



# Secret Surrender

Lisa Dawn  
MacDonald



## **We don't belong here...**

“Trevor, what are you doing?” Vivian sounded concerned.

He didn't answer. Instead, he let his hands run the arch of her back and onto the curve of her derriere. He lifted his hips and ground his center against hers.

Her arms grew weak and she rested her forehead on his chest. All of her weight crushed against him. “What are you doing to me?” she whispered into the dark.

“I want you to know what you do to me. Feel how my body reacts whenever I think of us together.”

“We've been down this road before. Trevor, we don't belong here.”

“I disagree.” His mouth met hers in a swirl of erotic tenderness. “I love you.” He put even more passion into his kiss. “I want you. Damn the consequences.”

She met his kiss with equal ferocity.



# *Secret Surrender*

by

*Lisa Dawn MacDonald*

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Secret Surrender

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## **Dedication**

I want to thank my friends and family for making me stay the course.



## Chapter One

There wasn't a reason in the world for Vivian Ashton to be sitting quietly at the kitchen table sipping a cup of coffee. Six o'clock, Saturday morning should have been reason enough to stay in bed. The sun started to peek over the distant mountains in the east. The sky was purple, and the air drifted through the open window, gentle as silk, and as cool as an ocean breeze. Caressing her face, it kissed her cheek. Sadly, this was the only type of kiss she could expect.

Vivian didn't cry anymore, at least not like she had. The anniversary of her husband's death was behind her, and as her friends and family had told her, a year was long enough to grieve. She had buried Dean, but how does a wife bury nineteen years of marriage? She didn't know how to be, nor want to be single, let alone a single mother to three children.

She sighed as a garbage truck roared to life somewhere down the street. Quickly, she stood and ran to the garage. The automatic door creaked as it lifted into the rafters. Using her hip, she rolled the heavy can to the curb. The garbage truck was two houses down. She tried not to be embarrassed by the mound of trash crowning out the top of the can because she'd missed him the previous week.

Vivian waited for her trash to be dumped, and then pulled the can back into the garage. Once back in her tidy, white kitchen, she leaned her back against the door and closed her eyes. If she held perfectly still, she could hear Dean's voice asking her about her plans for the day. She lifted the corners of her mouth into a smile.

She missed the way the morning used to greet her.

Dean had been taken from them suddenly. Everyone felt the shock. Every day Vivian tried to be strong for her children, family, and friends. It was hard not to fall apart whenever Dean crossed her mind. It couldn't have been easy for any of them to see her in utter despair. She knew that life without her spouse would be a struggle. In spite of this, she had three wonderful reasons to get up every morning and put a smile, however forced, on her face.

She sat at the table and lifted her cup of coffee, took a sip, and found it cold. She glanced at the clock, and then hurried up the stairs to her bedroom. The kids would be awake soon and she wanted to be dressed for the day when they came down.

As she passed her daughter's room, she heard Amber shut off her alarm clock and crank up the stereo.

Once in her bedroom, Vivian pulled her shoulder-length hair into a ponytail. Blue jeans that once fit like a second skin, now hung like a baggy pair of pants, and a short sleeve jersey were standard attire. Waterproof mascara was all she trusted when it came to make-up and she didn't do that most days. There had been a few public occasions she just couldn't stop the tears, and she'd worn make-up down her face. Today she tried putting a little more effort into her appearance. When she looked even a little bit like she did before Dean's death it helped her children believe today might be better than what normal had become.

Later in the morning, Amber snapped her gum as she headed to the refrigerator for a can of soda. "What'cha you doing, Mom?" Her daughter, at fifteen, physically looked far beyond her years. Never before had Vivian seen a child develop so quickly. One day her little girl looked her age and before the dust had collected on her Barbie dolls, she could pass for nineteen or twenty.

Thick chestnut hair as shiny as glass fell in soft waves to the middle of her back. Her eyes were the color of copper. Thankfully, Vivian sighed, Amber wasn't aware that she had become a

beautiful young woman. She still babysat for the neighbor and on occasion, would stay at home to play Scrabble.

Of course, there were still the normal problems every parent of a teenager deals with such as too much time on the telephone, and talking back.

Vivian pushed her bangs out of her eyes. "Thinking of Timmy's birthday. He wants a sleep over." She arched an eyebrow as an amused expression quirked her mouth. "I'm imagining eight or so ten year olds?"

