



Praise for the writing of Elisa Adams

Reality Check

Loved this story; the wacky, but loving relatives, and the great central characters. Wonderful plot, quickly paced with humorous dialogue. ... Rachel and Doug accept that they really do seem to fit well together and enjoy their feelings for each other. Definitely a story for all romantics!

-- Glenda K. Bauerle, *The Romance Studio*

Elisa Adams has done a wonderful job writing a tremendous tale where reality and make-believe have a way of joining forces and becoming one.

-- Jessica, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

In *Reality Check*, Ms Adams takes her characters from laughter to tears to embarrassment and, finally, to love. The best part is that the reader gets to go along for the ride.

-- Vicki Turner, *Romance Reviews Today*

The antics between Rachel and Doug will have you laughing out loud. There is tenderness between them and you cannot wait for the truth to come out about their feelings for one another. This book has everything comedy, scorching sex, tenderness and emotion.

-- Sherry, *Coffee Time Romance*

Elisa Adams' *Reality Check* is one that I would recommend that you grab, as it is one of those that have it all, heat, humor and honest to goodness entertainment that tempts you page after page.

-- Wendi, *Enchanted Ramblings*

Reality Check is now available from Samhain Publishing.

DIVINE INTERVENTION

Elisa Adams

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This book contains explicit sexual content and graphic language.

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Chapter One

“I want a baby, Drew.”

Larissa paced the kitchen, one hand twisting the hem of her shirt and the other clenching the cordless phone in a death grip while she waited for her husband’s answer. Her heels clicked on the hardwood floor, a hollow echo that mimicked the empty chill in her heart.

She waited through the silence of an endless minute. Still, he didn’t reply. Her pulse raced, her tongue darting out to wet her dry lips.

“Did you hear me?” She paused by the window and parted the curtains, peering out into the semi-darkness. Snowflakes danced through the air, incandescent in the soft glow of the streetlights. In the past hour, an inch or so of wet snow and slush had gathered on the road in front of the house, and the weather forecast called for a lot more before morning. If Drew stayed much longer at work, the snow would be too heavy for them to make their dinner reservations.

They’d have to cancel yet again. Her heart sank at the thought. Big surprise there. Of all nights, tonight should have been the night she could count on her husband. But the

routine they'd settled into after five years of marriage wasn't a comfortable one, at least not for her.

The shuffling of papers and tapping of computer keys carried across the phone line. "What was that again, babe? I'm sorry. I'm in the middle of this huge deal. You know how it is."

Typical. A sigh slipped from her lips, and her heart dropped to her knees. Of course she knew how it was -- but that didn't mean she had to like it. She couldn't remember the last time she'd gotten him to take a personal day, and it had gotten worse in the past year. Their only contact in months had been a hurried kiss as he raced out the door at six a.m. -- or earlier.

By the time he got home at night, run ragged from trying to do too many things at once, he was too tired for anything more than dinner and bed. Making love had become a thing of the past, as had evenings out and even casual conversation. An ache started low in her gut. It had been more than a month since he'd touched her.

Something had to change, and it damned well wasn't going to come from her end of the marriage.

She cleared her throat, determined to make him notice her. "I said I want a baby. A *baby*, Drew. Is that so hard for you to understand?"

His answering laugh had a nervous edge, and for the moment, all his usual work noises stopped. "Excuse me? You want what? Are you serious?"

Now that she had his complete attention, she wanted to pull back her words. Her stomach churned and her palms sweat. He'd told her more than a few times how he felt about adding a child to their family. *Not now. Not yet. Too soon.* It might be too soon for him, but she was more than ready. Had been for the past two years. And she was sick of living life on his terms.

She drew a deep breath and squared her shoulders. She wouldn't let him brush her aside this time. With everything else she stood her ground, but she'd been willing to let him have his way when it came to children. Not anymore. If he planned to spend the next fifty years locked up in his office, she needed something to give her life purpose.

"I'm very serious. I'm sick of waiting for it to be the right time for you. I'm going to be thirty next month. It's the right time for *me*. You're never home, anyway. It's not like you'd notice another person in the house." *You never notice the one who already lives here.*

He heaved a sigh, and she pictured the frustration etched on the planes of his handsome face. His green eyes would be dark with aggravation, his full lips pursed, his jaw tense. Right about then he'd sink his fingers into his thick, dark hair and tug, giving it that messy look she'd first been so attracted to.

And then he'd give her a million excuses, just as he always had. Her shoulders slumped.

When he spoke, his voice vibrated with tension. "Do we have to talk about this now? I have at least another hour's worth of work to do. The longer we talk, the longer it's going to be before I get out of here. You know how my car is in this weather. I want to be on the road before the storm gets worse, so I really have to go. How about we discuss this when I get home?"

And when would that be? Knowing Drew, at least two hours from now. Probably closer to three. Hot tears welled in her eyes, and she swiped them away with the back of her hand. *Not now. Be strong. If you give in to him now, things will never change. He'll always be the workaholic you're learning to despise, and you'll always be left alone and waiting.*

"You can't stay for hours tonight. Don't you remember?" A bitter laugh stuck in her throat. Of course he didn't. He never did.

Drew's personal life took a backseat to his job. *Always*. If only she'd known five years ago how their life together would turn out. She would have left him at the altar.

Exasperation hung heavy in his tone when he answered. “Exactly what am I supposed to remember? I don’t really have time for guessing games.”

“We have dinner reservations.” She tapped her freshly manicured nails on the counter, waiting for her words to spark something in his memory. How was it that he remembered court dates and meetings with clients, when he couldn’t remember special occasions with the woman he’d made vows to?

“Cancel them. We’ll have to make it another night. I’m sorry, babe. Really I am. But you know how it is.”

She clenched her hand into a fist so tight her nails bit into the skin of her palm. She knew, all right. She knew that Drew got what he wanted, and she got shoved to the side. *Not anymore*. Anger twisted her insides, hot and fierce, and a frustrated scream threatened to break free from her throat.

But she held it back, all the anger and disappointment and need to be loved. Stooping to that level would do nothing except get him mad. And she was worth a lot more than this kind of treatment.

A few deep breaths did wonders to calm the fire inside her. She had a better way to get him to stop and take notice of what he was throwing away. It was a risky plan, but it was her last resort. “You know what? Cancel them yourself. I’m sick of this.”

“Larissa. Please don’t be like this. I promise I’ll make it up to you. Why don’t we go out tomorrow night instead?”

“Because tomorrow night isn’t our anniversary.”

She heard his muffled curse, and the tears started flowing in earnest, running in scorching rivulets down her cheeks. He really hadn’t remembered. Five years. *Five years*. How could he have forgotten?

When had he not?

The first year had been the only time. He'd been wonderful, surprising her with roses and a bottle of champagne and taking her away for the weekend to the Maine coast where they'd spent their honeymoon. The following year, he'd been too busy trying to make partner in his family's advertising firm. He'd promised that once he made partner, things would change. That had been more than four years ago.

"Hold on. We can figure something out." When he spoke, guilt filled his voice. But from past experience, she knew guilt wouldn't be enough to drag him out of the office. He would come home with a dozen generic red roses and think it made everything okay.

"You know what, babe? I'll be home as soon as I can. Give me just five minutes to tie up a few last things, and I'll head home."

Had those words just come from her husband? She smiled through her tears, hope swelling her heart for the first time in longer than she could remember. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Of course. We can get takeout. We can both be happy. I'll bring my work home, and you can keep me company while I finish it."

Her hopes came crashing back to earth, reality a bucket of ice water splashed over her. Bring his work home? On their anniversary? *Like hell.* "Just forget it, Drew. Stay at the office. Stay there forever, for all I care. I refuse to spend the rest of my life with a man who won't even keep a date on our anniversary."

"Is this because of the baby? I told you, we'll talk about it. I just ... I don't think I'm ready for children yet."

Of all the selfish things ... "Well, *I* am. I guess I'll have to go out and find a man who won't ignore me."

A tense silence stretched between them until every nerve in her body felt pulled taut and ready to snap. So many things flew through her mind, but she held her tongue and waited for his response.

Finally, Drew cleared his throat. “Larissa, babe, don’t do this. We can work this out. I love you more than anything. More than life. You know that. Please think about this. Don’t leave.”

The fear, the agony in his voice pierced her heart. Why couldn’t things have been different?

“You may love me more than life, but not more than your stupid job.” She shuddered, fighting a sob. “I have to do this. I can’t live like this anymore. This is the way it’s going to have to be from now on. Goodbye, Drew. I hope you have a nice life.” With the last of her courage, she pressed the *end* button on the phone and hung up on the only man she’d ever loved.

No longer able to hold back the flood of tears, she sank to the floor. The phone dropped from her hand, hitting the wood with a thud. Nothing would ever be the same, but she didn’t see any other choice. She’d tried everything she could think of to bring him back to her. Nothing had worked. As much as it broke her heart to leave, it’d kill her to stay.

Chapter Two

Drew switched his windshield wipers to high as the snow started coming down even harder. He'd left the office twenty minutes ago and hadn't yet made it halfway home -- usually a ten-minute drive. The storm had taken a turn for the worse a lot sooner than predicted, and his little sports car had zero traction in nasty weather. He'd be lucky to make it home in one piece.

He *had* to. He had to get there, the sooner the better. He had to catch Larissa before she left and beg her to stay. He'd do anything it took. Anything at all. The thought of living without her left him empty inside. Would she really walk out on him just because he'd forgotten one little anniversary?

No. If it had been just that, he'd have nothing to worry about. But it was a lot more than just one dinner reservation. He'd promised with his wedding vows to put her before all others. He hadn't done that in years, but until she'd voiced it, he'd been too busy to notice.

He could try to cut down his hours. Though it would be hard, he could probably work something out. She'd surprised him with the baby request, but if that was what it took to get her to stay, he'd do it. The thought of being responsible for another life scared him to death, but he'd learn to live with it.

And it wouldn't be so terrible, really. A child, with Larissa's sun-kissed brown hair and warm brown eyes, cuddled in its mother's arms. His wife's arms. A smile played at the corners of his lips. No, it wouldn't be so terrible at all. Now he just had to find a way to convince her that he was serious.

He slowed as he came to an intersection. Seeing no other headlights illuminating the area, he stepped on the gas to drive through. Larissa couldn't leave him. He couldn't lose her. He loved her too much. She loved him, too. He'd heard it in her tear-filled voice. She didn't want their marriage to end this way, but she probably felt like he'd left her with no other choice.

Thanks to the unpredictable New England winter, he might still have a chance to convince her to stay. She wouldn't leave in the middle of a snowstorm. She couldn't. She hated driving in the snow, even with the big SUV he'd bought her last winter.

But she'd been so serious, so angry.

His chest tightened at the thought of going home every night to a cold, empty house. She had to be there. He *had* to get to her.

The screeching brakes registered too late for him to do anything about it. He barely had time to glance to the side before a truck slammed into his car and pushed it across the road into a building. The sides of the car closed in around him. Larissa's smiling face was the last thing on his mind before everything went black.

Chapter Three

“Drew.”

The soft voice called to him, tried to drag him out of a foggy sleep, but his sluggish mind refused to cooperate, and his eyelids declined to open. It hurt too much to move. Too much to even think. He tried to wave the speaker away, but his arms stayed pinned by his sides, limp and useless. Every nerve hovered between throbbing pain and a strange, numb nothingness that tempted him sorely.

“Drew, you need to wake up.”

His thoughts exactly. But his body -- and mind -- had other ideas. What had happened to him? Had he been drugged? Beaten?

He tried to push into a standing position, but something hard and heavy had his legs trapped. A wave of nausea rolled over him, ripping a groan from his throat and knocking all the fight out of him. *“Not now.”*

Not now. There was something important he had to do. It couldn't wait another second. What was it?

Larissa.

He had to get home to his wife. But he'd never make it in this state. He needed to wake up, shake off whatever this funk was, and get moving. She needed him. Larissa needed him. And he needed her.

The wail of sirens pounded into his muddled consciousness. An accident? Had he been in an accident? Maybe. Snow ... a crash ... it slipped out of his mind before he could get a good grip on the memory.

"Drew. This is important. Snap out of it." The woman cleared her throat and tapped him on the shoulder, her stern tone echoing through his head. A sharp pain shot down his arm, but somehow his mind had managed to disconnect from his body. "You can't lie around all night. We have many things to discuss."

Discuss what? All he could think about now was getting rid of the pain -- in any way possible. Once he was back to normal, he'd be able to find Larissa and make things right again. But now, with every cell in his body throbbing, concentration was hard. He just needed a little time. A little rest, and all would be well again. He started to drift off to sleep, but her groan of frustration kept him from floating into the welcoming darkness.

