



Cold Comfort

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Chapter One

Kit Redstone's hand cramped against the doorknob.

He can't be real.

She felt her eyes water, then burn, as she glared at the apparition. The man was a phantom—a six-foot-four phantom, with light-brown hair, sparkling blue eyes and a sexy grin that had haunted her dreams for years.

He'd swept in on a bitter, late-December breeze—looking hotter than he had the last time she'd seen him...

Shawn.

The man she'd years ago assumed had died. The man who would wish he was dead if he came back into her life with his lies, excuses and foolishness. She drew closer, reaching out to touch him, before pulling her hand away.

"Is it really you?"

He nodded. "It's me, Kit. I'm alive. I've come back to you."

He still looked and sounded the same. And though the crisp winter air and his thick down jacket should have made it impossible, his scent—so sexy and familiar—overwhelmed her.

Lord. I've finally gone and snapped...

"Fuck off!" Kit slammed the door against her not-dead husband's steady hand and tried to latch the chain. "Stay away from me!"

But she was too late. She felt the force of his body shake the door's frame, causing her to flail and fall backward. Stunned, she righted herself and stood, staring in puzzlement at the man she'd thought she buried four years earlier.

"Kit, I—"

"You can't be real!" Her dark brown eyes shimmered as she inspected the man from head-to-toe, taking in every aspect of him, every inch. He looked the same, still as fine as ever. She hated the pitiful gasp in her voice as she railed at him. "You're dead. I buried you!"

He stepped forward, holding up his hands against whatever attack she would throw at him. "I know what this looks like, honey, but you need to let me explain..."

"Explain, what? That you allowed me and your children to think you were dead? That you fooled me again, Shawn?"

"I had to...pretend to be dead. Everything I've done the last few years has been to protect you."

How many times had she heard that particular brand of bullshit before?

She shook her head violently, causing her bangs to fall into her eyes. She'd grieved so hard, for so long, but had finally learned to make peace with her husband's death. She'd also made peace with all her memories — both good and bad.

Why am I shocked? she wondered.

Leave it to Shawn to show up on my doorstep on the night I'm supposed to go out on my first date in years. Leave it to him to come back during the holidays, the first week of my vacation, no less.

"You piece of shit!"

She stalked forward and shook a fist at him. She knew he hated it when she belittled him, hated it when she spoke to him like he was a child. But isn't that what Shawn was? Had always been? And he hadn't changed, the jerk. No, he was still up to the same old games. The same old, tired bullshit. Well, this time, she didn't care about his excuses. She didn't care about his motives. She didn't care about his rationalizations. She just didn't care.

"Just leave. Go back to where you came from. Go back to the life you've been living the last four years, Shawn, and don't ever think about coming back. I'm fine. So are our kids. We've been more than fine without you!"

"I don't believe that Kit. You don't either."

Her bitter, keening laughter echoed around the living room. "I believe you left your children, Shawn. And that's all I need to believe!" She glanced to her right—looking at the silver-tinseled, red-satin-bulbed Christmas tree her cousin Paul helped her unload. It was an eight-foot tall monster, something she would have allowed her husband to handle years ago. But no longer.

Shawn Redstone had been a very bad boy; there were no gifts under the tree for him that year. There had been no gifts for him the previous year, either. Or the year before that...

He sighed, moved forward and unzipped the front of his black, down jacket. "There are reasons for everything I did, Kit! Good reasons. Why won't you let me explain everything to you?"

Because when you died, I thought I would die, too, her inner voice screamed. Because loving you has cost too much, and I'm not prepared to go down that road anymore...

"I don't want you to explain, Shawn."

"You're not gonna stand there and tell me that you're not glad to see me," he rasped. "That you're not glad that I'm alive!"

She shook her head and tried to fight the panic swimming through her stomach, tried to fight the great waves of pain that his presence had brought. "Just leave, okay? Isn't that what you're good at? If you go now, no one will ever have to know."

She turned her back on him, swinging her dark-brown ponytail as she marched up the stairs toward her bedroom. Kit planned to call the police, report a break-in and perhaps get her unwelcome houseguest locked up for the rest of the evening.

But she never made it to the telephone.

She felt Shawn's long, broad arms encircle her waist from behind. Even after all the years that had passed, even in the midst of her anger, she instinctively melted into him, the way she'd been doing since she was sixteen years old. She'd loved this man for fifteen years and brushed off the taunts and objections of family members and friends to be with him. She'd learned to accept his gambling habit, his addiction to danger—even the fact that he could never hold down a nine to five job.

But she'd never accept this. Whatever excuse he had for faking his own death and destroying their family would never be enough. Kit wanted him gone. She wanted him to return to the grave.

She'd struggled for so long to get on track after he left. But she'd finally managed to make things work—and make ends meet. Since her husband's "death," she'd gotten her real estate license and become more confident—making her own hours and her own way through life. If she allowed him to come back, she feared going back to days of disorganization, scraping by, bitter arguments over bills, finances and responsibility. Kit feared the chaos Shawn would bring into her life.

But his hands felt so wonderful against her skin...

"Doesn't this feel good?" he whispered. "I've missed you so much. I've missed our kids, our life so much, Kit."

God help me, I missed you, too, she wanted to say. Or at least the idealistic, younger, more naïve part of her wanted to be able to say these things. But a thirty-one year old mother with a car payment and a mortgage couldn't afford to act the fool. Still, she allowed herself to melt into him, if only for a minute.

"Shawn, you have to get out of here. Now. I have a date and he —"

He gripped her shoulders, spinning her around, forcing her to face him. His reddening face glowed fearsomely under the dim hallway light. "Get rid of him, Kit. Whoever it is, just ... just call him up and tell him to stay home."

"Like hell!"

"Look, baby, I forgive you. It's been four years since I left. If you needed a little company —"

"You've got some damn nerve." She was happy that she'd decided to wear her strappy, four-inch stilettos on her date with Bobby. Had she been barefoot, or in flats, her five-foot-seven inch frame would make her feel too small to deal with her six-foot-four inch husband, an ex-basketball player. "You forgive me, Shawn? Now, that's a grand goddamn gesture if I've ever heard one!"

Too late, she saw the shift in his eyes. They narrowed into angry, blue slits—the way they always did right before they had a massive blowout. Or before incredible lovemaking.

When he pulled her wrists into his hands, pulling her closer, forcing her to feel his heartbeat, she made no motion to escape. She couldn't. No matter what, damn it, she was still powerless in the face of this man. Already, her anger was giving way to something familiar, to something haunting. She flashed upon memories of his lean, well-toned body against hers, singeing her flesh. Of how it felt to be in his arms. Of how wonderful it felt to see his smiling face every morning.

Kit more than expected the kiss; she welcomed it. Since her husband's "death," she'd often dreamt of feeling his hands on her body again, fantasized about the pleasures he so naturally gave her. Now, despite all the anguish of the last four years, she had an opportunity to make her fantasies come true. Her hatred for him would not be a factor.

"I love you, Kit."

She said nothing.

Still, she accepted his kiss. When his sweet, full lips made contact with hers, she threw herself into it, full force. Their tongues mingled and danced so easily together, an instinctive tango of pleasure that reminded her of passion from years past. Whimpering, she pulled her hands

free, shoving them into his mass of light-brown curls, clinging to him as if both their lives depended on it.

Tasting him this way, being so close to him after all those painful years, forced angry, confused tears to her eyes. Kit felt her body begin to tremble, and without warning, her knees buckled. Shawn immediately drew her up into his arms and moved down the hallway. When he kicked open the bedroom door, she felt her heartbeat quicken.

Not a word passed between them.

Instead of gently depositing her onto the bed, Shawn thrust her down with a force that took away her breath. He stared at her. She stared back. He clenched his fists. She bared her teeth. They were childhood sweethearts, husband and wife, but on this night, they glared at each other like warring strangers.

Finally, they moved together. Kit hiked up her short, black skirt. Shawn unfastened his belt buckle. Still glaring, she dug trembling fingers into her panties, moving the gauzy pink material down her shapely legs. She didn't remove her black stockings, or the garters that secured them. He watched for a moment, inhaling deeply, before finally pulling down his jeans. His briefs followed. His penis, thick and veiny, shot up and nuzzled near his abdomen. The head throbbed, shiny with pre-ejaculate.

Kit felt her legs begin to shake. She became dizzy. Her vision blurred. It was almost as if she were afraid to really see him.

Shawn crawled over her, crouching like a jungle cat ready to pounce. "I've missed this," he said. Hope shined in his eyes.

She still could not bring herself to speak. Instead, she grabbed the collar of his tee shirt, pulling him against her. Gasping, she greedily accepted his kiss. Its intensity felt raw, animal-like, almost as if he meant to consume her.

So weak.

That's who she had always been with him. Over the years, they'd settled damn near every argument and miscommunication this way. With hot, hard fucking.

Their kisses were anything but sweet; gnawing, biting and whispered curses did away with any softness their meeting could have inspired. When Kit pulled away, Shawn held her down, growling at her, forcing her to accept his touch.

She slapped out at him. He caught her hand. With her other hand, she gripped his hair. He returned the favor, pulling the band that held her ponytail and throwing it to the floor.

Finally, they collided, and it was a relief for both of them. Kit pushed her legs up as far as they would go, tying them around his shoulders, locking them there. Her vagina dripped with anticipation. Her heart thudded with realization. Her soul cried for release.

Shawn fisted his cock, angling it into her, sealing her up, closing all barriers between them.

Kit screamed. It was a guttural, nasty sound—a testament to her love, fear and suffering. Immediately, they synched up, grinding hard, fucking in deep, tight bursts.

His hands were everywhere—in her hair, on her face, massaging her breasts. She closed her eyes, because it hurt too much to look at him. It hurt too much to look into his warm, blue eyes and see the boy she'd loved for so long and so hard.

She still loved that boy. But she would never accept the man he had become.

Already, she felt it. That buildup of tension—the climax of pleasure that would leave her breathless. It never took long. He had always known how to touch her...

Kit's orgasm struck her like a punch, incapacitating her, making her feel groggy. She lost all sense of space and time, and in that moment, all she could do was look into the eyes of her children's father and cry.

Shawn moaned deeply, battering his cock into her, forcing another breathtaking orgasm to rip from her body. The tears rolled freely down her cheeks, now. She twisted her face on its side, burying her cheek in the black comforter. But her prodigal husband would not be cheated. He slid his hands into her hair, forcing her face to him. By the time he touched his lips to hers, groaning her name during his own climax, Kit's cries echoed around the bedroom.

Mindless.

They were like animals, merging and coupling thoughtlessly.

Clothing ripped. Tears fell. Blood flowed from Shawn's cheek after Kit gashed it open with an errant fingernail.

Mindless fucking seemed in keeping with the events that had brought them to this place in their life together. Thinking would certainly have stopped the harried couple in their tracks.

Without either understanding how it happened, Kit lay prone on her stomach, her skirt torn open and split, hiked up on her rounded buttocks. Shawn's dick, still wet from their first round of hurried thrusts, sought out the hot recesses of her grasping cunt. Burying himself inside, balls-deep, he pounded into her clutching vagina until she trembled and gasped and

begged for mercy.

Again, he allowed himself relief only after his wife had found her own pleasure, anchoring himself onto her quaking back, pressing his face into her mass of wavy, dark hair. Finally spent, his own tears gathered against the nape of her neck and he settled there, taking comfort in the evenness of her breath.

Chapter Two

They marched to opposite sides of the bedroom. Kit fiddled with her panties, but left her ripped skirt on the floor. Shawn pulled up his underwear and jeans.

He watched as she sat on the edge of the bed. Her shoulders wilted; she seemed exhausted. He wanted to touch his wife; he wanted to console her. But years of experience told him this was not the appropriate time. Instead, he would plead with her. He'd talk to her until he could break down the wall she'd built to keep him out.

He would tell her the truth—most of it, anyway—and accept the consequences.

"It was that last deal that I made with the Constantine brothers, Kit." If she had turned around, she would have seen him cast his eyes to his feet. "I was moving up in the world—or so I thought. I wasn't going to just be some driver or deliveryman anymore. I would be in on the action. I was in line to make some serious cash."

When she still did not speak, Shawn moved closer. Now, he stared at her pretty profile. Her light, copper-hued skin called to him. He wanted to caress her cheek, run kisses across her nose and drink in her soft, sweet mouth. All the things he'd dreamt of doing while he was in hiding.

But he knew Katherine Greene Redstone too well. Despite what they had just done, despite the awesome and perfect lovemaking that had, once again, brought them together, he understood that he might never get a chance to touch her again if he didn't come clean... And make

amends.

"Well, you know what happened, next dontcha, Kit? The youngest Constantine, Vito, went missing. So did the money – damn near a million bucks – he was holding." His voice dropped to a whisper. "They found Vito in the East River, but they never found the money. Because I was supposed to meet Vito that night, they assumed I killed him and stole the cash."

When Kit finally spoke, her question seemed engineered to insult. "Did you, Shawn?"

"You know I didn't." He wouldn't take the bait. He wouldn't allow her to lead him into one of their screaming matches. "I'm many things, but I'm no thief. You know I'm not a murderer."

She shrugged. "I don't know what I know about you. I never thought you'd leave me and the kids, so –"

"I did what I had to do!" he thundered, going to her, pulling his wife to her feet. "I had to make it look like I was dead. Otherwise, I would've been dead for real, Kit!"

"Well, you almost got me killed, you son of a bitch!" she yelped. Disentangling her arm, she stepped back. "The day of your funeral, instead of getting to grieve like a normal widow, do you know what I was doing, Shawn?"

He shook his head weakly.

"I was forced into a limo. Big Lou Constantine wanted to speak to me. He wanted to make sure that I didn't have his money!"

"I'm sorry, baby. I –"

"I thought our children would be orphaned that day, Shawn." Her voice dropped to a sad whisper. "I thought that he'd kill me, too."

"Kit, I –"

"Stop apologizing to me, all right? If you would have had some damn ambition, instead of always trying to do things the fast and easy way, none of this would've happened."

She's so right, he thought. But just because she was right about him being lazy and unwilling to get his act together, didn't mean she was right about them. This wasn't the end for them. It couldn't be. If anything, it was just the beginning. But, he couldn't let her know about the money. Not yet.

She glared at him, looking like a new woman. She'd put on a few pounds over the years, but her curves were still as seductive as they'd ever been. Her hair hung to her shoulders, a sleek

and polished mahogany hue.

Shawn swept his eyes over their bedroom and saw that other than a few touches—a rich, crimson vanity table and a subtle, red eel-skin easy chair in the corner—little had changed. The bureau he'd built, as well as the bookshelf he'd hung over the bed, were still there. The smoky, gray carpet they'd lain together still felt plush and new.

Pictures of him and his family still lined her dressing table. Best of all, Kit's left hand still bore his mark. She'd never removed her wedding ring!

The pear-cut diamond weighed in at mere carat, with no attending stones to take away from its beautiful simplicity. Shawn grinned as he remembered all the stupid things he'd done to get that ring—stupid things he'd never told his wife about because she would never have accepted the ring.

No matter what she said, the fact that she still wore the symbol of their love spoke volumes, obliterating any chance she had of pushing him out of her life. He'd come back for her and their family, and he wouldn't take no for an answer!

"I know getting you to come around won't be easy. I know it'll take time, Kit. I know I have a lot to make up for." He reached out and touched her face. Relief flooded his system when she didn't jerk away. "I love you. If you don't believe anything else I say to you, if you don't believe anything else about me, believe that much. Believe that I love you and our kids above everything else in this world."

Her eyes shined like deadly, black onyx. She lifted her delicate face, flexing her jaw muscles in determination. "We don't need your love, anymore. We've gotten along just fine without it."

"You're a liar."

"You're a deadbeat husband and father." She shrugged, offering a shark-like grin. "Thanks for dropping by, honey. But next time, send a postcard."

She went to move past him, but Shawn barred her path.

"How can you be so cruel to me? After what just happened between us, today, after everything I told you—"

"All that happened between us?" she snapped. "Oh, you mean sex?" Kit's laughter socked him in the gut. "Sex was never our problem, Shawn. In fact, if all marriage was based on was good fucking, deep-dicking and salad tossing, we'd be the happiest mothafuckas in the world, wouldn't we?"

"Why do you twist everything around?" he demanded.

"Oh, cuz you play it so damn straight, right? You never twist words, intentions or motives, do you, Shawn?"

His head ached. They were doing their usual dance—going around in circles, avoiding the main issue. "Our love, our life together, is based on more than sex, and you know it. You can pretend you're not happy to see me all you want, but we both know it isn't true."

Again, he touched her, but this time, his hold was not so sweet. He yanked her against him, forcing her to feel the erection that strained against his jeans. "Yeah, we fuck great. Always have, always will, Kitten. But we also had a great life and home together—a great family. And I want that back, too. I want all of it!"

He saw her eyes soften, and thought he saw something in those expressive mirrors crack—give in.

But the doorbell rang, putting their drama on hold—unleashing a whole new one.

Shit.

Kit went to the bureau—a solid oak creation she'd watched Shawn piece together with his own hands—pulled out her favorite, dark-rinse blue jeans from a drawer and shimmied into them. Though she'd turned her back on him, she felt Shawn's eyes roaming across her body the whole time.

She pushed past him and moved toward the bedroom door. His voice, a low, threatening growl, caused her heart to turn over.

"Tell him to go away, Kit."

"Don't tell me what to do! You don't have any right—"

"You're still my wife," he muttered. "You're my kids' mother. I have every right." His eyes darkened into a moody, overcast blue. "Tell him to go away, or else, I will."

"What do you —"

"I mean it!"

In spite of her weak protests, a part of her, the part of her that still loved him with everything she had, wanted to listen to him. She wanted to back down and become a meek, accepting wife—the sort of woman whose husband's every word was final. But Kit hadn't been that way

during their courtship. She hadn't been that way during their marriage.