"Count me out. No way am I sticking around with a room full of little twerps". She closed the fridge with her hip. "And keep those perverts out of my room."

"Your brother and his friends are not perverts," she corrected. "They're boys with puberty around the corner."

Amber covered her ears. "Don't go there. You'll make me gag."

"I don't picture Joshua being much of a help either." She glanced back at the notes she made for the party. How many boys? How much food? How much would it all cost, and what in the world would entertain eight boys for the night? "Have you seen Joshua today, or do I need to ask?"

Amber rolled her eyes. "Take a guess," she said, disgust registering in her voice. "Probably has Heidi in the back of Daddy's truck somewhere," she said, as she left the room.

"Not funny!" Vivian called back. "Although most likely the truth," she said in a smaller voice.

Thinking about the party again, Vivian wondered whether she could afford it. She'd find a way. Timothy floundered without his father and this could be just the lift he needed. Maybe she could turn it into a surprise party.

Vivian picked up the telephone. On the third ring someone finally answered, but it wasn't who she expected.

"Is Trevor around?" She held for a minute while the woman who answered the phone went to get Dean's brother. She shook her

head while she waited, pushing her reading glasses a little farther up her nose.

One might well describe Trevor as the classic example of a man with the Peter Pan syndrome. His taste in women could only be called multifarious. Vivian had no doubt that the woman who answered the phone was just a flavor of the month. And most likely not the only one.

"Yeah." His voice was rough around the edges and slow from just being roused from bed.

"It's me."

"Hey." He groaned. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah."

"Then what do you want?" He tried to sound annoyed.

"Did I wake you?" she purred. "And at such an early hour of eleven a.m.; you should be ashamed," she said more firmly and heard him groan again. "So can I guess?" She paused as if she were contemplating something important. "Five' eight, long hair, bleached blond?" She started to laugh at the image she visualized. "Big boobs, too?"

"Of course. Now that you've demonstrated your knowledge of my taste in women, what *do* you want?" She heard the flick of a lighter followed by a long inhale and a heavy exhale.

"Don't be mean. I didn't know I interrupted something important."

"Did I say it was important?" He took another drag off his cigarette.

Vivian heard the woman's muffled voice in the background and then a "Thanks," from Trevor. "There's nothing more pleasant than coffee in bed." He let out a growl as he obviously stretched. "Okay, Viv. So what's up besides me at this ungodly hour of the day?"

She laughed again. "I hope there's not a double meaning in that. I don't want to know any details about your sex life. At least not explicit details. Well, maybe a few would be okay now and

again seeing as I won't be having it anymore."

"Vivian," he scolded. "You're rambling and I'm about to be indisposed."

"Aagh, no more." She sighed and then in her most enticing voice she said, "I need you." It was difficult to keep a straight face.

"Get in line." Another pause while he inhaled off his cigarette. "I've already heard that one this morning."

"You're disgusting. That's not what I meant and you know it." Her annoyance was greeted by his laughter. "Timmy wants a sleepover birthday party. I need a big strong man to come help me control eight prepubescent boys."

"I think you've called me one of those before." There was laughter in his voice.

"I said you were like a boy *in* puberty. There's a difference." She doodled circles on her notepad. Leave it to Trevor to make her feel normal, even if just for a moment.

Trevor had been by her side constantly since Dean's death. Perhaps it helped him to heal as well. However, in recent weeks, she'd seen less of Trevor because of his flourishing business. She found herself missing him. He'd become her best friend, just as he had been Dean's when he was alive.

"So will you help me?" She held her breath for fear he'd say no.

"Of course," he said. "You know I'd do anything for that kid. And for you," he said as if were perfectly normal for him to be at her disposal. "When?"

Vivian gave him the general idea of what she had planned, but let him know nothing was set because she hadn't really started lining things up. She needed to know he'd be there first. In truth, she couldn't do it without him.

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Vivian startled when the front door flew open and Timothy came running into the house. "Mom!" he screamed. "Come quick!"

She dropped the knife she used to slice mushrooms. With her

stomach in her throat, she ran into the living room. “Timmy! What’s wrong?” She crouched in front of him and grabbed hold of his shoulders. “What happened?”

Timothy’s face flushed red. Out of breath, he could barely find the words to tell her what had happened. “Uncle Trevor’s here,” he panted.