"What is it with men? They can't do anything without help. If you're not going to do this yourself, I guess I'll have to do it for you." She heaved a sigh, and a loud clap filled the air.

All at once, the weight lifted from his legs and the pain drained from his body. Though the rational part of his mind knew it was impossible, he seemed to be suspended in the air, hovering in nothingness. Everything turned bright behind his closed lids, and he tried to force his eyes open again. Still, they wouldn't budge. "What the hell?"

His words died as he felt himself lowered onto something soft. His hands, no longer trapped, felt around below him. Was this some kind of dream? He snapped his eyes open and stared around. A bedroom. But not his own. *Definitely* not his own. He bolted upright,

wincing in preparation for pain that never came. A chill crept down the length of his spine, settling in a ball of ice in the pit of his stomach. This wasn't any place he recognized.

The décor in the small room was drab, lots of blacks and grays, with heavy furniture and abstract art -- not Larissa's taste at all. There wasn't a single feminine touch in the room. The cold, unfamiliar room. He swung his gaze around, taking in every detail, but knowing none. His pulse kicked into overdrive, his gut warning him that something was very, very wrong. Nothing here belonged to him.

Including the tiny, dark-haired woman perched on the foot of the bed.

Her heart-shaped lips tilted into an amused grin. "Welcome back. I thought you'd never wake up. Geez. Talk about lazy."

"Back from where?" He gulped back the knot in his throat and tried to will his arms to stop shaking. This had to be some kind of twisted dream. "Who are you? Would you care to explain to me what I'm doing here?" Vague recollections of some kind of accident floated through his head. Had he been in a car crash? Hurt?

Killed?

"Please explain to me what's going on."

Her smile widened, turned enigmatic. She made a sweeping gesture with her hands, her icy-blue gaze never leaving his. "This is your bedroom. Your apartment."

Bullshit. The breath left his lungs in a whoosh. If she hadn't called him by name, he'd think this was a case of mistaken identity. "No, it's not. I don't have an apartment. I live in a house. With my *wife*."

All at once, the smile left her face, and a deep sadness passed across her eyes. Her lips pursed, and she glanced toward the ceiling for a few seconds as if thinking about what to say next.

When she looked back at him, her expression had turned serious.

“You’ll have to forgive me. I don’t know any nice way to say this, so I’m going to be blunt. I hate to have to be the one to break this to you, but you have no wife.” She shook her head, her choppy dark hair brushing her chin. “You have no house. Anything relating to her, to the life you shared together, is gone. You do, however, still have your family and friends, and your job. A vehicle, too ... though it’s not the same one you had, obviously. After what happened, I thought you might need something a little safer. Those tiny sports cars ... they’re death traps. All of them. But the most important thing you have is time. I suggest you use it wisely.”

You have no wife.

His blood turned to ice in his veins. His heart pounded to a stop. Was this some kind of threat? “What happened to Larissa?” If anyone had touched her ...

She stood and lifted a hand to him, palm out, her lips pulled into a stern expression he wouldn’t have thought the tiny woman capable of. “Stop freaking out. It’s only going to make your confusion worse. Nothing happened to *her*. She’s perfectly safe. It’s *you* who had the accident, remember?”

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to drag the memories from a mind that refused to cooperate. “Not really.”

“A big truck knocked your little car into a really big building. The car’s gone. Beyond totaled.”

“How did I survive that?” A sickening thought hit him, and he opened his eyes. The blinding pain, the feeling of being trapped, of sinking into nothingness. Of wanting to do anything to stop his body from hurting so much. Why had the pain stopped?

“I’m dead, aren’t I?” The second the words left his mouth, a surreal feeling washed over him. He held his breath while he waited for her response, though his every instinct already screamed what her answer would be.

“Actually, yes.” She blew out a breath, sending her bangs into the air. “In a manner of speaking. It’s complicated. It would take me too long to explain, and you don’t really have that much time to waste. Suffice it to say that you have one month to learn what’s important in this world, or else you’ll have to leave it for good.”

“Okay.” He spoke slowly, still not certain this wasn’t some stress-induced dream. This couldn’t really be happening to him. Could it? “What am I supposed to do?”

“You’ve lost touch with reality. Work is not the most important thing in life. Family is. *Love* is. You seem to have forgotten that on your quest to make money and get ahead in your career.” She propped her hip on the footboard and crossed her arms over her chest. “You’ve been given a gift, Drew, a pretty big one. Most people never get this chance. Somebody must think you and your wife are pretty important people in this world.”

“Who?”

“You know. The big boss.” She smiled. “Maybe that baby Larissa wants is destined to do something great.”

The big boss. He swallowed hard. That settled it. This was definitely some sort of weird dream. Or nightmare. A nervous laugh rumbled from his throat. “Let me guess. You’re an angel.”

Her eyes widened. “Not hardly. I’m more of a freelancer, of sorts. You don’t need a full description of what I am. It would only bore you. Besides, you have more important things to think about. You’ve got one month to make your wife fall in love with you all over again. One month to win her back.”

She had to be kidding. He scrubbed a palm down his face. “That isn’t nearly enough time.”

“Sure it is. Haven’t you ever heard of the soul mate theory?”

He blinked at her, and she rolled her eyes.

“You and Larissa are destined to be together. Two halves of a whole, I guess you could say. You lost sight of that, took more of an interest in material things than what really matters, and it pushed her away. Thanks to your accident, you have a chance to start over.”

He ran a hand through his hair. He really needed to cut back on caffeine. Or get more sleep. He must have dozed off at the office. Wouldn't be the first time. Any minute now his secretary would come in and wake up him, tell him to go home for the night. And then he'd go home, sit down with Larissa, and have a long-overdue talk.

“I can convince her, no problem. All I have to do is tell her I'm willing to work on the baby, and --”

“No, Drew. You don't understand.” Her crystal gaze turned sad, almost hopeless. “She doesn't know who you are. When I said you have another chance, I meant you have to start over. From scratch.”

“*What?*”

“The chemistry will still be there. That's something not even an ‘all-powerful’ being can take away. It's up to you to take advantage of it.” She glanced at the clock on the small mahogany nightstand next to the bed. “And now I need to go, or I'm going to be late for a very important meeting. It's Saturday morning. Take advantage of the weekend and start working toward your goal.”

This was all too much. How was he supposed to believe any of this was really happening? He felt like he'd been transported to some alternate universe where nothing made sense, and everything that mattered had been taken away. An ache started low in his gut, and he rubbed the spot with his fist. His mind refused to believe it was happening, but he couldn't afford not to, either. He couldn't risk losing Larissa forever. “What happens if I fail?”

“You leave your life behind.”

“And if I do it? If I get Larissa to fall in love with me?”

“The benefits of that should be obvious.” She walked to the window and lifted the shade. “Come on, buddy. It’s a nice, sunny day. Warm for this time of year -- around forty degrees, heading for nearly fifty. All that snow will be melting. Get out there and get your woman back.”

He had a sinking suspicion that would be easier said than done. Way easier. “Who are you?”

She winked. “Shari. And don’t worry about failing. I’ll be around to personally make sure you don’t.”

“Where am I supposed to find Larissa, if any of this is even real?”

Shari rolled her eyes. “Where would you normally find her on a Saturday? Go lay the groundwork. I’ll see you soon.” She disappeared in a puff of smoke that left him coughing and gasping for fresh air -- and questioning his sanity.

Chapter Four

“Yes, right there.” Larissa moaned and clutched his shoulders, writhing on the soft sheets. “Oh, God. That’s perfect.”

He chuckled against the damp skin of her neck, his body moving over hers in a rhythm designed to drive her wild. His cock pounded into her pussy over and over in hard, quick thrusts that pushed her toward the headboard.

He knew just what to do to make her come -- and just how long to keep her teetering on the edge of sanity before he gave her what she wanted. Her inner muscles quivered, her body poised on the edge of an orgasm he wouldn’t let happen. “Please. Just a little more.”

“Not yet.” He shifted, changing his angle, moving her release further out of reach.

She bit back a curse. His thrusts were too slow, too measured. Too calculated. He enjoyed the game, enjoyed making her crazy with need while he held back her release until she was panting and begging.

She dug her nails into his muscled back. “No. I can’t wait anymore.”

Her head thrashed on the pillow, and her body bowed, her chest crushing to his. Her pebbled nipples scraped against the coarse hair on his chest, and she moaned.

“Patience.” The single whispered word reached her through the fog of her arousal. “All things in time.”

“Next time I’ll wait. Not tonight. Please don’t make me wait tonight.”

He chuckled again, the rough sound vibrating against her skin and adding to the tingling sensation filling her belly. He was so stubborn. Impossible. And she loved every second.

He shifted his weight off her, kneeling between her legs and lifting her hips as he continued to thrust. His hand stroked down her stomach until he reached her mound, his finger finding the nub of her clit. He rubbed across the bundle of nerves once, twice, and she came apart in his arms. Her world shattered into a thousand points of light.

And then he was gone.

Larissa bolted upright in bed, her breath heaving in and out of her lungs. Her nightshirt was drenched in sweat. Her pussy still quivered, shaking with the intensity of her orgasm. An orgasm that had been, like most of the ones she’d enjoyed lately, part of a vivid, sensual dream. She hadn’t had a real man in her bed in months.

She flopped back on the mattress and squeezed her eyes shut. A laugh caught in her throat. The dreams were intense -- and the most likely cause of the dry spell that had plagued her love life recently. No man she’d been out with had compared to the one in her dreams. Sexy, dark, and mysterious, yet kind and giving and selfless at the same time. The type of man that didn’t exist in real life. At least not in hers.

His face was always in shadow, though she’d caught a few glimpses of thick, dark hair and warm green eyes. Tall and lean, with muscles in all the right places. She had to give her subconscious credit. She wouldn’t have been able to create someone more perfect for her if she’d tried. And Lord knew she wouldn’t find someone like that in her day-to-day life.

She shook her head. Even if she did, he wouldn’t be interested. Why go for plump and average when a man like that could have any woman he wanted?

Not that it mattered. He was just someone her active imagination had conjured up to satisfy lurid fantasies brought on by too many nights without sex. Those types of fantasies were best left in the dark.

She rolled over and buried her face in the softness of her pillow. The dreams had been growing more and more frequent, and if she didn't find a way to get some sleep, her body and mind would shut down.

Sleep would be a lot easier to find if he didn't seem so *real*.

* * * * *

"What are you doing sitting around out here all by yourself?" Shari plopped down in the vinyl padded bench across from Drew, a curious scowl marring her delicate features. "Why aren't you over there getting your woman back?"

She stabbed a thin finger in the direction of the bookstore Larissa owned, across the street from the diner where Drew had come to form his plan of attack.

He took a sip of coffee from the beige ceramic mug a waitress had set in front of him ten minutes earlier. The muted sounds of traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian, reached him through the plate glass window next to his table. Soft, wordless music floated through the relative stillness of the room.

He inhaled a deep breath of air scented with coffee and baked goods, and let it out on a sigh. Shari had been right when she'd told him his life as he'd known it had changed -- though he still wasn't entirely convinced the tiny woman wasn't a figment of his imagination.

He'd driven by the house he and Larissa had built a few years back. Only, there hadn't been a house on the property earlier this morning. It was just how it had been when they'd found the lot. Wooded and overgrown, a For Sale sign posted at the edge of what used to be his front yard.

His driver's license, credit cards, and all the mail in the apartment corroborated Shari's incredible story, as had the phone call to his parents a few hours ago. For a while he wondered if he'd had a stroke, or if there was some other medical condition that had caused him to imagine a life he'd never had. He still had yet to rule out that possibility. He tightened his grip on the mug until his knuckles turned white. It was entirely probable that he'd lost his mind.

Shari cleared her throat, drawing his attention back to her face and the impatient expression that had settled over her features. "Why aren't you answering me?"

He glanced quickly around the bright room before leaning forward, his elbows propped on the table between them. "Can they see you?"

"Who?"

"The other people here."

"Oh, them." She waved her hand in the air, gesturing to the room around them. Several small groupings of patrons occupied nearby tables in the little café. "They can if I want them to."

He waited for her to say more, but she just stared at him with a serene expression that left him wanting to pull out his hair. "Well, do you?"

She leaned forward, mimicking his position, and whispered, "I haven't decided yet."

"I don't want to look like I'm talking to myself. Don't I already have enough cause to question my sanity?"

The gray-haired waitress walked over to the table, notepad and pen in hand, and smiled down at Shari. "What can I get for you?"

"Nothing, thanks. I won't be here long." She winked at Drew. "On second thought, maybe just a glass of ice water."

The waitress nodded and walked away from the table.

Drew leaned back against the booth and glared, arms crossed over his chest. "I suppose that answers my question."

"And which question would that be? Oh, yeah -- can these people around here see me?" She winked at him again, laughter dancing in her eyes. "I suppose it does."

