speak with you first. I figured I could call Shell afterwards."

"How much is... telling all?" She wasn't sure how much of her private life she was willing to expose. Paige had been aware that Lon was considered a celebrity and anyone connected to him might be publicly scrutinized as well. She definitely did not want to cause him any professional problems.

"Well, since we obviously don't have to keep it a secret here that we are seeing each other, why

don't I take you to lunch and we can sit and talk about it?" Lon looked relieved when Paige accepted without hesitation.

He had been pleasantly surprised when Paige agreed to let him write about their relationship. The only stipulation was that he didn't include her past and if the subjects seemed personal, she wanted to read about it before the public did.

That was why he was sure she would be willing to accompany him to Chicago while he made a TV talk show appearance. He was familiar with the hotel his publicist booked him into and he was looking forward to romancing her in the beautiful setting.

"No?" He sat down heavily on her couch. "We can get separate rooms if you don't want folks to think we're sleeping together."

"Lon, people already assume we're sleeping together." She laughed at herself. "They just don't realize you're not getting anything from me..."

"Paige, I'm not pushing. Trust me, when you are ready I will be here."

Shrugging her shoulders, Paige turned to face him. "I don't understand why you are being so patient. I know it can't be easy for you."

He smiled gently. "I'm getting everything I need each time I feel you relax in my arms."

"But I still don't understand why you're doing this? I'm not worth this kind of effort."

"Don't say that!" He immediately lowered his voice. "Paige, I told you, I care about you. I really care about you, more than I have ever cared about someone before. I admit, eventually I would like to get in your pants..."

She sounded embarrassed when she chuckled.

"Seriously Paige, I'm trying to build something major with you. And if you need time, I'll manage to give you that time." He walked to her and took her in his arms. "You are definitely worth it."

She looked up at him in wonder. "I feel very lucky."

"Well you should." He smiled teasingly. "I know I am. Paige, please think about coming with me to Chicago. It will only be like two days. You know you won't have a problem at work."

She hugged him. "I'm not really ready for this much of a public commitment to a relationship with a celebrity. Maybe by the next trip I'll be able to face your adoring public."

Lon sighed. He knew she was a private person. She just needed time. If things went the way he had been thinking lately though she would have to get used to sharing his limelight on a fulltime basis. "I have to leave early tomorrow. May I stay tonight?"

She nodded.

When he kissed her goodbye, she had barely moved. While they still hadn't made love, not through full intercourse, Paige had made sure he was satisfied during the night. They were getting closer. He was happy about that.

"I'm going to miss you baby." He kissed her temple. She half smiled in her sleep. "I love you Paige." She didn't answer. He knew she was asleep and if she heard him at all, it was only part of a dream for her.

He had to get home and throw a few things into an overnight bag before the car came to pick him up, but Lon really didn't want to leave her side. If someone had told him a few months ago that he would be thinking of permanency with one woman, he would have laughed in their face. At first he was worried that his attraction to her was about her deep wounds and his desire to help. But he knew now it was so much more. A rage had built up inside him against Hal and he fantasized beating him to a pulp for what he had done. Lon was wise enough to know that the thought of violence could only scare Paige more so he kept his fantasies to himself.

Another fantasy he had been having was seeing her in his luxury Manhattan condo. So far they had spent all of their nights at her Brooklyn walk-up. Knowing that the media hounds would be all over them if he brought her back to his place, they thought they were being more discreet. But the secret was out now anyway. He only hoped all of the attention wouldn't scare her back into hiding.

She reached for the ringing phone expecting to hear Lon's gentle voice. "Hi." Her voice was still thick with sleep.

"Hi doll." His voice felt like a razor slicing through what was left of her sleep. "Are you alone?"

Paige clutched the sheets to her naked body as she sat up alert. She drew in a panic filled breath and assured herself he wasn't in the room. "What do you want Hal?"

He laughed cruelly. "I see I still have an effect on you. I was reading about you and your new boyfriend. Is he there in bed with you?"

"This is none of your business Hal. I am none of your business. Don't call me again."

"Don't hang up on me! I am down the street and I will be at your door in less than two minutes."

She didn't care if he heard the panic in her voice. "Hal, please don't come here." She didn't want to lose the safe feeling of her home. "Tell me what you want."

"I want you under me doing all the things you know I like." He laughed again at her silence. "I need cash."

His gambling debts again. She knew that he had hocked the engagement ring she tossed back at him. Paige also knew that he had stolen a few pieces of jewelry from her box. But the jewelry had been far less important than what he had taken from her. "I don't have much in savings…"

"But you've got a rich boyfriend."

"Leave him out of this. I'll send you a check for whatever I have."

"I want cash. I'll be right over."

"No! Please don't come here Hal. I'll bring you the money. Where are you?"

When he told her she felt like screaming. He was using the pay phone on the corner.

"I'll be down in five minutes."

Paige dressed hurriedly. She didn't want to take the chance that he would grow impatient and come up to her door. Somehow she had to make him believe that Lon was there, that she wasn't alone and defenseless.

She felt sick when she first saw him.

"Hey babe." As soon as Hal saw her, he approached and using one hand at the back of her head, he pulled her to him for a kiss. In front of the few early morning pedestrians, he assaulted her mouth with his tongue as she pushed him away.

She used the back of her hand to wipe her mouth. "Don't touch me again."

He laughed at her. "So where's your boyfriend? I thought he'd want to meet the guy that taught you how to fuck."

If it hadn't been for Lon's nurturing, Paige didn't think she'd be able to muster up any of the false bravado she was hiding behind. "I told him I had to run an errand for a sick girlfriend and that I would be back in a few minutes." She noticed as he looked back towards her apartment building with as bemused smile. "So let's get this done with so you can get out of my life."

Paige didn't look to see if he was following her as she headed towards the nearby bank branch and ATM machine. He stepped into the small vestibule with her as she reached into her back pocket to get out her ATM card. She felt the hardness of his body as he leaned against her.

She managed to control her body's trembling and spoke in a strong voice. "If you want me to do this, you'd better step back and give me some room."

She heard him laugh as he took a step back. Paige inserted her card into the machine slot and covered the keypad as she punched in her pin number. She knew that she barely left enough in her account to cover checks she had already written but that didn't matter to her. As far as Paige was concerned, if Hal would stay out of her life, it didn't matter what the cost so long as it was only money.

He took the stack of twenties she handed him. "You know, it really pissed me off that you told Rita I raped you. You know that's what you wanted." Paige was surprised that she felt brave enough to stare at him in the eyes. "You taunted me that day and I only gave you what you wanted. And don't taunt me now unless you mean it."

Hal pulled her to him for a kiss again. He didn't expect it when she bit down on his tongue.

"You bitch!" He raised his hand to strike her when she turned suddenly and reached for the alarm button on the ATM console. He caught her hand before she could push it. "Don't!"

Paige couldn't hold it anymore. She sobbed. "Please let me go Hal. I gave you all the money I had. You've already taken everything."

He gave her arm a painful squeeze before he laughed cruelly again and stepped back. She knew she would have bruises where he grabbed her.

Paige ran all the way home.

She couldn't stop crying as she brushed her teeth and washed her face. After she spit out the mouthwash she rinsed with, Paige went into her room and pulled out a small carry-on bag. She threw some basic toiletries, a nightgown and robe, and changes of underwear and clothes into it.

Jeanmarie picked up her home phone on the second ring. She was surprised to hear Paige's voice. "What's up?"

"I won't be in the office for a few days."

"Is everything alright?" It was unusual for Paige to call out of the office even when she was under the weather.

"Jean, I need the name of the hotel that Lon was booked into?"

"Marvelous! You're joining him then? Oh this will be excellent for our publicity!" Jeanmarie came back with the hotel information. She offered to have Paige's travel arrangements made but Paige turned her down.

Lon felt the burn of the scotch as he swallowed. The redhead in front of him was making it very clear that she would like to get to know him better. He laughed.

He was used to receiving multiple offers from any number of willing women. It seemed that now that he was off the market, the offers came even faster. He didn't mind company at the bar, but the only company he wanted tonight in his room was the phone and Paige's voice. He was very disappointed that she hadn't accompanied him but he understood. He just hoped that the next time she'd be able to face the media hounds that had accosted him all day.

Tomorrow would be an appearance on the local TV talk show followed by another newspaper interview. His image was changing and even he was having difficulty adjusting to it so quickly. Paige wouldn't have it easy. He hoped the attention wouldn't send her back into her shell. He wished he could hold her.

All day long he had been asked for descriptions of the woman he was spending time with. How long had he been seeing her? What did she think of his rakish reputation? Were there any marriage plans in the works? His publicist wanted to play it up. The notorious playboy and eligible bachelor Lon Bartlett took a nosedive into romance and a relationship. The world was going to be panting for a look at the woman who finally tamed him. He hoped Paige wouldn't resent the scrutiny. There was no way he was going to be allowed any privacy to court her properly. Lon was used to the cameras and he almost felt guilty for subjecting anyone else to the attention.

"Mr. Bartlett, I know I can't make you forget about your lady," the redhead reached for his hand as he started to stand. "But I could help you miss her just a little less."

He raised his eyebrows and treated the girl to a devastating smile. Then he thanked her and said goodnight. She was attractive as she pouted while he walked away.

Lon swiped the keycard across the lock and opened up the door to his suite. The light was on in the sitting area and he tossed his jacket over the sofa before he reached for the phone. He just wanted to hear her voice.

"Hi Lon."

He dropped the receiver as he spun around towards his bedroom door. "Paige!" She was there and he was nearly afraid to believe it. "You came." She stood in a thin cotton hotel robe, her bare feet sticking out of the bottom.

She ran to him and hugged him until he kissed her. She smelled like vanilla.

He ran his hands down her back and pulled her to him. "You're really here. Please tell me I'm

not dreaming this." He kissed her again and again.

She broke their kiss and whispered. "Lon, make love to me. Tonight."

He took a small step backwards. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I need you."

With one finger under her chin, he raised her head and searched her eyes. He knew that there was something she wasn't saying. "Promise me you'll tell me to stop if you get scared."

"I won't do that to you again."

"Promise me Paige."

"I promise."

He nodded. Then he scooped her into his arms and cradled her as he carried her to the bed. He knelt at her feet as he sat her on the bed. Lon slowly undid each button of her long robe. He caressed and kissed the smooth skin underneath as she was exposed to him.

They had given up wearing clothes to bed to sleep in each other's arms, so he was familiar with the tantalizing curves of her body. But this still felt like the first time. He cherished her with his hands and his mouth. She arched her back and held him to her as his tongue lathed her belly.

Paige reached for his shirt buttons. With his help she opened his shirt and slid it off of his muscled shoulders. She reveled in the strength she felt in his arms, the corded muscles of his biceps, the dusting of hair along his forearms. She rested her hands lightly on top of his as he kneaded the soft mounds of her breasts.

He stood and unfastened his pants and let them fall to his ankles. Lon slid his briefs down his legs and removed them. It was like a million voices shouted as one when he felt her caress him between his thighs, it was only him.

Paige lay back on the bed, her knees were parted and she reached for him, beseeching him to join her. Lon fumbled with the wallet from his pants pocket and sheathed himself before he settled over her. She arched her back towards him and he sank deeply into her velvet warmth. He struggled for control afraid that he would drive too painfully if he lost it.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and pulled him to her. "Don't hold back." He felt her clench her muscles around him.

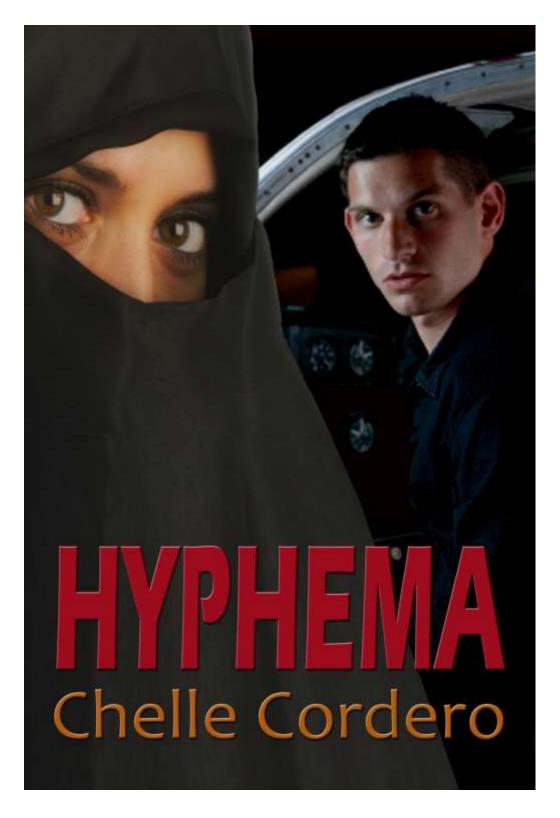
Lon couldn't hold anything back. He rocked against her. He held her to him. He watched her eyes and could tell the moment her world exploded even if he hadn't heard her cry of satisfaction. He drove more deeply into her amazed that he was here at last. Bolts of ecstasy shot through his body as he emptied into her. His voice was hoarse as he buried his mouth against her neck to muffle his cry.

He couldn't let go of her as he lay spent. Their mingled breaths were coming in short little gasps. Lon was the first to break the silence. "I feel like I'm finally home. I love you Paige."

Her brows knit as she looked at him. She heard his words and he watched as they absorbed into her consciousness. Lon would have liked to hear the same declaration, but it still felt good to feel her hug him in return.

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Hyphema by Chelle Cordero

Hyphema: Bleeding in the eye caused by trauma...

Prologue

Matt was looking down over the dark water as they were being buffeted by the winds. "It's always choppy over here," shouted Tony, the pilot. "You get used to it after a while."

They had just finished their pre-flight check when they got banged out on an emergency transport job. The patient, a diabetic male in his forties, was in distress after being pinned under a car in a freakish accident. The bulk of the damage was centered on his back after the car fell off of its jack. His urine was filled with blood and he needed immediate transport to a level one trauma center.

North Carolina's Outer Banks had a reputation for beauty and serenity. Several old fishing villages dotted the barrier islands along with spacious homes and bed and breakfasts. Matt was thinking of taking Sudah and Aden there for a weekend jaunt soon.

Luckily the area was served by a state of the art hospital center so any injured or sick could be treated there without the hour-and-a-half commute a car would need. With a serious trauma, patients could at least be stabilized, and air transportation used to one of the trauma centers inland.

"Have you ever been out here before Matt?" Frank was a thirty three year old critical care flight nurse who had grown up in the area.

"Nope. First time." Matt had not ventured far from New York where he grew up until he decided to move his family to North Carolina after a job offer from NC Air EMS.

The LZ was lit up on the grounds of the hospital and Tony was preparing to put the chopper down. Matt and Frank remained quiet. All three were communicating through the headsets in their helmets; the sound of the rotor above them would have made it too noisy to talk otherwise.

It was still his first week in the new job and only his second living in the area. It amazed him that Sudah was so supportive even though he practically yanked her and the baby from New York. She stood by him, never questioning his decision and saying goodbye to their friends without even a tear. He was going to do everything he could to make sure this worked.

Matt felt the EC 145 bank hard to the right as Tony brought the bird around. His harness held him securely in the seat. He smiled as he watched the landscape grow bigger and realized that he was finally in his dream job.

Chapter One

Damn that's good. The hot coffee sliding down his gullet was welcomed to ward off the chilly morning. Matt stared out the kitchen window and noticed droplets of ice crystals against the pane. It was early and still dark outside. He savored another gulp of hot coffee.

Delicate brown arms wound around his waist. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you." Matt covered both of his wife's hands with one of his own. Maybe it was the early spring chill in the air, but he really wanted to crawl back into bed with her.

"I wanted to be awake with you." Sudah snuggled under his arm and slid against his body until she was facing him. She gently ran a hand up the crisp uniform shirt until she touched his shield. "You look so handsome in your uniform." Taking a step back she smiled up at him. "I am very proud to be married to such a hero."

Matt chuckled. Sudah never missed an opportunity to praise him and bolster his ego. "I love you babe." He leaned down and kissed her. Matt was worried about providing for his little family and being a good husband and parent, he didn't have a great example growing up. "One of the three best

days of my life was the day I met you." She always teased him when he said that and demanded that he tell her what the other two were. He never hesitated to tell her that their marriage and the day their son was born made up the other two. "Hey, do you want me to light the stove for you before I leave. It'll help warm the place up a bit."

"No. I will take care of it later if I need to. I do not want to leave it burning until I am ready to be in here."

Matt loved the old wood stove that sat in the corner of the kitchen. It threw heat into the living area and was great defense against the early morning dampness. When they first moved in he teased Sudah that she would have to cook on that instead of the more modern stove and oven on the other side of the kitchen.

She looked at the clock and reminded him that he had to get going if he was to get to work on time.

He uprooted his family from New York to North Carolina, but he knew that career wise he could do much better for them with this move. He was just starting to train as a flight medic back in New York when they announced that the Mercy EMS base where a job was originally guaranteed was closing. All of the existing flight medics were scrambling for jobs and he didn't think his lack of experience would hold up to the others in the region. He heard about job openings at this station and Sudah told him that she had no objection to the move.

His mom still lived up in New York, so did his best friend Julie. Other than them, he never really felt any other ties to the area. Sudah had already moved across the ocean from Pakistan so to her New York to North Carolina seemed miniscule. Aden was just a baby, as far as he knew the world consisted of his crib and his parents' arms. Julie had even suggested to him that leaving the area he grew up in might be good for him. He told his best friend about the bad memories he had of his own father's abandonment when he was just a little kid.

Matt knew that Sudah would understand why he had doubts and he knew that she would tell him he had no reason to worry, but he didn't talk about it to her. He wanted to appear strong in his wife's eyes so that she would always feel safe. He took her in his arms for one more long kiss to last him through the day and then he put his jacket on.

He navigated the winding roads carefully. It would take a few more trips to really get used to the route. Matt was a seasoned paramedic from New York and now he was going to be using his skills to save the good people of North Carolina. As much as he missed riding with his paramedic partner back in New York, being a flight medic had been a dream of his ever since the first time he stepped foot on an ambulance.

"Wee-oh, talk about somebody from the dead coming back and biting you in the ass." The crew room was filled with laughter as Matt and Tony walked in. Big John slapped his knee, "When I called it into the hospital I said that there were two patients but the other one refused medical assistance."

"What's going on?" Tony offered Matt a can of soda from the counter.

The question spurred on another round of laughter from the five people sitting there. Little John answered between chuckles, "Big John and I were dispatched to a one car M.V.A., the guy didn't hit anything, the car was just sitting there in the middle of the road. Seems a dog ran out in front of him and he hit the brakes. Well the dog got away, but the guy in the back comes forward and hits him in the back of his seat."

"And this is the best part," Big John guffawed. "The patient was driving a delivery truck for the funeral home. The guy in the back was a stiff in a body bag!"

Matt and Tony both laughed at the image.

"I really wanted to check the vitals on the guy in the bag, but with my luck I would've unzipped the bag and the stiff would have sat up."

"I wonder if we could have collected on two patients."

"I mean the driver definitely got hurt, he really got hit in the back hard. But I want to hear how he explains that injury to his friends."

"Hey, maybe he'll have the stiff charged with assault with a dead weapon. A dead weapon, got it?"

Everyone in the room groaned. Both Johns were feeding off of each other until the laughter was contagious.

Matt sat at the table and drank his soda once he stopped laughing.

"Hey guys," Frankie spoke up. "Howz about some paintball this weekend?"

"Sounds good." Tony replied immediately. "Maybe we can take the old ladies out to dinner after. Be a good chance for Matt and his wife to meet the crowd."

"Ginny and I won't be able to make it. Sorry guys, her folks are coming down." Big John waved off the beginnings of a protest. "But you four go ahead. Besides this way we can save the best for last. Ginny and I will meet Matt's wife some other time."

Matt shrugged. "I'd have to make sure we can get a sitter for the baby."

"My daughter will do it." Little John made the offer.

"Thanks. I'll speak to Sudah."

"Hey, what kind of name is Sudah?" Frankie leaned forward.

"She's originally from Pakistan."

"Sounds exotic." Little John raised his eyebrows comically. "She pretty?" Matt nodded. "Looking forward to meeting her."

"Do you think your friends will like me?"

Matt chuckled. "Are you really worried?" He realized that she was. "Oh baby, how can they not like you?"

"It is one thing to ignore stares from strangers, but these are people you know. I do not wish to embarrass you." Sudah adjusted her scarf.

"You could never embarrass me." He stopped her and turned her to face him. "You're beautiful and you are the best person I know..."

"I wear a scarf."

"So?"

"I am a Muslim. I am not an American yet." She looked down. "I do not want to cause trouble for you."

"Sweetheart, I am very proud of who you are, everything about you. My friends won't have an issue." He hugged her gently. "Besides, I wouldn't worry. I already told them that you're from Pakistan. Hey, they accepted me and I'm from New York." He laughed. "Anyway, John wouldn't have sent his daughter over to babysit if he had a problem."

Sudah smiled at him. "Dory is a very sweet girl. She is very polite. I think she will be very good with Aden."

"If it works out, maybe you and I can get out a little more often, you know, couple stuff." He snuck a quick kiss to her cheek before they entered the club room where the others were waiting for them.

After introductions were made all around, the four men donned their paintball gear and headed onto the field; the wives sat on the benches outside of the locker room with no interest in participating in the sport for themselves. Trisha, Little John's wife, poured hot cocoa from a thermos for all of them.

Laurie pulled a nail file out and was examining her nails. "I'll never understand their fascination with this game."

"Boys will be boys," laughed Trisha. "Actually I tried it once, got a bunch of bruises and said that was enough." Trisha caught an odd look on Donna's face as she sat staring at Sudah.

Clearly puzzled, Sudah spoke up. "I do not even know what they do in this game."

"They go around shooting at each other..." Laurie started to explain.

"Shooting?" Sudah was alarmed.

Trisha broke in, "It's just little balls of paint, and they splatter on contact. There's really no harm."

"But it sounds so violent."

"Wouldn't you be used to that?" Donna directed her question at Sudah.

"Donna?" Both Laurie and Trisha were shocked by Donna's question.

Sudah shrugged. "Why am I used to violence?"

Clucking her tongue, Donna waved off her friends. "Well I figure where you come from..."

"I come from Pakistan. We are not near the Afghanistan border where there are skirmishes. My home is in a little town, it is very nice there."

"Well you Arabs are always fighting." Trisha tried to stop Donna, Donna ignored her.

"But I am not Arabic, I am Pakistani."

Donna snorted. "Same thing."

Trisha broke in. "Donna I don't understand why you are being so rude. I am so sorry Sudah."

"Why are you apologizing?" Donna faced Sudah menacingly. "My older cousin's fiancé was killed on 9/11..."

"Oh goodness Donna, that was almost ten years ago. Sudah was only a little girl back then."

"I am very sorry for your loss, but we are very much alike then. My father's dear friend Jamaal also died on that terrible day."

"Hmmph. On one of the planes I bet."

Laurie gasped.

"He was working in a restaurant in New York City. He was very proud and working to bring his family to America. He loved this country and was studying to become a citizen."

Donna rolled her eyes. "So what happened?"

"He ran to the two buildings after the first plane crashed. The restaurant was across the street. He was trying to help when the second plane came. He was lost in the debris and fire." Sudah had to pause. "We were very sad that day. I remember when Jamaal's wife was told her husband was dead. I felt very bad for her."

"And yet you cover your head like those Arab women who cheered."

"I cover my head because I am Muslim. It is a sign of respect for my beliefs."

"Muslim? That's who attacked us." Donna snorted. "And they say that Bin Laden lives like a hero in Pakistan."

"I have not seen him. I do not know where he lives. I would tell authorities where if I knew." Sudah smiled sweetly and shook her head. "The Islamic people are people of peace. The few who murdered so many and the people who were happy about it are not true believers. They are cowards who hide behind a sign that says 'I am a Muslim'. They do not speak for most of us."

Anxious to change the topic, Laurie interrupted. "Hey, do you do all of that curry cooking and stuff?"

"I cook many dishes from the area. Matt likes the combinations and flavors of the spices."

"Tony and I went to a Pakistani restaurant in New York on vacation last year. He really liked the food." She came close to Sudah. "Do you think maybe you could teach me to cook some of those dishes?"

"Oh that would be a great idea! I'd love to learn too." Trisha chimed in.

"I would be very pleased to teach cooking Pakistani meals."

The next few hours passed with conversations about the culture Sudah was raised in and why she came to America. They spoke about Sudah and Matt's mixed faith marriage and their decision to raise Aden as a Christian. Laurie and Trisha set a date to come over to get a food demonstration from Sudah. They planned to introduce her to some of the local culture as well. Donna was more cordial, but she never warmed up to Sudah.

The men finally came back from the field; they were laughing, sweaty and splattered with paint. They stopped to shower in the locker rooms. Then the four couples went to a local diner for dinner.

Matt was trying to keep himself busy. He laughed to himself at the irony of his job. Everyone wanted flight medics to be the cream of the crop and yet, when all was said and done, they spent the majority of their time on the ground and bored. He and Tony were scheduled to do a non-emergency transport later that day; up north most transports were done by air ambulances, fixed wing aircraft, but down in this area choppers were often used for the short hauls.

"Hey man, can I speak to you?" Frankie stopped Matt as he was sweeping out the hanger.

"What's up?"

"I heard that Donna gave your wife a hard time about her being a Muslim and all. I wanted to apologize."

Matt looked confused. "Sudah never said anything."

"Laurie told Tony that Sudah handled it real well. Look, I just want you to know, I don't have any problems with your wife."

Matt could see the sincerity in his eyes. "Good to know."

"So how did you wind up with a girl from over there anyway?"

Matt let Frankie follow him into the crew room before he answered. "Sudah enrolled in a college program in New York. I sometimes helped out with the paramedic program there. We met one day in the hallway and I knew that I loved her right away."

"So she's not a citizen, right?"

"Not yet." Frankie handed Matt a cup of coffee and they sat at the table. "She's working on it though, but it takes several years."

Frankie took a long swallow from his coffee. "It's just that it's odd to see foreigners around here..."

"You know we all started out as foreigners somewhere in our families." Matt bristled a bit.

"Hey, no offense. I just didn't know if you guys are prepared for some of the shit that can go on down here."

"We've gotten some looks. A few folks have made comments too." Matt shrugged. "But I've also heard some whispers about northerners and New Yorkers, as well."

"Well you know that all of us here at the station got your back..."

"Whose back do we have?" Tony entered the crew room.

"I was telling Matt what Laurie said."

"She shouldn't have gone mouthing off, I'm sure that Donna didn't mean any harm."

"Yeah well," Frankie scoffed, "she shouldn't have said anything."

"Let it go. I don't want it causing any problems between you and your wife." Matt grabbed three cups and the coffee pot. "Anyone up for some swill?" Matt poured after getting chuckles and nods.

Other crews joined the chatter in the crew room. Ground crews and flight crews intermingled. The chief called a few in to his office to exchange tablets, electronic patient care report computers, which they carried on their runs. A ground crew was dispatched to a woman in labor, another to a child who fell on a playground.

That night Matt tried to get Sudah to talk about meeting his coworker's wives, but she didn't say anything negative. He hoped that she would feel comfortable making new friends.

Chapter Two

Tones went out just as he finished checking his equipment. It was a rollover M.V.A, motor vehicle accident, on a remote stretch of a dark, nighttime highway. The dispatcher relayed details to the chopper crew from a state trooper at the scene. No EMS was on scene yet and chances were that the chopper would reach the scene before any ground ambulance.

"How bad is it?" A last minute ride-along was sent with them. The kid, Jimmy, was visiting from out west; his uncle was a local political figure. He was a pre-med student and had just completed

an EMT class to get his feet wet. "You gonna let me work or you gonna make me just observe?" He tone was filled with attitude.

The station chief thought it would be a good move to let the kid see emergency response firsthand. Besides, it couldn't hurt the next time they went to town officials for extra funding. Matt felt like he was babysitting.

"There's two patients so I'm probably going to need your hands, but don't do anything unless I tell you." Matt could smell the newbie on Jimmy and he worried he might be a maverick. "I know you've got some training, but I'm still in charge." He ignored the glare he got from his young partner. It didn't matter; Matt had no idea what kind of skill the kid really had.

Finding a clear landing zone was difficult amidst all of the towering Sycamore trees. Once the chopper was on the ground Matt grabbed his bag and ran to the overturned vehicle. Jimmy ran right behind him, his hands were empty.

"There's a kid in the back." A distraught state trooper was standing next to the car. He had blood stains on his hands. "I can't get near him. The car is too smashed up." Matt glanced in and saw the toddler lying motionless in his car seat. He tried calling to him and there was no response.

What had once been a luxury SUV was flattened over more than half of its roof. Matt could see the unconscious driver slumped over the wheel. Once the door was open he would be able to get to the driver. "Let's concentrate on getting her out. We should be able to reach the kid with her out of the way."

"I don't know how long they've been here. I came across it on patrol. Her door is stuck."

Calling over his shoulder, Matt knew they couldn't wait for the fire department to cut the roof off. "Hey Tony, bring the Haligan." The tool resembled a crowbar and would help them get the door open. He reached through the broken driver side window to check for a pulse. It was weak and thready, but at least it was there. She had several obvious contusions and cuts, and bits of broken glass were imbedded in her face. "She's still alive."

"What should I do?" Jimmy gawked at the injured patient.

Motioning to the rear side window behind the driver, Matt told Jimmy to hold the driver's head still as he and Tony pried the door open. Tony pushed against the tool and the door swung partly open. Matt used his full body weight to push the driver's door completely back and then did a quick assessment of the driver. She was still breathing. Her legs were pressed under the dashboard; the steering column was pushed against her chest. He checked to make sure she had full circulation in all of her extremities and that there didn't seem to be any arterial bleeds.

"Geez, the whole engine is practically sitting in her lap." Matt threw Jimmy a warning look. He was aware that some unconscious patients could still hear everything around them. Jimmy shrugged, annoyed, and finished with a loud whisper, "Just saying."

They got the woman out of the car and gently placed her into a basket for transport. "Get her in the chopper, high flow O2 and have her vitals for me. I'll be right behind you with the kid." Tony and Jimmy ran to the helicopter with the basket. The trooper stayed to help Matt.

Matt stretched into the back seat to reach the little boy. A heavy tree limb had entered through the side window opening during the roll and pierced the little boy's chest. Too much blood had been lost for a child that size to survive. A sickening sensation tore through Matt's gut as he realized the boy had bled out long before they got there. There were no breaths and no pulse, but the body was still warm even for the night air. He took the kid out in the car seat and ran to the chopper while he started compressions on the boy's chest.

Handing the car seat to Jimmy he told him to continue CPR. Jimmy took the car seat and looked at the child with a frown. "But isn't he dead anyway?"

"I said to do CPR." Matt was gritting his teeth. "This is probably his mother and she is going to know we did everything we could for her son." Jimmy looked like he was going to protest, but changed his mind when he saw Matt's angry glare. He started pumping the boy's chest.

As Tony lifted the chopper, Matt gave the woman a thorough once-over, palpating where the noise from the rotor over his head prevented auscultation. Under the glow from the roof lights he could see a dark stain spreading under the skin from her breastbone to her neck. And he saw her

jugular pressing to the side. The blow to her chest from the steering wheel had caused an injury to the ribs and lungs; air pressure was building on one side of the pleural cavity. He called his findings in to the hospital as he inserted a needle into her chest to relieve the pressure.

By the time they reached the hospital, Matt managed to stabilize his patient's breathing and her vitals were improving. She was still unconscious and would require immediate surgery to keep everything on track. Even though he knew it was futile, he still dressed the boy's wounds and pumped fluids through an IV. If the mother was aware of anything, she had to know that they tried to save her child. He had Jimmy continue CPR until the doctor in the ER told him to stop. The boy was pronounced as his mom was being rolled into surgery.

Tony and Matt were both somber as Matt forced himself to finish the paperwork he had to turn in. Losing any patient was rough—losing a little kid was torture. Jimmy leaned against the wall, his arms crossed in front of him, glaring at Matt. Matt ignored him. He figured that the young man would need to deal with the call in his own way. If he needed to talk, Matt would be there. Tony told Matt he'd be at the chopper waiting for him to finish up and left.

"Where's my son?" A middle aged man in a suit and tie was pounding on the nurse's station for answers. "The police called and said my son was brought in. Where is he?"

"Let me get a doctor to speak to you." The nurse pushed a button on the intercom.

"Where is he?" The man bellowed. "Where is Jeremy?"

Matt turned back to his paperwork. He didn't want to witness the devastation the father was facing when he learned his child was dead. Even though he tried not to, he kept picturing his own little boy.

"Mr. Adams?" One of the doctors came hurrying over. "Let's go into the next room..."

"Talk to me here dammit!"

The doctor took a deep breath and kept his voice even. "Your wife is in surg..."

"Where is my son?" He grabbed the doctor's white jacket. A security guard started to approach until the doctor waved him off.

The doctor calmly disengaged himself from Adam's grasp. "I'm sorry sir. We did everything we could for your son."

"What are you saying?"

"We couldn't save him. I'm sorry sir..."

Adams shuddered. "Oh my God. He wasn't supposed to be in that car." His voice sounded torn. "Where is his body?"

"I can arrange for you to see him shortly." The doctor was trying to be compassionate. "Your wife should be out of surgery soon. She doesn't know yet. She'll need..."

"He wasn't supposed to be with her today." Adams sobbed. "Her sister was supposed to have picked him up."

Matt's gut twisted.

"Why wasn't he with her sister?" Adams covered his eyes and wept.

The doctor led the grieving man to a chair down the hallway.

Matt snapped the pen he was writing with. He muttered a curse under his breath and threw the broken pieces into a wastebasket behind the desk. Grabbing another stick pen from his belt, he tried to concentrate on the continuation form in front of him.

Jimmy snickered. "Why are you so upset? That's the kid you didn't give a damn about."

"What?" Matt was careful to keep his voice low.

"What did you think it was some kind of a joke to keep me busy with a kid you had no intention of really helping?" Jimmy approached Matt. "Yeah, you resented the fact that I was riding along and you didn't want to bother with the kid, so you pawned him off on me."

"Shut up." Matt whispered loudly enough for Jimmy to hear him. "The boy bled out before we got there. He was dead, his heart had stopped. There was really nothing we could do for the kid. His mother was alive but she needed help, serious help. And she also needed to know that we were trying to save her son, she had to know if there had been any chance at all..."

"You just said he was dead, so why were you wasting my time?"

Sometimes after a patient's heart stops and the patient is clinically dead, he can still be resuscitated with compressions or drugs. Sometimes though the injuries are too extensive and the damage is too great. Matt knew all of the hard facts. He didn't want to start preaching to this pain in the ass. "His body was still warm, I wasn't about to pronounce. I had you there. If the kid had any chance, your training was enough. The woman needed more advanced interventions. I let you take care of the kid so that I could pay attention to the mom." Matt counted silently while he turned to face Jimmy. "Look Jim, patient care is sometimes doing things just for comfort. That's what I had you doing. There wasn't anything else we could do."

"Then why..."

Suddenly Adams shoved Matt back into the desk. "So you didn't even try to save my son!"

"Sir," Matt was caught off guard. "I'm sorry, your son bled out."

Adams shrieked. "You killed him!"

"Sir, please" Matt tried to back away.

The security guard that had earlier backed off came forward. "Sir, you're going to have to calm down."

"He murdered my son!"

Matt was torn between protecting himself and trying to help the distraught father. "Mr. Adams I can assure you—"

"Mr. Adams," the doctor was back. "I can take you to see your son now, if you calm down."

Adams threw a final angry look at Matt before he drew in a deep breath and followed the doctor. Just before Adams disappeared from the hall, he turned back to Matt and said, loudly enough to be heard without yelling, "You will pay. You will. I swear it." He followed the doctor through the double doors.

Matt looked angry as he turned back to Jimmy. Before he had a chance to say anything Jimmy said "Fuck you!" and walked away.

Tony witnessed the final exchange between Matt and Jimmy. He shook his head after Jimmy left and went over to Matt. "I think about now my wife would say I think that boy's about two sandwiches shy of a picnic."

Before Matt's shift was over, Jimmy called his uncle who in turn called the station commander. Both Matt and Tony were called into the chief's office separately to give their version of the events. Matt had to go over every detail of the call in the chief's office including what he told Jimmy in the ER. The chief was satisfied.

"By the way Garratti, I spoke with the hospital ER. You saved her life. You did good." The chief was nodding approvingly.

When he finally left to head home, Matt sat in his car for a long time just staring at a wallet sized picture of Sudah holding Aden. Calls with kids always got to him.

Sudah greeted Matt at the door like she always did, at least whenever he managed to get home while she was still awake. She saw the sadness in his eyes.

"Is everything all right Matt?" She soothed her hand along his cheek.

He kissed her neck as he hugged her a little tighter than he should have. "Is Aden sleeping already?"

She stepped back from him. "Yes. I put him to bed an hour ago."

"I need to see him Sudah. I need to touch him." He felt like he had to ask her permission. "I promise not to wake him."

"If you wake him I will rock him to sleep again." She searched his face. "Go, go see your son." Her husband needed this.

He didn't wake the baby.

Sudah asked if he was going to be up much longer, she was getting ready for bed. He kissed her lightly and said he needed a few minutes.

Matt decided to call Julie. They were used to each other and were always able to bounce things off of each other when they rode together. He knew that Julie would tell him what he already knew—there was nothing he could have done. Hearing it from her might have made a difference, but then again he might just scoff. A fellow paramedic, Julie could understand his frustration over the call first hand.

Julie and Matt spent a lot of years responding to calls together and it was a very special friendship and bond they shared. Fortunately Julie's husband, Jake, and Sudah both understood the relationship or they might have been jealous.

He waited while the phone rang and hoped he wasn't disturbing their sleep. Both Julie and her husband worked rotating shifts for their jobs – she as a paramedic and Jake as the chief of the sheriff department in the small New York county where they lived.

"Hello?" Julie's voice sounded just like she was in the next room. "How's my godson?" Caller ID ended any anonymity of a phone call.

"Aden's fine." Matt smiled as he pictured the sleeping child in his mind. Then a pang of guilt hit him because he couldn't save the other child.

They chatted about unimportant things, talked about the move to North Carolina, about their spouses and about people they both knew. Julie sensed his mood and finally, after he relaxed while talking, she asked him about it. Matt told her about the call, complained about Jimmy, and tried to sound unaffected by the toddler's death.

Julie told him what he already knew; there was nothing he could have done. He scoffed. But she still made him feel better anyway. They both said they missed each other and promised not to let so much time go by before they spoke again. Matt asked her if she'd like to bring Jake down to see the place, she said they would as soon as possible. They hung up.

Matt remembered how jealous he was when Julie first started seeing Jake. He wasn't jealous in any romantic way, he was just afraid of losing her friendship. At first he couldn't understand how she could want to pay more attention to Jake than to him, and then he fell in love himself and knew. Julie had been the first person Matt had felt comfortable relying on in a long time, at least ever since his father walked out on his mother and him when he was just a kid. He was thrilled to find that their friendship was as strong as ever and Jake even became someone that he could call his friend.

He knew he could still rely on Julie console him after a call like this. He really did miss working with her and talking with her pretty much every day. Sudah tried to understand about his job, but he didn't feel that he should talk with her about some of the tragedies he saw. Some of the stuff sounded really ugly and he didn't want to poison her world with ugliness. You never really could understand unless you were out there in the field trying to cheat death.

He dropped his clothes and took a quick shower before climbing into bed next to his wife. She reached out for him—it felt good to feel Sudah holding him.

"So you didn't even try to save my son!"

"You killed him!"

"He murdered my son!"

"I'm Jeremy Adams, I'm dead. Dead. I'm Jeremy, dead. Jeremy, dead. Jeremy, Jeremy, Aden..."

Matt threw the covers off and ran to his son's room. He knew he wasn't fully awake, but he had to get to Aden's side. He had to. The baby's room was just a few feet from their bedroom but it suddenly seemed so far away.

Finally reaching his destination, Matt pushed the door open. He caught the nursery room door before it crashed into the wall behind it. Some sense had returned and he didn't want to wake the sleeping child if he could help it.

Aden was there, dreaming. His thumb was in his mouth and his little behind was in the air as if he was trying to crawl. Matt stifled a chuckle. Relief flooded through him. And then a slight sense of guilt.

There was another man who wouldn't feel this sense of relief tonight. There was another man who couldn't watch his sleeping child. Matt knew that there was nothing he could have done to save Jeremy Adams. The decision had been made even before he got there. He still felt frustrated.

It was far from the first time that Matt had lost a patient or couldn't help one that he responded to. Julie always said she never wanted to not feel the sense of loss when someone died. The day she would no longer feel like crying over someone's death would be the day she'd quit EMS. Matt agreed, if you didn't keep your humanity about you, you might even feel tempted to stop trying when things seemed bleak. So you allowed yourself to get battered emotionally now and then. It wasn't the first time he had lost a patient, it wasn't even the first time he had seen a kid die. This death affected him even more it seemed—he was a dad with a little boy of his own to take care of.

"Are you all right Matt?" Sudah touched his arm.

He hadn't heard her follow him into the room. "Yeah. I'm sorry I woke you." He whispered back.

She took his hand and gently led him from the room. "Do you want to talk?"

"No." He hesitated. "It was just a bad call." Matt shivered and laughed at himself standing stark naked. He had run from the bed so quickly he hadn't stopped to put anything on.

Sudah hid a small smile. "If you prefer not to talk, would you like me to warm your body?"

All his wife ever had to do was hint at making love and Matt was eager. Sudah was reserved in public, but there never was any hesitancy in their bedroom.

This time his need was more than simply feeling her body under his and being inside her, this time he needed to feel alive. Matt nodded and then he picked Sudah up and carried her back to bed.

Chapter Three

Matt decided to explore the area with Sudah and Aden on his days off. Sudah already made plans to enroll in a nearby college extension program in the fall. She wanted to educate herself in order to work towards her American citizenship. They had to notify the authorities when they left New York as part of her visa. They also had to guarantee that she would continue to actively work towards her naturalization.

She came to New York from Pakistan as a student in business studies. She met Matt in the halls of the college when he stopped by to help test a new batch of paramedic students in the EMS department. They hadn't known each other very long when her student visa expired because the program she was enrolled in ended early due to a lack of funds. Sudah was told she would have to go back to Pakistan. Matt didn't want to lose her so he proposed and hoped she would be allowed to stay as the wife of an American. They married in a hurry and in secret at a justice of the peace. He hadn't even told Julie or his mom until well after the fact. He was afraid that someone would try to talk him out of moving so fast. It complicated things when the Immigration and Naturalization Service investigated their sudden marriage and found that his friends and family knew nothing about it.

It was a real marriage in every way right from the beginning. He was in love with Sudah and she with him. The secretiveness that surrounded their wedding made the immigration people suspicious. They had just managed to convince the authorities that they married for true love and not simply a green card when Sudah discovered that she was pregnant. It was obvious the marriage was more than name only.

Matt panicked and spent hours talking with Julie and Jake instead of telling Sudah how happy he was to be her husband and have a baby on the way. When he finally came home he told her how scared he was of being like his father and letting his family down. Sudah wasn't even angry with him. She just told him that she knew he would be a good father and husband. She wanted many children with him.

After that he vowed never to walk away from her again. He would never abandon his wife and child the way his father abandoned him and his mom when he was just a little boy. Everything he did from that point on was for Sudah and their children. Any free time he had was devoted to them.

The diner waitress put their meals down in front of them. She smiled at Matt. "So are y'all new to the area?" Matt could see she was trying not to look at Sudah. "Where are y'all from?"

"New York."

The waitress stole a quick glance at the infant in the carry seat next to his mother. "Cute babe." She looked back towards Matt. "Your... wife from New Yawk too?"

He narrowed his eyes in annoyance. "Why don't you ask her?"

The waitress blushed. "Uh..."

Sudah kindly piped in, "Yes I also lived in New York." She was dressed in a long skirt and modest blouse. Her clothes were purely American even if the style was reserved. She also wore a hijab, a flowing scarf that hid her hair from the public.

Nodding and smiling politely at Sudah and Matt, the waitress made a hasty retreat.

"Matt, why are you angry? Sudah shook her head gently. "She was just making conversation."

"She didn't even give you the courtesy of asking you the question."

She shrugged. "They see the color of my skin and my scarf. I'm different. They do not mean any harm."

"You're my wife Sudah and I want people to respect that."

"Maybe they worry I don't speak English?"

"If they bothered to speak to you they would find out that you do." His wife always made excuses for people; she never wanted to see bad in any of them. But even her positivity wasn't enough to dispel his foul mood.

Matt was feeling edgy all day. He was very aware of the hostile looks they received earlier in the day while touring some nearby towns. One old man even called Sudah an Aaa-Rab and made fun of her head covering. Matt almost lost his temper with the old man, but Sudah's light touch on his arm calmed him. When she politely told the man she was Pakistani, the old guy guffawed and said "same thing." Later, Sudah explained to Matt that she didn't think it was worthwhile to argue. "We will not change a man's mind unless he wants to hear something new."

Earlier in the day he drove to the college campus with them so that Sudah could see the route she would have to take. He also wanted to see the area she'd be spending so much time in for himself and make sure that it was safe for her. That's when he first got an uneasy feeling that they were being watched, but he didn't see anyone specific. Matt convinced himself that it was just more of those hostile looks keeping him on edge. There was a small mosque in the student center and Sudah told him that she would pray there. Matt hoped she wouldn't be harassed because of her faith. The campus advertised that childcare was available but neither of them were impressed with the facilities. That was when they started exploring and finally wound up in the diner on their way back home.

Sudah fed Aden creamed corn from a small jar while they waited for their orders. The waitress put heaping platters of food in front of each of them. She made sure to thank the waitress.

Matt bit into an overstuffed club sandwich with turkey and ham Sudah chewed slowly on her grilled cheese sandwich while she helped Aden hold his bottle.

"I am happy the drive to school will not be long." She took time to chew the bite of sandwich she just put in her mouth.

He nodded. "It's a pretty direct route. That's good."

"Matt, thank you for bringing us here."

He took a gulp of lemonade. "Oh baby, I hope you're happy."

"Yes, I am happy." She smiled at him. "You give us a nice home. You are taking care of your family."

The three left the diner with their stomachs full and his foul mood dispelled a bit by his wife's optimism. Matt stayed off of the highway as they headed back towards their home in order to see a little more of the area. Driving along a street of one and two million dollar homes, Matt tried to imagine coming home to Sudah and their son in one of those luxurious estates.

"One of these days..."

"One of these days what, Matt?" Sudah asked about his barely audible statement. Her own voice was low because of the sleeping infant in the rear seat.

He chuckled. "One of these days I would love to afford one of these homes for you and Aden."

She looked out of her passenger side window. "These homes, they are so big."

"Yeah. They're beautiful."

"But Matt, compared to the house I grew up in, our home is a," she paused to come up with the right word, "a... a big house."

"Like a mansion?" He was amused by his wife's naivety about the language and expressions.

"Yes, a mansion. It is a mansion to me."

He pulled the car to the side of the road and put it in park. A wisp of hair had escaped the scarf she wound around her head. Reaching towards her, Matt tenderly brushed it behind her ear. "Baby, I want to give you so much. I want to do so much for you and Aden." He wanted to be the perfect husband and father, everything his own father wasn't.

She smiled demurely. "You have given me everything. You are everything that I need." Looking around quickly to make sure they were not being observed, Sudah leaned forward and placed a light kiss on his lips. "You have made me very happy. I never thought that I would find a man like you for me. I am so lucky."

When Sudah looked at him like that, she made him feel successful. "I'm the lucky one." He gently pulled her forward to kiss her again. "Would you mind if we went home?" He knew she wasn't comfortable with public displays and it was a lot more than simple kissing that he wanted to do with her at that moment.

"I think that might be a very good idea."

He followed them from the college campus to the diner through the winding streets. So somebody was looking for an education? It certainly wouldn't be for that little half breed brat. He wondered which one of them thought they had a right to better themselves and then he smiled as he knew he would make sure they would never get the chance.

He lost everything that day. They were part of the reason he was miserable. He would make sure that they paid. He would make sure that their loss mirrored his own.

Matt was on a high when they came back to the station. He had just assisted at a birth in the field, which was always his favorite kind of call. The woman already had two beautiful sons, but this time it was a girl and both she and her husband were ecstatic. When Matt saw the look that passed between the couple he imagined that was the way he and Sudah had looked when Aden was born. He enjoyed seeing that. A volunteer basic life support crew transported the mom and new baby to a local hospital in their ambulance.

His euphoria was destined to be short lived. The chief called Matt and Tony to the office shortly after they got back to the station. He let them know that the woman from the remote highway accident, Mrs. Adams, died of an air embolism. Embolisms weren't uncommon after injuries as extensive as hers. Matt really thought she had been out of the woods after the first twenty four hours so he was really disappointed. The chief was warning them, there were rumblings about Adams filing a suit against the air ambulance company. The suit would name Matt, Tony and Jimmy as well as the company.

Matt felt bad for Adams' loss, first his toddler son and now his wife. He remembered that the man hadn't seemed all that concerned about his wife's condition in the hospital, maybe that was just a front? He really hoped this wouldn't go to court and put his position at risk. He felt a twinge of guilt thinking about job security, but if he was named in a negligence suit against the company he had to worry about providing for his family.

He could smell the fragrant scent as he walked up the walkway to his front door. Matt wondered how many of their neighbors could smell the aromatic spices permeating the neighborhood when Sudah cooked. Every so often Sudah cooked an old American standby because she knew that Matt had certain favorites, but most of her cooking was very ethnic and he had grown fond of many of the Pakistani dishes.

He opened the door to hear Sudah sobbing from the kitchen.

"Baby?" He called out to her.

She came to the kitchen door sniffling and wiping her eyes. "Aden is sleeping."

He nodded and lowered his voice. "What's wrong? Is he okay? Are you?"

She stifled a sob and nodded. "Please come into the kitchen and I will tell you."

"Okay." He followed her. She stopped by the table and he wrapped his arms around her. "Tell me what's wrong."

Sudah motioned to an open letter on the table. "I took in our mail from the box..."

He reached for the envelope and noticed the return address. "It's from your parents. Are they okay?"

"They are in good health." She squeezed her eyes to keep from crying. "I sent my mother and father a picture of Aden, but my father made my mother return it. He will not recognize our son as his blood." She leaned against Matt and cried into his shoulder.

The first emotion he experienced was anger. Then he felt bad for his wife's pain. "I'm sorry baby."

"How can he not accept a son from his daughter?"

"Because of me..."

She stepped back and looked up at him. "You are a good man and a good husband. I know that he does not approve of our marriage because you are not Muslim, but Aden is my son."

"Sweetie, you told them that we were raising Aden in my faith, didn't you? They are probably pretty angry at me."

She dried her eyes. "We agreed we would raise our children as Christian. And we agreed you and I would remain in our own faiths."

"And I want our children to understand Islam."

"I am not sorry for the decisions we have made." Sudah swallowed and wiped her eyes again. "I have gone against my parents by marrying a non-believer, but I did not betray them as my father has accused."

"Does your mother feel that way, too?"

"I know she is not happy, but Matt," Sudah picked up the letter, "I can see her tearstains as she wrote this letter. She did not want to turn away her grandson."

"I'm sorry. I wish I could make things better."

"There is nothing to be done." Sudah stroked his cheek. "I must learn to accept things as they are."

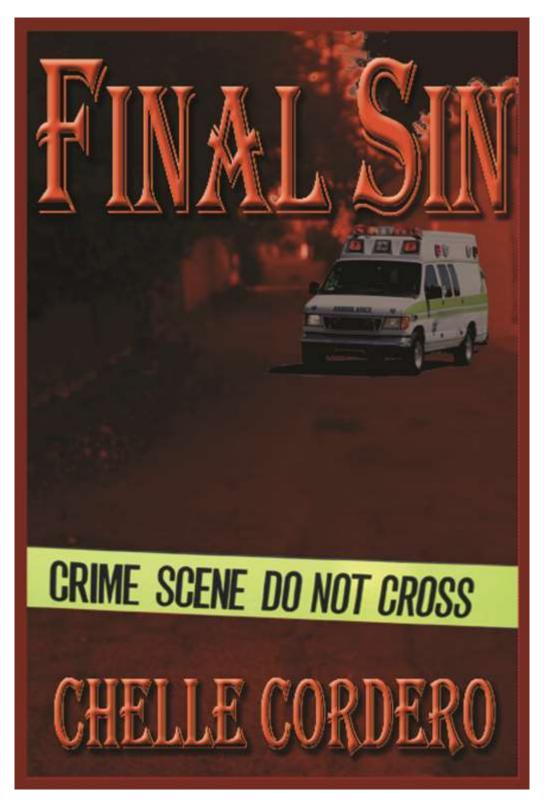
"I love you Sudah."

"I love you Matt."

Matt stared into a cup of black coffee and brooded the next day about Sudah's parents, the inlaws he would probably never meet. He was sorry that Sudah had so much pain and sorrow, but he wasn't sorry that he had married her or that they had Aden. She was right, they had many discussions about their religions and they had agreed. It was their decision as parents, no one else's. Damn it, he thought, why wasn't being in love enough for some people?

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Final Sin by Chelle Cordero

Prologue

There wasn't anyone there who didn't look like they weren't ready to heave. Julie felt sorry for the vollies, the members of the local volunteer ambulance corps. At least she and Matt were being paid to be there. Then again, no amount of money was worth witnessing the carnage that was lying there before them.

Matt had done the unwelcome task and already pronounced one of the girls dead. It was obvious death, obvious to anyone. Trying her best not to step into the pool of blood or disturb anything else vital to the crime scene investigation that would follow, she finished preparing the one girl who was still alive for transport.

A young man in his late twenties or early thirties, Julie wasn't sure without reading the patient care report, had been burnt when his shirt had caught fire. He was sitting huddled and guarding his severely burnt arm as Matt treated him. He looked scared and in shock at the events around him and wouldn't look at any of the police officers who had responded. Julie assumed that it was his need to deny the trauma.

A broad shouldered officer came through the door and took command of the scene. He seemed hardened to the butchery, almost as if he had seen too many gruesome scenes just like this one. Dressed in a dark blue baseball jacket, open collar knit shirt and khaki pants, he donned a pair of latex gloves he had carried in his pocket and began an almost detached visual inspection of the room. The springy snap of the elastic gloves stretching to fit his large hands was in sharp contrast to his motionless stance. Other officers at the scene deferred to his judgment and took instructions from him as he calmly took in the entire scene. He was concerned with the best way to collect the pertinent evidence to tell the story of what had happened.

As Julie and one of the ambulance crewmembers moved the surviving girl to the gurney, she risked a quick look at the tall officer's dark eyes and noted that there was a thinly disguised veil of dismay. He had intrigued her with his stony expression and seeming aloofness to the horrors, and his complete focus on the collection of relevant clues. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, it was a comfort to Julie that the cop was not completely indifferent to this horror or detached from the human cost.

For Matt and Julie, their tour of duty had started out like many others. There had been a call to a minor motor vehicle accident, another for chest pains and one more for a cancer patient who needed to go to the hospital for treatment. Many of the upstate New York communities had contracted with Paramedic services to complement the existing ambulance corps and provide emergency medical response. Whether paid or unpaid, the certified corps always responded with Emergency Medical Technicians who were capable of handling most emergencies. When the Paramedics were dispatched as well, IV drugs and additional hands could often help make critical differences when necessary.

This call had gone out over the radio for a burn victim, so none of the responding police, fire fighters, volunteer ambulance crew nor paramedics were prepared for what they found when they reached this isolated tool shed. From the outside, the grayed wood had seemed serene enough, and the one small window had been caked over with dirt. She didn't think that she would have given the shed a second glance under normal circumstances. But this was far from normal. No one had anticipated the horror scene inside.

Two young women were staked to the dirt floor, both had bled profusely from a variety of wounds. Although one was still alive, barely breathing after severe mutilation and a huge loss of blood, the other had been burned and was only the charred remains of who she once was. Julie wasn't alone in her prayers that the young woman had died long before the flames had destroyed her body. It didn't look like she had struggled and yet her mouth was open, Julie feared that she might have died screaming. She had still been smoldering when the fire department had arrived and the puddle of water around her had quickly turned into mud.

The young man told them tearfully that he had tried to douse the flames and had been injured when his own shirtsleeves caught fire. If he hadn't run from the remote little building into the night, none of them might even have been discovered until they had all perished. A passing motorist with a cell phone caught sight of the man running with his clothes on fire and dialed nine-one-one before he got out to help. Apparently a second man, the monster responsible for the imprisonment and torture of these three young people, had already disappeared into the murky darkness.

The police were questioning the male victim while Matt finished cutting away his charred shirtsleeve. He said his name was Andrew and that he and the other man had picked the two girls up in a bar in Westchester. With the two girls in the back seat, Andrew drove into the northern Hudson Valley town following the step-by-step directions of the second man. Andrew said he didn't know the other man's name, he had used more than one and Andrew didn't think any of them were real. They snorted some coke, he assumed it was supplied by the unknown assailant, and had sex. That was when the other man had pulled a gun and forced Andrew to tie the two girls to stakes he pounded into the ground. Then Andrew was led outside and locked in the trunk of the car.

He heard muffled screams, he couldn't tell where they were coming from. He was disoriented and felt like he was suffocating in the trunk of that car, but he said it sounded like the screaming went on for hours. He was finally released and led back into the smokehouse by gunpoint to see the horrible results. It was when the perpetrator doused the first girl with gasoline and lit a match that Andrew finally tried to fight. The man warded off the attack and pushed Andrew to the ground. Then he ran. Andrew stayed behind to try to extinguish the flames and save the poor girl.

Julie used her walkie-talkie to call dispatch and request a chopper to bring her patient to the trauma center. The voice on the radio squawked back that there was a multi-car and multi-patient accident on the local highway, the chopper was already enroute to that scene and wasn't available for their call, nor was there a second rig available to transport the patients separately. Matt, listening on his own talkie, motioned that they could transport the victims together since his patient, although burned, was stable.

They moved their patients to the ambulance with the surviving girl lying motionless on the gurney. Julie started a line to get some much-needed fluids into her patient. She kept her hands steady as she inserted the first of two large bore IV's into the young girl's arm and attached the saline drip. Matt was stepping into the truck as she was carefully inserting a tube down the throat to intubate the girl.

The broad shouldered officer followed Matt to the open rear doors of the rig as he transferred Andrew to the bench in the box rig. Matt made sure that his patient was seat belted in place, his arm had been wrapped in wet gauze. The cop watched quietly as Julie adjusted the rate of drips coming out of the hanging saline bag that fed into the young girl's arm. A bottle of sterile water was placed nearby to keep the burn patient's dressing wet enroute to the hospital.

Obviously there were questions to be asked, but the paramedics and EMT's had important work to do and the officer discreetly tried to stay out of their way. Finally, as the cop saw Julie turn to jot something onto her clipboard, he stepped into the rig. Matt threw an annoyed territorial look in the direction of the officer at his invasion. The cop had to stoop to accommodate his large six-footplus frame. Stepping closer to Julie, he quietly asked her to stop in at the local police station upon her return to help fill in some patient information that he needed for his reports. Even though he worded the suggestion politely like a request, it wasn't really a question. He let her know he would be expecting her later.

Piercing tones squelched over the walkie talkies on the paramedics' belts and the ambulance radio. Matt left to answer the other call for help and left Julie and the two EMT's in the back of the rig with the patients. He was needed elsewhere. Matt brushed past the man just as the officer backed out of the way and stepped down from the step at the big double doors. Julie reached for the grab bar on one of the doors and the policeman helped by swinging the doors closed. He mouthed the word "later" through the glass panes. The ambulance driver waited for Julie's word before he shifted the truck into gear.