“That’s why you nearly gave me a heart attack? For all the....” She closed her eyes and silently started to count to ten. She made it to two. If you ever come running into this house again screaming like you’ve met Darth Vader, I’ll—”

“But Mom,” he interrupted. “Uncle Trevor brought me a puppy.”

“What?” She furrowed her brows. “He did not bring you a dog. At least, I hope he didn’t bring you a dog.” She stood with her hands on her hips just as a floppy eared mutt found its way into the house. “Oh please, he did.” She put her hand across her forehead.

“See Mom,” Timothy knelt on the floor. The new puppy licked his face as if it were an ice cream cone. “I told you.” He vigorously scratched the dog’s belly. The furry puppy with huge paws squirmed in delight.

Her son’s smile stretched from ear to ear. Timothy, whose life goal was to be just like dad, hadn’t been the same since Dean’s death. He was dad’s little helper and now without him, he felt useless. He moped around the house most days, wearing Dean’s tool belt, looking for things he could repair, tightening screws and changing light bulbs. His little heart had a hard time healing.

Vivian looked away and blinked back the tears threatening to spoil the pleasure she witnessed. Trevor stood in the doorjamb. His mirrored aviator glasses did nothing to disguise the sheer triumph on his broad, shameless smile.

“You didn’t?” She attempted to plead with her eyes as she mouthed the words.

She wouldn’t have thought it possible, but Trevor’s smile

widened. He nodded yes. Vivian shook her head no. However, with the way Timothy played with the dog, she'd already lost.

"How's the birthday boy?" Taking off his glasses, he went down to his knee and Timothy leapt from the puppy's side into Trevor's arms.

"It's the best birthday ever." He gripped tightly around Trevor's neck. "I always wanted a puppy." He leaned in close to Trevor's ear. "You're gonna get in trouble." He lowered his voice even more. "Mom doesn't like dogs," he said as if it were sacrilegious. "I always wanted a dog, but even Dad couldn't get her to want one." His lip distorted raising one side higher than the other. A sure sign he was concerned for his uncle.

"I can handle her." Trevor winked at him. "She can be mad at me, and you get to keep the pup." Trevor was rewarded with a wet kiss on the cheek only a ten-year-old boy could give.

"You've done it now," Vivian said after Timothy ran outside, the barking dog on his heels, nipping at the back of his legs. "I'm going to kill you!" She slugged him in the arm harder than she'd meant, and enjoyed a bit of satisfaction when he flinched and rubbed the spot.

"What on God's green earth possessed you to bring my child a dog? Just who do you think is going to clean up the little presents he leaves all over this house, and do you think for a minute any one of my three is going to pooper scoop the back yard? I'll tell you the answer." Vivian jabbed her finger into his chest. "No! It'll be me that has to care for that flee trap once the newness has worn off and I'll tell you right now, I don't want the job!"

Trevor didn't appear the slightest bit concerned at her objections. He walked past and headed toward the kitchen. "What time do the friends arrive?"

"Trevor, are you ignoring me?"

"I can't take the dog back and I wouldn't even if I could." This time he poked her in the chest with a finger. "You need that pup as

much as Tim does.” He pointed to the front of the house. “I know you, Vivian. You’re scared shitless since he died.”

No one was supposed to know she feared being alone with her children. Before Dean died she never worried about a stranger following her home from work. Now she found herself watching the rear view mirror for simple trips to the grocery store. She hated feeling insecure.

She turned away from his intuitive, gray eyes. If she looked at Trevor he’d surely see he spoke the truth. “I’m fine,” she tried to say with more conviction than she felt.

Her spine straightened when she felt Trevor’s hands, long-fingered and strong, on her shoulders. “You’re not. You can’t lie to me, so don’t bother with the bravado. If that mutt gives Tim a smile and you peace of mind, it’s worth any aggravation you feel toward me right now.”

He was right. However, she still had other concerns. How she was going to afford the stupid beast? A dog with paws as big as baseballs was bound to outgrow the laundry basket about to become his sleeping area. She sighed and tried to smile a genuine grin. After all, he gave them a family dog for all the right reasons.

“Thank you. It was nice of you to put so much thought into the gift. Timothy does seem grateful. You’ve made him happy and that goes a long way with me. We’ll keep the pup.”