"Why couldn't you just have told me?"

"We've been through this already. You need to learn the basics, need to work for every small victory you get." One tiny shoulder lifted in a shrug. "I just figured things have come so easily to you for so long, you needed a little practice at handling situations that aren't in your control."

He slapped his palm down on the table, drawing the attention of a couple seated two tables away. He ignored their stares, focusing his attention on the woman who had his gut twisted in knots and his mind reeling. "Are you kidding me? I've worked my ass off for everything I have."

"No need to get testy. Okay, so you work hard. At work. But with relationships, with your *marriage*, you took too many things for granted."

Like hell. He opened his mouth to object, but couldn't think of any reasonable argument to support his case. His jaw snapped closed, and all the fight rushed out of him in a single, frustrated breath. She was right. He'd taken Larissa for granted. Expected her to be there for him, even when he didn't reciprocate. Wanted her support without offering his. That was why she'd caught him by surprise when she told him she wanted a baby. Sure, they'd talked about it before, but he'd always told her the time wasn't right. He'd never given it a second thought -- until she made it part of her ultimatum.

The waitress came back with a tall glass of ice water and set it on the table in front of Shari. She left without a word, just a brief, curious look from Drew to Shari and back again.

"Do you see what I'm saying?" Shari swirled the straw in the glass, clinking the ice cubes against the sides. "You have a second chance. A lot of people don't get that."

He wanted to tell her that she'd judged him too quickly, but he couldn't. It would be a lie, and lying was no way to get Larissa back. "Yeah, I do. I'm trying like hell to be grateful for it. But I don't understand why I have this chance. Why me? I'm sure hundreds of people died that night. Who decides who gets to come back and try again?"

"There are greater forces at work here than I can explain. And even if I wanted to, I couldn't tell you. Don't question why you've been given this chance. Just take it and do your best to win her back. Otherwise we've all wasted a lot of time on nothing." Her eyes shaded for just a second before they lightened again and her smile returned. He couldn't be entirely sure he hadn't imagined the emotion.

He picked up his mug and drained the rest of the lukewarm coffee. He *would* go talk to Larissa, once he'd worked up the nerve. In the time he'd been sitting across the street from Larissa's bookstore, he'd had ample opportunity to observe her through the front windows.

The basics were still the same -- golden-brown hair, medium height, amazingly curvy body his hands itched to touch. Even the graceful, fluid way she moved was the same. But he still felt like he was walking on eggshells. Nothing guaranteed she'd react the same to him as she always had. She might not even be attracted to him anymore.

His chest ached at the thought. Larissa didn't love him anymore. It didn't matter why, just that she didn't, and it was tearing him up inside.

Shari tapped her long, bright pink fingernails against the side of her glass. Condensation dripped onto the worn tabletop. "Are we going to sit here and discuss this all day, or are you going to go talk to her?"

"I'll go when I'm ready. I'm planning first. I can't just walk up to her and confess the whole twisted story."

She let out a sigh laced with aggravation. "That's right. You're a planner. Always have every last detail nailed down, don't you?"

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I just hope it doesn't stop you from reaching your goal. One month, Drew. Don't forget. That's all you have. It might not seem like it now, but that's a very short amount of time to accomplish what you need to."

With that final comment, she stood and walked away. The bell above the door dinged as she stepped out onto the sidewalk and disappeared.

After fifteen minutes of sitting in silence, waiting for the perfect plan to come to him, Drew gave up. No amount of preparation would help him now. There were too many unknowns. He'd just have to risk approaching her and hope she didn't turn him down flat.

* * * * *

Larissa stooped in front of a low bookshelf tucked beneath the front counter, feather duster in hand, sweeping it back and forth along a row of hardback books. A warm front had moved in, and most people had decided to spend time outside before the next big snowstorm. She hadn't had a single customer, and she was starting to go stir-crazy.

When the bell that hung above the shop door sounded, she jumped, smacking her head on the underside of the counter. She winced and rubbed the spot where an egg had already started forming. "Lovely."

"Ouch. Are you okay?" The smooth, concerned male voice made her face heat. She hadn't had one of her finer moments, and the man who'd walked in had witnessed the whole thing.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sometimes I'm just a stupid --" She glanced up at the customer through blurred vision, and her breath caught in her throat. Dark hair, lean body, green eyes ... *Familiar*. "-- klutz."

The last word came out as a whisper. How was this even possible? She must have hit her head harder than she'd first thought, because there was no way the to-die-for man standing in front of her was the same one who'd been in her dreams.

“You look a little stunned.” He took a step toward her, his head cocked to the side and his lips pulled into a frown. “You should probably put some ice on that.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Stunned, definitely. Something low in her stomach fluttered. She reached her hand out to touch him, to see if he was real, but thought better of it and dropped her arm back to her side. Of course he was real.

And she was nuts.

His gaze fell to her arm, and he let out a nervous laugh. “Then again, you might want to have it looked at. You don’t look so good.”

“I’m fine. It’s just that you ...” What was she supposed to say in her defense? She couldn’t very well tell him she’d been dreaming about him.

No, not him. Someone *like* him. Dark brown hair with green eyes wasn’t exactly a rare combination. “You look familiar. It startled me for a second.”

One side of his mouth lifted in a half-smile that made something deep inside her twist. “No big deal. I get that a lot.”

He paused a second, giving her an odd glance before he walked down an aisle and out of sight.

She leaned against the counter and smothered a laugh. Now that he’d discovered what a goon she was, she was surprised he hadn’t turned around and run in the opposite direction.

Ten minutes later she could still hear him shuffling through books, but he had yet to show himself again. She left the counter and walked to the aisle where he stood perusing a shelf of nonfiction titles.

She cleared her throat and rubbed the small lump on her head again. That was going to be sore for a week. “Can I help you find something?”

“Maybe. I’m looking for a book.” He smiled, and her heart thumped loudly before screeching to a halt. She *knew* that smile. Not from her dreams, but from somewhere else. Somewhere she couldn’t quite remember. Her stomach quivered. And those eyes ... they

seemed to take in her every movement, following even the slightest shift of her foot or twitch of her hand. She swallowed hard.

Her fingers curled in to her palms. With any luck, he was CPR certified. She might need mouth-to-mouth if he didn't stop looking at her that way. It was a little too familiar. It should have made her uncomfortable. In a small way, it did. But in another way, it intrigued her.

She licked her lips to cover her anxiety over the situation and forced a laugh. "Oddly enough, books are what most people come in here for. So I guess you've come to the right place. Anything in particular I can get for you?"

Anything. Anything at all. And it doesn't even have to involve literature.

His brows dipped into a frown, and he held his hands in front of him, palms up. "I honestly don't know. I'm not looking for anything specific. Just ... I'll know it when I find it. Thanks, though. I'll let you know if I need any help."

He picked up a book, leafing through the pages before setting it back in its place on the shelf. Every once in a while he glanced back at her over his shoulder, an odd expression in his eyes. A couple of times she had to check the corners of her mouth to make sure no drool had collected there. If not for the risk of making a complete and utter fool of herself, she could stand there and stare at him all day.

But she wouldn't. As much as she wanted to admire his toned body encased in jeans and a heavy black pullover, she wouldn't risk giving him the wrong impression. "Okay. Well, let me know if you need any help."

She moved back toward the register and slumped into the chair behind the counter, determined to focus on something -- anything -- other than the customer with the nice eyes and the uncanny ability to rattle her with just a look. He was just a customer. No different from any other, and when he left she'd forget all about drooling over him like a hormonal

teenager. He'd walk out of the store, out of her life, like the rest of them did. Maybe he'd be back; maybe he wouldn't. Other than wanting to make a sale, she shouldn't care either way.

After a few more minutes, her customer came back to the counter and leaned his arms on the wooden surface. "Okay, I guess I do need a little help. I'm looking for a book about second chances."

"Second chances? What do you mean?" He even smelled good. Better than good. A favorite cologne of hers that hit her right where it counted and made her want to bury her face in his neck and take a deep breath. Or ten.

Maybe that's what her problem was. That particular fragrance always did funny things to her insides. It couldn't be the man she'd never met before. The cologne had made her brain shut down and sent her hormones into overdrive.

He seemed to lean even closer, but that could have been a trick of her lust-addled mind. When he spoke, his voice took on a low, husky tone. "This is probably going to sound nuts. Like reincarnation, but not exactly. More like going back in time -- a few years, maybe -- and starting over again."

She stared at him, her mouth open wide. She'd found his flaw. The man might be incredibly sexy, but he was also insane. He was interested in time travel? "The only place I've ever heard of that is in romance novels and science fiction."

A corner of his mouth lifted into a small smile. He shook his head and chuckled nervously, then shifted his arms on the countertop. Anxiety passed across his gaze, and his throat worked as he swallowed hard. "I was kind of hoping for something more ... nonfiction than a romance novel."

"Oh, really?" She raised her eyebrows at the discomfort she caught in his gaze and the way his jaw tightened. "Do you have something against romance?"

"Nah. Not at all. I'm a big fan of romance." He gave her a slow wink, sending a shiver down the center of her back. "I just prefer to live it, rather than read it in a book."

Oh, boy. She drew a shuddering breath and bit back asking him where he'd been her whole life. His comment sounded like any other cheesy come-on line she'd ever heard, but for some reason, coming from this complete stranger, it affected her. He'd managed to turn the tables on her with barely any effort -- and he knew it, too.

"So what you're looking for is how-to manuals on time travel?" God, she hoped not. It would ruin the fantasy -- and her sensual dreams. They would never be the same.

His eyes widened and he straightened, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "No. Definitely not a how-to manual. More like a history of, or maybe theories. Or ... I told you, I'm really not sure how to explain this. Does anything like that even exist?"

"Doing a research paper?" He looked to be in his mid-thirties, too old to be a typical student, but anything was possible.

"Something like that."

The history of time-travel theories. An unusual request, but owning a small bookstore in New England, she'd heard stranger. "I don't know if I'll be able to find exactly what you're looking for, but I can check around if you'd like. I can always place a special order."

"Yeah. That would be great. Would you mind?"

"Nope. It's all part of my job." And it would get him out of the store so she could breathe again. She'd have to at least speak to him on the phone if she found the book he wanted, but she'd deal with that situation when it faced her. "Just let me get your number, and I'll call you as soon as I have any news."

She handed him a piece of paper, and he scrawled his phone number on it before sliding it back across the counter. When she reached for it, his fingers brushed hers. The touch was brief, fleeting, but it made her breath catch in her throat. Even his touch was familiar, and that just wasn't possible.

"That's my cell phone number. Call me anytime. Leave a message if I don't answer, and I promise I'll call you right back."

Anytime? Why did she think he wasn't talking about books anymore? A little twinge of anxiety trembled in her stomach. Her voice sounded shaky when she responded. "I'll call you when I track down that book."

He shrugged, a rakish smile on his face. "Or even if you don't. I'll talk to you soon." He turned and walked out the door, but his presence remained in the room for far longer than she would have liked. She flipped the little slip of paper over and over in her hand, glancing at the name and number.

"Drew Parker." She half-expected it to sound familiar -- like someone she'd gone to school with or had taken swimming lessons with as a child -- but she found herself strangely disappointed when the name didn't register at all.

Chapter Five

Bizarre, jumbled dreams gave way to the blaring alarm clock at five a.m. Drew slammed his hand down on the clock to stop the incessant beeping before he dropped his hand to the bed next to him and touched cold mattress. No Larissa. A chill washed over him.

As he had the morning before, he'd woken up with the hopes that this mess was a twisted nightmare and he'd find Larissa next to him, where she belonged. But the past two mornings had taught him that this was no dream. It was what his life had become, and he'd better get used to it.

On Saturday he'd laid the groundwork. He'd seen the interest in her eyes -- but unease had been there as well. What had he done to make her nervous? He'd better figure it out so he could keep from doing it in the future. He'd already made himself look like an idiot with his book request. It had been a snap decision, and not a very good one. He didn't want to give her any more reason to avoid him. He still had no idea if she'd call, and he couldn't afford to waste too many days waiting.

He climbed out of bed, scrubbed a tired hand down his face, and headed to the bathroom for a quick shower. Monday morning had come, and today he'd have to face work. He thought briefly about calling in sick, but vetoed the idea. He had nothing better to do

with his time while he waited for her to get in touch with him. He might as well spend the day doing something familiar.

Drew walked into his office at eight am, an hour before everyone else was scheduled to arrive. He didn't want to sink back into his old habits, but he needed a little time to be alone and come to grips with everything.

He settled into the leather chair behind his oak desk and shuffled through the papers on the navy blue blotter. Everything was the same in the office, right down to the account folders he'd left on Friday night when he'd rushed out. Everything in his life was the same, except for the apartment and the car -- and his wife.