And she wasn't going to start that shit now, no matter how fine he looked, how well he'd fucked her, or how much she still loved him.

She left Shawn in the bedroom, determined to salvage her plans. Not only would she go out with Bobby, the hunky history teacher she'd started flirting with the previous week, she would have a damn good time.

She bounded down the stairs, two at a time, looking over her shoulder every step of the way.

Kit pulled open the door and beheld her smiling date. He brushed a quick kiss across her cheek and handed her a single, red rose. "You look great, Kit."

"Thanks," she said, feeling shy.

"Can I come in?"

Dread settled in her stomach, and her mouth dried before she could answer. Suddenly, she heard Shawn's voice in the background. He'd come out of the bedroom to size up the competition, she realized. And maybe to start a little trouble.

"Well? Can your friend come in?"

Bobby's smile morphed into a grimace. "Kit, who's that?"

Again, she had little chance to answer.

Shawn moved next to her and extended a hand to her date. "My name is Shawn Redstone. I'm Kit's husband."

She groaned. Bobby's eyes, so much like Shawn's, became cloudy. She studied his crestfallen face, recognizing the look. It was the same look she was sure she'd worn an hour ago when she last opened this door.

"I don't understand. You told me you were a widow."

"I thought I was, Bobby," she snapped. "What I didn't tell you is that my ex has a habit of getting into the kind of trouble that might make a man fake his own death."

Kit looked at Shawn, who grinned good-naturedly beside her.

This fool thinks this is funny.

She opened her mouth to speak, again, but for the third time, her husband interrupted her.

"Aren't you kinda young to be sniffing around a lady with kids?" Shawn stepped forward to get a better look. "What are you? Twenty-three?" Then, he turned to his wife and winked. "Looks less like a 'date' to me than...stud service."

She saw Bobby's fist rise, but it was almost as if she were trapped in some sort of weird, slow-motion dream. Her first instinct was to push Shawn out of the way, but before she could do that, he had taken an action of his own.

Kit's mouth fell open when she saw Shawn catch Bobby's fist, crunching it within his much larger hand. Bobby, who looked as shocked as Kit felt, swung out with his other arm, only to have it twisted behind him. A sputter, a thud and a groan later, Bobby slammed to his knees, with Shawn leering over him.

"Let him go!"

"Not until he says he's sorry," Shawn said, pouting with mock indignation. "If little Bobby tells me he's sorry, I might consider letting him go."

"Fuck you, man!" Bobby's pale skin reddened.

"Say you're sorry," Shawn demanded.

Kit stepped forward.

Shawn rolled his eyes in exasperation. After one hard – and totally unnecessary – squeeze, he let go. "Get the fuck outta here."

The other man – bested, humiliated and sore – stood up, yanking at the sleeves of his expensive leather jacket. "If anyone's leaving, it's you." He looked pointedly at her. "Right, Kit?"

She cast her eyes to the floor. "Maybe...maybe this isn't such a good idea, tonight, Bobby. My husband and I have a lot to discuss."

"You can't be serious!" he thundered. Bobby stepped back, opening some distance between his body and Shawn's capable hands. "You're not taking this jerk back! Are you?"

"Now, be careful, Bobby," Shawn teased.

"Shut up, Shawn!" Kit stepped into the space between the men and held up shaking hands. "Bobby, I need you to go home and cool off. I'll call you in a couple of days."

The thwarted suitor moved his mouth to speak, but Shawn leaned in and grinned at him. His eyes glittered coldly, icy blue chips of hate. "You heard the lady, didn't you? Get out!"

Bobby looked at her one last time, turned and was gone.

Before Kit had even closed the door, she heard Shawn's gleeful, boastful gloating.

"That kid had a lotta nerve. Thinking he was gonna walk in here and talk to my wife like that in front of me!"

She rolled her eyes. "You had no right to treat him that way."

"He tried to hit me! What the hell else was I supposed to do?"

She shrugged. "You enjoyed that way too much. You liked hurting him."

"You're damn right, I did!" He touched her shoulder. "You're still my wife. Did you expect me to allow that guy to disrespect me?" His eyes narrowed. "And just where the hell did you find him, anyway? He's a bit young for you, isn't he?"

"He's twenty-eight!" She walked to the couch and gestured at his parka. "It's time for you to leave."

"Why?" he demanded. "So you can call Bobby? Your younger, softer, more sensitive version of me?"

Oh my God.

If Shawn had not pointed out the obvious, she might never have noticed the resemblance. Bobby Watkins, though smaller in build, looked a lot like Shawn Redstone.

Mischievous blue eyes that changed color with his mood? Check.

Sandy-brown hair that waved or curled depending on the weather? Check.

Full, pouty lips many women would envy, lust after and desire to kiss? Check.

Kit nearly laughed at her own transparency. She'd waited four years to look at another man, had waited that long before accepting an offer for a date, and what was the first thing she did? Hooked up with a guy who looked like her husband!

"What I do isn't your business anymore," she said calmly.

"Everything you do is my business."

She smirked. Still jealous, huh, Shawn? Well, you should have thought of that before you left us, you deadbeat!

"I want to see my kids. Where are they?" His eyes glowed viciously, assuming a silver tint against their storm-blue backdrop. "They at your mom's? Your sister's?"

She felt her blood rising. "Isn't it bad enough that you ruined our life together? That you ruined my life? What the hell do you plan to do to our children?"

He shook his fists in the air. "I plan to love them, goddamnit, the way I always have!" He stalked forward—measured, angry steps. "I've made a lot of mistakes, okay? I get that. I understand that. But you're not going to stand here and call me a bad father, Kit. I won't accept that!"

Suddenly, everything became so clear.

Though she'd missed him deeply and had grieved for him until she thought her heart would burst, Kit understood that the life she'd managed to build in his absence would tumble down around her ears. If she took him back, once again, they would appear to all the world as a loving couple—the epitome of true friendship and passionate affection. But very few would see the screaming matches and the hurtful words that passed between them.

Forgiving Shawn Redstone would mean loving hard, but fighting harder.

And damn it, what she really wanted was some peace and quiet.

"I want a divorce." She hiccupped the words out, tasting the bitterness they left in her mouth.

He lunged forward and Kit cowered, uncertain of his intentions. She hadn't seen this man in four years. The Shawn she loved would never have hit her, but four years was a long time.

I don't know this man, anymore.

She waited for his eruption, waited for the cursing and the threats. Instead, he circled her for a moment, grabbed his coat and backed toward the door.

His voice, so raw and powerful with emotion, assailed her nerve endings.

"I'm going to get you back, Kit. We're going to be a family, again. Wait and see. You're not getting rid of me that easily."

Only seven blocks away from the Bushwick brownstone he once shared with his family, Shawn nursed his third beer with his wife's first cousin — his childhood friend, Paul Greene.

"I just can't get over you, man!" Paul leaned forward from his position on the tan sofa and swiped at his old high school buddy's leg. "You're not dead. You ain't dead."

"Well, I might as well be. Your cousin dumped all over me." He sulked a little before sucking down the last of his beer. "She didn't look too happy to see me."

"What did you expect? Kitty to go running to you with open arms? For her to throw you a damn parade?"

Shawn grinned at his old friend. Before going to see her that evening, he hadn't been sure of what her reaction would be, exactly. He guessed he'd expected some combination of shock, happiness, relief and confusion. Instead, he'd received hot sex and a request for a divorce.

"She still loves me, Paulie Boy. I know it." He winked at the other man. "We have to work a few things out, but she'll take me back."

He watched as his friend's eyes darkened. "What's wrong? Don't tell me you want a divorce, too."

Paul shrugged. "Man, you know I'm happy to see you. I'm so happy that I'm not even going to get mad at you. But you weren't there. These last few years... Kit was so hurt when you died...when we all thought you had died."

"I know, but —"

"But what? It doesn't matter why you did what you did. What matters is that you did it. The fact that you had to do something so...crazy is beyond me, Shawn. I'm not even your wife, and I'm a little pissed with you. Kit was a wreck. It took her weeks before she could even explain what happened to Dee and Jimmy."

The dark-skinned man with the velvety voice and neat cornrows stood to get fresh beers. "If you think showing up on my cousin's doorstep to sweep her off her feet is going to heal the last four years, you're wrong."

Shawn swallowed the lump in his throat and sat back in his chair. A sense of hopelessness began to seep through him, a malignant emptiness that sought to shatter everything he held dear.

"What am I supposed to do, huh? Both of you act like this was the easiest thing in the world for me. In four years, I've lived in six states, always running, always just one step ahead of my past. I always think about that day — the day I 'died' — and I always go back to the moment I

last saw Kit. I held her so tight and promised her so much. Ten hours later, I was a black and blue, bloodied mess. I lost three teeth during that beating—and the only reason I survived was because one of the punks who did it thought it would be funny to shoot out my gas tank while I was in my car.

“Drunken, coked-out bastard. The car blew up, taking him and his friend out with it. I was blown clear.”

“Damn. You were lucky.”

“Not so lucky. Just...desperate.” Shawn placed his head into his hands. Shame tainted each of his words as he explained his next actions. “One of the guys was about my height. He was burning, but not so bad to where I couldn’t touch him. I dragged him into the corner of the alley and...” Haltingly, he explained how he removed the dead man’s head, hands and feet, before throwing the body into the burning wreckage. To make it look good, he pulled two loosened teeth from his mouth and tossed them near the body. A third tooth, a bicuspid, was already burning in the car. He stowed the head, hands and feet in a garbage bag and dumped it into the river an hour later.

Afterward, he boarded a bus headed for Wyoming, bought a new identity, replaced his missing teeth and lived as inconspicuously as possible. Odd construction jobs and low-wage occupations sustained him.

“So, not only am I a louse, but I’m also a ghoul. Who else messes with the dead that way? Even bad guys like the ones who were trying to kill me?”

Paul handed his friend a fresh beer. “You said you were desperate. You did what you had to do.”

“Maybe so. But I should have gotten word to Kit, somehow, you know? I was too afraid. I knew they would have the house under surveillance. I knew they’d be watching every move she and the kids made.”

“You put my family in danger. I don’t know how to feel about that.” Paul shook his head. His dark-brown skin took on a grayish tint. “Do you know what could’ve happened to them?”

“I knew they’d be safer if I stayed away. I didn’t steal that money, Paul. I figured as long as Kit didn’t start buying new cars or any shit like that, she’d be fine.” Shawn’s belly clenched as he forced the words out of his mouth. Not only had he lied to Kit, but now, he was lying to his best friend.

“Then, I guess she was more than fine. She was broke! Kitty lost her job at the doctor’s office, because, well, she couldn’t function. She started calling in sick, and eventually, stopped going in at all.”

Shawn slammed a fist against the coffee table. "I didn't know that."

"Why the hell would you? You were off being Mr. Gangsta."

"That's not fair, Paul —"

The other man held up a large hand. "Don't talk to me about fair, all right? You didn't see what she went through." He chuckled bitterly, and suddenly, his unlined face looked tired. "Thank goodness she had the family. I think that was the only time in recent memory that all the Greenes got their act together. Kit needed us. Your kids needed us."

"I get it, man. I get it." His stomach bubbled and something rumbled to the surface, something putrid. The more he realized how his deception had hurt his wife, the sicker he became. "I fucked up."

"Yup. Bad. You fucked up so bad that I don't know if she'll forgive you." Paul paused before speaking again. "But I wouldn't mind if she did."

"So you still love me, huh?" Shawn joked. "Well, I'll sleep better tonight knowing that, at least."

"It ain't all like that," Paul sniffed. "But I'm used to you. You've been down with the family for fifteen years. I'm not sure I'd like the next bonehead Kitty brought home." He took a swig from his bottle and smacked his lips. "You know how I hate change."

Shawn twisted his mouth when he thought of the punk he'd caught trying to get at his wife that evening. "Has she been dating a lot since I...since I left?"

"Nope. Nothing and no one that I know about."

"Well, there was some clown sniffing around her, tonight," he grunted. "But he and I had a discussion. He didn't stay long."

Paul's laugh rumbled through the apartment. "A discussion, huh? I remember you having discussions with a few guys who tried to mess with my cousin." He whistled. "Those discussions always ended in hurt feelings, bruises and sometimes —"

"Broken limbs!" The men shouted at the same time.

Shawn shook his head at the memory. "What else was I supposed to do? Every time I turned around, he was sitting on your aunt's stoop, staring into Kit's face. I'd told him in every way I could think of that she was taken, that she was with me, but he wouldn't listen!"

"If I recall correctly, Kitty didn't belong to anyone. She was way too young to be messing with you when y'all met."

"I waited, though, didn't I?" His blue eyes shined mischievously. "She was so fine, there was just no way I could believe she was only fifteen. But after you told me how young she was—and threatened my life—I backed off. I waited."

"Waited? Please, man, you tried to kill every dude that even looked at her."

"Damn straight. She was mine." As pleasant as these memories were, Shawn felt overtaken by sadness. "We were meant to be together, then. We're meant to be together, now."

"If you say so," Paul said. "So, what's the plan?"

"What do you mean?"

"You want her back, right? And considering what you told me, she's being less than cooperative."

"Yeah." He smiled in spite of himself. Sure, she'd cursed him out. But they had also made love. He'd made some progress. "I only have one thing—no, two—on my side. My trump cards. They're aces."

"Sounds good. What's your scam?"

He cast his eyes to the floor, allowing the shame to wash over him. He knew he was about to fight dirty, but it seemed the only way to beat his wife at her own game. "Dee and Jimmy. They're gonna help me get their mommy back."

Before he left, Shawn wrote down his address and phone number. "I'm staying in a shitty efficiency on Jane Street. Make sure your cousin knows how to get in contact with me."

"No problem, man."

He hugged his still incredulous friend and walked the three blocks to the nearest subway station. As his steel-toed boots thumped through the slush and slime of an early snow, Shawn Redstone plotted his next move.

Only minutes after her husband's departure, Kit fled to the only place she ever felt truly safe. Just as the clock struck ten that evening, the shaken woman gratefully accepted the green tea her mother set before her. Dee and Jimmy slept upstairs, safely bundled away from the sounds of their mother's torment and anger.

"Why is this happening to me?" she groaned. She badly wanted to slam her hand upon the table for emphasis, but she feared Louise Greene's wrath. No one messed with her mother's pretty, glass table. No one.

"Girl, this sounds like something I saw on one of your Aunt Addie's soaps. This woman's husband has died and come back from the dead so many times—"

"Ma, I'm serious!"

The older woman fluttered her sharp, brown eyes. "So am I! His name's Tim. Or Tom. The man is evil as hell, though I suppose he's cute enough. But the bastard just won't stay dead..."

Kit threw up her hands. "Thanks a lot, Ma." She'd gone to her mother, the woman she considered her best friend in the whole world, expecting solace. So far, all she'd received was hot tea, smirks and a summary of a damned soap opera! "Can you be serious for a minute? This isn't funny. My husband is alive and—" She stopped, a blush creeping along her cheeks as she recalled just how alive her husband had seemed.

Why am I so easy? I should never have allowed that fool to touch me! her mind chastised.

Still, she couldn't forget the way it had felt when he touched her. Even now, sitting in her mother's kitchen, her pussy clenched and throbbed from the memory of his dick.

She watched her mother pick up one of her hideous checkered tablecloths—a weird combination of blue, red and maroon outlined the box stitches—and wipe at nonexistent dirt and food. Kit stifled a grin. Her OCD's kicking up again...

Finally, Louise spoke, offering—if her tightly lined mouth and narrowed eyes were any indication—sage advice. "I say you keep on keeping on. He wanted to be dead these last few years? Then, let his dumb ass stay dead. Greene women don't have time for that kind of foolishness. That's why I divorced your father."

She leaned back in her chair and worked her fingers through her auburn wig. Confident that the bobbed hairpiece covered her graying sideburns, she grinned. "Lord, but your father was fine—still is, with his old self. But after a few years, even that wore thin. I had bills to pay, children to raise and business to take care of.

"Your man may be white, Kit, but I'll be damned if you didn't go out and find yourself a fool just as bad as your daddy!"

Kit rolled her eyes. "I haven't talked to Daddy in a few weeks. Gotta call him." She placed her head into her opened palms. "Have you seen him?"

“For what? Please. Ever since he moved in with Nancy Belle—that damn fool—Ronnie Greene think his shit don’t stink! I ain’t got time for him. Even though he’s supposed to come over next week to eat and play cards.”

It always amazed her that her parents, who’d divorced nearly twenty years earlier, still kept in touch. She raised her head to see her mother stand, open the lower cabinet and pull out a bottle of bleach.

Now that Louise was in cleaning mode, Kit knew trying to talk to her would bring middling results, at best.

“Ma, you mind if I stay here, tonight?” She stood and walked toward the kitchen door. She already knew her mother’s answer. “I mean, the kids are already in bed and I don’t have to work tomorrow, so...”

“Of course, baby. Don’t mind me. I’m going to stay up a few hours and —”

“Show the Lord how much you love Him...by cleaning your kitchen,” Kit cracked.

Louise shook a bleach-moistened hand at her daughter. “You should try it sometime. Maybe your husband wouldn’t have come back from the dead. ‘Cause Lord knows that ain’t nothing but the devil’s work!”

Kit didn’t know what role God or the devil might have played in her husband’s sudden reemergence.

What she did know is that she’d have to tell Dee and Jimmy about it. And soon.

Chapter Three

Shawn awoke with a start, swung his legs out of bed and set his feet on the floor. He stared ahead at a drab, slate-gray wall of his cramped studio apartment and wished he had awakened in his own bed. He wished with all his heart and body that he’d turn to his right and see his wife’s pretty face.