“As if you had much of a choice.” He chuckled as he picked a thin slice of pepperoni out of a dish sitting on the counter and popped it into his mouth.

“You’re in enough trouble.” She playfully slapped his hand away from the toppings.

He put an olive on his pinky and put that in his mouth too. “What can I do besides aggravate you by eating the pizza fixings?”

Vivian put her hands on her hips and glanced around the room. “I’ve got the food under control, but I’m running out of time. The kids are going to be here soon. Amber needs driven over to the

Campbell's house. She's babysitting tonight. Joshua is taking Heidi to the movies so he'll be gone. Oh," She reached around Trevor and grabbed a notepad off the counter. "I almost forgot. I told Scott's mom I'd pick him up." She handed the address and directions to Trevor. "Would you mind grabbing him when you take Amber?"

"Done." He folded the paper, shifted his hips, and stuffed it into the front pocket of his jeans. "Need anything from the store?"

"I think I'm set." She felt a sense of satisfaction because the party was coming off without any major glitches. "Hurry back, though. This house is going to be full of children in half an hour."

Vivian heard Trevor holler for Amber to get the lead out. Amber spoke with equal zest telling him to hold his horses. Funny, she thought, today feels almost normal.

Later, with the boys settled in sleeping bags, tired out from a game of street kick the can, Vivian had a chance to catch her breath and calm her nerves with a cup of coffee. The kitchen was dark. She could easily see Trevor standing on the back porch leaning against the railing that surrounded the raised deck. His head bowed as he studied something on the ground beneath him. A cigarette burned between his fingers. Intermittently, he took a long drag. Vivian watched the smoke trail between his fingers as it did a dance into the night. When he exhaled, the smoke surrounded and clung to him like a mysterious cloak. His dark hair was too long she noticed. It brushed and fluffed against the collar of his flannel shirt.

Strange, Dean hadn't looked anything like Trevor. He didn't have the traces of gray at his sideburns like Trevor. It added character to his features. Thick brows, chiseled cheeks and a hint of a cleft in his chin, but every now and again Trevor sounded like his brother. They used the same inflections on certain words. There was comfort in that. She didn't overanalyze her maudlin mood. It felt good to find Trevor familiar. He was safe.

She went to the sliding door and stepped out onto the porch with him. "It's cool tonight." She cupped the mug of coffee between

her hands. "Are you cold?"

"Cigarettes taste the best on chilly nights." He took another drag, and then flicked the butt into the darkness. "I wasn't sure if I was going to have permanent hearing loss from those boys' screams. I'm happy to say it doesn't appear to be the case. They sure had a lot of fun with the dog." He hadn't looked at her, but still stared into the night. "Dean would be proud of Tim. He's a good kid, you know?"

Vivian didn't say anything as she handed her mug to Trevor. He took several sips of her coffee before handing it back.

"Ever see such a mess?" Trevor laughed.

She recalled the kids making their own personal mini pizzas out of English muffins, spaghetti sauce, and toppings.

"It was a great idea."

"I thought so, too." She looked back at the house. "We should probably go check on them." She took a step toward the door.

Trevor reached out and took hold of her arm. "You're a good mother." He let his hand slide down her arm until he held her by the tip of her finger. "Come on." He put his arm across the small of her back and led her into the house. "Morning comes and we're going to have round two with this group."

"Round two?" she questioned. "It feels like I've gone a full twelve already." She sighed as she entered the house. "Don't forget to call the puppy?"

Trevor whistled and the puppy followed them in.

"It's quiet," Vivian noticed. She turned to him while they were still in the kitchen. "Thanks."

Trevor shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"I mean it, Trevor. You've been a good friend to me." She shyly looked away. She wanted to tell him how important he'd become to her. Really, she wanted to tell him how much she loved him, but it would never come off sounding the way she meant it to be heard. He was her best friend. And at times, it felt like he was the only

other person on earth who understood her loss.

“Hey, don’t get sad on me.” He put his finger under her chin and lifted her face.

“I’m not sad. Just thanks for playing the role.”

He gently pulled her hair and said, “You’re doing it. I’m just helping out when I can.”

“Well, I appreciate it. I like knowing that I can count on you.”

“You can always count on me being here for you and the kids. Now let’s check on your boy and his friends. I’m tired and the couch is calling my name.”