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. How was he supposed to do this alone? Whenever he'd had a tough problem, he'd talked it over with Larissa and she'd helped him come to a decision. Whenever he'd walked through the door after a long day at work, she'd been there waiting for him. But she hadn't been happy.

Why hadn't he noticed?

He'd only wanted to make a good life for them, to bring home the kind of money that would buy her anything and everything she wanted. Somewhere along the way, it had all gone wrong.

A knock on the door drew him out of his thoughts. He snapped his eyes open to see his secretary, May, standing in the open doorway. He glanced her over -- still the same short, slight, gray-haired woman he'd hired three years ago.

"Good morning." He tried to smile, but was afraid it didn't quite reach his lips.

"Is everything all right? You're in early this morning."

He shrugged. "Couldn't sleep, so I figured I'd head in and try to catch up on some things. Could you do me a favor before you get started?"

"Sure."

This was it, the final chance to prove that the weekend was a crazy, mixed-up dream. He took a deep breath. "Can you get my wife on the phone for me, please?"

Her eyes widened, and she stepped into the room, closing the door behind her. "Excuse me? I could have sworn you asked me to get your wife on the phone. Did you get married over the weekend?"

He pushed his chair away from the desk and stood, walking over to the window and shoving aside the curtains. His gaze fell to the people, bundled in heavy jackets, walking along the sidewalks a story below. The snow had melted steadily for two days, leaving puddles of water in the dips and grooves of the roads.

He leaned his forehead against the cool glass. It was real, not a nightmare. Everything Shari had told him had come true. Larissa was gone, and now he had to find a way to get her back into his life before it was too late.

May cleared her throat. "Drew? Are you all right? Is there someone else I can call for you? A doctor, maybe?"

His breath condensed on the window, leaving a circle of fog. "Why would I need a doctor?"

"You're not acting yourself. Sometimes stress can do funny things to you. Maybe I should let your father know you need to go home early today."

"Never mind. Don't bother him with this. I'm fine. I just need more sleep, I guess."

"Maybe a cup of coffee, too?"

"Sure. Sounds fine."

"There's a woman waiting out here to see you. Should I send her in?"

His heart sped up for a second. Larissa? No. It couldn't be. She had no idea where he worked -- he'd only given her his cell phone number. There was only one other person it could be, and he didn't have a lot of interest in facing her again so soon.

He thought for a second about telling May not to send her in, but didn't want to raise any more questions. Instead, he settled back against his chair with a sigh. "Sure. Go ahead and send her in."

Without another word, May stepped out of the room and Shari took her place inside the doorway. She shook her head at him before closing the door.

"The woman thinks you're crazy. Did you know that?"

He shot her a quick glance. "Yeah, I got that impression. I'm starting to think the same thing."

"*Please*. You know you're not crazy." She flopped into the chair across from his desk, crossed her legs, and snagged a mint from the dish May kept full. She popped the mint into her mouth and smiled. "So how's it been going?"

Such mundane conversation given the situation. "I don't know yet. It's only been a few days. What does any of this matter to you, anyway?"

She blinked. Agitation passed over her features before the bubbly, perky expression slid back into place. "I have a bigger stake in this than you'll ever understand. I couldn't begin to explain it to you. I just wanted to remind you to work a little harder at your task rather than sitting behind your desk all day. I've got some other things to take care of, so I won't be around to bug you as much for a while. Think you'll be able to manage on your own?"

He let out a harsh laugh. Three days into the *task*, and he could already see a whole list of problems. What had first sounded so easy had turned into a nearly impossible issue that seemed to be without a viable solution. "Yeah, I think I can handle it. Get my wife to fall back in love with me. In less than a single month. No problem."

She stood, plucked another mint from the dish, and wagged her finger at him. "That kind of attitude isn't going to get you anywhere. Let me ask you something, Drew. Do you like being alive?"

"What the hell kind of a question is that?"

Her thin shoulders lifted in a shrug. “An honest one. And I think it deserves an honest answer.”

“It’s also pointless. Of course I like living.”

“Then why not go all the way with this? Put the same effort into winning her back as you do into getting ahead in your job. It’s the only way this is going to work. Next time I see you, I want you to have some good news to report. She’s interested. It’s your job to make sure she stays that way.”

She turned and walked out of the office, the crunching of the mints she chewed following her until she closed the door and left him sitting alone in the thick silence.

He would have been more confident if Larissa had been easy to win over the first time. She hadn’t been. She’d made it a battle from start to finish, and he almost couldn’t bear the thought of having to go through it again. But he would. She was worth it.

Larissa was confident in most areas of her life, but she had an insecure streak when it came to her body. She’d always told him she was happy with who she was, but he would get sick of her quickly. It had taken him a while to convince her that he loved his women with curves rather than just skin and bones. She was beautiful to him, had been since the first time he’d seen her. But could he convince her of that again? He didn’t know, but he’d have to try. He had no other choice.

He picked up the morning newspaper off the desktop where May must have left it. When he and Larissa were newly married, they’d started every morning the same way, sitting at the kitchen table with mugs of coffee and the *Globe*. In the past year or so, that had stopped.

He hadn’t noticed how much he missed the morning ritual until he woke up alone. The small things he’d taken for granted now seemed to be the things he missed the most.

His head ached and his stomach turned. He’d be lucky if he didn’t end up with ulcers at the end of the month.

The chirp of his cell phone pulled him out of his thoughts. He lifted it from the clip on his belt and glanced at the caller ID screen. Larissa Bentley. Relief washed over him. Maybe this wouldn't be as hard as it had been the first time.

He smiled and pressed the talk button. "Don't tell me you found the book already?"

Her laugh reached him from across the line. "Caller ID, huh?"

"The wonders, and curses, of the information age." He shifted in his seat, hoping she'd called for more than just the book. She'd looked interested yesterday, but he wouldn't push her. Pushing her would drive her away. He knew that from experience and wouldn't make the same mistakes twice. "What can I do for you?"

"Actually ..." She hesitated, the sudden tension between them an almost palpable thing. "I haven't found the book. I just ... I'm sorry. This is stupid. I don't know what I was thinking, bothering you on a work day. I'll let you go."

He couldn't let her do that. She'd wanted to see him, or at least hear his voice. She wouldn't have called if she hadn't.

"Don't hang up. Please. Have dinner with me tonight." His head dropped back against the chair. So much for taking things slow and easy, for not pushing her into something she might not be ready for.

He closed his eyes and braced himself for her brush-off.

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do, or you wouldn't have called. Let me take you out."

She sighed. It was a moment before she answered. "I don't even get off work until eight tonight."

"Perfect. I'll pick you up at the bookstore at eight."

"I can't go right from work. I have to go home and get ready first."

He smiled. She hadn't changed a bit. Always worried about her appearance. Didn't she realize she was beautiful without the makeup?

He hadn't told her so in too long to remember. It had been years.

"You're beautiful just the way you are. Don't go home and change to impress me. Trust me. You made quite an impression on me the other day. I thought about you all that night. Hardly got any sleep."

She laughed nervously, and he could picture the blush creeping up her cheeks. "I don't know what to say to that."

"Say you'll go out with me. If you want references, I can direct you to my boss. I'm sure he'll be happy to provide you with them." He smiled to himself as he heard her chuckle. "You've got to give this a chance. I haven't been able to get you out of my mind. I feel some kind of a strange connection with you. Does that sound too corny?"

"Yeah, it does, but that's okay." She laughed again, this time without the nervousness. "I don't know why, but I don't think references will be necessary."

He moved the phone away from his face and let out a breath. Finally he was getting somewhere with her.

"So what do you say? Can I pick you up at work?"

"Okay. I guess that would be fine."

He punched his fist in the air in a silent cheer. One step down. He still had a long way to go, but they'd passed the largest hurdle. "Great. I'll see you then."

Chapter Six

Larissa dropped the phone back into the cradle and stared at it as if it might sprout wings and fly away. What had just happened? What had she done? Talk about stupid. She didn't even know the guy, and yet she'd called him for no reason at all. She was lucky he hadn't laughed and hung up the phone.

A smile curled her lips. Yes, she was very lucky. He hadn't laughed or disconnected the call -- he'd asked her out to dinner. Maybe he felt the same strange familiarity with her as she had with him.

Or maybe he thought she played some part in this whole reincarnation and time-travel fantasy he refused to admit to. Her lips pulled into a frown, and she slumped into the chair behind the counter. There had to be another explanation, but for the life of her, she couldn't figure out what it was.

The trickle of customers kept her busy for most of the day, but Drew wasn't far from her mind. What was it about him that made him so unforgettable? Looks aside, he had a sort of magnetism she'd rarely felt. Yes, she was curious about his reasons behind requesting the books he had, but there was a lot more to it than that.

She'd give him this one night to see if the chemistry she'd felt between them was real or imagined. After that, all bets were off.

* * * * *

Drew reached for Larissa's hand, but pulled back at the last second. After a fairly quiet yet comfortable dinner, despite worrying about saying the wrong thing or revealing too much, he'd suggested they take a walk. The evening seemed ... charmed, and he didn't want the night to lose its magic. The last thing he wanted to do right now was make her nervous. If she was scared, she'd run. If she ran ... He didn't even want to think about the possibilities.

The warm front had continued, though now that night had fallen, a chill crept into the air. Larissa pulled her coat lapels together and wrapped her arms around herself. Part of him wanted to comfort her, to hold her and keep her warm, but another part of him warned that it would be a mistake so soon in the relationship. Caution was killing him slowly, eating him up inside, but it was necessary. He knew everything about her, but she didn't know him at all.

"Larissa?"

She glanced up at him, a wary smile on her face. "Yeah?"

"Is something wrong?"

She shook her head, waited a few seconds before she answered. "No, I ... why did you want books on reincarnation and time travel?"

Her question seemed to come out of nowhere, and it took him by surprise. He stopped walking and shoved his hands into his coat pockets, glancing around the quiet downtown street before his gaze dropped back to her. "Just curious. It's something that's always interested me. Why?"

She seemed to take his lie in stride. "I was only wondering. I don't get a lot of requests for that sort of thing. People around here don't have the most open minds."

Her comment dragged a chuckle out of him despite the tension that had snuck over the evening. “Very true.”

“But you have an open mind, don’t you.”

It was as much a question as a statement, and it made him wonder what was on her mind. Did his request for reincarnation books make her nervous, or was there another reason behind her anxiety tonight? “I didn’t used to, but lately I’ve started to believe in all sorts of things I hadn’t believed in before.”

A small, nervous smile flitted across her lips before she shook her head and started walking again.

They strolled in silence for a little longer before she stopped and turned to him again. This time a hopeful glint lit her eyes. “I really like you.”

Something in his heart twisted at the uncertain tone in her voice. He longed to reach out and pull her into his arms, but he couldn’t. Not yet. “Thanks. I like you, too.”

“I shouldn’t.” She spread her hands out in front of her, palms up. “But I do.”

“Why shouldn’t you?”

“I barely know you.” Her arms dropped to her sides.

You know me better than anyone ever has. “You know me better than you did before we had dinner.”

Unable to help himself, he reached out and grasped a strand of her hair, rubbing it between his fingers. After a second, he dropped her hair and cupped her cheek in his palm. Her skin was so soft and warm against his. He fought the urge to close his eyes and groan. She was so close, and yet she wasn’t his. Not like she used to be.

She blinked, but made no move to step away from his touch. “Right, but that’s just one date.”

“Sometimes that’s all it takes.”

She tugged her bottom lip between her teeth. “I guess so.”

Her words lacked conviction, and the knot in his heart twisted a little tighter. Less than one month. That was all he had. Was he really going to be able to pull this off?

It didn't matter. He had no other choice but to try.

Chapter Seven

"I had a really nice time," Larissa told Drew as he walked her to her door. The air had turned cold, the sky overcast and pale with the glow of impending snow. She was warm inside. Too warm, if the heat rising in her cheeks was any indication.

The date had been so different from what she'd been expecting. He was funny, charming, and sexy, and she found herself hanging on his every word just to hear the sound of his voice as the deep tone rumbled through her. Just being with him gave her goose bumps -- but she had yet to figure out *why* he affected her so strongly.

She felt like she'd known him forever. Within minutes of sitting down at the table, they'd been talking and laughing like old friends. There had also been a level of sexual tension hanging over the meal -- and it hadn't stopped there. And when he'd touched her face ...

She glanced up at him. Had he felt it, too, or was it just her overactive imagination running away with her again?

"Yeah. I had a great time, too." He smiled down at her, his gaze filled with heat that left no doubt he felt exactly what she did. It made her shiver. Definitely not her imagination. "Why didn't you tell me you live above your bookstore?"