He told himself he wouldn’t give up on her. When he left Kit, he thought he would be forced to stay away forever. But a series of fortunate events had made it possible for him to come back to her.

First, one-third of Big Lou’s captains went down in front of an illegal gaming house. Only

weeks after, Pete “The Dragon” Rafano—who had gone into hiding after Lou realized he was talking to the feds—finally agreed to turn state’s evidence against his former boss. When Shawn read about Lou’s arrest on a news website, he understood that his time had come. He could finally go home.

Going back, though, seemed almost worse than being away for so long. His wife hated him; his kids barely knew him.

He wished he could turn back time, wished he had never become involved with the Constantine brothers and various, hoodlum associates. The lure of easy money and power had blinded him to the repercussions of his actions. He thought he’d be able to have it all. Instead, he’d lost everything.

Had he been an upstanding man, he never would have lost so much time with his family. For years, he’d blamed his shattered knee, an injury that had never healed properly, for his money woes. Now, more than a decade later, Shawn Redstone finally understood the true reason for his failure: laziness. When a grown man with a wife and kids refuses to hold down any steady work for more than three months at a time, it screams of laziness. When this same man would rather drink, gamble and hustle in pool halls, he could be classified as a lazy asshole.

Laziness had sent him spiraling into an underground society where thousands of dollars could be had if one was willing to deliver a package. Rates climbed for men with a talent for breaking bones. And, for those who got in good with the leader of the pack, uncommon wealth could be achieved.

Shawn Redstone had used his strong hands and unflappable demeanor to rise through that underground world, but as with many of his brethren, he didn’t get the results he expected. All he got was dead.

He recalled how hopeless he felt after he’d stepped off the bus in Laramie, Wyoming. Though he had been certain his plan had worked, he felt like a hunted man, one on the brink of being pulled in by the cops—or worse.

The thick burnished-silver suitcase he carried felt like a lead weight, pulling him down as he walked into the center of town, looking for a cheap hotel room.

Seven hundred thousand dollars was a lot of money. But his heart—his lying, thieving, cowardly heart—had been much heavier.

“If you let that fool come back home, you’ll regret it, Kit. And I’m not going to feel sorry for you. Shawn’s always been bad news.” Cassie Prescott-Warner twisted her lips in disgust. “Though I totally get the attraction. Dude’s fine as hell and a little...dangerous. Guys like that

will hurt you every time.”

“Who said I was letting him come back?” Kit demanded.

Cassie rolled her light-brown eyes before reaching down to peer into the carriage at her left. Satisfied that six-month-old Judy was sleeping comfortably, she turned back to her friend. “You just got your shit together. You just started seeing a new man. I saw how messed up you were when you thought Shawn had died.”

“So?”

“So, him showing up like this is bound to open up something in you. Those wounds aren’t totally healed, girl, and we both know it.”

Kit sighed and picked at her cookie. She sat at a corner table in Sweet Mouthful, Cassie’s downtown patisserie, and savored the combined smells of gourmet coffee, upscale wedding cakes and holiday-themed pies. As good as everything smelled, though, she could barely bring herself to eat. “How’s Nathan?” she asked wanting to turn the topic away from her own woes.

“Mad at me. As usual.”

“What’d you do this time?”

Cassie sighed. “He says I’m not home enough. Since I started the bakery —”

“Well, you did just have a baby, honey.”

“And she’s with me, right now. See?” She hooked a thumb at the baby carriage. “He dropped her off today to go bid on some sort of construction job.”

“That sounds good. Nathan’s always liked to work.” Kit sipped her hot, chamomile tea. “I don’t know why you always give that man a hard time. He’s hot to death, and loves you in a way that’s scary. Though sometimes, I have to wonder why!”

“Ha, ha.” Cassie scowled at her before lifting chocolate biscotti to her lips. “My career means a lot to me. He doesn’t understand that. He says I’m not doing enough of the wife and mother thing.”

“Well, are you? Is he right?”

She shrugged and her pretty face crumbled a bit. “I love him and Judy so much. But it’s like nothing I do is enough, you know? We’ve been married less than a year, and sometimes I think we’re already headed for divorce court.”

"Chile, join the club," Kit grunted. "I'm going to divorce Shawn's trifling ass so fast he won't know what hit him." She frowned when something occurred to her. "Can I divorce him? Do I even need to? I mean, he faked his death, right? So, maybe that somehow voids the marriage outright. Otherwise, I'd be married to a dead man."

Both women snickered.

Kit's outward laughter did nothing to dull the shock and pain she still felt inside.

"Girl, I have to get back into that kitchen. Roberto can mix the hell out of a cake, but his decorating abilities leave much to be desired." Cassie frowned.

"Who watches the baby when you're in the kitchen?"

"Oh, Jerome should be here in about ten minutes. He works out at the gym up the block. He and Judy usually run to the park across the street until I'm done." She looked at her watch. "I should only be about an hour or so."

Kit smiled at her girlfriend. She was so happy Cassie's dream had finally come true. She just hoped the new business owner would figure out a way to get her new marriage on track. Nathan and Cassie's relationship may have been a volatile one, but it was full of love.

Does that sound familiar? her inner voice quizzed.

She stood, moved around the table, and enveloped the other woman in her arms. "Keep your head up, baby girl. Your life's been pretty good lately. And if you learn how to multitask, preferably all over your gorgeous husband, you'll be all right."

"Um-hm," Cassie grunted. "Well, I hope you take your own advice, except for that last part about your husband. Leave that fool alone, girl. I got sick of watching you cry before. If you take him back, be ready to pull out your tissues."

"Yeah, yeah. I know."

"Where are you off to, anyway?"

Kit's smile was tight. "Actually, I'm going to see Shawn. We're going to pick up the kids' together today. We thought it would be best if we were both around to explain...you know."

"You mean explain why their daddy thinks he's some guy on a damn soap opera?" Cassie giggled so loudly that two of her customers glanced over. Smiling prettily at them, but showing no signs of embarrassment, she wagged her finger at her friend. "I'd love to be a fly on the wall for that conversation. Lord have mercy!"

It's like Cass and my mom are the same damn person!

Kit's face grew hot. "I'm glad someone thinks it's funny."

Cassie narrowed her eyes. "I don't think it's funny, at all. I think it's sad as hell. I just don't want you to suffer like you did before."

"Don't worry about me."

"Try and stop me, Kit."

The friends beamed at each other from across the table. Finally, Kit moved to the door.

"I'm gonna be calling you, soon!" Cassie yelled after her. "I'm gonna be calling for all that good scoop! I'm gonna wanna know all about the drama!"

Shawn was the first to see Darla—or Dee as she preferred to be called—step through the school doors. Though dozens of other students surrounded her, she stood out from the rest. It wasn't just her too-mature curves, or her long, sandy-brown hair, or the way her hazel-green eyes seemed to scan the world, missing nothing. It was her confidence that struck him, her seeming sense of independence—an independence few girls her age possessed. The proud father supposed most of that confidence came from being thirteen, beautiful and a high school freshman already taking advanced algebra classes.

Or, maybe, Shawn thought idly, she just takes after her mother. She certainly hadn't taken after his own scatterbrain of a mother, the woman after whom Darla was named.

Briefly, he wondered about Darla Redstone's whereabouts. She'd left her husband, John, and their three sons the very same year her namesake was born. Though her departure had hurt him deeply, Shawn didn't much blame her. Her husband had been an alcoholic wife-beater with a tendency to gamble away his paychecks before he ever made it home from work.

Bringing his mind back to the present, Shawn glanced at Kit. The two of them sat in her car in front of their daughter's school, speaking as little as possible.

Kit's nails rapped and tapped against the steering wheel, a sign of anxiety Shawn had grown used to during their early years together. Though he didn't show it as easily as his wife, he felt anxious too. A gnawing ache had settled into his stomach the moment they parked in front of the four-story stone and brick building.

He watched his daughter wave to her friends and approach her mother's car like it was any other day. But the moment she stopped in front of the passenger side door, her skin—a rich,

creamy caramel hue — burned crimson.

Her eyes first held a question. Then, an accusation.

Shawn opened the car door, stepped out and drew the girl into a hug.

He'd expected some type of resistance — a push, a turned head, angry words. But his daughter melted into his arms, sobbing loudly, placing her face into his broad chest.

They stood that way for a long time, neither caring about the crowd that suddenly enveloped them. Shawn and his daughter ignored the whispers and the pointing. For a while, they clung to each other, neither wanting to let go.

Finally, he pulled back. "Let's get in the car, honey."

"I can't believe you're alive," she sputtered. Dee searched his face. Fresh, raw tears rained upon her cheeks. "This feels like a dream."

Or a nightmare, the embarrassed father thought. How am I going to explain why I left the way I did?

"I'll explain everything to you, later, Dee. I promise. But first, we need to pick up your brother from your Aunt Nora's."

"Cool, Dad." She stared at him hard, almost as if she were trying to drink him in fully. Once she was satisfied, she climbed into the backseat.

He'd expected a lot of questions from his firstborn, had expected her to lob question after difficult question at him. But the teenager remained silent. The only clue he had that he interested her at all was when he scanned the passenger side window. His daughter's keen eyes, a perfect mixture of his and her mother's, stared back at him — contemplating, wondering.

Kit didn't speak either, until she stopped the car in front of her sister's home. She turned off the ignition and turned to him. "I've talked to Jimmy about what happened, but he still doesn't understand. Well, he does, but..." She trailed off. "I'll be back in a minute."

"All right, Kit."

He watched her every movement, from her first steps from the car, to her oh-so-jiggly walk when her three-inch heels circumvented a crack in the sidewalk. Though his wife wore a white, down jacket, he still traced every curve, every body part in his mind's eye. The years he'd been away had done nothing to diminish Kit's beauty. In fact, she looked better with age — healthier, more substantial, stronger. He craned his head to watch her lean into her

sister's doorbell. He blushed when he realized two things. He'd been holding his breath. And his daughter had caught him staring at her mother!

When Kit was out of earshot, Dee leaned forward and gripped his shirt collar. "Are you moving back home?"

"I honestly don't know, sweetie. Not anytime, soon, that's for sure."

She nodded. She knew her mother probably better than even he did, by now.

"But you want to come back to live with us?"

"I've dreamt about it forever," he rasped, turning in his seat to get a better look at her. "Gee, you're pretty."

She blushed. "That's what everyone says. Mom says I look like you and Uncle Kevin. I think I look more like Mommy and Aunt Nora."

He studied her face and laughed. "Some would say you got the best of both worlds. But the longer I look at you..." He traced his index finger across her nose and cheekbones. "In that area, at least, you're all Miss Kitty. I helped a little, I guess, but there's no way you would have been as pretty without your mom's good genes."

She smiled, and Shawn thought he would melt right there. But the good vibes didn't last long.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Nora Greene stalking toward him. Immediately, Shawn rolled down the window and smiled. "Hey, Nora. How are ya?"

"Not as good as you," she snapped. "I've never come back from the dead!"

He nodded, unsurprised. "Well, it's great seeing you, too."

"I knew you would hurt her," she hissed. His wife's attractive, but bitter, older sister bent closer to say something only he could hear. "She's gonna make you pay, too. Me? I would've gone easy on you."

Shawn glared at his sister-in-law, but said nothing. She'd been jealous of Kit probably all her life. She'd been bitter about Shawn and Kit's relationship for nearly two decades.

He grinned hard, relieved, when he saw his wife approach. She held the hand of James Paul Redstone—little Jimmy.

Dismissing Nora entirely, the curious father scoped out his pride and joy. "Hey, big man!" he called.

This kid is definitely his mother's son, Shawn thought. Dark, curly hair, big brown eyes and Kit's cheekbones and smile nearly knocked him over. Though he hadn't been the father he was supposed to be, and many might accuse him of being only a sperm donor, Shawn couldn't help but be proud of his good-looking children.

We did pretty good.

The boy looked up at him and smiled, but to Shawn, it seemed like the smile a polite six-year-old would offer to anyone inside his mother's car.

He doesn't even know who I am. He doesn't care. But what did I expect? I left right after he turned two.

Determined not to allow his disappointment to show, he grinned while Kit settled him into the backseat. Jimmy stuck his tongue out at his sister. Dee threw up her hand and instructed her little brother to talk to it. Kit climbed into the driver's side, stared into the rearview mirror, and demanded order.

"Please don't start acting brand new up in here, children. Mommy's had a rough enough day as it is."

An amused grin played across his lips as he watched his children straighten up and close their mouths.

By the time the family parked in front of their home, Shawn felt more determined than ever to get his old life back.

From her position at the dining room table, Kit ate and watched silently while Shawn tried to explain his disappearance to their children.

Dee, who'd always worshipped her father, nodded her head between bites of pepperoni pizza, seemingly mesmerized by Shawn's every word. Jimmy, on the other hand, played with cheese, talked to his older sister and barely acknowledged his father's presence.

By the time Shawn squeezed Dee in his arms and bent to shake Jimmy's hand, Kit was exhausted.

After the kids were tucked into their beds, she went back downstairs and joined her husband on the sofa. Neither felt the need to begin speaking immediately; each tried to digest their children's reactions.

Shawn broke the silence. "I guess having me back is going to take a long time to get used to."

"That's a bit of an understatement, isn't it, Shawn?"

He shook his head. "Don't start..."

"Fine," she whispered. "Then I'll finish. I'm going to contact an attorney tomorrow to talk about divorce proceedings. We'll also have to decide on a custody agreement." She hated the way her voice cracked. She had been unable to sound as confident as her words. "I'm thinking supervised visits, maybe three times a week."

Quick as a cat, Shawn pounced across the tan sofa, encircling her waist, pulling her close...

"If you think I'm going to accept supervised visitation with my own children, you're crazy."

"I guess I'm crazy then," she snarled. "You haven't seen them in four years. They don't know you! Have you ever considered the fact that they might not feel comfortable with you?"

She shivered. Her discomfort was showing.

"Did you see Dee's face? Did you see how she —"

"She's a child. I don't care what she thinks she wants, or what she thinks she can handle, Shawn. At least she knows you. Jimmy doesn't seem to care about you one way or the other."

"If you allow me to be a real father to them, I can make everything up to them, Kit! I can win them over!"

She couldn't breathe. He was too close. She could feel his warm breath on her cheek and hear the steady thrum of his heartbeat. This is why she had always backed down. This closeness, this heat had always made her act foolishly. The sound of his voice, the way he touched her, his smile—all of these had, once upon a time, led her down a path of no return. Kit pulled away. She'd stepped off that road to nowhere a long time ago. She promised herself she would never go back.

"I'm not angry, Shawn. Not like I was. It's just that my life is different now. I have a career and savings and —"

"You have everything but me." He snaked a hand into her hair, forcing her face forward. He made her look at him. "I've changed, too. I stopped drinking. I don't gamble anymore. I'm even looking to start my own business."

She pulled back. "That's great. I —"

"I want us to start over, Kitty."

He silenced her misgivings, claiming her mouth, pressing greedy, hungry kisses against her protesting lips.

She didn't think; she couldn't. She had never thought about much when it came to Shawn. Kit just acted, raking her fingers through his hair, pulling his mouth closer. She groaned into his mouth, relaxing, undulating, as his hands dropped to explore her inner thighs. He snaked her skirt around her hips, pressing the palm of one big hand into her mound, caressing her clit through her panties.

Arousal and shame combined into one heady emotion as she found herself responding to his touch. Tossing back her head, she thrust her hips forward, grinding her pussy against his hand. Hot, shallow bursts of breath escaped her, strangled her, when one of Shawn's thick digits sank beneath the satiny material of her panties...

Memories of their early years together overtook her. How often had they had sex on sofas, kitchen chairs, and tables? She recalled a time when she was about six months pregnant with Dee. They'd gone to the maternity department of a major department store. When Kit went into a stall to try on a large, billowy shirt, Shawn sneaked in and pulled her against him. He pressed her hands against the wall-length mirror, and within moments, had the bottom of her skirt in his hands. They'd fucked silently—hard and fast—a feverish coupling made more exciting by the spontaneity of it.

Upon their first heated embrace, fifteen years earlier, in the back of a car parked on a quiet Greenpoint street, something primal clicked within them—something perfect and lasting. They'd always fit together—at least sexually. But, the other activities of daily living had stumped them.

Their hormones got the better of them. That was the only explanation for what happened next. Why else would she allow him to push her back, pull apart her thighs and lick her until her insides vibrated?

Spasms...

Her body quaked. Kit trembled and shook.

She closed her eyes against the tender assault. Her skin felt ablaze from heated kisses and hot, sultry licks. Naked and open, she struggled to keep her emotions in check. Even as she gave her body over to unmatched pleasures, she desperately tried to remain in control.

But that's the problem, isn't it? she mused. I have no control over anything, when it comes to Shawn. Never have... "Oh, fuck, Shawn. Get it..."

She felt him groan into her flesh, nibbling gently at her sopping-wet lips and sensitive clit. His hot breath rushed over her, sending her spiraling toward her climax. She gasped his name until her voice caught in her throat.

How can loving somebody so bad for me feel so damn good?

Kit shook her head. She hated to push him away, but if passions rose any higher, they would be rutting on the sofa. "The kids..."

His eyes, cloudy and moody with passion, cleared a bit. "Oh. Right. Well, let's go to the bedroom, then."

He bent to lick her pussy again, but Kit, who had finally collected the last of her sanity, resisted. "Go home, Shawn. I'll call you after I speak with the lawyer."

The big man with the sexy lips grinned like someone who had a secret. A juicy secret. "Speak with as many attorneys as you want, honey. I'm not signing away my rights to our children." His eyes flashed. "Or my rights to you."

After he had gone, she avoided the sofa they had nearly coupled upon, choosing instead to slide to the floor.

Her eyes remained dry. Her pussy did not.