The girl, Andrew had called her Holly, didn't survive the thirty-five-minute trip to the hospital. Her heart stopped. One of the EMT's started CPR while the second hooked up the leads from the monitor. They shared a hopeful moment as they watched the screen show a normal sinus rhythm only to lose their optimism when CPR was briefly stopped to obtain a true reading. At the same time the EMT took pride in the competent CPR, he was disheartened that the young girl's heart could not maintain the rhythm on its own.

Julie injected epinephrine and sodium bicarb twice in an effort to restart her heart, but they couldn't get her back. She had lost too much blood and had suffered too many traumas. It was almost as if she was surrendering to the peaceful cloak of death. It was a frustrating twenty-five minutes while the crew worked hard to save the young woman's life.

Andrew sat quietly on the bench as the ambulance crew worked non-stop, his eyes were brimming with unshed tears.

Julie looked over her shoulder at him and felt sorry for the young man. He was so obviously in pain with his own injuries, but he sat quietly and tried to stay out of the way while they tried in vain to revive Holly. The code was called at the hospital, the doctors hadn't even bothered to transfer the poor girl from the gurney before they pronounced her.

Chapter One

On the way back from the hospital, Julie got banged out on another job. Tones had come across the airwaves to respond to a seven-year old female with an uncontrollable nosebleed. It was just a simple nosebleed caused by a persistent but common cold and aggravated by an overly worried mother. It would have been a waste of resources for Julie to ride this call in. The Emergency Medical Technicians on the rig were well equipped to handle this kind of emergency.

Julie never underestimated the value of the vollies that rode the local rigs. Even though they were unpaid, she had always been lucky to ride with some of the most professional people in the field. They were well trained and they took their commitments seriously. She had ridden as an Emergency Medical Technician for two years with a paid service before she made the decision to begin her Paramedic classes. Julie would never let herself forget who she was or where she came from and she resented those medics who treated the EMT's and other vollies poorly. Many of the ambulance corps members that rode with Julie appreciated the mutual respect between them. Often she had heard that she was specifically requested to cover some of the stations.

She handed patient care over to the BLS crew and continued on her way to the police station. Before she got there, Julie took the Motorola walkie-talkie from her belt and called to Matt for his location. He was on his way to one of the area hospitals aggressively treating a difficulty breathing case in the back of his rig. It would be a while before he finished up the required paperwork at the hospital. Anytime a paramedic had to use IV drugs the paperwork was lengthy and every detail had to be perfect. She told him over the radio that she'd catch up with him later.

The officer met her as soon as she entered the lobby of the police station, he had watched as she pulled up in the van-style medic fly-car on the closed circuit TV. Julie thought that the little lobby seemed even smaller with him in it; she hadn't remembered quite how broad his shoulders were and marveled that he had even been able to fit in the back of the ambulance. She noticed he also had the height to wear those broad shoulders very well. He was wearing a dark blue knit shirt and khaki pants that emphasized his tall, lean build. He was certainly an attractive man, she thought.

"Hi, I didn't get to introduce myself before, I'm Deputy Sheriff Jacob Carlson. Please call me Jake." He extended his hand to her in greeting. His hand fully enveloped hers in warmth and his touch sent a tingly pulse racing up her arm.

"Julie Jennings." She returned his greeting with a slight nod of her head and her own extended hand. His lingering grip was firm and comfortably solid. Julie was struck by the feeling of comfort she had feeling her hand embraced by his. He held her hand just a moment longer than he had meant to.

"Why don't we go sit inside?" He reminded himself to let go of her hand and motioned for her to walk down the narrow hallway. She couldn't help but notice again, as she followed him down the corridor, how big a man he was. He looked powerful and muscular, the way he moved was fluid and strong. He moved with a confidence and, despite his large size, a grace few men seemed to radiate. This man was formidable, Julie thought, and was somehow comforted with the thought that he was upholding the law to make her world a little safer.

Stopping by a doorway, he let Julie pass him. "Let me just get the light," he reached past her to flip the light switch on in the stark interview room. A bare bulb glared from the ceiling fixture. "Can I get you a cup of coffee or something?"

"No thanks." Julie entered the small room and sat in one of the green padded chairs at the wooden table.

Julie had been at this police station before to check on the welfare of prisoners. She recognized this chamber as one of the interview rooms. Bare except for a small wooden table in ash blonde wood and three metal chairs with green padding, it normally gave her a chill. Somehow though the man who entered the room behind her seemed to warm up the temperature a few notches.

He stood next to her and apologetically picked up what had appeared to be a square plastic sheet from the table. "I need to ask you to let me get your shoeprints since you were at the scene. I'm going to have to call your partner for this, too." He waited for her to acknowledge his request before he crouched in front of her. "Unfortunately there was so much traffic in the cabin, we wanted to be able to isolate any shoeprints that might help us find the perp."

"No problem." Julie stood and stepped on the vinyl sheet he had put down on the floor for her to step on. She noticed he had put on a pair of latex gloves. "Is that it?"

He knelt in front of her and tried very hard not to focus on the delicate curve of her hips. "Yeah." When she stepped back, he carefully picked the sheet up by the corners and covered it with another clear plastic sheet before sliding it into a large manila envelope. He sealed the envelope, picked up a pen to write her name on it and placed it into a wire basket on the table. Julie sat back in the chair.

Jake settled in a chair on the other side of the table and pulled the tight gloves off of his hands. He flexed his fingers to get the circulation going again. Smiling, he looked at her, "I hate those things." She nodded in complete commiseration.

"I've got the names and patient info here." She pulled a folded paper from the pocket of her uniform shirt. "The girl didn't make it." His knit polo shirt was open at the collar just enough to reveal a generous dusting of dark curls. Julie noticed his corded neck muscles tense as she told him of the poor girl's tragic fate.

Jake exhaled loudly and muttered an expletive. "Did the guy...", he looked down at the paperwork in front of him, "Andrew Larkin tell you anything?"

She shrugged. "Basically just what he told you and the other cops at the scene." Julie took a moment to replay any conversation that had taken place during the trip to the hospital, being careful not to reveal any confidential patient information. She wanted to help as much as she could. "He did say that he had been the one to, well, he had been with Holly. The other guy, he called him John, at least that was one of the names he had used, had been with Beth. He didn't know the girls' last names."

Jake sat at the opposite side of the table and made a few notes on a yellow pad of paper that was lying there. "It was a real mess." He tipped his chair back, crossed his muscled arms and studied her.

She looked young. She was of average height and slender, although when he thought about it, nothing about her really was very average. It wasn't easy to ignore that she definitely had all the right curves. Even with the starched white uniform shirt and shiny EMS badge, the unisex trousers and bulging pockets, she was definitely all-woman, he thought quietly. He silently tried to guess how tall she was, five-five or five-six? She certainly didn't weigh much. Appreciating her figure as only a man could, he admitted to himself that he wouldn't mind picking her up and trying to guess her weight.

Jake silently admonished himself. They were both professionals and he had to curb his male appreciation of her looks before he crossed any boundaries. His imagination had gone into overdrive though, and he found it hard to try not to imagine her out of her uniform. He found it even harder not imagining that he was helping her out of her uniform. When he watched her working so feverishly to try to save that poor girl's life, he couldn't help but think that she was just a kid herself. It was a shock to his normally reserved nature to realize, kid or not, she also was a very attractive woman. Jake thought about the crime scene and admonished himself, of all places to try to make a pick-up.

He continued to study her. "How do you stand it?" Jake was amazed that she seemed so untouched by the brutality they had witnessed. He resisted his natural inclination to offer comfort in his arms. She was so pretty he thought. Her eyes were so full of life and he thought of how many lives she must have seen die in her line of work. It must be nice to view life through the passionate eyes of her youth.

"I try not to think about it." She began to wonder if he was nearly as hardened as she originally thought. "You know that they scheduled a CISD session in a couple of days, don't you?" His composed expression gave nothing away. "Are you going to be there?" Her supervisor mandated all of the paramedics to attend critical incident stress debriefing sessions whenever one of their calls was deemed especially unnerving. Julie always went and participated fully; it did help her deal with brutal or tragic cases. The first time she had ever gone was after an entire family was wiped out in a fiery car accident, including kids. It had helped.

"No. They told us about it, but I've seen a lot worse. Besides, I'd rather not lose any time when I could be looking for evidence. I want to find the guy who did this. That's my way of coping." He shrugged his broad shoulders as he looked directly into her eyes. His voice had taken on a steely edge.

"My partner, Matt, never thinks he needs them either." She gently tried to coax him. "But they do help."

He shook his head and looked down as he scribbled something on the pad in front of him. "Nah, if I needed it, I'd go. I'm really not trying to be any macho man." He kept looking at the pad of paper. Julie was sure that if he had looked up, she would have seen the telltale dismay in his eyes that she had glimpsed earlier.

They were both silent for a few moments. "Well, is there anything else I can help you with?" Julie pushed her chair back and started to stand.

Jake quickly stood and came to his full height. He stammered for something to say to keep her there longer. He didn't want her to leave yet. She fascinated him. He didn't know why, but he needed to reach out to her. His eyes had lingered on her even at that bloody scene earlier. "How long have you been a paramedic?" He wondered how long the auburn hair she had braided into a bun was. The bun, he realized, was probably her choice of style not only for its utilitarian purposes but also because it might make her look older. Jake had to fight the urge to loosen the bun. The youthfulness she tried to disguise pulled at him in a primitive way.

"Two years."

"So, that makes you... twenty-two?... twenty-three?" He looked at her full lips and surprised himself by wondering how they would taste. Oh man get a grip, he chastised himself silently. He tried telling himself once again that she was just a kid, she was much too young for the things he was thinking.

"I'm twenty-four." She was thrown off balance by his personal questions.

He glanced at her left hand and was happy to see that there wasn't any ring. "I'm thirty-seven", thirteen years older than you, he thought to himself. I must be overtired because I'm finding it too easy to be distracted by her. Thirteen years, it isn't such a big deal, is it he wondered? Jake tried to think of something else to say, something that wouldn't sound too inane.

Julie realized that she really didn't mind spending time with him. He intrigued her enough to want to know more about him. But she still checked her watch discreetly; she couldn't stay there very long. "How long have you been a cop?"

"Fourteen years"

"Here?" She was surprised. She didn't recognize him and she thought she had met most of the town cops at the various jobs she had responded to. Julie definitely would have remembered him, especially his very broad shoulders. They looked like strong shoulders. She chuckled quietly, she always did have a weakness for big men. His wavy chestnut brown hair barely brushed the back of his shirt collar and tempted her to touch it.

"No, I'm with the Sheriff's department in B.C.I." At her puzzled expression, he explained, "Bureau of Criminal Investigations. We go mostly to crime scenes, homicides, arsons, things like that."

She chuckled out loud suddenly and he paused. "And you wondered how I handle it?"

Jake knew that she'd be insulted if he let her know he thought she looked too pretty to be caught up in such ugliness. He had been at enough accident and crime scenes to have a pretty good idea of the things Julie saw when she responded to an ambulance call and he marveled at her composure. At a loss of what to say, he merely shrugged and Julie could see the fabric of his knit shirt straining as the muscles in his upper arms flexed. She tried not to stare.

"In case I need any more information, can I have your phone number?" He pulled out a notepad from his shirt pocket and waited with his pen poised.

She stood. "You can always reach me through Town Hall. We're in and out of the medic station so often, at least there you can leave a message and I'll get back to you."

"Well," he took a step around the desk, "Can I have your phone number anyway?" He knew very well that he could reach her through the town. He also knew very well that he wanted her number for himself. The hell with propriety, he thought, the hell with age. He was a man and she was definitely a woman.

Julie looked into his dark brown eyes and was surprised to see a definite softening in them. He had a few fine creases at the corners of his eyes and Julie enviously noted how full his lashes were. Jake waited and smiled. He looked almost hopeful.

She didn't let him down.

He wondered why it had taken him so long to realize that she was the one. Usually he was able to tell with just a glance, but then he had been wrong before and had chosen women that had disappointed him terribly. It was so hard to suffer when they let him down.

It was only after he had thought about her while he watched another ambulance crew bring their patient in that he realized how gently she had tended to her patients, how light her touch had seemed, that he knew for sure. He knew that she had been sent to him for one purpose.

She really cared.

She was the one.

He entered the autopsy suite passing the heavy wooden sign next to the door. It said, 滴ic locus est ubi mors gaudet succurrere vitae · . Once before when Jake had been here, he had asked for a translation of the Latin words and was told, 典his is the place where death rejoices to teach those who live. · He was anxious to learn and he hoped Holly would be anxious to teach. He had high hopes that they could learn something, anything that would lead them to the murderer. Two men were waiting for him as he donned a surgical gown and protective eyewear.

Holly's body was already lying on the shiny, aluminum dissection table. The table, a little more than waist high, was edged with an aluminum channel to allow blood and fluids to drain away from the body. The room was uncluttered and glaringly bright. It was a stark reminder of the lifelessness of the cadavers stored in the drawers along the wall. Soft music played from a radio on the counter in contrast to the harsh reality of the body lying motionless on the sterile looking table. Jake was always impressed with the clean up after an autopsy, the table always looked totally fresh and unused in time for the next patient. And there was always a next patient to fill the spot. That supply never seemed to end.

Dr. Ramos, the pathologist in charge of the lab, explained that one of his residents had already taken care of Beth, the charred corpse, early in the morning. He would complete his report and get it

to Jake as promptly as possible. The first-year-resident assigned to assist Ramos with this autopsy was looking ever so proper in his starched white lab coat and was nervously readying a number of quart-sized jars for organ tissue samples to be sent to the lab for toxicology tests.

The doctor donned clean gloves before adjusting his goggles. "Pretty messy scene last night, huh?" Ramos spoke with ease, almost as if he was chatting with a familiar friend over a card game. Well into his sixties, the study of body parts and what they could tell you about how a person lived and died had always fascinated the doctor. He was well accomplished in his field and his word was highly respected in all the circles of investigation and trial. The doctor lived by the words on the door and truly believed that the dead rejoiced in communicating with him.

Although it was Ramos' responsibility as Medical Examiner to pen all final autopsy reports, in recent years he had often allowed younger pathologists and first and second year residents to perform the more mundane procedures. He was personally overseeing this autopsy on Holly as a favor to Jake and to help speed along the findings and bring closure to his investigation. Dr. Ramos had the utmost respect for Jake Carlson, he had always been a man of his word who always sought the truth and justice for the victims. Ramos also got a special kick out of Jake's interest in the autopsies and his own regard for listening to what the dead had to say.

It was a shame, mused Ramos that Jake hadn't chosen medicine as his career, but then again, he was very good at what he did. If he weren't so good, he never would have made it to the rank of Commander, especially as early as he did. Carlson had certainly been a few years younger than his two most recent predecessors had been when they earned their titles. In the good doctor's opinion, if that old goat sitting in the Chief's chair ever decided to retire, Jacob Carlson would probably find himself heading up his department.

Jake sighed. "Yeah. Unfortunately, with all the people who responded, all the trampling through the place, I can't shake the gut feeling that we missed something."

A crime scene should remain undisturbed, victim's bodies should remain where they're found, there shouldn't be any bloody footprints belonging to rescuers. While so many of the EMS and fire personnel were careful not to disturb any more of the scene than they needed to, it had been impossible to maintain the complete integrity of the scene. Too many shoeprints to get anything clean, too many clothing fibers left by responding police and rescue workers, and the fire department destroyed evidence as it put out the fire.

It made Jake feel more than a little guilty and certainly sinister that he would have preferred no survivors that had to be removed from the cabin. Of course he wanted survivors, he corrected his thoughts silently, he just wished they had all been outside of the cabin when they were found. "Now we'll have to waste time getting shoeprints and all from everyone who was there."

"I've already begun my external examination. We've recorded the height and weight, her clothing and the general appearance." The girl had been dressed in a torn, gauzy white shroud similar in shape to a judge's robe, or graduation gown, and it had emphasized her youth.

The gray-haired doctor motioned that he was once again turning on the tape recorder to dictate his findings. "We have multiple lacerations and avulsions of both breasts, while there was profuse bleeding, no arteries or veins were compromised. This appears to be a non-fatal injury. There are also severe contusions and rope burns circling both wrists and ankles, these appear to be consistent with a struggle. There was no evidence of tissue samples under the victim's nails. Some light bruising around the mouth and laterally on both cheeks are in conformity with the type of gag the police report described."

"The pattern of the lacerations and the tearing of the breasts seem to have been done with a common variety garden tool. We are comparing the markings to some of the hand tools found at the scene." The abandoned tool shed was located at the perimeter of an old farm that had been sold to a developer for new housing. Like most of the suburbs, active farms and open land was giving way to an increased population.

Dr. Ramos removed the thin white sheet that had covered the young girl's body. "I noted the absence of any body hair on the trunk, including the pubic area. She seems to have been freshly shaved. There also appears to have been vaginal bleeding." He gently inserted a speculum into the

cadaver's vagina and adjusted the light behind him. Jake was impressed with the respect Dr. Ramos showed in his handling of the young victim's remains.

"There appears to be several lacerations and contusions along the inner membranes. My impression is that a hard object penetrated the victim, possibly something jagged. I am going to swab the vaginal canal for any evidence of fluids." If any semen was present, then the DNA would be run through the computers.

Remembering that Julie had told him about Andrew Larkin telling her he had sex with Holly, Jake made a mental note to have Larkin called in for a DNA sample for comparison. He watched as several swabs were bagged and labeled for the lab. He spotted a small amount of a white chalky substance on the side of Holly's knee. "Doc, what's this?" Jake pointed making sure not to touch and contaminate the body.

"I don't know." Ramos walked around the table to Jake's side. "Only one way to find out." The doctor scraped the white substance with a cotton swab and dropped it into another plastic specimen bag to send to the lab.

Dr. Ramos finished his examination of the outer body. Then he picked up a shiny knife and cut a large Y-shaped incision into the girl's chest with a sharp, long blade and separated the fractured ribs that were not uncommon after CPR compressions. Since dead people didn't bleed, there was only minimal oozing along the incision.

After cutting the cartilage that held the remaining ribs to the sternum, Ramos folded back the skin to expose Holly's heart and lungs. "This girl was a heavy smoker." He directed Jake's attention to the less than pink lung tissue he had just sliced into. "Her heart is somewhat enlarged and shows some signs of cardiomyopathy," he looked up at Jake to explain, "that's a muscle weakness."

"After the heart is weighed, I'm going to have some tissue samples sent to histology. Since the police report indicated that there had been cocaine use reported, I'll ask them to look for some amounts of Benzoylecgonine in her body." Benzoylecgonine was a telltale and lasting ingredient found in cocaine, an element that sometimes could be found up to a few weeks after its use in a person's bladder.

The examination continued with an ongoing litany for the tape recorder. Ramos indicated that, since the girl's stomach was nearly empty, death had been several hours following her last meal, possibly a full day or more. The information bothered Jake, but he wasn't sure how important it was or not. Larkin had indicated meeting the girls in a bar, Jake figured they'd have ingested at least drinks, pretzels or popcorn. If she had been a frequent cocaine user, that could explain why she hadn't eaten recently.

"She appears to have a small needle puncture in her antecubital fossa," the doctor pointed towards the crook of the girl's right elbow. "But there are no track marks or other visible punctures to suggest any illicit needle drug use."

A little bit more than two hours after Jake had entered the room Dr. Ramos and the resident had returned the bulk of the organs to Holly's body cavity and the resident was busy sewing up the Y-incision. Various samples of tissue were packaged and on their way to the lab for study. "Based on my initial examination, the apparent cause of death was cardiac arrest. Contributing factors would include an enlarged and weakened heart and severe blood loss."

Dr. Ramos let the resident finish sewing the cadaver closed and preparing the body for release while he went to wash up. "So Jake, are you up joining me for lunch?"

The morning had been emotionally brutal for Julie. She attended the CISD session that her supervisor had scheduled. She was very affected by the poignant words of one of the volunteers who had witnessed the horrible carnage. He haltingly told the group and the counselor leading it about the recurring and terrifying nightmares he had when he closed his eyes to sleep. He alternately envisioned each of the women in his family as a mutilated victim, including his lovely teen-age daughter. It was heart-rending to hear him retelling his terror as he woke to check on the safety of his wife and daughter in his home. Empathy was often such an enemy for emergency workers who saw things you only imagined in gory horror movies.

Each of the participants started out by replaying the scenes that were the most prominent in their minds. The counselors had called it a mental videotape. When this man started to talk, you could hear the catch in his voice.

Julie, like so many of the other participants, found herself at a loss for the right words to reassure the man. Even though it wasn't her role to comfort him during that session, it was frustrating to Julie whenever someone was in pain. There were times when Julie needed to console herself because she couldn't heal everyone whether physically or emotionally.

In some ways, Julie knew that had been her underlying reason for becoming a paramedic, so she wouldn't feel so frustrated by a child's crying or an adult's anguish. Since her brothers were much older than her, she had only been a teen-ager when the first nieces and nephews were born. It was always a struggle not to go pick up a crying baby at the first whimper, and she was always chided by one of her sister-in-laws for giving in to the infants too easily. And those were just simple tears. Matt always warned her that her altruistic nature would eventually do her more harm than good. She ignored his criticism and complained about his cynicism in dealing with the tragedies they came across.

She was in a hurry when she got home to take a quick shower before changing into her work clothes and reporting for her four-to-midnight shift. Her skin was still uncomfortably damp as she pulled her EMS trousers on. The shrill ring of the phone startled her as she buttoned a freshly starched uniform shirt. She balanced the receiver on her shoulder as she continued to pin her paramedic badge in place.

Her curt hello was greeted by a deep baritone voice. She really hadn't expected to hear that voice again.

Jake invited her to join him for coffee at a local diner that night. After a brief hesitation, she agreed to meet him at the all-night diner for coffee after her shift. Julie noted with some amusement that he hadn't even been put off by her blunt greeting. It was as if he was so determined to ask her out for coffee that he hadn't taken the time to listen for anything else. Despite the fact that they had only just met, Julie felt an odd but pleasant anticipation about seeing him again.

Matt and she were busy during their entire tour. They got banged out on a variety of calls ranging from a possible fractured ankle to the beginnings of an AMI, Acute Myocardial Infarction more commonly referred to as a heart attack. Most of the calls they responded to went as ALS ride-alongs and she and Matt took turns responding with the BLS crews.

It had worked out conveniently that Julie wound up taking the juvenile with the broken arm while Matt dealt with the angry subject of a bar fight. While both Matt and Julie felt perfectly competent to handle any kinds of cases that came their way, they agreed the patient usually received it better when Julie handled pediatrics and females. Even though Julie could handle herself with a feisty patient, Matt's larger size usually proved to be a deterrent from any unexpected outbursts.

They responded to a spousal abuse case. The husband had beaten the wife and she was terrified of the man Understandably she didn't look comfortable with any of the men that responded to the emergency either. Although she had come to, she had lost consciousness during the beating – it was a definite call for an ALS ride-a-long. Julie took the ride.

Tempting though it was, Julie bit her tongue when the patient tearfully asked her for advice during the ride. The only thing Julie would say to her was to take advantage of the social workers that could point out her list of options.

Treating without prejudice was one of the harder things to learn when Julie first started riding an ambulance even before she became a paramedic. There were times she found herself treating an apparently guilty party of an assault, the drunk driver responsible for a fatal crash, the self-destructive overdose patient or the spouse that kept on returning to the abuse. While not having to recite the well-known doctors' Hippocratic Oath, EMT's and Paramedics had to remain professional and treat to the best of their ability and training.

As was common in many of the smaller towns, BLS crews consisting of well-trained Emergency Medical Technicians and Certified First Responders were mostly volunteers. The local towns had contracted with Paramedic Services to provide Advanced Life Support care where more advanced skills like IV drugs and intubations were necessary. When ALS was needed on a call, a paramedic would ride in the vollies' ambulance and administer care.

Julie thought it would be a bad idea to talk about Jake in front of Matt. As the night wore on and they got summoned on yet another late call near the end of their shift, she was sure that Matt sensed her anxiety building. Even when he began to pry she refused to say anything; she knew that Matt wouldn't approve. When they finally returned to base after their last call, she briefly greeted the new team on duty and excused herself claiming a terrible headache. She left Matt to re-stock most of the medications and equipment after reminding him that she had done the same for him many times before.

She was late getting there. Jake was sitting in the booth nursing a cup of coffee while he waited. He checked his watch again as the waitress smiled in his direction. The diner was simple but met the needs of night owls and graveyard shift workers with its twenty-four hour convenience. Reminiscent of a fifties diner, it was complete with jukebox and neon lights. Jake dropped a few coins into the mini-jukebox at the booth and chose some quiet melodies that weren't too brash for the late hour. Feeling nervous, he hoped she wasn't going to stand him up.

Chapter Two

When Jake looked up to see Julie enter the diner, his eyes lit up and he smiled broadly. She had changed out of her uniform into faded jeans and a striped Yankees baseball jersey with the number 21 on the back. He couldn't help but appreciate the gentle sway of her hips as she walked towards him. Her jeans revealed so much more of her curves than the unisex style EMS pants she wore on duty. He stood as she reached the table and waited for her to sit before he sat back down.

"I'm sorry I'm late." Julie slid into the booth and thanked the waitress when she appeared with a fresh cup and a steaming pot of coffee.

The waitress stopped by to freshen Jake's coffee. "Hungry?" Jake asked before the waitress had a chance to retreat.

Julie shrugged. "A cheese danish would be nice." She took a moment to put her head back and closed her eyes briefly.

Jake added a roast beef sandwich order for himself and the waitress left the table. Julie opened her eyes and apologized for her lateness again.

He smiled for her benefit and tried to sound casual. "In my line of work, I'm used to dealing with last minute emergencies. I figured you just got hung up at work." Jake sounded a lot more cavalier than he felt just a few minutes before. He didn't understand why the thought of her backing out of meeting him was so disturbing. All day since dialing her number he had hoped that he hadn't misread her willingness to give it to him. It had been a challenge not to call her as soon as he woke up that morning, but he didn't want to lose the opportunity all together.

"Busy day?" Jake watched her eyes, he could see that she was tired. He watched as she politely stifled a yawn. For some inexplicable reason he felt very content just to look at her. Although he was sure he had seen prettier women in his lifetime, none of them were ever emblazoned in his mind the way this lady was. Even at that gruesome scene in the shed, her image, her face, her tender hands... she stood out. Somehow she comforted everyone with just her mere presence and compassion. Ever since she left the police station last night, he missed her. It certainly wasn't often that Jake was so taken by a female that he couldn't forget her for even an hour.

"Yeah, but thank goodness nothing like that horror scene straight out of Freddy Kruger." She rolled her eyes and shook slightly as if to emphasize her relief. She thought about her patients, especially the wife that had been abused. Chuckling lightly, she mentioned just the highlight of a few of her calls. "Toddler broke his arm leaning out of the open window of a pick-up truck, thankfully it was parked in the driveway. A woman angered her bully of a husband. A drunk found a reason to punch out another bar patron. Simple stuff."

He noticed that her eyes seemed to flash as she thought about her day. Her eyes were green. His ex-wife's eyes were green, but not like this, there was no comparison at all. No, she was infinitely more beautiful, he mused.

"I guess you never know what you'll find when you're dispatched." Jake told Julie a little bit about the investigation, whatever he was at liberty to say anyway. He hadn't meant to talk about the case, but suddenly his throat felt dry. He didn't know what else to say. It wasn't usual for him to feel so tongue-tied with a woman. "Tell me the one thing you like the most about being a paramedic."

She laughed. "One thing, huh? Okay, I like the fact that people know you're there to help them." She fiddled with her napkin. "I mean, even when you lose a patient, they know they weren't alone. Somebody was trying to help them. I like to think that's a comfort." She let her eyes rest on his strong jaw line and the open V of his shirt.

"I never thought of it that way." He admired her for her answer. Jake usually tended to be cynical and figured that most times someone said something good about their job, it was usually just so much well-rehearsed wordiness. Somehow he could tell that Julie was totally sincere. "Okay, is there something you don't like?"

Julie thought silently for a few moments. She smiled at him. "Actually, it's not so much that I dislike responding to a call with a real young kid, it's just more difficult. You know, I can get to a scene where a baby is sick and I have to waste time trying to get a hold of the kid to treat."

"What do you mean?"

"Parents don't like to pass care for their kid off to someone else, you usually have to convince them that it's best for the child. I once responded to a call for a baby who stopped breathing..."

"Damn. That's got to be tough."

"It's the kind of call you don't waste time getting to. Anyway, by the time the first cop and I hit the door we heard the sweetest sound of the baby crying. The poor thing was all congested and mom kind of panicked about the baby not being able to catch her breath."

"That's understandable, I guess."

"Oh yeah. I would have probably freaked out if it were my kid. Anyway, I get in to the house and all the adults there were really upset. They were literally running around carrying the kid and passing her off to each other. I had to chase the kid down and finally asked the cop to help me get a hold of her." She chuckled. "It actually would've been pretty funny if it were just a scene in some comedy show."

He nodded understandingly. "Sometimes family members are so upset at scenes I go to, they get in the way and they don't realize they are only making it worse." Jake took a sip of his coffee. "So, tell me more about you?"

She looked at him thoughtfully and smiled. "I guess the one thing I can tell you about me right now is that I'd like to know more about you."

That made Jake nervous and he didn't understand why. Then he realized that it was important to him that she like him.

"This may sound dumb, but I have always pictured a Sheriff to be like Marshal Dillon from Gunsmoke." She chuckled. "I mean, you are kind of James Arness-y, you know, tall and broad shouldered."

"Do you want to be Miss Kitty?" He joked back.

She glanced at him and ignored his attempt at humor. "Explain to me, what are you doing in New York instead of some old Western town, Mr. Sheriff?"

"First of all, it's Deputy Sheriff. The Sheriff is an elected position, really a politician. We're responsible for law enforcement, civil and criminal investigations, and corrections. We also cover areas where no local police have jurisdiction since we operate by county instead of town." He was very serious while explaining the duties. "Did you know that the Sheriffs' Departments are the oldest law enforcement agencies in the country?"

"What do you like about working for the Sheriff's Department?"

He shrugged. "I like finding answers. I like giving people closure."

"That must be tough."

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't giving people closure really just another way of saying, yeah, we found the body?" She wanted to take the sting out of her words. "I mean, it's necessary and I realize it means they can move on. But it's still got to be tough to end someone's hopes."

"You can say that. But what I do is more than just finding bodies." Jake knew he'd hate going to work each day if that were all it was about. "If it's a homicide, it's also about finding the killer. Or answering a family's questions about how something happened. Like if it was a freak accident that really couldn't be helped, knowing what really happened might relieve somebody's guilty feelings."

"So, do you always," Julie made a funny face, "ta-da-da... get your man?"

"We always get our clues. There is no such thing as a perfect crime anymore. Our work starts with the body. They talk to us in a way." He was enthusiastic about his work.

Julie listened to him tell her about fingerprints and police sketch artists, she was pleasantly surprised to be so interested in what he had to say. Jake spoke about his work with passion and she noticed how animated he was when he explained the steps they had to take to ensure the sanctity of the evidence. He was using the ketchup bottle and salt shakers to build an imaginary crime scene and Julie watched as his muscles flexed each time that he reached across the table. He mentioned how each office contributed to the case.

"I'm a little confused," she interrupted him. "What does your office do that the Medical Examiner doesn't? I mean, you said you work with the Coroner." She was enjoying the deep timbre of his voice.

"Yeah, I guess it gets confusing. It's really just the bureaucracy of it all. Not everyplace has a Coroner, a criminal investigation team and a Medical Examiner. I think they wanted as many appointees on the payroll as possible. I don't know, maybe when it was all set up, somebody wanted jobs for all their relatives and friends." He explained that his office investigated all sorts of crimes and collected evidence. "I get to work with some really great people, people who really know their stuff. There's Sally Marin in the Coroner's Office and Doc Ramos is the ME. And my department deals with more than just homicides." The Sheriff's office had countywide jurisdiction and worked in cooperation with the local police departments to enforce the laws.

Julie could see the admiration Jake had for Sally, the Chief Investigator from the Coroner's office. Even though Sally did have an extensive medical background, her position was not as a doctor. She had to go to scenes where bodies were found and pronounce if necessary. Then she would oversee the collection of forensic evidence that would help tell about the events leading up to the person's death. A lot of what she did was to take in the entire scene and consider the contributing factors.

The Medical Examiner was a forensic pathologist who performed autopsies in the morgue and was able to prepare detailed legal records that could be used in court cases. The legal-medical autopsy that the pathologist was responsible for often involved toxicology reports and the condition of the body, both internal and external, and the contributing factors to the death.

Julie liked listening to the way that Jake spoke about his work and the abilities of those he worked with. He seemed to have a clear understanding of everyone's job and even a lot of knowledge beyond his own responsibilities. She imagined that he was very capable in his job, and thorough. Absently, she couldn't help wondering how thorough he would be in other ways.

Julie felt the tension of work ebbing out of her as she listened to the deep melody of his voice. She felt his warm tones soothing her and enveloping her in comfort. She wondered if his broad shoulders were as solid as they looked to be, she wondered how it would feel to rest her head on his shoulder. She took a deep breath in as she imagined personally checking out how broad and muscled his shoulders really were. Julie was sure that she was just reacting to how tired she was feeling.

It was a surprise when he had asked her for her phone number at the police station and even more of a surprise when he called her today, a very pleasant surprise. He was handsome in a very rugged kind of way. He had a few telltale age lines around the eyes and a couple of random gray hairs among the dark waves. There was more than a hint of five-o'clock shadow at this late hour, too. But he sure wasn't hard on the eyes she thought to herself. Julie admitted silently that she could get used to seeing his chiseled features a lot more often.

The waitress returned with their orders and they both looked away from each other. Both of them felt caught by their innocent, and some not-so-innocent, musings. Julie didn't understand why it annoyed her when the waitress gave Jake an appreciative smile before leaving the two of them alone at the table. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the flicker of a frown on her face when that waitress smiled, and he enjoyed it. They both turned their attention to their plates, the food gave them something to distract themselves with.

Julie watched as Jake bit into his sandwich, she enjoyed the way that he hungrily devoured the mouthful. She watched his strong jaw-line as he chewed his food. He was a big man and the unexpected thought crossed her mind as to how big an appetite he had for... everything.

Julie realized it wasn't just the breadth of his shoulders and his height that were impressive, his well-defined arm muscles and lean hips were testimony to how well toned he was. As a paramedic she was no stranger to the human anatomy and subconsciously she found herself picturing him without a shirt on. She was imagining how he would look with his broad shoulders, muscled arms, flat stomach and matted chest hair. She had to force herself to listen to his explanations of the evidence he was gathering. Julie found herself staring at Jake's lips.

He swallowed and then continued telling her about the case. "The artist met with Larkin today and got enough of a description to make a crude sketch of the other guy. We also got a list of the bars they went to, but Larkin claims he can't remember which one they picked the girls up at. Right now we're just trying to fit a lot of pieces together. This is the tedious, boring part of the work." Jake watched as Julie bit into the sweet confection and then innocently licked some of the icing from the danish off of her upper lip. He felt an embarrassing tightening in his groin and took a gulp of his coffee.

She noticed his sudden discomfort. "You okay?"

"Yeah." His voice sounded a little gruff. "Julie, do you... uh, are you seeing anyone? Anyone special, I mean."

"No one special." Her dates lately were few and far between. Not that Julie hadn't had recent offers, she just was working very long hours and didn't feel like wasting her precious free time just for the sake of saying she had a date. She and Matt spent some free time together now and then, just as friends. It was more than enough just to have someone you could pal around with and feel comfortable with. Working together so closely, trying to save lives, losing some, and backing each other up in the field helped them to form a special bond, but they were still just good friends.

"So if a guy asked you out on a date, you'd be free to accept?"

"Are you asking me out, Jake?" She realized that she was hoping he was.

He bit his lower lip. "Yeah. I'd like to."

"Well?" She smiled at him and it was almost his undoing.

Jake took a moment to appreciate her smile. "When is your next day off?"

They made plans to have dinner and see a movie.

He really was trying to be helpful, thought Jake. Still, something was bothering him about the information the guy was handing them. It was almost like he was trying to be too helpful.

Jake berated himself for thinking poorly about Larkin, after all, with everything he had witnessed that night, it was no wonder that he wanted the bastard caught. At least that was what he had told the detectives. He had even come in voluntarily to answer questions, they didn't have to ask him to be there.

He let the other team members ask the questions while he quietly made notes. But when Larkin couldn't, or wouldn't, get specific enough about which bar he and the mysterious John had picked the girls up in, Jake voiced his dissatisfaction with an impatient sigh and a snort. And he got a disapproving look from his superior for that.

"I don't remember, we went to several nightspots, I don't remember which one we were in when we met Holly and Beth. All I know it was somewhere in Westchester." He whined. Larkin fixed his watery eyes on Jake. "I am so sorry, I really wish I could remember." Jake excused himself from the room, he'd get the notes from the rest of the interview from one of the detectives.

Larkin had worked with a police artist and now Jake had a sketch of the perp. He also had a photo of Holly and an artist's sketch based on a reconstruction of Beth's face. He sent those pictures over the wire to the local Westchester police along with a list of the clubs Andrew had named. Now if only someone would recognize the missing man and give them some clue as to his whereabouts.

Meanwhile he had pulled several missing persons files on descriptions matching the two girls; sometimes the victim's identity was an important lead as to who the murderer was. There were a few files that came close, but so far nothing had matched. Jake was suspicious by nature, and in this business it was best to check out everything, so he ran any information he had on Andrew Larkin through the computers as well. The man came up squeaky clean.

It irritated Jake that Larkin didn't have even a traffic violation on his record. Something about Larkin bothered Jake and he was hoping to find something out about him that would justify his dislike of the other man. He just couldn't figure it out.

The forensics team had found evidence that the car found at the scene was the same vehicle that had carried the two girls and Larkin. There were inconclusive signs of a fourth person. Only Larkin's prints were on the steering wheel but that only confirmed the story that he had related to them. The carpeted floor mats were filthy and it seemed impossible to get a clean copy of any shoe prints. The well-worn cloth-covered seats didn't give up much evidence either.

The team was thorough about collecting any evidence from the car in the hopes that they might get some leads on the identities of the other three occupants. The tires were well worn but scrapings were made from the treads to see if there was any telltale substance that might lead them to a garage, industrial parking lot, construction site or anywhere that Larkin might not have remembered driving to that night.

The lab techs collected shoeprints and fingerprints from all the responding emergency service workers and had diligently weeded those out of the prints found in the cabin. It was time consuming but necessary. Still, although they were able to pick up another man's shoe prints, they had nothing else to go on.

Curiously neither of the girls seemed to have carried a purse with them, at least they didn't have one at the crime scene. Both female victims had been dressed in similar gauzy robes with no underwear or footwear. What should have been their normal street clothes were missing and Jake wondered if the absent man had taken those items with him as some sort of perverted souvenir. It wasn't unusual for the police to find a victim's personal effects among a killer's treasured possessions, a trophy collection of sorts.

Without any hard evidence, the trail was already feeling cold. Jake was frustrated at the lack of clues. The crime was definitely one of the more heinous he had ever encountered, he rarely felt as jolted as he did now. He couldn't explain the strange foreboding he had about this case or the frantic need to solve it immediately.

She was leaving the station, it was later than usual but she had taken the last call of the evening. Matt had been anxious to get out of there, he said he had plans, so when the call came in just ten minutes before the end of their shift, Julie wasn稚 cruel enough to tell him to take it. She wasn稚 surprised when Matt didn稚 argue with her and even wondered a little suspiciously if he was just getting back at her for running out so quickly the night before.

Both of the medics who came in on the next shift were already out on emergency calls. There was a heavy feeling in the air and it brought with it a rash of difficulty breathing calls in addition to the usual list of ailments they normally responded to.

It was a chore to finish up that last patient care report even though it was routine to list her findings and treatment. It seemed to take forever until she finished her reports of drugs used during the shift. Julie felt overtired and was impatient to get home and put her feet up. She grabbed her pocketbook and street clothes from her locker and decided to wear her uniform home.

It was dark, the nearby street lamp had burnt out. Julie was concentrating on just getting home and she yawned broadly. She wasn't expecting to have anyone come up to her as she walked to her car in the lot. Jumping when Andrew Larkin said hello, she dropped her purse as she took a defensive position from a class at the local-Y she had taken a few years before.

He stepped back. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." He extended his hand and thrust a bouquet of carnations at her. "I just wanted to say thank you for what you did for me."

It took Julie only seconds to recognize the burn victim from the other night. She could see that his other arm, the one without the flowers, was bandaged heavily. He was only about five-foot nine or ten and had stringy blonde hair. Julie noted that his eyes were deep-set and haunting. She had noticed his eyes looked haunted the other night and thought it was what he had witnessed.

He was dressed casually in a pair of dark slacks and a short sleeve shirt that didn't encumber the dressings on his arm. "No, that's okay. I just wasn't expecting anyone." She still sounded a little breathless from the fright he had given her as she bent to pick up her purse from the ground.

"I came by earlier, twice, but I guess you've been busy." He approached with the flowers. It was a carefully arranged combination of yellow daisies and red carnations. "These are for you."

Taking the bunch of flowers, Julie smiled and sniffed the fragrant bouquet. She had regained her composure. "Thank you, that was very sweet of you." She smiled as she looked at him. "How are you doing?" Julie always enjoyed a chance to follow-up on her patients' recoveries.

"I'm healing, physically anyway. I imagine I'll have all sorts of nightmares for a long time to come." He sighed loudly. "I can't help but think how lucky I was, especially when I remember those poor girls. I wonder if they caught the bastard yet." He seemed embarrassed by his crude language. "Sorry."

She shrugged. "The description fits. I haven't heard anything new."

Andrew looked around. "You know, it's really not safe for you to be out here alone, it's awfully dark back here." He looked around the small lot. There were three vehicles, Julie's and two cars belonging to the current crew. The parking area, hidden from the street and behind the building, only had enough room for about half a dozen vehicles.

"It happens all the time, it's nothing. Once they fix the street light, it won't be so bad." She fidgeted in her pocketbook for her keys not finding them in the side pocket where she normally kept them. "I'm rarely by myself anyway and I usually have my keys ready." She found that they had slipped to bottom of her bag as if to contradict what she had just told Larkin. She chuckled quietly. "I guess I'm more tired than usual."

He stepped in a little closer. "Well, if you don't mind, I'll just wait until you get into your car. Lock the door behind you." Larkin looked over his shoulder. "I would feel better if I knew they had caught that guy."

"Thank you." Julie smiled at him as she put the key into the driver's door. "You really are a gentleman." She never felt very comfortable being fussed over and protected by a man. Her brothers had always admonished her for her feelings of invincibility and that was why she had taken the course in self-defense, to appearse them.

"You can't be too safe these days. Will you be okay getting to your apartment?" He held the car door for her. "If you don't mind my asking, do you have somebody waiting for you there?"

"No, but it's just a short walk and my neighbors are usually home." She smiled at him. "Thanks for your concern, I'll be okay." And you can leave, Julie thought to herself. "I'm okay."

He pushed the door closed after she sat inside and adjusted her seatbelt. "Safe home."

He watched her as she drove off and disappeared down the dark street.

He almost walked back out again when he saw Lorna Ines in the office. Unfortunately she spotted him a little too quickly.

Jake was fuming. It was bad enough that it was an election year and the District Attorney's office was on his back for immediate answers, but then that nosy reporter had to come around looking for news. It was obvious that she had cornered one of the newer deputies and was pumping him for

information when Jake walked in. The deputy looked chagrined and introduced Jake as the senior investigator.

Lorna was a crime beat reporter for the local daily paper and her reputation for getting answers for her articles was far from sterling. She was known for her abrasive and intruding questions. She had a way of twisting words however she wanted to and Jake was sure that more than once she had even fabricated responses just to sell a story. Unfortunately she was just what the local city desk editor wanted on his staff, she sold papers and so far, the paper hadn't lost any lawsuits.

She turned on Jake and began to fire off a barrage of assumed facts she had already gathered, all she wanted was his confirmation. When Jake replied with his well-practiced, stock answer of no comment, Laura informed him coolly that she already had the Chief's permission to speak with the investigating team. She was sure, she informed him that meant she was to expect full cooperation from all of his officers.

Jake asked when she had spoken to the Chief; he knew the man was out of town for a few days attending a conference. The Chief had left Jake in charge of the office and any cases that came up during his absence. Lorna finally told Jake that the Chief had earlier given her permission to question members of the BCI office during another investigation. Jake knew that if any such conversation had ever taken place, it surely didn't mean she had blanket permissions and he abruptly lost his cool. He ushered the woman out of his office. The Chief wasn't going to be too happy with that but public relations and the media were never Jake's forte.

Lorna must have used her cell phone as soon as she reached her car to call the DA's office and complain about Jake's brusqueness. The Assistant DA had Jake on the phone within minutes and proceeded to lecture him on the finesse needed to deal with the media. To Jake it was all just a useless waste of time, time that he could have spent making phone calls and comparing notes while he tried to scare up any leads. He silently counted to ten, and then to twenty, as he ground his teeth in anger. He knew Lorna was on her way back to his office as he hung up the phone. The phone jangled again just as Lorna appeared in the doorway, Jake grimaced as he reached for it.

One of the bartenders that had been interviewed thought he might have recognized Beth but was sure that she had come in to the bar alone. And he hadn't remembered seeing her for a few days anyway, so his memory wasn't as sharp as Jake would have liked. He provided some names of college students who frequented the bar that he thought might have known her.

Jake had followed up on this possibility and had been waiting for a call back. That was why, when the District Attorney's secretary had called, he had picked the phone up so quickly and was totally frustrated during the reprimand.

Turning his back to the door, Jake hoped his voice wasn't loud enough for a nosy reporter to overhear. He made another phone call to the local police where the bar was located and was informed that they found out that Beth had come to their town to visit her boyfriend, but an argument had cut the stay short. Friends thought she had returned to her own campus and so had never realized she was missing. Her roommate thought she was still visiting her boyfriend and wasn't alarmed by her absence. The boyfriend had told some friends he was taking off for a few days to do some thinking; they didn't know where he went.

Finally Jake thought that they might have a lead.

It had been a mundane tour and Julie actually felt as if the night had dragged. They responded to a frequent flyer, a patient who called for the ambulance regularly for both imagined and real emergencies. Most of the calls were B.L.S. and they hadn't been kept busy with ride-a-longs. She didn't mind a tour every now and then that proved uneventful, but Matt had been on edge and ragged on her every chance he got.

He had been very tightlipped about the evening before and Julie assumed it had been a date that had sent him hurrying off after their shift. He wasn't very communicative though and that was unlike him. During the nearly two years of riding together, Julie and Matt had developed a really close friendship where they were able to talk about almost anything. But every time she asked Matt what was bothering him during the tour he snapped at her and refused to open up.

Even more uncharacteristic for him, he had been impatient with her when she tried to talk to him about Jake. Matt was angry and she didn't have any clue why.

Julie found herself thinking about the broad shouldered sheriff much more than she wanted to. It was a new feeling for her to be so preoccupied with a man that she had only just met. She really was looking for some of Matt's logic to help her sort out her new feelings.

Between Matt's caustic mood and the repetitive simplicity of the calls they had been sent to, the shift seemed endless. She was exhausted as she climbed into her car in the parking lot.

Her shoes were still squishing from standing in the water tonight at the only call that had even seemed interesting. They had responded to a motor vehicle accident with injuries, only to find the vehicle stuck in the mud in a pond, the occupants holding onto the roof rack and screaming for help. They were too drunk to realize they were in shallow water and they could easily have walked to dry land. The local fire department had also been summoned and together they coaxed the young couple off of the car and into the waiting ambulance.

Luckily there weren't any serious injuries, but there was going to be a long night in jail for the driver whose breath reeked of beers and whiskey. The driver had been so drunk that he took a swing at Julie, when she ducked he connected with Matt. The intoxicated young man slid off the top of the car to land in the cold pond and immediately sobered from the shock. Meanwhile, both Matt and Julie stood ankle deep in the wet, sucking mud. The glancing blow to his jaw didn't make Matt's mood any more pleasant.

She had taken a quick shower and changed her uniform pants back at the station, and she thought she had managed to dry her boots enough to finish her tour. By the time she was driving home, she realized she had been mistaken. Julie was glad to park her car in her assigned spot outside of her garden apartment building. She couldn't shake the chill from her body from being wet in the night air. She heard every squish as the water seemed to swell in her insoles. She cringed every time she stepped down.

Julie turned the key in the door and opened it to a pitch-black living room. She cursed at herself; she must have forgotten to turn the light on when she left earlier. She hated coming home to a dark apartment. Julie normally remembered to leave the kitchen light on. She swore she left it on when she left that morning. It added to her annoyance when the lamp near the front door wouldn't go on, obviously the bulb must have burnt out. Why hadn't she noticed that, she wondered, and then tried to remember the last time she had used that lamp?

She never noticed that the lamp had been unplugged.

Chapter Three

Exasperated, tired and put out by Matt's rotten mood, she sat down in the doorway of her apartment and removed her shoes by the outside hallway light. She rolled off the damp socks and curled her toes in the pile of her carpeting before standing and gathering up her wet stuff. At least with the shoes off, she wouldn't track mud across her living room carpet. Closing the door quietly behind her, as a courtesy to her neighbors and the late hour, she let her eyes adjust to the darkness and pulled her Mini-Mag flashlight from her belt to find her way to the kitchen door and the welcoming light-switch.

The apartment had come with the pale tan-colored wall-to-wall carpeting that complemented the pale beige wall coloring. The living room was sparsely, but very comfortably, furnished. Many nights were spent curled on her sofa watching TV. The sofa was her prized possession; it was really the only piece of new furniture she had treated herself to when she first moved in. With three bulky seat cushions, well-padded armrests and a comfortable high back, the pullout queen size sleeper sofa also proved an excellent value whenever her family visited overnight. On her salary, Julie had hoped to save for pieces of furniture and accessories little by little. You didn't choose to be a paramedic to get rich.

The carpeting even though bland in color, was in good condition and Julie was thrilled to be able to curl her toes in it at the end of a long day. But she just wasn't a "beige" person, so she chose the sofa for its vivid colors and patterns. The overstuffed yellow throw pillows were a perfect complement to the bright green and floral upholstery.

She indulged her tendency to nostalgia in her bedroom, more out of economy than choice though. Her grandmother had given her a beautiful walnut wood Cheval oval mirror which Julie had standing prominently in the room. Her bed also came from the farmhouse. Originally it had also been her grandparents' bed, bought just a short time before her grandfather passed away. After he died, Nanny didn't want to sleep in the queen-size bed by herself and so it became the guest room bed in her folks' place. When Julie moved downstate and her parents retired, they gave her the queen-sized bed with a painted metal grillwork headboard. Julie indulged and purchased a floral print comforter to complement the ornate bed.

The fact that she had found an apartment with reasonably sized rooms, a decent kitchen and windows that overlooked more than just the complex's parking lot was a big bonus for her. The apartment complex was comprised of privately owned condominiums complete with clubhouse facilities and a summertime swimming pool. She had been lucky enough to find a unit for rent. She worried that the owner might decide to sell, she didn't think she'd be able to afford the necessary down payment to keep the apartment for herself.

Stripping out of her uniform was a long-awaited act of liberation and she didn't even bother to put the soiled uniform in the hamper as she walked naked through the apartment. A leisurely, warm shower and a glass of warm milk finally seemed to chase the chill of the pond from her body. Leaning against the tile in the bathroom shower stall, Julie enjoyed the warmth of the water as it splashed against her skin. She towel dried herself briskly in front of the steamy bathroom mirror and she used a hand towel to wipe a spot clear to see herself as she ran a brush through her long hair. Warming her glass of milk in the microwave was just the quick fix she needed. She didn't waste any time getting her weary self to bed.

Not bothering with bedclothes, sleeping in the raw as her brothers used to call it, she enjoyed the feel of the crisp sheets against her skin. Julie snuggled comfortably under the blankets of her bed and sipped the warm milk. She finally stretched and closed her eyes to unwittingly dream of a pair of broad shoulders, dark eyes and chestnut brown, curly hair.

The cell phone had rung while he was driving into the office, so he simply changed direction. The park was bustling with unnatural activity as he drove down the pebbled lane and parked on the grass. He took a moment to survey the area before he stepped out onto the dew-moistened foliage. Jake walked up the incline from the trail as he donned a pair of nude-colored latex gloves. The officers already on scene had cordoned off the crime scene with yellow tape and had begun collecting evidence. He was careful not to walk into the small taped-off area or trample over any impressions that might later turn out to be vital clues. Jake stepped carefully as he watched the ground beneath him.

The senior forensic investigator from the Coroner's office, Sally Marin, was kneeling over a naked and partially decomposed body that had been found in the woods. The daughter of a successful oncologist, she had once thought about a career in medicine. She had even been a first year medical student before switching to the study of forensics and crime scene interpretation.

About ten years Jake's senior, Sally always seemed to be working on some case. She loved the challenge of fitting puzzles together. Invariably, someone at the office Christmas parties would remember her with some complicated and large jigsaw puzzle thinking that the challenge might amuse her. Jake wondered what kind of life she had outside of her work and if she ever gave herself any time off from solving mysteries.

"It's been here a few days. A hiker discovered it today. White male, probably in his late twenties, five-eleven, looks like he kept himself fit." Sally motioned him closer. "We've already gotten castings in here." Plaster of Paris castings of the ground were made to preserve any impressions of shoes. "There were only footprints, no tire tracks." She looked up at Jake as he approached. "Hope your stomach is strong."

He exhaled. "I've probably seen worse." As he got a good look at the remains, he silently agreed that it was a gruesome sight. The nude male was marked with scores of open wounds resembling bite marks. The body reminded him, disgustingly, of raw chopped meat. Bits of bone were exposed where the flesh had been torn off completely.

"These aren't human bites, more like canine. The animals, probably wolves or some wild dogs, got to it. Also looks like there was some mutilation." She moved to the side as she pointed to a view that she wanted the crime lab photographer to shoot.

Jake took out his notebook. "What kind of mutilation?"

"He was castrated."

"Ouch..." Jake looked down at the body. "Could an animal have bit it off?"

"Oh, I doubt it. This injury was definitely inflicted by a human being." She used a cross finger technique to open the victim's mouth. "The penis was shoved into his throat. It probably helped suffocate him. You can see it for yourself if you'd like to." She taunted him with her grin.

"You know Sally, no man would ever be that casual about something like that." Even at grim crime scenes, a light, friendly banter made the work a little more bearable.

Chunks of flesh had been eaten away and what was left was crawling with maggots. The stench from the body was nearly overpowering and Jake made sure to stand away from the wind's direction. He would never admit it out loud, but the one whiff he did manage to catch was nauseating. The decomposed corpse would have sent most observers running just as it did the poor woman who found it. Jake found himself once again admiring Sally's composure.

Sally scribbled notes on a small pad of paper that she pulled from her medical bag. "We're going to need an insectology report to help narrow down the time of death. Too bad it wasn't found sooner."

"We'll also have to get an artist to draw up a reconstruction of his face. In the meanwhile, we'll check the missing persons file." It would all be standard procedure until they got some kind of identity. "No clothing or other personal effects?" Jake knew the answer before he asked, it would have been too easy a case if they had anything to trace.

Sally laughed sarcastically. "Right... I don't think whoever did this wants to make it that convenient. He was covered with a sheet, either the animals or the wind blew it off of him. A corner of it was stuck under one of the feet. Who knows, maybe we'll pick something up off of that. It's already been bagged."

"Any possibility of fingerprints?" Jake wasn't sure if exposure to the elements had destroyed any latent prints on the body.

"The only thing I managed to get off of him looks like the perpetrator was wearing rubber gloves, standard kitchen variety. Most of the body was exposed to the wind and the animals and a lot of the evidence has been destroyed." Sally checked off another item on a little memo pad checklist she carried with her. "I saved the impressions anyway." She stopped to initial an evidence bag before handing it to one of the technicians. "There were a few shoeprints but animals, the wind or the rain last night helped to obscure what might have been some cleaner ones. I don't know how much we'll be able to get from the castings we took."

At least the weather was kinder to their fact finding than it could have been. The fall's moderate temperatures hadn't hastened the decomposition any. If it had still been the late, hot dog days of August, much more of the evidence might have already been destroyed. At the same time, if it had been the freezing days of winter, the body could have lain there a lot longer before being discovered.

Jake looked over at the collection of police and unmarked cars sitting at the bottom of the hill. "Do you think he was killed here or maybe somebody just dumped him here?" He could see that Sally had already thought of that possibility and he was sure that they had already taken castings of any tire tracks in the vicinity. Tire tracks often narrowed down their search for a particular vehicle or make of car, or at the very least, helped them to rule out some.

"If I'm right and he was asphyxiated, he was definitely killed here. We bagged enough soil samples to grow our own garden, I'm pretty sure the bloodstains will match his DNA. It's hard to tell after all the exposure, but I wouldn't be surprised if he was very much alive when he was castrated." Sally spoke very matter of fact. "I can't imagine he was conscious when he was dropped here, even if he was still alive. Or maybe he knew his victim and came here with him or her and then was taken by surprise. There doesn't seem to be any visible signs of a struggle."

The surrounding soil would be tested for blood both that of the victim's and possibly even the attacker's just in case there had been any struggle. Not only would the soil be tested for evidence of blood, but soil samples were also taken from measured distances to help determine if the victim was dead or alive. If he had been alive when he was castrated, the heart would still have been pumping and the blood would have spurted rather than merely seeped into the ground. They would also study the photographs of the scene that were taken before any investigators even entered the scene to check for any nuances that might have gotten altered accidentally.

"It looks like he might have been dragged here, see the broken branches over there?" She pointed to an area of branches and wet grass that seemed to have been pulled into the same direction. "I'm not sure he was totally conscious when his manhood was being cut off." She looked up at Jake with a devilish smirk. "That should be a comfort to most of the men here."

Jake smiled as he shook his head at Sally's warped sense of humor. He admired the woman greatly. Even though she was well into middle age, she kept herself fit and always ready to scour a crime scene. He enjoyed knowing they were on the same team. She had been widowed several years earlier after a car accident with a drunk driver. Her husband had been killed instantly and Jake had heard it was months before she was really recovered herself. She was really much too young to bury a husband and Jake sometimes wondered if that was why she threw herself so completely into her work.

He left Sally and her technicians to finish up with the body while he collected notes from the team scouring the area. While they were looking for any remnants of physical evidence or personal effects he reminded them to be careful and not disturb the landscape any more than necessary, not that they really needed any reminders.

The police team was moving in a tight line and keeping their eyes fixed to the ground and brush before them, any time a possible piece of evidence was discovered, the line was stopped and the evidence photographed, bagged or a casting was taken. Depending on the route the perp had taken telltale footprints or even tire tracks could be anywhere. It was an exhausting and time consuming activity, but the results could make or break the case.

Investigating a scene was definitely a team approach and needed the full cooperation of all parties. Sally was the head of the crime scene investigation unit and was ultimately responsible for the collection and bagging of evidence, but she could never do it all by herself. The forensic photographer had to be first on the scene once the crime, or suggestion of it, was established. Once the other forensic techs got on scene, no matter how careful everyone was, other trace evidence was admitted onto the site. All of the evidence collected had to be properly identified and carefully transported to the lab under police custody.