Because she hadn't wanted him to know where she lived, just in case he was as crazy as his book request had indicated. "I ..."

Her voice trailed off when she wasn't able to think of any way to explain her reasons to him. He laughed. "It's okay. I understand. You were just being safe. I want to see you again. Are you free tomorrow night?"

"That's a little soon, isn't it?" But she knew it wasn't. She wanted to see him. Didn't want him to leave tonight, but she wouldn't ask him to stay no matter how strong the connection between them seemed to be.

She'd never felt like that after a first date before, and she couldn't explain any of her reactions to him now. All she knew was that she wanted more time with him. A lot more. But if she told him that, she ran the risk of driving him away -- and making herself look a lot needier than she was.

"Doesn't seem too soon to me."

"I'm not sure."

He leaned in closer, his breath brushing her cheek. "When something feels right, why fight it?"

Wow. At every turn he seemed to be able to surprise her with the unexpected. It all felt *right*, and fighting it was the last thing on her mind, though the warning to get to know him better before rushing into anything was still there.

She couldn't get to know him any better if she avoided him.

"Okay, tomorrow night it is." She licked her lips, resisting the urge to lick *his*. "But I'm warning you. You'll probably get sick of me once you find out I'm nothing special."

She winced, wanting to take back the words as soon as they left her mouth. Letting him see her insecurities was a surefire way to send him running in the other direction.

He stared at her for a few seconds, humor dancing in his eyes, before he shook his head. "I've never met anyone like you."

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Definitely a good thing.”

“Liar,” she chided softly, smiling. “Give me a break. Have you looked in a mirror lately? You could have your pick of any woman you wanted.”

His smile widened. “I hope that’s true. I’m looking at her right now.”

Another few seconds, and he would be mopping up a big puddle of melted Larissa off the porch steps. Flirting seemed to be a big part of his natural charm. She had to forcibly remind herself that he didn’t mean anything by it. He couldn’t. She wasn’t his type, and pretty soon he was going to come to his senses. “It’s cold. You’re not dressed very warmly. You really should get home before you get sick.”

“I’m not cold at all. Standing next to you, I feel like my blood is boiling.”

He didn’t give her a chance to respond to his surprising statement. He moved a windblown lock of hair from her face before he leaned down and kissed her. It was just a brief touch, a brush of his lips against hers. His hesitancy sparked something inside her and attracted her to him all the more.

When he pulled back, her fingers curled in his coat almost of their own volition. His hands came up to cover hers, her skin warming under his touch.

“I’m sorry, Larissa. It’s probably too soon, but I couldn’t help it. The moment felt right.”

She couldn’t agree more. His statement almost made her laugh. He was a little old-fashioned, but that was all part of his unusual charm. “Don’t be sorry. It wasn’t too soon.”

It made no sense, but she felt like she’d been waiting a lifetime for that one kiss. Without thinking, without letting her sensible side talk her out of it, she wrapped her hand around the back of his neck and drew him down to her, pressing her lips to his.

This time there was no hesitancy in his kiss. One of his big hands cupped her face; the other went to her waist and pulled her up against his body. It sent a shiver from her head to her toes.

Her breasts crushed against his chest, her nipples pebbling against the lace of her bra cups. Her fingers tangled in the hair at the nape of his neck. She parted her lips, and he stroked his tongue inside, filling her with the warm, masculine taste of him. Even the kisses of her dream lover couldn't compare to this moment, this man.

He backed her into the wall next to the front door, his body pressing tight against hers. She rocked her hips forward, and her panties dampened. She'd been deprived for too long, and her body was already begging for more. She clung to him, wanting to crawl inside him.

By the time he broke the kiss, they were both panting. She smiled up at him, drew a deep breath for courage before she made her request. "Do you want to come inside for a while?"

"That's probably not a good idea. I'm a little out of control right now, so we should probably call it a night." He kissed her forehead before stepping away. "Goodnight, Larissa. Sleep well."

Goodnight? After that, he was leaving? She closed her eyes and willed her breathing to return to normal. She needed something -- she needed Drew, but she didn't want to rush into anything. He'd been sensible to break it off with her for the night. Another time, they could pick up where they left off. Much later. She didn't want to seem too eager -- that would be the kiss of death to whatever was growing between them.

"Goodnight."

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"You'd better." She unlocked her apartment and let herself inside. Drew gave her one last smile before he walked down the steps and got into his car, tossed her a final wave before he pulled away from the curb, and drove off into the night.

She closed her eyes and pressed her fingers to her still-tingling lips. She'd be waiting all day for that call. But he didn't have to know that.

* * * * *

Drew drove the car on autopilot, thinking back to the time with Larissa. His body still recognized her on some distinct primal level, and there was no way to ignore it. She was *his* woman, and he couldn't ever forget that. Not even death -- or semi-death, as the case might be -- could stop that. It had taken every ounce of willpower he had not to confess everything to her and beg her to take him back. Nothing could take away the love he felt for her, even if she didn't feel it in return.

He'd come to a realization during their date, and it had struck him like a two-by-four to the gut. Larissa hadn't changed a bit. She was still the caring, intelligent, humble woman he'd fallen in love with. He was the one who had changed. The one who'd started putting work before family, before the woman he'd pledged his life to. The one who'd pushed her aside in favor of material possessions. Their marriage had crumbled, and it was his fault.

Now he just had to figure out how to change back, to become what he'd once promised her with his wedding vows. If he accomplished what Shari told him he had to, he'd never take her for granted again. Never push her aside or forget important dates. He *would* change, and he *would* make time in his life for Larissa. And it might be nice to have a baby or two around the house.

If he got her back.

He braked at a stop sign and slammed his hands down on the steering wheel. The fact that he could pinpoint exactly when everything had started to go wrong unnerved him. Why hadn't he noticed then what he was doing? Why had it taken such a jarring wake-up call to make him see what a mess he'd made of the best thing that had ever happened to him?

It was the way his life had been growing up, but that was no excuse. He'd done what he thought, at the time, would be best for them and their financial future, and he'd gotten

lost. Now he had a chance to fix his mistakes, a chance most people didn't get, and he wasn't stupid enough to let it pass him by.

Chapter Eight

Drew closed the file he'd been working on and shut down the computer. He slumped back in his chair and closed his eyes, taking deep breaths through his nose. All week he'd been on edge. Waiting, though not very patiently. Tonight, he had another date with Larissa.

He'd called her the day after their first date, as he'd promised, but she'd refused to see him again that night, or the night after, claiming she was busy until the weekend. No amount of persuasion during their daily phone conversations had been able to change her mind, and that worried him a little. She always sounded happy to talk to him, but he couldn't be sure she wasn't trying to avoid him. So by the third day he stopped pushing and forced himself to hold out until the weekend.

Somehow he'd made it to Friday evening without going out of his mind.

He opened his eyes and glanced at the clock sitting on the corner of his desk. Six-thirty. Still a half hour before he needed to go pick her up. He had more work to do, but had found he couldn't stare at the computer screen any longer without getting a headache. The wakeup call he'd gotten in the form of the accident had been enough to show him he needed to slow down, and he intended to do that no matter what it took.

Ten minutes later he walked out the side door of the building into the parking lot. All week he'd been on edge, but in the past hour his anxiety had grown to epic proportions. For five years he'd seen Larissa every day. He hadn't realized how much he'd lived for that precious brief contact until it had been snatched away. Now he lived for it even more.

Shari stood by his car, one denim-covered hip propped against the side. She wore a huge pink parka that would have looked ridiculous on any other woman, but seemed to fit this particular one. A strange sort of familiarity edged its way into his mind, but he pushed the thought aside. If he'd ever met someone as offbeat as her, he'd remember it.

Shari smiled when she saw him. "How's it going?"

He walked over to the car, opened the door, and tossed his briefcase into the back seat. "Fine."

He hoped.

"Fine? That's it? Fine?"

"Yeah. I'm taking her out tonight." Twenty minutes and counting. He refused to be late. He'd done enough of that when they'd still been married.

"It's about time." She rolled her eyes and let out a dramatic sigh, reminding him of a petulant child. He had to bite back a laugh. "It's been a week already. How do you expect her to fall in love with you if you never see her? Do you think she's just going to fall into your lap and confess her undying affection?"

The frustration he'd felt all day -- all *week* -- swelled inside him until his gut ached. His head started to throb, and he clenched his hands into fists. With a few well-placed sentences, she'd managed to ruin his good mood. His face burned hot. "Look, I'm doing the best I can, okay? This isn't easy. I have to talk to her and pretend I barely know her. Sit across from her and resist touching her when all I want to do is hold her and know everything is all right. But you know what? It's not all right, and at this rate I have no idea if it ever will be again."

A cough drew his attention to a young couple standing on the sidewalk a few dozen feet away. The woman's eyes were wide with anxiety, and the man's expression warned of held-back laughter. A chill ran down Drew's spine, and he clamped his mouth shut.

The couple walked away, shaking their heads and muttering.

Once they were out of earshot, he glanced back at Shari. "They can't see you, can they?"

"Not this time." She flashed a too-bright smile. "I thought we could mix it up a little."

What had he ever done to her to make her give him such a hard time? "Are you one of those men-bashing women on a crusade to crush any man who's ever done a woman wrong?"

She laughed. "Nope. Just certain ones. I don't think you're unredeemable, though. In fact, I know you're not. You and Larissa will have a very long, very happy life together ... if you can manage this one task you've been given."

Her gaze darkened, her last words taking on a threatening edge.

He narrowed his eyes. "I have to go. I need to pick her up, and I don't want to be late."

"Can I give you a little tiny bit of advice?"

"Do I have a choice?"

She lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug, her teasing demeanor snapping back into place. She tucked a short lock of dark hair behind her ear. "No, not really. I've never been one to hold back what I was thinking. Drove my parents crazy while I was growing up."

The hitch in her voice snagged his curiosity, and again the slight familiarity washed over him. He said nothing, only stared at her and waited for her to continue.

"Taking things slowly is fine, and I can see where you're coming from, wanting to ease into things and not spook her, but you don't have an overabundance of time. You don't want her to think you aren't really interested."

"She wouldn't think that."

“She might.”

“I think I know my wife better than you do.”

“Then why did her ultimatum seem like such a surprise?”

A cold spike of anger shot through his chest. “I don’t have time to stand here and argue with an invisible woman. I have a wife to win back.”

Without another word to her, he got into his car and drove away.

* * * * *

Larissa walked into the darkened movie theater in front of Drew and headed for a row in the middle of the near-empty room. His hand on her arm stopped her progress. She turned to him, her eyebrows raised.

“Let’s sit in the back.” He took her hand and led her to the back row.

Once they were seated, she leaned in to whisper in his ear. “Why all the way back here?”

“It’s not as crowded.” He shrugged one shoulder, a sly expression on his face. It left her wondering what he was up to, but she didn’t ask.

“It’s not crowded anywhere in the theater.”

“Yeah, but I want you all to myself.”

He took her hand and stroked down her palm with his finger, sending a rush of sparks all the way to her elbow. There was a hint of mischief in his voice that made her stomach flutter, but she settled back into the seat, intent on enjoying the movie.

Her intentions were good, but they didn’t last long. Within ten minutes of the start of the film, Drew let go of her hand and brought his fingers to her lap. He bunched her long, flowing skirt up until the material rose above her knees.

She circled her fingers around his wrist and pulled his hand to a stop. “What do you think you’re doing?”

He glanced at her and smiled. "Have I mentioned I really like that you wore a skirt tonight?"

"Why?"

"So I can touch you." His fingers stroked along the inside of her thigh, inching closer and closer to her pussy. She tightened her grip on his wrist.

"This really isn't the best place for this."

"Don't worry about it. Just watch the movie."

She turned back to the screen and tried to refocus on the comedy, but his fingers feathering across her skin made concentration on anything nearly impossible.

Drew leaned in and brushed a kiss over her ear. "Scoot down a little and open your legs."

"But --"

He laughed softly. "Just do it. Trust me on this."

With a hard swallow, she did as he requested.

"That's so much better, isn't it?"

Depends on your outlook. Though no one sat near them, there had to be at least two dozen people in the movie theater. The thought of being caught sent a shiver through her -- a shiver of both fear and arousal. Her panties dampened, and her breath caught in her lungs.

"Drew."

"Shh." His fingers trailed even higher along her bare thighs until they touched her cloth-covered mound.

She whimpered.

"Do you know how much I've thought about you this week?" he whispered into her ear.

“No.” She could almost guarantee he hadn’t thought about her as much as she’d thought about him. The dreams had grown even more intense, more vivid and naughty, and the images of the things he’d done to her stuck with her for days. Now the man in her dreams had come out of the shadows. He had a face. Drew’s.