Taking a deep breath, she hobbled up the stairs to her bedroom and fingered herself until she fell into a tortured sleep.

An hour before Kit would get up to help her children prepare for school, a cell phone rang in her home—a cell phone she had no idea existed.

Thirteen-year-old Dee wiped sleep out of her eyes and dug beneath her pillows to answer the phone before it could ring again. "Dad?"

"Who else would it be? I just slipped the phone to you, yesterday. You already giving out the number?"

She giggled, settling back against the mahogany headboard. Absently, she tugged at her sandy-hued ponytail. "Nope. Not yet."

"You didn't tell your mother, right? She'd kill me if she knew."

"God, Dad! I told you I wouldn't."

"All right. I'm not going to keep you. Just called to make sure we're still hanging out today."

Had her father been present to witness it, her sunny smile might have blinded him. "Yep. I'll cut out of school right before lunch. Then, I'll meet you at Aunt Nora's." Angling her head toward the window, she saw the beginnings of an early morning snowstorm. "Dad?"

"Yeah, honey?"

"I'm glad for the phone and everything. I'm even more glad that I'll get to hang with you in a few hours... But I don't like lying to Mom. She'll find out I've been talking to you."

He sighed. "I know, Dee."

"Then why can't we tell her?"

The girl held her breath and waited for her father's answer. Finally, he cleared his throat.

"We'll tell her when the time is right."

"And when will that be, Dad?"

"When she's ready for us to be a family again. Okay?" He sounded exasperated by her prodding, but he sounded sad, too.

Dee swung her legs over the edge of the bed and slipped her feet into her favorite pair of fuzzy slippers. "Okay. I gotta go. Mom will be up, soon."

"See you later, kid."

Chapter Four

Dick Moore leered at Kit from across his massive metallic desk and ran a hand through hair that dripped pomade. "It's nice to see you, again, Katherine. It's been a long time."

She cast her gaze to the tan carpet in an effort to draw the attorney's attention away from her face. Every time she looked at him, she felt an urgent need to roll her eyes. "Thank you for taking my appointment on such short notice."

He shrugged. "We were almost family. Even though things didn't work out with your sister,

we're still friendly." Dick smiled, exposing unnaturally white, capped teeth. "Besides, I've always had a soft spot for you."

She almost burst into laughter. A soft spot? The last time she'd seen him at her sister's house, he'd sneaked up behind her and pressed his hard dick against her backside! Richard Moore, Attorney-at-Law had always been—and would always be—a slimy piece of walking, talking shit.

He was also an excellent divorce attorney, one willing to work pretty cheaply, too, if he wanted to get into a woman's pants. She'd done a jig and thanked the good Lord when Nora changed her mind about marrying him.

Kit forced herself to look into the man's hard, dead eyes. "My husband came back to town a couple of days ago. I want a divorce, but because of the way he left, I'm not even sure if I can be granted one."

"Yeah." He leaned back in his leather swivel chair and glanced at the ceiling. "Nora hipped me to that business. Shit, I remember when he died!"

"Well, he's very much alive, Dick. I need you to tell me how to get him out of my life for good." She crossed her black-stockings clad thigh across the other and leaned forward. Parting her lips, the desperate woman smiled and tried to look available.

Dick's narrow eyes followed the movement of her legs, climbing steadily up to her small waist, bodacious bosom. He stopped upon her pretty, oval-shaped face. "You know, Katherine, I'm not even sure if there's a precedent for something like this..." He turned to his black laptop and his fingers drummed rapidly against the keys. "I'll need to do a little more research. But I can tell you this right now. According to the law, your husband is dead. You'd have to go before the courts and have him declared alive before divorce proceedings could begin."

She wrung her hands. "How long could something like that take?"

"Truthfully?" Dick muttered.

"No, lie to me!" she snapped. Recovering quickly, she apologized. "I'm sorry, Dick. This is just too much for me, you know? I just want this matter dealt with as soon as possible."

He nodded. "I understand. But the fact is that declaring someone alive is usually a lot harder than proving them dead. This case could take years."

"What about the fact that he faked his death? He left his wife and children for four years! Couldn't I get the marriage voided based on fraud or something?"

"Husbands and wives separate everyday. You're looking for an easy solution to a tough problem. The courts don't work that way."

Feeling beaten, she stood. He climbed to his feet, stepping from behind his desk to walk her to the door.

"Give me a couple of days to do some research. I'll figure out the fastest, most expedient way for you to get him out of your life."

She thanked him and they walked out into the lobby, heading for the main elevator. "You'll hear from me, soon," Kit said. "I just hope you'll have some good news for me."

At the moment Kit left Dick Moore's West Fifty-Seventh Street office, Shawn entered Nora Greene's spacious Prospect Heights house. From the white-stoned floor foyer to the shiny oak staircase, the four-story brownstone reeked of wealth.

Shawn guessed he could have been rich too if he'd married a stockbroker who died, leaving him his fortune. And that was just Nora's first husband. Her second, a banker, sent hefty spousal support checks each month.

"Thanks for letting me hang with the kids here, Nora," he said as she led him into her kitchen. "I know it's a lot for me to ask, especially since we both know Kit probably wouldn't like it."

Nora—a bustier, more statuesque version of her sister—smiled at him. "No problem, Shawn. Despite our differences, I've always liked you."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah! I mean, just because you wasn't feeling me, doesn't mean I hated on you for it," she cooed, using language neither of her rich husband's ever had the pleasure of hearing from her.

Shawn felt his skin burn under her stare. During the days when he'd hung around the Greene home, Nora, who was his age, had flirted sassily, flashing her pretty wares whenever he was in eyeshot. But, no matter how hard she tried, Shawn only had eyes for her little sister. "Glad to know there are no hard feelings."

"No. I did pretty well for myself, didn't I?" She stretched out her arms and waved them around her pristine mauve and white kitchen. Her top of the line, restaurant-quality stove shone with metallic brilliance. Pots and pans hung overhead, looking like something that belonged in a chef's kitchen. "As cute as you are, Shawn, you could never have afforded me all this. So, no hard feelings."

He stifled a laugh. Still materialistic, after all these years, he thought. The only reason she'd lost interest in him all those years ago is because he'd injured his knee, losing any chance he had to get a basketball scholarship and go to college. But if he'd been able to make it to the pros, he had no doubt she would have chased him until one of them grew tired of running!

Not that his injury changed his life much. Had he remained unmarried, Kit's unexpected pregnancy would have sidelined his NBA dreams anyway.

"Cool, Nora. You got any soda?" He pulled up a black, antique chair.

"Club soda. I have fruit juice, tea and coffee, too."

"I'll take the club soda. Thanks."

After she fixed their drinks, Nora sat in the chair opposite him. Time passed as the in-laws stared at each other. Finally, Nora broke the strained silence.

"What are your plans, Shawn?"

"What do you mean?"

She ran a finger across a stray lock of hair. To Shawn, her pageboy hairstyle seemed strange and matronly. But he'd passed several women in this neighborhood who wore the same cut, so he supposed her ugly 'do was the in thing for rich, society wives.

"I'm just a little curious, Shawn. You were gone for so long. For you to just pop up and assume everything would be fine is...weird."

"Why weird?" he demanded. "I explained what happened to Kit, and—"

"You think that explanation is going to hold any weight? Please! So what, Shawn? If you were any kind of father and husband, you wouldn't have been hanging around those thugs." She cut her eyes at him. "You could have gotten my sister killed!"

He stared into the clear recesses of his glass. "I know, okay? But I was younger, then."

"You were thirty and a married father of two! Honey, I ain't Kit, all right? I ain't stupid and I ain't sprung. You're going to have to do a lot better than that."

Her glared at the woman in the gray cashmere sweater and twenty thousand dollar watch. "You're right, Nora. You're not Kit. So, butt out of her business, all right?" He stood and clenched his fists. Nora had always been nosy, opinionated and intrusive, but she had never before been this blatant with her meddling. "Is this the reason you agreed to let me see the

children here? So you could browbeat me?"

Nora's eyes, so much like Kit's, glittered dangerously. "Don't you hurt her again, you hear me?"

"I wouldn't—"

"Don't give me any of your bullshit!" She climbed to her feet and moved toward him, stopping when only a breath separated them. "Do you think that my lifestyle has made me forget who I am, or where I come from?" She drew back her head and angled her face up at him. "You can talk as nice as you like; I ain't going for it. I know who you are. Remember that. You wasted so much of my sister's life with your shit. I'm just letting you know that I'm not going to let you do it again."

Shawn looked her up and down. She'd puffed up like a porcupine and her quills were set to sting. "I'm not here to hurt your sister. I love her. That's the only reason I came back home."

Before Nora could rebut, her doorbell sounded. "That must be Dee."

"Yeah," he mumbled.

Twenty minutes later, the adults and the teenager chatted leisurely over a game of Monopoly. Shawn and Nora's argument seemed to fade from memory.

But nothing is ever completely what it seems.

Despite Nora's goodwill gesture, Shawn had a feeling she would leak information about this afternoon to her sister. In fact, he was counting on it.

Chapter Five

She was so mad her teeth chattered.

Kit had managed to avoid Shawn for several days, though he hadn't made it easy. She'd avoided his calls, gone to her mother's or a girlfriend's house after work and made sure Nora picked up the kids.

Not that any of her machinations got her anywhere. Shawn had showed up to her mother's pre-Christmas bash several nights ago, smiling and talking like he had every right to be there. On that same night, she'd found out that Paul had been sneaking around with her ex. Her

turncoat cousin had even given him her itinerary, enabling Shawn to track her down!

Though she and Shawn had ended their last conversation on an up note—a high wail of passion, she recalled with shame—she hated the idea of her own family conspiring against her!

Now, she tore into her favorite cousin—a cuss-out that had been long in coming.

“Yeah, Paul?” Kit barked into the phone. “Well, I don’t appreciate you going behind my back to help Shawn see the kids!” She reclined in her leather swivel chair, counted silently and tried to stem her anger. Her cousin’s casual dismissal of her words made her turn on him full force. “I don’t care that Shawn’s your best friend! I’m your cousin. Your. God. Damn. Cousin.”

She probably should have waited and talked to Paul after she got home, but her uncle’s son had the misfortune of calling while she was in her office. Kit had run in to pick up the Christmas gifts she’d hidden in the closet of her economy-sized office. When her cell rang, and she saw who it was, she’d sat down and began ranting.

Scooting her chair around, she cast her gaze out the three-story window. All she got for her trouble was a view of the Queens Expressway. Though she’d risen to a top position at Albans-Rochelle Realty, pulling in as much as thirty percent of the company’s home sales the previous year, her office was definitely not a testament to her success. She itched to go out on her own, but doubt—and lack of financing—held her back.

She pursed her lips, still listening to her fast-talking cousin.

“Would you have agreed to see him otherwise?” Paul asked. “He told me you’d stopped answering his calls.”

“You damn right, I did! If he wants to speak to me, he can call my lawyer. I gave him the number.”

“What about the kids?”

Kit closed her eyes and massaged her temples. “I’m not keeping him from seeing the kids. But he can’t just come over anytime he wants.”

Her cousin’s last words stung. “I’m not going to apologize for inviting Shawn over for dinner. Dee wanted to see him. Jimmy needed to see him. And you know what, Kit? If you weren’t so damned stubborn, you’d realize you want and need Shawn, too!”

The next sound she heard was a dial tone.

Damn it!

The more she thought about that Saturday night, the more her head throbbed. She had a near permanent headache, because she thought about that night a lot...

"Not up in here. And not tonight!" Louise Greene roared when she saw her not-dead-enough son-in-law. "Paul Robeson Greene, I know this is your doing!" she screamed at her grinning nephew.

Paul, who sat at the bottom of his aunt's stairs, had a clear view of the doorway. He waved at his friend and poked little Jimmy gently in his ribs. "Hey, man. Go ask your father 'what's up!'"

Jimmy Redstone, so cute in his baggy, dark-rinse jeans and miniature Mets jersey, took slow, hesitant steps toward his father. When he stopped in front of the tall man with the piercing blue eyes, he smiled. "Hi...Daddy."

"Hey, Jimmy." Shawn bent to his knees and mussed the little guy's mass of curly, rust-brown hair. "Looking good, slugger."

Jimmy grinned and ran back to sit beside Paul.

Louise, a small woman with a big personality, threw up her hands, moved away from the front door and plopped onto her white sofa. The plastic sighed as she sat down. She shook her head rhythmically, causing her gold-hoop earrings to jangle. "Katherine Shantay Greene? Get your behind out here. Now!"

"I'm here, Ma," Kit said, rolling her eyes as she sailed out of the kitchen. Her worst nightmare had come true. Her husband stood in the doorway of her mother's Bedford-Stuyvesant brownstone holding a black, wool coat.

She looked him over, noting the crisp, white dress-shirt and the charcoal-gray pants that fit his well-defined legs like they were made for him. He'd taken the time to slick back his unruly light-brown hair—something that showed off his chiseled jaw line all the more.

Embarrassment flooded her system when he smiled at her. She'd been staring at him—and from the looks on the faces of her assorted relatives, she'd been staring long and hard. Finally, she hurried forward and blocked his path.

"You can't come in here."

"I don't want any trouble, Kit," he whispered. The tall man looked easily over her shoulder, smiling and winking at her mother's guests. "It's just that I knew that you and the kids would be here, tonight."

"How?"

"I have my sources."

"And I'll bet one of them is Paul, right?" she snapped.

"Hey!" he cousin yelled from his spot on the stairs. "I was just trying to help a brother out."

"Well, Paul," she craned her head back to snap at him. "Somebody might need to help you out, real soon."

Everyone in the living room tittered.

"Relax," Shawn muttered, running his eyes down the length of her body. He seemed to appreciate her tight jeans and v-neck blouse. "I just wanted to hang out a little with my family."

"You a fool if you think I'm about to let that happen, Shawn Redstone!" Louise's shrill voice sailed at them. Though she remained in her spot on the couch, the little woman's voice carried clear enough that the neighbors might hear her. "You're not wanted here. You best turn your backside around and go back wherever you came from!"

"Ah, leave him alone, Mommy!" Nora called. She rocked in the big, plaid armchair by the front window, cutting her eyes at her embarrassed sister.

Kit closed her eyes. The giggles of cousins, aunties and close friends seemed to come from all directions. There were only fourteen bodies scattered about her mother's spacious living room, but to Kit, it might as well have been fourteen hundred people. All laughing. Pointing. Judging. And most, she guessed, were secretly happy about her plight.

Didn't we tell you not to marry that white boy?

Shawn's voice pulled Kit from her momentary stupor. "Mrs. Greene —"

"Be quiet, Shawn," she interrupted. "Talking to her will do you no good."

"Amen!" sassed Adele Jenkins, Louise Greene's sister and neighbor for over forty years. "Boy, you've got big nerves showing up here the way you done. But I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Your type always feels entitled, don't ya?"

Lord. Have. Mercy.

Kit clasped her hands together. "See? No one wants you here —" Before she could finish, Dee

sprinted down the stairs. Paul and Jimmy moved out of her way in enough time to avoid being splattered against the banister. The teenager's squeals tore through the ten-room house.

"Daddy!"

Shawn winked at Kit before turning to their daughter. "Hey, Dee."

"I'm so glad you came!" she gushed, looking between her parents. "I didn't think you would."

Kit clenched her jaw. "You invited your dad over here, honey?"

Shawn held up a hand. "Don't blame Dee. Our daughter was only taking pity on me. She knows I can't cook. Plus, she didn't want me to be alone."

"Oh." She crossed her arms over her chest and looked at her oldest child. Dee grinned at her and grasped her father's hand.

He's been talking to Dee behind my back, she raged silently. Oh, God...

She would make sure to talk to his sneaky ass about that later. Possibly with an attorney present.

"I heard the yelling," the girl spat, stepping between her parents. She craned her head into the living room. Dee locked eyes with her stunned grandmother and stared daggers at the older woman. "I want Daddy to stay."

Kit shook her head. "This is your grandmother's home, Dee. If she doesn't want him here, then, he'll have to go."

"I want him to stay!" Dark green eyes turned on Kit and sliced her to ribbons. "If he doesn't stay, then I won't either!"

"And where the hell do you think you gon go?" Louise demanded. Her pecan-brown skin exploded with red shading. She stood up, shushed away a prying cousin, and stalked into the foyer. "I don't care what those fresh-behind boys at school tell you. You ain't grown, Dee. Keep cutting the fool in here, and I'll show you how much of a child you still are!"

Turning on Kit, Louise rolled her eyes. "Tell your husband he's allowed to come in. He can even eat. But if he acts stupid—even once—I got a whole houseful of company willing to rise up and whup his ass. Okay?"

Kit lowered her head. "That won't be necessary, Ma. Shawn's leaving." She turned her gaze to him. "Aren't you?"

He grinned in that casual way of his and gripped Dee's hand. Despite his easy smile, his eyes remained cold. "I'm keen on seeing my kids. I'm also pretty hungry. So, Ms. Greene, I guess that means I'm willing to risk that ass-whupping."

The assorted Greenes locked curious eyes on the back-from-the-dead white man in their midst and geared up for...something. They didn't know what was going to happen, but they hoped it would be good.

Shawn wound up sitting at the dining room table beside Kit. The former All-City point-guard ate heartily while fourteen pairs of eyes traced his every bite. After twenty minutes of strained silence, a curiosity seeker asked him a question, opening the floodgates.

"So, you wasn't dead all this time. Where were you hiding?"

"Was the mob after you, or something?" asked another cousin. "That's what I heard."

"Why'd you stay gone so long?" Aunt Addie pressed.

Questions of every stripe flew at him. Shawn, ever the gentleman, seemed hesitant to speak between mouthfuls of turkey, dressing, and yams – but he answered nonetheless.