Jake and the other Deputy Sheriffs were responsible for interviewing witnesses, helped to ensure the smooth processing of the scene, protecting the scene and above all, protecting the forensic specialists so they could effectively do their jobs. The Sheriff's department usually took custody of the evidence and saw that it was safely delivered to the forensic laboratory and Medical Examiner's office. There was always evidence at any potential crime scene and that evidence always gave them the chance to solve their cases. Every successful investigation always started at the primary crime scene.

Turning away from Sally and her team, Jake began his trek down the hillside towards the witness who had found the body. Approaching one of the patrol cars, he could see the young woman dabbing at her eyes.

She had gone for her usual early morning jog thinking of nothing more important than the large cup of latte that she was going to treat herself to this morning. She decided to cross the brush to go rest for a few moments on a bench and had inadvertently stumbled over the partially hidden body.

After a stunned moment, she got herself back on her feet and began to brush herself off when she glanced back to see what had tripped her. She screamed hysterically for a few moments before running away from the body and down towards the parking lot. The jogger had used her cell phone to call her husband. He made the phone call to the police about his wife's grisly discovery.

The husband arrived on the scene before the first police car entered the park. He was concerned about his wife and did his best to calm her as he sought to satisfy his own curiosity about the body. He walked to the crime scene and added his own footprints to the area. He claimed he didn't touch the body. The first officer on the scene had to talk him away from the area and then protect it from being disturbed further. Between the woman's still agitated state and the husband's resentment when he was asked for his shoeprints and fingerprints, neither individual was really being cooperative during the interview.

Dinner and a movie never materialized.

Last minute shift changes seemed to conspire against them and made it impossible for Julie and Jake to find the time to get together. He called her several times on the phone and they chatted, but he worked most days and Julie worked most nights. It was often when one of them was getting ready to climb into bed for some well-deserved rest that they made time to exchange a few words. Julie wouldn't admit it, but she enjoyed hearing his voice just before she drifted off to sleep.

Julie called him when another last minute schedule change gave her a few empty hours. Thanks to a new trainee they had coming on board at the medic station, she was assigned to dispatch while Matt showed the new guy the ropes, and the dispatch schedule was in eight-hour shifts instead of twelve. They agreed to meet at the mall to grab a quick bite in the food court and take in a movie at the multiplex cinema.

They met in the food court right by the Italian sub place. Jake couldn't resist kissing her when he saw her. He surprised himself by how much he had missed her. After a chaste kiss on her lips, he restrained himself from going back for more.

They stood on line together, he chose a double cheeseburger with fries and a large lemonade and Julie decided on a fish fry on a bun and small diet cola. Jake carried the tray of food back to a table near a young family with a toddler and an infant in a stroller. The toddler, a little girl, made eye contact with Jake and smiled. He smiled back and waved, the little girl giggled.

"Hey, so this is the way it is. I break one date with you and you have the competition lined up?" Julie said laughingly. Something about the way the big man in front of her showed a tender streak towards the little girl made her admire him even more. "You like kids I guess."

Jake took a quick bite of his hamburger before he replied. "Uh, yeah. They're cute."

"You'd probably make a great dad."

Julie couldn't understand what she saw in his eyes but something flashed briefly before it was gone.

He shrugged. "Thanks."

"Actually," she sipped her soda, "I'm surprised you're not married with a family."

"I'm divorced." He was blunt when he said it, but he watched her eyes for her reaction. "Does that bother you?"

"No. Should it?" She hid her surprise well. "It makes sense though."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you're in your thirties. You're a good looking man."

"Thank you." He was quick to catch her praise.

Julie laughed at how quickly he snapped up the compliment. "It's a lot easier to understand than if you were single and still living at home with your mother."

Jake chuckled. "And why don't you think I'm living with mom?"

She stopped for a moment hoping that she hadn't spoken too soon and then she realized he was teasing her. "There's been no one else answering your phone when I call you."

It seemed they spent a lot of time on the phone lately. They enjoyed talking to each other. They had already grown surprisingly close in just a very short time.

He grinned. "Okay. Besides, Mom and Dad live in Florida in one of those retirement places. Down in Boca Raton."

"Really? My folks are in Kissimee. They like Disney." Julie rolled her eyes. She actually was amused by her parents' fascination with Mickey Mouse. They had toiled a good many years to raise her and her brothers on an upstate New York farm and she was happy that they had decided to indulge themselves in their golden years. "I think it's their second childhood."

They spent the rest of their meal talking about their childhood and their parents. Julie had been a late life baby and the only girl, born more than twelve years after her second brother. Both of her brothers still lived upstate, the older one tending to the family farm and the other one was a veterinarian. Although she knew she was loved greatly by both big brothers, and they spoiled her when she was younger, she felt so far removed from their lifestyles, including families and kids, that she was more comfortable with the distance between them. She also appreciated the lack of interference in her life, they didn't always approve of her choices.

Jake was also the younger child, he had an older sister, by two years, who lived in California. He had grown up in the area having gone to nearby schools. His ex-wife had been his high school sweetheart, but he didn't say much more about her. Something about the way he quickly changed the topic made Julie too uncomfortable to pry.

His father had been in banking up until his retirement and he figured he had been a major disappointment to his folks when he decided on law enforcement rather than accounting as they had planned for him. Jake always thought his father looked tired, and bored, and even if things had turned out differently for him, he never once thought of following in his father's footsteps. His mother always ruled the house and his dad just never had the energy to argue.

They talked while they are and they joked about being the baby in their families. Julie had been a rebel in school, always had to have her parents called to school, and she amused Jake with several stories.

Laughing, Jake managed to feed Julie a greasy fry dipped in ketchup. Then he used his thumb to wipe the ketchup from her lip. She parted her lips slightly and he let his thumb linger while he watched her eyes. He had no doubts how much he wanted her, but he was still surprised because he had only known her a time.

"Guess we'd better go see about that movie." He cleared his throat and dropped his hand.

She exhaled softly. "Yeah, that's a good idea." Julie avoided looking at the other diners not wanting to see if anyone else had noticed the heightened tension. They quickly gathered up the wrappers and empty cups and threw them out. Jake extended his hand to her, she took it.

They held hands like two giddy teen-agers. Julie and Jake were both surprised by the connection they felt between them and how right it felt. On the way to the theatre, he stopped just to look at her. Jake finally satisfied his curiosity and found out exactly how delightful her lips tasted. Julie enjoyed kissing him back. The kiss seemed all too short for both of them. They continued on their way to the cinema.

Even though they had just eaten, Jake still bought a large, buttered popcorn to munch on during the movie. He insisted that it always made the movie better. They sat in the stadium style seats and waited for the movie to begin.

As the theatre slowly grew dimmer, several previews danced across the screen. One of them featured cops and robbers and it made Jake think once again about the investigation he had left behind in his office. Usually when he worked on a case, he didn't let anything distract him and this diversion was so unlike his nature. But he also couldn't get his mind off of this beautiful young woman he had met just a few nights before.

With an arm thrown gently around Julie's shoulders, Jake let his mind wander over the facts of the case. Julie munched on a handful of his popcorn and was so absorbed in the previews that she never realized his thoughts were anywhere else.

Nobody was able to find the mysterious man who had caused so much misery and the positive identification of the two young girls seemed even slower. Jake found himself sickened by the findings of Holly's autopsy. He thought of the horror the poor girl had gone through. With her breasts and

genitals mutilated, he had to entertain the idea that this was a sexual attack. But there were too many inconsistencies with that theory, there had been no semen in or on the body, just the vicious object rape.

The lead he thought he had about Beth's boyfriend hadn't panned out. The young man had truly been distraught by the argument he had with her and taken a few days to himself to set his priorities in order. He had returned back to the campus with the thought of asking Beth to marry him. After speaking with the local police department, he had agreed to come and try to identify her body. Jake felt sorry for the guy. He thought how sad it was to finally realize you had found the woman you love just to lose her to a senseless murder.

The theatre darkened and the opening credits rolled across the screen. Without realizing it, his arm tightened around Julie's shoulders as they sat in the large auditorium. She looked away from the movie screen and whispered, "You okay?"

He nodded. Jake wanted to protect the woman seated next to him. He thought about her nearly every moment since they first met. His obsession with her surprised him. At first he thought he was just craved her in a physical sense, but it was becoming clear to him that he was attracted to who she was. He liked being with her. Even though she was young, he kept reminding himself of her youth, she was definitely all flesh and blood woman.

It scared him that there was a monster out there that could be a danger to young women and he worried about Julie's usually late hours. It scared him that he didn't know enough about the bastard that they were looking for to be able to keep a young woman safe. It scared him that some crazed maniac might ever hurt Julie. And he wondered why he was suddenly feeling all these things for this woman.

He couldn't help himself as he leaned down to kiss her; he just needed to taste her again, to feel her breath, to know that she was there. It had been years since he made out in the darkened cover of a movie house. Julie tempted him in ways he barely remembered from his carefree teen-age years. Jake gently touched her lips with his own and enjoyed the sweet taste. Her lips parted and he explored her mouth with his tongue. It was easy to imagine making love to her as his tongue mated with hers. She welcomed him into the warm recesses of her mouth.

He needed to feel her heartbeat and his fingers moved from her chin and down to the hollow of her neck. Julie didn't push him away, she was as mesmerized by the kiss as he was. She put her hand on his thigh and even though it wasn't high on his leg at all, they were both very well aware when every muscle in his lower body instantly tightened.

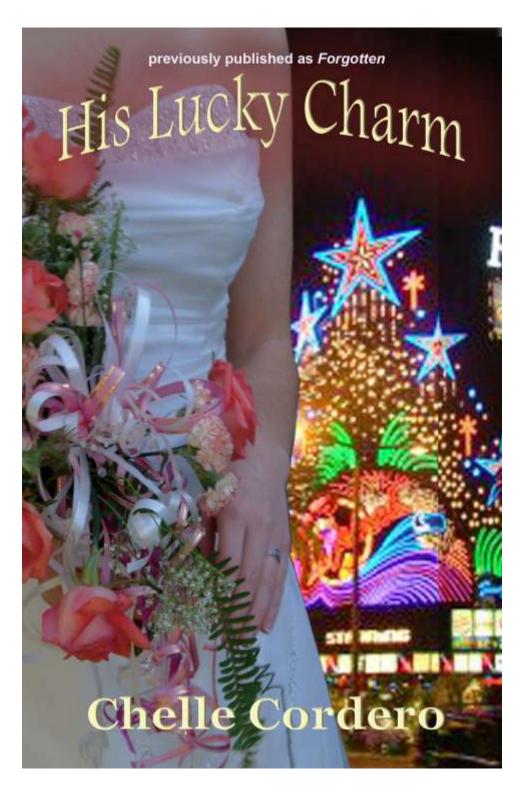
He dragged his mouth away from hers and reluctantly let go of the pulse he felt above her heart. Kissing each finger in turn, he gently took her hand from his thigh. "I think I'd better watch the movie for a while." His quiet voice was shaky.

Julie smiled nervously and agreed. She also had to calm down. She couldn't believe how close she had come to forgetting they were in a very public place. They found each other's fingers and held hands. They both knew they could no longer deny the attraction that was quickly growing between them.

The man watching them several rows back in the darkened stadium style movie house approved when he saw the couple stop themselves from going any further. He was still so disappointed that she was even out with that cop.

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His Lucky Charm by Chelle Cordero

Prologue

He felt his muscles clench as he stared into the woman's face that lay beneath him. If he hadn't already felt her trembling, he would have known she reached her own climax just by the expression of her face. With one more powerful thrust he felt everything he had spilling into her, he felt a completeness he would have never thought possible. Everything stopped and then he swore he felt their hearts start beating again as one. Pausing a moment to look into her eyes, and they were beautiful eyes he thought, he brushed a long strand of chestnut hair away from her face and kissed her. Then he rolled off of her.

"I love you." Her voice was soft, like the touch of her lips. He couldn't believe the tingling he felt in his loins at hearing her words.

"You're not even human..."

"What?" She almost laughed at his choice of words.

He hadn't even meant to say that thought out loud. "I mean... I just never felt so... consumed before. I feel like I am under some kind of spell." As he sat up to face her, he was surprised by the life he felt in his groin. Feeling a touch embarrassed, which was a new feeling for him, he admitted, "I almost feel like I can go another round, and considering how powerful that was..."

She faced him and gave him a sultry smile; her bare breasts were firm and small. But not too small, he thought, just enough to fill his hands. He felt his groin tighten again and just stared.

"Hey, are you okay?" She suddenly sounded self-conscious.

"Uh, yeah." He forced himself to look at her face.

She touched his arm, her fingers felt light like feathers. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes." He glanced at her breasts again and then back at her face. "Tell me... who are you?"

She laughed, it was a full-bodied sound. "Just one day married and..." She saw the surprise in his eyes as he looked at his left hand and saw the ring. Pulling the bed sheet up to cover her nakedness, she looked at him puzzled. "You're serious?"

He frowned. "Fraid so."

Chapter 1

"Was your last name really Smythe?" He looked from the marriage certificate to her and back again. He wondered if maybe she had checked into the hotel with him under an assumed name. After all, weren't variations of the name Smith often used to hide one's identity?

"Yes." She sounded a bit defensive. She had pulled her hair into a loose ponytail and he thought it made her look incredibly young. Almost a little too young for his comfort.

"Hey look... Caitlyn," he had to glance at the certificate again for her name. "All I know is the first thing I remember about you is that I woke up having really incredible sex with you this morning." He certainly did remember the fantastic sex and how it much he enjoyed it.

"I thought we were making love." Her lip barely trembled.

He sighed. "It was wonderful, really. Look, I don't mean to hurt you, but I don't remember anything else." Brandon, that was the name on the marriage license, stood. He felt frustrated. "I don't know who you are, or me, except for these names on this paper. I don't know why we're here. I don't remember these clothes I'm wearing. You told me that I drink my coffee black, I don't remember that." He knelt beside her and felt bad because she looked almost ready to cry. "I'm sorry. Really I am."

She was a pretty girl, he thought. It was easy to see how she would have caught his eye. Her dark chestnut hair framed a nearly perfect oval face. Her eyes were bright and her lips invited kisses. Her slender body and its womanly curves invited much more than just kisses. He felt that now

familiar stirring in his groin as he studied her.

When she realized he really didn't remember anything, Caitlyn had been remarkably calm. She had gotten out of bed protectively wrapping the sheet around her, got clothes from a suitcase and went into the bathroom to get dressed. She had politely asked him to please get dressed and told him that the other suitcase was his. When she came out of the bathroom, neatly dressed in black slacks and a short sleeved pink blouse, she made a call to room service and had coffee, tea and some breakfast Danish sent up. While they waited, she showed him the marriage license, her wallet with her driver's ID and photos of the two of them. Even without his memory, he had to admit that they looked right together. She suggested that he check his own wallet as well. At least now he knew his name, birth date and where he lived.

After the bellboy wheeled the cart into the room, he gave Brandon the receipt to sign. When he hesitated, Caitlyn took it and signed. Her scrawled signature read Caitlyn Price. Motioning with her hands, she suggested that Brandon offer the bellboy a tip. He placed a few bills in the young man's hand. She reassured him he could afford it. Closing the door behind the bellboy, Caitlyn walked back to the cart with the coffee and teapot and the Danish tray. She poured him a cup of hot coffee from the pot and put two spoons of sugar in it, then stirred. Brandon sat in an armchair next to a small round occasional table. She selected cherry Danish from the plate of baked goods and served it to him on a china plate. After pouring herself a cup of herbal tea, she sat in the opposite armchair facing him. She didn't take any baked goods for herself. Brandon heard her tea cup rattle for just a moment. It was then that he first noticed that she was holding back tears, but he had no idea what he could do to comfort her or even if he should try.

She looked at him and sighed before putting her teacup and saucer onto the table. "We got married last night. You thought it would be romantic to do it in Vegas." Caitlyn twisted the small diamond ring she wore next to a simple gold band. "We've been seeing each other for almost two years and a few months ago you asked me if I would consider marrying you. We didn't make it official, but a few days ago, on my birthday, you showed up at my door with this ring and asked me to come with you to Vegas. I said yes."

She held her left hand out towards him so he could see the ring. He was tempted to take her slender fingers in his hand and caress them. The ring she wore was delicate, just like its owner he thought, and the stone was cut in a pear shape. The diamond was small, he thought, and yet she seemed to wear it proudly. Couldn't he have done better than a tiny diamond? Her gold band matched the one he was wearing.

He really tried, but he couldn't remember anything. "What about our families? Did we call them? Didn't your parents want to see you married?"

She looked surprised at his question and then shrugged. "My parents are dead, they have been since I was twelve. I was an only child."

"I'm sorry." He was sincere about that. "What about... do I have any family?"

"Your father is alive, but you've been angry at him and haven't spoken to him, I don't know why. As far as I know, you haven't seen him since before you moved to New York. I don't think you have any brothers or sisters, but I don't know because you really haven't wanted to talk to me about your family. You haven't really talked much about yourself."

Brandon looked at his driver's license again. Price, Brandon Price. He was twenty-seven years old according to his license. "Where did I grow up?" Maybe he should look up his family...

"You told me it was outside of Chicago, but you never wanted to talk about it. You were always kind of quiet about your childhood."

"Didn't that bother you?"

"It did. It does. That's one of the few things we've always argued about." Caitlyn knew how much she wished her folks were alive, but a drunken driver destroyed that possibility years ago. She couldn't understand how Brandon could ignore a living parent. "But it also became one of those things we agreed to disagree on. You had just made it clear that the topic was off-limits." She shrugged as if she had given up.

He looked through the rest of his wallet and saw that he had both cash and credit cards. "I

assume I have a job. I hope so, especially if I can afford this." While he apparently hadn't gone so far as to reserve a suite, the room was certainly well appointed. The king size bed was definitely comfortable, and memorable. He glanced at the woman sitting quietly sipping her tea. She had seen his glance at the bed and the slight flush in her cheeks told him she was remembering the passion they had shared as well. "I didn't see any business cards in my wallet."

"You're an IT consultant. I think you carry some cards in your jacket pocket, your suit jacket, it's hanging in the wardrobe closet." He hadn't thought to look in the armoire when he chose clothes to put on; he had taken a pair of khaki trousers and a dark blue shirt from the suitcase. "I'm sure you brought some cards because you originally planned this trip for business. You have some kind of an appointment later today."

"With who?" He went to the closet and found a suit bag hanging there.

"You didn't tell me." She paused. "You don't talk much about your business either."

Brandon found a packet of business cards, all they had on them was his name, the words Information Technology Consultant and a New York City phone number. He looked at her suspiciously, "I'm secretive about my family and I'm secretive about my job... How well do you really know me?" He couldn't have sounded more accusatory.

Caitlyn looked hurt. "Obviously not well enough." She looked like she was mulling over her next words. Finally she blurted them out. "How can you not remember me?" She sounded frustrated. A lone tear finally rolled down a cheek.

"I can't remember anything, damn it!" He slammed the wardrobe closet door shut. "Who the hell am I? And who are you?" He strode across the room to look out the window at the Vegas strip. "Right now, I can't remember anything. I am relying on you to tell me everything and something tells me I am not the kind of man that relies on someone else very easily." Even the circus-like lights outside the window looked foreign to him.

After a few moments of silence, he heard her soft voice. "I think maybe, then, that you are remembering something about yourself. You've never liked asking for help." He never even heard her move and yet she was suddenly behind him. Her voice was quiet and reassuring. "I think you do some kind of work with government contracts, something with computers, but you don't talk about it. Not to me anyway."

He took a moment to calm the nervous churning in his stomach before he turned to face her. "Do you know if I work with anyone else? Maybe someone else can fill me in on some part of my life." He was willing to grasp at anything to escape the feeling of emptiness he had. He had even had to compare the face he saw in the mirror to the face on the driver's license she showed him to realize it was really him.

"You have a secretary."

"I do?" He sounded anxious and slightly relieved.

"Her name is Amanda."

He felt the hairs at the back of his neck stand up when he heard that name. "Amanda?" Although it was an overall uncomfortable feeling, the name Amanda evoked a strange reaction somewhere deep inside. "Uh, I hate to ask this but, well, is my relationship with her only professional?" Could something else be going on, something that raised the back hairs of his neck?

"It had better be." She wasn't joking. "Why don't you call her? That's your office number on the card. If she's not there, you can leave a message and ask her to call you back." Caitlyn motioned him to the phone. "I'm sure that you've shared some facts with her she probably needed for your business," she added a little testily.

He called and left a message on his office voice mail. A woman's voice greeted him in a recorded message. Somehow he recognized that it was Amanda's voice. He remembered her voice, but how could that be when he couldn't remember anything else? Caitlyn scribbled the hotel and room number for him on a paper napkin so he could leave it in the message. He finished his message and kept the phone to his ear through the rest of the recorded options. Wondering if his message sounded urgent enough, he thought about re-recording his message and then decided to let it stay as it was. He hung up the phone.

"I guess now I just wait." He sat back down at the breakfast tray and resigned himself to the uncertainty. "How did we meet? Please, tell me everything through last night."

"You know, I am really worried about you..." She came back to stand next to him. "Maybe you should go to the hospital? I don't understand why you lost your memory?"

"No. I'm not going to leave this room until I figure out some things about myself." The sights and sounds of whatever lay beyond the walls of the room nearly frightened him. There would be more people, more strangers, and more unknown routes to deal with. He felt safer staying put. He felt safe with this girl. Even though he still couldn't remember her, he felt safe.

"But sweetheart, something is wrong..." She seemed to understand his reluctance to face more things he wasn't familiar with. "I would go with you. I could keep telling you things I know about you, things you might even remember. I wouldn't let you be alone."

"I said no." He hadn't really yelled, but Caitlyn stopped short. "I don't know what's happened to me and right now, I just need to find out about myself. Please, talk to me." He felt completely helpless. He was afraid of facing a bigger unknown world and getting permanently lost.

Caitlyn sighed and sat in the armchair facing him. He studied her as she spoke. He watched the way her lips moved, the expressions she made with her face. Nothing looked familiar. "We met at a college career day almost two years ago." She saw his puzzled expression. "I'm an art student at a school in New York City, I was looking for a job. I had just moved to the city from upstate."

He listened to every word and felt frustrated that he remembered none of it. "Did I hire you?" He toyed with the golden fabric covering the table. The room was decorated in golden earth tones. A watercolor of a lonely desert scene hung on the wall; it reminded him of how lost he felt. He wondered if that was the kind of art that Caitlyn studied.

She chuckled. "You weren't looking for an artist, at least not a graphic artist." He tried to imagine what she apparently meant by her pun on words, but gave up. "But you kind of monopolized my attention and before the day was over, you asked me to join you for dinner."

"Did you accept?" He wondered what kind of man he was and if dinner had been his only invitation. She was a beautiful young woman and surely he must have been interested in more from her.

"I'm an art student... a starving artist. You offered a meal, I accepted." He struggled to remember and then shrugged when he couldn't. "You called me a few days later, just to talk, and then a few days after that you asked me out."

He remembered that her license said she had just turned twenty-one. She looked so very young. "Last night... you said we got married?" Brandon looked again at the ring on his finger. Surprisingly, he felt very comfortable wearing it.

She looked into her lap. "We had spoken a few times about marriage, but we never set any dates or anything..."

"Why not?" Could he have been toying with her?

"I'm a student with a poorly paying job. I barely make ends meet. The first time we spoke about marriage, I told you I needed to wait, to become more self-sufficient. You made the offer to pay for my school and said I wouldn't even have to work. You kind of reminded me that you made a comfortable wage and could afford to let me do whatever I wanted." She grimaced. "I don't know, it actually sounded kind of insulting. It was like you didn't take me seriously. I accused you of trying to buy me and it's been a touchy subject since."

"What made you change your mind now?" He looked at her stomach. "Are you pregnant or something?" He felt a nervous pang that he might be about to become a father.

"No." She shook her head. That would be something he'd think of, she mused.

He looked straight at her and again thought of how young she looked. "Uh, this wasn't our first time together, was it?" Hell, what if she had been a virgin and he didn't even remember it!

She smiled shyly. "No, far from it. We've been lovers for a while now, although... you were my first." She let him absorb that information. "You were so spontaneous, you just showed up at my door with a ring and plane tickets. It... it was just romantic."

He struggled for something to say, but just like his memory, nothing came. Knowing how sweet it had been to wake up in her arms that morning, to be making love with her, he wished he could remember the first time that they were together. He hoped he had been gentle.

"The Good Reverend Elvis Presley Cosby married us."

He pictured the legendary rock and roll singer. He imagined the theatrical production that must have been. He laughed. "You're kidding!" Although it was a fuzzy memory, at least he knew who Elvis Presley had been.

"No, I'm quite serious. Afterwards we went out to dinner and celebrated. You had quite a bit to drink..."

"I got drunk?"

She half nodded. "Not drunk but definitely... uh, you were definitely high."

"After the ceremony?" He stressed the word after.

"Yes. You were fully aware of what you were doing when you said I do. You can't use the excuse that you weren't in your right mind when we got married. You had been very sure that you wanted it. I admit it didn't take that much convincing, but you took the time to talk me into it when you showed up at my apartment with the ring." She paused.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't accusing you of tricking me into this." How could he be sure of that without his memory? But he was sure.

It showed that she was relieved he believed her. "I had never known you to drink so much that you lost control and I was really surprised when you insisted on having a drink before dinner last night, especially since you had that business appointment today."

"Uh, my drinking, did it affect my, you know, performance?" It was embarrassing, but he didn't even know what kind of lover he was.

She found it ironic that he was so worried about his virility. "You were fine in that department." She blushed. "But maybe, just maybe you should be more worried that maybe the alcohol made you lose your memory?" Her body still tingled from his "performance" through the night.

"What did I order?"

"Before dinner, you ordered a scotch on the rocks..."

"I drink scotch?" A good strong whiskey... It was the kind of drink for a strong man with strong ties, a capable person. He was trying to get an image of himself.

"That and other stuff." Caitlyn was remembering what else he ordered. "There was wine with dinner and a martini in the casino."

"I was mixing drinks... and it got to me?"

She picked up the china cup with the rest of her now cold tea and drank it slowly. "We were in the casino. You wanted to play at the tables. That's when you got paged to the hotel phone. You really sobered up quickly, you looked a little worried. You handed me your chips and some money, told me to play some slots or something and went to take the call. You were gone over half an hour..."

"Who called me?" Who was so important that he would he have left his new wife on their wedding night? The call must have been very important. And why would he be worried?

Caitlyn shrugged. "You didn't say. When you came back, you rushed me up to the room. You said you had a headache from drinking, those were your words." She frowned. "When we got up here, I offered you aspirin for your headache and you said you didn't need it. You said the headache wasn't really all that bad anyway. Then you laughed. It was strange; I didn't know what you found so funny. You said you just wanted to make love. We did and then we fell asleep. You woke me this morning and said you wanted to be with me again... well, that's where we are now."

"I had a headache?" He didn't feel hung over, not that he remembered ever feeling that way before. It just didn't feel like he was suffering the effects of a hangover.

"That's why I think you should get checked out."

"But I didn't want any aspirin? So it couldn't have been that bad." Maybe it was just an excuse to finally take his lovely bride up to their room.

"I watched a TV show once where this guy took sick and didn't even realize it..." Caitlyn pulled her chair to sit directly in front of him. "Look at me." She stared at his eyes, they looked okay to her and she nodded. "Squeeze my hands..." She took hold of both of his hands and rested them on her knees. He squeezed both of her hands firmly. "You seem to be okay. I guess."

He wondered what had happened to him. He knew that she was checking for signs of a stroke and yet he didn't understand how he realized that. She was looking for an explanation for why he couldn't remember anything. He really felt fine except that he had no idea who he was or how he got there. There was nothing wrong with him that a little relaxation wouldn't take care of. Maybe a massage or even another tumble in the bed with this woman... the thought of making love with her again was tempting.

The phone rang and he practically lunged for it. "Hello?... Yes... Amanda thanks for calling me back." Her voice definitely resonated in his memory. He listened for a few moments. "No, I... forgot. Actually Amanda, I don't remember anything... no, nothing." And the few random memories he had gave him no indication of who he was.

He turned his back to Caitlyn and lowered his voice. "No, I'm not alone... I'm here with Caitlyn, uh, Caitlyn Smythe." He quickly glanced at her to see if she had heard him say her maiden name, she had. Oh well, he thought, I don't remember any marriage anyway. He looked away. "What?" Stealing another look at Caitlyn while he listened, Brandon managed to move a little further away. He listened for a few minutes, nodding and grunting every so often. When he hung up, he stared suspiciously at Caitlyn.

"What's the matter?" His stare discomfited her.

"Is your name really Caitlyn Smythe?" He wasn't sure if he should believe her.

She smiled. "Actually it's Caitlyn Price now." He remained quiet. "Brandon? What's wrong? What did Amanda say?"

"Why are you worried what Amanda had to say?" He was beginning to sound as paranoid as he felt. "Do you have something to worry about?" How much of what she told him was true, if any of it was? He had begun to believe her, anything and everything she had told him, and it angered him that he now had reason to question her honesty.

"She barely knows me, what would she have to say?" Caitlyn was exasperated. "Brandon, what did Amanda say to you? What do you think I'm hiding?"

He wanted to trust the woman in front of him, he really did. He could understand why he liked her even if he had no memory of her. Her gentleness and supposed naivety had lured him into a feeling of safety. He said he had felt like he was under a spell during their lovemaking, maybe she was some kind of pro and he wasn't thinking with the right brain. That other woman, Amanda, her voice was so familiar, how could he not trust her? He knew that he remembered Amanda. He didn't know anything about Caitlyn before waking up this morning. And if he knew and trusted Amanda... then he couldn't trust Caitlyn no matter what.

He paced in silence for a few minutes. Amanda had given him some information and he wasn't sure what to do with it. Whether it was because Caitlyn was good in bed, he thought crudely, or because there was something more there, he decided to warn her. "Amanda is faxing some information to the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police. She expects that they'll be here shortly to take you into custody."

"Why?" She sounded totally dumbfounded.

"You've got a record. You've got a string of aliases..." He knelt in front of her. He was sure he had done the right thing to warn her. "Caitlyn, if you leave now, you'll get away. I wasn't supposed to warn you but I don't want to see you arrested."

"I haven't done anything..." Her protest sounded genuine and it twisted his gut to think otherwise.

"Caitlyn, she has proof." He thought for a moment and then stood to take his wallet out of his back pocket. "I don't know how much money I have in here, but," he pulled a wad of bills out and handed them to her. "You should be able to get somewhere with this. Go, go now while there is still time. I don't know how far you can get but you have to get away from here." He put the money into her hand.

She dropped the money on the floor. "I'm not going anywhere, I haven't done anything illegal.

Why would someone want to arrest me?"

He watched several bills float down to the carpet. "Damn it Caitlyn, I'm trying to help you!" Why didn't she just take the damn money and get the hell out of there?

Her voice was a hoarse whisper. "What did she tell you I did?"

He frowned. It was hard for him to make the accusation. "You are an artist all right... a con artist. Caitlyn, she said you stole from me, and you stole from some other people. And they want to press charges. I'm not but they are."

"You believe this?" She sounded so hurt, so wounded, and all he wanted to do was protect her.

He was consumed by guilt that he questioned her. "Come on, let's get out of here..." He tried to take her arm and push her towards the door. She pulled herself out of his grasp.

"No!" The tears welled in her eyes. "I thought you loved me. You married me! How could you believe I would steal from you?"

He took her by both arms and shook her. "I don't remember you!" Brandon stared in disbelief as he saw apparent fear in her eyes. He dropped his hands from her arms suddenly. "I'm sorry." He took a few steps back and spoke in hushed tones. "I know that it felt right to have you in my arms this morning, it felt good to be so close to you, but I don't know you. But Amanda's voice, I remembered that, I know her voice... and her name. I know Amanda. I have to trust her." His explanation lacked conviction.

There was a firm knock at the door.

"Go hide, I'll tell them you left."

Another knock. A single man's voice called through the closed door. "Hotel security."

"Please Caitlyn..." He motioned for her to hide.

"No." She stood where she was. "I haven't done anything." She sounded almost convincing to his ears, But he worried that she wouldn't be as convincing to the police.

She stood there defiantly.

After a few more knocks at the door, Brandon answered it. Caitlyn stood silently. Two Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Officers entered with the hotel detective.

The hotel detective stood back while the two police officers asked Caitlyn a few inane questions to confirm who she was. One of the police officers frisked her and nodded in satisfaction when he didn't find anything of danger.

Caitlyn looked confused and scared.

The second officer had a copy of a forged check and a New York City Police report with Caitlyn's picture on it. He read a list of charges out loud which included theft, embezzlement, forgery and passing bad checks. Her rights were read to her. They called her Mary Jones. The name under the picture on the NYPD report was Mary Jones.

She went to reach for her purse claiming she had plenty of identification to show them. One of the officers caught her wrist and cuffed her. He twisted her arms painfully behind her and cuffed the other wrist.

"My roommate... she's traveling in Africa right now, but I'm sure we can track her down." Caitlyn winced as the cuff tightened from her struggling. "Keisha can vouch for who I am."

One of the officers mocked her. "Keisha?" He looked towards his partner. "Doesn't even sound American to me."

"I have family in upstate New York..." Despite her protests, Caitlyn was led from the room.

Brandon couldn't stand the tears he had seen on her cheeks. She had seemed so bewildered, not like she was hiding anything. When the door was closed behind them, he sat on the bed with its still rumpled sheets and felt even more lost and more alone than he had before. Eventually he realized that he wasn't the type to sit and wallow and it wasn't long before he left the room on a mission.

Chapter 2

By the time he got back to the room, the bed had been made up and the breakfast dishes had

been cleared. Even the towels she had used had been replaced with fresh ones. There were fresh flowers in the vase on the table, the cherry wood doors of the armoire were closed, and the drapes were tied back to expose the view from the window. The only telltale sign that Brandon's memory hadn't failed him once again and he had only imagined Caitlyn was her small suitcase sitting discreetly against the wall. The suitcase and the empty feeling inside of him was all he had left.

Brandon had tried to find out what bail would be set for Caitlyn He didn't understand why, but he knew she didn't belong in a jail cell. He had emptied his wallet of credit cards and brought them to the hotel desk asking for help in determining how much money he could access quickly. Amanda had said she was on her way to the airport in New York and she would be by his side in a few hours. Maybe she could tell him what he owned, what he was worth so he could try to help Caitlyn out. The bail hadn't been set as yet, but he was told it would be high since she was considered a flight risk with no local ties and few, if any, in New York. He was willing to take that chance. He was even planning to try to convince her to run away and avoid prosecution.

Brandon had asked the desk clerk for any information about the phone call he had received last night and who it might have come from. If it was the individual he had the business appointment with, then maybe he could speak to someone who knew something about him. All the clerk was able to tell him was that it was made from inside the hotel and he hadn't stayed on the phone long, just a minute or two... but Caitlyn had said he was gone for a half hour. And why would the call have been made from inside the hotel? He had to find out who called him, why it "sobered" him so quickly and where he had disappeared to for half an hour.

As he passed by the hotel's casino floor, he wondered what the draw had been to play last night. Was there some reason he needed to stay in a crowd? He couldn't understand why he hadn't been more anxious to bring Caitlyn back to the room and make love with her. If he had really been that impetuous and romantic as to propose to her and elope to Vegas, then wouldn't he also have been amorous and anxious to consummate their wedding vows? Had it been Caitlyn's idea to stall and spend time at the tables? According to Amanda, Caitlyn was a con artist and she was working him. Amanda said Caitlyn had already stolen from him. But he couldn't see why her con would include the casino, how much could he have bankrolled her gambling? Weren't casinos sharp about con jobs? She would have been taking a big chance to rob him there.

On the way to the elevators on his way back to his room, he overheard the strains of a Presley song and remembered holding Caitlyn in his arms, but it was only a fleeting image. "...You give me hope and consolation, you give me strength to carry on..." The song made him want to rescue her even more. Brandon felt emotionally drained after hearing the song. Why had it affected him so? He didn't feel threatened by Caitlyn. His instincts weren't sending off any alarms about her. He actually felt right waking up in her arms that morning. Although he couldn't remember anything, he felt comfortable when he was with her. She actually made him feel safe. Could Amanda be wrong?

Pacing the room wasn't helping. He could feel the tension building in his muscles and the anxiety building in the pit of his stomach. He rolled his head to his shoulders and tried to work the kink out of his neck but finally gave up. Brandon put Caitlyn's suitcase on the bed and feeling like an intruder, he opened it. He hesitated only a moment before going through the contents. Her clothing confirmed his limited memories of her petite size. Brandon held a revealing, see-thru teddy up in front of him and tried his best to imagine Caitlyn wearing it. With her beautifully sculpted thighs and perky breasts he knew she would be quite a vision wearing the teddy. He wished he could remember.

Her purse was in the suitcase and he emptied the contents on to the bed. Out tumbled an apartment key, he wondered if it was his or hers and if he would find a matching key on his own key ring. He also found a few sticks of sugar free chewing gum. There was a package of pills in a small round compact-like container... he wondered if they were birth control? Remembering that he had been au natural this morning, he assumed she was on the pill; oddly it didn't scare him if she wasn't taking precautions. He opened her wallet; there were just a few folded dollar bills, not much, the driver's license that he had already seen, a student ID for the art school she said she attended, a dry cleaning receipt, movie stub and a coin wrapper full of quarters.

She also had a clear plastic key chain fob with a photo of a middle age couple, the woman

looked like an older version of Caitlyn and he wondered if they were her deceased parents. Encased in the fob, on the back of the picture, she had taped a yellowed paper from a Chinese fortune cookie, "Let your heart guide you. It whispers, so listen closely." He thought about this young woman who had lost her parents so young in life and apparently tried to live her life through instinct. He found himself admiring her. If he had been hoping to find something incriminating, something to justify Amanda's accusations, he found nothing and he felt relieved.

He folded everything carefully and put the suitcase back the way he had found it. Still feeling a bit guilty, he couldn't help but wonder if he had left any telltale signs of his intrusion among her personal belongings. There was a light tapping at the door and he went to it hoping it was Amanda, hoping she could shed some light on his life.

"Oh Brandon!" The redhead that stood outside his door threw her arms around him and kissed him intimately. "Sweetheart, you don't know how worried I was."

He kissed her back without desire. He felt he was somehow obligated to return her affections, but he couldn't help comparing her kiss to Caitlyn's. He wished he was kissing Caitlyn instead. "Amanda?"

She stepped back and looked at him in surprise. "You really don't remember me?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure." She pouted as she walked past him into the room. He closed the door and followed her. "I know that I remember your name... and your voice. I think I remember the red hair, but... I'm not sure."

"What did that bitch do to you?" She sat in one of the armchairs and crossed her long legs. She didn't even try to pull her skirt down when she exposed an ample section of thigh.

"Who?"

"Caitlyn! Mary, or whatever her name really is." She sniffled loudly. "If it were up to me her name would be Jane Doe."

He stopped himself from defending Caitlyn even though he felt he should. He had no rational explanation for wanting to defend Caitlyn. He didn't even know who she was. Brandon sat in the second chair and faced Amanda. "I really need your help... I don't remember anything about who I am or any of the people in my life."

"What did she do to you?" Frowning, she continued, "Were you drugged or something?"

"I have no idea."

"Tell me what you know and I will try to fill in..."

"I found out that I'm some kind of IT consultant and I came out here for a business meeting with someone. I brought Caitlyn with me and, well to be honest, I proposed..."

"You what?" Amanda was practically shrieking. "Oh, that tramp has another thing coming if she thinks she's going to fool you into thinking you have something going on with her." She was angered by his puzzled expression. "You and I, we're engaged!" She flashed her hand with a sizeable diamond ring on it. "We're the couple and she's not a part of it. She just better keep her hands off of you."

"Uh," Brandon wished he could slink away. He hid his left hand at his side. "Uhm, Caitlyn and I were... married last night." He wondered how this could have happened.

Amanda stood and slapped him. "How could you do that to me?" She looked towards the bed and around the room. She pouted. "Did you sleep with her?"

He let out a heavy sigh. "Yes." He told himself it wouldn't have been as bad if he hadn't enjoyed it as much.

"You bastard!" She shook her head. "That bitch!"

He stood and moved towards her, she backed away and he reached out to touch her arm. "I'm sorry Amanda, I don't remember anything that's going on..."

She sniffled and regained her composure quickly. "Did you really get married?" He nodded. "Well, we just have to get that annulled."

Brandon turned away. How could he tell Amanda that he actually felt some comfort, something solid to hold on to, by being married to Caitlyn? But if he had intended to marry Amanda, why didn't he feel the same draw to her?

"She tricked you somehow, I don't know how, but she is going to pay, I guarantee it." Her voice was filled with rage.

He was chilled by her expression. He couldn't help thinking how she looked filled with venom. He had no idea how to protect her intended victim. "I'm sorry."

"Make love to me Brandon," She moved into his arms. "Show me how much you love me."

As he bent to kiss her, he realized he had no desire to, but he tried anyway. If he was engaged to this woman, then he had to show her he still wanted her. He really wanted to appease her. But he couldn't pretend. The only woman he wanted in that way was Caitlyn. Finally he broke the kiss. "I just need some time Amanda."

She looked wounded and he told himself he should feel guilty, but he didn't.

After a few moments, Amanda once again began her planning. "We need to get you to the hospital and get your blood screened for drugs. We have to find out what she gave you."

He ignored her statement and looked at his watch. "Amanda, how much money do I have?"

She looked at him curiously. "I would say you're pretty comfortable."

"Do I have enough money to pay Caitlyn's bail money?"

She directed her anger at him. "Why would you want to pay for her bail?"

"Something just isn't right, I don't think she belongs there," He touched the gold band on his finger. "She is my wife..."

"Because she tricked you!" She finally noticed the ring he was wearing. "Take that damn thing off!"

He mentally counted to ten. It was understandable that Amanda, his fiancée, would want him to remove the ring. And it wasn't understandable why he liked wearing it. "I'm sorry Amanda, please bear with me... I need to get things settled. I need to remember something."

She was exasperated. "For now." Looking around the room again, Amanda stood in front of him and crossed her arms. "I want another room though. I don't want to spend the night in the bed where you slept with her."

"I'll get vou a room..."

"For us!"

"I think maybe it would be best if we slept apart for the night, just until I get my memory back a bit."

She glared at him.

"Amanda, please, don't be mad at me. You have to understand, I have no idea what the truth is and I'm relying on the things I'm being told." He rubbed the back of his neck again and tried to relieve some of the pressure he felt building. "Please help me out a little."

She shook her head and then sat down. "What can I do to help?"

"You said that we're engaged, but Caitlyn said that I've been seeing her." He could see the protest starting. "Amanda, she had photos of us together."

"I have pictures of you and me also! I even have a copy of the engagement announcement my folks put in the paper." She reached for her purse and pulled out a purse-sized photo album. "Here, look at this... Everything is in there. The only thing I'm missing is a copy of the contract we signed for the wedding ceremony."

He took the album from her but didn't open it. "When are we, when were we supposed to be married?"

"Were?" She looked pained. "I expect that you'll end this farce with her immediately."

He rubbed his head. "I promise you I'll get this all sorted out as soon as I can."

"Okay." She was mollified.

"How did we meet?"

"At work, you hired me as your secretary. We've worked very closely together on a lot of your projects. We've worked closely on a lot of things."

"So you know my business?"

"Of course, why wouldn't I?" She reached forward to take his hand. "You hire out as an Information Technology consultant, you're very successful."

"Who are my clients?"

"A lot of companies, even the government." She dug out a business card from her purse. "You were supposed to be meeting this gentleman, that's why you planned this trip. You had asked me to come with you but I had some personal stuff to do back in New York." Amanda assured him she had already been in touch with the client and got him to agree to a postponed meeting.

He frowned. "Do we often travel a lot together?"

"Oh yes. You've always said that you prefer it that way." She smiled coyly. "I get to help you with your business dealings, and then I get to help you relax at night."

No matter how he tried to picture being with Amanda, he couldn't. "Do you know how I met Caitlyn?"

"I am really getting tired of that name." She pouted. "There have been several articles in the financial section mentioning your name, she just started showing up after a few of those appeared. At first you felt sorry for her. She had some sob story about being all alone in the world and she needed a job. You paid her to run a few errands. But then she really became a nuisance and you asked her to leave us alone."

"And she didn't listen?"

"Definitely not. Then, because you had let her run some errands previously, she posed as a courier on your behalf and took funds from one of your clients. Needless to say, those funds never made it to your office." Amanda saw the pensive look on Brandon's face. "Don't feel too foolish, you weren't the only one she was conning, the police have quite a list."

He shook his head in disbelief. "I believed her. I know what you're telling me, and I saw the report the police brought with them, but I still can't see her as being so dishonest."

"That's why she got to you in the first place." Amanda stood up and went to hug Brandon. "You are so trusting, that's one of the things I love about you. You always try to see the best in everyone... and sweetheart, you bring out the best in me."

He allowed her to hug him for a moment, and then he gently pulled away. "I'm sorry Amanda, I have to find out what her bail is..."

"No! I won't let you."

He stood to face her and he looked annoyed. "Is this what our relationship is like? Do I need your permission before I can make decisions?"

"I don't understand why you want to let her out of jail?"

"I don't understand either," he ran a hand through his thick wavy hair, "but I just feel I have to do this."

"You're making a mistake."

"Maybe."

"I can't even try to talk you out of this insanity?"

"No."

Amanda gave an exasperated and very unladylike snort and walked away from Brandon. "You have to promise me that you won't let her come back here."

"I won't spend the night with her," then he added under his breath, "not again." Once again he felt a stirring in his loins as he remembered waking in her arms.

Picking up her pocketbook, Amanda threw him an impatient look and walked to the door. As she opened it, she looked back over her shoulder. "I will not let you go to her alone. I don't trust her."

"Okay." He followed her out of the room.

Chapter 3

He could feel the angry stare biting into his back as Brandon gave Caitlyn a room key. The hotel clerk had only been able to give them one room on the same floor and the second one two floors up. Explaining to Amanda that he needed to be able to watch Caitlyn, he decided to put her in the room three doors from his own.

They all went up to his room together and Brandon carried Caitlyn's suitcase to her new room. Once the door was closed behind Caitlyn, he offered to see Amanda to her door.

They took the elevator. Since Amanda had flown out to Vegas suddenly, all she had with her was a small carryon bag. Brandon offered to have a few things sent up from one of the downstairs stores. It has surprised him to realize how much room he had on his credit cards and, according to Amanda, how easily he could afford all these expenses. Apparently he had done very well for himself.

Amanda's room was very similar to his own with a king size bed, rich cherry wood furniture, flocked draperies and comforting earth tones. Throw pillows were attractively arranged on the two armchairs. The lamp on the small oval table between the chairs gave a soft glow to the room. The fresh cut flowers in her room were varying shades of orange and yellow. Although it was on the late side, they had ordered dinner for two from room service; he hoped to try to appease her after bailing Caitlyn out. He had also arranged to have a tray delivered to Caitlyn but he didn't make a big deal of that to Amanda.

He had let Amanda do the ordering for him even though the things she ordered for him didn't seem to be the things he really wanted to eat. Hot roast beef and mashed potatoes dripping with gravy didn't excite him, but he sat quietly chewing as he listened to more of Amanda's tirades about Caitlyn. Meanwhile he ignored the way she tore into a piece of blood red beef brisket. The image left an uncomfortable feeling in his gut.

She filled him in on his business, the people he dealt with on a regular basis, financial investments he had made. Earlier in the day, she informed him, she had been able to contact the man he was supposed to have his business meeting with and managed to postpone it. The man, a part time professor at the computer engineering school at the local university, was going to be busy with other matters for a few days so, she figured, it would give them enough time to get Brandon back on track.

Amanda let Brandon know that she had arranged for a local doctor to make a "house call", it was important that they learn what had cause his memory lapse. The doctor was on his way up to the room. Brandon didn't like the feeling of being managed, but he also wanted to know what happened to him to cause his amnesia. While they waited, he asked Amanda what she knew of his family and personal life.

She confirmed what Caitlyn had said about him being estranged from his father. Apparently some marital problems between his parents just before his mom passed away had angered him. He couldn't forgive his father who still lived in the family home. Amanda was much more informed about where he had grown up. It was a suburb of Chicago. He had attended the University of Illinois at Chicago graduating with a master's degree in mechanical engineering. His specialty was in robotics. Even though Brandon had no memory of his school or even the knowledge and skill he supposedly possessed, it comforted him to have some idea of who he was.

Amanda rose to let the doctor in when he knocked. The examination began while she sat to the side.

After shining several lights into his eyes, checking his pulse and blood pressure, checking reflexes and asking several questions, the doctor told Brandon how rare total amnesia was, it was highly unusual to forget everything including one's own identity. He wasn't comforted.

"Doc, will I get my memory back?"

"I would have to say most probably. This appears to be the result of drugs, once they wear off..."

"Drugs?" Brandon jumped at the thought. "What kind of drugs?"

"Sedatives, something to suppress the central nervous system."

Quickly going over the contents of his suitcase, Brandon came to a disturbing conclusion. "I don't think I'm taking any prescriptions..."

"I knew that bitch drugged you!" Amanda's voice dripped with venom.

"Could I have taken something without knowing?" He looked at the doctor.

"It's possible, but without doing a tox screen, I can only make assumptions here." He made a show of checking Brandon's pulse again and then listened to his lungs with his stethoscope, "It's an unfortunate but increasingly frequent incident for someone to put medications into drinks, especially

alcohol."

Brandon looked down. He didn't want anyone to see the concern in his eyes. He kept remembering Caitlyn telling him how he had gotten drunk the night before. "Wouldn't I have tasted something?"

The doctor stole a glance at Amanda; she was sitting quietly perched on the edge of her chair. "A lot of the drug companies are now coloring or flavoring some of the sedatives used, but, uh, if someone meant to harm you, it wouldn't be hard to come up with some of the earlier versions." Amanda cleared her throat. "We're seeing more and more use of drugs like Rohypnol, it's commonly called a roofie. Any benzodiazepine could have been used."

"What would the symptoms be?"

"It depends. If it was put into alcohol, you might have just thought you had overindulged..."

"You mean, like I got drunk or something?" He looked at Amanda, she met his gaze with anger. "How long for that to wear off?"

"Usually it wears off within the day."

"So why don't I have my memory back yet?"

"There are a lot of factors, Brandon. How much you were given, were you given another dose..."

"But I didn't drink today."

"Usually it's in alcohol, that seems to maximize the effect, but it could have been put into any beverage, coffee, soda, juice."

"How long will it stay in the blood?" Amanda sounded determined.

"Two to three days..."

"Then take a sample of his blood, I want proof of what she did to him!"

Not sure what to believe, or who, Brandon was hesitant. "Even if you find that... stuff in my blood, it still doesn't prove who gave it to me, does it?"

"I can't believe you are still defending her!" Amanda yelled at him. "She drugged you, got you drunk and then convinced you to marry her... Doctor, would a contract signed while someone is under the influence be valid?"

"Uh, no, a judge would just throw it out." The doctor was putting the tourniquet on Brandon's arm to prepare for taking a blood sample.

"So you are not married to her! Brandon, you have no obligation to her. You should have just let her rot in jail."

He inhaled sharply as he felt the needle piercing his skin. "When will I start to remember things Doc?"

"Well, assuming good health and removal from the source, if that is what was used, I would say within a few days." The doctor examined Brandon's eyes and head again. "Of course some kind of trauma to the head might change that prognosis. But I'm fairly confident that this won't be permanent."

"Permanent?" It hadn't even occurred to him that he might never remember who he was.

Amanda came to stand beside them. "Is there any injury?"

The doctor answered her. "He has a small bruise on the back of his neck at the base of his skull. It seems pretty insignificant, but..."

"But she could have hit him with something, right?"

Brandon rubbed the back of his neck reflexively.

The doctor began to squirm. "It's possible." He capped the tube of blood he had drawn. "I have to get this to the lab. I will call you with the results in the morning."

"As soon as you can," Amanda stood with a hand possessively on Brandon's shoulder. "I want to hang her!" She turned to take the doctor's elbow and walk with him to the door. "Thank you for coming. I'll be expecting your call in the morning."

The doctor nodded and took one last, pitying look at Brandon before Amanda closed the door between them.

She turned back to him.

"I don't believe him. I just can't believe she would drug me, or try to injure me." He wished he

had something to back up his beliefs. "Something is terribly wrong here."

"The terribly wrong is that you refuse to see the truth! How stupid can you be?"

Brandon was angered by her insults. "I'm going to go back to my room and try to sleep long enough to get my memory back. Then I will know who I can trust..."

"No, Brandon, sweetheart, I'm sorry." She moved to stop him from leaving. "I am just frustrated and it's not fair because I know you are too. Please... stay with me tonight."

He managed to control his annoyance with her. "No Amanda, I need time to myself." Even without his memory, he knew that at least he could trust himself. "Thank you for standing by me" He hesitated before leaning down and giving her a brief kiss. "Good night, I'll see you in the morning." Then he left.

He thought it was remarkable how much he was able to think about during the short ride between two floors in the elevator. But then, he mused, not having any memory certainly leaves your mind uncluttered.

He had no recollection at all of Caitlyn but he felt completely drawn to her. He did remember Amanda, or at least had a familiarity with her. Her name sent a curious tingling down his spine and he couldn't understand what that meant, was it a warning that maybe he wasn't as happy with her as she had indicated? Amanda's voice and her red hair somehow just belonged in his memory but he had no idea what she really meant to him. Brandon was only sure of one thing, Amanda didn't have the effect on his libido that Caitlyn did.

Pausing outside of his own hotel room door, Brandon struggled with his desire to see Caitlyn. Hell, he admitted to himself, it was a struggle not to take her in his arms and make love with her again. Finally he decided to pay her a visit, but he also decided to restrain himself and not complicate things any further with any intimacy.

Caitlyn opened the door to his knock. She was dressed in the same slacks and pink blouse she had put on that morning. Her dark eyes met his and he noticed a quick but fleeting happiness at seeing him.

"How are you doing?" He felt stupid asking her. "To say it's been a rough day is an understatement."

"I'm fine." She answered quietly. "Would you like to come in?"

She stepped aside and he entered her room. The room was appointed similarly to his and Amanda's rooms, but Caitlyn's room had two double beds instead of one king. The dinner tray he had sent to her room was still on the serving cart, he could see that she had barely eaten anything.

"Have you been able to remember anything?" She moved her purse off of one of the chairs and sat down. "You've probably had a rougher day than me."

He shook his head and smiled. Considering all that she had been put through that day, it amazed him that she was concerned about someone else. "No memories, but I did see a doctor..." He sat in the other chair. "The doctor thinks I was drugged."

"Omigosh, how?" She seemed horrified.

"He said someone probably put something into my drink."

"But who would do that? That's horrible."

"I wanted to ask you a couple of questions to try to figure that out."

"Okay."

Brandon was awestruck by her innocent reply and relieved at the same time. He wasn't sure how he would have handled it if she had gotten suddenly defensive. "Do you remember when I had my first drink?"

"You ordered a drink while we were waiting for our table," she glanced down at the rings on her hand. "After the ceremony, we went to dinner to celebrate. You had made reservations at Michael's, here in the hotel." She smiled. "It's right next to the garden. It's pretty."

There were so many reasons he wished he could remember it. "Did I act... differently after that drink?"

"Not really. I mean, we were both acting kind of giddy. You announced to the maitre'd and our

waiter that we had just gotten married."

"What did we have for dinner? Food and drink, can you tell me?"

"We started with soup, uhm, it was a mushroom soup. Then we both had fish, you had sea bass and I had sole. You ordered wine to go with it, I think it was called something like... pinel... pinella."

"Did you drink any?"

"I only took a sip. It was too dry and I'm not really a drinker. You wound up ordering an iced tea for me."

If she had drunk the wine with him, then he would have known if the stuff was put in before or after it came to the table. He didn't think one sip was enough to tell. "You said I drank a lot last night."

"I guess that was really my fault. You had ordered that carafe and then you wound up drinking it all by yourself."

"It was a carafe, not a bottle?" He wondered if that meant anything.

"Yeah. I think so." Caitlyn frowned. "You think maybe someone put something into the wine?"

"I have no clue. Did I change or anything after I drank the wine?"

"Well, you were kind of, I don't know, loopy? I figured it was because you had several glasses of wine."

He nodded. "What happened after that?"

"We finished dinner. We didn't have any dessert, we were both too full. I thought we were going to come up to the room when we left the restaurant and we started to head to the elevators. But then you suddenly decided you wanted to go into the casino."

"I changed my mind?" He looked at her puzzled expression. "About coming up to the room? Did I say why?"

"No, I don't think so. We were walking to the elevators, you had your arm around me and," she blushed, "You were leaning over to whisper something and someone bumped into you. He apologized. He had been in a group, they had just come out of the elevators, and you thought they might be students at the university. Then he left. You weren't angry or anything, you just looked worried. And then you said you wanted to try your luck at the tables."

Brandon caught himself wondering what he had whispered to her to make her blush. "Was I acting drunk?"

"You were buzzed, but you seemed pretty sure of yourself."

"But I seemed worried after we got bumped? Did I say why?"

"No. You were looking around a lot like you were looking for someone and then you ushered me into the casino."

"Can you describe the kid who bumped into me?"

She thought for a moment. "Not really, uh, average, white, maybe college age..."

"What next?" He sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm just trying to figure things out."

"That's okay. I just guess I wasn't paying attention though so it's a little hard to remember everything."

"You're doing great."

"We were at the wheel thing, roulette. You had placed a couple of bets, nothing big, and you lost." She pursed her lips. "A hostess came over and you ordered a scotch and soda for you and a cola for me. That was really when you seemed like you had too much to drink."

"What do you mean?"

"You got a little loud and I had to help you count your chips because you kept losing your place."

"This was after the scotch?" He thought about that. "Do you remember if the same hostess that took the order delivered it?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea."

"Then what happened?"

"I had suggested we go upstairs and then you got paged to the hotel phone. I was going to come with you to the lobby, but you handed me your chips and some cash and said I should go play something. You asked me not to leave the casino. You said you would meet me back there as soon as

you were off the phone." She sounded a little hurt at being left behind. "It took about a half an hour before you came back."

The hotel clerk had already told him he was on the phone for only a few minutes. Brandon had no idea where he had been for half an hour.

"I hope I helped you." Caitlyn looked concerned.

He smiled. "I think you did, a little anyway." If he was drugged, he was pretty sure it was the scotch he had ordered in the casino, and apparently Caitlyn had nothing to do with that. "I better get back to my room. Have you gotten any rest at all? We have to go to the courtroom tomorrow."

"I know. Thank you for paying my bail, I know your secretary wasn't happy" She glanced over at the dinner tray. "Oh and thank you for my meal too, I'm sure that was your idea."

"You need to take care of yourself. Caitlyn, I can afford to lose the bail money, maybe you should take off..."

She stood. "No! I haven't done anything wrong."

He knew in his gut she was telling the truth, but the evidence said otherwise. "The police have enough proof against you. I just don't want you going to jail."

She wrapped her arms around herself and her voice shook. "I'm innocent."

Brandon had to take her in his arms at that point. He hated to see her looking so vulnerable. "I believe you, I really do." He held her close against him and thought how well she fit.

"But why would anyone say that I stole? They don't even believe I'm who I say I am."

"I don't know sweetheart."

She looked up at him when he used the endearment and he could no longer resist the urge to kiss her. Caitlyn's lips parted under his and he felt the tips of their tongues touch and tease. He held her tighter and he was afraid he'd crush her if he weren't careful. She pressed herself up against him.

When it became obvious, physically obvious, that Brandon really wanted more, he broke the kiss. He was determined to keep himself controlled but he admitted that it wasn't easy so long as she was in his arms. He fought with himself to let her go.

It took a moment for him to catch his breath. "I'm sorry Caitlyn."