“I’ve been thinking about you all the time. I shouldn’t have left the other night. I should have stayed.” His finger stroked along the wet fabric covering her clit. Each press of his finger sent a jolt through her middle until she was clutching at his wrist, her fingers aching from holding him so tightly. She arched her hips a little and moaned.

“So why didn’t you stay, if you wanted to so much?”

“I didn’t want to rush you.”

A soft laugh escaped her lips. “By all means, Drew, rush me.”

Right now would be great.

“I want to get to know you better,” he continued. “To learn every little moan and sigh, every move of your body when I’m thrusting inside you. The noises you make when you come apart in my arms.”

His finger slipped underneath the elastic leg band of her panties and pushed between her lips. She bit back a harsh groan as he slid the finger inside her.

He found her clit with his thumb and pressed down, stroking in little circles. Larissa bit her lip to keep from moaning as the beginnings of an orgasm stirred low in her belly. She glanced around to make sure no one was watching, her hands digging into the armrests. If he didn’t stop, she had about five seconds before she came -- in the middle of a very public movie theater. The thought thrilled her more than it should.

Drew leaned in and nipped her earlobe, and that was all it took for her to tumble over the edge. She threw her head back and closed her eyes, wave after wave of tremors washing over her. It seemed like an eternity before her body started to relax and the fog cleared from

her mind. When she could think again, she glanced at Drew, biting her lower lip to hide her smile.

He brushed a brief kiss over her lips. "You're incredible. Did you know that?"

She shook her head. "Don't start. I look in the mirror every day. I know what I am."

He withdrew his hand from her body, straightened her shirt, and shook his head. "You have no idea what I see when I look at you."

With a lingering smile, he turned his attention back to the screen.

A wicked inspiration hit her, and she had to hold back a giggle. If he thought he was the only one up for a little movie-time play, he'd better think again. She moved her hands to the waistband of his jeans and started unbuttoning the fly.

His gaze flew to hers, his eyes wild and questioning. "What are you doing?"

"I have a little payback in mind."

He didn't try to stop her as she made quick work of the buttons and pulled his erection free from the confines of his briefs. His flesh sprang warm and hard into her palm, and she circled her hand around the length of him. His hips bucked, and he hissed out a breath.

"This isn't a good idea." Warning filled his tone, as well as the look he shot her.

"Funny, but I think I said the same thing to you a few minutes ago." And she was still feeling the aftereffects of his touches. "So deal with it."

She glanced around again to make sure no one was watching as she stroked her hand up and down his length. Her thumb swirled around the head with every upstroke, inciting a small string of whispered curses from Drew's lips. Within a few minutes he turned to her, his expression ragged.

"Shit. You'd better stop. I'm gonna come."

Did he really think she'd stop just because of that? She smiled, satisfied that she'd been able to make him lose control so quickly. "Good thing I grabbed some napkins from the snack bar on my way by."

Chapter Nine

The ride back to Larissa's apartment had been pure hell for Drew. She was amazing. Perfect. And he couldn't wait to get back to her place and get inside her. Every breath had a frantic edge, every gesture of hers driving him nuts.

Once Larissa had closed and locked the door behind them, Drew reached for her. The interlude in the movie theater was just an appetizer -- he'd been semi-hard since, and it wasn't getting any better. He'd promised himself he'd wait, promised he wouldn't rush her into anything, but now all bets were off.

He unbuttoned the front of her shirt and kissed his way down her neck to the valley of soft skin between her breasts. Once there, he inhaled deeply, drawing in the intoxicatingly familiar scent of her favorite perfume. Just as wild and sweet as he remembered. It made his cock ache even more. It made his heart ache, too, but he pushed that thought away. No sense getting depressed over his situation. It wouldn't change anything. It would only distract him from the beautiful, willing woman standing in front of him.

He ran his tongue along the tops of her breasts before taking a cloth-covered nipple into his mouth. She moaned against him and arched her back, encouraging him to continue. A voice in the back of his mind told him to slow down, let her get used to him, but he

couldn't help it. She was so achingly familiar that he couldn't imagine taking his time. He'd never been able to hold back with her, not even in the beginning, and he wasn't about to start now.

He parted her shirt completely, unclasped the front hook of her bra, and pushed the cups aside. Her breasts were exactly how he remembered -- not too small, not too full, exactly how he liked them. He sucked a peaked nipple into his mouth and reveled in the familiar taste. He swirled against the hardened flesh over and over until she moaned and tangled her fingers in his hair. Then he moved on to the other nipple and offered it the same treatment.

He loved this woman. More than life itself. At that moment, he knew he'd do whatever it took to keep her. Everything and anything. That was how it was going to be. Anything she wanted, she could have. Nothing would be out of her reach.

"Drew." Her soft plea nearly undid him. He reached under her skirt and hiked it up, cupping her mound in his palm. Even through her satin panties he could feel how wet she was. Knowing that was all it took to push him to do more. He slipped his finger under the leg band and traced his fingertip over her clit. She bucked against his hand, and he realized how close she was to orgasm. Her breasts had always been so sensitive. It was just another thing he loved about her. He thrust a finger inside her soaked cunt as his thumb played with her clit. Stroking in tiny circles and pressing alternately, just the way she'd shown him early in their marriage, when they'd still made time for intimacy whenever possible.

He closed his eyes for a brief second and swallowed back the memories. Those had been the best times of his life. Somewhere along the way, they'd lost that intimacy and she'd started to lose trust in him. He *had* to get it back. He'd do anything.

"Drew, I can't stand much longer." Her grip in his hair tightened to the point of pain, but he welcomed it. Welcomed everything about this moment. It would be forever burned into his brain.

“I’ll hold you up. I promise.”

To prove his point, he wrapped an arm around her waist and held her close, the stroke of his fingers increasing until she canted her hips toward him and her knees gave out. In seconds, she came apart in his arms. He kissed her hard and almost told her how much he loved her, biting it back at the last second.

He knew just where to touch her to make her sigh, make her moan. Make her scream. That knowledge was still there in his mind, and he’d use it to his advantage. He planned to do it all to her. Over and over again. Just not tonight.

Tonight would be for getting to know each other again. For giving her a chance to get to know him. He needed to get her to trust him, to believe in him. If he stayed with her tonight and made love to her, would she shy away from him in the morning? He couldn’t take the chance. He might remember her, but she had no idea who he was.

After one final kiss, he smiled down at her.

She frowned. “Why did you stop?”

“I don’t want to push you too much.”

“You didn’t.” She smiled, though arousal still clouded her eyes. “I know we haven’t known each other long, but I feel like it’s been forever.”

That’s because it has. His heart was breaking, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Larissa straightened her clothes and held her hand out to him. “Don’t go. Please stay tonight.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

“Absolutely sure?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Okay, if you really want me to, I’ll stay.”

He let her take his hand and lead him into the bedroom, though the sensible half of him warned that it was too soon. His hands shook and his palms broke into a sweat. What if she didn’t like things the way she used to? Did he dare risk everything to make her happy?

When they’d been married, she’d always liked him to take charge of the lovemaking. He enjoyed it, and he enjoyed watching her come apart in his arms. He was banking on the fact that letting him take charge still got her as hot as it always had.

When they reached the bedroom, he flipped on the light. She reached to turn it off again, anxiety etched on her delicate features, but he shook his head. “I want it on. I want to see you.”

“But ...” Her voice trailed off, and she glanced down at her body.

Her thoughts were written clearly on her face, and he shook his head. “You’re beautiful. So sexy.” He sat at the foot of the bed and kicked off his shoes. “Take off your shirt.”

She shivered and snagged her lower lip between her teeth.

“Please take off your shirt,” he urged when she hesitated. “Show me how gorgeous you are.”

She let her shirt drop from her shoulders, and her bra followed it to the floor. Her body shook as she toed off her shoes and dropped her skirt to the ground. There was only one thing left, and he was on edge waiting for it.

He let out a breath of anticipation. “The panties, too.”

“Drew.”

“You have to know what you do to me.” He gestured to where his erection pressed painfully against the fly of his jeans. “The panties. Give them to me. I want to see all of you.”

She hesitated so long he thought she'd ask him to leave, but finally she stripped her panties off and tossed them in his direction, her whole body blushing pink. He caught the red satin panties and stuffed them into his pocket.

"Come here," he told her. She walked over to where he stood, and he held his hands out to her. "You know I would never hurt you, right?"

"Of course." Her voice was unsteady, but he didn't know if it was from nerves or arousal. Most likely both.

He pressed his lips to her bare, silky stomach. "I would never, ever do anything to hurt you. I won't tonight, or any other night as long as we're together. I need you to understand that. If anything we do, anything I say, makes you uncomfortable, don't hesitate to tell me, and we'll stop immediately. Is that okay with you?"

She gulped, but nodded. "I have done this before, you know. I'm not afraid, Drew."

He looked up into her eyes and saw it was the truth. She wasn't. He didn't scare her. What he saw in her eyes in place of the fear he thought he'd find was arousal -- a lot of arousal. His cock tightened just looking at her. She was so beautiful, all her pale flesh so close to his mouth. His tongue itched to reach out and taste her. He already knew her taste, had years of experience in the matter. And he loved it. She was so addictive, she would be even in this different place. And he planned to taste every inch of her luscious body before the night was out.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Undress me." What he wanted, he'd have to force himself to wait for, or he'd end up exploding in his pants like an inexperienced teenager. "Take your time."

She knelt in front of him and started unbuttoning his shirt, playing her fingers across his chest as she went, flicking those manicured nails over his nipples and making his cock even harder. He grabbed her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers, sucking each one

delicately into his mouth. She smiled up at him, and the look in her eyes told him she knew exactly how she affected him.

When his shirt hung open from collar to waist, she leaned in and pressed a kiss to the center of his chest. He bit back a groan, wanting to prolong his enjoyment as well as hers. It would be so much sweeter for both of them to wait, no matter how much he wanted to thrust deep inside her. But patience didn't come easily to him when he'd been waiting a week -- and a month before that -- to get back inside her.

He would, soon enough, but for now he'd content himself in seeing to Larissa's thorough enjoyment of the situation.

He stood long enough for her to help him out of his pants and boxers. When he sat back down on the bed, she pulled them, as well as his socks, from his legs and let them drop to the floor. "There. All undressed. What now?"

He couldn't help but smile. Arousal pulsed through his whole body, and every move she made drew him deeper. "I want you to take my cock in your mouth."

"Gladly." She sucked him deep in one pull, running her tongue over the length before pulling back and playing with the slit in the head. God, she was good at this. Always had been. Somehow, now, it seemed even better. He pictured her stomach growing round with their child, but pushed the thought away. Tonight was for pleasure alone. In the morning, they could have a serious talk.

It wasn't long before he wound his fingers in her hair and tugged her mouth away from his erection. She glanced up at him with curiosity dancing in her eyes, but he only shook his head. If he let her keep going, it would have been a matter of minutes before he came in her mouth. Tonight he wanted to come inside her. More than anything.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her tone unsure.

"Nothing. That was unbelievable." He cupped her cheek in his palm, and she leaned into the touch. "Now I want you lying on the bed. It's my turn."

Larissa didn't hesitate to follow his instructions. She crawled onto the mattress and settled on her back, her knees bent and her thighs spread wide. She gave him a smile of pure womanly satisfaction. "Like what you see?"

He had to clear his throat twice before he could get words to come out. "More than anything."

Drew settled his face between her thighs and took a second to breathe deeply, inhaling her musky, familiar scent. Then he spread her lips with his thumbs and leaned in to lick the line of her slit. She moaned and dug her heels into the mattress. He pressed a kiss to her clit.

"I love the way you taste. Like you were made just for me."

A whimper escaped her.

With a satisfied smile, he leaned down and started to lick her in earnest. It had been so long, and he drank from her juices like a man starved. He thrust his tongue into her pussy, reveling in the way her muscles fluttered around him. She was close. A good thing, too, because so was he. His cock was so hard it lay flat against his stomach.

She gave his hair a sharp tug. "Drew, stop."

He pulled his mouth away and glanced up at her. "What's wrong?"

"I want you inside me. Now."

The urgency in her tone echoed deep inside him. He was all too happy to oblige. He moved up her body and settled between her thighs, the head of his cock nudging the entrance to her pussy. And when he stroked into her, it felt like coming home. No other words could describe the incredible rightness of being inside the woman he loved. His wife. His soul mate. Even if she didn't know it, he did, and for now that would have to be enough.

What could have been moments later, or even hours, he felt her inner muscles tighten around his cock. He thrust harder, his strokes growing faster and deeper, and she came apart in his arms. Her body bucked against his, her pussy muscles milking him, bringing him to his own release. With a hoarse cry, he came, emptying himself into her.

It was sometime later, while she lay asleep next to him and he stared up at the ceiling in the semi-darkness, that he realized the truth. He'd lost her once, and he'd fight to the death to keep that from happening again.