## Chapter Two

Monday morning came quickly after the hectic weekend. Some people had the pleasure of seeing their jobs as a sort of break from the daily grind of their house, husbands, and kids. Not Vivian, because she absolutely hated her job.

She worked at the mall in a small flower shop. She did a bit of arranging. Mostly she answered the phone, and cleaned up after her coworkers, a couple of girls who were half her age with boys on the brain. Above all else, Vivian hated her boss. She could tell by the way Cheryl treated her that she enjoyed making her do the grub work. Vivian only stayed because the hours were flexible and worked well with Amber and Timmy's school schedules. In addition, she needed the money.

Remembering life while Dean was alive, she never had more to worry about than what time to put dinner on the stove. He'd made a great salary, however he hadn't thought of their long-term future. Weren't they too young to think about their own mortality? Evidently not and now the price was crystal clear. She had collected a reasonable sum from his insurance policy immediately after his death. The house was now free and clear and she had saved a small amount, but resolved not to touch it unless for an emergency. Her family was not destitute, and they wouldn't be as long as she earned enough money to take care of the monthly expenses. There were still car insurance, health care premiums to pay, as well as food and utilities. Last week Timothy needed new shoes. The last pair hadn't made it six months.

"I need to be doing this at home," she said under her breath as she scoured. "But who's going to pay me for cleaning my own sinks." She scrubbed harder at the injustice. "I really am pathetic." She pushed her bangs out of her eyes. "I'm talking to myself while cleaning a rusty sink at a job I loath." She hated to think about what could be around the corner of this unlucky streak. She turned on the faucet rinsing the cleaner down the drain while she washed her hands. Staring at her hands, she remembered when she used to get her nails done every two weeks at the little Vietnamese shop on the other end of town. Now her cuticles were bleeding and her nails were broken far enough down to hurt. Not even lotion could make them pretty.

"Vivian,"

"Hmm?" She turned from the sink to see Cheryl standing with her hands on her hips and a sneer on her lips. Her eyes narrowed into slits as she looked at Vivian. It was difficult having a twenty-four year old brat for a boss.

"You have a personal phone call."

"Oh!" she said surprised. The kids were in school and no one else would have a reason to call her. "Thank you." Vivian quickly dried her hands on the towel.

Cheryl placed a hand on Vivian's arm as she passed her at the doorjamb. "I don't allow personal phone calls. Let's not make a habit out of this." She licked her lips and tilted her head to the side. "If it becomes a problem, I'll have to write you up. Consider this a verbal warning." She let go and walked ahead.

When Vivian finally answered the phone, she'd regained her composure. Cheryl, the little bitch, was not going to treat her as a servant. As soon as she dealt with whoever was on the telephone, she was going to tell Cheryl exactly what she could do with her verbal warning.

"Hello, this is Vivian."

"This is Albert Rockchild." Timothy's principal.

Vivian sucked in a sharp breath. “Has something happened?” Her heart beat faster.

“No, no, nothing’s wrong with Tim.”

Vivian let out a sigh.

“It’s another matter I’ve called to discuss. I apologize for disturbing you at work.”

“Don’t worry. It’s not a problem.” She glanced at Cheryl who now sat at the front counter filing her well-manicured nails. Irritation and, she hated to admit, a bit of envy somehow mixed together in her stomach and made her sick. “You can always contact me here if needed.” Ha, she thought. I’ll show her what I think of her policies and procedures.

“As I was saying,” he continued. “We’ve sent notes home with Tim, but haven’t heard back from you.”

Obviously she’d missed something because she had no idea what he was talking about. “Timothy hasn’t given me any notes.”

“Well, I guess that’s where the problem lays. There’s an outstanding bill in the cafeteria. There’s no gentle way to put it. School policy is that you must take care of it before Tim can eat school lunch again. We’ll continue to provide a peanut butter sandwich, but not the hot meal.”

Humiliated, Vivian said, “I’ll be there this afternoon to take care of it. I apologize for the inconvenience.” Her voice cracked.

“Mrs. Ashton, maybe there’s a way we can help you. We’ll talk when you come by.”

The puff of steam Vivian felt before she’d taken the phone call was gone. She couldn’t vent to Cheryl about how offended she’d been. Reality, she needed a job. This one was as good as the next for a woman who’d been out of the work force for eighteen years.