She gently brushed her fingertips over his lips. "Don't be."

He grabbed her hand. Her touch had nearly sent him careening out of control. He kissed her fingers carefully. "I have to go back to my room now." Brandon walked towards her door. He avoided facing her. "I need you to think about running away. I'll give you whatever money you need..."

"I'm not leaving."

"Caitlyn..."

"No Brandon. I'm innocent. If I run I will look guilty." He finally turned to look at her. "I'm just going to take a quick shower and then get into bed. Tomorrow will be better. They are going to find out that all those papers are wrong."

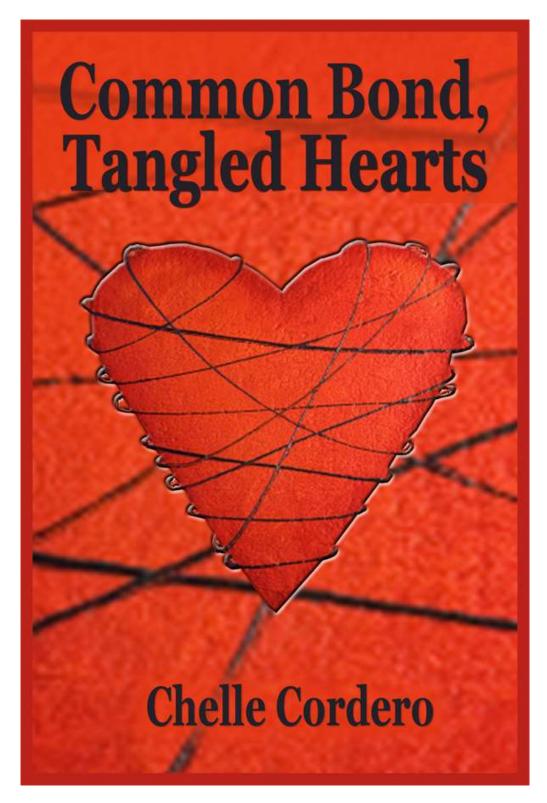
"I hope so." He meant it. "Good night." He started to lean in for a kiss and then stopped himself.

She saw him stop and smiled slightly. "I will see you tomorrow."

"Yeah." He nodded at her and then he left.

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Common Bond, Tangled Hearts by Chelle Cordero

Prologue

If he was reading her surprised expression right, she was expecting somebody else to be on the other side of the door when she swung it wide open. Cautiously, the willowy blonde pushed the door partly closed before politely inquiring if she could help him.

Justin took his time letting his eyes roam from her short, tousled hair down to her very long legs. He noticed, in typical male fashion, how very shapely those long legs were. She was wearing a loose fitting shirt and cut off jeans, her feet were bare.

Layne felt uncomfortable as the stranger's eyes made their leisurely excursion. She closed the door just a little bit more and then fortified her courage with the thought that her nosy neighbor, Mrs. Addamson, would open her door at the least little yell she might make.

"Is there something you want?" She impatiently asked him and then blushed when his eyes flew up to meet hers with an amused smile.

Oh baby, where have you been all my life? He thought and then smiled politely. "I was looking for..." he carefully checked a piece of paper he held in his hand. "...for Layne Gillette." Justin said 'Lane'.

She refrained from correcting his pronunciation. For the last few years, Layne had explained to people that it was pronounced like Janie except with an L.

"Who's asking?" No matter that he seemed to fit the exact description of tall, dark and handsome that she and her friends always joked about, she was wary of any stranger who came looking for her.

"My name is Justin Ross..." He waited just a moment to see if there was any recognition, he was disappointed. "I was told that Layne Gillette lives here."

"It's Lay-nee..." She was expressionless.

"Hi, I take it you're Lay-nee?" His eyebrows arched as he emphasized the proper pronunciation.

"What do you want?" Layne inconspicuously braced herself against the door so she could slam it forcefully in his face if need be.

"It's... uh... personal. May I come in?" He was mesmerized by her golden eyes.

"No." She was firm.

It took a moment before her refusal totally sunk in. Not many dared to refuse Justin Ross anything. He took a deep breath in and started to patiently explain to her that he needed to speak with her privately. "Look, I just came a long way... and we really need to talk..."

"Hey Mom, is that Rita?" The childlike voice startled the both of them. Layne turned her head to answer when Justin pushed on the door with his hand and knocked her off-balance. The door swung open and Justin got his first look at the little boy who had his mother's golden eyes. Like his own hair, the boy had jet-black curly locks and the contrast was extraordinary.

"Is that him?" Justin pushed his way past Layne and went to the boy. "Are you Dennis?"

The little boy stared at the stranger who had pushed past his mother. Justin didn't mean to scare him and started to smile.

She was ready to physically tackle him as she shouted at her son. "Go to your room... now!"

"But Mom..." The boy looked between the stranger and his mother.

"And close your door!" She put herself between the stranger and her child. The door to the hallway swung wide open.

"Mommmm..." He did his best to hide his trembling lower lip.

"Now!" Layne stared at him until he obeyed. She stood with her hands against Justin's firm chest to block his advance. She swung her gaze back to Justin, he could have sworn her eyes glowed

with rage. "Did Charlie send you?"

He was puzzled by her strange behavior. She seemed overly melodramatic. All he wanted to do was see the boy. "Who's Charlie?" He was annoyed when he heard the click of the boy's bedroom door.

"Just answer the damn question!" Layne had tried to mentally prepare herself for just this kind of confrontation for the last six years, but she never thought her anger or her fear would be so great.

"I don't know... who the hell... Charlie is!" He forcefully brushed her hands off of him. "Look, I came to speak to you because..."

"If Charlie didn't send you, who did?" She cut him off.

Justin tried to control his own frustration. He understood this woman's need to protect the boy from someone she didn't know, but he needed desperately to see the boy. He resented her refusal.

"No one sent me!" He made sure not to yell.

"Then why are you here?" She wouldn't trust him.

"Because... we need to talk." It was harder to say it than he realized.

Layne was prepared to defend her son with her life if she had to. "...about what?"

"You and I need to talk. I'd really like to do this calmly." Justin knew she wasn't going to react very well. She was being too overprotective without knowing the reason for his visit. Once she found out...

"What do you and I have to talk about? There's nothing for us to talk about." She wasn't letting her guard down for anything. And if he thought he could just come in here and shove her around, he'd soon learn differently.

"Layne..." He tried to reach out for her, she sidestepped him. "We need to talk about... our son." He saw her look of shock. "We need to talk about Dennis."

She slowly turned her head to look at a photograph of Dennis that was sitting on the top of her television set and made the comparison to the man standing in front of her.

Suddenly she screamed at him and began to beat at his chest with her clenched fists. "Get out! Get out of here! Get the hell out of my home!"

"Layne, calm down." Justin tried to defend himself from her blows. He grabbed at her hands and tried to hold the struggling woman away from him. "Stop struggling. Just calm down!" That's when he heard a door open.

"Should I call the police, Layne?" Mrs. Addamson called across the hallway from the protection of her own doorway.

Justin wanted to see the boy again. He wanted this beautiful lunatic to stop attacking him. He didn't want to have to call his lawyer to get him out of jail. "I'll be back." Justin turned on his heel and left. Mrs. Addamson slammed her door as he entered the hallway.

Layne pushed the door closed behind him and locked it. Then she sunk down to the floor and held herself to keep from trembling.

Chapter One

"Damn it!" Justin paced the short length of his motel room several times. This little nothing town was one of the last places he wanted to be. Damn Davis for insisting that he had to "get this matter cleared up". Damn the college pranksters that robbed him of a choice. Damn his brother for leaving him the only heir. And damn his grandfather for dying and dumping everything on his shoulders. He stopped short of cursing his frail mother for making him feel guilty enough to accept the duties of running the three stores.

After a very rocky start, Justin had been a model student for years until he earned his master's degree. He drank only moderately and partied occasionally. There had been a few college girls he saw on a serious level, but he never got carried away. He never made promises and he never once thought of a future with any of them. That was why he was so surprised when the family attorney, Larry Davis, told him he was a father.

"That's impossible!" Justin protested. "I was always very careful. If some girl told you it's mine,

don't believe it." He had always been a careful and considerate lover and when it came time to end a relationship, he always did it gently. He'd bet his life, he never got any girl pregnant.

"Justin, maybe you'd better sit down..." Larry put his unlit pipe in his mouth and waited until Justin was seated. "It seems that you and some of your friends decided to do a little bit of celebrating just prior to your graduation, when you received your masters."

A little bit of a celebration was an understatement, Justin thought. He remembered having gotten totally drunk, he spent at least two days nursing a hangover. He suddenly laughed. "If you're going to tell me I went out and got laid, there was no way... I was too far gone for that."

"You were... the victim of a fraternity house prank." Larry had known about this for a few years, but Justin's grandfather wanted it kept quiet for the time being. "I don't know how to say this delicately, but... you passed out in the offices of a sperm bank."

"What?!" Justin stood abruptly.

"You made a... donation." Larry watched the younger man grow furious.

"I wasn't even conscious! That's impossible. Isn't it?" Justin stood looking down at his body incredulously. "Isn't it?" He looked back at Larry with a perplexed look on his face. "Isn't it impossible?"

"Apparently not..."

"How do you know about this?" Justin was in shock.

"Your grandfather received an anonymous letter a few years ago."

He frowned at the attorney's words. "Why am I only just now finding out about this?"

"Your grandfather wanted things checked out thoroughly. He wanted to know if there were any heirs." Larry Davis handed Justin some printed documents. "You have a six year old son, his name is Dennis. Here's his and his mother's address."

Justin looked the papers over and gave a nervous laugh. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Your grandfather and I discussed this just a week before he died. You have to go see the mother, find out what claims, if any, they plan to make against the company. This boy is legally your heir." And so Justin headed out for Massachusetts to a little town miles away from civilized Boston.

He flopped himself down on the lumpy mattress. "So grandpa, this is why I'm in no-wheres-ville." Speaking towards the ceiling as if he really expected a reply, Justin snorted angrily. "Why the hell did you keep this information from me?"

Larry had told him how his grandfather had hired a private investigator to check out the unbelievable story. Not only had the young lady been able to confirm that he had donated... she also provided files which had been discreetly, even if illegally, removed from the medical center's archives. It was through these files that they came up with the name of a young woman artificially inseminated nearly seven years earlier.

Re-reading the report from the P.I., Justin noted that there seemed to be approximately three years that the young lady didn't even seem to exist. Then she suddenly surfaced again, with a different name, and a two-year old child. At the time of the procedure she was Elaine Harris, but now she was known as Layne Gillette. He had no more information on her in the early years.

Lay-nee with the long legs, thought Justin. Oh, if he had known her seven years ago he wouldn't have minded bedding her. But he still would have been careful enough not to get her pregnant. He thought about the boy... Dennis... his son. Justin was happy that his child had inherited his mother's golden eyes, those eyes literally shone with magic in that youthful face. Those same golden eyes captivated his imagination in the mother's face. He yawned, tired from his trip.

He looked at the clock and decided to call it a night. He wanted to be back at Layne's first thing in the morning, early, too early for her to make any kind of an escape. Justin finally dozed off dreaming of Layne and dreaming that he had been there to spill his seed into her... in person. He smiled in his sleep as he could almost imagine feeling those long legs wrapped around him.

Layne didn't sleep. If this Justin Ross person could find her, how far behind was Charlie? How did Ross manage to find her anyway? And what did he want?

She had absolutely no doubts about his paternal connection to Dennis, it was a wonder she

hadn't seen the resemblance for herself before he even said anything.

At least, she mused, if Dennis grew up to look anything like his father, he was going to be a very handsome man. But handsome or not, she didn't need another father in Dennis' young life.

Why did he come looking for her now? Dennis was already six years old, if there had been curiosity, she would have thought that would have come much sooner. Besides, didn't he sign away all his rights when he decided to go to the sperm bank? She shook her head to clear it of the image of his broad shoulders. His chest did feel so very solid where she hit him. Layne mentally chastised herself for noticing his good looks. He probably figured he was some super being who was obligated to add his genes to the world's population. He probably figured he was doing the world a favor.

Looking at her framed photo of her precious son, Layne realized that Ross had done her a favor, even if she didn't think so at the time. Would she have to fear him, too, now? After so many years of hiding from Charlie, Layne never even once thought there might be an even greater danger. God, she'd fight him with every bit of strength if he ever thought he was going to take Dennis from her. She would do whatever she had to protect her son from the likes of the Charlie's and the Justin Ross' of the world.

Poor Dennis had been so upset because of his mother's sudden violence earlier when Ross forced his way into their home. She couldn't tell him the truth, he was much too young and innocent for that. As far as Dennis knew, his father died before he was born and before she and his father could marry. He was a love child as far as he knew and that was what she intended to keep telling him. She knew that her son desperately envied his friends who had fathers to comfort and protect them and it broke her heart to see the yearning in her little boy's face. But she would lose him if she let that happen and she knew without a doubt that Charlie would only have done her son harm. Maybe Justin Ross would be no good either. She fibbed to her son and told him that Justin was someone she once knew and that they didn't stay friends.

She knew that she was going to be dead on her feet tomorrow if she didn't manage to get some sleep. Layne wondered suddenly how it would have been to have actually slept with Dennis' father instead of having his sperm injected into her through a catheter.

Layne's cheeks flamed as she realized the wanton road her thoughts had taken. It just wasn't natural, she decided. Nothing had been very natural for her ever since she met Charlie.

She just knew it was going to happen. Layne had finally fallen asleep during the very early morning hours and she hadn't heard her alarm clock chirping for the first thirty minutes. It was really only when Dennis shook her shoulder when she realized how late it was... the alarm had woken her son.

They were rushing through their morning trying to get ready, If Dennis missed the school bus, she was going to have to ask one of her neighbors to drive him to school. She hated to impose on the people around her. Layne had learned that every favor was a debt to be paid back, sometimes at prices much too high for her comfort. But she didn't own her own car and the walk to the school was just too far.

Dennis spilled his milk while he tried to gobble down the toaster pastry she tossed at him in a last ditch effort to get him ready to leave. Layne caught herself before she actually yelled, but Dennis started to pout anyway. It wasn't his fault that this morning was so askew. She kept reminding herself that. It was thanks to his father, his biological father... that damn Justin Ross. What right did he have to force his way into her home and preoccupy her thoughts all night?

She remembered to run water into Dennis' breakfast dishes although there was no way she would be able to take the time to wash and dry them this morning. Layne had thrown her own clothes on in a haphazard manner and had barely passed a brush through her golden curls, but her next hurdle after seeing Dennis off to school was getting to her job, a long walk in the opposite direction of the school building.

Layne worked as a receptionist at the local realty office. She was generally very good with people and her boss didn't question her education, or lack of it. So long as she did her job well he was happy. The job was ideal because she was able to have the school bus drop Dennis off at the nearby

corner. Since the office was in a small model house, there was an extra room where Dennis could nap, do his homework, or play a game. There was even a small yard he could sit in. She never had to worry about his whereabouts and he had gotten very friendly with the older children of one of the realty agents. Rita often let one or both of her kids come to the office after school to sit and play with Dennis. He never got a chance to feel neglected.

Layne pulled the door open to reveal Justin getting ready to knock.

"What are you doing here, again?" Layne said under her breath. She didn't want to upset Dennis before he had to go to school.

"I... I told you I would be back to talk." He looked down at Dennis and noticed that the boy was watching him with those very interested and very big golden eyes. "I thought Dennis would have left for school already."

She didn't take kindly to his criticism. Just because he left some sperm in a cup seven years ago didn't give him the right to barge into her life and criticize the way she was raising their... her son. "We're running late. If you would just get out of our way..."

"Was he supposed to catch that school bus?" Justin didn't move.

Layne gave a resigned sigh, they had obviously missed it after all. "Yes."

"I'll drive him." Justin was looking just a little too eager for Lavne's composure.

"No..."

"But Mom, I'm going to be late and Mrs. Chase is giving out our parts for the Memorial Day play today." Dennis whined. The stranger didn't look as scary to him today as he did last night. Besides, his mother had told him they used to be friends.

"Come on, my car is right downstairs." Justin smiled as he encouraged her.

"I have to come with you." Layne relented. She wasn't going to chance putting her son in this stranger's car, a stranger that probably thought he had a right to the boy.

"Okay."

"Will you be able to drive me back?" She would have preferred to get out at Dennis' school with him, but then there would be no way she could get back to her job anywhere near on time. Layne needed her job.

"Sure." Justin waited while Layne locked the door and then led the way to his car.

Layne had to introduce Dennis to Justin as they were seated in the car. She introduced Justin as an old friend that she lost touch with. Then she sank low in her seat as Dennis made his own observations.

"My mommy said she doesn't like you anymore."

"Anymore?" Justin looked sideways at Layne.

"I told him that we used to know each other." Layne mumbled.

"Oh, that..." Justin pretended to remember for Dennis' sake. "Well, I'm a much nicer person now, so maybe your mommy will like me... again." He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing at her embarrassment.

"Will you Mommy?" The little boy was anxious. He was at that tender age where he thought everybody should be friends.

"...maybe." Layne felt trapped.

"I hope so, Mommy, 'cause if Mr. Ross is your friend, he can be mine, too."

"You know, if your mommy doesn't mind," Justin stole a look at Layne, "you can call me Justin. Friends should be able to call each other by their first names."

"Is that okay, Mommy?" The little boy was impressed with the privilege he was given. "Can I?"

Layne felt uncomfortable with allowing her son to get close with his... biological father. "Well, actually Dennis, you should call an adult Mr..."

"But Mommy, we're friends." Dennis pouted.

"Come on Layne, what would it hurt?" Justin pouted almost the same as his son.

What would it hurt? Just me when you break my heart and take my son away from me. She looked up at the rearview mirror and saw her son's big eyes beginning to water as he waited for

permission. "Well... okay." She didn't sound very sure of herself.

"Thank you Mommy!" Dennis nearly bounced on the seat in happiness.

She chanced another look at Justin Ross and saw him grinning. Damn you Ross, she thought, you knew I was going to give in. You knew I couldn't keep denying him things. Layne felt the usual guilt she thought she had learned to live with for denying her son a father for all these years.

He could feel her resentment. Maybe he shouldn't have pushed, but hey, it wasn't like he had told the boy to call him Daddy or anything like that. She'd just have to get over it.

"So Dennis, how do you like school?" Justin asked over his shoulder as he waited for the traffic light to turn green.

"I like it... Justin." Dennis was very proud of the way he said his new friend's name. "I'm really smart"

"Oh yeah?" Was that actually pride Justin was feeling, he wondered? "What's your favorite subject?"

"Math. I'm real good at it." Dennis was pleased with himself.

"That's great! You got a good business head, I see." Now why did he go ahead and say a thing like that? His grandfather had always compared everything he and his brother did as little kids to the business. "What else do you like about school?"

"Oh lots of things. I like to paint. And I like to be in plays. Will you come to my play, Justin?"

"When is it?" Justin asked quickly.

"Oh Mr. Ross won't be able to." Layne tried to speak over Justin.

Justin flashed Layne an angry look, but then he realized he probably wouldn't even be there. "I'm only here on vacation for two weeks, Dennis."

"Oh." Dennis sat back and remained quiet.

Layne could see that Justin felt guilty for saying no. Good for you, she reflected, the sooner you understand that you can't let him get attached to you, the better off we'll all be. Still, Layne was baffled that he did seem to feel sorry.

"That's the school up ahead... you'll have to go in the second driveway, it's one way." Layne pointed to the brick building coming up on the right. She saw that Dennis' bus was only just unloading passengers. She was relieved that he wasn't late for classes after all.

Justin pulled into the circular driveway and stopped the car to let Dennis out. Layne stepped out to kiss her son good-bye.

"Bye Dennis. Have a good day. I'll be seeing you." He shouted across the front seat as he watched his son throw his little arms around Layne in a bear hug. He wondered what it would be like to be hugged by his son... or by his mother.

"Bye Justin. Thanks for driving me." The little boy waved and then ran off to meet some friends filing into the school building.

Layne got back into the car. She and Justin both noticed Dennis pointing back to the car with an excited smile as he pointed it out to an interested friend. Justin put the car in gear and drove slowly out of the driveway. He headed back in the direction they had come from.

"I take it there's no man in his life?" Justin quietly asked. He wondered if there was any man in her life either. But he didn't feel that he had that right to ask, not yet.

"No there isn't. And he's done just fine." She retorted angrily.

"Hey, I'm not criticizing. I'm just trying to learn a little more about him." He shrugged.

"Why?"

"Because he's my son."

"No. That's your... sperm donation. He's my son, not yours."

"Layne..." He made an effort to soften his voice. "Layne, we really do need to talk."

"There is nothing, nothing to talk about." She was suddenly frightened. "You... jerked off in some cup or something seven years ago. That's the total extent of your involvement here. You can't have him!"

Justin pulled the car over to the curb and stopped. He turned to face Layne. He was disturbed by the fear he saw in her eyes. "Wait a minute. Do you think I'm here to try to take him away from

you?"

"Well why else are you here?" She challenged him.

"Because I just found out that I have a son." He felt frustrated.

"Well, what did you think was going to happen when you decided to be a sperm donor?"

"Layne..." He was embarrassed. "I didn't know that I was a sperm donor until I found out about Dennis."

She looked at him incredulously. "You're kidding, right?" She watched him shake his head. "How did that happen?"

He literally hid his face in his hands as he spoke. "I got drunk one night... and some people I was with apparently thought it was a great joke."

Layne stared at him, he wouldn't look at her. Then she started to laugh.

"Hey, it's not funny!" He growled. "You know, I really feel a little violated here."

She tried unsuccessfully to smother her laughter. "I'm sorry. It's just not the normal kind of story."

Justin was angered that she saw any humor in the story. "You know, if I had decided to father a kid, I really would have liked it to be my own decision." He leered at her insolently. "And looking at the mother here, I, uh, would have liked to have been there myself to do it... personally. I can guarantee you would have liked it, too."

She stopped laughing suddenly. "How dare you!"

"Oh, believe me, I would have found a way. And I'm sure you would have enjoyed it a hell of a lot more than some medical procedure." He traced her jaw line with a finger until she yanked her face away.

Layne felt her entire body grow uncomfortably warm as he let his brazen gaze travel over her once again. She hesitated and then just turned to her door and started to open it. "Well, thank you very much for driving... my son to school."

"Layne..." He reached out to gently grab her arm before she could leave. "Layne, I'm sorry. I, I just really feel uncomfortable here and..." He was suddenly at a loss as to what to say. "You know, Dennis is a great kid. You've done a terrific job with him."

"Thank you." She was flustered by his humility.

"Can we please go somewhere to talk?" Justin looked imploringly at Layne.

"I have to get to work."

"Do you have a little time? I'll buy you a cup of coffee. And I can drive you right to the door afterwards."

She gave in.

They sat in a booth where they could talk without being overheard and yet where Layne felt comfortable because there were so many other people around.

"Would you tell me about Dennis?" Justin wanted to know everything he could about his son.

Layne smiled thinking of her little imp. "He's... an average little boy. He likes to draw and build things. I keep teasing him that he'll be a great architect one day." Layne paused as she realized she'd probably never be able to afford college for him. She shrugged. "There's not really much, he loves to play ball and ride his bike. Of course he loves all the current action heroes."

"When's his birthday?" He liked the way Layne's eyes shone when she spoke about Dennis.

"The end of April. He just turned six." She wanted to share with him because he did seem so sincere, but she still worried about the reason for his interest.

"He's a bright kid." He just wanted Layne to keep talking.

"Oh yeah." She was very proud of her son. "He's really mature for his age, too. He's really friendly, as you found out yourself. And he's a caring little guy."

"You've done a great job with him." Justin sipped his coffee and watched Layne over the steam rising from his cup. He could see she was still poised to run and he wished she could relax. He just knew she wouldn't like what he had to say, he knew because she had shown such fear earlier. "Layne, I'd like to be a part of his life..."

She shook her head. "No, that's not a good idea." There was just no way she would, or could, allow that.

"Why not? I already told you... I promise you, I'm not going to try to take him away from you. I'd be a fool to do that, he's too happy."

She could barely look at him. "It would be too confusing."

"We don't have to tell him I'm his father... at least not until he's much older and can understand." Ever since Justin saw the little boy he became so real. Justin realized that this is what he had been missing for so long. He wanted to know his son. "I'll just be a family friend for now."

Layne was nervously wringing her hands. "I don't want him getting attached to anyone." What if they had to hide again? She couldn't bear to see the hurt in Dennis' eyes if he had to lose his new friend and she knew that saying goodbye to Justin would be a loss. It was better if it didn't go any further right now.

He saw the fear in her eyes again. "Layne, why are you running?"

She was startled by his question. "I don't know what you mean..."

"You're hiding from..." He had to search his memory. "Charlie. And I know that Layne Gillette is not your real name."

She began to feel very frightened of him again. "Of course it is!"

"No. Whatever it is that's got you so scared... Elaine Harris... I can help you."

She stood abruptly. "How did you... Don't come near us again."

"Layne?"

"No, I don't care who you are." Layne looked around to make sure they weren't being watched. She didn't want anyone in this town to know her secrets. "Look, if you really care about Dennis, you'll just leave us alone. You don't know what you're opening the door to." She started to leave.

Justin stood and took her arm gently. "Let me help."

"No." She shook her head as she looked at him. He was confused and he was concerned. But there was too much risk. "Goodbye." She pulled her arm away and left.

He stared after her for a moment unsure whether to run after her or not. Finally he sat at the table and wondered what the hell she was so scared of.

Chapter Two

The motel room phone was ringing as he unlocked the door. It was only for a moment, but Justin wondered if Layne might have gotten his phone number somehow and was calling to say she needed his help. When he picked up the phone and heard Larry Davis' voice he almost laughed at himself for getting his hopes up.

"Where have you been all morning?" Larry sounded perturbed.

"I went to see Layne and Dennis."

"Is she looking for money?" He could hear papers being rustled on Larry's desk.

"No." Justin sighed. That would actually have made it easier for him; it would have given him some kind of a hook. "To be honest, she wants nothing to do with me."

"That's good!"

"No Larry, Dennis is really something special. I want to know him." And knowing his son's mother wouldn't be so bad either.

"Justin, you went up there to make sure there were no complications, not make problems!" The attorney admonished him.

"I've got a son now Larry..."

"Who has managed just fine for six years without you."

If someone had told him six years ago that he was going to be a father, he didn't think he would have been very happy about it. But at least he would have had the opportunity to watch his son grow. The loss stabbed at him in his heart. "Dennis and I were both robbed of knowing each other, but now we have a chance to make up for that."

"You just said his mother doesn't want you there. So just give it up and come on home. It's for the best."

"No, I'm staying for..."

"Besides Justin, I called to let you know your mom is sick. She's asking for you."

Instantly alert, Justin even forgot about Layne for a moment. "What's wrong?" His very delicate mother had been constantly sick ever since Justin's dad died. It was no wonder, for all their money and material comfort, her life hadn't been easy. Justin's father was the only mainstay to keep her going after she buried one of her two children. Justin, always the dutiful son, almost always anyway, paid for round-the-clock companionship and a visiting nurse in order to keep her comfortable in the big house the two of them lived in. This way he was able to work or travel, whatever he had the need for. Nobody but Larry knew that he maintained a small apartment that he could use when he needed some space or needed a place for overnight company.

"Don't worry, it's not serious, but she's demanding that you be there. She refuses to eat otherwise."

Justin felt frustrated. His mother had been so used to being pampered by her husband and then later by her father-in-law. Now, her demands for attention fell entirely on his shoulders. This wasn't the first time she had refused to eat or take her medicine when he wasn't around, but until recently, his grandfather was there to help smooth things over.

"I'll pack my bag and be home in a couple of hours." Justin sounded resigned. He only hoped he could get back here just as quickly. Justin resented the sometimes huge responsibilities that had been thrust upon him in his lifetime. He was born into a privileged family life thanks to his great-grandfather's foresight and hard work and he really did respect the old man for that. Justin was very young when his great-grandfather died while working in the lumberyard. He always wondered if he would have had the same obsession for the paint and lumber business as his father and grandfather if his great-granddaddy had been around longer. His grandfather and his father took the business over when great-granddaddy died of a massive heart attack in the lumberyard. Justin spent his teen-age years after school working in the yard alongside his identical twin, Jason Ross the Fourth.

Jason and Justin both used the heavy physical labor to build muscles that all the high school girls ogled and the guys envied. It had become a game for them to toss the heavy pieces of lumber and sacks of concrete-mix between them. Justin really did enjoy those carefree years. Both boys were handsome in their own right, but the adoration heaped upon them by the female population only served to make them even more proud. Their jet-black hair and deep tans from working out-of-doors made them stand out from the crowd even more. Jason loved to show off whenever a group of schoolgirls walked by and he always made them pause to watch as he stripped to a bare chest and climbed on the highest stacks of piled lumber. Whenever dad caught him, there was always hell to pay.

Dad wasn't there the day that Jason had climbed on a hill of railroad ties. Justin saw the stacks of wood begin to sway, but his brother wasn't listening to his warning shouts. Jason was laughing and showing off for his admirers. Justin ran from the other side of the yard dodging other skids and a moving forklift. By the time he reached his brother, Jason was hidden under a mound of wood. He died that night in the hospital, the swelling in his brain had nowhere to go. At sixteen years old, he never had a chance.

Justin refused to work in the lumberyard after that. His grieving mother took his side. His father, Jason Ross the Third was angry at his remaining son's refusal to give all his devotion to the success of the business, but he went along with his wife's pleas and let Justin work in the paint department inside. The long time employees of Ross Yards always reminded Justin how much he and his brother had looked alike and he felt angry about the constant comparisons.

Now when his mother reminded him that he was all she had left and talked about how Jason would have done things differently, Justin couldn't help wondering if she had wished it had been him who died that night so many years ago.

Layne had expected Justin to follow her, or at least show up at the apartment that night even though she told herself she didn't want him around. She hated not having an answer for Dennis when

he asked when they would see Justin again.

He really did seem like he wanted to help her and she almost buckled under. Having a strong shoulder to lean on, figuratively only she reminded herself, would have been a welcome change for her. She told him to get lost and he obviously did. Layne had even called the town's one motel after Dennis wouldn't stop asking her about Justin, they said he checked out that morning. Well, she thought, he made a good show of caring and then... poof, he was gone. It was good that she hadn't counted on him after all. Once again she fibbed. She told Dennis that Justin had to go back to work early and didn't know when he'd be able to visit again. She hated herself when she saw her little boy's eyes moist with disappointment. She hated Justin for doing that to him.

Layne chastised herself as she scrubbed out the glass-baking pan she had used to make their dinner in. She had made extra ravioli just in case he showed up, which he didn't. She did tell him to leave them alone, but she thought he was going to fight her on that; she had actually looked forward to his perseverance. It was only because Justin was Dennis' biological father that she even thought of the man, at least that's what she kept telling herself. After seeing him in her little living room, seeing how he filled the empty space with his broad shoulders and his wavy black hair, Layne knew how tired she was. She was tired of being alone, tired of seeing the yearning in Dennis' eyes, tired of hiding. She really had hoped that he'd stick around no matter what she said to him.

"Mommy, did Justin get mad at me?" Dennis stood next to the kitchen doorframe.

"No, of course not. Why would you even think that?" Layne dried her hands on the dishtowel and walked over to her son.

He pouted... and he looked just like Justin. Layne knelt in front of him and opened her arms to him. Dennis hesitated and then ran into her arms and held her tightly.

"Why do you think he got mad at you?"

"I took something from his car this morning."

"Oh?" Layne noticed that he was holding a newspaper circular in his hand. "What's this?"

"He had more. I wouldn't have taken it if it was the only one." Dennis showed the circular to Layne.

Emblazoned across the top of the front page was the name of a store, "J. Ross Paint and Lumber"; three locations were listed. It said the family-owned company was established early in the century in a New York City suburb. The colorful advertisement showed a lot of wood, paint and building supplies.

"Isn't that Justin's name?" Dennis tentatively pointed to the R-O-S-S.

"Yes, it is." Layne gently pried the circular from Dennis' little hand. She opened it curiously.

"Look, that's Justin." He pointed to a photo inset in the middle of the fold-out.

Next to the photo was a short bio about the owner and president of J. Ross Paint and Lumber. It stated that he was the fourth generation of the family to run the firm. A few innocuous public relations facts were thrown in about his years of experience, involvement in the community and his education. There was really nothing personal about the man. Layne wondered if he was married. He didn't wear a wedding ring... but then neither did she.

"Can I keep it, Mommy?" Dennis looked at her with his huge eyes.

"You know you really shouldn't have taken it without asking first." Layne was positive that Justin wouldn't have minded giving the flyer to his son. It obviously was part of his legacy. "Put it away safely." She almost added that he would have to tell Justin about it the next time he saw him, but she didn't want to get his hopes up.

It both impressed and scared Layne that Justin Ross had both power and money. It scared her because men with power often used it to get whatever they wanted. Charlie had. At the same time, maybe Justin would be the one man she could count on to stand up to Charlie if they ever needed. At least now she knew where to reach him.

As Dennis got ready for bed, Layne thought of her own childhood. Her parents had died in a car accident when she was just a toddler, she didn't even remember them. Her grandparents raised her; grandpa died when she was six, her grandmother had a stroke which left her in a coma when

Layne was almost eight. Layne was put into a foster home close by so she could visit her grandmother in the hospital. Grandma died the day Layne turned eight. She figured it was because the state had never been able to trace down any of her mother's relations that she was kept in the foster care program rather than put up for adoption.

Some of the foster homes weren't too terrible, the parents were friendly and her foster siblings were nice to play with. But as Layne grew into a teen-ager and her tall lanky shape developed into a womanly figure, Layne found herself in a dangerous situation. She had been put into a home where the parents had two teen-age boys of their own. Her foster parents called her ungrateful when she complained that the boys were sneaking peeks of her while she showered or changed in her room. Layne tolerated it until the night one of her foster brothers climbed into her bed and touched her in ways he had no right to. She ran away before dawn broke.

The next few days she literally lived on the street with no money, no food and no bed to sleep in. That was when she met Charlie. He found her in the alley outside of his gallery and he invited her in to warm up, use the shower in the back of the store and sleep in the stock room; it was the first solid sleep she had in days. When she woke up, she found a tray laden with juice and milk and cereal and fruit. She was so grateful to him.

After she was rested and clean and the hunger pangs in her stomach were gone, he invited her into his office to chat. She told him what had happened and thanked him for his rescue. He asked her how old she was, she told him sixteen; he was forty-nine. He offered her a permanent solution, one which the frightened teen-age girl saw only as a fairy tale come true. He had money, he lived in a big house, he owned an international art company and he was offering to marry her; she would have money and status and a place to call home. Because of her age, he handed her money and travel directions to a nearby state where the legal age to marry was as young as sixteen and he told her he'd meet her with the necessary documents. She never bothered to ask what documents they needed.

They met at the hotel and went to the justice of the peace where Elaine Cowan became Mrs. Charles Harris. That night he took her to bed and when she cried from the pain he caused her, he told her that the first time was the worst and it was a small price to pay for all the comfort she now would be living with. They went home the next day.

Layne got used to Charlie taking what he called his husbandly rights, but she never looked forward to them. She learned quickly that any refusals she made only made things worse, he wouldn't be denied, he didn't care what her reasons were. After the second month of their marriage, Charlie demanded that Layne take a pregnancy test, it was negative. He demanded another one every month after that and with each negative response, he became angrier and more abusive. Charlie told Layne that he "bought her" so that she could give him an heir. He told her that horrifying fact the very first night he beat her.

He hadn't told his mother precisely why he had to get back to Massachusetts. If he had told her that he had a son, he would have had to produce him and he didn't know if Layne would ever give him that chance. Justin almost kicked himself, he realized long after the fact that he should have called her the day he left town. No matter what she had said to him about leaving them alone, he should have called. He realized that she would believe that he had just walked away without giving them any thought, just like she seemed so scared of.

Larry Davis was really upset with him. "Why do you have to pursue it? She gave you the boot. She said she doesn't want you around. You were told she doesn't want you in the kid's life." Davis shook his finger at Justin as he lectured him. "Leave it alone already."

"But this is my son. I don't want to leave it alone." Justin continued to protest.

"It's not like you got her knocked up or anything. She made the decision to get pregnant. It's not your problem." Larry had come into the company long after Justin's brother had died and he had first met the young man when he was refusing any responsibility for the business. Later, when Justin returned from Europe, the attorney saw a much more serious side of him. He still never expected this need to be part of a child's life that he never even knew existed until recently. "Look, if you really feel some obligation, write the kid into your will or something, or send his mother a bond for him towards

college. But you don't have to waste your time on them."

"It's not a waste of time!" He pounded his fist on the lawyer's desk. "All I want to know is what the hell she is so scared of. Find out exactly who Charlie is. Tell me why she's using a phony name." He stared angrily at the older man. "You got it?"

Davis was indignant. He had watched this kid grow up. He had been friends with Justin's father and had come into the company years ago. It was the next best thing to family. Hah! Well, if this young cipher wanted to treat him like an employee that would be the best he'd ever get from him again. "Oh, I got it alright... Mr. Ross!"

Justin cursed under his breath. "Larry, I'm sorry. I had no right to overstep. If you saw my son, I think you'd understand. This is really important to me. I didn't expect it."

"Whatever." Larry collected his file folders off of his desktop. "Will there be anything else, Mr. Ross?" He stared at Justin.

"No." He left Larry's office. He had already apologized, he didn't know what else to do.

So now his mother was upset with him because he wouldn't stay by her side, Larry was pissed at him and Layne would probably slam the door in his face. If he were lucky, maybe Dennis would say hello to him. He drove non-stop and arrived in town just after noon.

He parked his car outside of the realty office where he knew Layne worked. It took a few minutes for him to muster up enough courage. He went inside hoping that the public view would make her react a little kindlier than the last time he saw her. He hoped that at least he'd get a chance to plead his case.

Layne couldn't believe her eyes when she looked up and saw him walking in the door. She quickly looked down into her lap and tried to hide the grin she felt sneaking into place. He came back. She had been so afraid that she was right about him in the beginning. Fortunately one of the agents was walking past the door when he entered and she intercepted him. Aside from noticing his good looks, the agent probably hoped he was moving into town and she'd be able to get a major commission.

"No. I was hoping to have a word with Miss Gillette." He responded politely to the inquiry.

She hid her disappointment well when she realized she wouldn't have the pleasure of showing properties to the good-looking man. The agent showed him over to Layne's desk. Behind Justin's back, the other woman gave Layne a big smile and a thumbs-up sign about the handsome stranger.

"You're back?" Layne refused to admit that she was actually happy to see him.

"Yeah, sorry, it was a family emergency." He was only gone two days but it felt like so much longer to him. He shocked himself when he realized that it wasn't just Dennis he was in a hurry to return to. He had really been looking forward to seeing the long-legged beauty again. "Have you gone to lunch yet?"

"I'm not taking lunch today, the office is closing early. The boss has some big shindig or something tonight." He sat in the chair next to her desk. Layne never realized what a small desk she had before.

"What time are you getting out?" He was beginning to feel cocky. She hadn't told him to get lost... yet.

"One." She noticed how incredibly dark his eyes were.

"How about going out to lunch then, my treat?"

"I think I'm just going to go home." Layne noticed his hands and remembered watching them on the steering wheel of his car.

"I'll give you a lift."

"I have soup waiting at home." She inhaled deeply. "You're welcome to share lunch there." He smiled, it was devastating. "I'll pick you up at one."

Chapter Three

Years ago, Layne had learned to stretch a dollar by making leftover meat and vegetables into

stew and then into a watered down soup. As a single parent with no other means of support, she did her best to provide the best she could for her young son. She felt guilty for denying him a father, she didn't want to have to deny him anything else either. She heated some soup on the stove and poured a bowl full of homemade croutons she had made from stale bread. Homemade lemonade was poured into glasses. Layne arranged everything on a tray and carried it to the small folding table she had set for the two of them in the corner of the living room. The kitchenette was too small to eat in.

Justin was standing in the living room while he waited for her. He offered to help but she told him it was no bother, he should just relax. So instead he used the time to look at the modest furnishings. He noticed that the bright curtains were hand-made, hand-sewn even. The clay pot on the coffee table looked like Dennis might have made it in school and his mother proudly displayed it for all to see just as if it were some expensive Ming-Dynasty vase. Even the frame around Dennis' picture was old and nicked, but had been camouflaged with glued on shells and beads. A small afghan was thrown over the back of the old Tuxedo-style sofa and Justin could see that it strategically covered some well-worn fabric. Justin noticed that the television set was years old and he realized how pampered he had been when he automatically looked for a DVD player or a computer. It obviously hadn't been easy for them financially. Justin admired Layne for all that she had managed to provide.

She saw Justin looking at the old television set. It had been a terrific find for her when one of the office's clients announced they were going to toss it when they refurbished their home. Layne was worried that he would judge their meager set-up harshly. Ever since Layne found out that Justin was financially set so well, she worried that he would want to take Dennis away from her; he could provide so much better than she could ever dream of doing. He could afford to give their son so many luxuries.

"Lunch is served." She forced a smile on her face as she set the tray down on the table. "It's not fancy. I'm sorry, I'm sure you're used to much better." She wished she had something more substantial to offer to company. Especially to the president of a thriving business.

"It smells great." He came to sit at the table with her. "Thanks for inviting me..."

Layne was feeling self-conscious about the financial setting she had provided for her son. She was a proud woman, everything they had she had worked hard for, she just worried that he wouldn't approve. She cleared her throat. "So... uh, how is everything at home?" He looked up at her. "You said you had a family emergency."

"Oh." He smiled. "Actually just a mother who is very used to being spoiled. She's getting on in years and doesn't always want to cooperate. I guess in some ways, we've reversed roles... you know, I've kind of become the parent." He tasted the soup. "This really does taste good."

"Thank you." Layne watched him for a moment. She was curious about him. "So, how many children do you have?"

He laughed. Layne liked the sound of his deep rumble. "Not counting my mother... just Dennis."

"Considering what you told me... are you sure?" She actually enjoyed the wide-eyed response she got.

"Uh... I'm pretty sure." His grandfather and Larry Davis would have checked that out thoroughly, he hoped. After all, they were the ones who came up with Dennis. "I only got really drunk the one time... at least in those years."

She noticed that he was really did seem to be embarrassed by his gaffe. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to keep reminding you."

He shrugged and went back to eating his soup. They ate the remainder of their meal in mostly silence except for a few polite comments.

"I spoke with my lawyer..."

Layne was instantly alert. "What did you need to speak to your lawyer about?" What legal rights did he have when it came to Dennis?

"I want to set up a trust fund for Dennis."

"Why?" What else did he speak to his lawyer about? Had he already started the process to take

her son from her?

"To help provide for him." He saw how defensive she was.

"I've managed to take care of him just fine." She'd always managed to scrape by. She managed fine, even if it meant she'd have to run and start all over again.

"You've done a great job, Layne. It's just..."

"We've done fine without your help for six years." She stood and took the empty soup bowls back into the kitchen. She didn't want him to see how badly her hands were trembling.

"I didn't say you haven't." She was thoroughly frustrating him. He followed her. "Look, I've got some money..."

"And I don't. So we should be thankful and all that happy crap. I've managed to raise Dennis on things that are a lot more important than money." She turned her back to him and began washing the bowls. She tried to sound calm and in control. "I know all about J. Ross Paint and Lumber."

He was puzzled. "How do you know about that?"

"Dennis took a circular from your car the other day... he didn't mean anything by it." Oh God, she suddenly worried that Justin would think she taught her son to steal.

"Okay, so you realize it's no hardship for me to come up with some support. He's my son. I'd like to do something for him."

"But why?" She finally turned to face him. "What do you want in return?"

He stared at her. What had her so scared? "To be his friend... and yours."

She shook her head and tried to walk past him. "It's never that simple." There was always a price. What price did he want to extract?

Justin grabbed her arm and made her look at him. The space was narrow and she found herself being held close enough to feel the heat from his body. "But it is simple, Layne. Why the hell won't you trust me? What's got you so scared?"

She looked up at him and he saw fear in her golden eyes. He felt an overwhelming need to protect her. They stood for several moments just watching each other. He hated the fact that she looked so scared. He wondered if he could ever make her feel safe. He almost laughed at his own inflated ego. Justin finally let go of her arm and when she didn't move, he slowly moved his head down to touch his lips to hers. They kissed cautiously.

Layne felt his kiss through her entire body. It warmed her.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close against him. "I don't want to hurt you or Dennis. Please trust me." He kissed her again and slowly she allowed him to take full possession of her mouth. She wrapped her arms around his neck never understanding her need to hold him. It felt so easy to lose herself in this incredible feeling of being held, of feeling his strong arms around her. It felt good.

She parted her lips and Justin traced the line of her teeth with his tongue. Layne touched the tip of her tongue to his and both of them felt as if the room had ignited. Justin pulled her hips closer to his and lifted a hand to cup her breast. She felt his fingers begin to knead the soft flesh and pressed her body next to his. It felt so good. It felt too good. Unfamiliar warmth started to spread from the bottom of her belly.

Suddenly Layne pushed away from him and ran from the room.

"Layne?" He drew a deep breath in and steadied himself. Justin followed her into the living room. "What's wrong?"

She had her back to him. He could see that she was hugging herself.

"I... can't do this..." Her voice wavered.

"I'm sorry Layne. I didn't mean to take advantage." He touched her shoulder and she flinched. He let his hand fall harmlessly to his side. He didn't want to frighten her. "I've just wanted to kiss you. I wanted to hold you. I guess I got carried away."

She turned to him. "Are you married?"

"No." She had startled him with her question.

"I am."

He sat down on the couch. "When I asked you if there was any man in Dennis' life, you said

no." But he hadn't asked her if she had someone.

"There isn't." She bit her lip.

"Then where is your husband?" Justin was completely confused.

She paced. "I left him the night that Dennis was conceived."

"Does he know about Dennis?" There didn't seem to be any traces of a man in the apartment. Why had they struggled so much if there had been someone to take care of them?

Layne hugged herself tighter. "God, I hope not."

"That was almost..." He did some quick mental calculations, "seven years ago." He remembered the first night he met her. "Is that Charlie? Is that who you thought had sent me?"

"Yes." She swallowed. "His name is Charles Harris." Even saying his name frightened her.

He thought for a moment. "Where did you get the name Gillette?"

"It was my grandmother's maiden name." She whispered. "I'm sorry I lied to you, Justin."

"Layne, talk to me." He patted the sofa next to him. She hesitated only briefly before sitting. "Why did you leave him?"

"Charlie was demanding. He believed that he had rights and I didn't always agree. There was no love."

"But you two were married?"

"He said he only wanted me to make a baby for him. He was sterile, that's why..." She shrugged and looked at him.

"If things where so bad, why did you agree? I mean, going through with being artificially inseminated, that's got to take real commitment." He remembered hearing about the procedure when one of his employees and her husband tried to start a family.

She looked down into her lap for several minutes. When she looked at him again, there were tears in her eyes. "I fought. I tried. Justin, I was strapped to the table. I had no choice."

"What? Tell me you're not serious." He watched her shake her head "Oh my God." He put his arms around her in a gesture of comfort. She leaned her head on his shoulder."

"Aren't we a pair? You didn't even know... and I. And then Dennis was born." Layne sniffled.

Justin sighed. Now he understood some of her fears. Looking down at her again, he thought of question after question he wanted to ask, but he knew that some of them weren't his business. "Layne, how old are you?"

"Twenty-four next month." She knew what his next questions would be. She had asked herself some of them over and over again through the years. "I was married at sixteen. He was forty-nine. I was a stupid teen-age girl who thought she had met her gallant white knight and he was going to save her." Instead she had met a domineering master who enslaved her. "I was stupid. So stupid."

He could hear the upset in her voice. "Ssh, I wasn't judging you." His arm rested gently around her shoulders. He had to know. "Has there been anyone since then?"

She almost laughed. "Justin, you're the first man I've even kissed since then."

He looked at her in surprise. "Now I know you're joking."

"No. I'm not." Layne looked up at him. "And I liked it. And I know it's wrong..."

"It's not wrong, not at all. I'm sure that somebody could condemn my morals, but from what you're telling me, you didn't really have much of a marriage. And Layne, it was a long time ago."

"No. You're not doing me any favors by making excuses, Justin." She stood and walked across the room. Her cheeks felt hot and she wondered if she was actually blushing. "I liked it when you touched me. I wanted more." She didn't mean to say her next thoughts out loud and she was embarrassed when she heard her own voice. "It would be too easy to talk me into it, into so much more." And it would be too easy to lay down her defenses. She was tired of being alone.

He looked at her. It suddenly became so difficult to find words. "Layne, I would love to be with you." He could imagine the passion that could ignite. The thought of burying himself deep inside her was almost too much for him to restrain from acting on. "You are an extraordinarily beautiful woman."

"This... feels so... strange." His words were having an effect on her that she had never anticipated.

"Layne, I don't want you to do something you'd regret. And I didn't come here intending to try to seduce you." He walked to her. "But I really do want you. Think about it. Seven years is a long time. Don't you miss being with someone?"

She looked at him bitterly. "I would have had to like it in order to miss it."

He whispered. "What happened to you?" Justin sighed. He knew that any touch they shared would be volatile. Hesitating, he watched her quietly before softly touching her shoulder. "Sweetheart, you might have had sex, but obviously you've never made love."

"Is there a difference?" Almost without realizing, she shook his hand off.

"Yeah." He nodded. "You would have enjoyed making love."

She shook her head in denial. "Charlie said I was too frigid." His words were just one of the ways he beat her down.

He sounded annoyed. "More likely he just was too damn selfish." Justin swallowed. Layne was an attractive woman; he saw that the first time he met her. He still couldn't understand why he felt such a strong need to be with her, why he wanted to see her enjoy so much. It was criminal what that old geezer had done to her.

Layne stared at Justin for a long time. She chewed on her lower lip and finally walked up to him. "Could you... just hold me?"

It had only been a few minutes that she had been in his arms, but she had already learned what it was like to feel warm.

"Are you sure?" Holding her was dangerous and he knew he would want more.

She nodded. It amazed her that this was her decision. "Please." It had been a long time since she had been naïve. Layne understood the temptation there would be just by being close to him.

He smiled warily. "Come here." He opened his arms to her.

Layne rested her head on his chest and thought how very solid he felt. She heard Justin's steady heartbeat and found it comforting. She wrapped her arms around him, she felt like she had finally found something. He was someone solid to hold on to.

Justin looked down at the woman he held in his arms. He wanted to comfort her. He wanted to erase her fears. He ran his fingers through her hair and restrained himself when he realized he also wanted to make love to her until she screamed his name repeatedly.

"You know, in seven years, he probably filed for divorce. He probably went to court and told them that you abandoned him. I bet you you're not even married anymore." Justin said his thoughts out loud. He hoped. It would make what he wanted to do so much easier.

"Could he do that?" It sounded wonderful to Layne.

"Sure. Actually he probably figured this way he had no responsibility to you even if you decided to come back if you two were already divorced." Justin sounded more hopeful than confident. "I would imagine that Charlie is the kind of bastard to look forward to the day you'd come crawling back and he could shut the door on you. Especially if he didn't know about Dennis."

Layne was wistful. "That would be wonderful. But how would I know?"

"When I go back home next week, I'll have my lawyer check it out. Would that be okay?"

She stepped back to look up at him. "You would do that?" He nodded. "Oh yes, please."

They stood looking at each other for minutes. Justin traced the line of her jaw with a fingertip. He slowly moved his finger back and forth over her full lips until she parted them. She touched her tongue to her lower lip to moisten it and he used his finger to rub it dry again. Then he dipped his finger into her mouth. Almost without meaning to, Layne began to gently suckle on his fingertip and he involuntarily simulated the erotic motion of lovemaking. He felt himself growing hard.

Justin's breathing was deep. He watched her eyelids flutter closed as she enjoyed the foreplay. He pulled his finger from her mouth and when her lips remained parted, he replaced it with his tongue. He tilted his head and fit his lips over hers to join them together. Layne drew Justin's tongue deep into her mouth.

He had to break the kiss. Things were getting too powerful for him to remain in control. He was too close to the point where he wouldn't be able to walk away from her.

She felt bereft that he had broken the contact. Layne wrapped her arms around him and

refused to let him leave her. She whispered. "Show me, Justin."

"Show you?" His breathing was ragged.

"Show me the difference. Show me how it feels to make love." She couldn't believe what she was asking of him, but Layne knew that she needed this closeness. She had never known this much need before. She had to know, just one time in her life, what it was like to feel like a woman with a man.

"We don't have to... have intercourse. There are other ways to satisfy each other... just in case you change your mind." He hoped she wouldn't. "It would still be making love."

"I won't change my mind." She marveled that he had given her the choice.

Justin mentally counted his blessings, he couldn't believe that this beautiful woman asked him to hold her and love her. He slowly reached out to unbutton her blouse. Slowly he caressed the flesh above the lacy cups. Concentrating deeply, he gently unhooked the front hook of her bra to expose her to him.

Layne reflexively crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm small..."

He tenderly pried her arms away and gazed at her. He sighed. "You're perfect." Justin took her into his arms again and pulled her against his chest. Then he kissed her. He let his tongue leisurely explore her mouth.

Layne followed his example and her tongue dueled with his. She put a hand between them and unbuttoned his shirt. Then she reveled in the sensation of her tender breasts rubbing the mat of curly hair on his chest. She noticed him watching her rosy nipples as they hardened from the response to him.

He dragged his tongue down the side of her neck and to her breasts where he took turns sipping from her small, hardened nipples. Justin reached down to her hips and pulled the hem of her skirt up to her waist. With Layne's cooperation, he pushed her panties down until they fell to her ankles and she stepped out of them. She kicked off the shoes she had worn since early that morning. Layne drew in a breath and held it when she felt his fingers tease her between her delicate feminine petals.

Justin raised his head to catch his breath and caught sight of the sofa. He guided her to the cushions. After removing his gaping shirt and dropping it to the floor, Justin lied down on the couch and rested his head against the raised end. Without words, just a smile, he guided her until she was straddling his chest. One of Justin's hands kneaded her buttocks and pulled her hips closer to him. Layne gasped when she felt him slide a finger deep inside her as he kissed the triangle of curls. She tangled her fingers in his dark, curly hair as she held him to her and surrendered to the wanton tremors that passed through her body. He teased her with his kisses. He sought out every sensitive spot. Justin was relentless and didn't stop until he heard her cry out his name.

He stood as he held her to him. Releasing her for just a few moments, Justin unzipped his jeans and pushed them, together with his briefs, to the floor. His male pride was evident as he stood naked before her and welcomed her inspection. He was fully aroused and thrusting.

"Touch me, Layne." His husky voice held the slightest hint of a plea.

She moved to him. "Where?"

"Anywhere. Everywhere." He shuddered when he felt her hands gliding over his body.

Layne felt very brazen and she began to kiss his chest. Kneeling she trailed kisses from his naval to his groin. She caressed his manhood with her hands and placed tender kisses on his jutting manhood. He looked so strong and it amazed her that she felt so much joy at exploring his body. She wondered if it was proper to tell a man that he was beautiful.

His breathing was rapid. He hadn't expected to come this close to losing control so quickly. He never expected her to be so bold. Justin felt like a schoolboy in a woman's hands. "Layne, you've got to make a decision. If you want me inside you, you'd better let me know now or there won't be anything left."

"Yes." Layne looked up at him. His question only excited her more. "I want you in me."

He pulled her to her feet and kissed her. Then he bent to retrieve his wallet from his pants, pulled out a foil packet and sheathed himself. "Are you sure?"

She nodded.

Justin took Layne to the edge of the couch and backed her up against it. He parted her legs and stepped in between.

Whispering to her, he commanded. "Wrap your legs around me."

She did.

Feeling her long legs around him, seeing his fantasy turning to reality, was almost his undoing.

He entered her slowly, she was tight and he nearly lost control. He moved his hips and gently laid her back along the top of the sofa. Justin caressed her breasts and increased his pace as she matched his fervor. He gasped, she trembled. He shuddered, she cried out his name again. Then he pulled her to him and held her tightly, her legs were still wrapped around him. He kissed her and they both trembled.

They remained like that until Justin looked over at the clock on the end table. "Uh, what time does Dennis get home?"

Layne answered dreamily. "About three-oh-five."

He exhaled loudly. "It's three-oh-two now." And then he muttered an expletive.

They released each other and dressed quickly. Justin was done first.

"Go into the bathroom and finish. I'll wait here." Justin kissed her quickly and then sat on the couch looking nearly relaxed.

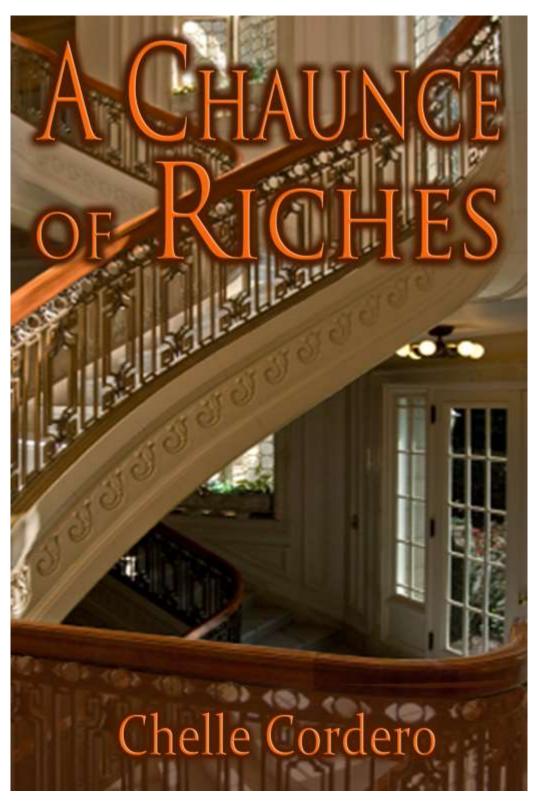
Layne had barely closed the bathroom door behind her when the front door opened and Dennis burst into the room.

"Justin! You're back!"

"Hi champ." They shook hands just like any two men.

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A Chaunce of Riches by Chelle Cordero

PROLOGUE

He was sitting in the large den feigning patience while waiting for his new assignment to show up. The room was expensively and garishly decorated and Ben wondered about the owner who lived here. As far as he was concerned, the room was merely a boastful display of riches that screamed, "I think I'm better than you" to all who entered. Ben knew by the address his employer had given him that he was going to be spending some time in the wealthier section of town, but he still had to curb his cynicism when a butler answered the door. People with money had always bugged him ever since he was just a little kid looking, and looking, at all the rich kids' toys.

He thumbed his way through the file he was carrying again. Even though Ben had already read about the case multiple times, it gave him something to do while he waited for the widow of the late Julian Chaunce to make an appearance. He was growing more disgusted by the minute and he silently fumed that she was so inconsiderate of another person's time. But then, as far as Ben was concerned, people with money always thought they were the only thing that mattered anyway.

Chaunce had been a very successful tycoon and was renowned in the publishing world. The trade magazine that had started his company, Chaunce Publications, was still out there and very much alive in the roofing industry. He had sold it years ago and used the tremendous profits to establish new magazines that were all equally successful. Even the security agency Ben worked for had a Chaunce publication delivered to their main office every month. The magazines had called him a self-made man but Ben was convinced that he must have help from somewhere.

Only in his fifties, Chaunce had died suddenly while using a treadmill at a private gym. He left a wife and son and loads of business rivals behind. Now someone was sending threatening notes to the company and the house. Flipping through the folder, Ben frowned and shook his head. The family had tried to keep themselves isolated from the public, probably in an attempt to protect themselves from the same kind of journalists their own publications paid on staff. While there was an occasional headshot of Julian Chaunce, Ben had seen no pictures of the family. He was expecting to see a bland middle-age woman when the door finally opened.