Chapter Ten

Larissa woke up the next morning and stretched. Every muscle in her body was pleasantly sore. Drew had been perfect. No other word could describe how their bodies fit together. He knew just where to touch her to make her scream. She'd come so hard at one point, she'd felt like her head might explode, and still he'd pushed her harder, asked her for more. She'd feel the effects for days, but it would be worth every twinge and cramp.

Her gaze fell to where he lay on his stomach, so peaceful in sleep. The early morning light caressed the lines and planes of his bare back, down to where the sheet rode low on his hips. Her fingers itched to run across his tanned skin, but she held back and clenched her hands into fists. She didn't want to chance waking him. Not when she had a lot of thinking to do.

She eased off the mattress, wrapped herself in her red silk robe, and padded to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. Once the coffee was ready, she poured herself a mug and settled onto the couch. So many thoughts raced around in her mind, she couldn't think straight. After a few sips of the rich, warm brew, she set the mug on the small oak end table at the arm of the couch and leaned her head back against the plush cushion.

How could something so new feel this right? She'd never bought into the soul mate theory before, but now her thinking was starting to change. Drew embodied everything she'd always looked for in a man. Intelligence and sexiness coupled with boyish charm, caring, and kindness.

He *got* her, seemed to sense her emotional needs without her having to voice them. At first, she'd wanted space, and he'd given her that space. Then she'd wanted something else, and he'd been right there with her the whole time. They fit, not just sexually, but in every way. They had so much in common, so many shared interests and tastes.

And they'd known each other for little more than a week.

The thought had her bolting up from the couch and pacing the room, her mug of coffee now forgotten. They'd been out twice. Two dates, and she'd already let him into her bed -- and let him stay the whole night. What had she been thinking, letting him stay? For all she knew, he considered what they had a one-night stand. What if he got up and wanted to leave? What if he never called again? She couldn't bear the thought. Despite her best intentions, she'd let herself get attached. In one week, she'd managed to give him a place in her heart she didn't know if he even deserved.

Part of her warned to slow down, to feel her way along the tricky slope of the new relationship before she took a serious tumble into the unknown, but a larger part of her embraced what she was feeling inside. Falling in love had never come easily to her. Neither had trust. A born skeptic, it usually took months of deliberating before she even decided if a relationship had long-term potential. There was nothing usual about what she felt for Drew. Words she'd heard so many times, from friends, from relatives, came back to haunt her.

When he's the right one, you'll know it.

Lord help her, she did.

With hesitant steps, she made her way back into the bedroom and settled onto the mattress. She'd have to face him sometime this morning. Might as well be now.

Drew opened his eyes and smiled at her. His gaze -- a deep, sleepy green -- struck something deep inside her. The dreams she'd had ... he was the one. It defied all logic, but she knew now that he was the man who'd been visiting her while she slept. She tried to school her expression, hoping she wasn't looking at him like some lovesick teenager.

"Morning, sexy," he mumbled. "You have a deep-thought sort of look on your face. Something you want to share?"

She had to know. "That reincarnation stuff you were interested in ... do you really believe in it, or was that all some line?"

His smile dimmed, his expression growing serious. He pushed into a sitting position and settled himself against the headboard, one sheet-covered knee drawn up to his chest. "If you'd asked me that a couple of weeks ago, I would have told you I didn't believe. But now, I'm starting to believe in a lot of things I didn't used to."

That made two of them. Now she wanted to know why. Something strange was going on. Something she was afraid she might not be able to figure out. Anything abstract made her uncomfortable. She preferred to deal in facts, but this situation seemed to defy whatever knowledge she had. "What brought about the change?"

Had he been dreaming, too? Dreaming of her?

"Let's just say I had an epiphany of sorts."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah." He reached for her. "Come over here, will you? I'm feeling a little lonely with you all the way across the bed."

"I need to know one thing first. Is this just a one-time deal with you? Because if it is --"

"No way. I know this'll sound weird, but I really think we could have something special here."

She smiled. Exactly the answer she'd been hoping for. He pulled her back into his arms. She laughed as he kissed her belly. "Didn't you tell me you have to go into work for a little while this morning?"

He sat up and looked at her, all traces of humor gone. His expression was guarded, his answer hesitant. "Yeah. Do you?"

She shook her head. "Nope. It's my day off."

"Good. Then we can have all day to play."

"You have to go to work, remember?"

His eyes took on a glow that was complete mischief. "I've got a few personal days. Playing hooky once in a while won't kill me."

"Are you sure?"

"Sweetheart, I've never been more sure of anything in my life." She suspected from the look in his eyes and the tone of his voice that he spoke of more than just taking a day off. Something deep inside her echoed the emotion she found in his gaze, and when she spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper.

"Okay, but I don't want you to get into any trouble."

"The only trouble I plan to get into today involves a certain sexy brunette and her bed. And maybe her shower. And couch. And maybe her kitchen table if I'm really lucky."

She couldn't help laughing at his half-teasing tone, but she suspected she'd be sore for at least a month when the day was done.

Chapter Eleven

Larissa sat on the couch, curled up against Drew's side. He stroked her hair with his palm, his fingers sifting through the strands and inciting little tingles along her scalp but at the same time making her muscles stiffen. The fact that he'd been so accommodating should have put her at ease about him, but it didn't. It raised some red flags even her newfound soul mate theory couldn't explain.

She'd given it time. Nearly three weeks had passed since their second date, and this time she hadn't made him wait when he'd told her he wanted to see her again. They'd been together almost every night, and on the nights they hadn't seen each other, they'd engaged in lengthy -- and sometimes steamy -- phone conversations.

Things seemed perfect on the surface. Maybe a little too perfect. There was the time-travel thing, which made her uneasy the more she thought about it. They didn't talk about it often, but whenever she brought the subject up, he seemed to shut down. And last week the books she'd found for him had come in. The day he'd come to pick them up had been one of the few in recent weeks he'd claimed to be too busy to sneak away, even for a quick dinner.

And then there was Drew himself. He seemed too wonderful for words. Always accommodating, planning dates he seemed to know she'd love. Willing to take entire days off

just to spend them with a woman he'd known for only a few weeks. Most guys she knew wouldn't even take a few hours off. What was it about him? Maybe she was making him out to be more perfect than he really was to fit the image her mind had created in her dreams.

The funny thing was, she could really fall for the guy. Hard and fast. She'd never felt this way before, and it scared her more than she'd ever admit to him. Or even to herself.

"What's on your mind?" he asked softly, seeming to read her mind yet again.

"Nothing."

"Liar." His tone held a hint of teasing, but also an edge of anxiety that sent her mind running in all directions. He was holding her close. Maybe too close. He knew so much about her. But how?

"Really. It isn't important."

"If you want to talk, I'm here."

She bit back her confession, all the words she wanted to say to him but never could. Instead of alerting him to the problem before she had a chance to analyze it and come up with a solution, she forced a smile. "I know you are."

"I mean it." His green gaze settled on hers, and something strange washed over her.

No one could know her this well after such a short time. But he knew everything that would make her respond to him -- and what would make her angry, since he seemed to be careful to avoid certain things.

Maybe her mind was manufacturing all the weirdness. Maybe there was nothing unusual about him at all. Trust had always been an issue for her, but she couldn't let it ruin what she and Drew had. She snuggled closer to him, needing his warmth despite the strangeness of the situation. She'd give it a little more time, see where things went. But she had to remember that neither of them had made any promises.

Drew leaned down and kissed the top of her head. "I was thinking."

"Sounds dangerous."

“Hey!” He playfully pinched her cheek. “Seriously, how would you feel about having dinner with my parents?”

Everything inside her froze. Was he serious? They’d been dating for less than a month, and he wanted to bring her home to meet mom and dad? Her stomach churned at the thought. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Why not? They’d love you.”

Somehow she doubted that.

* * * * *

Drew clasped tight to Larissa’s hand, knowing she’d run away the second she got the chance. Introducing her to his parents had seemed like the right choice to make at the time, but now he realized what a mistake it had been. This was what he got for not thinking things through, for jumping into something feet first without thinking of the consequences.

“Would you like more coffee, dear?” his mother asked him, her lips pinched and her eyes narrowed.

“No, thanks.” He tried to smile at the woman who’d raised him, but after the hell she and his father had put Larissa through over dinner, he couldn’t quite manage the gesture.

The meal had been tense, to say the least, with his father shooting rapid-fire personal questions at Larissa until she’d turned ghostly pale and sunk down in her chair as if she wanted to disappear under the table. His heart had gone out to her, and he’d put his foot down, throwing the room into complete silence for the rest of dinner.

Why had he not remembered how hard it had been for Larissa to win over his parents the first time? By the time their wedding date had come, both his mother and father had loved their daughter-in-law. He’d been hoping that love would have carried over into this new life, as his had. But it hadn’t. If anything, this meeting was worse than the first time she’d been introduced to them.

“Would you like more coffee?” he asked Larissa when his mother remained silent.

She shook her head, glancing up at him with wide, nervous eyes. “I haven’t finished my first cup.”

He followed her gaze to where the delicate bone china cup sat perched on its saucer on the sitting room table. It looked like she hadn’t even taken a sip.

His gut clenched, and he squeezed her hand even tighter. It wasn’t fair to put her through this. He should have seen what a mistake this would be, and now it was going to cost him.

He had days left to make her fall back in love with him. Hours. How was he going to do it now, after subjecting her to this torture? It would all come down to what happened after they left his parents’ house. That would be it, his last chance to convince her that what he felt for her was real, despite what anyone else thought.

“Is there something wrong with your coffee?” his father asked Larissa, his gray eyebrows arched high over green eyes.

“No. It’s fine. I’m full from dinner, I guess.”

“You barely touched your meal,” his mother chimed in. “Was it not up to your usual standards?”

“It was fine.” She tried to smile and ran a hand through her hair. “Delicious. Really.”

Her fingernails dug into Drew’s palm. He bit back a cough of surprise. “Yes, it was delicious, Mom. We appreciate the invitation.”

She offered Drew a small smile before turning her attention back to Larissa. “What are your plans for my son?”

“What do you mean?”

“What are your intentions? Do you have marriage on your mind?” Her expression told Drew how unhappy she’d be if Larissa answered in the affirmative. “Because if you don’t, it would seem to me that you’re both wasting your time.”

Drew opened his mouth to defend Larissa, to defend what they had, but she beat him to it. She untangled her hand from his, shot up from the couch, and rushed out of the room, mumbling something about having to get away.

He threw his parents a warning look before he got up to follow her.

"Where are you going, Andrew?" his mother asked.

"I have to go find her. I can't believe the way you two treated her. I love her. Can't you just be happy for me?"

His father shook his head. "She doesn't seem like your type."

He knew what his father meant. Her weight, and the fact that she owned a small bookstore rather than working in a high-pay, high-pressure corporate job. He'd heard the Larissa-isn't-the-one-for-you lecture before, and he didn't have time to hear it again.

"Save it. I'm going to marry her, and you're both just going to have to get used to it." With that final comment -- eerily similar to what he'd told them the first time they'd met her -- he stomped out of the room.

He rushed outside and found Larissa standing by his car, her arms crossed over her chest and tears streaking down her cheeks. He reached out to hold her, but she ducked away.

"Just take me home, please."

"But --"

"No, Drew. I don't want to talk about it. I want to go home. I have a lot of thinking to do."

Up until that moment, he'd been sure he'd be able to salvage what little they had left of a relationship after tonight's mistake. But the ominous feeling that swelled in his gut warned him that nothing was going to come easily to him anymore.

Chapter Twelve

Larissa opened her door to find Drew standing on the doorstep with a big smile on his face. Her heart clenched at the sight. He wasn't going to like what she had to tell him. She'd done a lot of thinking since the evening before, when he'd dropped her off after the fiasco of a dinner with his family, and she'd finally come to a decision about him. About them. She stepped back to let him inside.

He stopped just inside the doorway, his expression worried, letting her know once again that he'd seemed to manage to sense her emotions and respond accordingly.

His silent response prodded her into saying what could possibly have been the most difficult words she'd ever had to say. "We need to talk."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"Why don't you go sit down in the living room? Do you want something to drink?"

He shook his head, his shoulders slumping. "Something tells me we should get this over with."

She sucked in a fortifying breath. For nearly a month, since the day she'd met him, she'd been agonizing over this conversation. She'd been waiting for the other shoe to drop, in a way, waiting for him to show her he wasn't as perfect as he seemed on the surface. That

day still had yet to come, but last night had pushed her into action. Nothing could ever work between them. They were too different. So she'd had to come to her decision.