Cheryl tapped her nail file on the counter when Vivian approached. “Sorry for the interruption.” After all, dozens of customers clamored to get into the store. So swamped, Cheryl had time to file her nails and, as she did now, apply a coat of polish. “It

was my son's school."

"You don't need to leave, do you?"

Oh God, did she ever. "No, everything is fine," she said. "Do you care if I take a break for a few minutes?"

Cheryl's hand dropped to the counter with a thud. She sighed deeply and said, "I thought you just did. The phone call counted as your break."

Vivian hated her. Every bone in her cute, young body screamed to be bashed by Vivian's car in a dark alley off a deserted street. "I thought I'd walk down to the Coffee Cup."

"Goodie, get me a tall latte mocha with lots of whip cream." She reached down for her purse and handed Vivian a five-dollar bill. "Hurry back because I need a few arrangements sorted in the walk-in refrigerator." She dismissed Vivian by going back to her fingernails. Vivian took the money and tried to think positive thoughts. It was going to be a long day in what seemed to be an endless line of long days.

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"What'cha doing?" Amber came out of her room and walked down the hall with a bounce in her step.

Timothy sat on the floor outside his mother's bedroom door. His back was against the wall, knees drawn to his chest where he rested his chin. His arms wrapped tightly around his shins.

"Timmy?" She stopped in front of him. His eyes stared at her feet as she stood above him. "Timmy!" she said. When he didn't respond, she grabbed him by the shoulder and gave him a firm shake.

He lifted his head and slowly, his eyes met hers.

"You're scaring me," her voice cracked. "What's the matter with you?" Then she heard the soft crying coming from the closed door. Now she understood the blank expression in Timmy's face, why his eyes were hollow. "How long has she been crying?"

Timothy looked at the door. His shoulders visibly lowered as a

sigh shuddered from his body. "She's been crying since we got home from school. She picked me up today."

"Why didn't you take the bus?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "She was there so I didn't have to."

Amber contemplated for a moment. "Go play with Mutt."

Timothy's eyes narrowed. "Her name is not Mutt. It's Jenny."

"Yeah, whatever." She put her ear flush against the door and listened to her mother gulp for air. Her own eyes filled with tears and spilled down her cheeks. She thought it was getting easier for her mom. At least she wasn't crying at night anymore.

Calling Uncle Trevor was the only course of action she could think to take when her mother hadn't come out of her room by dark. "She didn't eat dinner. I don't know what to do?" Amber's own crying mimicked her mother's. She sobbed and hiccupped uncontrollably.

Trevor ran his hand through his hair as he considered what to do. "What set her off?"

"I don't know. Neither does Timmy. He said she was at the school, but doesn't know why. She just started crying in the car on the way home, went to her room, and she's still crying now." Her breath caught on the words. It took her a moment to make a complete sentence. "You can hear her through the door. Now Timmy's crying in his room."

"And you're crying on the telephone," he told her with a lift to his voice. "Now if Josh can break down and cry we'll have a family event to be proud of." This did make her giggle through a hiccup.

"Josh never cries. And he doesn't care about Mom anyway. He's too busy with his girlfriend." The way she spoke left little doubt as to her feelings for Joshua's behavior.

"Okay now," he gently scolded. "I'm sure his girlfriend has her good points." Although he had only met Joshua's girlfriend on one occasion so of course, he didn't know her well. He believed Joshua to be a good kid even if at the moment he wasn't showing his

mother respect. In his opinion, Joshua was trying to become a man, and Vivian was having a hard time letting go of her child. They both would eventually come to terms they could live with. It simply took time and they had plenty of it so he wasn't worried. "Did you and Tim get something to eat?"

"Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches."

"Okay," he said. "I'll be there in twenty minutes. Call that pizza place your mom likes and order something. Order enough for all of us. I'm hungry, too. I'll pick it up on my way over." He took his car keys off the counter and put them in his front pocket. "Don't worry, sweetie, we'll make your mom better." He held the phone between his ear and shoulder as he jotted down a note for Maggie, the woman he was supposed to see tonight.

"Uncle Trevor?"

"Uh hum," he answered distracted by the apology he scribbled. He hoped Maggie would be able to read it. He was sure she wasn't going to understand.

"Thanks for caring about Mom. She doesn't have anyone, but you."