"I am so sorry to keep you waiting. My son was having a bit of a crisis..."

She stopped short as Ben stood up from his chair and turned to face her.

After seeing him her face drained of color. Other than that, he could only think how young she still looked in her light blue slacks and the tailored striped man's shirt she was wearing. Her hips were a little wider, a little womanlier, but she was still as lithe as she ever was. His gaze traveled up to her face. It had been years since he had seen those eyes staring back at him.

"Sam?" His lips felt parched as he managed to say her name.

CHAPTER 1

Samantha Chaunce took a few moments to regain her composure while she settled herself behind the large mahogany desk in the room. She told herself that there was no way that Julian's assistant could have known about the relationship she once shared with Ben. This was just a cruel coincidence. She felt as if her knees were about to give way just as she sat in the large black leather chair.

She stole a glance at him. He hadn't changed much. His hair was cut a little shorter; his shoulders were a little bit broader. He still wore jeans that clung to his hips and hugged his groin in the most tantalizing of ways. Samantha Chaunce knew there was no good reason to be looking at him the way she was. Certainly she had no right to be enjoying looking at him the way she was.

When she was sure her voice could sound nearly normal, she smiled sweetly. "It's good to see you again Ben." It was difficult to look at him and not remember things she had no right to remember. She didn't want to remember how it felt to run her fingers through his hair or the feel of his breath against her skin. She absentmindedly played with one of the short tousled brown curls that framed her face. He couldn't ignore the diamond encrusted wedding band she wore on her left hand.

He chuckled softly and cynically. "Well, now I know why you left." He wasn't smiling.

"What do you mean?" Her hand froze in mid air.

"I never realized how much money meant to you." He couldn't help it. He would always be bitter. "When I heard that you got married and left for Europe, I thought it was because you thought I could never be a whole man again. But I thought you would have at least waited to see. Now I understand, he probably flashed some bills in your face. That was all that it took, wasn't it?" Ben was failing dismally at ignoring the stinging pain he felt around his heart.

It sure didn't sound like he was asking.

Sam's eyes clouded with tears and she bit her lower lip to keep from replying too soon. She knew that he had been deeply hurt by her abandonment and she truly regretted causing him that pain. She hadn't been able to give him any explanations. But he was right, it was the money. He could never understand exactly how much the money had meant to her. Ben would never understand how much it hurt her to leave. The last time she had seen him he was lying battered and unconscious in a hospital bed. They had told her he probably wouldn't walk again. Then Julian was there... and he had money.

She managed to draw in a deep breath and as she let it out slowly, she felt in control of her emotions again. "Well, now that you've voiced your opinion of me," she stopped to swallow as she heard her voice catch. Even though she expected it, it was too painful to hear how much he still despised her. "I'd like to get back to the purpose of our meeting..." There was no way she could let him know that the coldness that crept into her voice was all an act.

Ben snorted and shook his head. "Sam, you know this isn't going to work." He knew he should have called her Mrs. Chaunce, but this was Sam. "I can't stay by your side twenty-four hours a day protecting you." He had read some of the threats she had received. He had also seen police reports of vandalism and intrusions both here and at her office.

"I don't want you to protect me. You're here to protect... my son." She had been concerned about leaving the care of her son to a stranger. She wasn't concerned any more. No matter how he felt about her, Sam knew Ben would do whatever he had to in order to make sure that Philip would be safe. She knew he would take good care of him especially once he met the boy. "I know you Ben. I know that Philip will be safe with you." Any doubts she had about hiring someone to keep an eye on her son were gone. It was good that, no mater how the fates had contrived it, it was Ben who had come.

Even though all the reports had said there was a child, Ben still couldn't accept that Sam had a child with another man. "I'm not a baby sitter Sam." It was a relief to know he wouldn't have to be in her constant company. Almost. She was just supposed to be some rich widow with a kid. He couldn't get it out of his mind that this was Sam and this was some other guy's kid.

"I know. You're a bodyguard. Obviously you're a good one because Julian's assistant," she sighed, "my assistant said your agency came highly recommended. And I know he demanded the best man for the job."

Ben looked towards the ceiling as he rolled his eyes. He told himself that it would be unprofessional to walk away. But could he really work for her? Maybe he could pull it off if he thought of her as just some rich bitch with a kid that needed watching. It was a kid... and he couldn't walk away knowing that some kid was in danger. He realized he couldn't walk away from her if she was in danger either.

"What about you? Who's protecting you?" The file had indicated that both the widow and the kid were being targeted.

She could still read him and she smiled. She knew he was going to stay. "I can take care of myself. So long as I know Philip is safe, I'll be okay." She could see the debate in his eyes as he finally acquiesced. "I'll let you get settled in your quarters and then I'll introduce you to Philip." She pushed

an intercom button on her desk phone.

"Where am I going to be staying?" There was still a fair amount of disdain in his voice. It annoyed him when he heard her start to give instructions into the intercom mike to show him to his room. She wasn't rude to the disembodied voice that answered, but he couldn't help thinking that she sounded... superior. He was going to have to swallow a lot of pride being Samantha Chaunce's employee.

"We have a guest house out back..."

"No good. Where is the boy's room?" He decided he was going to be in charge.

"Upstairs, down the hall from mine."

"You have an extra room up there?" She slowly nodded. "That's where I'm staying. I have to stay close to him."

He was waiting outside of Philip's room when she came upstairs.

"I'm sorry. I hope you weren't waiting long." She ignored the cynical shrug. "Let me introduce my son." Sam tapped on the door gently before opening it.

The first thing Ben saw was the sullen looking eight year old on his bed. He was wearing earplugs from an IPOD and playing a furious hand-held computer game. It took a moment before the boy even looked up at the two adults entering his room. Then he went back to playing his game. The kid was skinny and gangly. Ben thought he looked a little pale. He was dressed in a white button down shirt and tan trousers.

Ben remembered his growing up years in the foster home, He knew that he was too old to be adopted and he never paid much attention whenever adults came to meet him either. Only he didn't have expensive IPODs and computer games to occupy his time. He doodled angry stick figures, violent car crash scenes and burning houses into a composition notebook.

"Philip..." The boy pretended not to hear his mother and continued playing his game. Sam sat next to him on the bed and carefully popped an earplug out of place. "Sweetie, I want you to meet someone. This is Ben Johnson, he's going to be staying with us a while. He can drive you to school and to the park."

"I don't need a babysitter." The boy looked resentfully at Ben. He had his mother's eyes.

"That sounds great because I'm not a babysitter." Ben approached the bed and reached out for the computer game. "What are you playing?" He couldn't help thinking that the kid should be dressed in clothes he could play outside in. He shouldn't be dressed like he was headed off to some kind of a parochial school.

Philip looked back at his game before showing it to Ben. "Delta Raid."

Ben nodded. He wasn't surprised to see that the game dealt with its own brand of violence. "What level have you gotten to?"

"Three." His face was animated. "Do you know the game?" It was the first time Ben noticed any real interest in the boy's voice.

"I've played it once or twice. In my line of work, sometimes, I need to pass the time playing a game." He still had his hand out. "May I?"

Philip slowly handed him the game. Ben pushed a few buttons and the little machine beeped. "What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm a bodyguard." Ben kept his eyes glued to the game. There were a few more beeps and the sound of a blast. "Level four." He handed the game back to Philip.

The boy looked at the computer screen with amazement. "Wow. You're good." He went back to playing.

"Thanks." Ben quickly surveyed the room. He noticed the desktop computer with its blinking cursor. "This hooked up to the internet?"

Sam answered. "Yes."

Ben frowned and shook his head gently. Then he went to look out the window. Just one window over, he noticed a balcony. "Where does that balcony lead?"

"My room." Sam remained seated next to her son.

Ben mentally calculated the distance between the balcony and a ledge next to Philip's bedroom window. He did the same with the closest tree. They could be vulnerable points but at least they weren't too easy.

Philip kept playing the game until there was another blast sound and a deep computer voice said "Game over." He put the game down next to him. "We need a bodyguard?"

"I thought it would be a good idea sweetie. You know there have been some strange things going on since your father died."

The little boy squared his shoulders at the mention of his deceased father. "Everything would be okay if daddy were still here." His eyes welled with tears and he tried to hide his face from his mother.

It hurt her to see her son so sad. "I know." Her voice was quiet.

She looked up to see Ben watching them from across the room. He had a strange expression on his face. He turned away as soon as their eyes met.

That night Ben went upstairs before Philip to check his room. The little boy kissed his mother downstairs and told her he didn't need to be tucked in. Sam smiled at him and thought of how much he was trying to be a grown-up. She remembered how he had taken her hand at the cemetery and told her he would help to take care of her. The world had gotten so scary for her little boy with Julian's sudden death and police being called to the house after strange noises and late night phone calls. She only wanted to make the world safe for him again.

Sam forced herself to remain seated in the family room as her child skipped out. She would manage a peek in on him before she went to bed and assuage her need to kiss her little boy good night and tuck him in. Picking up a hard cover book from the end table, she curled her feet under her and threw a fleecy throw over her lap. She planned to just read for a while and relax before heading up to bed herself. Absorbed in the book, she never expected Ben to return to the room.

"I checked to make sure your room was secure as well." At her look of surprise, he quickly added, "I checked all the upstairs rooms. It doesn't make sense not to be sure the entire floor is safe and sound."

She swallowed her discomfort of his being in her room. "Thank you."

Ben sat quietly and watched her. Sam tried to go back to reading.

"So what happened to you Sam? I really thought we had the same values and the same dreams. When did money become so important to you?"

She didn't want to have to defend herself to him. It would be too easy to be swept up in a lie. Looking away from him, afraid that he could read her pain, she barely whispered. "What makes you think it wasn't important all along?"

"I thought I knew you better than anybody else. Just like I thought you knew me better. You were the only person I ever let get close to me."

Sam had already been in the foster home when Ben came to live there. Her parents had died in a car accident. She had been rescued, orphaned, from the wreckage. There was no family to replace the loving parents she remembered. She had been the only child of two only children. There was an ailing grandmother halfway across the country but no one else. Her grandmother sent what money she could for the few years she lived but she couldn't take care of a child. Samantha had just started kindergarten when her world was destroyed.

It was a little more than a year later when Ben, already eight, the same age as Philip, was taken away from his drug addict mother. She had tried to sell him for drug money when she came up short but he had kicked the pedophile she was bargaining with and ran away. It angered her and she sent him into the streets to fend for himself. He was scared, homeless and hungry for almost two days when Baltimore cops picked him up and child services got involved. Ben was brought to the foster home; there were six other kids including Sam and two more birth kids belonging to the couple. It was a relief not to have to hide in the closet while his mother turned tricks to get drug money. But the child in him still felt resentment that his mother had tossed him away like garbage. And the child in him was terrified that he would lose the newfound comfort his foster family provided him with. He

couldn't relax, he couldn't trust. Sam was the only one who could get through to him. She was the only one who made him feel safe.

He had come to the foster home early in the fall, just in time to start the school year. He was lacking in education because his mother never made sure he got to school each day and he was embarrassed. Even though Sam was younger than him, she helped him study and eventually catch up to his grade level. Then, when the excitement of Halloween drew near, he was terrified when the other kids talked of donning costumes and going door-to-door for candy. He refused to go, he was afraid he would have to do more than just ring doorbells. But when the other kids came home happy and laughing and with sacks filled with candy, he felt left out. Sam dumped her bag of candy in front of him and said it was too much for just her, he had to help her and eat some of it.

They were inseparable as they grew up together. He realized in his teen years that he was falling in love with her but that kind of a relationship would have been just too weird. So it wasn't until after his eighteenth birthday when he was living on his own that he even let her know how he felt. And it wasn't until she was eighteen and living out of the foster home that he finally asked her out on a date. It was always just the two of them. At least that's what Ben had thought.

She still couldn't look at him. "I had just gotten out in the world and I made choices."

"But why? You told me you loved me. You said you needed me. We were working towards a future..."

A tear rolled down her cheek. She remembered the things they had promised each other and it was sheer torture to hear him reminding her. "What kind of future did we have Ben? I was working selling donuts in a bakery and you were hoping for something better than a sales job at the hardware store. We didn't have two nickels to rub together." She never would have had the money she needed to make things right again.

"So it was the money?" Ben sat at the edge of his chair. "And you couldn't even wait to tell me yourself? You just left."

It was another car accident that had changed her world... again. Sam had little more than a broken arm and a minor concussion. Ben was in a coma and had a severe spinal injury. He almost died. There were so many complications. She couldn't look at him. "I did what I had to do."

"Are you that much of a coward?" She couldn't answer him "And he was almost thirty years older than you. Was his money so attractive that you didn't mind being with a man who was old enough to be your father?"

She looked up at him then. "Julian was... good to me."

"He bought you." Just like all those johns who had bought his mother. His voice was edged with disappointment and pain. "Sam, you sold yourself. Did you enjoy letting him put his hands all over you? Was it worth it? I really thought you were different from my mother."

Sam opened her mouth to speak but decided to remain quiet. She refused to debate this with him any more. Putting the closed book back on the end table, she stood and threw the blanket onto the chair behind her. She couldn't let him do this to her. She couldn't let him past all those barricades she had built around her heart so long ago.

"I have contracted with your agency for your services. I think that is the only relationship you and I need to have..." She started to walk towards the door. She turned back to him. "Breakfast is at seven, Philip needs to be at school by eight-thirty. Please manage to find it in your talents to be civil with me in front of my son. He seems to like you and I want him to feel safe. But Ben, I won't hesitate to have you replaced. Remember that." She left the room without looking back.

Ben remained seated for a few minutes. His lips were tight and his nostrils flared. Finally he couldn't hold his tongue any longer but he was still quiet when he called her a bitch. He desperately wanted to walk away from this assignment, but he couldn't. There was something about the boy that made him want to be close, to keep him safe. He kept telling himself he didn't care about the mother at all.

Ben entered the dining room just before seven to see three places set at the table. Two of the place settings had delicate china cups and saucers beside them. He sat quietly at the table and heard

Sam hurrying Philip in.

Sam coolly bade him good morning. Philip seemed much more excited to see him. As soon as the three were seated, the cook appeared to take their egg orders.

"I don't want an egg today." Philip protested. "I want chocolate milk and cookies." His lower lip jutted out. "Daddy always gave me a cookie."

"You don't eat cookies for breakfast Philip." It was obvious that Sam had this argument with her son before.

"I have rice cakes Missus." The cook whispered loudly to Sam. Sam smiled slightly and nodded her head. "Master Philip, if you eat a bowl of oatmeal with strawberries, I'll add a nice cookie to your plate."

The little boy nodded happily. The cook asked Ben how he liked his eggs and then offered him a choice of wheat toast or muffins. A plate with a variety of breakfast meats was placed on the table. He couldn't help but compare the grandiose setting with the local diner he usually frequented.

When the cook asked Ben if he would like coffee, Sam stood. "I'll take care of the coffee Sadie." Sadie smiled and left the room to tend to the eggs.

Sam walked to the serving cart and picked up a pot of coffee. "Black and sweet, right?" Ben nodded. He was amazed that she still remembered how he drank his coffee.

Philip monopolized the conversation at the table throughout breakfast. He told Ben all about his teachers at school and the games he liked to play in the schoolyard. Ben couldn't help but notice the love in Sam's eyes as she watched her son talk so animatedly. He remembered when she used to look at him like that and mentally scolded himself for feeling jealous.

As soon as the meal was over, Sam told Philip to make sure that he brushed his teeth before he left for school. "Ben will be driving you to school today. And he will pick you up later. No one else, remember."

"I know mommy." He looked at Ben and rolled his eyes. Ben almost laughed at the young child's feigned exasperation at his mother's rules.

Except for the servant clearing the dishes from the table, the room fell silent as soon as Philip left it. Sam fidgeted with her napkin while the servant was in the room. As soon as she left, Sam rose to leave.

"Sam?" Ben's voice was gentle and just a bit uncertain. "Sam, I want to apologize. I had no right to say what I did last night."

She looked at him and smiled kindly. "I never intended to fire you. Thank you for the apology." He made an impatient snort. "It's not about the damn job. I'm sorry if my words hurt you."

She sat back down and looked at him across the table. "But that was what you meant to do..." Her voice was very quiet as she continued. "Ben I can understand your anger. I know how much I hurt you. Last night was just a way to get even."

"Yes it was. I wanted to hurt you." He stared at her unable to believe what he had just admitted. "And I was wrong. I was still in shock about seeing you again after all these years. It didn't give me any right to say the things I did. And I am sorry."

Sam blinked several times as she felt tears forming behind her eyes. Finally she looked back at him. "Thank you." She got up and left the room.

CHAPTER 2

Between the letter of introduction that Samantha Chaunce sent to the school and a few personal phone calls she made, Ben had no trouble being allowed on school grounds. He was close by whenever Philip needed him. The teacher even seemed amused when Philip stated that he wanted to bring his bodyguard to class one day for show and tell.

The teaching staff was friendly and so were a few moms of other students. In less than a week, Ben had politely turned down two dinner invitations, a theatre ticket to accompany another mother, and had received assorted phone numbers. He was charming, polite and friendly to all. Each day he kicked himself. Ever since he saw Sam again he wasn't interested in anything any other woman had to offer. Ben told himself he was pitiful. Not only had Sam dumped him once already because he was broke, but now that she was wealthy on her own, he knew there was no way he could ever be of interest for her again. Then he got annoyed with himself for even entertaining the possibility.

The atmosphere back at the house was surprisingly pleasant. Sam seemed to go out of her way to make him feel comfortable. Cook prepared a few of Ben's favorite dishes for dinners and he couldn't help but suspect that it had been more than simple coincidence. He marveled that Sam might actually have remembered such things about him. Ben wondered if his services were really needed though. There had been only one incident since Ben had been there. Sam received a letter at her office mentioning some of the security measures she had arranged. It even mentioned the security agency where Ben was employed. She seemed not to be worried by the unfriendly surveillance. Ben didn't like it at all. He wasn't comfortable with the level of knowledge her tormentor seemed to possess about her home and her dealings.

The next afternoon while Ben was waiting for Philip to appear after school, he noticed a strange man wielding a camera on the corner of the school block. The man was watching the front of the little school building intently. As soon as Philip appeared, the camera was lifted and pictures were taken. Ben made sure the teacher would keep a close eye on Philip and he took off after the unknown man with the camera. The guy ran fast, but Ben was faster. He caught him in an alleyway just a block from the school.

Grabbing him by his jacket front, Ben pressed his face close to the culprit. "Who the hell are you and who are you working for?" He moved one large hand to the guy's throat. Ben was ready to strangle the man if he didn't answer quickly enough.

"Hey, it's just a picture." The frightened man tried to escape Ben's clutches. "The Chances' are news especially since the old man kicked the bucket. And who the hell are you?"

Still holding him by the throat, Ben relaxed his stance a little bit. "You're press?"

The uninvited photographer nodded against Ben's hand at his throat.

"Let me see your ID. And your camera."

As soon as Ben read the media identification, he let go of the guy. He flipped open the back of the camera and pulled out the film.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"My job." Ben handed the empty camera back and unrolled the film in the daylight.

"Well that's my job you're wrecking there buddy!"

"If I ever see you taking pictures again I will break the damn camera. And it will definitely be in the company of some of your body parts. Am I understood?"

After calling Ben several foul names, none of which even made him flinch, the dejected photographer finally left. Ben threw the exposed and ruined film out in a trash can on his way back to the school.

Philip was gently swinging on a swing set on the school's lawn; he was under the concerned eye of the young teacher. He had no idea that anything untoward had happened and Ben decided to keep it that way.

Sam was late coming home from the office that night. She called and explained that she had a late meeting with the Board of Directors. Ben and Philip had dinner together and he helped the little boy finish his homework before bed.

When Sam finally came home, Ben was waiting in the den. He was amused at her surprise that Ben had seen to Philip's schoolwork and tooth brushing before bed. Cook offered to prepare her a dinner, she asked for just a simple sandwich. Ben fixed her a cherry rum mixed drink from the simple bar. When he handed it to her, she looked surprised that he remembered her favorite drink. His fingers brushed against hers as she took the glass.

His eyes bore into her at the slight contact. Then he chuckled. "Do you remember the fake ID's we used because we were too young to drink?"

Thankful that he had broken the tension, she chuckled back. "Yes. I think your name was... Joe... Roberts?"

"Yeah. That was the name on the phony license. You were Linda Cristos and you were twentytwo. At least that's how old our Miss Cristos was."

At the real age of twenty-two, Sam had been a mom, living in France and married to Julian. "That was so long ago. Wow." She sipped the drink slowly, aware that her stomach was empty. They had both shared dreams so long ago. Sitting together sipping drinks and talking made her think of things that could have been, But then, she forced herself to remember, it was Julian's money that had made any of this possible. Glancing up, her eyes met Ben's and she got the eerie feeling that he was reading her mind.

He seemed to sober. "Yeah."

Sam knew from the fire in his eyes that he also remembered the passion they had shared so long ago. So much had happened since. She had given up so much and she never wanted him to know why. In the long run, it had been for the money so it was just as well that Ben thought that.

The cook entered with a sandwich on a plate and Sam sat to eat. While she ate, Ben filled her in on the incident with the photographer. She seemed a bit unnerved.

"And you're sure that's all he was there for?"

"His ID seemed valid. I called the paper when I got home and he is on staff."

"Thank you. Julian never wanted the press to see us too much. He was always afraid of letting our faces become too familiar to the public."

"He was protective?" Ben didn't really want to find out anything good about the man that had stolen the love of his life. But he was curious. He found himself being drawn in. He wanted to know everything about her and it wasn't just on a professional level.

"He did his best to keep us sheltered."

Ben simply nodded and forced down another pang of jealousy. He sat down on an overstuffed padded leather chair and watched her quietly.

Sam ate some more of her sandwich and sipped her drink. She knew that he was watching her and she knew she should feel uncomfortable. Instead she was comforted just having him near. It was easy to pretend, just for a moment, that this was where they were supposed to be, together after a long and tiring day.

Trying not to let him catch her staring at him, she noticed the breadth of his shoulders and the confidence of his stance. It wasn't hard to remember the image of him as he grew into manhood so many years before; those memories occupied her dreams every night. Even after so many years, she could still remember the feel of his muscular shoulders, the touch of his naked skin under her fingertips. The silence had become too uncomfortable and just a little too intimate. "What made you go into the security field Ben?"

He sat back and sighed. "After I recovered from the accident I began working out in a gym to rebuild some of my strength. I was... determined. I met this guy there who suggested I might try being a bouncer or something." His anger at being abandoned once again made him angry and he was always getting into some kind of trouble. He shrugged. "I thought the idea of being able to knock a few heads around sounded appealing. So I got a job in a bar. I met my boss Tony there and he offered me a position." Under Tony's tutelage, he learned to control his temper and use his anger to his advantage.

Sam certainly could see and appreciate the effects of Ben's workouts. She also knew very well that there was a lot more to his physical recovery than he seemed to want to talk about. It was a relief to see that he didn't even appear to have a limp or any other disfigurement leftover from the accident. She had betrayed his trust by leaving and left deep emotional scars that couldn't be seen, only felt in the heart. Julian had let her know that there were residual effects to treatments he received in the hospital but she was sure that Ben wasn't going to discuss his health with her, especially not details he would be embarrassed about. He wouldn't be happy to find out how much she did know about his condition.

She was remembering that terrible night that had changed both of their lives. They had been busy laughing. Hanging out with friends had been terrific. They had gone to the movies and then to a friend's cousin's house party two hours away near Pennsylvania. Even though neither one had been

drinking, they still felt kind of giddy on the ride home. Earlier in the evening, they had both said they had something important to tell the other. The discussion never came. They never had the chance. How different things would have been if she had only gotten the chance to talk with him.

Instead the headlights of the other car came right at them and Ben had swerved to avoid a collision. He lost control. The car rolled down an embankment stopping only when it came to rest on its side against a tree. They had both been wearing seatbelts; that was one of Ben's adamant demands each time they got in the car. Sam was conscious for the whole terrifying tumble down the hill. When they finally stopped, her right arm had been horribly twisted. Her arm was bleeding and she could see bone. The pain was nearly unbearable.

Ben didn't answer when she cried his name out loud. It was dark and she couldn't see much, but she could see he wasn't moving. She unbuckled her seatbelt and tried to pull him from the car, but with only one good arm she didn't have the strength. Sam had climbed out and then tried to tear the remaining pieces of broken windshield away from in front of him. She gave that up when her palms were shredded from the broken glass. If she looked hard enough, she could still make out some of the tiny scars that were left. The car was propped on the driver's side and that section of roof was crushed where it leaned against the tree. She couldn't get him out and she couldn't wake him.

Sam had no idea how long it took for her to climb back up to the road. She barely felt her arm anymore and had lost so much blood that she was fighting just to stay awake. When she got to the road, she could see that the car that had swerved into their path had never stopped. She leaned against a still standing piece of guardrail and managed to flag down a car almost half an hour later.

Forcing herself back into the present and trying desperately not to remember a past she could never have back, Sam gulped the balance of her drink down. She sputtered as the sweet concoction went down the wrong pipe.

Ben was at her side immediately. "Hey, are you okay?"

She managed to croak a response and nodded.

He waited until she caught her breath and then he laughed. "This isn't the first time you've gulped your drink and then choked. I always had to tell you to take it easy."

She looked up at him and saw how close his face was to hers. Sam swore he was going to kiss her. She could remember how she clung to his kisses in the past. But then he suddenly got up and went back to the other chair.

He took a deep breath in. "I heard that you went to Europe after you got married." Ben had to remind himself how she had betrayed him. He had to remember or he was liable to lose himself in her. He promised himself that he would never again allow himself to be that vulnerable, not for anyone.

"Yes. We lived in the French country side for two years." Julian had wanted to make sure there was enough distance. "Philip was born in France."

"Do you speak French?" His grin was infectious.

"Un petite. I had to learn quickly just to ask for directions if I went anywhere."

"I was going to say I don't remember you knowing the language. You didn't do too well in school as I remember."

Sam laughed. "I also speak a little Italian now. We moved there for a year before we came back to the States. You have to learn the language a bit when you can't even ask where the public restrooms are without it." Julian had told her that Ben was recovered and out of the hospital. He never told her where he was living or what he was doing. So many years had passed and she stopped asking. "Julian felt he had to be closer to the company's main office... so we settled here. It's an easy enough commute."

Deep in thought, Ben cocked his head to the side. "Wait a minute. Didn't you work for Chaunce way back when?"

"It was just a temp job." It was during that time that Julian had first expressed an interest in her, but she told him she was with Ben. It was just a fluke that a temporary in the typing pool even got a glimpse of the big boss. It was only one day that he had stopped in to visit with his underlings and it was a day that she was there. He watched her almost the whole time and then he approached her before he left. She had nearly forgotten about even meeting him until that night he showed up in the hospital.

The doctors had just told her that Ben was in a coma. He had severe spinal injuries and he had lost a lot of blood by the time she managed to flag down help. They weren't optimistic about his survival. They were even more pessimistic after the ex-rays came back from the lab. Sam was inundated with dire statistics and a dismal prognosis. She was desperate. And then Julian showed up.

She couldn't understand what Ben was thinking but he was looking at her oddly. As soon as he saw her looking at him, he looked away.

Ben stood. "I think I am going to go up to my room now. Your son volunteered me to go on a class trip tomorrow. It's going to be a long day."

She had barely nodded when he was already gone from the room.

Ben and Philip were having dinner together again when Sam called home. The maid called Master Philip to the phone at the request of his mother. She wanted to apologize that it would be a while before she arrived back home and she would miss kissing him goodnight. Then she asked to speak to Ben.

He smiled as the little boy handed him the phone. "Working late again?" Ben watched as Philip left the room to head back to finish his dinner. "Is everything okay?"

"My car has two flat tires. I called the service and I'm waiting for them to come take care of it."

He was still surprised that she avoided the luxury of being chauffeured to and from her appointments and instead liked to drive the silver BMW sedan by herself. "Where are you waiting? Are you alone?"

"I'm downstairs on the parking level and I'm not alone, I've got my cell phone."

Her answer alarmed him. "Can you go back up to your office? Or at least to the lobby? I assume there is a security guard there all night."

"I don't need to..."

Ben cut her off. "Don't argue with me! I am going to call you back on my cell phone so I can speak with you while you go back into the building. I'm on my way..."

"You don't need to..."

"Listen, multiple tires is not a coincidence. Now get moving to the elevator. And answer me as soon as the phone rings."

Ben grabbed his jacket and cell phone. He quickly explained to Philip that his mom had car trouble and they would both be back soon. He was running out to the car when he dialed her cell phone number. It was so good to hear her voice.

She was waiting in her office when he got there.

"I had some work I could do anyway. I let the guard know I was headed back upstairs."

She completely infuriated him. "Why are you so unconcerned about your welfare? You are smart enough to realize there's a threat or you never would have hired me to watch Philip."

"Who, by the way, you should be with right now. He's just a little boy..."

"And you're his mom and he needs you. The kid has already lost one parent." If he sounded angry, he was. Whenever Ben thought of Sam having that old coot's child he got angry. She should have had his child. "He's safe. I told the housekeeper not to let him out of her sight and she has my cell number."

Sam sighed heavily and looked at her watch. She shook her head and the curls bounced. "I can't believe they didn't come yet to fix my tires."

"Call and cancel them. I'll take care of it. You have a spare and I grabbed one of your winter tires from your garage. It will be good enough to drive on for the short hop back home. I want to get you out of here."

Reluctantly she did as he instructed and they went back to the parking floor together. His dark blue Buick was parked in front of her car.

Ben surveyed the two flat tires on the driver's side of the car. He knelt and ran his hand over

the lifeless rubber. "These were punctured." He stood and went to the back of his car to get out the extra tire. "This wasn't an accident." Both tires had small slices in them about one-inch from the tread.

"I might have driven over something. They're both on the same side, which could explain it."

"Both of your tires have puncture holes and both of them are on the top sidewalls. This was done after your car was sitting here." With holes that big, there was no way she could have driven all the way into work without the tires going flat.

"So it was a stupid act of vandalism. It was probably just some kids who broke in. If we look, we'll probably find some other cars they did damage to also."

"Why can't you get it through your thick skull that you need to be careful?" Ben was frustrated with her. Then he noticed that her hands were shaking. She was too afraid to admit that she could be in danger and his heart melted. "Why don't you pop the trunk for me?"

He leaned the spare tire he brought against her car as she was opening the driver's door to slide in. She pushed a button and the rear trunk lid slowly rose. Ben walked casually to the back of her car. He could see the little doughnut that was meant to be used as a spare in the luxury sedan and bent to move it and look for the jack. Even in a luxury car of this value, flat tires happened and sometimes some poor schmuck even had to change a tire for himself.

Just as he bent over the open trunk, Ben noticed a thin silver colored wire coming out of one of the right rear brake light. He quickly traced its path and saw it threaded under the gas cap. "Don't move!" He ran to the open driver's door and yanked Sam out by her arm.

"Ow!" Sam rubbed her arm as she regained her footing. "What the heck?"

Ben wasn't moving. He stood looking at the car with an odd expression on his face. He didn't turn to look at her. "Do me a favor, walk away. I want you to walk far away from this car." His voice was completely monotone.

"Why?" He was confusing her.

"Just do it!"

She started to protest and then shut her mouth. "Okay," she started walking. "Do you mind telling me how far I should go?" He didn't answer her. "I'm walking away. Did you hear me? I said..."

"I heard you." He turned his head and looked past her. "Go stand behind that van over there, but keep talking. I want to know you are there."

She laughed ironically as she kept walking in the direction of the parked van. "I don't know what game you're playing..."

"It's not a game." Ben walked to the other side of her car and stopped in front of the fuel port. "Your car was rigged to blow."

"What?" She stopped and turned to face him.

"Get behind that van... now. It's just an amateur job."

She scooted behind the van. "So it's not really a danger?"

"No, it is a danger. It's just easy to disarm." He carefully flipped open the lid covering the fuel filler neck.

"So why am I hiding?" She poked her head around the van.

"Just in case..."

"In case of what?"

Ben slowly unscrewed the filler cap with one hand while he held the wire as still as possible. "In case I'm wrong."

"Oh." She frowned as she leaned against the bulk of the van. "Are you?"

He took a deep breath as he flipped open the fuel filler neck. "We will find out soon." Barely breathing, Ben slowly pulled the wire out of the fuel tank. He seemed relieved when it wasn't attached to anything. "You can come back now, but don't touch your car at all." After he screwed the filler cap back on, he pulled his cell phone from his pocket and made a phone call. He turned his back and Sam could not hear the exact words he mumbled into his phone.

When he hung up, he turned back to her. "Get into my car, I'll take you home."

"But what about my car?" She motioned towards the car and her open driver's door but seemed

afraid to get too close.

"Don't touch it. Leave it just as it is. I've got a friend coming over to check it out thoroughly and make sure there was nothing else done to it."

"What else could have been...?" Her words trailed off and her eyes glistened with tears. "Did someone really try to kill me?"

He blew out a breath as he walked towards her. Ben wanted to let her know he would do everything he could to make sure she wasn't hurt, but she had to stop being so carefree. "Yes. But we didn't let that happen." He gently guided her into the passenger side of his car. "You're safe with me." The last thing Ben wanted to do was let her know how shaken he felt when he thought of her being hurt.

During the ride home, Ben explained to Sam how the wire went from the tail light to the gas tank. If someone had stepped on the brake pedal an electrical charge would have traveled from the wire into the gas tank and the car would have potentially exploded. "It was an amateur level stunt. It isn't really victim specific and it isn't always reliable. But when it works, it can be deadly." He noticed that her face seemed drained of color.

Sam was quiet for the rest of the ride home.

CHAPTER 3

Sam was scared. She hadn't remembered feeling that scared since, well, since the night she thought Ben was going to die. And she realized that he had put his life in jeopardy to keep her safe. She couldn't let him get hurt. Then she worried about her little boy if the threat to her life had succeeded.

"I don't know if it was such a good idea to leave Philip alone..." She couldn't hide the tremor in her voice.

"He's not alone. The housekeeper is with him. She would have called if there was a problem." Nonetheless, Ben took his cell phone out to call back to the house.

"Hurry. Please. I need to see that he's okay."

Ben was already talking into his cell phone. He nodded a few times and then disconnected. "He's fine. He's in bed."

"I need to see him." She sounded as if she were ready to cry. "I just need to see my little boy with my own eyes." Her eyes felt watery at the thought.

Ben sighed. He leaned on the accelerator just a bit more. "We'll be home soon."

As soon as he drove onto the grounds, Sam barely waited until he stopped the car before she got out and ran for the door to her home.

By the time Ben parked the car and joined her, she had sunk to the floor outside of her son's bedroom. She was crying silently.

Ben knelt in front of her. "Everything is okay now. You're safe. Philip is safe." When she continued to cry, Ben moved next to her and put his arm around her shoulder. She leaned her head against his chest and continued crying softly. "Ssh. I don't want to wake the boy." She nodded into his chest and he heard her sniffle.

After a minute or two had passed, Ben helped Sam to her feet. "Come on." He took her hand and led her down the hall to her own bedroom. He paused with his hand on the doorknob. "You need to lie down and rest. Let me take care of you." He opened the door and led her in.

When he turned to close the door gently behind them, Sam stood quietly, staring vacantly at the floor. He put his arm around her again and when she didn't move, he cradled her in his arms.

Carrying her to her bed, he pulled the corner of the cover down before he set her on the white sheets. Ben sat next to her and tried not to picture her lying in this bed with her husband. "Baby, you're in shock. But everything is okay now."

She looked at him and her eyes welled with tears. "I thought someone was just trying to frighten us." Sam sniffled and used her blouse sleeve to wipe across her eyes. "When Julian told me he was getting threats, he said they weren't serious. He said someone was just playing games. And then

he was dead so suddenly. I never saw any of the threats before. Julian took care of everything."

"Your husband was threatened?" Ben was intrigued. He had only been aware of threats received since Chaunce's death. "How long has this been going on?" He didn't want to admit how affected he was by her vulnerability. He couldn't let her know how bothered he was by her dependence on Julian. Ben reminded himself silently that she was married to the man; it was only natural for her to miss him.

Sam looked up at Ben. She didn't have an answer. She shrugged. "I don't know when it first started. Julian told me it had been going on for a while but that there was nothing to worry about." Julian had a habit of letting her know only what he wanted her to know. "Julian said he had it under control. He said I shouldn't worry."

"How did your husband die?" Ben had already read the news clippings that said Chaunce died of a heart attack, but he wanted to hear it from Sam.

"He had a heart attack while he was exercising in the gym. I guess maybe he pushed too hard."

"Was there an autopsy?"

"No. The doctor said it was a heart attack."

It was a sudden death. There should have been an autopsy. "His cardiologist?"

"No. It was his regular doctor."

Ben was getting an uneasy feeling. "When was the last time he had seen his cardiologist?"

"He didn't have one. His physician sent him for regular check-ups."

"Wasn't he seeing someone for his heart condition?"

"He didn't have a heart condition." She looked at him puzzled. "At least he never told me he had one."

"So a relatively healthy man in his fifties who regularly exercises and keeps in shape suddenly drops dead from a heart attack and the doctor just signs off on it without an autopsy?" He knew she wasn't going to be happy with his next request. "If there was no official examination of the body, I'd like to have an examination done now."

"But he's already buried!" She looked horrified. "You're not suggesting..."

"Yep." He sighed. "It doesn't sound right. Something else had to have gone on. We also have to look at the gym equipment he was on when he died and record whatever he may have ingested that day."

"Ben, do you really think..." She couldn't bring herself to form the words. "But why would someone want to hurt him?" Julian had said there was nothing to worry about.

He had read the newspaper articles and interviews with folks who had known Julian Chaunce in the business world. "He had a reputation for bring ruthless in his business dealings. He was a very successful man. He probably made several enemies along the way."

Julian's reputation was no surprise to her. She knew exactly how ruthless he could be. Sam knew how Julian brokered deals and how far he was willing to go to get what he wanted. She knew because that was why she married him. He had wanted her and she couldn't turn down the deal he offered. But she never thought that he had enraged someone to the point of murder.

She frowned. "Would this be the same person who tried to blow up my car tonight?" Her voice quivered with apprehension. "Could Julian have really been murdered? And now I'm next?"

"It could be."

"But why? I was never involved in any of Julian's business. And what if he doesn't stop with me? What about Philip? Is he in danger too?" She was beginning to get frantic with worry. She couldn't manage to hide the tears. "Ben, I am so scared."

He sighed heavily while he brushed the tousled curls from her forehead. "That's why I'm here Sam. I am going to take care of you and Philip... that's my job." He sat silently, just watching her, while he said a soundless prayer that he could keep them from harm. "I'm here. I promise I won't let anything happen to you or Philip."

Sam buried her face against his jean-covered thigh and sobbed quietly. Ben stroked her shoulders gently until he thought she was asleep. He felt the hand she had resting on his thigh start to tighten when he began to pull away, so he sat there and leaned his back against the headboard. She

slept with her head in his lap. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to rest.

Hours later Ben woke. Listening intently, he was satisfied that the night sounds were as they should be. Then he watched the woman whose head was in his lap, her hand was precariously close to starting a reaction that he knew would test his will power.

His words were barely audible and his expression was bleak. "Sam, I wish you would tell me why you left. I know that it had to be more than the money. I knew you. I loved you." He stopped to swallow the lump he felt in his throat. "I looked for you when I woke. I called your name. I cried for you." That was the only time Ben had ever let someone see him cry. "I needed you so bad." He was scared he still did.

He didn't mean to wake her but his touch became more forceful and she began to stir. Sam opened her eyes and smiled for him. Ben felt the jolt go through him. She twisted to lie on her back, her head still resting on his leg, smiled again and closed her eyes.

Ben felt as if his body was on fire. He worked at keeping his breathing steady and slow. There was no way he could get any more sleep, not with her so close to him, touching him. He fought the need to just lean down and kiss her. He fought the need to run his hands over the curves that haunted his memories. There was definitely no more sleep.

It was almost daybreak when Ben's cell phone rang. The jingle of the phone woke Sam and Ben breathed a sigh of relief when she sat up and broke contact. He brought the phone to his ear and mumbled into it and nodded in earnest. Sam sat up and watched him.

When he put the phone back into his pocket, Ben turned to her and said, "Your car is clean." He tried to keep his voice level. "Are you going to go into work today?" He stood and headed for the bedroom door. Escaping to his room was the only way he could pull himself together. Right now he was having difficulty thinking of anything but her.

She replied reluctantly, "I really do have to. Where is my car now?"

"At my friend's shop. But I am driving you. Wait here and when I get back from bringing Philip to school, I'll drive you to work." He shrugged. "You'll just have to go in late." He stared at her in challenge.

"I can call for a car..."

"No." He left the room before she could argue.

Ben took the stairs two at a time. He had been worried that she wouldn't listen to him the entire ride home and would have left before he got back. When he got home and found out from the housekeeper that she hadn't even come down from her bedroom, he was concerned.

Rapping his knuckles against her bedroom door, he called her name. "Sam?" There was no answer and he put his ear to the door. He thought he could hear the shower water running. "Hey Sam..."

Telling himself she couldn't hear him over the running water, he tried the doorknob. And it opened. Ben hesitated for just a moment before he walked in and closed the door behind him.

He walked to the closed bathroom door and stood with his hand on the doorknob. While he argued with himself if he should even be there, he heard the water stop and the shower door open. Swallowing, he backed away from the door and knew he would never have the time to leave the room before she opened the bathroom door.

Sam was holding a large towel loosely in front of her as she opened the bathroom door. She was startled when she saw Ben standing there and she quickly tried to wrap herself in the damp towel. "What are you doing here?" She sounded breathless.

He didn't try to hide the fact that he enjoyed the sight of her glistening, damp skin.

"Ben?" Sam wondered if she should be scared of him, but she knew she wasn't.

She had gotten dressed shortly after he left the room that morning but she couldn't get the memory of waking up with him there out of her mind. She couldn't forget the feeling of his muscular thigh. She couldn't ignore the erotic dreams she had enjoyed during the night.

That had been when she began to feel sinful. She had walked out on him all those years ago; it

didn't matter why. She just knew that she no longer had the right to want to feel his flesh against hers or to be enveloped by his passion. The strength of his arms and the pounding of his heart during lovemaking was no longer hers to revel in.

So Sam had stripped off her clothes under the hot water of her shower. She had scrubbed her skin until it felt raw. The memories couldn't be washed away but her skin no longer tingled where she imagined him touching her. Sam thought she was ready to come out of the shower and dress again, she thought she could face him and pretend that he was just a man. She never expected to have to face him with only a towel between them to hide desires she had no right to have.

"What do you want Ben?" She saw the answer in his eyes even though he tried to keep his expression neutral. "I mean, why are you here?"

He grinned slightly at her discomfiture. Then he shook his head. "I don't know." He slowly backed away and sat on her bed. "I was worried because your housekeeper said you had yet to make an appearance."

The way he was looking at her was affecting her in ways she hadn't felt in years.

"I'll get dressed and come downstairs in a few minutes." She expected him to leave. But he sat there. "Ben, are you okay?"

"Yes." His eyes seemed almost predatory.

"Then..."

"Then what?"

"Why are you just sitting there?" He didn't move. "I would like to get dressed."

He exhaled deeply. "I was remembering. You know, you are still beautiful."

She swallowed after his compliment. "I uh, I think you should leave."

"I will." He was hoping that she couldn't see how easily his body had responded to her. "In a few minutes. I'm just enjoying the view... and the memories." He stared at her eyes. "I know you can remember too. There used to be a time when you would have dropped your towel for me."

It took a moment before she nodded. "Yes, I remember."

He stood and slowly approached her. Sam clenched the towel in front of her.

"Relax. I would never force myself on you." His words were gentle. His voice was strained.

"Then what are you doing?" She sounded nervous.

He sighed and fought to keep control. If he showed her how much he still wanted her then he would be lost forever. He had to stay above it all. He had to hold on to his anger and his bitterness or he would be destroyed. "I keep telling myself that the only reason my memory of making love to you is so special is because you were the first woman I was ever with. But now I've been with other women and they all have been good." He ignored the slight flicker of pain he saw in her eyes. "I'm sure that if I made love with you now, you would be nothing more than just another vessel."

She tried to sound indignant to hide the hurt he had just inflicted. "You won't get the chance to find out."

He snickered cruelly. "Why not? I know I probably couldn't afford you but can't you just pretend? I want you. I need you."

Samantha Chaunce was doing her best not to cry in front of him. "Why are you being such a bastard?"

He laughed out loud. "You know that I am a bastard better than anyone else."

"I didn't mean it that way." She remembered how proud he was as a kid and how he hated it whenever someone made a nasty comment about his origins.

He sighed again and backed away. "I know you didn't." Ben crossed the room and stopped just inside of the door. He sounded tired. "I'll be downstairs."

They barely spoke during the ride to her office. Ben was too embarrassed to say much after he let her see how much he wanted to be with her. He was too embarrassed by the things he had said. Sam couldn't look at him without feeling like she was ready to cry. She also didn't want him to know that if he had just asked her to go to bed with him without being so cruel, she would have. And she would have been willing to deal with all the self-recriminations later.

Just before he pulled into the garage and announced he would escort her up to her office, Ben told Sam that he had already made a phone call to his office and arranged for someone else to help with protection.

"Are you leaving us?" She sounded worried.

"No. I just think you need more than just one man providing security. I can't be with both you and Philip all day. Last night should prove that you need protection too"

"Oh." She figured it was an easy way for him not to deal with her. "So will this new man be my bodyguard?"

"Not specifically. I am still going to be in charge of making sure both you and your son are protected. Jim is just going to be my back up when he's needed. At night when you are both home and in one place we don't need him, but during the day... I can't be two places at once."

And it would be an easy way for you to keep your distance, she thought. "Whatever you think is best."

"Jim will be at the house tonight so you can meet him. I'll make sure that Philip feels comfortable with him before I come to pick you up at work." He left her with strict instructions to stay put at the office, not to go anywhere without security and to call him immediately if anything seemed askew.

"Last night was meant to be a scare. Whoever set your car up didn't need to deflate those tires. They wanted someone to find the wire into the gas tank."

"But it still could have blown up if I had pressed the brake pedal?"

"Yes."

"Well," she admitted reluctantly, "it did scare me."

He looked at her kindly. "I know." He really wished she didn't have reason to worry but he knew better. "By the way, I started the process to have your husband's body exhumed. I'll need to get your signature later."

"Okay." She sounded sad. "Please don't say anything in front of Philip. He was very close to Julian."

Ben felt that pang of jealousy again. Damn the memory of Julian Chaunce! He married the one woman Ben had ever loved and then Chaunce also knew the love of a son. Ben figured those were things he would never know. He was tight lipped as he escorted her to her office.

Over the next few days, Ben introduced both Jim and Dave from his office. Sam and Philip got used to having Ben and one of his coworkers around during the days. Philip even built a good rapport with the two men although he admitted he preferred his time with Ben the most. That was an admission that Ben secretly enjoyed.

Nothing untoward had happened since the night with her car and Sam was beginning to give Ben arguments why she didn't need the extra protection. Then Ben got the autopsy report on Julian Chaunce. The embalming had managed to preserve enough for the medical examiner to find significant traces of burns on both of Julian's palms. He waited until Philip was off to bed and then he asked to speak with Sam privately in the den.

"The M.E. is recommending an investigation..."

"Into what?"

"Your husband's death. He believes there's enough evidence to classify it as a homicide."

Sam turned pale. "What?"

She looked so frightened and fragile suddenly and all Ben wanted to do was hold her and keep her safe. But he kept his distance. "He believes that Julian was murdered. He was electrocuted."

"But it was a heart attack."

"An electrical shock could stop the heart." He couldn't ignore the chalky coloring of her cheeks any longer. "I think you'd better sit down." Once she sat, he went to the bar and poured her a shot of brandy. "Here, sip this." He waited until she took a small sip. "I went to the gym and... not surprisingly they just got a row of new machines. They didn't keep any of the old stuff."

"What does that matter?"

"Your husband was on the treadmill when he collapsed. Many of those machines have special handles you can hold on to and it records your pulse. I think the machine he was on was rigged to deliver a significant jolt of electricity."

"But the doctor..."

"Who by the way has suddenly gone away on some mysterious humanitarian effort."

She took another sip of the brandy. "Oh my god, oh my god." Her eyes welled with tears. "Couldn't it have just been an accident?"

"Sure. But considering that he had gotten threats, the timing would have been awfully coincidental." He felt annoyed about her tears until he realized they were tears of fear. "I am going to need to go through all of your husband's papers and his desk, both here and at the office."

She nodded wordlessly.

"And we are going to beef up security for both you and your son." He finally gave in and sat beside her. He put an arm around her shoulder. "Sam, I am going to get you and Philip through this." She leaned against him and he knew he had made a mistake. "I swear I won't let anything happen to either of you."

He felt her shoulders shake and she buried her face in his shoulder. Ben let her cry for a few minutes and then he picked her chin up and kissed her. Within moments she was kissing him back.

It had been so long since Sam had felt safe. It had been so long since she had lain in Ben's arms. She had loved him more than her own life. It was his bed she wanted to come to every night; it was his love that took away the loneliness. He always managed to keep the world at bay; nothing ever seemed scary when she was with him.

Until that night when he lay broken in a hospital bed and the doctors said there was nothing more they could do. The x-rays had uncovered so much more than just the injuries from the car accident. There was a growth on Ben's lower spine, a tumor. The doctors weren't going to operate. Between the tumor, the crushed vertebrae and the possible damage to the spinal cord, they said there was no hope. Very few doctors in the world were trained well enough to even attempt the surgery and even then there could be no guarantees.

Ben had no insurance. His boss had missed several payments to the insurance company and coverage for all employees had been canceled. There was no way that Ben could afford one of those highly trained specialists. And if the tumor were malignant, the best hope the hospital doctors offered was less than six months.

Suddenly Sam didn't feel safe anymore. There was nothing she could do to save Ben. She didn't have the money or the resources. That was when Julian showed up and he offered her a deal. Ben was never told the truth about where the money came from. Thinking that the other driver had called in the accident and not knowing about the painful climb that Sam had made that night, he thought the auto insurance from the other driver paid his bills. He never knew that Julian got regular reports on his recovery and that he shared so much of that news with Sam.

He lowered her to the couch and covered her with his body. She parted her lips and his tongue invaded her mouth. She sighed contentedly as she felt his hand cup her breast. Tears escaped her eyes.

He saw the tears and stopped. "I'm not forcing you to do this, Sam."

"I know." She sniffled.

"Then why are you crying?"

"Because I've missed you so much. Suddenly you're here and I want to be with you."

"I've been here all along. I wasn't the one who left." His voice recaptured a tinge of bitterness. "If you really missed me then why did you leave me?"

She turned her head. She couldn't tell him why. "I... I don't want to talk about that anymore. That's in the past. We're here now, together. Please, make love to me."

Ben frowned and pulled away from her. "I can't dismiss it as easily as you. You betrayed me." She couldn't meet his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"It's not that easy." He sat up and turned away from her. Sam sat and reached towards him. He jerked away from her touch and stood. "Why do you want me now? I don't have any great wealth. I'm

just your employee dammit!" Ben looked at her with disgust. "Or do you figure that entitles you?"

Sam gasped and then she stood. "I wasn't forcing you either."

He snorted. "No, no you weren't." He started to say something else and then shut his mouth suddenly. Running his hand through his hair, Ben looked frustrated. "I just don't know why, now, why you're willing to... Why now?"

She sounded ominously calm. "Ben, you said you wanted to know that being with me really wasn't special. So prove it. Take me to bed and see how I compare."

He frowned at her. "No, you're not doing this for me. You've got something else going on. What are you after?" Ben was scared that he would find out she was still special and he didn't know how he would be able to survive losing her again. "You don't need to do this for me to protect you. You're already paying me to do that."

His kisses had opened feelings that she had managed to stow away for almost nine years. She had told herself that she would never again have the chance to be with him. But now he was here and she couldn't deny she needed him. "I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing this for me. I want you Ben."

"Why?" He was scared that he would lose control. He was scared that she would break his heart again. "What is it you are trying to do?"

His fear was obvious and Sam thought she understood. She hoped she understood. He was looking for some kind of protection for his heart. He was afraid to believe in her. "All right. You asked me what my price was. I have a price." His gaze hardened. Now she was living up to his expectations, he didn't have to care. "I need you to forgive me. That's my price."

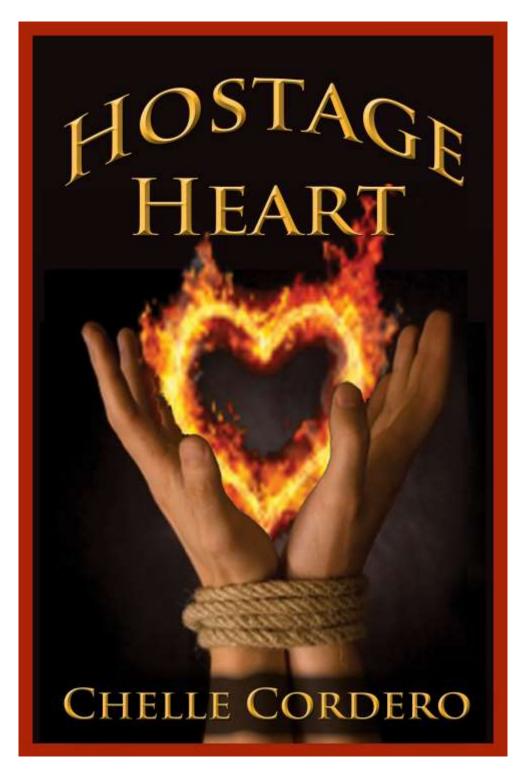
Ben glared at her. His lips were set in a straight, thin line. "I will never forgive you."

She held back the tears she felt stinging her eyes. Sam slowly retreated towards the door of the den. "I never meant to cause you so much pain. You have to believe that." She left the room carefully closing the door behind her.

He stood still in the room with his fists clenched by his side. Then he went to the bar and poured himself a tumbler full of scotch.

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Hostage Heart by Chelle Cordero

Prologue

Deanna had a heavy feeling as she headed to work. Maybe it was just those extra bills that had come due. She had been sending a large portion of her paycheck back home to her folks ever since she came to the city. There really wasn't that much paycheck to go around. She hadn't been prepared for that assessment the landlord passed on to his tenants for the boiler repair. There just wasn't any place else where she could cut spending. She already walked to and from work, never went out and spent money with her friends, and she even bought day old breads and produce rather than fresh. She counted her blessings on a daily basis that she had a job and a roof over her head, no matter how meager, but she found herself bordering on frustration every time she balanced her checkbook.

She made up her mind, today she was going to ask Rob if there was any way he could raise her salary a bit. She was willing to take on extra work; she just needed to be able to keep sending money home. The hurricanes had pretty much devastated parts of Louisiana over the last few years. The resulting tornadoes hit surrounding areas and wiped her folks out. There was no way they were able to rebuild their home and the business. She graduated high school out of a makeshift building before the last round of storms hit. Her original plans were to remain at home for a while and maybe find a job down there. Her parents had always figured she could come into the shop with them but there was no more shop to generate money. Deanna decided to go someplace where she could earn some money to send home to them. Deanna made the move to New York City and had been trying to build a life for nearly a year. A trailer sat on the site near where Deanna remembered her favorite tire swing ever since Katrina and Rita ravaged the area. Her parents didn't complain. There was no way she wanted to let them know how tight things were for her. She let them believe that money was rolling in or they never would have accepted the money she sent back home.

Clutching her purse tightly to her side, Deanna entered the bank. She was supposed to get some smaller bills for the register this morning on her way into work. She didn't like walking around with so much money, but Rob insisted that he trusted her to take care of things. Deanna wasn't naïve; she knew that her neighborhood wasn't exactly the most crime free in the city. She worried about the responsibility of carrying that much money. If she lost it, there was no way at all that she'd be able to replace it. There never had been any temptation to take what didn't belong to her but she did allow herself a brief fantasy during the night that the wad of bills in her purse was really hers.

She stepped in line with about half a dozen other customers. She stood behind a very broad shouldered man in a suit and she had to stand on tip-toe to try to look around him to see how fast the line wasn't moving. He turned towards her and smiled as he adjusted his glasses. His brown wavy hair and bronze complexion stood out against his light brown suit. The ends of his hair brushed his collar. Deanna smiled back politely while hoping she wouldn't encourage him into a conversation. He was very attractive and she kept looking towards him when he wasn't looking at her. Under other circumstances, she wouldn't have minded trying to engage him in a conversation. But as it was, she needed to be at work soon and she couldn't forget the money she was carrying. He kept checking his watch and she wondered if he was late for some important business meeting. Deanna checked her own watch and hoped she could make it to the store in time to open the doors on schedule.

Finally the gentleman in front of her was the next in line. Suddenly there was a shout and a scream. Deanna turned and saw two men -and there a third—with stocking-covered faces waving very large and frightening handguns.

"Everybody get down! And keep your faces to the floor."

All of the bank's customers obeyed immediately. When Deanna raised her head to watch what was happening, the man who had been standing in front of her gently pushed her back down.

"Do as they say," he cautiously whispered to her from his own position on the floor.

She could see the feet of the frightened tellers as they were ushered toward the front of the counter to join the rest of the customers. One poor young man was stopped and dragged back behind the counter to empty the cash drawers into a sack. Deanna heard muffled sobbing around her.

One of the masked robbers was moving through the mass of people on the floor demanding wallets, purses and jewelry. Perhaps foolishly, Deanna decided she wasn't going to give up the store money without some kind of protest. She also slid her grandmother's birthstone ruby ring off of her hand and slipped it down her bra front for protection.

"Open your purse."

"No." He grabbed for it and she wouldn't let it go.

"Damn it, it's not worth dying for." The man spoke to her again in a harsh whisper. She saw that he was eagerly handing over his own wallet.

The purse was wrested from her hand. "No. Give it back!"

He heard the gentle twang in her voice and was intrigued by it. "Don't be an idiot!" he grumbled under his breath.

Deanna raised her head and her voice in anger. "Will you just be quiet! Ow!" She felt her head being yanked backwards by the hair and she found herself staring at the stocking face of one of the robbers.

"Stand up!" She was forced to her feet. "You want to fight?" A gun was pressed against her ribcage. "I'll give you something to fight about." He started to push her towards one of the office doors.

"Where are you taking me?" Sudden terror seized her. She tried to break away but found his grip on her was too strong. "Please. I'm sorry..." Her imagination ran wild with horrible possibilities. Tears began to sting her cheeks.

"Well gee, I got me Scarlett O'Hara, boys." The bank robber laughed as he announced his find to his cohorts.

"Let her go." The man from the front of the line made a meek plea for her safety.

"Mind your frigging business!"

Deanna continued to struggle and finally broke free. The robber lunged for her. Faster than she was aware, the suited customer was standing and pushed her protectively behind him. He blocked the robber and they scuffled. She stepped backward and was terrified to see the robber gain the advantage and hold the gun to the man's temple. One arm wound its way around the would-be rescuer's neck and he was quickly subdued.

She stood trembling. "Oh Gosh, I'm sorry..."

No one else wanted to take a risk. Everyone obeyed the robbers' demands. The young teller finished filling the bag, customer pockets were emptied of valuables. The gun was still being held on the attractive stranger.

"Get back down on the floor!" The robber commanded Deanna to lie down on the floor.

She was shaking with fear and with guilt. "Please let him go."