Kit barely touched her plate. Her cornbread, which had sat upon her plate in golden-brown splendor, now lay soggy, sopping up yam juice and turkey gravy. She looked around the table at her family – especially her angry mother, nosy aunt and judgmental sister. She stared down curious neighbors and a couple of distant cousins she'd never liked anyway. She watched the smiling faces of Dee and Jimmy. Finally, she glared at her favorite cousin, Paul, and silently vowed to get revenge.

Her head suddenly ached, causing Kit to rub shaky fingers across her temples. She placed her napkin on the table, stood up and excused herself. "I need a few minutes."

"Hank just went into the bathroom," Paul said, reaching for a bowl of collards.

"I'll use the one upstairs."

She left the table and took the stairs, two at a time, to the second-floor bathroom. Once inside, she leaned against the door and closed her eyes.

It angered her that her husband thought it would be this easy, that he thought he could just keep popping up until she decided to forgive him. Frankly, she'd grown used to having him gone and saw little value in trying to reintegrate him into her life. Once she finally petitioned the courts to have him declared alive, he'd finally get the point.

Wouldn't he?

After several minutes, Kit glanced into the mirror, fiddled with a few stray hairs and disentangled the bracelets on her wrist. Finally ready to face her family and ex-husband again, she opened the door and headed down the hallway. Her feet had almost made contact with the first step when a familiar voice called to her.

"Here, Kitty."

"Ssh!" she sassed instinctively. All at once, she was seventeen again, trying to sneak her boyfriend into the house. "My mother'll hear you." She turned to glare at the man standing in the doorway of her old bedroom.

"Your mother knows I'm up here," he whispered. "I excused myself."

"Well, you can go right on back downstairs, Shawn."

"I'd rather go into your old bedroom. So many memories in here..." He dipped into the darkness and flipped up the light switch. He leaned against the door and held out a hand. "It even looks the same."

"It does, doesn't it? But just because something looks the same doesn't mean it is, the same, Shawn." She tried to move past him, but his hands, still so quick and agile, stopped her. "I have a whole mess of family downstairs. I'm not going to do this with you!"

"Do what?" He jerked her hand into his, pulled her into the room and firmly shut the door. "You mean this?"

He kissed her – the bastard – and as if by design, Kit forgot all about the family and friends who waited for them downstairs. She forgot the anger and pain that urged her to slap at him, to put him down.

Yet, even as she responded to the passion of his kiss, she told herself she'd never forget the way he'd abandoned their family...

Since his wife had gone out of her way to make reconciliation so rough, Shawn decided he'd have to play rough, too. When he bent her over the edge of her childhood dressing table, he was not shocked by her easy acquiescence. Her round hips molded against him, fitting perfectly. He peered into the mirror and caught her staring at him. A mixture of desire and hatred played within her delicate features.

"Remember the last time I did this to you?" he asked.

Kit twisted her mouth.

He pulled her against him, forcing her against the hardness of his body. "Do you remember, Kit?"

"Of course, I do," she strangled out, still looking at him through the mirror. "You thought I was still dating Johnny Serrano behind your back," she snickered. "But it wasn't true."

"Well, what was true, then, is still true, now. You're mine. You belong with me, and..." He ran his tongue along her earlobe. She shivered and sighed, pressing her ass along his midsection. "Even your family knows it."

Kit began talking in fast, angry bursts, but Shawn was too caught up in the feel of her body against him to catch but a few of her words.

"What? What did you say?" He moved his hands over her heavy breasts, massaging at the nipples through the soft material of her creamy, v-neck blouse. "I didn't catch that."

Her words squeaked in exasperation, but her body, still moving stiffly against his thick erection, said something else. "I said the only thing my family knows is that your lifestyle made you go underground and pretend to be dead. That same lifestyle could have hurt me and our children." Her dark eyes, blue-black under the low lighting of her old room, glistened at him through the mirror. "They never liked you. Despite that easy, breezy bullshit you put on downstairs, they won't forgive you, either."

He nodded, thinking he didn't particularly give a shit whether her family would forgive him or not. Kit and his kids were another matter, entirely. "Will you forgive me?"

Shawn barely got the words out; he felt too choked. Fear tightened his chest—a kind of fear he'd never felt, even when he was on the run.

She glared at him, refusing to answer.

Shawn moved his hands down until they encircled her tiny waist. Turning his head to the side, he rested it upon the side of her supple, bronzed cheek. "I lived in a lot of shitty places over the years, hiding out like some hunted animal. I felt hunted, and haunted, too, Kit; I was haunted by you.

"In every out-of-the-way city and town I stopped in, I vowed to make a fresh start. I'd lost you and my kids, so I figured maybe it would be best for me to leave everything behind for good. But it never worked out that way. Every time I got close to another woman, I was reminded in a hundred different ways of why she wasn't you. I was always reminded of how she could

never hold a candle to you."

She tried to pull free, but he held on tight. Her eyes narrowed in anger. "If you think I'm going stand here and listen to you talk about your other women—"

"What other women? Didn't you hear me, Kitty? There were no other women. Yeah, I dated. I'm not going to stand here and lie to you and pretend to be some saint, honey, because I'm not. I'm only a man."

Kit snorted.

"I'm your man. And that's why when the cops rounded up the last of the Constantines and their associates, I knew it was time to come out of hiding."

He felt her relax against him. His heart swelled as he reached out to stroke her cheek. "Eventually, sooner than later, I'm gonna have to talk to the cops and tell them what I know."

"What'll happen then?"

He shrugged. "A deal, hopefully. I might have to do some time, though." Of course, even if he got sent to a minimum-security prison, Shawn understood his actions could cause him to spend several more years away from Kit and the kids. Great.

She shrank away from him, and this time, he let her have her space. "Why the hell did you even bother to come back if you think you might have to go to prison?" She sounded more wounded than angry. "That's not fair, Shawn!"

He felt like she'd grabbed his balls and squeezed with all her might. "Life isn't fair, Kit. It never will be. But I had to come back. I missed you so much." Slowly, he pulled her hand into his, stroking the inside of her palm. "I know you missed me, too. You can deny anything else you want, but you can't deny that."

Before she could respond, someone knocked at the door. Shawn turned in time to see his mother-in-law peek inside the room.

"I thought I'd find you in here."

"We're on our way down now, Mommy."

Louise crossed her hands across her chest. "No rush. Paul and Lee are already setting up the card tables and pulling out the good liquor."

Shawn made the mistake of smirking.

The small woman was on him in an instant. "From the moment I saw you, Shawn Redstone, I knew you were nothing but trouble. Hanging out on my stoop everyday like you didn't have a home to go to..." She lowered her voice to a whisper and leaned in close. "Though, from what I remember of your father and brothers, I can understand why you'd rather be anywhere but at home."

He hung his head, but said nothing. He had not contacted his ailing father yet, and it never even occurred to him to call his brothers Rob and Kevin. None of them had ever had a good thing to say about him, his wife or his family. He doubted any of them would care that he was still alive.

"While I could understand your need to be away from home, what bothered me was the way you infiltrated my baby's life. You were like some...Caucasian virus she couldn't get rid of!"

"Ma!" Kit stepped forward. "Don't start —"

"Let your mother finish, honey."

Louise waved off her daughter. "You were bad news, boy, but over the years, I realized that it had little to do with where you're from, or the color of your skin. You just wasn't raised right. You weren't given enough love."

Shawn and Louise locked eyes for a moment. He felt his mouth tighten in retaliation. Still, he couldn't bring himself to speak.

"I begged Katherine not to marry you, you know. Even after she came up pregnant with Dee, I told her to forget you. We could raise that child, I told her. She wouldn't have to know anything about her no-account father." She moved into the room and planted herself at the edge of her daughter's old bed. "But you know what she said to me?"

Shawn found his voice. "No. I have no idea."

The older woman's eyes glistened as she turned to her daughter. "She howled and cried something awful, that night. Told me and her aunt Addie how much she loved you. Told us how much you loved her, too. That y'all would get married and make it."

He turned to his wife and smiled. Kit had turned away from them and now stared uneasily at the door.

"So, Shawn, while I didn't always understand why God sent you into my child's life, I figured He had a plan. I stopped questioning Him. I just put my baby and her baby in His hands." She sighed and reached out, beckoning for him to come closer. Shawn did and was surprised when his hand was enfolded into one of hers. "I know you love my daughter, Shawn."

His voice sounded like a raspy croak. "I do, Mrs. Greene. With all my heart."

"And even though she's standing over there with an attitude, I know that Kitty loves you right on back."

Louise and Shawn looked at Kit. The younger women angled her head away so that neither of them could read her expression.

"So, I'm going to leave you in God's hands again."

"Thank you," Shawn said.

"Dinner's over, y'all." Louise stood and dropped her son-in-law's hand. "Folks are playing spades." She looked pointedly at Shawn. "And while I know how much you like to sit around taking everyone's money, I suggest you go on home."

He shook his head. It pained him to climb back onto her shit list after all she'd said, but he was determined not to leave until he and Kit had talked some more. "Mrs. Greene. Kit and I were in the middle of—"

"Oh, I know," she grunted. "What I'm saying is that you and Kit should go home together and...work things out."

"Mom!" Kit finally broke her silence. Her lips formed into a pout as she approached her mother. "Shawn and I have said everything we have to say to each other. We're done."

Louise grinned. "Bullshit." She headed for the door. "The kids will stay with me tonight. You two go home and talk things through. If life doesn't seem better tomorrow, then go right back to fussing. But if there's any chance to work it out, do it. And soon. Dee and Jimmy are confused enough as it is." She sailed through the door and grinned. "And I'm just tired."

Talking would only send them around in circles. Kit had grown tired of trying to deflect her husband's probing questions and insistent demands.

She playfully grabbed at his crotch when they climbed into the front seat of his burnt-out, black Honda. "Why don't you get rid of this thing, Shawn? Keeping a car in the city has got to be expensive, and I know you ride the train most of the time, anyway."

"I keep it for convenience." He keyed the ignition and turned to her. "And for moments like this."

The car might have seen better days, but to Kit, her husband had never looked better.

The plan was simple. Get some and get gone. She would surrender to his touch this weekend. On Monday, she would call Dick and move forward with her plans to get Shawn out of her life.

Her plan, as with everything else concerning Shawn Redstone, didn't stay on track. Not that she should have been surprised. The boy she'd smirked at on her mother's stoop was never supposed to become the love of her life or the father of her children. He'd originally been intended as a one-night stand to make another boy jealous. But after that first time together, neither had been able to let go.

Though many years had passed, their need for each other burned as strong as ever.

Feeling more like a wanton slut than a spurned wife with an axe to grind, Kit unzipped Shawn's pants and worked his slumbering cock into an erection large and hard enough to do some pleasurable damage. Only fourteen short blocks stood between Kit and her mother's house, so she wasted no time, sucking the dick between her lips with deep, vacuum-like suction, inhaling him deeply, playing with his balls.

She thrilled at her husband's harsh, shaky breaths, sucking nosily as he steered the car through the quiet, slushy Brooklyn streets. By the time he angled the car into a space in front of the house, she could tell that his composure was nearing its end. He was ready to blow...

"Stop it, Kit."

Damn it!

"Come on, honey. I know you're almost there..." She slid her mouth over his towering erection, gagging as it hit the back of her throat. An insistent hand jarred her out of her task. Frustrated, she looked up again. "What?"

"Let's go inside."

Before she could protest, he gently pushed her mouth away. Leaning his head against the driver's side seat, he closed his eyes and willed his erection down.

"Christ! That reminded me of the first time we went to the movies together," he cracked. He looked over at her and shrugged. "We've got all the time in the world for games. Your mother was right. We need to talk."

Talk was exactly what she'd been trying to avoid.

Inside, she tossed her coat onto the sofa and stomped into the kitchen. She heard his footsteps echo behind her. Reaching inside a cabinet, she pulled down two glasses and set them on the

counter. "I made some eggnog before I went to Mommy's," she said. "It's my special blend. I know how much you like it. Want some?"

"Sure."

After she poured their drinks, each pulled up a beige, leather-trimmed stool. The couple sat at the kitchen counter, sipping the holiday concoction—drinking each other in. Finally, Shawn set down his glass and reached for Kit's hand.

"I expect to open my door any day now and find a process server standing there. I'm not going to make it easy for you to divorce me."

"Well, if you think I'm going to roll the fuck over and allow you to come home like nothing ever happened, then you're crazy," Kit steamed. "You've got a lot of damn nerve. Just because your life is a game, Shawn, doesn't mean mine is. And what about the kids?" She shook her head, and the hard curls she'd fought so hard to tame earlier in the evening spilled over her eyes. "You're thinking only of yourself."

"Don't give me that! I—"

"It's true!" she roared, yanking away her hand. "If you were thinking clearly, if you were thinking about your kids, then the only thing on your mind right now would be trying to figure out what's best for them!" She stood, hopped from her stool and tried to flinch past him. When his hand snaked out and gripped her waist, pulling her against him, she froze. "Let. Me. Go."

He ignored her. "I am thinking about our kids and what's best for them."

"How?"

"Kit, what's best for them is having their parents together. Christmas is only a few days away. I can't think of a better gift than you and me working everything out."

"Aren't you the man who disappeared four years ago? Who the hell do you think you are to walk up in here and tell me what's right for my children? You don't even know them!" She moved violently, trying to extricate herself from his grip. Shawn stood up so quickly that the stool he'd vacated crashed to the floor. She squealed when she felt her body being rammed against the edge of the counter. The edge—sharp, icy Formica—bit coldly into her back. "Ouch!"

"Why are you acting this way, Kit?"

"Because I don't want to talk to you!" she hissed. She threw back her head. "You know what? This was a mistake. I want you to leave. There's nothing left for us to say."

"Like hell!" He pinned her against the counter. "Ten minutes ago, you had my dick in your mouth. You didn't want me to go, Kit. You wanted me to come."

"I would do anything to get you to shut up. I am so sick of your lies!"

"I'm not lying to you, anymore. I haven't lied since I came home. I'm not lying when I tell you I love you and I want our life back."

She stared up at him and couldn't decide whether to kiss him as hard as she could, or smack him harder. There was a time—it seemed so long ago—when she would lose herself in his eyes, allowing herself to be carried away by dreams that would never come true, drifting into fantasies of the perfect life for which they both yearned. But that was it, wasn't it? Shawn Redstone had managed to sell her a dream that had become a nightmare.

His lips moved, but Kit heard none of her husband's words. A fire had alighted within her belly, burning her insides, scorching her soul. An anguished growl wrenched free from the chaos that had burdened her. She reached up with both hands and pulled his face toward her lips.

No more talk. There is only this. His kiss. His hands. His body...

The kiss she initiated tore something free in him. He groaned into her mouth, wrapping his hands into the thickness of her hair. Their tongues licked and sucked, probing the familiar corners and tastes of the other's mouth.

Shawn pushed her ass up onto the counter, roughly pulling at her belt. Kit helped him, their hands moving together in tandem. When she felt her jeans being pulled over her thighs, she arched her back, anchoring her vagina until it was only inches away from his nose.

Her jeans fell to the floor. Her panties followed.

Kit crumbled against the counter and into the soft, sensual strokes of his lips. She could scarcely breathe; she felt paralyzed. Her heart nearly stopped when his tongue fitted into the wet crevice of her dripping vagina, fitting itself between the lips. No longer unable to move, she felt her body moving against his face, riding his mouth and nose, using her nether-lips to kiss those upon his face.

Much too soon, she felt herself unhinging, coming against his experienced lips in a dewy downpour.

The sound of Shawn's zipper coming down jolted her out of her come-drunk stupor. Whimpering her assent, she latched her quivering thighs over his forearms and braced herself. When his cock burrowed into her, she screamed shamelessly, rocking back, spreading her

thighs as far apart as she could without injuring herself.

Lord, but he was big, thick, filling her up so completely she could barely move. Instead, she lay prone, moaning in ways that would embarrass her later, begging for every inch of him.

Again, Kit felt her belly tightening, a hard ball of excitement lurching every time her husband snaked deeply inside her. She shook and bucked upon his hard, hot commanding cock, trying to swallow and hold it inside the quaking recesses of her body.

She was so close, nearly falling over the edge again. When he stopped, she stared up at him in surprise. Realization slapped at her, causing her passion-filled eyes to glare with anger.

"I'll let you come again," he whispered. One of his large hands snaked around to palm her bulbous ass. "But only after you say it."

"Say what?" she gasped, sounding simple.

"That you love me."

Is he for real?

Kit might have laughed at the absurdity of the situation had she not been so pissed. There she was, spread out on her kitchen counter, her ass hanging over the edge, his dick buried inside her, and this fool wanted her to whisper sweet nothings?

"Why are you doing this?" she quavered. "It was getting so good..."

"And it'll get better, Kitty. I promise." His eyes shined down at her. The laughter she saw in them pissed her off all the more. "You get what you want when I get what I want."

She opened her mouth to curse, but the result sounded more like a loud, keening wail. Her husband, as enterprising as ever, had chosen that moment to thrust into her—hitting her G-spot.

"Oh, Shawn," his name ripped from her throat. "Please."

One of his arms gripped her thighs together and he thrust into her again, grinning at the low, nasty moans his movements induced. He held her legs hostage, now, and there was little Kit could do about it.

"I love you," he said. "Why can't you just admit you still love me?"

"Because there's nothing to admit!" The words were barely out of her mouth before a deep, powerful thrust sidelined her. Her waiting orgasm almost pained her, but her final pleasure

was just out of reach. “Ooooh... You’re evil.”

“Only because you’re stubborn.”

Kit closed her eyes, but even in her self-enforced darkness, she still saw some light. A memory—a strange one, given her circumstances—rose in her mind. She saw herself holding Shawn’s hand in the moments right after she’d given birth to Dee. She had never loved or trusted anyone so much in her life. She had never before--or since—felt so whole and complete.