It had been hell to make, but she'd finally come to the conclusion that she'd have to end it with him. It wasn't because of problems they'd had. It was because of the lack of them. He knew her too well, and even after all this time it still unsettled her. She'd stupidly fallen in love with the guy -- which was why she had to end it now, before things got worse.

Once in the living room, Drew sat on the couch and patted the cushion next to him. She sat on the opposite end instead.

His expression darkened even more. "What's the matter?"

She clasped her hands in her lap and looked down at her fingers, unable to look into his eyes. If she did, she'd lose her nerve. "This is just too strange. It seems to be moving too fast. I can't deal with it."

"What do you mean?"

"It's weird, but it's like I know you. Or you know me. Like we'd met before, but I know that just isn't possible." She looked at him now, wanting to see his face when she asked him for the truth. "What did you want those books for?"

He gave her a strange, long look before he spoke. "It's too crazy."

"It couldn't sound any crazier than anything's been around here for the last month."

"I can't tell you."

She stood up from the couch and paced across the room, her heart beating against her ribs and a lump forming in her throat. "I need to hear it. You don't really believe in that kind of stuff, do you? Deep down, you can't be thinking what I'm afraid you are."

"What if I am?"

"Then I'd tell you you're crazy." She sighed. But the dreams ...

They weren't real. They were figments of her imagination. She knew that, just as she knew he was too good to be true. *Something* had to be wrong with him. Something big. Men like him didn't just fall into her life.

"If you think about it, you'll figure out I'm right." He stood and walked over to her, pressing his hands to her hips and pulling her up against him. She leaned in to him and inhaled a breath filled with the scent of his cologne. "Can't you feel it?"

Yes. God, yes. She shook her head.

"I know you can. You feel it as well as I do. You know we were together once, in another time. Another place."

"No."

"Yes."

If she accepted what he was saying, she'd have to admit that she'd lost her mind. "I can't believe that, and you'd be better off forgetting this whole thing. It's crazy."

"Yes, it is. But it's real. It's true. I need to be with you. I can't live without you. Literally."

He was nuts. Then again, so was she for buying into this for so long. It would never work between them. She should have seen that on the first day. "We need to end this. We can't build a real relationship on something you *think* happened in the past."

He froze, backed up a step, and stared at her. "Excuse me?"

"A relationship needs love and trust, a strong foundation built on common interests and fascination with each other." If she kept repeating the words to herself, maybe she'd finally start believing them. "It doesn't start from us thinking we knew each other in a past life, that we loved each other once, in another time. That doesn't guarantee happiness."

"Larissa."

She shook her head. "I think you need to leave now."

"Don't do this. We have all those things. Can't you see it?"

"Please leave, Drew. This is too crazy even for me to believe. I can't see you anymore."

He gave her one last long look before he spun away and marched out of her house. The door slamming shut echoed the ache inside her heart.

* * * * *

Drew sat on the edge of his bed in his dark apartment. The desolate atmosphere echoed the feelings swirling and churning inside him. Tonight was the last night, and he'd blown it. He hadn't been able to win her back, and now he'd have to give up his life forever. She'd move on, find someone else, and her life would be much better without him in it. At least she'd be free to find someone who deserved her. This past month had proven one thing beyond a doubt -- that man wasn't him.

He *didn't* deserve her. Hadn't been able to make himself worthy, no matter how much he'd tried.

He flopped down on the mattress. He wasn't ready to say goodbye, but if that was what it took to make Larissa happy, he'd do it. He wouldn't force himself on her. It would only make her resent him in the end -- like she'd come to do before his accident.

"What the hell are you doing?"

He snapped his eyes open to see Shari standing at the edge of the bed, her hands on her hips and her gaze shooting fire.

"Go away. It's too late. There's nothing I can do now."

"Bullshit."

Her harsh tone made him sit up, his curiosity sparked. What did it matter to her? Why did she seem so connected to his success? "It's over. She told me to leave. Doesn't want to see me anymore. I screwed up."

"No, you didn't. You can fix this. Go find her. Talk to her. Convince her you're serious."

He ran a hand through his tangled hair. “No. She’d be better off without me. That’s what this month has shown me.”

Shari surprised him again by kicking the foot of the bed. “That’s a lie and you know it. I already explained to you that the two of you are meant to be together.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Believe what you want, but you still need to go and fix this.”

“Why? What will happen to you if I don’t? Does your pay get docked or something?”

She looked at him for a long time, unshed tears welling in her eyes, before she answered. “No. If you don’t exist, neither do I. Now, go fix it before you ruin both of our lives.”

“Who are you?” he asked her.

“Don’t you know the answer to that by now?”

Suddenly he did. The pieces of the puzzle slid into place, and he realized exactly what he’d be losing if he didn’t get Larissa back. His heart nearly broke at the thought. Not just for him, but for Shari as well. “How is this even possible?”

“There’s a lot ordinary humans don’t know about the world, a lot they don’t see. Some are born with the ability to *see* in a way the others don’t, and they’re given a special place in the world.”

“You’re one of them.”

She nodded. “So are you. None of this would have been possible if you weren’t. Now, are you going to go back out there and get Larissa back?”

He started to say no, but something inside his heart clenched and he couldn’t. He had to do whatever it took to get Larissa back, had to make one final attempt at getting her with him again. Shari’s words had only confirmed it for him and renewed his resolve.

There was more at stake than just his life, and he’d be damned if he messed it up again.

“What am I supposed to do?” he asked her. “I scared her off with this whole time-travel thing.”

“You shouldn’t have been so upfront about that, true, but that might be able to work to your advantage now.”

“How so?”

“She believes you. She might not want to admit it now, but she knows. Go to her. Just try, okay?”

Now that he knew the truth, he had no other choice.

Ten minutes later, Drew pounded his fists on Larissa’s door for what seemed like an eternity before she swung the door open and faced him with her arms crossed over her chest, a stern expression on her beautiful face.

“I thought we agreed --”

His heart swelled at just the sight of her. At least she’d opened the door. One small step down, a thousand more to go. “No, we didn’t agree. You spoke, and I left. But now I’m back, and I want to have my say.”

“I think --”

“That’s your problem. You think too much.” He leaned in and kissed her hard and fast, long enough to show her the passion still burned between them even though she was spooked. “Listen to me for a second. You know this thing between us is right. You feel it, too, even if you don’t want to admit it.”

She started to shake her head, but then stopped. “Okay, so what if I say I do? What happens then? Don’t tell me you’re going to get down on one knee and pledge your undying love to me after only a month.”

“If that’s what it takes to get you to believe me.”

Her expression lightened a little bit, but her arms stayed crossed in front of her breasts and she didn’t move aside to let him in. “Maybe it would.”

If that was what it took, he'd gladly do it. Over and over again. He dropped down on one knee and took her hand in his. "I love you. It might sound hard to believe, and you might think it's too early, but you've got to trust me. Can you honestly tell me you don't feel it, too?"

She shook her head slowly, her arms dropping to her sides. "No, I can't say I don't. This is going to sound really strange, but I think I dreamed about you before I met you."

They weren't dreams. They were memories. Though he didn't say the words, he felt them deep down inside. Shari had told him Larissa wouldn't remember him, but she'd also told him the connection between them would be strong. They hadn't been able to wipe him completely from her mind. She still felt him inside her, as he did with her.

Now that was something they could build a life on.

He smiled up at her. "Marry me, Larissa."

The words, unintended, just slipped out. But it felt like the right thing to do at exactly the right time.

Surprisingly, she smiled. "This is nuts."

"Tell me about it."

"Then I guess I have to say yes."

Chapter Thirteen

Drew stirred in bed and tried to roll over, but a sharp pain in his side wouldn't let him move much more than a few inches. His head throbbed, and his mouth felt like it had been stuffed with cotton. He forced his eyes open and closed them almost immediately due to the bright light glaring in his face. What the hell?

"Hey, you."

The soft sound of Larissa's voice made him open his eyes again. He found her sitting in a chair next to the bed, one hand stroking his face and the other holding his.

"Hi." His voice held a strange, raspy quality that made his stomach ache. Something was wrong, but he couldn't figure out what. He'd fallen asleep in Larissa's bed, in her arms, and now everything had changed.

The stench of disinfectant reached him, and he let out a breath. A hospital. That must mean ...

"What's going on?" He had to force the words past his dry lips.

"You were in an accident. But you're fine. Don't worry."

"When?"

"Last night. You've been in and out of consciousness for about twelve hours."

A wave of relief washed over him so hard it nearly brought him to tears. He tightened his grip on her hand, vowing to himself to never let go of her again. Losing her once was enough, even if it had only happened in some sort of injury-induced stupor.

“Happy anniversary,” he told her.

A tear slipped down her cheek. “Well, you’re a day late, but I’ll forgive you just this one time.”

“I think I have a good excuse.” He took a deep breath and winced as a pain shot through his chest. “My car?”

She shook her head, telling him everything he needed to know. “It’s gone, Drew. Totaled. They don’t know how you got away with a broken leg and a few bruised ribs. The doctors said someone must have been watching out for you.”

He nearly laughed. Someone he could never tell Larissa about.

“You need to rest some more, and I promised your mother I’d call her as soon as you woke up.” She patted his cheek, stroked the line of his jaw with her finger. “I’ll be back soon.”

She’d reached the door before he was able to speak to her again. “Wait a second.”

“What do you need?”

“That baby you wanted ...” He drew a shallow, pain-laced breath. “As soon as I’m out of here, we can work on that. If you still want to.”

His eyes closed on the image of her smiling face.

* * * * *

The next time Drew opened his eyes, he found Shari perched on the end of the bed much as she’d been the first time he’d seen her. He struggled to sit up, ready to bolt if she told him his life had been taken away again. No way was he letting that happen. He’d just gotten it back.

"Take it easy, will you, before you injure something else. I'm just here to say goodbye."

He settled back against the mattress. "For now."

She nodded. "For now. We'll see each other again soon. Of course, I'm not going to remember any of this, at least not in the time we meet."

"I kinda figured that. So, your mother and I have a daughter, huh?"

She winked. "I was worried about you at first, but you're smarter than I thought."

"Thanks. I think."

"I always knew you could do it." She stood up and walked toward the door. "I have to go. I'm needed in my own time. I have a job to do, and I think I've taken enough personal time already. It's been ... surreal."

He chuckled. "That it has."

"Even more so for me. *I* remembered *you* the whole time. I'll see you later, huh?"

Without another word, she left the room, shutting the door quietly behind her.

Larissa walked back in just seconds after Shari left. She glanced at him with a curious expression. "Who was that I saw leaving?"

Your daughter. "Someone who works here. I think she said she was from the billing department."

Larissa looked like she wanted to say more, but brushed a kiss across his forehead and settled back into the chair next to his bed. "If you say so."

He clasped her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing her knuckles. His heart swelled to bursting. He'd been lucky -- luckier than he deserved to be. And he was going to spend the rest of his life proving to Larissa just how much she meant to him. He'd never make the mistake of taking her for granted again.

"I love you. Have I told you that lately?" he asked.

Tears welled in her eyes, a few spilling down her cheeks. “Yeah, but I haven’t felt like you’ve meant it for a while. Not until just now.”

“I always meant it. Always. And I always will.”

Epilogue

Larissa cuddled the small, pink-wrapped bundle in her arms and breathed in the scent of new baby. Her daughter. A tiny, feminine version of Drew, with his dark hair. Larissa was willing to bet she'd inherit his green eyes, too. She would have cried if she had any energy left.

She glanced up at Drew, who sat by her side on the edge of the mattress. "She's perfect."

He smiled down at their daughter, his finger stroking her cheek. "I knew she would be."

Drew had changed so much in the past year; she almost didn't recognize him sometimes. He'd started coming home at dinnertime every night, and even though he still needed to bring work home with him on occasion, they'd managed a lot more time together in recent months. The accident had been horrible, but it had also been a blessing. The two months he spent in a cast had slowed him down, and he'd managed a reasonable pace ever since. She finally had her husband back, and now they had a new addition to their family.

She kissed the top of her daughter's head. "What should we name her?"

Drew didn't even hesitate. "Shari."

“How did you come up with that name?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s just the only thing that fits.”

Something in the corners of her mind clicked, something she didn’t understand. A sort of familiarity that had her shaking her head. Shari. It was ... perfect. Nothing she could think of would suit the little girl better. “You know, I think you might be right.”

Drew stood, took Shari from her arms, and held her to his chest, rocking her as he walked the length of the room. “Mommy looks tired, kiddo. I think we need to give her a little time to rest.”

“I’m okay.”

Drew just glanced over his shoulder at her and smiled. She’d expected him to be nervous holding the baby, hesitant, but he hadn’t been. Right from the start, he’d been at ease. She had to smile at the picture they made, her two favorite people. At that moment, seeing them like that, she knew without a doubt that everything would be all right.

 THE END 

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