"Lie down!"

She hesitated briefly and then did as she was told.

"Now everyone just remain where you are. Count slowly to three-hundred. If I hear any police sirens or see any cop cars, I will kill this man." The robbers began to back out of the bank with one of them dragging the struggling man with him.

Deanna couldn't let them just take the man with them, not after he had risked himself to save her. She looked up and saw a large ceramic demonstration piggy bank on the counter; as soon as she saw the robber look away, she jumped to her feet and grabbed it. She ran after the robber holding the hostage and struck him in the back of the head.

The robber stumbled. "Run!" She screamed at the stranger. He stared at her in disbelief. "Run!" Finally he made a hasty retreat to the street.

Before Deanna could get safely back into the bank, she found herself being grabbed again and this time the gun was held to her head.

"You little bitch." The robber's voice was raspy. "You're coming with us instead, then." He

dragged her pleading out the doors and threw her into a van just outside on the street.

Another one of the assailants grabbed her to tie and gag her as the vehicle made a hasty retreat. About a block later, the van made a quick stop and Deanna was surprised to see the suited customer step into the van.

He looked at her in anger. "You couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?"

Chapter One

The handkerchief he held over her face smelled foul and the stench remained in her throat after she woke up.

She opened her eyes to dark, pitted log walls. It smelled musty. There was a single camp bed in the corner and an open alcove with empty hangers. The floor that she was sitting on was wooden, dusty and drafty. Her hands were still tied behind her and her ankles were tied together. Tape covered her mouth. She could hear men's voices arguing from outside the room, but she couldn't make out their words. Suddenly, the door burst open. Deanna jumped in surprise at the noise. Her pseudo rescuer from the bank walked in. The suit was exchanged for a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. He wasn't wearing glasses. Deanna was intimidated by his bulging muscles and his rugged looks. He looked dangerous.

"Finally, you're awake." He walked over to her and pulled the tape from her mouth. It stung. "Why the hell you couldn't just lie there and mind your business? What's your name?" He stood over her. Her porcelain skin was in stark contrast with her dark hair and even darker eyes.

She looked at him in fear. "Deanna. Deanna Blair."

"Well Miss Deanna Blair," he mocked her southern accent. "You really screwed us. Kidnapping is a federal crime. We never planned to take any real hostages." He shook his head as he looked at her. He realized he could easily stare at her for hours. There was no way he wanted this kind of complication in his life. The last thing he wanted was to be attracted to her, to be distracted from the things he had to do.

"I thought you were in trouble." He looked even taller and broader from this angle. "I thought you needed help."

He exhaled loudly. "Crimes happen every day in New York and no one ever wants to get involved. And then Miss Goody-Two-Shoes has to come along. Damn!" Now he felt responsible for her.

"Just let me go." She pleaded with him. "I swear I'll forget what you look like."

"Right." He snorted. "Like I could believe that. You wouldn't be in this mess if you were that kind of person." *She is just a young girl*, he thought. *Why did she have to be so foolishly brave and concerned about a stranger*? He paced the room. "Do you have family?"

She glared at him. "No one has any money to pay a ransom if that's what you want to know."

He frowned. "I wasn't suggesting ransom. I simply wanted to know if anyone was worried whether you were alive or dead."

Deanna swallowed. She held an image of her dear parents in her mind. "I don't think they would know that I was kidnapped. They aren't local."

"Just listening to your accent would tell me that." *She definitely isn't from the city.* "How about friends? I'm sure you've got a ton of them." He figured she probably befriended every other person who walked the streets in the city.

"I guess just my boss. I was on my way to work." She thought bitterly of the money she was carrying for Rob. She wondered if he had heard about the bank robbery and understood that was why she never showed up at the book store with the cash. Hopefully Rob's insurance money would cover the loss and she wouldn't have to... *if she survived*.

"Give me his name and number. I'll get in touch with him." He didn't bother to copy anything down when she told him and Deanna wondered if he was being honest with her when he offered to call Rob. Honest? She couldn't help but think how ironic it was that she even thought he could be. "I wouldn't waste your time or energy screaming. This place is pretty isolated in the off season. The only

ones who would hear you are my crew and trust me, you don't want their attention." He walked back to the door. He sighed and sounded apologetic. "If you cooperate, we won't hurt you." He left the room and closed the door soundly behind him.

Deanna was struggling to stay awake. She wondered what was on the handkerchief in the van. The room was hot and stuffy, she was sure that didn't help. Her overactive imagination nearly convinced her that she was going to die no matter what the man had promised her.

She kept hearing the muffled voices of the other men. They were alternately arguing and laughing. She heard the sound of broken glass and then laughter. After a few moments the door swung open. One of the men appeared grinning in the doorway.

"Now aren't you a pretty sight?" He advanced on her and laughed when he read her fear correctly. Grabbing her bound arm and pulling her to her feet, he pulled her stumbling from the room. She had to hop to try to keep up with him. "The boys and I just want to have a little bit of fun." Deanna could smell the unmistakable stench of beer.

He sat on a wooden picnic bench next to the camp style table in the cabin and pulled her on to his lap. She struggled when he tried to pour the contents of an open bottle of warm beer into her mouth. The beer ran down the front of her blouse.

"Tsk, tsk. Now look what you've gone and done. You're a mess." He brazenly ran his hand down her chest pretending to wipe away the wet beer stain.

Deanna tried to pull away. Tears came to her eyes. "Please, let me go."

"Hey Roy, Miss Southern Bell said please." He mocked her pronunciation. One of the other two men laughed at her distress.

The third man got up and grabbed her chin. He held her face still as he forced the neck of another open bottle of beer between her lips and poured. Deanna choked and spit out most of it. "Come on, swallow." He kept pouring and she finally swallowed some to keep from choking. "That's right baby, you're going to feel much better. We just want you to enjoy it too."

After most of the contents of the bottle of beer was either down her throat or spilled down the front of her blouse, he tossed the bottle onto the table. Deanna fought to keep from gagging as the beer hit her stomach and started an abrupt return trip. "I'm going to be sick."

The first guy stood and nearly dumped her on the floor. They let her heave the contents of her stomach while she bent over. They laughed at her. When she was done, one of the men splashed her face with even more beer to rinse her off. Then the front of her blouse was torn open.

"Oh God, please don't...:" Unable to defend herself or run away with her hands and feet still tied, she cried and pleaded.

Tugging the front of her bra as if to rip it off of her, the second guy found her grandmother's ring. "What's this?" He dug the piece of jewelry out.

She looked longingly at the ring. "Please, that's all I have left of my *mamere*." They still hadn't recovered the old woman's body long after the flood waters receded. "Please don't take that."

One of the men leered at her. "Maybe we'll let you earn it back."

"What the hell is going on here?" His booming voice surprised everyone.

"Hey man, we were just having some fun. She doesn't mind. Do you?" One of the three drunken revelers pouted.

"I told you, she's my property... and I don't share with anyone." The pseudo bank customer had returned from his errand. He walked to them and grabbed her roughly by her arm. "What's that?" He questioned the guy with the ring in his hand.

"She was hiding it."

"Give it to me. Now." The ring was put into his outstretched palm and he put it into his pocket. He looked at the floor where she spit up. "Clean this up."

"Hey man, we were just bored.

"That's not my problem." He pulled Deanna into the small kitchen and helped her wash her face and rinse her mouth at the sink.

"So long as Jacob is gone, I'm in charge around here. And I don't like having my orders

ignored." He started to pull Deanna back into the room.

"You gonna do her?"

He glared at them. "Yeah. I'm going to do her. And only me."

"Why can't we?"

"If and when I get tired of her, maybe I'll let you have her. In the meanwhile, there are whores in town you can pay. You don't touch what's mine again." He pulled her struggling into the room. "Now don't bother me for a while."

"Please don't hurt me." Deanna was crying. "You said you wouldn't hurt me."

He pushed her up against the door and pressed himself against her. She heard the loud clunk of the door being pushed closed. "Keep crying. Beg me to stop." His voice was low and guttural.

"You're sick."

"I need you to scream a little." He whispered into her ear. "Scream." He tore the gaping blouse off of her.

"Stop. Please." She begged him.

He bent close to her ear. "Please," He sighed. "I need them to think I'm hurting you."

She looked at him confused.

He was loud. "Bitch. Do what I'm telling you!" He kicked the bottom of the door. Then he punched his fist into the palm of his hand. "You like it when I hurt you?"

She frowned and was still confused. Then she played along. "Please... stop." He made another punching sound. "No. I'll do whatever you want."

He knelt to untie her feet. "Stay still!" Deanna was still wary of him but realized that he was indeed making it sound like he was overpowering her. He pulled his belt off and threw it on the floor by the door, the metal buckle made a loud noise. Then he gave her a look to encourage more crying.

"No! You're hurting me."

"Good." He leaned next to her and again whispered. "I'm going to tell you to do a lot of things you're not going to like, but trust me, I'm protecting you. Now cry."

Deanna was still so frightened, the tears came easily. He untied her hands.

His voice was a low murmur. "Take off your clothes." She looked at him in shock. He nodded toward the camp bed in the room. "Get under the sheet of that bed. You can keep your panties on, everything else comes off."

She shook her head no as she looked at him wide eyed.

He set his jaw. Again he whispered. "It's your choice. Pretend that I am doing what I want with you or get passed around by those three for real."

Totally confused as to why he was helping her, Deanna hesitated for only a moment. She pulled her slacks off but waited until she was under the sheet before removing her bra. Then she watched him while he just seemed to wait. Finally, the man picked up a length of rope that he had removed from her earlier and approached the bed.

"Give me your hand." He tied one wrist to the metal frame of the bed. "Don't even try to escape. You won't get far enough to make it count." He glanced at the door and then back at her. He whispered, "Keep crying."

Then without any explanation, he pulled his shirt off to reveal a bare chest, tousled his hair and unzipped his trousers. He headed to the door and opened it as he re-zipped his pants. He smacked his lips and as the door was closed again. Deanna heard him say, "It'll be a while before I get tired of that little piece."

She curled up in the bed trembling and hugging the sheet to her. He could have hurt her and yet he didn't. Not only didn't he hurt her, he said he was protecting her. Should she believe him? Should she trust him? She had trusted him in the bank and then found out that he was lying. Deanna was confused and terrified. His laughter sounded through the door. He was describing his exploits to his cohorts, only his exploits with her were all lies.

The room was already dark when he returned. He said nothing to her as he sat on the side of the bed and removed his shoes. Then he stood and unzipped his pants.

"What are you doing?" She sounded as scared as she felt.

"Getting into bed."

"Why?"

He looked at her shadow and spoke calmly. "Because we sleep together." Just before he pulled off his boxer shorts, he paused. "You're welcome to watch..." Then he chuckled when she quickly turned away.

He climbed into bed and under the sheet next to her. She could feel the heat rising from his body. She moved as close to the edge of the bed and the wall as she could get.

He sighed. "I am not going to hurt you."

"Then why are you naked?"

"We don't really have privacy. The door doesn't have a lock. There's no curtain over the window." He paused. "If anyone sees me in bed with you, or getting out of bed in the morning, it's got to look real."

It took her a few minutes to muster the courage to ask his name.

"It's Ryan, just Ryan." He gently put his hand on her shoulder. "Deanna, I need to warn you... If at any point we are being watched, I may need to make it look like I have had my way with you. I promise only to do what I have to. Struggle if you want, just not too much." He pulled her onto her back. "It's the only way I can think of to protect you."

"Why are you doing this? Why are you promising to help me?"

"You should never have been here in the first place. Now go to sleep." He turned to his side facing her and pulled her against him. "You've got to trust me. I'm all you've got right now."

It was long after she heard his steady breathing that she finally fell asleep herself.

Ryan woke her in the morning. He had already gotten out of bed and was wearing his jeans. He untied her wrist and handed her a man's clean white T-shirt. "This should more than cover you. We're going in to the other room. Remember what I said about my familiarity with you. Be a little scared of me but do whatever I tell you. Clear?"

She nodded and took the shirt from him. Since he stood watching her, she slipped the T-shirt over her head while she held the sheet to her. When she stood, it covered her to mid-thigh. "Okay. I'm ready." There was a tremor in her voice.

"Good." Ryan noticed movement behind him at the window and he grabbed her to him for a punishing kiss. His hand rested comfortably on her behind. Surprised, Deanna tried to push him away. "Someone was checking on us." She believed him, but she also suspected that he kissed her longer than was absolutely necessary.

Before they joined his partners, Ryan politely asked her if she needed to relieve herself and then took her outside to a large tree. He turned his back but stayed next to her so there was no chance of escape. She watched his back as she took care of her needs. It was like he was two different people, one who took care of her and one who stole and had been party to her kidnapping. When she was done, he held her arm firmly as they returned to the cabin.

Deanna kept her eyes cast downward in front of the other men. She could feel their ogling. Ryan kept her close to his side. She knew that he was keeping a watchful eye on her whenever anyone got close even if he pretended no to care. He tossed her a buttered roll while he sat and ate another with a cup of black coffee. There was conversation about his boss returning. The boss in question was apparently the Jacob he had mentioned the day before. Ryan sounded displeased at the prospect.

The room was damp and chilly. The stones around the unused fireplace glistened from leaking rainwater. A pile of cut wood sat in a bin next to the hearth. The bare wooden floor was coated in dust. Deanna watched a spider moving in a web that covered the corner of one of the windows. Two more wooden doors led to other rooms, she imagined that was where the other men slept. An open doorway led to a kitchen of sorts. The view outside the windows showed only trees, open fields and hills. She had no idea where they were.

She had barely finished eating when he took her arm and pushed her back towards their room. Laughing, he made a comment about returning in a few minutes. He was asked if he needed any help. He shook his head, laughed again, and declined.

Ryan tied her wrists to the bed frame again. "I'm sorry about this."

"You're nothing like those other men. Why are you even involved with them?" Deanna knew that his kindness to her was more than just an act. "You are different. You act like them, but you aren't. Who are you?" Her *mamere* used to call it vibrations and Deanna got very different vibrations from Ryan than from his cohorts.

He stared at her in silence. Finally he looked away. "The less you know about me, the better off you are. Don't ask questions." He reluctantly gagged her. "We will be out for a while. I can't take the chance you'll shout if someone does happen near. I am sorry to do this." Then he left the room.

If she twisted just right, Deanna found she could either sit up or lie down with the way he had tied her wrists to the bed frame. She even found it possible to maneuver into a semi-standing position, but not straight enough to be able to drag the weight of the camp bed across the room to the window. She was able to loosen the gag a bit as well. Everything was ominously quiet. She didn't have a watch but Deanna knew that hours had passed before she heard the sounds of the group of men returning.

It wasn't long before Ryan came into the room carrying a small white bag from a fast food restaurant. He greeted her with a smile and confused her even more. "Do you like vanilla shakes?" He removed the gag from her mouth and noticed with a frown that she had loosened it considerably.

"I don't understand you. You hold me here against my will and even tie me up and gag me. You pretend to abuse me so your friends won't. And you buy me a vanilla shake like we were on a date?" She wasn't trying to anger him, but she was confused by the act she knew he was putting on. She was relieved to see him again and that scared her. Deanna didn't like the idea of becoming dependent on someone who could be involved with robbing banks and kidnapping.

He didn't answer her as he untied her wrists from the bed and handed the bag to her. "I also bought you a burger." After he finished untying her, he walked over to the window. "If we had met under different circumstances, you wouldn't be questioning me if I did things for you." Ryan wished he *had* met her under different circumstances. From the moment he saw her in the bank, he wanted to get to know her.

"But we met while you were robbing a bank. And then you helped to kidnap me."

"You were kidnapped because you couldn't mind your own business."

"So you're saying it was my own fault?"

"Hell! Why couldn't you have just minded your own business? Why did you have to try to be heroic?" He wasn't sure if he was angry at her or at himself.

"You seemed like a nice guy and I thought you needed help."

He laughed and turned to look at her. "But now you know I'm anything but a nice guy." Ryan walked back to her and sat on the bed next to her. "I bet now you really do wish someone had pulled the trigger when the gun was pointed at my head."

"I... I don't wish harm on anyone."

Damn it, he thought, why couldn't she just be a vicious bitch? Why couldn't he find something about her to dislike? "Yeah. You aren't the type that would want someone hurt. And you don't deserve any of this that's happened to you." He watched her quietly for a moment then he put a finger under her chin and made her look at him. "I really would like to kiss you... for real." At her frightened look, he quickly added, "I won't force myself on you. I'm asking for your permission."

Her look of fear quickly turned to puzzlement and then resignation. "Alright."

Ryan didn't hesitate. He wound his fingers in her long brown tresses and pulled her to him gently for a kiss. He was ecstatic when he felt her lips part slightly and he took full advantage. He caressed a shoulder and ran his palm down her arm. Deanna lifted her hands to his shoulders and rested her palms there. It just felt natural. She was surprised by how much she was enjoying the kiss but worried that he might press for more.

Finally he reluctantly broke the kiss. "Your burger is getting cold." Ryan sounded even more irritated than before. He walked away from her again. She wasn't the only one confused, he thought. The kiss had been everything he had expected and a whole lot more. He had been hoping he would be disappointed. If only he had met her under different circumstances. If only she could feel something for him besides contempt. "Thank you for the kiss."

Unsure as to how to respond, Deanna simply thanked him for the food.

That night they slept just as they had the night before. Deanna woke at one point to find Ryan's fingertips resting on a naked breast. His breathing was slow and steady and she had no doubt he was still asleep so she carefully moved his hand away. He still had an arm thrown over her and she felt branded by his touch.

Chapter Two

When Deanna woke, Ryan was lying next to her and watching her. He smiled when he saw her eyes open. He had already untied her wrist.

"Good morning." He was the first to break the silence.

Deanna looked at him. "You make it sound like we're here because we both want to be." Her voice resonated with irony.

He sighed and sat up, letting the sheet fall to his waist. She noticed how muscular and broad his bare chest was. "I know you're here against your will. I'm sorry. I truly am." He let his gaze wander around the room. Ryan had been watching her ever since he woke. There was no way he could change the events that had put her in bed with him. He truly wished he could. "You have no idea how sorry I am for everything right now." He looked back at her. "I want to kiss you again. Hell, I want to make love to you. I was thrilled when you let me kiss you yesterday. But I wish I could be sure you let me because you wanted it and not because you were scared of saying no."

She sat up to face him clutching the bed sheet in front of her. "Ryan, if you are so sorry, why don't you just let me go?"

"I can't." He wore a troubled expression. "Not yet."

He could see that she was struggling not to cry. "Ryan, I have a life. I have friends. I have a job." She swallowed back a sob. "I want to go home."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

Deanna was surprised by his question. "No."

"When you walked into that bank, you caught my eye. I couldn't get over how pretty you were. If I hadn't known what was going to happen, I would have done more than smile at you."

"You're just confusing me."

He smiled impulsively. "You're not the only one who is confused." The smile left his face as he stared at her. Without warning he tangled his fingers in her hair and pulled her to him for a kiss. When she didn't resist, he pushed her back and lay with his body half covering hers. Ryan pulled the sheet out from between them and enjoyed the feel of her bare breasts against his naked chest.

Deanna tensed for just a moment when she felt him pull the sheet away.

"Trust me, Deanna. I'm not going to hurt you. I just wanted to kiss you and feel you in my arms." He chuckled quietly. "I'm not even looking. And I'm just kissing you, no more. Just please, tell me you want this too. Tell me it's not fear that's letting me kiss you."

It was amazing, she thought, she wasn't scared of him anymore. "It's not fear."

After a few more moments of kissing and holding her, Ryan realized that he had to stop or he might not be able to control his impulses. He leaned back on the bed while Deanna covered herself with his T-shirt again. He took several deep breaths while he willed his body to relax. "Aside from letting you go home, which I can't do, is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable? Anything to make this more bearable?"

She thought about it. "Is there anyplace I can bathe? I can still smell the beer your friends poured on me."

"They are not my friends. It's just... a job." He sat up and looked at her. "There's a bath house down the trail. The water's chilly but the showers work. I've used them myself."

"I would really like to take a shower."

He looked happy to be able to do something for her. "I'll get a couple of towels." He pulled on his pants and left the room for a few minutes. Deanna wasn't tied up and she did try the window but it was nailed shut. When he came back and saw her near the window, he realized she had thought about escaping, but he didn't say anything.

Ryan handed her a clean T-shirt and a pair of men's boxers so that she had a chance to wash and dry her underpants. He also gave her a towel. He carried a towel and clothes for himself as well. "Don't worry, there are separate shower stalls." And he really needed a cold shower.

They walked a short distance down a trail marked with red triangles. Deanna could no longer see the cabin by the time they neared the bathhouse. Unfortunately there was nothing else in her view either. If she had been inclined to try to escape, she had no idea which way to go. With her poor sense of direction, she figured she'd probably wind up lost in the woods for a very, very long time. Even though it meant remaining a captive, Deanna felt safer staying with Ryan.

The wooden bathhouse consisted of three door-less stalls, but the side walls provided enough privacy to change comfortably. Deanna felt odd to know that Ryan was on the other side of that short wall undressing for his own shower. He purposely positioned himself so that she would have to pass by him if she tried to leave the bathhouse on her own.

Deanna made a startled little gasp when the cold water hit her body and she heard Ryan laugh. "Told you it was chilly."

She heard the shower water go on in his stall as well. Even cold, it felt wonderful to rinse her body off. She soaped her pair of panties with a small soap bar Ryan had given her and rinsed them under the water while she showered. She would let them dry back in the room. Then she rubbed the soap over her hair and rinsed as well. She stood naked with her eyes closed letting the water just splash over her. She trusted him not to peek. Suddenly Deanna felt something grab her ankles. She looked down and screamed.

Ryan was thinking that cold showers had been very helpful the last few days. Sleeping next to Deanna had certainly tested his will power. He still believed putting on the act was the best protection he could offer her. He dropped the bar of soap he had been rubbing over his body when he heard her scream and he went around the stall divider.

She stood perfectly still with the water still cascading down her body. Her eyes were terrified. "Help." She barely croaked the words as she motioned downwards.

He looked down at her feet and saw the back half of a Black Rat Snake coiled around her ankles. He said quietly, "It's not poisonous."

"I don't care. Get it off of me." Even with the shower water hitting her face, he could see that she was crying.

"Okay." He started to bend towards the snake when it turned its head and snapped at him. He pulled back.

Her voice quivered. "I thought you said it wasn't poisonous."

"It's not. It still can bite." Wary, he kept an eye on it and when he saw an opportunity, he lunged for the head. Grabbing the snake behind the head, he was able to keep its sharp teeth away from Deanna and himself. With his free hand, he grabbed the coils. "Can you step out of it?"

Shaking, she pulled one foot and then the other out of the tight coils. Amazed at the strength of this six or seven foot long snake, he was happy Deanna was able to extricate herself. He picked up the struggling snake and held it at arm's length away from him. Ryan carefully walked out of the bathhouse with it.

Just a minute or so later, Ryan returned. "Our friend has found a new home up a tree." He saw Deanna was still shaking and still looking frightened. "Ssh, it's gone." She looked up at him with tears cascading down her cheeks. He took her in his arms and held her close.

"I hate snakes. Back home we've got all kinds around the marshes. I hate them." She leaned into him and let him comfort her. "They scare me so." He turned off the running water in her stall while he held her.

After a few minutes, they realized their mutual state of undress. Ryan stepped back and didn't hide himself. Deanna reflexively tried to cover herself. He gently pried her arms away. She didn't fight him.

"I want you." Once she looked at him, he didn't have to state the obvious. "You are really

beautiful. I would like to make love to you." She didn't respond. "But... if you say no, I'll just take another cold shower." He shrugged. "I mean it, if you say no, then it's no."

She couldn't find her voice. Deanna stared at him wide eyed. He bent his head to kiss her, she kissed him back. That was all the permission Ryan needed.

He reached around to turn off the water in his stall, picked up the towels and cradled her in his arms. Walking out of the bathhouse, Ryan spotted a grassy patch of land and brought her to it. He stood her on her feet and laid the towels on the ground. And then he kissed her again. He let his lips trail over her jaw and down the side of her neck. He lowered her on to the towels and let his lips keep wandering until he was suckling at her nipples. He murmured into her chest, ""If you want me to stop, just say so."

Terrified and longing for his touch at the same time, Deanna held him to her as he tasted and nipped at her breasts. She had never expected to want him the way she did. He reached down to the apex of her thighs and toyed with her feminine core. Deanna was glad her nails were short as she dug her fingers into his muscled back. Ryan kissed his way back up her neck to her lips and plunged his tongue into her mouth. He heard her panting and felt her writhing as he brazenly parted her with his fingers.

Ryan had promised himself he would stop if there was any resistance, but when she spread her legs and allowed him to lie between them, he knew it was okay. She was tight as he pushed his way in. When he felt the tear and heard her cry of pain, he felt like a jerk.

"Deanna, I'm sorry. I didn't know." He held himself perfectly still as he tried to sooth her pain away. Kissing the tears that rolled from her eyes, he called himself all kinds of foul names. If he had known that she was a virgin, he would have been so much gentler.

She sniffled. "I didn't want to tell you. I was afraid."

"Afraid of me? Afraid that I would force myself on you?"

The pain was beginning to subside. "Afraid that... you wouldn't do this."

Ryan hadn't thought he could be any more shocked than discovering she was a virgin.

"I just didn't know it would hurt so much." She felt as if she had to reassure him.

He shook his head. "It shouldn't have. I'm so sorry." Slowly, he began to move. "It gets better. I promise." Realizing that he had already done the damage, Ryan tried to give her time to adjust to his fullness inside her, but when he felt her wrap her legs around his hips, he couldn't hold back any longer.

He rocked against her until he felt his muscles clench and he spilled his seed into her. Ryan knew that Deanna hadn't climaxed so he reached between them and finished with his hand what he should have already done for her. It wasn't until he was sure that he felt her tense and shudder that he stopped and rolled off of her.

Ryan sighed. "I apologize for making your first time so terrible. I never meant to cause you pain." He was embarrassed. "Deanna, making love is beautiful. It's supposed to feel really great. Not like this." Guilt assuaged him. "If I had known, I would have been gentler. I would have made sure it was good." He leaned over and kissed her wishing he could redo the last few minutes.

She shrugged. "I know you could have stopped caring once you... came. But then you made sure I enjoyed too. Thank you." She paused. "This wasn't a typical first time anyway."

He raised himself on his elbow. "What do you mean?"

Deanna looked at him emotionlessly. "I wanted to be with you, but I'm a hostage. I barely know you. And I just thought I was going to die when I saw that snake." She suddenly felt self-conscious about her nudity. "I'm glad you did what you did. I'm not sorry. I just don't know why."

He laid down on his back again. "I took advantage." He gave a deprecating laugh at himself. "I am no better than the men I was trying to protect you from." Ryan didn't think he could think any less of himself. "Why don't you finish your shower and we'll go back to the cabin?" He closed his eyes and told himself that his partners had just wanted to use her. He almost convinced himself he had been different.

Deanna went back to the shower and washed off the spot of blood from her lost virginity. Then she tried to wash away the desire to be with him again.

Back at the cabin, Ryan was solicitous to her even though he had to hide it from his partners.

Ryan kept asking if she was okay. He wanted her reassurance that he wasn't as vile as he thought he was.

"I'm fine." Deanna felt sore but she figured that was because it was the first time she had ever had sex. While she had certainly done her share of petting with dates, Deanna had never wanted to be intimate with a man before. She wasn't sure why she had wanted to be with him, but she did. It surprised her but there were no regrets.

He took her over to the bed and sat next to her. "Deanna, making love is supposed to be something wonderful." Ryan would never forgive himself for what he had done. "I failed you. I want to make it up to you."

"What do you mean?" She sounded nervous.

"I want to make love to you again. But this time, I want to make sure that it's good for you." He knew he couldn't undo what he had done to her. Ryan also knew his time was getting shorter and he wanted to make sure that he didn't leave her with scars that couldn't heal. He didn't want to leave her afraid to make love with a man. "I want to make sure you enjoy." Ryan tried to tell himself that he wanted this for her. He couldn't deny he just wanted her again.

She looked at him and then she quietly chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"Your ego."

If she had intended to wound him, she succeeded. "Okay. I guess I am a pretty rotten lover..." He also wanted her to remember him as being a good lover. He needed to know that he could satisfy her.

She suddenly got serious again. "Ryan, we are in a room where you've held me prisoner, you've kept me tied up, you've made me sleep almost naked next to you... why are you even bothering to ask?" Deanna appreciated that he wasn't forcing her. She also was embarrassed for her own wanton behavior. She couldn't understand why but she felt that what they had done was right. Making love with Ryan, with a man she barely knew, was somehow meant to be.

Ryan stammered. "Deanna, I never meant for any of this to happen. Honestly. You were never supposed to be a part of this. I asked before. I thought it was what you had wanted too."

"It was." She whispered the words.

Her admission surprised him. "So, let me show you that it can be good." He looked around the room and at the piece of rope that was still tied to the bed frame. "I will help you get out of here. I'll help you get home."

She frowned at that point. "In exchange for sex?"

"No. Not in exchange. Deanna, I'm not asking for payment. You can say no. I'll still get you out of here. I promise."

She finally admitted her own needs. "I'm not saying no."

He drew in a deep breath as her words sunk in. He kissed her, leisurely and gently. He took his time as he nuzzled her neck. The tip of his tongue teased the bottom of her earlobe. He heard the change in her breaths.

He pulled his T-shirt off. "Touch me Deanna. Make me as much yours as I want you to be mine."

She timidly, inquisitively touched his broad shoulders. Her fingers trailed down his chest and she lightly stroked a male nipple. Ryan drew in a breath as she began her exploration.

He stood and unzipped his jeans letting them fall to the floor. She traced the thin dusting of hair that disappeared under the waistband of his boxers. "I want you to see me. Touch me. Is that okay?"

She nodded. He removed his boxers and stood naked before her. He was fully aroused and thrusting. Hesitantly, Deanna took the length of him in her hand. Patiently he stood still while she touched and investigated his body.

"May I undress you?" Ryan surprised even himself with the amount of control he was

managing.

Deanna lifted her arms and allowed him to remove the T-shirt. He knelt before her and used his tongue to tease her nipples. He kissed the fullness of her breasts and held her in his arms.

She enjoyed the feel of his tongue. "That feels so good." Sensations were beginning to erupt from the pit of her belly.

He smiled against her chest. "Please stand up." When she stood, he gently pulled down the shorts she wore. Still kneeling in front of her, he kissed the triangle of curls and stroked her with his hands.

"Oh Ryan..." Her knees felt weak from his kisses. She put her hands on his shoulders and allowed herself to give way to his ministrations. He felt her shudder as she clutched at his shoulders. Lowering her to the bed, Ryan kissed his way back up her body. He paused to drink deeply from her rosy nipples.

Deanna was panting as she tried to regain control. This was nothing like before. Before she had wanted him for curiosity. This time, she was beginning to feel an ache between her legs that only he could soothe. He continued to kiss and stroke her until she was nearly ready to beg.

Ryan knew this time she was so much more ready for him than before. He was still gentle as he entered her, holding back as much as he could. There was no pain, he was sure of that, only her wide-eyed response as she wrapped herself around his fullness.

When Ryan began to move, so did Deanna. He was able to wait until he felt her tighten around him and saw the fire in her eyes before he allowed his own release. He held her close to him and felt their hearts pounding.

"Better?" He whispered gently.

"Oh yes." She was still breathless.

Ryan waited as long as he could until he no longer had a choice before he withdrew. He held her to his side. "That's how making love is supposed to be. I'm sorry this wasn't your first time." He swallowed. "That's how I wish I had done it the first time."

She was quiet as she lay next to him. Her fingers toyed with his muscled chest. "Come back with me, Ryan. Turn yourself in. It's got to be easier than always running and hiding. You're better than this." She waited through his silence. "Please Ryan. Please do the right thing... for you."

He squeezed his eyes and exhaled slowly. "No Deanna, this is me. This is my life."

"If the police capture you, they are going to put you in jail for a long time."

"They won't capture me."

She sat up next to him. "Ryan, if you come back with me and turn yourself in, I'll tell them that you didn't kidnap me. I'll tell them you protected me and saved me. I'll help you as much as I can. Even if you have some jail time, they'll go much easier on you."

"No." He felt a hole in his heart. "I know that you are trying to help me, but don't. I am going to get you out of here. And then I am never going to see you again."

"No Ryan, you could if you wanted. Not because of what we just did. I know there was no commitment. You could choose someone else... or I could. But I can feel there is so much good in you. You're a good man."

He wished he had the time to see where things could go. He wanted to get to know her better, maybe even to build a relationship with her. "Deanna, trust me, I am not getting out..."

"You could."

"No. Deanna, I expect to die here."

"No!"

He looked at her and saw her tears. It hurt. There was nothing else he could do. Everything was already in motion. Ryan just hoped he had the time to get Deanna out of there. He got up and got dressed. Then he pulled down a paper bag from the shelf in the closet and handed it to her. Her bra and slacks were inside.

"I'm sorry. Your blouse was ruined. You'll have to use the T-shirt." He reached into his pocket and took out her grandmother's ring. "Here."

She cried when she saw the ring. He slipped it on her finger. Then he left the room.

When Ryan's boss, Jacob, showed up a little later that day, Ryan seemed troubled. He left her alone and untied in the room while he met with Jacob in the larger common room. She could hear muffled arguing. Ryan sounded angry. When he came back, he kissed her and promised to get her home very soon. He was wearing a lightweight jacket and explained he had some errands to run. Deanna saw a gun tucked into his waistband and she worried what his errands might be.

Chapter Three

Deanna heard a sudden commotion outside and went to the window to see what was going on. She saw two of Ryan's partners being wrestled to the ground by individuals in dark blue windbreakers. She heard the door to the cabin being kicked open and the sounds of another scuffle inside.

Then the door to her room burst open. It was a woman and a man, both wearing dark blue jackets with the letters F.B.I. on them. They had their guns drawn. The man quickly checked the room.

"Miss Blair?" The female asked her and motioned for her to stay still.

"Yes." She nodded nervously.

"Are you alone?" The woman's eyes darted around the room.

"Yes." Deanna's voice quivered with the realization that she was being rescued.

"All clear." The male agent was satisfied that they were alone.

Both agents holstered their weapons. The female advanced. "Are you all right, Miss Blair?"

Tears came to Deanna's eyes as she nodded.

The male agent motioned towards the rope tied to the unmade bed. Both agents shared a look. The man left the room.

"Miss Blair, I think it would be wise for us to transport you to the hospital to be examined."

She understood her meaning. "I wasn't hurt."

The agent looked relieved. "It might still be a good idea. You've been held hostage for a few days." She guided Deanna out of the room.

As they neared the open front door of the cabin, Deanna saw that there were still only two of the men plus someone she assumed to be Jacob.

"Someone is missing." She tried to warn the agent. "There were three..."

The woman stopped and looked directly at Deanna. "We know there are two men we haven't apprehended yet. What are you hiding?"

Just then Deanna heard a shout. It was Ryan. He was standing near the third man. The other man had a rifle in his hands and it was pointed towards the doorway, it was pointed right at Deanna. A shot rang out and the man with the rifle went down. Just as the agent pushed Deanna to the ground and covered her, Deanna saw that Ryan had pulled the gun from his waistband and shot the man with the rifle. Ryan still had the weapon in his hand and the F.B.I. agents ordered him to drop it. He stubbornly refused.

"No!" She screamed when she saw one of the agents taking aim.

Another shot rang out and she watched in horror as Ryan's body jerked and he collapsed. She watched as the F.B.I. agent who shot Ryan calmly holstered his weapon.

"Ryan!" Deanna scrambled to her feet and tried to run to him. She was stopped in route by another agent. "Ryan! Please..." From where Deanna was held, she could see the blood staining the chest of the man Ryan had shot. Ryan was further away and the agent wouldn't let her get to him.

Another agent went to check the pulse on Ryan and then repeated the gesture on the bleeding man. "Both dead."

"No! No, no..." Deanna collapsed to her knees crying Ryan's name.

She was still in shock and crying while she sat on the hospital gurney. The F.B.I. agents had suggested that there might have been sexual abuse and she had been examined before she was even

aware of what they were looking for.

The female agent returned. "Miss Blair, are you up to answering a few questions?" She sounded compassionate. "My name is Connie Reed."

Deanna looked at her blankly and then nodded. She sniffled and the agent handed her a box of tissues from the counter. She stopped to wipe the tears from her eyes.

"Miss Blair, the nurse told us there was evidence of sexual intercourse. Do you want to press charges? If you are unable to identify the individual, the lab will be able to match the DNA sample..."

"I know who I was with. It was Ryan."

"Ryan?" The agent's brows furrowed.

Deanna looked at her accusingly. "Yes, Ryan. He was the man your agents killed. He shot the man with the rifle and saved me and then your agents shot him."

The agent took her time making a notation in her notebook. "Ryan attacked you?"

"He didn't attack me. We made love." She sounded defensive.

"Miss Blair..."

"My name is Deanna. Please call me Deanna."

Reed looked uncomfortable. "Deanna... uh, sometimes hostages develop strong feelings for their kidnappers. It's called the Stockholm Syndrome." She made reference to a classic case used by psychologists to explain the loyalty victims sometimes feel for their captors or abusers. "In the early seventies the hostages of a bank robbery refused to testify and even protected the thieves."

Deanna looked at her angrily. "I've heard the term. I'm not crazy. I wanted to be with him."

Agent Reed couldn't look at Deanna. "If... this Ryan showed you any kindness, it would explain your dependency on him."

"I made love with the man. I wanted to. And I don't regret it." She sobbed. "Why did you have to kill him?"

"He pulled a gun."

"He pulled his gun to shoot the man who was aiming at us. Why couldn't you shoot him in the arm or leg or something? Why did you have to kill him?" Deanna was directing her anger and grief at the agent.

Connie Reed sighed. She was keeping a very tight reign on her words. "I believe the correct term for this is suicide by cop. He must have known he would be shot once he pulled the gun. He could have dropped it when they ordered him to. He knew he had no escape."

The tears flowed down Deanna's cheeks. "Oh, you are full of psychological terms, aren't you?" She wiped her face with the collar of her hospital gown. "This is none of your business anyway. I'm not pressing any charges. And he's dead so what difference does it make? If you push this, if you try to blame him, I will sue you for having me examined against my will. You have the other men in custody and two dead bodies. Build your case on them. So, can I go now?"

Resigned, Agent Connie Reed closed her notebook and headed to the door of the room. She turned and looked at Deanna sadly. "Miss Blair, I understand you've been through an awful lot. Maybe it would be better if we spoke at a later date. I'll leave my card at the nurse's desk, please call me when you are ready to talk."

Deanna didn't answer her.

Closing the door behind her, Reed walked down the length of the corridor before pulling her cell phone out of her pocket. She punched in numbers and then put the flip-phone to her ear. "The girl is okay. We have some serious problems though. We need to talk." She slammed her phone shut and leaned back against the wall.

Deanna did her mourning in private. The police psychologist suggested that she speak to a counselor. No one understood. A few nights after she was home, Deanna had a dream about Ryan – she was in his arms. Her *mamere* was in the dream too and she was happy that Deanna was with Ryan. She knew that Ryan was meant to be her soul mate, she just couldn't understand why it was over so soon. Her dream *mamere* told her that the best was yet to come, but when she woke, she was confused.

Although she had to make a statement for the District Attorney's office about the bank robbery, they had kindly allowed her to give a taped deposition. She was extremely relieved not to have to face the surviving kidnappers again. The DA assured her that the bank robbers turned kidnappers would be put away for a long, long time. To her dismay, she learned that the robberies they staged were used to help finance suspected terrorist activities. She still couldn't accept that Ryan had been involved in something like that.

Fortunately Rob let her come back to work. He told her he understood that the loss of the money wasn't her fault. Then he told the police, the F.B.I. and his insurance agency that the loss was twice the actual amount. Deanna kept quiet and she felt guilty. But she was desperate to hold onto her job. She had told her parents about the bank robbery but not the kidnapping. Deanna knew they would have made her come home if they had known the whole truth.

Rob told her how worried he had been when he got the phone call from her kidnapper. He said he prayed for her safe return to him. He became possessive. Deanna found herself working with him more and more, he scheduled her work hours closer to his own. She briefly suspected that he might not trust her alone with the cash register. Then Rob made it clear that he wanted to be with her. Deanna suspected that his ultimate plans included a more personal relationship. There had been several unsolicited invitations for a quick bite to eat or more after work. It wasn't long before he stopped being subtle.

The feeling wasn't mutual, but Deanna decided she had to move on or she would never recover from her all too brief love affair with Ryan. Ryan was gone, she was still alive. Rob was there and he didn't hide the fact that he wanted her. He had more than once offered to comfort her after her terrible ordeal. Despite her denials, he let her know that he suspected she had suffered indignities after she was held hostage by four men for several days. Rob said he wanted to help her heal her wounds.

Before this, Deanna had never considered the idea of involvement with Rob. He was her boss, but he kept planting the seed in her mind. She accepted his dinner invitation for that Saturday night. She tried to concentrate on her work for the rest of the week, but she couldn't ignore the nervous twinges in her gut. It was enough to get her sick and she left work early on Friday and stopped by the clinic on her way home to get something for the nausea.

Rob had already given Deanna Saturday off and teased her that she would have all day to get ready for their date. Deanna got herself dressed and was standing in front of the bathroom mirror when she burst into tears. She had been in control ever since the doctor told her that she was expecting the day before, but after having all day to dwell on it, Deanna was scared. She had no idea how she was going to be able to manage; certainly she would have to stop sending money home to her parents.

Half an hour before Rob was due to get there, Deanna used a cool washrag under her eyes so they wouldn't look so puffy. Putting her hand on her still flat tummy, she managed a smile. She was having Ryan's baby and *Mamere*'s words suddenly made sense. The brief love she had known with Ryan made a baby, their baby.

"Yes," she whispered. "The best is yet to come, *Mamere*."

Deanna finished dressing. She didn't think she was showing yet, but already some of her tighter pants were a little *too* tight. Her already limited clothing selection just got smaller. She brushed her shoulder length hair back into a ponytail which made her look even younger than her twenty years. Inexpensive earrings from a street vendor helped to diminish the childlike look of the ponytail. She wore a red pullover top and dark blue slacks. Everyone always said red was her color.

There was a knock at the door promptly at seven. Deanna grabbed a sweater and her purse as she went to open the door. Rob smiled broadly when he saw her. It was obvious he approved of her appearance. She took the arm he proffered as they went out onto the street. He said the diner was within walking distance, Deanna was happy she was wearing a comfortable pair of shoes. Dinner was uneventful and pleasant although she couldn't finish most of what he ordered for her.

They took the train to the movies. Once they were in the movie house, Rob's demeanor changed. He threw his arm around her shoulders and held her with a grip that was much too tight for

her liking. During the film, he nuzzled her neck and nipped at her earlobe until she asked him to stop. He stopped, but only for a short time. Deanna was happy when the movie was over and he was taking her home. At her apartment door, Rob kissed her goodnight with his tongue pushed into her mouth and his hands dangerously below the waistline. He seemed oblivious to her attempts to step out of his clutches.

"I had a terrific time this evening." He bent to kiss her again. Deanna turned her head aside. Rob wasn't deterred... he nuzzled the side of her neck. "Let me come in." He was already panting with excitement.

Deanna finally managed to take a step back, even though he hadn't left her much room, and escape his grasp. Reminding herself to be polite, as she was raised to be, Deanna kept her tone even. "Rob, I enjoyed myself tonight too but..."

"Tell me inside." He brazenly pressed himself up against her.

"Rob, if I let you come in, it is just to talk." She thought about it. She figured he would certainly run the other way as soon as he heard she was pregnant. He smiled and shook his head eagerly. "Just to talk, Rob."

As soon as the door closed behind them, Rob took her in his arms again and captured her in another invasive kiss.

"Rob, please, stop, I have to talk to you..."

"We have all night to talk."

"No. We don't. I have to tell you something..."

Impatiently he stepped back and sighed. "What?"

"I'm pregnant." He stared at her in surprise. "I'm almost three months along."

She could see him doing the calculations. Suddenly he snorted. "I knew they raped you."

He shocked her with his blunt statement. "I wasn't raped. I already told you that."

Rob tried to give her a sympathetic smile. "Of course. You did what you had to do to survive." He brazenly put his hand on her stomach. "How many were there?"

"What?"

Shaking his head at her apparent evasiveness, he went to her couch and sat. "Do you have any idea which one of them is the father?"

It dawned on her what he had implied. "Rob, I slept with one man. Only one. And I chose to be with him. He's dead now."

He practically leered at her. "Deanna, I understand your denials. But trust me, I don't think any less of you. I do understand."

"Just what do you think you understand?"

"You were held in an isolated cabin with four men. You were one woman. I'm sure it wasn't pretty." He was smug as he leaned forward to grab her hand and pulled her down next to him. "I still want you," Rob smoothed her hair behind an ear. "As a matter of fact, it kind of..."

Deanna was horrified. "You actually sound like you're intrigued by that scenario which, by the way, never happened." She yanked herself away.

"Intrigued?" He laughed loudly. "I do love the way you talk. Oh come on, I certainly don't think any woman should be abused like that but you can't deny how many x-rated movies have done well just because of that type of situation." He tried to pull her back. "I would be happy to show you what it is like with a real man, one who doesn't have to force you into being with him."

"Rob, I was not forced." Deanna was shocked by his presumption. "Why won't you believe me?" She pulled away from him again. "And I have no intention of sleeping with you."

He let her pull away. "Why not? It's not like you're some kind of virgin, is it?"

"You are a pig!" She stood angrily.

Rob stood and stepped forward so that he was snarling into her face. "You are the one who is claiming to have slept with one or more of those bank robbers by choice. And you lost my money. Was this all a set-up? Were you in on it?" He grabbed her by the arm. "Now you are acting like some kind of prude. You owe me. And trust me, you are not worth all of that money in just one shot."

Deanna slapped Rob, or tried to. He caught her arm and twisted it painfully. She fought back

tears. "Get out of my apartment Rob."

He wasn't letting go of her. "You pay or I tell the cops that you were in on it."

"You can't tell the cops that, I didn't do anything wrong. But I will tell them what you just tried to do. And I will tell them that you reported the wrong amount to the insurance company."

He pushed her away from him and spit at her. Pointing his finger and jabbing her painfully on her chest, he practically growled. "You try to make it in this city carrying that little bastard and no job. And your name is mud because I have friends in this town. You're going to wish that I sent you to jail, at least then you'd get three squares a day."

Rob left abruptly and slammed the door behind him.

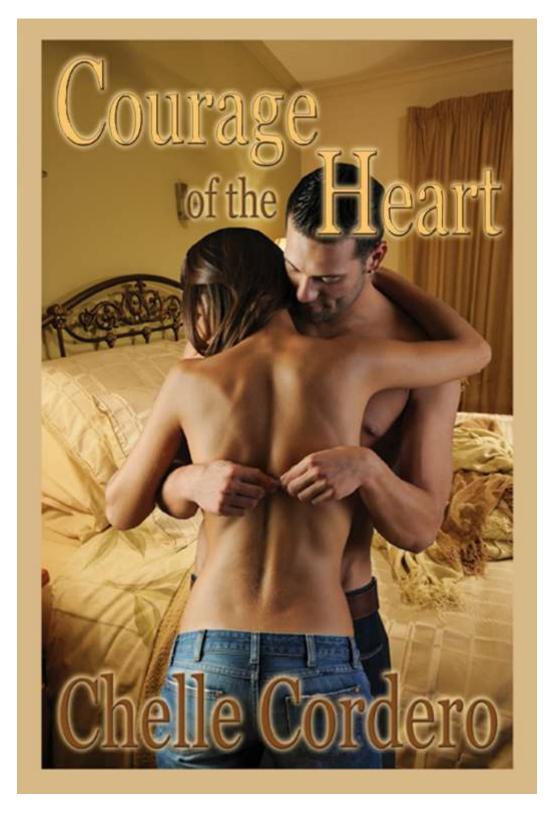
Deanna had already had serious misgivings for having gone out with Rob that night. She continued to stand long after he left. She was pregnant, alone, unemployed and terrified. It took a long time before she gave in to her tears.

After she cried herself out, Deanna looked around her small apartment. It was just a tiny studio, but it was hers. Luckily the place had already come furnished. Lucky because she wouldn't have been able to afford the furniture on her salary and lucky because now she wouldn't have to pack everything up before moving. There was no way she could remain in the city. She had to go back home.

"Mamere," she spoke aloud through her tears, "how am I going to do this?"

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Courage of the Heart by Chelle Cordero

PROLOGUE

He trailed kisses down her neck while he let his hands explore the recesses of her body. Davie shuddered when he found the warmth between her thighs with his fingers.

"Am I hurting you?" He was concerned. Even though he had made it a habit not to get involved with any of his partners, she had made him pause. There was something special about this girl; there was something about her that had stayed in his mind ever since their first meeting.

"No...oh, Adam, that feels so good." Davie kissed him back as she felt her response spiraling toward the unknown. "Adam..." Her breath caught.

"What Sweetheart?" It was easy to see how excited she had become and it felt good to know that he had that effect on her.

"Adam..." She felt very timid. "I've never felt like this before."

"I'm glad." He thought of how good it was going to feel when he entered her. "I'm so very glad." "Adam...teach me..."

He mated their lips and wrestled his tongue with hers. "What do you want me to teach you?" He smiled against her neck.

"Teach me how to...ooh..." She arched her back and pressed herself into his palm. "How to make it good for you."

Oh lord, so sweet, he thought as he took a delicate nub into his mouth. "How could it not be good for me? You are so beautiful..."

Davie felt another shudder run through her. "But, I don't know...Adam, I," She inhaled sharply as she felt his fingers probing inside her. "Adam...I've never..."

For the first time, Adam remained motionless. "Never...what?"

"I've...never been with a man before." She sensed his withdrawal before he actually pulled away.

Adam's brow was furrowed, "What are you saying, Davie?"

The icy chill that Davie felt left her feeling embarrassed to be lying naked in bed with this man. She pulled the bedsheet over her exposed breasts. "I've never been with a man...before"

He sat upright in bed seemingly unaware that he was just as naked as she was. "Are you telling me that you're a virgin?"

Davie sat up clutching the bed linens tightly to her body. "Yes."

"Damnation!" Adam got up from the bed angrily. "You couldn't have told me that before?"

Her eyes welled with tears. "I didn't know we were going to wind up in your bed..."

They had gone out to dinner, again, and a walk in the park. His kisses turned into an invitation back to his apartment. She wasn't naïve, she knew that they might...get closer, but she was so spellbound by him...

"Dammit Davie! I have never taken a virgin before and I certainly don't intend to start with you!"

She watched incredulously as he pulled a pair of jeans on. "I'm sorry...I..." Suddenly Davie felt angry. " If you thought that I thought it was going to be some kind of commitment, you don't need to worry. I got carried away...don't worry, it won't happen again." She stood taking the bedsheet with her to cover herself. "If you don't mind giving me some privacy, I'll get dressed."

Her anger made him feel contrite and he responded in much gentler tones. "I'll take you home as soon as you're ready."

"Don't bother! I'll manage on my own." She stared at the bedroom door pointedly, but he didn't budge. "Fine!" Davie dropped the linen to the floor and picked up her clothing.

Earlier, Adam's body had felt as cold as if he had been blasted with icy water, but as he got

another glimpse of her astonishingly beautiful naked body again, he was happy he had donned his pants to hide his reaction.

"I...I'm sorry", he turned his back to her. "I...I just can't be...the first..."

"What?!"

"I'm sorry..." He left the room.

CHAPTER 1

Davie had hoped to be working in earnest at her desk before anybody else got in to the office after the long holiday weekend, but one delay after another had her walking into the building amidst a throng of co-workers. The office building was a modern hull of steel and glass and loomed over the sleepy bedroom community. A myriad grouping of companies had made their move to this towering infrastructure over the last few years. It was a prestigious place for a business to call home. Davie took the elevator to the fourth floor. She had nearly made it to her offices when she heard him behind her.

"Good morning, Miss Prescott...Davie." His voice still sounded like it had some of the other night's regret in it.

Davie cursed silently when she felt her pulse take a giant leap. Since they weren't alone in the hallway, she couldn't very well ignore him without raising the eyebrows of her co-workers. She turned as casually as she could manage. "Good morning." She opened her office door, closed it soundly behind her and escaped to her desk.

Her hands were trembling. Davie hoped to calm herself before anyone noticed her agitated state. Damn the man for doing that to her! Although she had been nervous about seeing him again, she really hadn't thought he would have so great an effect on her. It was just the humiliation, she was sure of that. All weekend she was angry at the thought of how he must have been laughing at her. He must have enjoyed knowing he had her succumbing to his seduction, willingly ready to give herself to him...for the very first time of her life! It was astounding that the creep hadn't taken full advantage and gone for the trophy. She just couldn't reconcile his insulting behavior with the remorseful apology he had tried to give her during the ride home Friday night.

She took a deep breath and tried a few mental relaxation exercises. Closing her eyes, she tried to picture herself in a comfortable spot, someplace where she felt warm, someplace where...she quickly scratched the image that popped into her mind, the memory of lying in Adam Sherman's arms in his bed. Okay, she decided to try again. Davie tried to get an image of the most beautiful thing she had ever seen in this world...there was the spot in the hollow of his throat. Nope, scratch that. She was completely frustrated and not just because he had brought her so exquisitely to a level she had never known before, and then just left her hanging, but because she was still so infatuated with him. She was supposed to be totally furious with him!

The phone rang and startled her. Her two fellow office workers hadn't gotten to their desks yet and Davie was alone in the office. She reached for the ringing phone only when the flashing button showed it was from an outside line. Davie loved her job and enjoyed dealing with customers; even when a customer started their conversation with a complaint, she usually found a way to smooth things over. She was good with people. Davie liked to talk, she liked to draw people into conversations. She found it hard to understand how some people could sit all day without a large amount of human contact, people like Adam Sherman who spent his days pouring over schematics and computer terminals; she wondered if there was something wrong with the social skills of such an isolated worker. The caller had a few questions about the service contract with the Internet Provider she represented. She answered all his questions to his satisfaction.

At the beginning of the last school term Davie had found out about this job when she was surfing the Net in her college library. It wound up being an ideal position. The bosses often gave consideration to students who needed flexible hours to fit their course schedules. She was able to work four mornings and all day Friday and still be able to attend classes in the afternoons and evenings in Business Administration at the nearby university.

Everything had seemed so perfect, she looked forward to coming to her job each day and enjoyed the people she worked with. When she first met Adam and he asked her out, she had to put aside her wariness about dating a co-worker. Adam Sherman was the System's Manager for the Internet Provider company where they both worked; luckily he spent his days in a different department than her. He had started with Home-Based Communications when he graduated college as an Information System Specialist and had moved himself up in just a few short years to manage the department. He was very good at what he did. The other employees had joked that Adam was a closet "hacker"; supposedly there wasn't a computer system that he couldn't master. Everyone respected Adam Sherman and Davida Prescott had been very flattered when he walked into her office and asked her to lunch that first week.

Davie was aware that she was an object of envy by several of the female staff, Adam was also extraordinarily good looking and had earned himself a reputation for being quite a desirable escort. It was well known that Adam had an impressive list of female companions, including several of the single women from HBC. He never minded going out on the town with a different lady friend every weekend and it was no secret that many young ladies were familiar with the inside of his bedroom. Davie's cheeks flamed as she remembered that she had willingly offered herself as just one more of his conquests...and he had turned her down!

A few of her college girlfriends had seen Davie with Adam when he drove her to her classes one day, she had been running late and missed the bus so he did her a favor. They noticed how very good-looking he was; Davie had already noticed his broad shoulders, his expressive hazel eyes and his sensual hands. He drove her to classes a few more times, stopping for lunch along the way. Then he asked her out to dinner and a movie...and then dinner...and again. He never hid his attraction to her. Although she had received many offers Davie had never seriously thought of going to bed with a man before, but something about Adam monopolized her thoughts until she had dreams of making love with him. Each time she looked at his hands, she had no difficulty imagining those long fingers manipulating fine computer circuitry...or splayed over her naked body teasing it to an awareness she'd never known before.

She thought she was going to live those dreams Friday night, but then she learned in a cruel way that a virgin apparently wasn't worth his time. He obviously wanted someone who knew all the tricks, someone he didn't have to concern himself with pleasing. She just couldn't believe how shallow he really was.

Adam had never before had difficulty concentrating on his work. The company had just finished investing a lot of time and money into a new Integrated Services Digital Network and it was his responsibility to make sure everything worked. Great, he thought to himself, one screw-up and all of their customers could kiss their email and web-sites goodbye.

He thought of how one very pretty young lady in Customer Service would respond to customer complaints..."Oh, I'm sorry, is this your FIRST Internet connection? Well, our department manager has a problem with that..."

Damn! She's twenty years old...and beautiful. He never once thought she was so inexperienced, he just couldn't believe that someone that appealing hadn't already been sweet-talked all the way by a guy or two. In this day and age, he thought cynically, he would never have expected some college girl to be saving herself. The problem was he still wanted her and that scared the hell out of him! There had never been another woman that had monopolized his thoughts the way Davie did. He certainly wasn't desperate, if he just wanted to spend an evening out or have sex he had any number of willing partners. But when he thought of Davie, he wanted more than sex, he wanted her body and soul. He wanted a relationship, not just a one or two night fling. It flabbergasted him that the beautiful Davie Prescott had wanted him enough to give up her virginity. It frustrated him that he could never let her know why he couldn't do that to her.

There had been several times when he had started to call her over the weekend, but then he remembered how quiet she had been when he drove her home and tried to apologize. She had actually

started to walk home, he followed her with his car for about half a mile before she finally gave in and got in. Adam felt terrible; he knew how badly he had hurt her with his rejection. If only he could make her understand how much he still wanted her, but he didn't know how. If only he could make himself understand why he wanted her so much...

Adam had never felt so frustrated about a relationship before, at least not since he got out of that little Pennsylvania town he grew up in. His teen-age years were filled with memories he wished he didn't have; so long as he could remember that time, though, he'd never be any good for someone as pure as Davie. He had been with a lot of women and he never made any secret of his appetite or his lack of emotional commitment. Adam had told himself that his unusual interest in Davie as a person and not just a sex partner was only a sign of his "growing up", at twenty-five it was bound to happen...eventually. He shook his head, because it was Davie and not his age that was playing havoc with his libido.

Adam stared at the clock on the wall and decided that he had to get close to Davie somehow. He had no idea how to get beyond his dilemma, but he knew he had to try to mend fences with her. Red roses were Davie's favorite, he had learned that during one of their relaxing conversations. He had enjoyed listening to her talk about just about any subject, he was always interested in everything that made her smile, or pause. A quick phone call to the florist gave him a touch of hope.

Forty-five minutes later he felt a little cocky as he walked down the hall to Customer Service.

The door was ajar and Adam peeked in. Only one of the desks was occupied.

"Oh, hi Mr. Sherman. Are you looking for Davie?" Agnes, one of the other girls in Customer Service, was holding down the fort by herself. Since he had not made any secret of his interest in Davie, it was a natural assumption why he was there. "She's already gone for the day."

Checking his watch, he frowned. "Isn't it a little bit early?"

"To be honest, I don't think she was feeling too well." Agnes shrugged. "And then she got some flowers delivered and it must've really started her allergies or something...'cause her eyes got all red and she had to get out of here."

"Flowers were delivered?" Good, then she got his note.

"Yeah. They were really pretty. She took them with her."

"She did?" Maybe there was a reason to feel optimistic after all. Adam thanked Agnes and left the office.