It was this memory that spurred her to admit the unthinkable, to once again put her life into her husband’s hands. Even during their darkest moments, they’d shared a love unmatched by anything else in her life. Even when they had nothing, they had each other.

A lone tear trailed down her cheek. “I love you, all right? It doesn’t change anything—”

Shawn moved within her—up and in, thrusting purposefully until she cried out and shuddered long and hard. Where before, she’d assumed her orgasm would bring some relief, now she understood she’d probably opened a door that had been better left closed.

“Now, we can fix things, Kit. We can fix it all.”

Hours later, as Kit slept fitfully, Shawn sat up and leaned against the headboard, drawing his wife’s head into his lap. Slowly, he ran his fingers through her wavy, light-brown hair and marveled at its silkiness. On the morning he last saw his wife before going on the run, she’d just removed long, flowing extensions from her then reddish-brown hair. She’d been sporting a large, halo-like afro that day—what he’d laughingly called “the Angela Davis Deluxe”—and he thought she looked like a beautiful, Nubian warrior woman.

Now, he touched locks as wavy and silky as something out of a shampoo ad. Shawn shook his head. He had never understood women’s obsession with hair. When it came to black women and hair care, he’d often found himself perplexed and amazed.

Not that Kit’s hair had ever mattered to him. Over the years, he’d seen her sport weaves, braids, men’s cuts and every type of hairstyle she could get her stylist to do for her. She’d dyed and fried her hair so many colors that he could not readily remember her natural hue. These days, she was going for a more professional, polished look—the better to sell houses, he supposed.

But even if she had been bald when he came back home, to him, his wife would still be the hottest chick around.

Still hot. We still have it...

As hot as they were together, sex wouldn't be enough to heal the rift between them. If anything, their lovemaking was too easy—a perfect way to avoid dealing with their very real issues. Kit wasn't yet ready to talk things out; she'd rather argue or hump their problems away.

Because he hadn't exactly been as forthcoming as the situation merited, Shawn decided to accept this arrangement. For now.

He couldn't tell her the whole truth yet. He didn't know if he'd ever be ready to reveal more about what had sent him on the run. The secret he harbored would probably destroy any chance he had to be with her for good, and for him, those terms were unacceptable.

His wife mumbled, then moved her head.

Shawn smiled and ran a hand over a high cheekbone, then her full, sexy mouth. "Hey there, pretty girl."

"Hi there yourself, handsome."

She looked ready to say something else, but he cut her off, pulling her into his arms for a deep kiss. When he pulled away, her dark eyes were shiny with passion.

"Kit, I don't want to fight with you, anymore."

She sighed and rubbed at his cheek, stroking gently against the blondish stubble. "I don't want to fight with you, either." She leaned back, tossing her hair out of her eyes. Her firm, plentiful breasts bobbed up and down when she reached for the coverlet.

"You're not going back to sleep are you?" he asked. He couldn't be bothered to hide the disappointment he felt.

"Well, I..."

"Come on, Miss Kitty." Moving quickly, he wrapped his arms around her waist and hoisted the laughing woman into his lap. "I've been waiting for you to wake up."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah."

He angled her upon his lap, moving her body sideways so that he could look into her face. "You're mighty fine, ya know that? You don't look much older than you did when we got

married.” He bent and grazed a kiss along her collarbone. When he pulled back, he looked at the spot his lips had marked. The light-chocolate skin there glowed rosily, almost as if it had been branded.

Kit giggled. “You don’t look so bad yourself for a thirty-four-year-old, broke-down, ex-baller, fugitive!”

“Ha, ha.”

For a moment, the couple grinned at each other, and it was like they had never been separated. They were, once again, the best of friends, better lovers and awesome parents.

His dick swayed to life, climbing steadily toward his belly button—a thick, long muscle whose only mission was to give and receive pleasure. Still looking into his wife’s eyes, Shawn began to stroke himself, fisting his veiny appendage inside his large hand.

Kit grinned saucily at him and twisted her body off his lap, bending upon her knees. As he stroked himself, she licked, sucking the thick, bulbous head between her lips, using her heavy breasts to suckle and warm his cock.

She didn’t have to suck too long, much to Shawn’s embarrassment. With a massive grunt and a satisfied sigh, he climaxed, ejaculating in long, arching bursts. Kit, who had never been afraid of a nice, protein facial, stuck out her tongue, slurping up his viscous, salty juices.

“Two-second white boy...” Kit teased. She laughed so hard, that she fell against his thighs, gasping for air.

“Uhm...no,” Shawn scolded. “Look again.”

When her eyes bulged at the sight of his still-hard cock, it was his turn to laugh. “Wanna go again?” he asked.

Slowly, seductively, Kit climbed the length of his body. He inhaled deeply at the feel of her soft skin against the light hairs on his flesh. When her bountiful, curvy ass bounced against his thighs, he closed his eyes, and said a silent prayer for strength.

If she keeps looking at me like that, I’ll come before she even touches me.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and gifted him with a kiss so gentle and sweet it brought tears to his eyes. Though their animal-like passion had always aroused him, some of his best memories of Kit were moments like this—gentle, tender and full of love. When she pulled away, he searched her face. So many emotions swirled in the depths of those black eyes—love, anger, fear and confusion were the most apparent.

Guilt tightened his stomach, forcing him to rein in the action. Shawn pressed his face into her neck, thrilling in her warmth and smell. She still wears Red Door, he mused. He sank into her, allowing himself to become almost numb with happiness. Then another thought struck him, one that helped chase away some of the guilt and shame he felt.

No matter how much she resists her feelings, she still loves me.

Suddenly, her voice, hazy and grainy with passion, whispered to him, pulling him back into her eyes. "I loved you so much; I was so happy with you. Why'd you have to mess everything up, huh? Why'd you leave me?"

He couldn't bring himself to speak. He was certain opening his mouth would unleash a loud torrent of unmanly sobbing.

Shawn placed his hands upon Kit's cheeks. He tried to use his eyes to say what his lips could not. She wilted against him, crying violently against his chest. It was almost as if she cried for both of them.

Nothing he could say would make her feel the depth of his anguish. Action suited Kit better.

Palming her ass-cheeks in his hands, he moved her body over him, fitting her gently over his penis. Once he was inside her, it seemed he could feel all of her emotions, warring, tearing and pulling her apart. He hoped she could ride away some of those emotions by pounding away at them, using his body to find some release – and relief.

Kit pushed her hands through his hair. She moved her lower body up and down, taking long, even lunges. Shawn didn't move, deciding to hold her waist instead, allowing her to fuck as long and hard as she wanted until she got her fill. Every time her pussy clamped down upon him, sometimes hard enough to make him shake, he inhaled.

He liked watching her this way, fully in command, a woman going after her own pleasure. Her hair was mussed, falling into her closed eyes, sticking to her wet lips. Those slighted parted lips released deep, tortured moans, feral, wicked sounds – groans so heated and ferocious that Shawn felt every hair on his body stand on end.

By the time she'd found her rhythm – a nice thrusting gallop – he gripped her waist with a force that would later leave bruises on her lovely skin. She wailed at him, milking his cock, torturing him into a painful orgasm the likes of which he'd never experienced.

Shawn's deep groans echoed around the room, their intensity embarrassing him. Finally, he felt her cunt tighten and grind around his cock. Pleasure and relief overwhelmed him when their orgasms merged – a dizzying, heated combination of throbs and pulses.

Exhausted, neither of them spoke. Shawn wrapped his trembling wife into his arms and tried

to sleep.

Yet, even as Kit's deep breaths indicated she'd found her peace, he still could not drift into oblivion. When he tried to figure out why, seven hundred thousand reasons tortured him.

Chapter Six

Just before seven the next morning, Shawn slipped from his old bed, put on his clothes and glided down the stairs. He left without saying goodbye, because in the cold light of day, he understood that the previous night's fireworks would flame out, leading, no doubt, to a heated argument.

The only heat he wanted between them was the kind that came from hot sex. So, until his wife became ready to accept him back on a permanent basis, he was determined they would never fight, again.

If sex was what she wanted, he'd give her as much as she could handle.

Before he could make his escape, however, Shawn opened the door to a magnificent blanket of white snow—a blanket that nearly touched the tall man's waist. Snow continued to swirl, slapping his face, burning his eyes.

Goddamn.

For weeks, assorted local weathermen had hinted of a blizzard that never seemed to materialize. It must have snowed hard and fast last night, but for the life of him, Shawn could not see how he would miss something like that.

Without warning, a memory of Kit's hot, dark skin enveloping him took him back to the previous night. He certainly hadn't been concentrating on the weather. A tornado could have swept off the roof, and he still wouldn't have noticed.

Instead of stealing away like a criminal—his original plan—Shawn walked through the kitchen and out to the shed just off the backyard. After hefting a shovel, he went outside and began uncovering the walkway.

Despite the weather and the effort he exerted, he became hard.

Every time he bent to shovel and salt his path, he felt his penis, enormous with longing, rub against his thigh. Huge patches of thick snow numbed his face; he could barely see his car beneath the white coating of snow.

Pulling the hood of his down jacket closer to his face, he shoveled snow with the speed and determination of a man on a mission. He couldn't think about spending the day there, much less another night, because he knew Kit needed space. He was determined to be gone by the time she came downstairs. He recalled how she liked to sleep in during her vacations. He'd done the housework and run after the kids on those odd days. Shawn figured he had a couple of hours to kill before he risked having to face her.

After nearly an hour, he drove the shovel through the pile of snow he'd plowed to the driveway's edge. He was wasting his time, he realized, because the parts he'd cleared whitened with hard powder moments after he moved along.

Shawn decided to go back inside to keep track of the storm. When it finally showed signs of letting up, he'd come back out and clear a proper path. Hopefully, by then, the snowplows would be out in force. Otherwise, he had no idea when he'd be able to drive back into the city.

Back inside, relief washed over him when he saw that Kit had remained in her bedroom. Despite the cold, shoveling the snow had made him work up a sweat. And an appetite. Yet he was in no mood for food. Perhaps if the woman with the fast mouth and mercurial temper had been waiting for him, he'd have eaten her...

Suddenly, he felt in no great hurry to go anywhere.

Making his way over to the kitchen area, he studied the scuffed wood cabinets and countertop. Had he been around, he would have buffed and refinished them until they gleamed. He shook his head, guiltily. He had a lot to make up for, and soon.

Opening a cabinet, he found a bag of coffee and fired up the coffeemaker. While the coffee perked, he peered into the refrigerator, and was relieved to see that Kit was prepared for long stretches away from the supermarket. In fact, from the looks of things, she wouldn't have to shop for months. Lamb chops, ground beef, pounds of bacon and other meats lined the freezer's shelves. Yogurt, fine cheeses, cold cuts and salads sat in the refrigerator—quick and reasonably healthy options for the kids.

Finding some bread, Shawn assembled a turkey sandwich and sat down to think.

He had a two-track mind. When it wasn't on the track leading to his family, Shawn thought about the cash.

He'd stolen the money from the men who'd tried to kill him. The fact that they were killers, however, made him no less of a thief.

Unconsciously, he placed his hand against the tiny, front pocket of his jeans. Seven hundred grand — compiled into a cashier's check — taunted him.

Three days before he'd knocked on Kit's door, he walked into an Atlantic City casino and played a few hands of poker. Afterward, he went to a cashier's booth, calmly handed over the silver suitcase and false IDs and had his money put into a check. Since then, he'd carried the worn, folded check everywhere. All he wanted to do was hand it over to his wife and make a few of her wishes come true.

We'll finally be able to pay back Nora, he thought. She'd gleefully lent them money for the down payment on the house Kit lived in now. He'd been desperate; Jimmy had only been two months old. They had quickly outgrown their tiny, two-bedroom Park Slope apartment. Nora, fresh off the inheritance her first husband bequeathed to her, had given the money freely, fully knowing they'd never be able to repay her.

Though what they owed her totaled nothing close to the money he had in his possession, Shawn would have given it all to her just to see the look on her smug, superior face.

Finishing his sandwich, he went to the couch and grabbed the remote control. The slick-haired weather guy reiterated what he already knew: Kings County, Manhattan and the surrounding areas were in the eye of one of the worst blizzards in years. Everyone was advised to stay off the roads. He sucked his teeth and clicked off the set just as Kit breezed down the stairs.

"I saw you outside earlier," she said, her hand on her jean-clad hips. She wore a clingy red sweater that did little to hide the strain of her abundant, braless breasts. "Did you really think you'd make headway in all that mess?"

"I gave it a shot. It was better than sitting around here and doing nothing."

She plopped beside him. "I called my mom to make sure she and the kids are all right."

"They okay?"

"Yeah. She's making a slumber party out of it. She said they're going to stay in their pajamas all day and watch DVDs."

They exchanged grins. Stuck together, alone, both knew talking would only get them into

trouble, igniting a war.

And despite their differences, the Redstone's would rather make love than war.

They didn't make it to the bedroom.

They dropped to the floor, laughing and kissing, pulling off clothes. Each surrendered to the most animal, natural pull they'd ever felt. They were like magnets that had no choice but to connect.

She bucked against him, massaging her glistening vagina across his thighs. When she leaned upward, undulating across his thickening erection, she shook with pleasure at the shock of one of his fingers probing her slick cunt. "I like that," she enthused.

Now that she decided it would happen again, that she would break her promise to herself, and again experience her husband's body, she let it all hang out – no holds barred.

Grabbing at her tight little waist, Shawn hoisted her off his lap as if she weighed nothing. With a thud, he slammed her to the floor and threw his body across hers. "God, I want you," he grunted. To Kit, he sounded like a man desperate with desire. She loved that sound. "You drive me crazy."

Tenderly, she reached up to stroke his face, but he didn't want that. He brushed aside her hand, and used his mouth to trail over her body. "Shawn, I –"

"Shut up," he barked. His eyes were molten, blue-silver, piercing into her soul. "Let's not talk. This is going too well. Let's just pick up from where we left off last night, baby. We clear?"

As his mouth traveled down the length of her body – lapping at her taut belly, nibbling her inner thighs, kissing the tender flesh of her labia – Kit's eyes fluttered. His mouth – hot, soft and wet – found the center of her growing pleasure, and she spread her thighs. His lips worked with expert precision, tasting the silky warm juices. Shawn took his time, bringing her to the brink on several occasions, before moving his efforts to another area. Torture. That's what it was, for she literally cried with desire.

When her release finally came – when Shawn deigned to allow her an earth-shattering orgasm – she shook and hollered so badly that she feared she'd never stop.

He leered over her. "You okay?"

"Better than I've been in a long time," she confessed.

“Let’s do something to make you feel even better.”

Though she’d climaxed mere moments ago, Kit’s body was aflame again at the sight of his bare chest. He’s such a man, she thought, before leaning forward to suckle one of his nipples. Her hand caressed the soft, blondish down upon his belly, and she felt the quickening of his heartbeat when her hands delved lower. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back at the feel of her hand as it stroked, caressed and squeezed.

“Get on top of me,” he commanded, running a finger over one of her peaking nipples. “I want to watch you ride me.”

Feeling dizzy, she obeyed.

For a moment, she was hypnotized by how handsome he looked stretched out on the floor, exposing his impressive cock in all its strong, upstanding glory. He appeared like a god sent down to teach her all about the finer aspects of love—at least while they were stuck together. But what would happen once the blizzard stopped?

He leaned back, his penis pulsing purple under the white-hot, winter sun streaming just beneath the blinds. She crawled along him until she reached her destination. His hands dug roughly into her waist, slamming her down onto the throbbing member. “Ah!” She leaned back, closed her eyes and began her ride.

Shawn watched her every movement, so much so that he had a hard time controlling himself. Sometimes he thought he liked watching Kit almost as much as he enjoyed fucking her. Every time he felt her twat surround him, he knew he was wrong.

She clutched at him, caressing his thickened organ with strokes so well-timed that he shuddered beneath her thrusts. She was impossibly pretty during her control of him, and idly, he wished she had been able to see herself at that moment. Her softly feminine legs rocked back and forth, carrying her burning slot over him, making him grunt his appreciation.

His orgasm wrenched out of him. He convulsed in a guttural roar—a roar over which Kit’s name drifted.

As with all good things, the not-so-estranged couple’s hot tryst came to an end. Just before three that afternoon, the blizzard headed north to devastate New England and Canada. Shawn was finally able to dig out his car and drive into the city.

A whole lot had happened between them—more than mere sex. But had either party been asked, each would have denied making any progress.

Chapter Seven

Christmas at the Redstone house was less than festive that year.

Minutes before Shawn arrived to spend a few hours with the kids, Kit found the cell phone he'd gifted to Dee. It had fallen to floor when Kit bumped against one of the girl's pillows.

"Looks like Christmas came early, huh, honey? Where did you get it? No, scratch that, because I think I might already know. So, what I really want to know is: how long have you had it?"

"Only a few days," Dee pouted. "But you made it so hard for Dad and me to see each other! We had to find a way to meet up."

Kit sat on her eldest child's bed. She felt neither anger, nor surprise. She sighed and reached out to remove a piece of tinsel from Dee's green, silk blouse. "Where have you been meeting him? His apartment? That area of town is rough, sweetheart."

The girl stared straight ahead, refusing to acknowledge the question.

"Answer me, damn it! Where have you been meeting your father?"

"At Aunt Nora's, all right!"

She chewed her bottom lip. "When?"

"Anytime I can go! Sometimes, I'll cut school. Sometimes, I'll go when I'm supposed to be at pep squad!" The huffy teenager's jade-green eyes glistened. She stood and slammed out of the room. Her angry footsteps echoed down the stairs.