It was only when he passed the garbage chute that he lost his newfound hope. On the floor was a rose; a piece of green fern was sticking out from the side of the bin where it had gotten stuck when the bouquet was thrown out.

Davie was surprised when the doorbell rang so early; she hadn't expected Chad until eight o'clock. Luckily, she was already dressed and ready to go, so they could get a few minutes jump on traffic if he wanted.

"This is a..." She pulled the door open to see Adam standing there.

"A surprise?" He tried to smile, but seeing her cold gaze greeting him was unnerving.

"I'm really busy." She had put up with the occasional glimpses of him for the last few weeks at work and had managed to fool herself into thinking she wasn't affected by him. It was different seeing him at her apartment door.

"Can I come in?" He waited for an answer. "I promise I won't be long."

Adam noted the outfit she wore. It didn't look like she had planned to be lounging at home all evening, at least not alone.

"I'm getting ready to go out. I have a friend coming over." She started to push the door closed.

He put his hand against the door to prop it open. "I promise you I won't keep you long."

She looked at the watch on her wrist and shrugged. "Keep it short."

He followed her inside. "Please Davie, take pity on me, I feel like a jerk already."

'There's nothing I can do about that." Placing her hands on her hips, Davie tried to ignore the trembling she felt inside, the same trembling she got whenever she saw him lately. "Did you have something important to say?"

"I want to see you."

"Why?"

He shrugged.

"I'm still a virgin, Adam. So you're not interested. Nothing has changed." She walked back to the door and put her hand on the knob to open it.

"I like you, Davie." He hadn't been able to get her out of his mind. He had tried, but he hadn't even been able to bring himself to see anyone else since before the fiasco when they almost made love. That was a new experience for Adam Sherman, spending his nights alone, sitting in a movie house alone...dreaming of Davie and waking to take a cold shower...alone.

She turned to face him. "So why did you make me feel like...a nothing, like a piece of dirt?" It surprised her that she still felt so strongly. "You humiliated me that night. But you know, I thought about it, I have absolutely no reason to feel ashamed in front of someone like you." Davie thought again about his shallowness.

There was sadness in his eyes as he listened to her tirade. She was right, he thought, he was the last person in the world to make anyone else feel ashamed. "There's nothing you can call me that I haven't already labeled myself at one time or other in my life. I'm sorry I hurt you. That never was my intention."

The quiet apology almost got to her; she had to remind herself to stay angry. "It's time for you to leave."

"Isn't there anything I can do to make it up to you? Davie, isn't there anyway I could see you?" He even surprised himself with his willingness to beg.

Davie forced a laugh. "I'm not going to go out and get laid just so you can feel comfortable. And I have no intention of giving you reason to be comfortable with me again."

"I'm sorry." He was clearly embarrassed. "I know I have a problem. I know I have to deal with it. But I can't get you off my mind."

"Try. Because I'm not interested in your problems or your over-inflated ego."

There was a knock at the door.

She exhaled a breath and smoothed her blouse before she pulled the door open.

"Hi." Chad was tall and blond and broad-shouldered. His smile turned to puzzlement when he saw Adam behind Davie.

"Hi." Her greeting was just a little too merry. Davie stood on her toes and kissed Chad on the mouth. She did her best to pretend that she forgot about Adam standing in the room behind her.

Adam cleared his throat. Chad looked at Davie questioningly.

"Oh, sorry, Mr. Sherman was just leaving." She wrinkled her nose delicately at Chad before turning to Adam. "Mr. Sherman, this is my date, Chad Donaldson." She turned back to Chad. "Mr. Sherman heads up one of the departments at work. He was trying to convince me to do some extra paperwork. I told him I prefer not to work off hours."

Sensing some tension, Chad wasn't too sure of what to say. He extended his hand to Adam. "Good to meet you, Mr. Sherman."

"Yeah." Adam shook the extended hand but stared at Davie the entire time. "Are you sure I can't convince you... to come to the office, Miss Prescott?" He had great plans on his way over there. His plans went down the tubes with the jock standing in her doorway,

"Nope, sorry," She linked her arm through Chad's. "I have every intention of having fun this weekend, Mr. Sherman."

Adam bottled up the stab of jealousy he felt at seeing Davie link her arm with her date. Jealously was a shock to his system. "I'm sorry to have bothered you." He tried to smile at Chad. "I hope you enjoy yourselves." Just not too much, he thought.

When the door closed behind Adam, he could swear he heard Davie laughing.

Monday morning, Adam was waiting for Davie in her office; he just hoped that she would get in before Agnes and Ruthie so they could have a few uninterrupted minutes to talk. At least he hoped she'd be willing to talk to him. The nervousness he felt about seeing her again was another new feeling for him.

Davie had the feeling that he'd be waiting for her, so she had braced herself for a confrontation before she pushed open the office door. Unfortunately he saw her just as she had decided to run back out the way she had come in.

"Good morning." He smiled at her. "Did you enjoy yourself this weekend?"

"Yes, thank you." She tried to walk around him pretending that his nearness had absolutely no effect on her.

"Actually I had kind of hoped you hadn't." he chuckled and then sobered as soon as he saw her glare."Davie, can I take you to lunch today?"

"No."

"Tomorrow?"

"I'm busy all week." She circumvented the office and stood with her desk between them.

"Please, don't avoid me."

"You are a pompous...egotistical...self-serving..."

"Can I help you fill in the blanks?" He was trying to get her to smile. Adam really thought she was gorgeous when she smiled, especially when the smile was for him. He was disappointed.

She let out an exasperated sigh and sat down. "Look, I've got exams at school all week. I don't need this harassment." Davie was afraid of someone hearing her outside of the office. "Look Adam, I need this job, I can't afford to file complaints if you won't leave me alone here. Please, leave me alone."

"Okay, I'll keep it out of the office." He sounded too patronizing.

"That doesn't mean you can show up at my door again." She thought she saw him hiding a grin.

"How about this weekend?"

"I have plans, I'm going away."

He lost any hint of a smile. "Where?"

"That's none of your business."

"With Chad?"

She stood to face him. "That is none of your business!"

"Davie, he's not good enough for you." He leaned over the desk. "Please don't go."

They didn't see Ruthie enter the office.

"I'll do what I want this weekend."

"Oh, did you ever pick up the dress, Davie?" Ruthie was busy stuffing her pocketbook into her lower desk drawer.

"What dress?" Maybe he could get Ruthie to tell him about Davie's plans.

"Miss Davida Prescott over here is going to be her cousin's Maid of Honor this weekend." Ruthie didn't notice Adam's smile or Davie's chagrined look. "Oh Davie, I saw that picture of the gown you brought in last week. You are going to look absolutely stunning!"

Adam smiled at Davie. "Where is the wedding?"

"Back home." She referred to the south Jersey home where her dad still lived.

" I hope you enjoy yourself." Adam was thrilled knowing that she was only going to a family function. "I'm sure you will look beautiful," He lowered his voice, "but then, that only comes naturally for you."

Davie glanced at Ruthie and hoped she hadn't overheard the compliment. "Thank you." She wished he would leave.

Adam glanced at his watch and turned towards the door of the office as Agnes came in. "Good morning, Agnes." He turned in the doorway. "I will see you lovely ladies," he looked pointedly at Davie, "around." He was feeling better.

It had only been a brief respite.

Davie had adored her cousin's new husband and his family. She had to admit to herself, she even felt a little envious when she saw how happy the two were.

The following week when she returned to work, it was infuriating to deal with Adam's constant smiles in her direction. She wished that he had never been set straight about her weekend plans. Let him think she wasn't interested in him. Really, she wasn't giving him a second thought.

Thanksgiving dinner with her family was wonderful, but Davie was happy to get back to her own place for the rest of the weekend. Thanksgiving dinners were always a monumental event in her family and especially since her cousin and her new husband had just gotten back from their honeymoon, the family went all out this year. She seemed to remember that last year they had some special reason to go all out then too, just like the year before.

When she was little, she remembered helping her mother prepare wonderfully delicious Thanksgiving dishes. She loved the baking most of all, fresh apple pies, delicious cornbread and pumpkin muffins – her mouth watered just thinking about it. Her mom and all her aunts, and sometimes even her uncles, helped to make a cooperative feast that she was sure rivaled any that the Pilgrims might have even dreamed of. Even now, long after her mom was no longer around to make any contributions, the dinner was still a huge ceremony. Everyone agreed though that the sweet potato pie was never as good as Laura used to make.

She was put on the bus for the trip back home with a carton of plastic containers filled with leftovers. Luckily the bus was near empty, so the cardboard box had its own seat for the ride. By the time she had gotten back home, she was so tired she barely got everything put in the fridge before she climbed exhausted into bed.

Saturday morning she slept late. When she finally left the comfort of her bed, she donned an old tattered sweatsuit and curled up on the closed sofa bed with a new bestseller that she had wanting to read. Her small studio apartment was cramped, but then Davie usually spent very little time there between working and going to school. This was the first time she had ever lived away from home. It was actually very comforting to know that there was a family living upstairs. Her apartment had its own entrance next to the two-car garage so she was able to come and go as she pleased without disturbing her landlord's family. It was close to a commuter bus route so it was easy to get to school and work. The apartment came pre-furnished so that was a big plus.

Davie was startled when her doorbell rang. She wasn't expecting company.

"Hi." Adam greeted her when she opened the door. "I drove by last night and saw your lights on, but it was late." He had worried that the family upstairs would think he was a prowler at that hour, especially if Davie hadn't welcomed his presence. "May I come in?"

Davie looked down at her garb and sighed. She shrugged, "For a little while. I'm kind of busy."

He smiled one of his devastating smiles as she opened the door wider for him to enter. Except for an occasional greeting as they passed one another in the halls at work, he hadn't bothered her there at all since he had made his promise not to. Davie motioned him over to an armchair before she went to her dresser for a scrunchie to pull her shoulder length auburn hair back into a ponytail.

"How was your visit home?" Adam wanted to keep their conversation as casual and comfortable as possible.

"It was nice. It usually is."

He nodded.

"How was your Thanksgiving Day?"

"It was good."

"Where did you go?"

"No where."

"Oh." She figured that he probably was entertained by some eager woman. She didn't want to think about that. Davie forced herself to laugh. "I was sent back with so many leftovers, I won't have to cook for a week. Talk about being spoiled."

"I guess with your busy schedule, that'll be a nice treat." He had hoped to ask her out to dinner.

"I have a lot of studying to get done for school today."

He ignored the obvious hint. "How is school going?"

"Fine."

"Classes should be almost over for the term."

"Yeah."

"When will you know your class schedule for next term?" He was getting desperate for more than one-word answers. "How will it affect your work schedule?"

"It really shouldn't. I'd really like to stay at HBC."

"Do you think you might have to leave?" He hoped not, even from a distance it was nice to be able to see her almost every day.

"HBC has a good rep about working with students. They really try to accommodate our schedules and all."

"I hope it works out. I'd really hate to see you leave." Adam felt like he was grabbing for anything to say to prolong his visit. He wanted to be honest with her. "Davie, I like seeing you around the office..."

Davie was uncomfortable with the wistful yearning she heard in his voice.

"Thank you for your concern."

"Look Davie, we both know how I feel about you."

"Yeah, you made that very clear."

"We really seemed to have a good time together until I acted like such an ass. I'd like to try again."

Davie hesitated. "You never did tell me why?"

"What do you mean?"

"You told me you couldn't be the first. Why not?" She was puzzled. "I thought most guys loved to be the first. I don't know, I always thought guys wanted to take a girl's virginity because it was like some special prize or something."

"I, uh..." He turned away from her. "It's a big responsibility. Besides I don't want to hurt you, physically I mean."

She looked at him incredulously. "That's really lame."

"I'm sorry." He stood and paced a moment before trying to change the topic. "Would you like to go out for dinner tonight?"

She shook her head; he was difficult to understand. "Not with all the leftovers I have in my refrigerator."

"Oh." He looked disappointed.

"I could put some leftovers in the microwave and we could eat here." She had no idea why she had just invited him to stay.

"That sounds great!" The invitation was totally unexpected but he wasn't going to refuse. "How about I go get a movie to watch? Do you prefer VCR or DVD?"

He asked her for names of movies she preferred and she told him to surprise her. After he left, Davie decided to change into something a little less tattered.

Adam admitted that it was the first time he had tasted many of the foods she had reheated like sweet potato pie and orange-cranberry relish. He looked suspiciously at the slice of pecan pie she served him before taking a bite and saying it was good.

"What did you have for Thanksgiving dinner?"

"The usual I guess, turkey."

"What did you have with the turkey?"

Adam looked like he had to think about it before answering. "Mashed potatoes, peas, stuffing and gravy. Why?" It hadn't been the most memorable meal of his life.

"That sounds like a frozen TV dinner." She chuckled. "Was it?"

He cocked his head to the side. "Yeah, it was." He looked at the variety of leftovers on the

folding card-table in front of them. "It was dinner." For Adam, home cooked meant a TV dinner and a bottle of beer.

"Adam, were you alone for Thanksgiving?" Davie was so used to big family gatherings on every holiday and the idea of being alone seemed abhorrent to her.

"I watched the game on TV."

"Alone?"

"So?" For the first time, Adam had actually felt alone for the holiday; he kept wishing Davie had been by his side. "Not everyone goes home for the holidays."

"It's just, uh," She hadn't meant to offend him. "I was just raised with a huge family and these colossal gatherings every holiday. I'm sorry if I offended you."

"We never really spent time with family. My mother usually worked the bar on holidays anyway. And then later, it was just my father and me." While he had listened to Davie regale him with stories about her family get-togethers he watched her eyes light up.

"Did your mom die?" Davie still missed her mom even though it had been over five years already.

"No, she's still alive as far as I know." He tried to sound unaffected.

" I'm sorry." She figured it was divorce.

"No big deal. My old man hit her one too many times." He had always felt betrayed that his mother left him with a drunken, abusive father. "Last I heard, she was shacked up in Nevada or something."

"What about your father?"

"He's either in or out of some local drunk tank, but he's still around I guess."

"I take it you don't go to see him either."

"It's better this way." Adam hadn't told too many people about his childhood. "I never knew what you have, with your family, so I really don't miss it."

Davie wondered how different she might be today if she hadn't known such a loving family all her life.

He wasn't looking for sympathy. "Can I help to clean up the table?" Adam stood. He motioned towards a bowl of stuffing, "Does this go back in the container?"

"Yeah, thanks." She stood also. "You put yourself through college, then?"

"Uh-huh. Work study."

"That must have been hard."

"You're working to pay for college, too. It was no harder."

"But I do have some support from back home and my mom's life insurance helps a little." She enjoyed learning more about him and felt comfortable talking. "Do you have any siblings?"

"No, I was enough to handle. How about you?"

"My mom wasn't even supposed to have me. She had a bad heart. After I was born, she really had some bad bouts. Even raising a child was too much of a strain. Luckily all my aunts and uncles were around. My dad felt guilty that he had ever gotten her pregnant."

Adam stopped and looked at her. "They didn't want you?"

"Oh no, I was wanted. That's why they disobeyed the doctor's orders. My mom said I was her best accomplishment and especially after she died, my dad said he was thankful they had had me. He just really felt bad that she was always so sick." She smiled. "I guess they could have resented me, but they never made me feel that way."

"You were very lucky."

"I sure was, still am, as you can see from some of the evidence of those family ties." She motioned to the food in the refrigerator. "So, what made you decide to work with computers?"

"I always liked computers, it was something I could do by myself. I tried not to hang around when my dad came home drunk. If I was home, I could lock myself in my room." He took a damp sponge to wipe the table off. "I lucked into an old 8088 computer the local real estate office was throwing out."

"That was ancient." Davie started to turn the table on its side to fold the legs down, but Adam

took over for her.

"Yeah, a real dinosaur. But it was enough for me to get started. I knew computers. I liked them. I guess I was just a typical computer geek." He laughed then. "And I still am. I liked getting the forums and playing online games and stuff like that. Then my father decided to kick the screen in one night." He shrugged. "By then I had made friends with the owner of the local music shop. He let me use his store's computer in exchange for helping him with record keeping. I set a database for him to use for inventory." Adam grinned, slightly abashed that he was speaking about himself so much. "I know it really wasn't all that much, but I was just graduating high school and, I don't know, I guess I was pleased with what I had taught myself to do."

"I'm impressed."

They slid the folding table behind the dresser and moved the folding chairs they used back to the wall.

Adam glanced at his wristwatch; he was suddenly worried that he was overstaying his welcome. "I hadn't meant to keep you this long, but would you like to go out dancing tonight?"

Although Davie had enjoyed his company immensely, the memory of their last date together was still too humiliating. "No, I don't think so, not tonight."

"Tomorrow then?" He looked so hopeful. "Please?"

Something in his eyes toppled her resistance. "I'm really not much of a dancer."

"A movie?"

"Okay." She didn't sound too sure of her agreement.

"I'll pick you up at one?" He wasn't going to give her a chance to change her mind. "Davie, I'd like to kiss you. May I?"

She was surprised that he should ask. When she looked up at him, he bent to capture her lips with his. Adam held her face between his hands and lightly kissed her. The kiss was tender and filled with longing, but he wouldn't allow even the barest of contact between their bodies. It was like he knew he'd be engulfed if he felt how well their bodies fit together. There would be no way he could leave her if that kind of conflagration happened.

Davie thought the week went by rather smoothly. They had enjoyed a delightful date at the movies and the few times she had seen Adam at HBC were very pleasant. She noted, with some amusement, that her pulse still did a rapid dance every time he stood near her. Maybe it would be best if they kept their relationship on a strictly platonic level, it definitely would be easier on her heart rate.

As far as Davie was concerned, it was obvious that their relationship had no future anyway. There was nowhere for them to go as a couple, especially since she was relatively inexperienced in physical love and Adam's position on commitment, or lack of, was well known throughout the company. She did enjoy spending time with him though. He had a gentle, vulnerable side that reached out to her as a woman. He had a rakish-quality that titillated her even if their physical relationship never went any further. His interest in her made her feel desirable even if, unfortunately, not enough to him. Even if it was only a fantasy. Davie wanted to be with him.

They agreed to be no more than casual business acquaintances to each other while at work and it made the thought of the coming weekend even more exciting. Friday he would be picking her up after work, driving her home to change and then out to dinner. He apologized that it really wasn't anything fancy, but a favorite restaurant Adam had developed a fondness for. The restaurant, a Mongolian barbecue, was the kind of place he just wanted to share with her. The restaurant with its intimate atmosphere was special enough to take her to and yet it was still casual enough not to add any undue pressures.

Davie was planning to go home for a few days the following week. She wondered if Adam would even miss her while she was gone, she planned to tell him about her trip before she left. It was the anniversary of her mom's death and she never liked her dad being alone for that. As much as Davie missed her mother, she could only try to imagine what it was like for her poor father to have lost the woman he wanted to grow old with. She couldn't even begin to understand the complete depth of

feeling her parents had with each other. They were so very close. Even though she was lucky to see close relationships among her aunts and uncles, Davie never believed any other couple was as close as her folks. She didn't think a love affair like that could ever exist for anyone else.

Christmas was coming soon and Davie started to make mental plans for the holiday. She soon chastised herself for thinking of spending it with Adam instead of going home. She worried that she was enjoying her time with Adam too much, maybe even too much to be able to let go when the time came - and it would. She wanted what her parents had, maybe not as intense, maybe not even as singular, just close enough to know someone was always there for you. Davie knew she was passionate, or wanted to be, and she wanted to devote her soul to one man...eventually. It felt odd, even though she had gotten many invitations, some of them even tempting, Davie had never felt the desire to share herself with someone the way she wanted to with Adam. Why oh why, she asked herself, did she have to fall for a man that was so indifferent to commitment?

Adam surprised Davie with a phone call Wednesday night to make sure of their plans for Friday. He sounded worried as if he thought she might change her mind. Davie told him that she was looking forward to their date...and she was. She stared at the phone after they hung up perplexed by the worry she had heard in his voice. It was like he was only pretending to be indifferent.

Adam helped Davie fill her bowl with an assortment of meats, vegetables and seasonings before handing it over to the chef to cook on the massive round stone griddle. The flavors and aromas wafted throughout the restaurant as the dishes were quickly cooked and handed back to the patrons on plates.

They had begun their meal with a spicy bean soup and tender wrapped dumplings. Then they went to get their entrees together. The restaurant and cuisine was more than just a nice place to dine, it was a total experience. A bowl of rice waited on the table along with delicious sesame rolls.

Davie had always thought of typical Chinese cuisine whenever someone suggested Oriental food. The Mongolian-style barbecue was a novelty to her. She surprised Adam with her skill in using chopsticks, an art she learned long ago during her adventurous teen-age years, and he admitted he envied her ability. His plate was mounded with delicately seasoned pork, chicken, shrimp and lo mein noodles while hers was filled with vegetables, noodles and cooked fruits with just a hint of chicken. The Chef's Special Sauce had more than a hint of spice.

He poured her a cup of steaming green tea that helped to sharpen her palate and made the meal even more enjoyable. Adam was enjoying watching Davie's eyes widen with each course. He was happy to know that she was enjoying herself.

Adam had begun to order wine when he remembered that Davie was still under-age. Looking slightly abashed, he asked the waitress to bring two soft drinks to the table. Ruefully he admitted to Davie that he normally dated women his own age or older and hadn't been thinking when he had asked for the wine list.

She paused with her chopsticks partway to her mouth. "Do you think I'm too young to be out with you?"

"There's what, five years between us. I don't have a problem with that. Do you?" He asked her seriously.

"No. But you said you normally date older women..."

"It's usually career professionals or women who are seriously looking for husband material."

"...and of course you don't want to get married." Davie really felt she was a long way off from that herself, although she eventually did want a family.

"I used to think I didn't." He looked away and left his answer hanging.

"Adam?" Davie waited for him to turn back to her. "Why are we spending time together?"

He shrugged. "Why not?"

"We both know that I'm not your usual type."

"Tell me what my usual type is?" Adam grinned; his potent smile was enough to make Davie stammer.

"Uh, you know...older, pretty, sophisticated...and more experienced." She blushed slightly.

He answered her quietly. "You are very pretty, I thought you knew that Davie." He held her hand across the table. "No, you're not one of these super svelte, sophisticated snobs. You're genuine. You're fresh and alive. You make me feel alive. Davie, I really do like you." Adam avoided mentioning anything about experience.

He discreetly managed to change the topic. They chatted carelessly about work, TV shows, school and people watching while they finished their meals. The waitress served them both mango ice cream with a fortune cookie stuck on top for each. Adam read the strip of paper from his fortune cookie and folded it quietly. Then he asked Davie what her fortune said.

She chuckled. "These never really do make much sense." Looking at the slip of paper again, she continued, "The path is straighter than it appears." Davie tried to make the message sound profound before she burst into laughter. "Can these quotes be any more vague?"

"Yeah, it is cryptic."

"So, what does your fortune say?"

He smiled and shrugged innocently. "It's the same kind of nonsense." Then he bit into the crunchy shell and scooped a spoonful of ice cream into his mouth.

He never told her what the message in his fortune cookie said. Adam watched Davie as she delicately licked her spoon. He couldn't help thinking about the words on his strip of paper. His fortune read "You are staring at your future."

A waitress on her way into the kitchen dropped a tray filled with dishes and Adam winced visibly at the clatter. He rubbed his forehead and waited for the pain to ease.

"Are you okay?" Davie noticed his frown.

"It's nothing. I've just been fighting a headache all day. I'll take a couple of aspirins when I get home." He picked up the bill the waitress had dropped on their table. "You ready?"

Davie nodded.

CHAPTER 3

Although she had called his number over the weekend to ask how he felt, Davie had only gotten to speak with Adam's answering machine. He never returned her calls. She bought a bus ticket for Tuesday evening to New Jersey, she was returning late Thursday; this way she would only miss a few days at school and work and still be able to spend the anniversary with her father.

Adam had apologized for cutting their evening short on Friday, he said the headache had gotten the best of him. He offered to take her to lunch Monday before her classes to make up for it.

Monday came and Adam never showed up. Davie waited in her office and then finally called his department to find out what had happened. He hadn't come in at all that day, he had called in sick. Since she had already waited long past the time she normally would have to leave, Davie didn't try calling him again. She ran to catch a bus to school and barely made it on time. She ignored the growling of her empty stomach.

She didn't even try to call him again after her classes were over. It was unusual for Adam to miss work and she was concerned. Davie stopped off at a deli near the school and picked up some matzo ball soup to go. She ate a potato knish to stave off her hunger while she waited for the order to be filled. Juggling her schoolbooks and the container of hot soup, Davie took another bus to the garden apartment complex where Adam lived. She had only been there once before, the night they almost made love, but she had no difficulty remembering the way to his door.

She knocked several times before she heard any movement in the apartment. Finally the door opened a crack. Adam peeked around, his hazel eyes were bloodshot and his short, brown hair was in total disarray.

"Wha' are you doing here?" He didn't sound happy to see her.

"I brought you chicken soup." She held up the bag for him to see.

"...don't want to eat." He turned away from the door without pushing it closed.

Davie entered his apartment and gently closed the door behind her. He stood a few feet away holding a bedsheet around his middle; he was naked from the waist up. She thought he looked terrible...and sexy at the same time. "I heard you weren't feeling well..."

"Yeah, I'm sick." His nose was red and his voice sounded scratchy.

"I kind of figured that." Davie reached towards him and placed the back of her hand against his forehead. "You're burning up! Do you have a thermometer?"

"Rectal..." He sneered. "Are you offering to take it?"

"No." She shook her head at his insolence. "Have you called your doctor?"

"...is jus' the flu." He started walking back towards his bedroom. "...jus' want to sleep."

Davie was left standing alone in the living room. She put her schoolbooks down on the glass and wood coffee table and brought the container of soup into the kitchen. The kitchen was tiny and uncluttered; except for a small microwave and an electric coffeepot, the room appeared to be used more as an office. A computer workstation dominated most of the space. She looked in the kitchen cabinets and except for a few odd pieces, she saw that Adam barely had complete service for one. She took a bowl from the shelf, poured some of the soup into it and heated it in the microwave.

The bathroom was next to his bedroom and Davie noticed that he had sprawled out spreadeagled on his bed, the sheet barely covered his buttocks. He tossed fitfully and coughed. In the bathroom cabinet, she found a bottle of aspirin and an unopened bottle of liquid cold remedy; she brought those to him with a paper cup of water. The hall light illuminated his room without being too bright.

"Adam?"

"Hmmm." His face was buried in the pillow.

"When did you take any aspirin last?"

He turned over to face her. "Yesterday...I think." He made sure he was covered as an afterthought.

Davie sighed. He was just like her dad, her mother always had to nurse him through even a simple cold. "I take it you never took any cold medicine?"

He squinted at the bottle she held in her hand. "I forgot that I bought it."

"Okay, here..." She poured out two aspirin and handed them to him with the glass of water. She used the measured cap to pour out a dose of the syrupy mix; she handed that to him as he finished swallowing the aspirin.

"Yecchh." Adam made a face as he drank the mix. He handed her back the cup of water and the cap from the medicine.

She was affectionate even as she called him a baby. He sniffled and coughed.

When she turned to leave the room, Adam semi-sat up in bed. "Where're you going?"

"To get your soup." She put the medications back in the bathroom cabinet and took stock of the other items he had stored there. She briefly noted his toothbrush and toothpaste, mouthwash, shaving cream and razor, two different aftershaves and a large box of condoms. She sighed as she thought about the biggest stumbling block to any relationship they could have.

Adam was sitting on the side of his bed holding his head when she returned. The bed linen had been carefully drawn across his lap to cover his nakedness. "I was going to get some clothes on, but my head is spinning."

"Don't worry, just relax." She appreciated his thoughtful intention. "I have your soup. Why don't you sit back?"

He eased back onto the bed. "I'm not really hungry..."

"Adam, when is the last time you ate?"

He frowned as he thought about it. "Friday? I think..."

Putting the bowl of soup on his night table, Davie helped fluff a pillow behind him to make him more comfortable. "You need to eat to keep your strength up." She sat on the bed facing him as she reached for his soup and spoon.

"I don't want to get you sick." He barely pronounced the words through his stuffy nose.

"Don't worry, I've had my flu shots." Davie held a spoon of soup for him, "Open up."

Adam sipped the soup from the spoon thinking how nice it was to have someone take care of him. The soup felt good going down and he realized how empty he felt inside. She fed him several spoonfuls, some with small pieces of matzo balls.

"I can't eat anymore..." He had managed to swallow more than half of the bowl.

"Okay, I'll put the rest in the refrigerator for you." She started to rise.

"Are you coming back?"

"Sure."

"Thank you." Even as sick as he was feeling, Adam realized that he enjoyed watching the gentle sway of her hips as she walked out of his bedroom.

As Adam stretched out on his bed again, he thought about Davie. He had never turned to anyone when he got sick before, there never was anyone to turn to. Even though he had been nasty to her when she first got there, she stayed. He hadn't expected that. Just knowing that he wasn't alone made him feel better. Yawning, he realized that the cold medicine was making him sleepy and he hoped he could get some rest. But he didn't want to miss her return.

Sometime during the evening, Adam woke to feel a cool rag on his forehead.

"Sssh... You were moaning from the fever." Davie drew the rag across his shoulders and down his chest. "How are you feeling?"

"Sick." He groaned. "What time is it?"

"Two o'clock. At least you managed to get some rest." She dampened the rag in a small bowl she had next to the bed and held it behind his neck.

"Thank you for staying." He caught her hand as she ran the rag down an arm. "Don't leave..."

"Don't worry. I'll be here."

Davie had fallen asleep while watching television in the living room after she had seen that he was resting. His thrashing sounds woke her and at first he seemed to fight against her touch when she felt his forehead. She had to admit that he had even scared her a little, his initial reaction to her presence had been violent and unexpected. It had only been after she tried to cool his forehead that his sleepy anger turned to moaning.

"I'll bring you some aspirin." She went to get the medicine from the bathroom.

After he swallowed the aspirin and another dose of cold medication, Adam lightly touched her hand again. "Davie...would you stay with me...please?"

"Don't worry, I'm not leaving."

"I mean here, next to me." He gently patted the bed.

She hesitated a moment. "Okay." After clearing away the bowl with cool water and returning the aspirin to the cabinet, Davie settled next to him. She sat with her back against the headboard and her legs stretched out on top of the bed covers.

Adam put his head in her lap, murmured a thank you and dozed off again. She ran her fingers through his hair thinking of the independent air he usually had and how vulnerable he seemed now when he wasn't feeling well. He put an arm around her as if to make sure she didn't go anywhere. Davie could feel the heat from his fever and worried because, even though she hadn't taken it with a thermometer, she knew his fever was much higher than an adult's should be.

Although she hadn't meant to spend the night, she was glad to be there for him. In the morning she'd go home to pack her overnight bag for the short trip home. If Adam still were so feverish, she'd convince him to call his doctor first and maybe get some antibiotics. She had to get home to her dad.

Sometime just before daylight, Davie dozed off while Adam held on to her. She woke suddenly, alarmed to find him lying on top of her, his hands working at the waistband of her jeans.

He was having that repeated nightmare again and he felt trapped. Escape was impossible, just as it had always been.

"Adam?" She tried to push him off. "Adam? Adam, wake up."

Although his eyes were open, she could tell he wasn't really awake. His skin felt even hotter than before. He managed to unsnap her jeans and was pulling at her clothes.

"Adam, stop!" She squirmed under him. He used his free arm to hold her down. "Adam, let me

go...Adam! Adam!"

Davie tried to pull her knee up when Adam clasped one hand over her mouth and pushed the other one under her panties. Tears welled in her eyes.

She shook her head furiously and tried to uncover her mouth. He grabbed at her, hurting her at the same time. She bit his hand and he stopped fighting her suddenly. With one huge shove, Davie managed to push him off of her. She fell unceremoniously onto the floor.

Adam looked startled. He realized in seconds that he was in his own bedroom and he had been fighting with Davie, not the monsters in his memory. It had been a long time since he had dreamt with such violence.

Within moments, a look of horror grew on his face. "Oh my God, Davie...I'm sorry." He stood remembering to take the bed sheet with him. He reached for her and she instinctively recoiled. "Davie, I would never hurt you...I would never want to hurt you."

Davie scurried backwards, away from him, and finally stood. "Are...are you awake now?" She sounded terrified of him.

He looked at the open waistband of her jeans and then at her terrified eyes. "What did I do to you?" The room started spinning and he sat heavily on the bed. "What...Did I hurt you, Davie?" His dreams had transported him to another place, another time. He was someone else in his dreams. Adam had no idea how far that someone else had gone and that terrified him.

"Who are you?!" Her voice sounded calmer.

"I'm sorry Davie..."

"Tell me your name." She tried to sound stern.

"Adam Sherman. Why?"

"What day of the week is this?"

He had to think about that. "Uh, Tuesday, I think."

"What's my name?" Davie pulled her jeans closed.

"Davie Prescott." Adam tried to take a deep breath; it hurt. The fear in her eyes hurt."I'm awake, Davie. God Davie, I'm so sorry. Please...are you okay?"

"Yes." She relaxed her posture a little bit. "Are you okay now?"

He could see the unshed tears and hated himself. It angered him. It frightened him. Davie stepped closer to him and touched his forehead. He flinched.

"You're burning up."

She was so innocent and trusting. "Get out of here, Davie."

"What?" She couldn't believe what she had just heard.

"I said get out of here. You're not safe..." He realized he was too sick to be in control.

"Adam, you were delirious from your fever."

"Get away from me. Leave." He tried to stand, but his knees were too weak. "I don't want you here."

"Adam," she tried to get closer, "I'm not scared of you. You're sick with a fever."

"Get out!" He raised his voice and found that his throat hurt from the effort. "I didn't ask you to be here."

"But..."

"Leave...me...alone!" His chest heaved and he suffered a spasm of coughs.

"Adam?" A tear embarrassed her and rolled down her cheek.

"I almost raped you, Davie." He couldn't hurt her like that. "Get the hell out of here, now!"

"But you didn't mea..."

"Leave, Davie. Please." He had to get her away from him before he did her any more harm. "Davie, I don't plan to help you lose your virginity, especially not like that. Get the hell out of here, now." He had to make her leave, he was too scared not to. He forced his next words out. "Get out before I finish what I started."

She stared at him in silence and tried to tell herself he didn't mean what he said. But he was awake, he was aware of what he was threatening. Another tear escaped, she couldn't argue anymore.

"Get out." He sounded defeated.

She sounded choked up. "Get help. Call your doctor." The tears ran down her cheeks.

Adam stared at her in stony silence.

Davie picked up her books and shoes on her way out.

Adam barely heard the door close before he stumbled to the bathroom to heave. He sat on the cold tile floor, naked, and felt the coolness against his skin. It wasn't long before he realized that even the tile had picked up the heat from his body and began to feel warm. He had hurt her. Davie was the best thing that ever came into his life...and he hurt her. Then he had thrown her out and hurt her even more.

There was no way he could ever undo what he had done. He hated himself. Adam couldn't excuse himself for attacking her. He called himself a monster among other things. An apology wasn't enough, but he didn't know what else to do. He was glad she had finally left, but he wanted her there to see that he really wasn't so hateful. He tried to stand and had to lean against the wall as he worked his way back to his bedroom.

Adam had never felt so sick before He had to speak to Davie. He had to let her know he never wanted to hurt her. He struggled to get dressed and nearly gave up when he couldn't button his shirt. After he found her and apologized again, he was going to see his doctor. He felt sick.

Adam struggled to get to his front door and the exertion made him breathless. He wondered if the pain he felt in his chest was even worth the effort to breathe. Adam pulled the door closed behind him and only made it a few steps away from his door when he felt himself falling forward. He remembered thinking how far away the floor was when darkness surrounded him.

"Dad? You home?" Davie used her key to come in, the downstairs of the house was dark; it worried her a little because her father was usually such a night owl. She was greeted with a minute of silence before her dog came yapping up to her.

"Hey Gizzy," Davie knelt to pet the Pomeranian. "Where's Daddy huh?"

"Davie!" Her father's voice suddenly boomed down from the darkness at the top of the stairs. "What a surprise, Honey. Hold on, I'll be right down."

"Okay." Her jacket was hung up in the hall closet and she left her overnight bag in the foyer. She went into the kitchen and turned on the light hoping to raid the refrigerator. She loved this kitchen. It was filled with memories of her mother and so many fun times she had. Her mother taught her to cook here and she helped her mom bake cookies and holiday treats.

After leaving Adam's place this morning, Davie had spent a solid few hours weeping. She still couldn't believe that he had thrown her out. He had scared her with his violence. Adam had been asleep when he had attacked her. She had only begun to feel safe when she was sure he was fully awake; that's when he turned on her...like it was her fault. Davie was aware that he had been delirious, she knew how seriously he could have hurt her, but she also knew he hadn't meant to. But she couldn't excuse his throwing her out of his apartment, no way!

After she had totally cried herself out, Davie packed a few things for what she knew was going to be another emotional day visiting her mom's grave. She had been rushed and still too upset to worry about eating. Near the end of her bus ride down to the south of New Jersey she finally took notice of the rumblings of her stomach.

Looking around her dad's kitchen, it surprised her to see a few dirty dishes in the sink. Her father was usually so immaculate, she couldn't imagine his having gone up to bed without cleaning up after himself. She started to tidy up for him and wash the dishes; but when she saw the lipstick smeared on one of the glasses, she stopped and stared as an unthinkable idea crossed her mind.

"Hello Sweetheart! I wasn't expecting you." Her father came up behind her and gave her one of his famous bear hugs. He was dressed in a stark white T-shirt and sweat pants.

"You know I wouldn't let you spend tomorrow alone, Dad." She twisted and hugged him back. "I came home to go to Mom's grave and Mass with you just like we always do."

Albert Prescott was still a handsome man at fifty-seven. His broad shoulders had always been the epitome of security to Davie through the years. He had been ten-years older than his wife, but he never looked it. He wasn't very tall, only about five-ten, but his build spoke of years of weight lifting and a vigorous outdoor life. It had been a major blow to him when Laura died six years ago. Davie remembered how her father carried her mom's frail body up and down the stairs the last months of her life so she could still be a part of their everyday family life. The day they buried her mom, he had held Davie and they cried together. Davie didn't think she ever could have gotten through that day if it hadn't been for her father's strong embrace. She hoped that one day she would be lucky enough to find a life partner as dedicated to her as her father was to her mother.

"...but you never said anything." He dropped a kiss on her forehead.

"Dad, you should know..." Her voice trailed off as she spotted a very attractive woman standing quietly in the kitchen doorway. She appeared to have dressed a little hurriedly in a pair of khaki slacks and a matching top.

Al Prescott looked slightly embarrassed as he followed the line of his daughter's vision. "Davie, Sweetheart, I'd like you to meet my...friend, Elizabeth Brady." He extended an arm to welcome Elizabeth into the room. "Liz, this is my daughter, Davie."

Elizabeth gave Davie an extremely warm smile and walked into the room, her hand extended to shake hands. "I'm so very happy to meet you, Davie. Your father has told me so many wonderful things about you." Elizabeth appeared to be close to Albert's age and, Davie thought, not nearly as pretty as Laura had been. Although Davie could see why this woman obviously had caught her father's eye. The woman held herself like royalty; her dark hair showed only a few streaks of gray and her high cheekbones and nearly flawless skin would be the envy of women ten years younger.

Davie glanced briefly at the glass with the smudged lipstick and then at the ceiling; it added up. She accepted Elizabeth's handshake without feeling. "Thank you."

Putting an arm around Davie's shoulders, Albert shared a meaningful look with Elizabeth. "Actually, Davie, Liz is much more than just my friend."

"Yeah. I noticed." Davie answered curtly. She didn't even pretend to approve.

Al dropped his arm from her shoulders. "Now Davie..."

Elizabeth gently laid her hand on Albert's arm and smiled. She looked towards the younger woman. "Davie, we hadn't meant for you to find out about us quite like this."

"Yeah, well, at least you knew about me." Davie looked pointedly at her father.

"How about I put up a pot of coffee and we can sit and talk?"

Liz was trying to smooth over Davie's hostility, but she only made Davie resent her more with her familiarity with Laura's kitchen.

"I don't want anything. Thank you." Her face and voice were devoid of any emotion.

"Well, since I know about you, and Albert hadn't told you about me, is there anything you'd like to ask?"

Davie stared at Elizabeth for a moment. "Uh, yeah, how long?" It was hard to stay angry when the woman seemed so damn warm.

Albert answered. "On and off for the past year."

"Not Thanksgiving?" Davie hadn't heard anything about Elizabeth then.

"Yes, Thanksgiving, too." He replied.

"We just thought Thanksgiving was a time for family, so I went home to mine."

"Are you a divorcee?" Davie allowed herself to be led to the kitchen table.

"No, my husband passed away two years ago. My children are both at boarding school in Maryland." Elizabeth explained that her husband, a career Army officer, had chosen a very reputable school for their kids off base and she continued to send them there to honor his wishes. She had two teen-age boys, thirteen and fifteen, and traveled back to her condominium in Maryland every other weekend to see them. She assured Davie that she had her own small apartment here in New Jersey and wasn't living with Albert.

"Well," Davie relented a little. "I guess my father is entitled to a life. I was just kind of surprised." She sat up straight and looked at Elizabeth. "Do your boys know about my dad?"

"Yes. I had to explain why I was staying here." She smiled at Albert as she remembered their first meeting. "I grew up in this town and had come back for a brief visit when I met your father."

"How do they feel about it?"

"They're happy for me. They like your father." Elizabeth glowed when she spoke about her boys.

That answer made Davie feel a little bit guilty. If only her father had forewarned her though, her reaction might have been better. She looked at her father and noticed the adoring way he was looking at Elizabeth, almost as adoring as he used to look at Laura.

Then adding insult to injury, Gizzy jumped onto Elizabeth's lap.

Davie resented the fact that her father brought this woman into Laura's home, her kitchen and even her bedroom. "Were you even planning to visit Mom's grave tomorrow?"

"Yes. I'll go every year of my life so long as I'm able." Strong as he was, he was still a man who could be moved by emotions. "I made that promise to her and you."

Refusing to look at Elizabeth, Davie asked, "Is she coming?"

Albert looked disappointed by his daughter's rudeness.

"I had been planning to go with Albert, I didn't want him to go alone." Elizabeth gently placed her hand over Davie's. "If you'd like to go with your father, I can stay home. Maybe it should be just the two of you."

Davie was unnerved by Elizabeth's continued warmth. "Yes. I would like to go with my dad...alone." She noticed the understanding in the older woman's eyes. "Thank you."

Although he hated seeing the tube dripping liquid into his veins, Adam had to admit he felt so much better. He had been told more than once that he had been very lucky to pass out in a public place or they might not have found him until it was too late. The first twenty-four hours in the hospital had been very touch-and-go.

He wasn't feeling very lucky though, as he heard her phone ringing unanswered. Davie should have been home from school by now and he was worried about her. Adam didn't remember much about the last few days, but he did remember attacking her in his sleep and then turning on her because he was angry with himself. He remembered seeing her tears before she left and knew that he had been the cause. He had to speak to her.

One of his neighbors had called the ambulance when they found him sprawled in the hallway. When he finally had regained consciousness, the doctor told him he had streptococcus pneumonia. It felt good to finally be able to take a deep breath without the pain.

They finally got rid of the face mask and fit him with a nasal cannula so Adam was able to speak on the phone...if she ever picked up. He had been told that the ambulance crew was bagging him to keep him breathing on his way into the hospital. The strong IV antibiotics and breathing treatments were helping him recover.

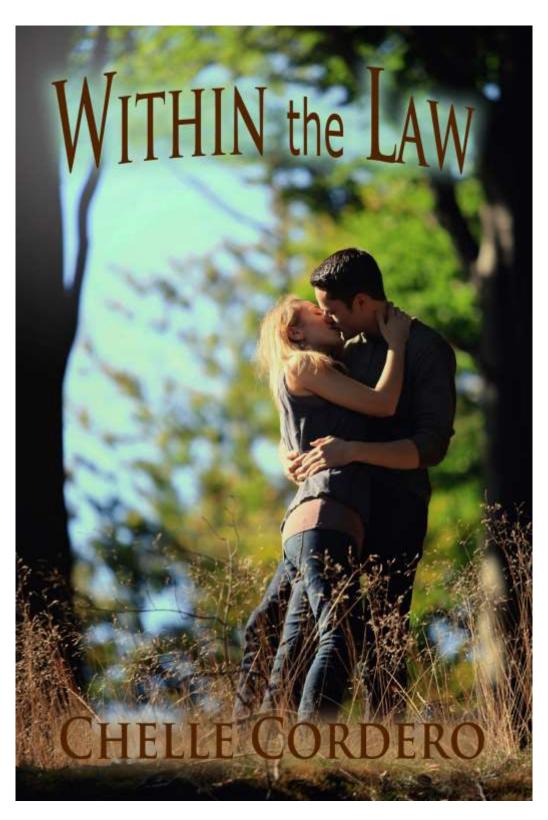
It shook him up to realize that he had been so close to dying that he needed assistance just to keep breathing. He wasn't scared of dying, but he was afraid of never getting the chance to apologize to Davie. He finally began to understand why thoughts of her had monopolized his dreams, he was falling in love. It chilled him through to think that he might never get a chance to let her know that.

A few of the guys from work stopped by to visit with him. He had tried not to make too big an issue of it, but he did ask them if Davie knew that he was in the hospital. Both guys fired a barrage of jokes at his expense before telling him that they didn't remember seeing her in the office at all that day. Adam was concerned.

He finally put the phone down after fifteen rings. Even that small effort had tired him out.

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Within the Law by Chelle Cordero

Prologue

He put his hand on the bartender's wrist as she moved the open bottle towards his glass to refill.

"That's going to be it for me, I've got an early morning." He removed his hand from her wrist and watched as she pulled her slender hand away, noting the bright red of her nails. He remembered seeing red nails like that before. It was the same red as the cherry that topped the ice cream sundae you took your girl out for on a hot summer night. It was the same red as the Ruby stone that sat in a high school ring.

It had been more than eight years since he had seen that high school ring. She had been wearing it on a gold chain around her neck as she kissed him and told him she'd see him later. He waved as she got into the car with her friends and they drove off. Even though it had been a girls' outing, he was supposed to drive them that day. One of her friends was planning to move into the dorm at the university in Syracuse later that summer and they all had wanted to help her make purchases for her room. But the restaurant manager had a last minute opening and he was grabbing all the work he could. So he stayed behind. He stayed behind and worked so they would be a little bit closer to being able to afford getting married.

His high school ring was never supposed to replace her engagement ring. He had been planning on buying one. But they wanted to move the wedding date up. They needed the money so buying the diamond was put on hold. Tom was still working the busboy job that had carried him through his senior year of high school. He had applications in at lots of other places for full time jobs, but the summer wasn't the best time to get hired. His dad had wanted him to go on to college, but college wasn't in his plans. Not anymore. He proposed to Joyce on their high school graduation day.

Joyce's parents tried to convince them each to go to the local community college. They kept telling them that a two year engagement wasn't all that long after all. Tom and Joyce knew they couldn't wait the two years. So he worked as many hours as he could as a busboy. He managed to pick up a few extra hours pumping gas at the local station also. Joyce babysat and she was going to start selling plastic kitchen containers to all the area housewives. She wasn't planning to buy anything that day. She was just going along for the ride. She was just going to enjoy the day with her girlfriends. He wanted her to have fun.

He was dead on his feet after the shift at the restaurant and he just wanted to go home and watch TV. His mom called him before he left work. His fifteen-year old cousin had run away again, something she did an average of twice a week since coming to live with them when she was twelve. Tom always knew where to find her and he picked her up on his way home that night. They were sitting in his car while he once again lectured her about her behavior when the police car pulled up. Tom knew that his world was about to end when he saw Joyce's father get out of the back seat.

Chapter One

The courthouse was already closed by the time Tom had driven into Rome, New York. He knew it wouldn't have made a difference anyway. The district attorney's office had been very specific about what time they wanted to see him. All they wanted him to do was identify the Tupper Lake High School ring with his initials engraved in it. All he wanted to do was get a look at the guy who had changed everything in his world. Tom had an almost masochistic need to put a face to the lowlife who had turned every dream he had into a nightmare.

Tom looked at his wristwatch and decided that as tempting as it was to drink himself into total numbness, he wanted to be aware enough the next morning to really get a good look at this guy. He'd been waiting eight years. Throwing a couple of bills on the counter, he paid for his last drink and stood. He took his car keys out of his pocket and weaved his way through the crowd towards the door.

Tom knew he was comfortably buzzed enough not to drive, but he also knew he had to get out of the bar before he lost total control of his emotions. He figured he'd see how he fared once the outside air hit him and if he had to, he'd just roll the car down the street to the empty parking lot of a closed supermarket and sleep there for the night.

He stood on the sidewalk outside of the bar and let the cool night air absorb him. The Subaru was parked just a few car lengths down. He decided that if he managed to put the key in the lock on the first try, he'd be okay to drive. When he first heard her, he thought he was imagining the sound. Then Tom was sure that he heard a woman sobbing. He continued down the block until he saw her.

She was on her knees and he could see that she was trying to stand but what looked like a broken shoe and a bloodied knee wasn't helping.

The woman, an attractive blonde, seemed scared when she first saw him approaching from out of the shadows. She tried to stand again and he watched as her ankle turned in and she groaned. Her knee-length tan skirt showed dark smudges from the dirty sidewalk.

"Don't come near me."

Tom stopped where he was. "Hey lady, it just looked like you needed some help."

"I'm fine." She managed to get to her feet. She was tall, maybe about five-foot-eight, he thought. Her stockings were ripped over her knees, one knee was bleeding and the contents of her pocketbook were spilled out over the broken sidewalk where she had tripped. "Thank you, but I don't need your help."

"Okay." Tom leaned against a parked car, crossed his arms and watched as she struggled to remain in an upright position and pick up her belongings at the same time.

The woman almost fell again and Tom lost patience. He came to her side.

"I'll scream for help." She looked frightened by him.

"Go ahead." Tom stared at her for a full minute. Finally after nothing more was said, he bent to pick up her spilled possessions and put them back into the wayward purse. "Do you live around here?" He handed her the pocketbook.

She hesitated. "No. Why?"

"I was just wondering what a woman alone was doing out on these streets at this hour." He raised his eyebrows.

"I don't like your insinuation." She looked around and seemed to realize how dark and isolated the streets were. "Not that it's any of your business, but I had an appointment."

"Okay, let's get you home." He surprised her by cradling her in his arms. "My car is right over here." She was a lightweight to carry.

"Put me down."

"Yeah... sure." He walked over to his car and put her down next to it. "You have your choice. I can drive you home. Or you can try to hobble along these dark streets by yourself. I can assure you I have no interest in attacking you. I can't guarantee anyone else you might run into in this neighborhood at this hour." This was an older part of town with lots of alleys and shadows to contend with. It was down near the courthouse and jail and had a forbidding feel to it in the dark.

She turned her head to look around. A few men stumbled out of the bar and headed in the opposite direction. "I don't live far from here." Their raucous laughter seemed to unnerve her. He noticed her slender hands which seemed much more suited to typing at a desk than defending herself on a dark urban street.

"So it won't be a long drive." He unlocked the passenger side door of his car and was pleased that he got the key in on the first try. He uttered silent thanks that his hands were steady enough and he wasn't really feeling any of the effects of the alcohol. "By the way, my name is Tom."

She sat in the car and just before he closed the door, she cautiously smiled. "Thank you Tom."

He couldn't explain why, but he knew that was the kind of smile he would remember and enjoy.

It wasn't far to her home. She gave him directions as he drove. Their path took them just past the local hospital to a small garden apartment complex. He parked in front of one of the Tudor style buildings.

"Thank you again." She opened the car door and stepped out. She had to lean against the car when she found her ankle wouldn't support her weight.

Tom got out of the car and came to her side of the car quickly. He cradled her again ignoring the gasp of her surprise. "Would you like to go to the hospital to have this looked at?"

"No." She seemed to relax in his arms. "No thank you. I'll just stay off of it tonight. I'll be okay." "What floor?"

Resigned to the fact that she did need help after all, she told him. "Second floor, rear apartment." After a moment, she added "thank you again," and loosely put her arms around his neck.

"Okay." He carried her into the building and up the stairs. "Do you mind if I ask your name?" He really wanted a name to call this ethereal wisp of a woman.

"Alli"

"Nice to meet you, Alli." He brought her to an apartment door. Tom stood there with her in his arms, enjoying the feel of her arms around his neck. Finally he looked at the apartment door. "Do you have your key?" There was a tinge of amusement in his voice.

"Really, I can manage..."

"I'll just put you on your couch, get some ice for your ankle and then I'll leave. Boy Scout honor." Tom grinned. It was for his own benefit, he thought, to get in and out as quickly as possible. He was enjoying the feel of her in his arms entirely too much.

Alli thought about it before she pulled a key from her purse and unlocked the door. The door opened onto her living room. As he bent to put her on her couch, she started to chuckle. "Gee, if I had realized you were a boy scout, I wouldn't have given you such a hard time." He put a throw pillow behind her head.

Tom pointed towards what appeared to be the kitchen. "Ice, that way?" "Yes."

He went into the kitchen and noticed it was immaculate. All the appliances matched with brushed metal finishes. The surfaces were pristine. The room looked like it belonged in a magazine layout. A hot and cold water dispenser sat in the corner of the room, no simple tap water for this lady. It was certainly not like his place at home where his mom had picked out a stark white fridge and he relied on well water for drinking. He came out a few moments later carrying ice wrapped in a kitchen towel and a plastic grocery bag. "Here, put this under your foot so the ice doesn't get everything soaked." He put the bag under her leg and then wrapped the towel and ice around her ankle. "Okay, I'm out of here...:

"Tom, thank you. I'm sorry I was being so difficult before." He liked the way his name sounded when she said it.

He smiled at her. "Don't worry about it. I understand."

"I just never expected to find a truly nice guy..." He hid his disappointment at her words. A nice guy wasn't the way he wanted her to see him. He would have preferred a handsome guy, an attractive guy, a sexy guy... Nice was just so bland.

"Don't sweat it." He looked around the room. She had a delicate collection of spun glass figurines on display in the living room. He thought of how the type of collection suited her, very beautiful, very intricate, very fragile. Probably very expensive. "Can I get you anything else before I leave?" He noticed that she had a few photos on display, probably family pictures. The frames were all highly polished chrome and silver. Except for an older man next to an older woman, she didn't seem to have any pictures of a special man in her life.

It looked like she wanted to say something else but changed her mind. "No thanks."

"Bye Alli." Discouraged, Tom left.

"Bye."

Tom went back downstairs to his car. Fortunately he had reserved a motel room by phone before he left home or he really would have to sleep in his car. He passed an all night convenience store on his way to the motel so he stopped and got himself a cup of coffee and a sandwich to bring back with him. He had never stopped for dinner and his gut was beginning to burn from the alcohol. While he waited for the sandwich to heat in the store microwave, he realized he would have jumped at even the slightest hint of an invitation to have stayed in her apartment. He had been feeling especially lonely since he first got the phone call about the ring.

He picked up his key from check-in, left a request for a wake-up call at the front desk and went to his room. He turned the TV on and put his feet up on the bed to eat his food. Thinking about it, he realized that Alli should never have let him pick her up and put her into a car. He sure as hell should never have put a woman into that position. He should have known better. There were sick predators out there waiting to hurt innocent women. But maybe, just maybe, because he was so pushy, he did save her from someone else who might have come along.

He also realized that, just for the short time he had been with her, he really felt an ease he hadn't had since the phone call about the ring. He had only known her an hour or so and already she was indelibly etched in his mind. She was a heck of a lot fancier than most of the women he knew. Even rumpled and ruined from her fall, her clothes were very businesslike. Her furnishings looked like they had been carefully selected by some expensive designer. Maybe that was why she stood out in his mind. The women he usually associated with in his hometown were much more casual in their dress. This Alli was just... put together so well. He was still curious what kind of an appointment she might have had at that hour in that neighborhood.

Tom felt like his mind was going in a dozen different directions at once.

He wondered how Alli would feel if he were to show up at her door again the next night. Would she welcome him or tell him to get lost? He was a small town, blue-collar kind of guy. Maybe he could bring flowers, ask about her ankle, invite her to dinner... He would see how he felt after the courtroom. He would see how he felt after he identified the ring. He had a feeling that no matter what the results were going to be in the courtroom, he would be tempted to seek her out again. It boggled him that she had such an effect on him.

He pulled his wallet out and studied a yellowed picture he still carried from his high school days. Joyce was beautiful. How he wished that someone had come along who could have helped her that fateful day. How he wished he had driven her and her friends to Syracuse. Maybe if he had been with her that day... He would never forgive himself for having stayed behind. She had been so disappointed when he explained that it was a chance to earn some money towards their goal and he wouldn't be coming along. But she told him she understood and she put a smile on her face just for him. That smile was all he was left with.

Joyce's father had come to tell him that she had been abducted from a shopping center parking lot. He and her father had driven to the mall where she was last seen. They spent the next two days camped out at the local police station waiting for word of her fate. Then the detective had come in to say that a young woman's body had been found by the side of a road. Tom would never forget the expression on her father's face after he identified his daughter's body. Tom asked to see her. She looked like she was sleeping, just sleeping. She was a beautiful angel just sleeping. He couldn't let himself cry. If he cried, then that would have meant things were wrong. She was going to wake up. Tom didn't want to leave her side. He wanted to wait for her to open her eyes. He wanted to stay and tell her how much closer they were to their goal because he had stayed behind to earn some money.

Tom stood outside the courtroom the next day and studied the faces of everyone who entered. He saw familiar faces from his high school years. Some of the faces he saw still belonged in his hometown of Tupper Lake, in Joyce's hometown. Two of the girls that had gotten into the car that day with Joyce walked through the lobby. They had both moved out of the area as their lives got busy. They nodded to him in recognition and sent little waves and obligatory smiles towards him. They were

older, probably married, probably in careers. Just like Joyce should have been.

He thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. He watched as Joyce stepped out of the elevator. She looked the same as she did back then. He stood there in disbelief feeling a lump in the back of his throat He wanted to take her in his arms and celebrate her return. She saw him and smiled. It was only when he saw Joyce's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Keller, step out of the elevator that he realized the young woman was Joyce's baby sister. He hadn't seen her since she was eleven years old. She had grown up to look just like her sister. Eight years, she was just about the same age now as Joyce was when she died.

"Tommy!" Kristen Keller recognized him and came running over to give him a hug.

He hugged her back wordlessly when he found he couldn't speak. He was still in shock over the resemblance.

The Kellers came to greet him. Mrs. Keller barely smiled. She was an attractive woman and he knew Joyce would have aged beautifully some day as well. He knew that seeing him brought back so many more memories. Every time she saw someone or something that reminded her of the daughter she had buried, she suffered anew. He knew she would always hurt.

"How are you Tom?" Mr. Keller asked. "How are your folks?"

"Fine. My parents are doing well. They retired and moved to North Carolina." Tom's father had been in the logging business and had worked hard all his life towards retirement.

Mr. Keller smiled. "That's good. They deserve some relaxation. How are you doing? What are you doing with yourself these days?"

"I wound up working with the State Police. I took the test and did well." It certainly was a more stable job than working as a busboy in the seasonal restaurant business. He hadn't had much to offer their daughter so many years before.

"A Gray Rider. Nice." Mr. Keller nodded in approval using the common term to describe troopers.

"Are you married?" Mrs. Keller asked suddenly.

"No ma'am." He hadn't found anyone special since Joyce. "I don't know if that will ever happen." How could he tell her that except for one unexpected woman, he always found himself comparing every other woman to Joyce?

Her parents had taken their two younger daughters and moved immediately after Joyce's funeral. Tom had tried to stay in touch with them. His cousin had been friends with one of their daughters, Stephanie. Steph called Cat one day and asked her to stop Tommy from calling. Her mother wasn't handling things emotionally and the reminder of what she had lost was too much. So Tom didn't call again, he let go of the last ties he had to Joyce. He had wanted to hold on but he couldn't cause them any more pain. He already felt responsible enough for their sorrow.

Her eyes misted. "They told you that they caught the monster that hurt my baby?" Joyce's mom had aged much more than just the eight years that had passed.

"Let's hope they put him away for a long, long time." Her father continued.

"I hope they give him the electric chair." Kristen added her opinion.

Tom heard the venom in her voice and he understood. But he still had to let her know. "New York doesn't have the death penalty, Kristen."

"But he killed my sister!" She pouted and reminded Tom one more time of her older sister.

"I know." Tom also knew that no matter what punishment he wished on this guy, it would never return Joyce to him. It would never bring back the future they had ahead of them. "Where's Stephanie?" Their middle daughter didn't seem to be with them.

Mr. Keller smiled broadly. "She joined the marines. She's stationed in Iraq. She's due back in a couple of months."

"Wow." Tom shook his head and remembered all the times Cat and Steph caused all kinds of havoc because neither of them wanted to follow the rules. Now one was a marine and the other was helping her husband run a business and had a baby on the way. Both of them had definitely grown up. That was something he and Joyce had wondered whether it would ever happen.

Joyce's dad put his arms around his wife and daughter. "We're going to go take our seats now. We'll see you inside."

He watched them enter the courtroom. The rest of the lobby had nearly emptied while they were busy talking. Tom decided to go in and take his seat. The District Attorney and his assistant were seated at the table up front on the left. He saw a small man seated between who he assumed to be two defense attorneys at the table on the right. The first lawyer was an older man with thinning gray hair and a suit that certainly had an expensive designer label. The other lawyer was a tall, blond haired woman. Even from behind, she looked attractive and very well put together. When she turned her head, Tom recognized Alli.

She didn't see him. Tom was incredulous that this was the same woman he had helped the night before. He had been concerned with protecting her from scum like the guy who killed Joyce and now she was sitting on the defense attorney side. She was defending that same scum and looking to send him back out on the street. He had thought she was fragile and delicate. Alli was an attractive woman. She felt good in his arms. He felt as if he had betrayed Joyce, he hadn't thought of her once while he had held Alli. For a brief time last night, Tom had thought of asking for her phone number and suggesting the possibility of seeing her again. Boy was he glad he hadn't. And then he was sorry that he hadn't.

Chapter Two

The monster that destroyed his dreams turned out to be a little weasel of a guy standing about five-foot-six. His name was Roy Dunlop, or Roy D as he was called on the street. At thirty-six he had already done time for sexual assault and it was during his last arrest for drug possession that stolen merchandise was recovered, including Tom's high school ring. The ring was linked to Joyce's unsolved murder. The D.A. tried to submit evidence of other crimes that Dunlop had been arrested for but Dunlop's smooth talking attorney had it suppressed since some of the cases were pending while others had been dismissed. The defense was trying to get the ring thrown out as evidence claiming that it was found during an illegal search. Dunlop's defense team was headed by the older man in the designer suit. Alli was the assistant defense attorney.

As a police officer, Tom understood how the system worked, but it made it no less frustrating. Dunlop was willing to plead guilty to the car theft but denied any accountability of the brutal rape and beating that the young woman endured before being left to die on the side of the road. Tom had often tried to erase the image of what she must have suffered. Every time he thought of what had happened to her, images just kept assaulting him. He had seen some of the police photos, photos that were taken before the coroner had the decency to clean her up for the family's ID. Then he had seen photos and reports that only the police files contained. The images still haunted him. He knew that he would have nightmares for the rest of his life.

"Miss Keller was alive and well when Mr. Dunlop told her to get out of the car on that road after discovering her sleeping in the back seat." According to his attorney, Dunlop wasn't even aware anyone had been in the car when he drove it out of the mall parking lot that day. The ring supposedly was left in the car. The defense's story was that Dunlop never had intended to kidnap the young woman and if he had realized she was sleeping in the vehicle, he probably would have chosen a different car altogether.

The judge decided to allow the ring as evidence even thought the defense attorney argued that it was found during an unrelated search and an unrelated allegation. Since the state wasn't accepting the plea of guilty to car theft and not guilty to rape and murder, Dunlop was going to be heard and judged by a jury. Dunlop's previous crimes were inadmissible, but anything about Joyce was fair game. A common ploy was to put the victim on trial to dissuade the jury from any sympathetic votes.

It was up to the state to convince the jury, without a doubt, that Roy Dunlop was guilty and deserved to be put away for the maximum penalty allowed. Tommy sat alone in the courtroom. Even

though all of the seats were filled, Tom sat alone. Ever since Joyce's death, Tom had felt alone, except for an unusual hour the night before. He stared at the back of Dunlop's head and remembered his own grief and tears eight long years ago. He remembered the giant ache inside of him that he hoped would still his own heart so he could be buried next to Joyce. The ache had become more bearable as time had gone by but he still felt it. He knew that he would always love and miss her.

Witnesses were called by the prosecution. One of the tactics the D.A.'s office decided on was to call Joyce's friends and fiancé to the stand to help establish the innocence and defenselessness of the victim. One of the girls who had accompanied Joyce that day testified seeing Joyce's face as she cried in the back seat of the car while Dunlop sped out of the mall's lot.

"Joyce had her face up to the glass. She was crying. There was no way he didn't know she was there..." Her friend's teary account seemed to affect the jury. Tom had heard that account before and he tried to pretend it didn't affect him anymore.

"Objection. That calls for speculation, your honor." The defense attorneys wanted to prove how emotionally charged and inaccurate her friends' accounts of that day were.

"Sustained."

By the time that the defense attorney had cross examined the witness, everything from her memory of the timing to her ability to see clearly into a speeding car across a crowded lot was questioned.

Another witness testified that Joyce had been tired from babysitting the night before so she had gone back to the car to wait for her friends.

"Do you know if she lay down to take a nap in the car?"

"I have no idea."

"But she was tired?"

"Yes." Another of Joyce's fellow travelers that day did her best to recall the events that led up to Joyce's death.

"So it's possible that she was asleep in the back seat when my client drove off in the car?"

"I guess."

"So it is reasonable that Mr. Dunlop didn't even know she was in the car..."

"Objection." The prosecution spoke up.

"I'm sorry." The defense attorney turned on all of his charm. "I withdraw my statement your Honor."

The District Attorney's office called Thomas Hughes to the stand. As Tommy walked to the witness stand, he noticed Alli was giving the senior attorney a folder. Then she looked up and saw him. It was impossible to mask her surprise. But it didn't take long for her to try to cover up her recognition of him for the benefit of the jury. He gazed at her as he was being sworn in, she looked away.

Tom never expected to feel the emotions he did as he was handed the clear plastic bag containing his high school ring. He was asked to make a positive identification that this was the ring he had given to Joyce Keller. Was this the ring she was wearing on a chain around her neck the day she went on an outing with some girlfriends?

He had to clear his throat in order to answer. "Yes. I gave this ring to Joyce. She wore it on a chain."

"Mr. Hughes," Dunlop's attorney approached the witness stand. "How can you be sure that Miss Keller did not remove this ring on her own? Perhaps she had arrangements to meet someone?"

"Joyce didn't remove the ring, she wouldn't have." That ring represented every promise he had made to her. That ring meant that he wouldn't abandon her. "She wouldn't take it off. She was wearing this until I could afford an engagement ring. She wouldn't have taken it off."

"You don't think it's possible that Miss Keller might have met someone after Mr. Dunlop asked her to get out of the car?"

"No."

"But she had sexual relations..."

"He raped her." Tommy's voice rose. "She was bruised." The D.A. had already had a witness on the stand who explained the common bruising pattern in rape victims.

"How can you be sure that Mr. Dunlop had relations with her? Was there any D.N.A. evidence to support that?"

"No."

"Why not? Weren't they able to test the semen?"

"He used a condom or didn't ejaculate..." Those were the reasons the police had given him back then.

"Wouldn't it be unusual for a rapist to use a condom?" Tom didn't answer. "Mr. Hughes, you are an officer with the New York State Police, correct?"

He swallowed back the pain he was feeling at the memory of what she had endured. "Yes but it does happen."

"Have any of your investigations dealt with rape or sexual assault? How many?"

"A few."

"In any of the cases you have personally been involved with, have any assailants used a condom?"

"Authorities have reported more and..."

"Please answer yes or no. In any of the cases you have personally been involved with, was a condom used?"

"No, but..."

"Were you intimate with Miss Keller?" Defense decided to put Joyce's reputation on trial and they planned to use Tom to cast doubt and dispel sympathy.

He looked at Joyce's parents. "What does that matter?"

The lawyer explained to the judge that he had a purpose to his questioning. The judge instructed Tom to answer. Tom indicated that he and Joyce had been intimate.

"What was your preferred method of birth control?

Tom exhaled loudly. "Condoms."

"Would you say that your relations with Miss Keller were consensual?" Tom nodded. "So whenever you and Miss Keller mutually agreed to have sex, you used a condom?"

Tom looked down. "Most times." His voice was low.

"Would you please speak up Mr. Hughes so the jury can hear you?"

He looked at the attorney. "Most times." He spoke in a louder voice.

"Do you remember when the last time was that you and Miss Keller had consensual sex?"

She had been babysitting. The kids had already fallen asleep. Tom came by. It was late. "The night before..."

"And that was consensual?"

"Yes."

"Did you use a condom?"

Tom knew just where this was heading. "No."

"So isn't it true that the only D.N.A. evidence found in the investigation pointed to you?"

"Forensics was able to..."

"Yes or no?"

He stubbornly refused to allow this path. "Forensics was able to determine I had been with her the night before she was abducted."

"All right. Your honor, I would like the record to show that Mr. Hughes refused to answer yes or no. However, I would also like to leave his response on the record."

The judge spoke. "I'll allow it."

The attorney came back to Tom. "The same lab that determined you had been with Miss Keller hours before her alleged abduction was also the same forensics lab that could not tie my client with any intimacy with her through D.N.A. Correct?"

Tom exhaled loudly. He had walked right into the lawyer's trap. "Yes."

"Mr. Hughes, you testified that you normally used a condom when you were with Miss Keller. However you also stated that you did not use one the night before she was going on a day trip with her friends. A day trip by the way that excluded you..."

"I was supposed to go with her." Tom interrupted.

"Were you angry that you weren't going with her?"

Tom was puzzled as to where the lawyer was leading. "I was disappointed, but not with Joyce."

Mr. Hughes, by your own admission, you were... upset. You saw Miss Keller the night before she went on her day trip. You had relations with her."

"I was not upset."

"Isn't it true that you might have caused the bruising that the prosecution claims was from rape? I think that, in your upset, you wanted to have sex with Miss Keller, but you weren't prepared with your usual protection. She said no and you forced yourself on her anyway."

"No. That never happened."

The Assistant District Attorney stood up. "He's badgering the witness your Honor."

The judge looked at the defense attorney. "Unless you can prove to me that this questioning is leading to a relevant point, I am going to have the last sentences struck from the record."

"Yes ma'am." The lawyer seemed contrite. "One more question Mr. Hughes, would you say that what happened to your girlfriend influenced your career choice?"

"Yes. Yes what happened to my fiancé definitely influenced my career choice."

"And once you became a law enforcement official, did you ever request to see any of the files pertaining to Miss Keller's death?"

"Yes." Tom scoured the files many, many times.

"Were you able to solve the case?"

"No. I wasn't."

"But you are trained in criminal investigations, aren't you? Wasn't there enough evidence?"

"No. Not at the time."

"But you are now convinced that my client hurt Miss Keller. Why is that?"

Tom knew that the attorney was successfully manipulating his answers. "He had her ring in his possession."

"But since my client freely admitted to stealing the car in which Miss Keller left her ring, we have no connection to her death."

By the time that Tom was allowed to step down from the witness stand, he couldn't bear to see the look on the faces of the Kellers. He knew that his testimony had weakened the prosecution's case. He saw Dunlop smirking at him. Alli still wouldn't look at him.

"Hello?"

He was happy to hear her voice. "Hi Cat." Tom's cousin was the one person who could always manage to lift his spirits. He really considered himself fortunate that he got along so well with her husband as well.

"Hey Tommy! How are you? Where are you calling from?"

The caller ID must have given him away. "I'm outside of Syracuse for a few days. So, how is my niece or nephew?" He tried to remember how far along his cousin was. Was she seven or eight months pregnant? He hadn't seen her for a few months and he tried to imagine her with a big belly.

Caitlyn laughed. "It doesn't matter if this is a boy or girl. I'm giving birth to a football player the way this one kicks."

"I bet Brandon doesn't get too much action if that kid kicks that much." He teased her. He propped the pillow behind him and put his feet up on the hotel room bed.

"Well right now he's away anyway..."

"Oh, I like that. He gets you knocked up and then he leaves you."

Caitlyn laughed. "He'll be back in a couple of days. I think he's worried about my traveling the closer I get."

"Everything is okay though, right?"

"Yes. He had a meeting in Virginia. He'll be back soon."

Virginia was code for one of Brandon's government assignments. He had been involved with national security issues as a computer expert for years. It was something that almost kept him and Caitlyn apart. While Caitlyn was usually aware of whatever project he was involved with, they never shared the information with others. Tommy knew better than to even ask.

Tommy had been worried when Caitlyn married Brandon three years earlier that he would lose that great friendship he had always enjoyed with her. He was actually jealous that Brandon was taking her away from him. It worked out nicely though. Even though they lived a few hours away, he managed to see them every few months, mainly because they traveled for business a lot. On top of it all, he and Brandon had become really good friends.

"So Tommy, what's going on with you?"

He shrugged even though Caitlyn couldn't see him. "I just wanted to hear your voice."

"What's up?" She gave him a moment. "Tommy, don't even try to lie. You know I've always been able to read you."

She was right. There was no way he could hide a problem from her. Even as kids, the two of them could just read each other. There were very few secrets he could ever keep from her, she knew him so well. She came to live with his family after her parents died and the two of them were nearly inseparable. They were more like brother and sister than cousins. Caitlyn had run away the day Joyce was abducted. That was the last time she ever did that. After that day, everything was always about him. She was always there for him.

He told her about the ring and the trial. He spoke to her about his testimony and how it had been twisted. Tommy told her about the Kellers' disappointment in him. He even told her about the defense team and the way they seemed to have complete files on all the witnesses.

"I'll be there tomorrow." As usual, Caitlyn was there for him.

Even though he felt a little guilty about Caitlyn traveling so far along in her pregnancy, he looked forward to having her by his side. He'd apologize to Brandon later.

He went downstairs to the hotel restaurant to get a bite to eat. Tom felt worn out and he hoped he'd be able to get a good night's rest, preferably without the alcohol this time. The hostess led him to a booth and he ordered a burger and fries. It was just a few minutes before he was eating.

"Are you going to eat your pickle?"

Tom looked up at the blonde who was sliding into the booth opposite him. He was surprised to see Alli. "You can have it if you want." He pushed his plate towards her so she could take it.

"Thanks." She took the pickle and bit into it.

Tom was at a loss for what to say. "How is your ankle?"

"Better, thanks. I kept an ace bandage on it all day. The ice really helped last night." She sounded as if this was a normal, everyday discussion she would have with him.

"Good." He picked up his sandwich and took a bite. He chewed slowly. He kept glancing at her. She sat quietly chewing on the pickle. "What are you doing here, Alli? Isn't this kind of... inappropriate considering the trial?"

"I'm pushing my luck." She signaled for the waitress and ordered a small salad and coffee. "Don't worry, I'm paying my own way."

"Okay."

"Tom, I am sorry that Justin grilled you like that today..."

Ah, finally something he could sink his teeth into, he thought. "He was just doing his job. Get the scum buckets back out on the street. That was nice investigating work you did, by the way. Did he really have all that information about my cases or was some of it just lucky guesses?" He sounded cynical.

"I try to do my job thoroughly." Alli sat back while the waitress poured her coffee and put the salad on the table. "I really can't discuss the case. I just wanted to say that I had no idea who you were

last night." She chuckled. "I guess I wasn't as thorough as I thought. I never had your photo ID pulled."

He couldn't help but wonder if she would have smiled at him the way she did if she had known who he was the night before. "Well, I guess you were lucky that I wasn't another Dunlop. Who knows who else is out there walking the streets after some smooth lawyer got him off?" Tom paused. "So what were you doing walking the streets so late last night anyway?"

"I had to interview a witness on another case. It had gone later than I expected and I knew the buses were going to stop running. I was hurrying and I tripped. There was nothing nefarious about it. Even though you seem determined to make it sound like I was, I don't know, turning tricks or something."

He didn't want to admit that he had put all kinds of wrong interpretations to her presence at that hour. "Sorry. I am just naturally protective I guess. And naturally suspicious."

"I said it last night. Thank you for being a genuinely nice guy." She stared at her salad for a moment. "Last night, I was upset with myself for not giving you some kind of opening to stay in touch. You were a perfect stranger, and yet, I felt totally at ease with you."

"Are you really coming on to me?" Tom almost laughed. But he couldn't deny the attraction he felt for her the night before either. If she had given him any opening the night before, he would have jumped at it.

She looked at his eyes. He again noticed how green her eyes were, they were almost electric. "I guess if we had met under different circumstances, I would say yes. I just wanted to say that I am sorry you are hurting so much. If I had been able to make things easier on you today..."

He was very careful not to raise his voice. "You would have done the same. Like you said, you try to do your job thoroughly. Right now all you are interested in is winning. It doesn't really matter who gets hurt does it?" He pushed his plate of uneaten food away and put a few dollars from his wallet on the table. "Thank you for the company. Good night." He got up from the table and walked out of the restaurant.

Tom kept walking straight out of the hotel and into the night air. Last night, he had a fleeting thought about meeting up with the tall slender blonde with the twisted ankle and bright green eyes again. He just never thought he would see her in the courtroom today. It shook him to realize that he had more than just a simple physical reaction; he had more interest in this willowy blonde than just sexual. He liked talking with her even just for the few minutes they chatted the night before. He like the way she said his name. He liked the way her eyes lit up. He even liked the faint lilac smell she was surrounded by.

It unbalanced him because he hadn't noticed or thought that much about a woman since Joyce. He had never looked at a woman the same way since Joyce had died. Tom enjoyed keeping company with women and he definitely enjoyed sex. But since Joyce, no one woman had ever stood out in his mind.

Years ago, his mother had said to him that Joyce had died, he didn't. He had felt like giving up on life back then. Tom didn't want to leave the house or see his friends, it was just too painful. The only one he ever let close to him was Cat. He didn't want to talk to anyone else. He just wanted to build a wall around himself and keep the outside world away.

It hurt to admit it, but his mother was right. It had taken some coercing and the help of a few friends pushing him, but he'd dated since then and even had a few very satisfying relationships. He didn't feel like he was cheating on Joyce. He was just trying to live. He briefly had thought about showing up on Alli's doorstep sometime just to see where things might go. When he had left her apartment last night, he was amazed at how many of his senses felt alive again. But, after today...

"Tom!" He stopped and let her catch up to him. "If we had met under different circumstances, do you..."

He took her in his arms and kissed her. She kissed him back without hesitation. Finally, they stepped apart. "Does that answer your question?"

Chapter Three

He drove her back to her apartment and came in. They just sat and talked, simply talked, for hours. They were surprised to see the hands on the clock moving so quickly. Alli and Tom finally agreed that they would be different people in the day, in the courtroom. But at night, they could be friends, good friends. They would be no more than friends for now. Tom knew that whatever the outcome of the trial might be, there would be too many emotions to deal with. There was no sane way he could commit to anything more than a friendship for now. His sanity was definitely an issue with this woman. No commitments. That's what he kept promising himself.

They spoke about themselves. Alli told him how her own interests in the law peaked when her father, a filling machine operator, was hurt on the job and needed help to get his medical treatments paid for. Her older sister was engaged at the time, but she went to work to help support the family. But when her sister got married and pregnant, not necessarily in that order, Alli did what she could and worked while she went to college at night.

She got her law degree in Syracuse, purposely choosing a school where she could be close to her disabled father and mother. She lucked out when she landed a job in Rome, less than an hour away. She also met her now ex-husband while in school in Syracuse. They were married for two years when he walked out on her. That was a year ago. He served her with divorce papers, she didn't contest them.

"He decided I couldn't give him the things he wanted in a wife." She sounded sad.

"Can you cook?" Tom smiled as he asked her teasingly.

"Some." She looked confused.

"Well, you're pretty, smart and you can cook. I have no idea what he thought you might be lacking." He grinned.

Alli looked into her lap for a moment. Then she looked up and spoke quietly. "Thank you. He just had other... expectations."

Tom reached to smooth her hair away from her face. "He was the fool."

She looked at him at that moment. He saw something that hinted of sadness in those green pools of light. He didn't understand why he found it so compelling to sooth the pain he saw there. He was sure it was just an innocent gesture when she licked her lips but he felt as if she had lit a fuse and he braced himself for the inevitable. Tom had to kiss her. He had to taste her. He started to move towards her. Then he hesitated.

Alli seemed to understand what he was thinking. The look in her eyes begged him to continue. She put her hands on his shoulders and pulled him to her for the kiss. There was no hesitation on her part as she parted her lips and allowed him entry. He took full advantage. Tom ravaged her mouth and took all she had to give. He wrapped his arms around her slender frame. She leaned back on the sofa and he covered her with his body. He moved his lips to her jaw and trailed kisses down her neck. His shaking fingers found her blouse buttons and he undid them. His lips followed as he revealed her golden skin until he was kissing the soft mounds above the lace of her bra. As he cupped a breast, he froze. Then he started to pull away.

His breathing was stilted. "I'm so sorry..." He barely mouthed the words.

"No... Don't stop." Alli tried to hold him there. "Oh Tom, it's been so long since a man has touched me like this." She looked fragile. She looked as if his next touch would either break her or fortify her.

He mumbled more to himself than to her. "My timing sucks." Why now, he thought, why now when all his memories of Joyce had been stirred up? Tom sat up on the couch. He pulled her to him and held her against his chest while he stroked her hair. He thought about what she had just said to him. "Have you been with anyone since your husband?"

Alli looked away. She shook her head. Her fingers rested on his chest and he knew she could feel how hard his heart was beating.

"Oh God..." His breathing was still unsteady. "It's about time that someone let you know how

desirable you are. And I do want you so much." He had to pause. He had to find the strength. "But we've gone too far already. There are too many complications."

"I know." Her voice trembled. "I know that you're right. But I don't want you to be. I want to be with you."

"I do want you. I do..." He barely restrained himself. "But we can't do this." His body was telling him he should. His conscience was calling him all kinds of foul names. His heart was telling him he was doing the right thing by stopping, even if the ache was so great he couldn't stand it.

"Hold me, please." Her voice quivered as she fought back tears of frustration.

He leaned back against the couch and held her tightly to him. It wasn't helping to feel her body pressed against his. But he enjoyed the sweet torture as he noticed how well they fit. He needed to do something to save himself but he was so tempted to just dissolve. He had to stop, somehow. "Tell me... why are you defending Dunlop?"

She looked up at him surprised by his question. "You know we can't talk about this." He wasn't letting go.

"There are a lot of things we can't be doing. Work with me Alli. I need to break the mood... or I feel like I'm going to break in pieces." He knew he was doing it to himself, he knew he should put some distance between them.

She ran her hand over his shoulder and down an arm. He trembled. "I was taught in law school that everyone deserves representation."

"Do you believe in his innocence?"

"I believe in his right to a fair trial."

"What about his guilt?" Tom felt his control beginning to return.

"If... if he is guilty, then he deserves to be judged by his peers as to his punishment." Alli sat back from him. She looked down as she calmly re-buttoned her blouse. "I am not discounting that you were hurt. A young woman died and she deserves justice. But it's got to be within the system."

"We both know that the system can be fallible."

"Tom, you took an oath as a police officer. Doctors have their Hippocratic Oath. Lawyers have a responsibility too." She looked back at him. "We've got to play by the rules, or no one will ever have justice."

She almost had him convinced.

Mr. and Mrs. Keller never even acknowledged him when they saw him. He knew that just seeing him must have stirred up a lot of painful memories for them. He knew he couldn't help that, but he felt rotten about the hurt that his testimony caused. But Kristen did and she came to him.

"Tommy, you did your best." She even sounded like Joyce.

He smiled at her. Again, he was amazed at the similarity she had with her sister. "I didn't do a very good job."

"You told the truth. That's all you can do." She took his arm. "You know, my folks just expected that someone would get up on the stand and say the magic words that would finally bring them peace. But trust me, the only thing that would really bring them peace would be Joyce, and she's never coming back."

Tom looked down at Kristen's hand on his arm. Her nail polish was a pale pink. He remembered how Joyce loved to wear ruby red on all of her nails. He used to love to kiss those ruby red nails, all twenty of them. "When I proposed to Joyce and I went to your folks for permission to marry her, I promised I would take real good care of her. I failed."

"You can't keep blaming yourself... and I know you do." She looked back at her parents. "Joyce was real lucky to know your love. You made her happy. I hope one day that I'll find a guy just like you."

He gave her shoulders a quick squeeze. "I hope you'll do better." He hoped she would find a man who could take care of her and not fail like he did with Joyce.

"Stop underestimating yourself." Kristen kissed him on the cheek and then went to join her

parents as they entered the courtroom.

He watched as Alli crossed the lobby. She and her partner were busy discussing details of the case and they were both examining the contents of a folder as they walked. She looked up and saw him. She did her best to mask any expression, but he saw her eyes light up for him. Tom smiled ever so slightly and he gave her an almost imperceptible nod. Then she went back to her work and entered the courtroom.

He waited until they announced they would be closing the doors and starting proceedings before he went to take a seat. Again, he sat alone. He noticed that Mr. Keller looked to see where he was. Alli kept her eyes forward and didn't seek him out in the courtroom. He understood.

Tom listened to the testimony. There were actually people who spoke of Roy Dunlop as if he were a saint. He was disgusted. Much earlier in the morning, Tom had driven to a nearby trooper barracks and pulled his shield out. He had Dunlop's rap sheet pulled. There was a long list of arrests. He also noticed some odd entries in recent months, a lot of small time arrests with no follow through, no court, no conviction, no jail...

Dunlop glanced Tom's way and smirked.

The judge recessed the session for lunch. Tom watched as Alli walked by. Then he got up from his seat and walked out. He saw her chatting with Justin, the senior defense attorney, and a young clerk in the corner of the lobby.

"Tommy!" Caitlyn ran into his arms.

He hugged her back. "Oh baby, thank you for coming." Stepping back and holding Caitlyn at arm's length, he looked at her belly. "Wow kiddo, it looks like this kid is almost as big as you. How far along are you?" Once again it struck him as amazing that his baby cousin was pregnant and soon to become a mom.

"Just going into my eight month. I can't believe how excited Brandon is. And how nervous. He can't do enough for me." She looked happy.

Hiding a smirk, Tom teased her. "Yeah, well, he did this to you so let him spoil you a little."

She laughed. Tom enjoyed the sound. He noticed that Alli looked over at the sound of his cousin's laughter. It was obvious that she was curious about the woman he was with.

"Caitlyn Smythe?" Kristen approached them.

Caitlyn looked at the young girl who said her name. Surprised she looked at Tom.

"This is Kristen... Joyce's baby sister."

"Hi." Caitlyn smiled. "Actually it's Caitlyn Price now. My gosh, you were just a little kid the last time I saw you."

Tom waited patiently while the two women caught up on personal news. He spent his time watching Alli. Before he knew it, Caitlyn was reaching into her purse and scribbling some phone numbers on a piece of paper to hand to Kristen.

"I'll let Will know you're coming to town. He can introduce you to some people." They pecked the air around each other. "It is so good to see you again."

Kristen left.

"I can't believe she's old enough to be going to college at John Jay. I'm going to introduce her to Malcolm's brother. At least she'll have a friend when she gets there." Malcolm was a good friend of theirs and his brother Will worked part time for Brandon. She looked around the lobby noticing the woman Tom was watching. Caitlyn put her hand up to Tom's cheek. "Tommy, how is it going?"

He shook his head. "It's not good. I think this guy is going to get away with it. His lawyers have made mincemeat out of all the witnesses." Tom sighed. "Cat, they practically had me exonerating him. His defense team is good. And it's not fair. He may not even have to pay for what he did."

She put her arms around his middle and hugged him. "Whether he pays or not, it's not going to change what happened. In the long run, it doesn't even matter anymore. If he receives a sentence, will you finally stop blaming yourself?" He hesitated and then shook his head. "Brandon and I will always be here for you. Is there anything we can do?" He hugged her back and shook his head wordlessly. "Maybe the jury will be able to see through his counsel's tactics." She started to step back and then put

her hand on her stomach in surprise. "Oops. Quick, give me your hand."

Caitlyn placed his hand on her belly. Tom chuckled when he felt the baby's movement and laughed out loud when the baby kicked him.

"What a little miracle!"

Tom never noticed that Dunlop was being escorted through the lobby. Dunlop shook his escort's hand free and stepped in next to Tom. He fixed his gaze on Caitlyn and then turned to Tom.

"The pregnant ones always squeal." Security pulled him away.

Tom felt himself stop breathing. The rage built inside him. Suddenly Tom sprang at Dunlop and grabbed him. Within a second, he had him on the floor.

"You bastard! You son of a bitch!" Tom wrapped his hands around Dunlop's neck.

"She begged me not to hurt the baby when I did her." Dunlop taunted Tom.

Tom had Dunlop pinned to the floor. He started throwing punches. Someone tried to yank him off. "I'll kill you!" He lost track of how many times his fists connected with Dunlop's face.

"Tommy!" Someone called his name.

There was a melee of police, security guards and reporters surrounding him and the bloodied mess he made of Dunlop's face. Tom looked at the crowd. Cameras flashed. Tom saw Alli. He saw Caitlyn. He felt his arms being pinned behind him and he was being dragged from Roy Dunlop's almost limp body. His knuckles were bruised and bleeding.

Caitlyn tried to get to him. She was pushed aside. Tom watched as she stepped back and tripped over a photographer's camera bag that was sitting on the floor. He watched as she fell backwards.

"Cat!"

Alli reached Caitlyn before Tom broke free. She had already checked her over. Alli looked at Tom. "She had the wind knocked out of her."

"I'm okay, Tommy." Caitlyn tried to laugh. She tried to reassure him.

"Do you want to go to the hospital?" Tom was worried. He felt his chest pounding. His eyes were wild. He still shook from the intensity of his rage and his sudden thrust into worry.

"I'm fine." She sat up and leaned on him for support.

Alli glanced at Caitlyn still curious as to who she was to Tom. Security was calling for an ambulance for the semi-conscious Dunlop. Alli looked at Tom. "What happened? Why did you react like that?"

It took a moment before Tom could say anything. "Joyce was pregnant."

"What?" Both Alli and Caitlyn asked at the same time.

"He knew that she was pregnant when he raped and murdered her." Tom held Caitlyn's hand. "He told me she begged him not to hurt the baby." His voice cracked as he repeated what Dunlop had said.

"I demand that this man be locked up. He attacked my client and beat him almost into unconsciousness. He threatened to kill Roy Dunlop in front of witnesses. Thomas Hughes is a dangerous man." Dunlop's senior defense attorney was enraged in front of the judge. Justin paced in front of the courtroom and kept pointing accusing fingers at Tom.

The courtroom was packed with the lawyers, court security, family and witnesses related to Dunlop's case. No outsiders were allowed to enter. The jury was being held in the deliberation room. The press was barred from entry. The judge wanted to deal with the most recent developments as quickly and as quietly as possible. She was already aware that the newspaper photographers had snapped several pictures of Tom attacking Dunlop and there would be headlines no matter how she handled this.

Tom watched as Alli had whispered fiercely to her legal partner before his tirade. She had frantically motioned with her hands until Justin was overheard saying "Just shut-up!" She sat stone faced at the table and refused to look at anything other than her tightly clasped hands.

"My client is currently in the hospital's emergency room receiving treatment for the brutal

beating he took at Thomas Hughes' hands. This man is a danger and a menace. He attacked Mr. Dunlop."

"Your honor, we believe Mr. Hughes was provoked..." The District Attorney spoke in Tom's defense.

The attorney snorted in disdain. "Roy Dunlop made an unwarranted comment about Hughes stroking the belly of a pregnant woman in the lobby!" Justin continued. "No one is denying that my client spoke about something he had no business with. Should the people of the State of New York feel safe with a peace officer who cannot control his rage over a poor choice of words? Does that give license to try to kill someone because you don't like the way they look at you?"

The judge raised her hand for silence. "Mr. Hughes, it does disturb me that you displayed such a loss of control today. Your temper has sent a man to the hospital. Please step forward and explain to me what happened... in your words."

Tom had been seated next to Caitlyn. He was worried about her since she fell, especially when she winced from what she claimed was a simple muscle cramp. He noticed that she looked a bit pale as well. She tried to smile encouragingly and rested her hand on his arm as he stood. He rose and stepped through the swinging gate that separated the audience from the plaintiffs.

"Your Honor, I apologize for my outburst. I was wrong and I accept full responsibility for my actions. I agree that I should have had better control of myself." He sounded contrite. "Unfortunately the... individual's statement was very charged emotionally for me. Dunlop made the statement that the pregnant ones squeal..."

"Do you have any idea why he made that statement Mr. Hughes?"

Tom looked back at Caitlyn. "I was standing with my cousin at the time. She's pregnant. But your Honor..."

Alli looked back at Caitlyn and then at Tom. She seemed relieved.

"He over-reacted your Honor." Justin spoke up. "He's dangerous. He tried to kill Roy Dunlop." The judge looked at the defense attorney. "Please restrain yourself."

"Ma'am," Tom continued. "Joyce Keller was pregnant when she died." He heard Mrs. Keller gasp. Tom could barely bear the pain of her anguish. They hadn't planned to tell their parents until later that summer about the baby. Mr. Keller found out when he identified his daughter's body but he told Tom to keep it secret. He didn't want his wife to suffer more than she already was going to. "Roy Dunlop told me that she begged him not to hurt the baby when he raped and murdered her." He heard Mrs. Keller sobbing. His gut twisted knowing that he was causing the woman to suffer more pain.

"He's lying to justify what he did to my client. No one else heard that alleged confession your Honor." Justin stood defiantly. "He's making this up."

The judge addressed the courtroom. "Is there anyone in this courtroom who over-heard any of those words Mr. Dunlop allegedly said to Mr. Hughes?"

No one answered.

"Anyone?" It was if she was hoping for confirmation of Tom's story.

She was still met with silence.

The judge spoke calmly and compassionately. "Mr. Hughes, it is unfortunate that your loss of control has brought us to this. I do believe that you were provoked. And I understand how painful this must be for you. But I also agree that with your training, you should have had more discipline and control. Even if Roy Dunlop did utter a sort of confession to you, it did not give you right to take justice into your own hands. I don't believe that confinement is necessary, however I do agree that you need to be held accountable for your actions. I am therefore willing to release you in your own recognizance after you surrender your ID and shield and make arrangements to turn over any weapons you may have in your possession here in Rome. I fully intend to make a phone call to your superior officers to discuss further discipline." She sighed loudly. "Do I make myself understood, Mr. Hughes?"

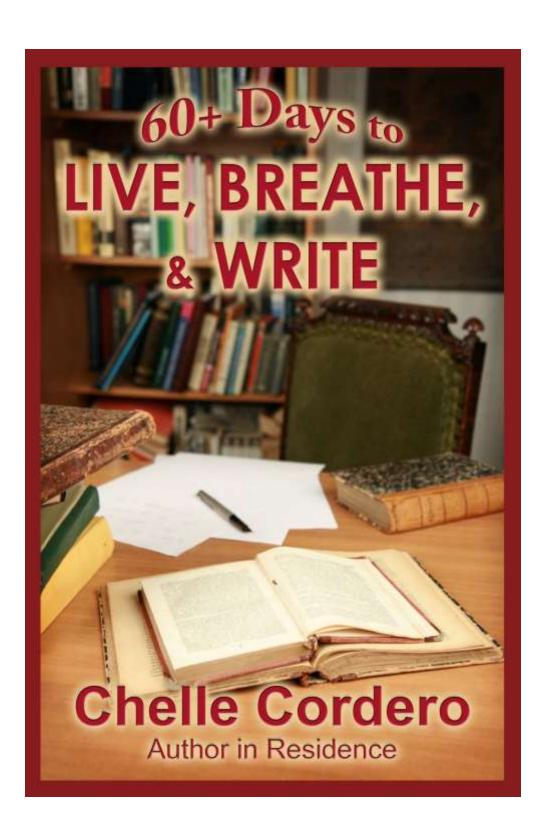
"Yes ma'am." Unfortunately he agreed with everything the judge had said. He had let his

emotions and his temper direct his actions. He knew better than that. He should have had more control.

The court officer approached Tom and he handed over his ID and shield. He told him he had no firearms with him in Rome. Then, just as he was feeling completely defeated, he turned back to Caitlyn. He watched as she stood with a half-smile of encouragement just for him. Suddenly her face drained of color. She clutched her stomach. She cried out to him in pain and then she collapsed.

For More Within the Law...

Amazon, Kobo, AllRomance, Sony, Apple, Barnes and Noble, and more retailers! Coming Soon in audio on Amazon and Audible!



Introduction

"Having Chelle Cordero's blog on my Kindle is like having an author here in residence with me. She gives inspiration, motivation, and best of all, practical advice and solutions. I love the 'writing exercises' she offers at the end of each blog, as well as the 'writing prompts'." ~J.B. Naylor

Due to demand and the overwhelming desire of her readers for more great information about being a successful and productive writer, Chelle Cordero and Vanilla Heart Publishing present 60+ Days to Live, Breathe, & Write – previously published as Living, Breathing, Writing, Volumes 1 and 2. This combined collection gives both the aspiring writer and the accomplished writer two complete months of lessons about the craft of writing and being a writer, from time management to social networking, organizing queries to publication, the business of being a writer, and more. Includes more than 100 brain-starting exercises, business activities, and prompts to help you get those words on paper, and create your successful writing career.

These short lessons and activities have been previously published as part of the acclaimed Amazon Kindle blog Living, Writing, Breathing available by subscription for Kindle owners, and consistently in the Top 100.

from Chelle Cordero:

"Living, Breathing, Writing is filled with weekly articles about writing, tips, trends, methods. Imagine a weekly writers' workshop and the convenience of your Kindle!" http://bit.ly/pILcG

Table of Contents

Day 1: Method Character Writing

Day 2: Getting The First Byline

Day 3: Abandon Your Excuses

Day 4: Social Networking

Day 5: Overcoming Writer's Block

Day 6: Blogging

Day 7: Insults And Rejections

and all this, too!

Day 8: Market Yourself - Sell Your Writing

Day 9: Are You A Novel Or A Short Story Writer?

Day 10: A Dirty Five Letter Word – Promo

Day 11: What Do You Want To Be?

Day 12: Professional... Always

Day 13: Don't Sabotage Yourself

Day 14: The Road To Publishing Your Book

Day 15: Show, Don't Tell

Day 16: A Team-Work Approach

Day 17: Finding The Time To Write

Day 18: A Never Ending Story

Day 19: Come Out Swinging

Day 20: Know Your Audience

Day 21: Writing And Being A Writer

Day 22: Giving Birth To Your Characters

Day 23: Look Who's Talking Now...

Day 24: Letting Your Characters Write The Story

Day 25: Start Building Your Writer's Platform

Day 26: Promoting Yourself With A Virtual Tour

Day 27: Polishing Your Work

Day 28: Accenting Your Characters

Day 29: The Business Of Being A Writer

Day 30: Legal-Ese

Day 31: Failure Is Not An Option

Day 32: Where Do Story Ideas Come From?

Day 33: Thinking Outside The Box & Promotion

Day 34: Opening The Door With Your Query

Day 35: Marketing Yourself Online

Day 36: A Picture is Worth A Thousand Words

Day 37: The Time is Now

Day 38: Challenge Yourself

Day 39: Beginning To End

Day 40: If You Build It, They Will Come

Day 41: Be Careful What You Write

Day 42: KISS: Keep It Simply Simple

Day 43: Your Editor – And The Final Word

Day 44: When Life Gets in The Way

Day 45: Living in Excess

Day 46: Writing Right

Day 47: The Three W's: Writing, Words and Work

Day48: Being a REAL Writer...

Day 49: Manners Matter

Day 50: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How

Day 51: Working The Network

Day 52: The Idea Well

Day 53: Far Reaching Efforts

Day 54: A Boy Named Sue

Day 55: Write To Read

Day 56: D.I.Y. Your Way to A Published Book

Day 57: It's Electric

Day 58: Setting the Setting

Day 59: Perspective Makes a Difference

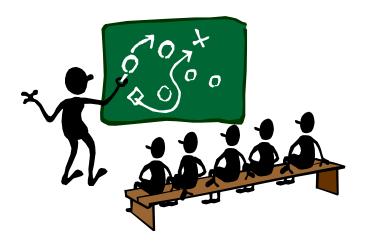
Day 60: Speech Patterns

Day 61: Imagery

Day 62: Back to Basics

To read all the great tips, exercises, activities, and discussions...

Print Edition on Amazon



Day 1 Method Character Writing

The first time I ever tried to write a fiction story, my characters seemed flat and onedimensional. So I quickly added emotions. I added a temper tantrum here and there, a prank, a bad joke. And I successfully created cardboard robots who laughed on cue, cried on cue and got angry with no apparent reasoning.

Like all writers, I wanted to create real people that my readers could empathize with, people who were believable. The first time that a friend/pseudo critic asked me "Why did so and so do that?" I had a huge epiphany. I hadn't spent seven years as a theater and drama student for nothing. I began to use the same philosophies I had learned under the guise of "method acting" in creating my characters

The actor who stands on stage and nearly crumbles when a firecracker goes off knows why even if it isn't part of the script; he knows that as a child he witnessed the gunfire at a jewelry store holdup that killed the friendly shop owner and the loud and unexpected noise is now making him replay that scene and causing a severe meltdown. The actress who bursts into real tears as she is given the news of another character's demise is remembering the funeral of a loved one, maybe her sweet old granddad, and the finality of knowing she would never see him again.

When I envision my characters I build a dossier on them. Okay, not really a dossier, but enough to fill an index card. I know their education, what kind of relationships they had with their parents and siblings. I list a few of the vacations they took as a child and their most memorable experiences. I may include the outcome of their first serious love affair. Even their food allergies are included; it doesn't matter if that information is never known in the story.

When I develop my story, I decide on the main characters, the basic conflict and the eventual outcome. I think of a few events that might be interesting along the way. Otherwise how I get from point A (the beginning) to point B (the ending) is totally up to my characters. I have stated in interviews that my characters write their own story and they do because their reactions and actions are all based upon their past experiences.

In one of my novels a supporting character took on such a life of his own that I had to write a story about him. In the first novel (*Forgotten*) the hero asked why Tom could give so much good relationship advice. The response was a mere six sentences which told of a tragic ending to a high school romance. But I knew more details and the impact it had on Tom. Tom became so real because of that paragraph and the poignant story behind it, that I had to write a story about him (*Within the Law*) and, in the romance genre I write, I had to give him a happy ever after ending as well.

When the character is more than just a name on paper and has a history, likes and dislikes, they can begin to live. That's when the story becomes real.

Activity: Write three blurbs about your life: A 10-15 word tagline; a 50-75 word blurb; and a two paragraph blurb.

Activity: Sit in a public place and write-down a few "snippets" of random conversation you hear around you (make the sources different). Link them together in a very short story (no more than a few paragraphs).



Day 2 Getting the First Byline

So you've made up your mind to write for publication. Before you romanticize your newest career choice and imagine yourself rolling in royalties, let's have a reality check.

#1- Most editors, even those who are looking for a bargain, want someone with published credits to his name. #2- And even more dismaying, many publications tell you up front that byline credit and/or a free publication copy is considered payment. While #2 doesn't help pay the rent, it does help you build those credits to satisfy #1.

If you have never been published before, here are a few things you can do to start building your publishing credits:

Check out your local publications, particularly the ones dealing with your specific community; do they have columns about community clubs, personal achievements, local schools, history and folklore? See if you can suggest a new and exciting feature or even regular column. Remember, you should be familiar with the writing style and the types of articles they regularly feature. Use the masthead to learn the managing editor's name – if you have to call the main office number and ask. Be sure you have the right spelling. Either snail mail or email (if the email address is provided, note that some publications state they don't want emailed inquiries) the editor with a professional looking query.

Remember, you are trying to sell yourself as a writer and the query letter is your first writing sample the editor will see.

Blogging is a wonderful opportunity thanks to current technology. Find a suitable site for the type of writing you want to do (many sites are free), blog regularly, keep it themed and keep it professional. Familiarize yourself with popular blogs at that site to see what gets the most response and how to get your blog and your name recognized. Include the link to your blog(s) in

your custom signature at the end of emails or forum submissions to help advertise it. By all means, use that blog in your list of writing credits, it is an easy way for an editor to see what you are capable of.

Read the classifieds regularly. It is rare to see an advertisement for a freelance writer, however be sure to read through all of the writing and editing listings. If you see an ad for an editor who "works with freelance writers" then bingo, you have just found a local freelance market. Browse through the publication if possible, again familiarize yourself with the market, and draft a query letter to the editor (by name). Don't get discouraged if you get a negative response or even no response at all, sometimes your info will be kept in someone's rolodex and called up as the need arises. Do not, under any circumstances, respond negatively to a decision – you will not only burn yourself with that publication but in the small world of publishing, you are liable to ruin your chances in a much larger market.

When you send your query letters, pay attention to spelling (ESPECIALLY the name of the person you are addressing) and punctuation. Often magazines and newspapers will include detailed instructions how to make queries, who to address, and how to submit. Follow the directions exactly or your query will only wind up in a wastebasket. Make your story/idea pitch in the opening paragraph, if your letter doesn't grab the editor, he won't read far enough into it to give your idea any consideration. Tell the editor why you are suited to write that article – do you have relevant experience, a chance to interview an interesting personality, are you good at research, etc.? Don't make any great boastful claims, no editor wants to be told that you are the "best writer since"; if that is the truth, let them discover it for themselves.

However there does come a time when the non-paying and low-paying gigs are no longer the path of choice for you unless you have a personal passion about a particular project. The first time you are asked for your rates, be realistic, but do not underestimate yourself. Again, being familiar with the market will help when you quote your fee. If the specific periodical doesn't post their rates, search "freelance pay rates" online and you will come up with several handy guides. Depending on your LOCAL market, the publication you are querying, and the type of project you are contracting for, advertorial rates can vary between 40-cents and 2-dollars per word; reviews can be as low as 10-cents a word; and magazine features can start at 14-cents per word. (*recent Writer's Market quotes)

Activity: You are about to attend your 25-year high school reunion and you haven't been in touch with most of these people since you graduated. Prepare a few sentences to let them know all the things you have done with your life and who you are today.

Activity: Imagine that your television/DVR remote control worked on people. Pick any three people in your life. Describe what you would see if you were to use the channel change, fast forward, mute, and slow-mode on each.



Day 3
Abandon Your Excuses

As a writer it actually pains me to hear the excuses many people make instead of following their dream to write. So many of the "reasons" people use to explain why they are not doing the very thing they say they really, really want to are decoys. People use excuses because of fear, because of false expectations, or because it just isn't that important to them.

If you really want to "be a writer", then write.

Making Time

"I don't have the time to write." That statement is a common one and often follows the declaration "I have the greatest idea for a novel, one of these days..."

Make one of these days NOW and write that book. No one expects you to finish writing all those magical words in one sitting, or even two. If you really want to write, there is time to write. Most published authors and writers have first or second jobs, families, schooling and other responsibilities. Few people can devote an eight hour work day to writing that great novel.

Part of the writing process is simply thinking – and we can think of scenes, characters and plot twists while we are doing housework, sitting in a traffic jam, riding the subway and even while we are in the shower. Keep a pad of paper in your briefcase, purse, in the kitchen. In your desk drawer, or next to your favorite TV chair to scribble notes whenever an idea occurs to you. Many writers keep a pad and pencil on the nightstand to record bits and pieces of dreams before they vanish away in foggy memories.

Keep a file folder or a large envelope near your desktop or other workstation and store these snippets. These snippets will help you organize your thoughts and begin writing your story. You can find 15-minutes, or more, to write full sentences on a legal pad or type words on a keyboard. Just fifteen minutes, the time it takes to drink your morning coffee, the time it takes to let your hair dry after a shower and you will find your story growing.

What If No One Likes It?

It is possible, even likely, that you will find editors and readers who do not like your work; that doesn't mean that it is not good. Try again with another editor or a different audience.

When you walk into your local bookstore, are you apt to want to read every book that is on the shelves? Some of the topics won't appeal to you, sometime you just don't like the writing. It's the same with your writing, not everyone is going to be enamored. Send your queries out to different markets. And while you are waiting, keep writing.

Many successful authors "papered" their office walls with rejections slips before connecting with the one right person.

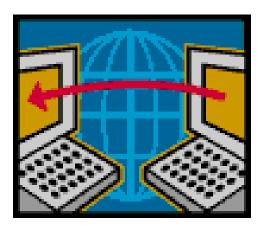
I Don't Know How to Go About Publishing a Book

Most of us didn't, some still don't. First you have to write the book and then you have to find a publisher. Speak to other writers, read magazines or books that appeal to the market you wrote for. Take names off of magazine flags (staff listings), look up publishing names you see on book spines. Join writers' forums and ask questions.

Most reputable publishers will take the time to explain the process. Understand that there are several different publishing methods. You can publish (if you are lucky to make the right connections) through a large house, small traditional press with small runs, small press with print-on-demand, e-publishing, and self publishing. Study the terms and again, speak to other authors. Lastly, don't sign anything until you are sure you understand what it means.

Activity: Write an instruction guide for a common, everyday chore (housework, driving, dressing, making a phone call, etc.). Avoid making a simple list and using mere phrases. Write this instructional guide in the form of paragraphs and complete sentences. Make it detailed so that even if someone has never used a telephone they will know how to make a telephone call, etc.

Activity: Using the seven numbers of your telephone number, in any order, write a very brief story about people sitting around a dinner table (how many people, how many dinner rolls, etc).



Day 4 Social Networking

You can use Social Network sites to help establish your presence on the internet and make your name known. Creating a profile on popular sites such as Face Book, MySpace, Twitter can give you a forum for introducing yourself to potential readers, publicizing your works, and mingling with others in the field to share tips, celebrate accomplishments and commiserate.

A few important tips to remember while you are mingling in cyber-land:

- 1) Don't be a user. It is certainly okay to do some bragging and promote yourself. Be sure to return the favor by congratulating others on their deeds, commenting on their blogs, and generally being friendly.
- 2) Yes, you want the world to meet you but you are representing a PROFESSIONAL. Keep the intimate details of your life off of your profiles (If you absolutely must have an outlet to talk about your marital woes, engage in online affairs, etc, do so where permitted in a different profile and under another name!) Remember to present the face that you want your readers to see.
- 3) Be careful when discussing controversial topics. You know the things your parents told you when growing up don't discuss money, religion or politics. Unless you are building a reputation as a political satirist, financial consultant or religious leader be very careful what you say. These are areas where you can (unintentionally) create a maelstrom that you can't escape and you may turn off potential readers.

- 4) Do NOT whine about any negative experiences you had while writing your book, finding a publisher or marketing your work. Facts are facts and that is okay, but if you whine about the tediousness of a project or disappointments people will wonder why you are doing something you so obviously dislike.
- 5) NEVER insult your fans/readers, no matter what. Those are the people your livelihood depends on. People will want to reach out to you yes, you become a celebrity when your name is in print you don't have to be reckless, but you should be nice, thank them for their compliments and comments and don't belittle them.
- 6) Be careful when disseminating personal contact information Most social network sites will allow you to receive private messages, similar to email, through the automatic filter of the site. If you choose to publicize a more direct email, consider establishing one just for your writing persona. And NEVER post your home address use a post office box (preferably in a nearby town and not your own) if you need to give a snail mail address.
- 7) Most of all be a real person. People will want to know YOU. Keep "friendships" two-way, be nice, treat people with respect, and remain humble.

Activity: Imagine that you are meeting, for the first time, with a friend who you haven't seen for at least 10 years - write approximately 3 paragraphs telling us about your conversation. Do a little bragging about your own accomplishments.

Activity: Finish these sentences:

- 1) My greatest flaw...
- 2) No one...
- 3) My worst fear is...
- 4) I was arrested because...
- 5) My worst day began with...



Novels of Passion and Suspense by Chelle Cordero



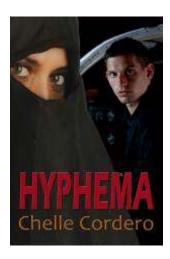
Karma Visited

Do you believe in karma? Annie Furman has a gift that allows her, while she sleeps, to visit people in their time of need - but who will be there for her when she needs help? Undersheriff Dave Turner is investigating a series of home invasions and homicides. He has no idea that solving this case will lead him to the woman of his dreams.



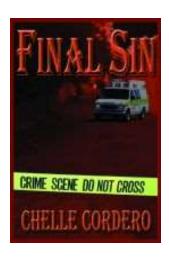
The Many Faces of Chelle Cordero

The Many Faces of Chelle Cordero is a single author collection of short stories featuring Introduction, Pussycat Tails, Holiday Happiness, Not Alone, I Swear That Raccoon Just Knocked on the Door, Stormy Weather, A Mother's Love, More Than a Friend, The Meeting, The Vacation and a special bonus section.



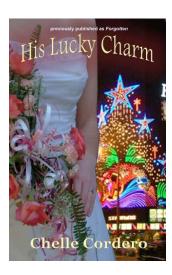
Hyphema

Hyphema: Bleeding in the eye caused by trauma... Matt Garratti, a paramedic from New York, moves his wife and son to North Carolina to work at his dream job as a flight medic. Pakistani born Sudah, his wife, receives frosty stares and insensitive comments from their new neighbors... Matt wonders if he is pursuing his dream or bringing his family into a nightmare from which they may never wake.



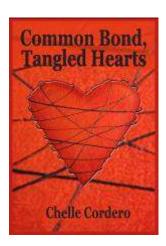
Final Sin

Deputy Sherriff Commander Jake Carson has his hands full... investigation of a brutal multiple homicide, a troubled son and a vindictive ex-wife. He meets young, free-spirited paramedic Julie Jennings. When Julie becomes the subject of an obsession, it puts both of them in danger...



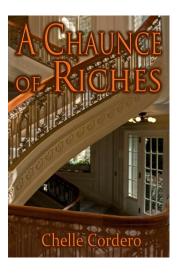
His Lucky Charm

What happens in Vegas doesn't always stay in Vegas... this time it follows Brandon and Caitlyn across the country and into a world of espionage and danger. The one thing that Brandon knows for sure is that he can't afford to lose his lucky charm, Caitlyn.



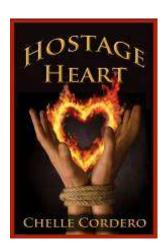
Common Bond, Tangled Hearts

Layne Gillette's world is turned upside down when a man she has never met shows up to lay claim as the father of her 6-year old son. When Layne's abusive "ex-husband" shows up, they are torn apart by danger, kidnapping and lies.



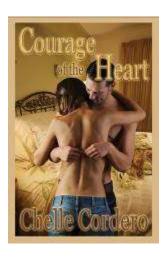
A Chaunce of Riches

Ben Johnson was hired as a bodyguard for a rich widow and her kid, but he never expected to be working for the woman who had abandoned him just when he had needed her the most. Damn it all, he still wanted her. Samantha Chaunce never thought she would have to explain why she married the rich man instead of Ben. Or that her husband had been murdered...and Ben was the prime suspect.



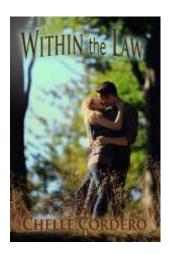
Hostage Heart

Life was hard after the hurricanes swept through, destroying her parents' home and livelihood... An errand for her boss - a chance encounter with a crew of bank robbers - a kind man who tried to help her ... a man who isn't all he seems...no, he is so much more.



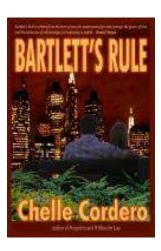
Courage of the Heart

Courage of the Heart shows us that sometimes love is the only cure for the very deepest of emotional wounds. The story of the two lovers takes a series of unexpected and fast paced turns where lives, sanity and love are put in jeopardy. Their commitment to one another results in a spirit that binds them together and helps them to overcome physical and emotional dangers.



Within the Law

Tom gave up on ever falling in love again the day that he buried his high school sweetheart and fiancé. He started a career in law enforcement just so that he could find her murderer and rapist. Just when he is about to see justice done, he meets Alli Davis-the defense attorney for the murdering rapist who took his love from him.



Bartlett's Rule

Bartlett's Rule shares the story of Lon and Paige's love affair; a romance filled with hardship, emotion, danger and triumph. Falling in love was never the challenge; being there for each other, knowing just what to say and making it work is the real test. Paige and Lon are real; they are human, they cry and they laugh. Paige has to learn to trust. Lon has to learn to be patient.

Photo by Mark Engelman



Chelle Cordero

Chelle Cordero writes stories of Passion and Suspense. Vanilla Heart Publishing has published nine Cordero novels: Bartlett's Rule; His Lucky Charm; Within the Law; Courage of the Heart; Final Sin; Hostage Heart; A Chaunce of Riches; Common Bond, Tangled Hearts; and Hyphema. She is currently working on her tenth novel and promises another action packed adventure and heartwarming love story. Chelle has been writing both fiction and non-fiction for the bulk of her adult life and has been with Vanilla Heart Publishing since early 2008.

Her books have earned many plaudits which includes: Bartlett's Rule was named one of Carolyn Howard-Johnson's Top Ten Reads for 2009; Final Sin was an Honorable Mention in the Fiction Category of the 2010 NY Book Festival and a 2009 Pushcart Prize nominee.; Hyphema won the Dec 9, 2011 Friday Book Cover Vote on the Shades of Love website; A Chaunce of Riches was Winner of D. Renee Bagby's readers' choice for The Best Overall First Chapter, April 2010; and Hostage Heart, Final Sin and A Chaunce of Riches had top ten finishes in the 2009 Preditors' and Readers' poll. Chelle was also featured in "50 Great Writers You Should Be Reading" published by The Author's Show in 2010.

Chelle Cordero maintains an author's blog at http://chellecordero.blogspot.com/, a promotional blog at http://ccepotourri.wordpress.com/, and offers a weekly writing workshop for Kindle Blog subscribers at http://bit.ly/pILcG. Her website http://chelleCordero.com offers information on all of her books and her appearances. Bloggers and the media are welcome to

visit Chelle's media room at http://chellecordero.com/media/ with downloadable photos and other information.

Be sure to LIKE Chelle's FaceBook page at https://www.facebook.com/AuthorChelleCordero and follow her on Twitter at https://twitter.com/ChelleCordero. You can email Chelle at ChelleCordero(at)gmail.com.

Chelle lives in the northeast with her husband, Mark, and family. They have two adult offspring. Jenni (& Jason) and Marc (& Trish); they also live with three mischievous and spoiled pussycats, one of whom has taken up permanent residence on Chelle's desk. Chelle is a full-time freelance journalist for multiple publications; her articles appear regularly throughout North America and she writes a monthly column on NYS Emergency Medical Services issues as a NYS Emergency Medical Technician (First Responder News).