By the time Shawn arrived, bearing gifts—an iPod nano for Dee and a junior science kit for Jimmy—Kit had worked herself into a lather.

"If you wanted to see the kids—and by the way, the fact that you're leaving Jimmy out is trifling as hell—you could have asked me." She moved from the living room into the kitchen. Shawn followed closely behind, smiling at a scowling Dee and winking at a zoned-out Jimmy as he went.

Kit granted him a wide berth, fuming as quietly as possible. "Am I going to have to get the courts involved with custodial rights, Shawn? I hadn't wanted to go there, but —"

"Save it, Kit. Damn! Every time I call you, you rush me off the phone—"

"That's because every time you call, you start in on me and you getting back together!" Kit crossed her arms across her chest and tossed back her flowing tresses. "You can't go behind my back where the kids are concerned. If anything had happened to Dee, I would have been the last to know!"

"Nothing's going to happen." He shook his head. "Look, I don't have a lot of time, remember? You're going to your mother's today, and it's bad enough I crashed her party that time. But you agreed to give me a few hours with my kids, today." His eyes were chilly. "The clock's ticking."

She nodded. "You're right. I...Look, just try to play fair, okay?"

"You know I can't promise that, Kitty." He shrugged and moved closer. "I have something for you, too."

"I won't accept it."

"You don't even know what it is!"

She held up her hands. "I don't want to know. Accepting a gift from you would be as good as saying I want you back, or something."

His face became that of a sullen child. "Fine. I'll give it to you another time, then."

Kit pulled a chair from the kitchen table and sat. "Don't count on it. Now, get out there and chill with our kids. It's Christmas, Shawn. Let's leave this stuff for another day."

Chapter Eight

Two days following his last visit with his family, Shawn decided to tie up some more loose ends.

The stink of rubbing alcohol and antiseptic stung his nostrils as he walked down the dim, narrow halls of Atlantic Mission Nursing Home. He'd last entered these halls five years earlier, and had vowed to never return. Fighting with his father, Johnny Redstone, had always made him make grand pronouncements like that. How many times had he sworn to forget the old man—to never see the nasty bastard again?

Something had pushed him toward this place. Though he had little doubt of how this meeting would end, he couldn't allow one more day to pass without seeing his father.

He peeked inside the room and watched for a minute as the balding, paunchy old man struggled through the Daily News' sports pages. The elder Redstone sat near the window, propped upon several pillows. His shaking, liver-spotted hands flicked slowly at the pages.

Shawn almost hated to stop in this way. After all, the last news the man heard about his oldest son had been about his death. Not that he figured the old coot would keel over from a heart attack or anything so hokey. But if something like that happened, he certainly didn't want his father's death on his conscience.

He took careful steps into the puke-green, undecorated room and waited for his father to look in his direction. It took a while, because for John, the basketball season meant new life. Basketball had been the only thing father and son had ever agreed upon.

Finally, after a hacking cough shook him out of his original position, the old man craned his head. When he saw Shawn standing in the doorway, he blinked a few times. A slow smile spread across his thin, dry lips.

"I was wondering when you'd swing by here. Or, if you'd even bother."

Shawn's stomach clenched. He'd called his brother Kevin last night. He must have told their father about his brother's resurrection.

"Are you happy to see me, Dad?"

He shrugged and continued going through his paper. "Are you happy to see me?"

"Would I even be here?"

"Now, Shawn, we both know that isn't an answer." He laughed, a gut-buster that caused his chest to rattle and his nearly hairless head to bob. "I can't tell you how surprised I was when Kev told me about you. I guess I shouldn't be surprised, though. You're nothing if not resourceful, kid."

Shawn moved into the room and sat at the foot of the bed. "How are you, Dad?" Other than being a nasty, old asshole, I mean.

"Life goes on, Shawn. You know that better than anyone, dontcha? I mean, even though my best days are behind me, I'm still feeling pretty good. I don't look so bad for a guy pushing seventy-five, do I?"

"You look all right," he grinned. Actually, he thought his father looked terrible. Too thin, too

pale, too brittle. "You're not eating enough."

"Trust me, you wouldn't want to eat the shit they feed us, either! Everyday, that colored nurse struts in here and tries to force that mush down my throat and I just about—" He snapped his mouth shut and rubbed at his chin. "Oh, that's right. I guess you don't like me talking that way, do ya, boy? You couldn't wait to marry that girl... What was her name? Katie? Kate?"

"Her name is Kit, Dad. Has been for the last fifteen years." He balled his fists at his side. "If you wanna be formal, I guess you could call her Katherine. That's her Christian name."

"Me? Be formal?" John snorted. "Nah, son. Honestly, I couldn't remember her name. But yeah, Kit. How is she doing?"

"She's fine. A little pissed with me. But that'll pass."

"You think so, Shawn? I don't know. That type has a temper, don't they? I mean, when everything's going right, it can be a real good time, but when they get angry..."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Though he asked the question, he thought he knew exactly what his father meant. Bastard.

"Alls I'm saying is I'm surprised she didn't round up her posse and pound on your white ass!" John's teeth, worn and brown from years of smoking, peeked out of his wan face. "I can't help but remember the day she ripped into me for—"

"Being a racist pig, Dad?" Shawn stood and advanced on his old man. "You did everything you could to make my wife uncomfortable that night, didn't you? It was our first Christmas together as husband and wife, Dee was only a few months old, but you went out of your way to make Kit feel like shit."

The old man reared back in his chair. One of the pillows lining the back of it fell to the floor. "You think this has been easy for me? I raised you and your brothers the best way I knew how after your slut of a mother ran off with that—"

"Don't say it!" Shawn thundered. "Don't you say that word to me. Ever." He moved forward and bent down, peering into his father's face. "I swear to God, Dad, you'll wish you hadn't."

For the first time since his son's arrival, John Redstone's face took on color. "You're just like her, you know that? Just like your mother." He exposed his ugly, stained teeth again—a look meant to threaten, but one that only looked pitiful.

"Matter of fact, you're worse. You married her. You coulda bought her an abortion and got free, but you actually swore in front of God and everybody that you loved that girl!" He shook his head and turned toward the window. "I wish you had stayed dead, Shawn. You're a

disappointment, you know that? Even before you messed up your knee, losing any chance at a scholarship, you took up with that black girl. You started hanging out with her and what happened? Suddenly, you're hooked up with this fast crowd."

"You can't blame Kit for —"

"I can do whatever the hell I want, kid! 'Cause nothing you say to me is going to change my mind about you or your loser life or your embarrassment of a family. You coulda been somebody! Now, you're nothing!"

Shawn's hand was at the older man's throat in an instant.

"You're the nothing! You're a bitter, angry, racist piece of shit who wouldn't know love or respect if it jumped up and pounded you in the face. So you were happy I died, huh? You wish that I'd stayed dead, you bastard?" Shawn squeezed his father's neck for a moment, relishing the fear in the man's eyes. "Well, let's pretend I stayed dead. Is that all right by you?"

He pulled away his hand and wiped it against his jeans in disgust.

"I'm going to pretend you died, too. As a matter of a fact, Dad, as of this moment, you are dead to me."

Shawn stalked to the door and waited for a feeling—a sense of loss—to hit him. Instead, what he felt more than anything was free.

"I know you're not thinking about taking him back, Kit." Nora eyed her younger sister with unconcealed contempt. "He's been nothing but trouble since the day you met him."

Kit said nothing, preferring to stir her meat sauce. When Nora dropped Dee and Jimmy off, Kit had rolled her eyes at the sight of sisters Evelyn and Monique, two of her oldest friends, pulling into the parking space behind Nora's white Escalade.

She hadn't said anything, but she hadn't been fooled by their sudden desire to have dinner at her home that evening. Her sister and their mutual girlfriends had always been nosy—the sort of women who knew your business before you did.

She'd rolled her eyes hard every time one of the snoops mentioned her husband in her children's presence. Now that Dee was in her bedroom doing homework and Jimmy sat in the living room playing with his trucks, she felt ready to talk.

"Every time you say something about Shawn, Nora, I always think back to a time, not too long ago, when you was feeling his cute ass!" Monique light-brown skin looked flushed under the

kitchen fluorescents. "If you were in this same situation," she said to Nora, "couldn't no one tell you to stay away from your man!" She turned to her sister and the women touched hands.

Nora slammed her own hand to the table. Her action was muffled by a heavy tablecloth. "I never would have married that fool! He was all wrong for Kit. I told her so."

"The same way we all told you not to marry Michael and Tyrell?" Evelyn quizzed.

"Say what you want about them," Nora spat. "They both had good jobs and benefits. And neither would have faked his own death!"

"Tyrell, that last one, might as well have been dead. Isn't that what you said, Nora?" Evelyn pursed her lips. "In the three years you were married, didn't you say he only gave you some a handful of times?"

Kit turned from the stove and waved a wooden spoon. Thick, red sauce splattered to the spotless white linoleum. "Y'all sound more like teenagers than women with sense."

"Girl, we're just having fun," Evelyn sassed. She folded her hands together and parted her lips to reveal even, white teeth. "So, are you, going to do it, Kit? You thinking of letting Shawn come home?"

"I'm comfortable with things the way they are right now. He was gone for four years. He might as well stay gone. I'm finally ready to move on."

"But he's not ready!" Nora folded her arms across her chest. "Didn't you say he's always calling, finding reasons to come over and asking to see the kids?"

"You're full of shit, Nora." Kit turned from the stove to eye her sister. "Dee finally broke down and told me you've been allowing him to see the kids at your house."

"Baby, don't be mad..."

"How the hell am I supposed to feel? I thought I could trust you!"

While the Greene sisters had it out, Evelyn fiddled with her freshly groomed micro-braids and Monique inspected the shine on her manicure.

"No matter what he did, Kit, it's just not fair to keep his kids away from him. He's a good guy. He wouldn't hurt them."

"He might not hurt them, but someone from his past could!"

"He's not going to make this easy for you," Monique broke in, her voice dipping

conspiratorially. "If he keeps stepping to you, maybe we could change his mind. I know some men who could force your husband to see things your way."

Kit placed a top over the meat sauce. She moved swiftly across the kitchen, stopping for a brief minute to swing open the kitchen door and look in at her son. Jimmy sat in a world of his own, rolling trucks up and down a hill he'd made with colorful blocks. "I know you're not suggesting what I think, Mo. I might be divorcing him, but he's still my kids' father!"

Nora nodded. "Fighting isn't the answer."

"Then what is?" Monique asked. "Now that he's back, he'll never leave you alone. And when you can prove he's alive and push the divorce through, what'll happen then? He's already damn near stalking your ass!"

Kit sank into the chair nearest to Nora. The sisters exchanged knowing glances and simultaneous shrugs. Though she and her older sister had their differences, having Nora there to fend off some of Monique and Evelyn's crazier ideas was reassuring.

From early childhood, these women seemed to always have major opinions about how she lived her life. It had started on the playground and continued into high school and adult life. She supposed this was because Evelyn and Monique—three and five years older than her—had been Nora's friend first. They saw her as more of a younger sister than a girlfriend.

She sighed. "He'll have to give up, eventually. No one's that patient."

Kit looked at her hands and swallowed back the disgust that roiled inside her. She could not bring herself to admit the real problem. Every time she and Shawn got together, they wound up in bed. Or on the floor. Or on her kitchen counter...

Later, after her sister and their friends had gone home, Kit remembered something Monique had said.

Now that he's back, he'll never leave you alone.

Realization hit her like a shockwave.

Despite her protests, her actions had shown that she didn't want him to leave her alone. She still cared about him.

If he could prove he'd changed, that he could resist the temptations of Atlantic City, that he'd no longer kiss her with gin-stained lips, she might be willing to consider reconciling.

For Dee and Jimmy's sake.

She went to sleep that night, and as it had been every night since she first laid eyes on him, Shawn's face was the last image she saw before dropping off to sleep.

Chapter Nine

Shawn refused to give up.

He'd come so far, and too close, only to lose her now. He'd allowed forty-eight hours to pass since their last conversation. That two days felt almost as bad as his self-imposed, four-year hiatus.

Gripping his cell phone so hard it nearly fused into his flesh, he dialed first Kit's cell, then her office line, and finally her home number. Her vacation ended today; she should be in her office. Voicemail picked up each call. Disappointment washed over him. Anger followed. He tossed the traitorous phone at the wall.

If only I'd told her about the money...

But would it really have mattered? His almost ex-wife, the woman he'd loved for most of his life, seemed determined to rid herself of him for good. He sank onto the foot of his bed, running a shaking hand against the threadbare linen. Maybe she was right. Maybe it was time to throw in the towel.

A knock at the door jolted him from his thoughts. He couldn't be bothered to get up to answer. "What do you want?" he barked.

A sweet, tentative voice—one a lot like his wife's when she wasn't pissed off—called to him.

"Daddy? It's me. Dee."

He practically flew to the door. When he opened it, he tried to smile, tried to swallow his confusion. His little girl didn't need to see that.

"Hey, honey." He stepped aside, allowing her entry. He watched as the stunning teenager looked around the beige and gray room, and nearly laughed when she wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Why didn't you call to say you were coming, honey? I would've picked you up. This neighborhood isn't the best."

She shrugged, tossed her pink, cloth handbag unto his bed, and sat in the spot he'd vacated. "I didn't know I was coming until I was halfway here. I needed to talk to you. But not over the phone."

He clicked his jaw, selected one of the four metal chairs surrounding the cheap, collapsible table and sat down. "What's wrong? You all right?"

"I'm fine. But Mom's not doing so well. She won't talk to me about it, because I'm her kid. But I heard her crying to Aunt Cassie on the phone yesterday."

He nodded. "Let me guess. She was crying about me."

"Yep."

"Your mom and I have been having a difficult time communicating. It's mostly my fault. But she's being stubborn, too."

Dee smirked and tossed back a mass of wavy, shoulder-length hair. "She's being a bitch, Dad. And I'm sick of it."

Shawn climbed to his feet. He had rarely had to discipline his daughter in the years before he left home, but this moment seemed as good a time as any to start. "You don't get to talk about your mother that way. I don't care how mad you are with her. You understand?"

The teenager rolled her eyes. "But Daddy —"

"Do you understand?"

"Yes. I understand." Her sullen tone mocked him. "You're just as bad as she is, you know that?"

Sitting on the bed, he gestured for her to scoot over. "What do you mean?"

"Well, she goes on and on about how getting back with you would be the worst thing ever. But the second anyone says anything bad about you, she gets all up in their face."

"Really?" Shawn couldn't help but smile. "All up in their face?"

"Yup. When Aunt Nora called you a loser one day, I thought Mom was gonna smack her."

He chuckled. He'd always thought Nora could benefit from a good smack. Several smacks, actually. "That's nice to hear, Dee."

Tears welled in the girl's eyes. Her lips trembled, and she reached for her father, gripping his arm with a strength that surprised him.

"What is it, honey?"

"You have to come home. I know what you did was bad. I don't care." She sniffled, burying her head into his shirt. When she looked up at him, again, her cat-like eyes sparkled. "Whatever you did to make Mom want to take you away from us, you have to fix it. You have to make it up to her."

Shawn felt his chest tighten. He folded his child into his arms and squeezed with all his might. "I don't know what to do."

He hated the way his voice sounded. His tone said he'd given up, that he'd come to terms with the end of his marriage. What he hated most, though, was the weakness he felt, the weakness he now showed to his daughter. "I've tried everything. Your mom doesn't want to be bothered with me anymore."

Dee flinched away and glared at him. The look she fixed upon him came straight out of her mother's repertoire. "Try harder. Do what you have to do to work it out. You're not dumb, Dad. If you were, I wouldn't bother. But I know you're a smart guy." She moved toward the door. "So, act smart."

He curtailed the father in him, the part of him that wanted to chastise and punish her for her disrespect. Instead, he focused on his child's words; he concentrated on their intent.

Shit, he thought. You're the smart one, Dee.

"Let me give you a lift."

She shook her head. "That's okay. I'll catch the train."

He wouldn't hear of it. "No, you won't, because you're coming with me." He lightly pulled her hand into his and opened the door.

"I'm supposed to go to Aunt Nora's today. Mommy's going to pick up Jimmy and then come get me."

"All right, then. I'll drop you off at your aunt's. Then, I'll surprise your mother." Shawn had a thought. "What time is she supposed to come get you?"

"Around four," she answered. She furrowed her brow. "You're gonna try again?"

He reached out and mussed her hair. "Yep. I'm going to try again, Dee. And again. And again. Until I finally get it right."

Shawn rounded the corner of Third Street and Tenth, pulling the collar of his leather jacket closer around his neck. The bitterly cold wind stung his cheeks. The sight of his wife and son only feet away took his breath away.

He slowed his pace, deciding to hang back. Kit looked terrific, her long, dark hair pulled back in a snug ponytail. Standing in her close-fitting shearling jacket and tight jeans, she looked more like Jimmy's older sister than his mother. He balled his fists at his sides when he noticed the tall, familiar male who held the attention of his wife and son.

Quickening his stride, he pulled an unused pair of leather gloves from his jacket pocket. When he stood only inches away from his family, he saw Kit turn in surprise.

"Shawn? What are you doing here?"

Jimmy stepped forward and tugged at his jacket. "Hi, Daddy!"

His eyes misted. Even though they'd only seen each other a handful of times, Jimmy seemed to be coming around. Shawn wished Jimmy would talk to his Mom...

"Hi, kid." He forced a tight smile to his lips. "I was in the neighborhood. Thought I'd catch a look at you." He shrugged and grinned at the frustrated man who'd backed off upon his approach. "I couldn't wait until Saturday night."

Kit looked at him curiously before turning back to the other man. "Bobby... You remember Shawn."

Shawn put out his hand, capturing the other man's in a hot, bone-crunching shake. Bobby's eyes watered a little, but to Shawn's satisfaction, his rival didn't let go. His last squeeze elicited a grunt from his wife's friend. Shawn smiled warmly, showing every one of his teeth. "Good to see you again, man."

"I'm sorry for the...misunderstanding before."

"It's all right, I guess. Can't blame you for being mad. You had a date with a fine lady, only to have her husband come back from the grave and muck it all up." He grinned coldly and ran lascivious eyes over Kit. "I would have been mad, too."

Bobby stepped back uncertainly. "That's cool."

"Is it? Are we cool, Bobby?"

Kit's cool hand tugged on his frozen fingers. "Shawn, please don't embarrass me, again."

He enfolded her hands into his, and pressed the gloves into the palm of her hand. "Thought

you might need these.”

“How’d you know?”

“You never remember your gloves. You used to always get me and the kids dressed first. By the time it was your turn, you’d be rushing.” Lost in her eyes, he brushed a quick peck over her pert nose. “You never remember to take care of yourself, Kit.”

To Shawn, it seemed they stared at each other for a long time. He no longer felt the freezing cold winds. Nor did he remember the smitten man wearing the multi-colored sweater and horn-rimmed glasses who’d been trying to hit on his wife.

Kit dragged her eyes away from him first, dissolving whatever magic that had been brewing. “Nice talking to you, Bobby.” She looked down at their son and tugged his hand playfully. “Say goodbye to Mr. Watkins.”

“Bye, Mr. Watkins!”

“Yeah, bye Mr. Watkins,” Shawn sneered as the man walked away. “Geez, Kit. Tell me you’re not—”

“Stay out of my business,” she said softly. “Who I talk to is not your concern, Shawn.”

“How many times do I have to tell you that you’ll always be my business?”

“Daddy’s business! Daddy’s business!” Jimmy yipped.

Kit smirked. “Lord, both of y’all are too much.”

He swallowed the lump that formed in his throat as his wife stared lovingly at their child. He remembered a time when she looked at him that way.

She looked so beautiful, so soft and open. Suddenly, he felt transported back in time. This was the woman he’d met sixteen years earlier, not three blocks from this very spot. He’d been playing basketball, tearing up the hoop, silencing all the hotshots who’d doubted his ability to dunk. Kit had walked past looking cuter than any girl had a right to look in skin-tight jeans.

He had seen her while he was in mid-dunk. He’d wiped out instantly, crashing to the pavement with such a thump that the girl in the tight Guess jeans turned. She’d stuck her delicate fingers through the chain link fence. “You all right?”

He’d sprained his ankle pretty badly, but walking away with the pretty girl’s number had sped up the healing process. Kit had always been a caretaker. He’d later realize that she’d learned from the best—her crazy mother, aunts and their assorted friends.

After his buddy Paul told him the fly girl with the pretty smile was his cousin, Shawn knew he was in there. All he had to do was wait. And wait he had.

At the time, he'd been dangerously close to his nineteenth birthday, while Kit had not yet celebrated her sixteenth. Of course, after she'd crossed that threshold, he'd hurried to ask her out. But she'd been seeing another guy, then. Her relationship, an on-again off-again teenage courtship with another baller hadn't worked out—especially since Shawn and his buddy Paul set enough traps and pitfalls to waylay even the smoothest of hustlers.

After a few misfires, Shawn finally got the girl. In short order, he got her pregnant and married her.

But what might have felt like an ending in the life of another twenty-year-old, felt like the beginning for him. In fact, other than witnessing the birth of his children, marrying Kit had been the happiest day of his life.

Now Shawn reached out to the young girl he'd met all those years ago. "Honey, I need you."

She quickly wiped a gloved hand over her eyes. "Say goodbye to Daddy, Jimmy."

"Bye, Daddy!"

"I'm not going anywhere, little man. Your mom and I aren't finished." Again, he reached for his wife's hand. This time, she didn't pull away.

"Shawn, I..."

He bent close and swiped a kiss across her cheek. "Can we drop Jimmy off at Nora's for a little while? Dee's already there."

She narrowed her eyes.

"Please? Please, Kit?"

An hour later, Kit opened her husband's refrigerator to have a look at what was inside. Or wasn't.

"You're going to have to do some shopping before the kids come to visit," she said. "Strawberry jam and moldy cheese aren't going to get it." She turned to find him staring at her.

"I know how to take care of my children," he assured her. "I'll do the shopping tomorrow."

"Okay. Fine." She backed off, not wanting to start an argument. Truth be known, she felt happy that she hadn't stumbled upon a case of beer. Or worse—a bottle of vodka.

Kit shut the refrigerator door and moved forward to get past her husband. Try as she might, she just couldn't move gingerly enough to minimize contact. She inhaled deeply as their midsections collided. She wasn't surprised to feel Shawn's hands encircle her waist. "Is that why you asked me here?" she quavered.

"Not particularly," he whispered. "I invited you back to talk, again, about reconciling. But let's face facts; talking isn't what we do best."

Before she could muster a suitable response, she felt his lips envelope hers. She didn't move, didn't so much as draw a breath. Instead, she surrendered to the sweetness of the kiss, and for a moment, pretended it was the most natural thing in the world.

But isn't it? she asked herself. Shouldn't she want to kiss the father of her children, the only man she'd ever loved? Despite all that had gone wrong, Shawn was right. Talking had never gotten them anywhere but angry. Kissing however...

Still, she pulled back. Their inability to communicate was one of her many reasons for wanting to pursue a divorce. How could she stay married to a man she couldn't talk to?

"No." She pushed him away and leaned against the wall. "This isn't—"

"Right?" he questioned, his handsome face drawn in anger. "Who says, Kit? Because it certainly feels right to me!"

Her lips trembled. Damn him! Why does he have to be so damn fine?

She tore her eyes away from his face, still a turn-on for her after all these years. Neither his love of a stiff drink nor his years in hiding had been able to mar his boyish good looks. "Sex won't change all that's happened. It won't change our debt, or the years you were gone, or the fact that I don't trust you."

Kit gasped at the feel of his hands—so warm and caressing before, now harsh and cruel. They bit into the flesh of her back. She bit down on the whimper that escaped her lips, too late to stop it. He heard it and the smile on his face filled her with dread.

"You still messing around with that nerdy teacher?" he demanded.

"No, I'm not. I haven't been with anyone else, if that's what you mean."

"Good." His grip loosened a bit, even as her chest tightened. "Neither have I. And I don't know about you, Kit, but I don't want anybody else."

This time, she didn't try to turn away. Her heart felt like it might explode as she made an admission. "I think about you all the time. I can't sleep. I miss you..."

"I know the feeling," Shawn agreed.

The tears she'd held back finally broke to the surface. She bent forward, hiding behind her hair, but didn't resist when she felt Shawn's hand under her chin, forcing her – daring her – to look at him.

"Look, I know I messed up. I'm the biggest jerk on the planet. But that doesn't change the fact that I love you and our kids more than my own life. I swear to you, Kitty. I stopped drinking like I used to – haven't had anything stronger than a beer in more than two years." He pulled her closer and kissed her temple gently. "And I'm through bumming around Atlantic City and Vegas."

"And what about your get-rich schemes? Pretending to be hard, running around with gangstas that would kill your ass as soon as look at you?"

"That's done. I want a normal life. In fact, I talked to Nathan about getting into construction and painting."

"Cassie's husband? Really? For real?" She'd caved faster than even she had expected; but isn't that the way things had always gone between them? She'd accepted his death because she had to, and despite the pain and all her regrets, she'd pushed forward with her life. She had managed to do pretty well, for a while.

But now, seeing him nearly every day, having Shawn thrust himself so determinedly back into her life, she felt her reserve shattering.

Making up her mind, Kit stood on tiptoe and wound her arms around her husband's neck. Immediately, his lips parted in desire.

"Kiss me again."

She didn't have to ask twice. Her heart skipped when his hands cradled her backside, bringing her closer. Their lips fused into one, hot unit, and she thrilled at the sparks going through her body.

"I love you," he groaned against her lips. "Thank you for coming back to me."

She didn't answer; instead, she dug her hands into his wavy, brown hair. She gasped as she felt her feet leave the floor, and giggled as he carried her into the dark confines of his small bedroom. Still holding her against him, he sank onto the bed. Kit wriggled atop him until she straddled his lap.

She reached to pull his shirt out of his jeans. Heat stung her cheeks as she eyed his chest and stomach. They were as hard and defined as they had been years earlier. Almost dizzy with passion, she bent to sprinkle kisses across his throat, collarbone, and nipples.

"Kitty...uh."

"Shush," she whispered, pressing another kiss to his mouth. "Don't spoil it."

She grinned when she saw how fast Shawn's mouth slammed shut.

But the time for grinning was over.

He ran his strong, capable hands over her breasts, awakening her flesh. Her nipples immediately jutting out, begging for the familiar touch. She lifted her arms and shivered at the feel of her sweater being pulled over her head. Her creamy, silk bra followed suit, falling to the floor. When she shivered again, it was against her husband's wet, warm lips.

Kit watched him watching her. His hot gaze excited her even more. His eyes had taken on that glazed cast they always had when they made love. There had been times through their relationship, especially after their marriage, where that look had frightened her. It was a primal stare—one of ownership, of possession. She felt her insides clutch and hum with wanting. For him to still look at her with that same depth of need confirmed what she already knew in her heart. He wouldn't give her up without a fight.

Thankfully, she didn't have a chance to get lost in her fears. He grasped her waist and stood, setting her on her feet.

She unbuckled her belt and unbuttoned her jeans; Shawn did the same.

Soon their bodies collided and clashed heatedly, at one point, literally tearing up Shawn's sheets when one of Kit's fingernails got caught.

Feeling sassy, she turned her naked ass up, waving her well-padded cheeks at him. "Come and get it, big boy."

"You offering me anal?" he quipped.

"Hell, no! You know I only do that if I get to ride." She craned her neck so that he could see her roll her eyes. "You're too big for me to let you roam free up in my ass!"

The couple howled with laughter.

“Fine, Mrs. Redstone. Then I guess I’ll just have to punish your pussy for a few hours.”

“Fine with me,” she sassed. “My pussy’s been a bad girl. She deserves all the punishment she can take. Lots of it, Shawn. Over and over again. Hard. And deep...”

Needing no further urging, the big man moved toward the bed, stopping for a moment to smack his beloved’s bountiful bottom.

“Whoever said black guys like ass and white guys are into tits, was a damn liar,” he growled.

Shawn grinned as Kit wolfed down her second slice of pizza. “Hey, watch it. You’re getting sauce on the bed!”

“Well, if you play your cards right, you won’t be sleeping in this broke-down double bed much longer.” She cut her eyes at him and chewed.

He loved this, watching his wife—naked, satiated and happy—chowing down on pizza after supreme lovemaking. Just like old times. But he had to risk turning their easygoing patter into a more serious direction. “Honey?”

“Yeah?”

He inhaled deeply. “There’s still something you don’t know. I waited to tell you because...well, I wanted you back before I broke the news.”

Kit’s eyes flashed. She placed the remains of her slice onto a paper plate. “Shit, Shawn. Is what you’re about to say going to make me want to leave you?”

Probably, he thought.

He stopped, fumbling for words, daring himself to tell her the truth. He’d just gotten her back. If he told her how he came into possession of seven hundred thousand dollars, she’d leave him for good and never look back. Yeah, he could beg and plead as he had before—but he knew this time would end differently.

Kit loved him with her soul. But she would never be able to forgive him for being a thief. She definitely wouldn’t be able to forgive him if she knew the details of what he’d really done to get all that money.

So, for what Shawn hoped would be the last time, he lied to his wife.

"I came into some money recently." He stood and picked up the jeans he'd so carelessly thrown to the floor. Reaching into a pocket, he removed a slip of paper and handed it to her. "This is for you and the kids, baby. It's for us."

Kit accepted the check. Her hand shook a bit as she read the amount. "Shawn, this is over seven hundred grand."

"Yeah, I know."

"Well, where the hell did you get it?" She stood and advanced on him. "Did you get a job as a corporate raider while you were on the run?"

He chuckled loudly. "I wish. After I left Wyoming, I made my way steadily back east. I lived in Jersey the longest. You know how much I've always liked Atlantic City..."

"How could I forget?" Kit mumbled. "So, you won this money? Is that why you won't be going back to Atlantic City? Because you no longer have to, Shawn?"

Now that he'd concocted this lie, he had to commit himself fully to it. "Yeah. I lived under a lot of different names—had IDs made, social security cards, birth certificates, the works. When I stopped into the casino one night, I'd only planned to play some cheap slots." He swallowed hard before continuing. She seemed to be buying his story—or, at least she seemed to want to believe it. "Anyway, I started playing one of those progressive machines—you know, the kind that builds a pot until someone takes the whole thing."

"Uh-huh."

"And after a few pulls, Kit, I won. I got so nervous when other players surrounded me and the hotel's staff came to see. My hands shook something awful when it was time for me to provide my ID. But everything went so smoothly that night—it was almost too easy. Well, you can imagine how fast I jumped in my car and left Jersey. That was only a couple of weeks ago. After the last of the Constantine family and their associates got rounded up by the cops, I decided to come out of hiding."

He watched as she went to the bed and sat down with a thump. After pulling threadbare sheets over her breasts, she looked at him. "You certainly haven't been living like a man who came into that kind of money."

"Because it's for you and our kids. Don't you know that I'd give it all up for you? If you want it right now, it's yours."

"Slow down. I need to think."

He sat beside her and looked into her face. She didn't speak for so long that an icy fear alighted in his stomach.

Finally, she touched his hand. "Why'd you wait so long to tell me? You've been back home nearly a month already. Why am I just hearing about your good fortune now?"

"Because I wanted us to be a family again." He turned up his palm and captured her hand inside his own. "I didn't want to use the money as a...bribe or something. I told myself that when you and I got back together—and I knew we would—it would be for the right reasons. And those reasons are our children, our love and our life together."

She sighed heavily. "I know what you're expecting me to do, so I won't give you the pleasure."

"What?"

"You're expecting me to curse you out for not trusting me sooner. You're expecting me to storm out of here." She drew closer to him, placing her head against his chest. He felt his heart flutter.

"I love you so much, Shawn. I thought I would die, too, after I lost you."

"I feel the same way, baby."

"The reason I was so...mean to you when you came back is because it hurt me so much. Taking you back into my life means I'm vulnerable again." She closed her eyes. "But you know what? I don't even care about the past, anymore. I don't care about the money. I'm just glad you're alive and with me, now."

They embraced.

He allowed himself to do something he probably wouldn't have four years ago. He cried in his wife's arms, feeling more open and manly than he had in his own life.

When he pulled away, he rubbed his eyes. "There's something else."

"Of course, there is," Kit groaned. "You're working my nerves, here, buddy. You're really pushing it with the secrets, ain't you?"

He grinned. "No, no. It's not like that. It's just that I spoke with a lawyer about how I could resume my old life. See, even though I was never officially part of the Constantine Cartel, the cops are definitely going to want to speak to me. I have to let them know that I'm very much alive. I'll probably have to make a confession about all that I saw and did during my short

tenure with Big Lou and the gang.”

“Shawn, you could go to jail, right?”

He nodded. “That’s a possibility. But the more cooperative I am, and the more information I provide...that could get me a very light sentence.”

Kit wrenched away from him and stood. Her dark eyes glistened with a desperation that scared him. “Why do you have to tell the cops anything? We have this money, right? How about we just take the kids and move somewhere—sorta like what you did before. We could start a new life, Shawn, using different names and—”

Shawn was on his feet in an instant. He grabbed her shoulders, shaking her, causing her naked breasts to bob against his chest. “No. I’m not running anymore. And I’m not going to put you and the kids through that.”

“I don’t want to lose you again,” she admitted. She pushed her body into his, folding her arms around his waist. “I just got you back!”

He leaned down and graced her with a kiss meant to banish her fear and panic. “You’re not going to lose me again, Kit. I know you couldn’t always count on what I said in the past, but believe that. There’s no way in hell I’d ever leave you and our babies again.”

Plump, luminous tears trickled down Kit’s cheeks. Her voice, choked with emotion, sang out to him as she pulled him closer. “I know you won’t. I wouldn’t let you go this time.”

They stood together, clutching each other’s bodies, hoping against hope they could keep the promises they made.

Epilogue

A hush fell over the courtroom. The judge was ready to sentence the defendant.

“The prosecution has petitioned the court to take into consideration your testimony for the State of New York vs. Luigi Constantine. Shawn Kenneth Redstone, I hereby sentence you to four years probation. Four years, young man. If you so much as jaywalk during that period, you’ll be pulled back in to serve a much longer sentence in a prison cell.”

The gavel crashed down.

Kit stumbled through the throng of onlookers, smiled at Shawn's lawyer, and went to her husband's side. "I can't believe it's finally over."

Shawn squeezed her hard. "I'm not so sure about that. Until Lou is sentenced, I could still be in danger." He hated the frightened look shining out of Kit's eyes. "They're saying I might have to go into Witness Protection."

"Well, I guess we'll be going with you, then."

"Honey, I promised you that we wouldn't live like that. Dee and Jimmy shouldn't spend their lives on the run."

She silenced him by standing on tiptoe and tasting his lips. "If you go somewhere, I'm going, too. You hear me, Shawn Redstone? We'll all go."

As the couple left the courtroom, he gazed openly at her, wondering if she could feel the love that wanted to burst out of him.

He couldn't be sure what life had in store for him. He'd never really been the most upstanding man, and the only thing he took pride in was his family. Life had always been a little rough for him, and he didn't expect their secret windfall to change his karma or his luck. But Shawn knew he'd get through anything the world threw at him, as long as Kit stood by his side.

He could learn to change. Well, he'd certainly try...

The End