"Yeah, I know." He considered that thought for a minute and was surprised at the pleasure he felt. He shouldn't have possessive feelings over Vivian, but that didn't change his reaction. It was hard to recall exactly when she quit being his brother's wife, but somehow she had. She was his best friend now and he liked being the one she called when she needed someone. Having someone's trust, felt good.

In fact, he even enjoyed her nagging about his social life. He didn't like to imagine what it would be like if she didn't heckle him over what she called his promiscuity. Yes, he did spend time with beautiful women and he liked to live fast, but that didn't mean he never thought about the other side of the coin.

Dean had had it all. There were many times Trevor had envied his brother for his family. Maybe if he had found a woman like

Vivian, he'd have built the same kind of life.

His brother had only screwed up one time. And that was when he died. He hadn't tied off properly that day on the mountain.

The tragedy compounded because Dean hadn't insured Vivian was financially solvent. She struggled and she wouldn't take any money he offered. She claimed he was too careless with his funds and needed it for his own expenses. She was right, of course, but he had enough to help her and the kids. More to the point, he wanted to. Dean might have made mistakes. Trevor learned from them. He'd already taken out an additional policy and left Vivian as the beneficiary.

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"Go away, Trevor." He knocked for the third time and clearly became impatient. Vivian lay in bed. She sank deeper beneath the folds of the blankets and pulled the comforter to her chin.

"I'm coming in whether you open this door or not." The handle creaked as he turned the knob and slowly pushed the door open.

The room was dark. He could vaguely make out her silhouette on the bed. Only the top of her head visible. "Is there a bedside lamp?"

"Please leave me alone." The normally strong woman who adored her children, kept her house immaculate, as well as making sure everyone else was happy, sounded dejected and small.

"Fine," he said and flicked on the light. Suddenly the room filled with a harsh, blinding glare.

Vivian screamed. Trevor slammed the door to keep Amber and Timothy from hearing their mother, as well as the fight about to take place.

"Viv, what's going on with you?"

She screamed again and threw the covers off the bed. She sat up and tossed her head, flipping her hair from her face. "This is none of your business!" She kept her eyes tightly closed and placed her hands over her face. "And turn off the light." She reached out

and turned on the much dimmer bedside lamp as Trevor flipped off the overhead ceiling light.

"It became my business when your kids called me because their mother nussed up in her bedroom." He poked himself in the chest as he spoke. His voice was a barely controlled whisper on the verge of becoming a full-blown yell. "I had plans tonight. I sure as hell didn't need to come here and find you having a breakdown. So getting pissed at me because I care sounds real sane, doesn't it?"

She abruptly stood and faced him. "I'm not having a breakdown," she yelled. "Maybe I'm just having a bad day! Is it too hard to think that maybe I have emotions just like the rest of the damn planet? Or aren't I allowed because after all I need to move on and be strong for the kids, the family, and you." She turned away because her voice broke on the last word and she started to cry. "I'm entitled to a bad day," she stated in a much quieter voice. "So give me a Goddamn break." Getting back into the bed, she tucked her legs under the covers. "Close the door on your way out." She reached out and clicked off the light. The rustle of covers seemed loud in the stillness of the room.

After several moments, Vivian realized Trevor was not leaving. He was still in the room standing in the dark. She supposed he waited for her to say something more. "I had a bad day," she told the darkness. "I'll be fine tomorrow."

Trevor remained quiet. Shocked over the language she had just used, he couldn't remember her ever yelling profanity. And why was his gut twisting in his body? Why hadn't he realized that she couldn't always be the strong, dependable one? Because she never let on to anyone if she felt out of sorts. And she was right about another thing too; he did take her for granted.

Remembering the funeral, Vivian had been busy seeing to everyone else's grief, never allowing anyone to help her deal with her own. Even he'd been selfish. Leaning on her had felt right. She was the closest thing to Dean. He had used her to feel close to his

dead brother. Maybe some part of him still did.

"I'm sorry," he spoke quietly.

Trevor's voice carried into the room, found her under the shield of covers, and broke through the wall she had erected to keep everyone out for just one day.

"Don't say anything else, Trevor. I'm going to feel guilty as it is." His steps padded towards her across the thick carpet. Without having to open her eyes, she knew he was beside the bed. Suddenly her mouth went dry. Trevor was in her bedroom, standing above her while she lay there. Realization dawned on her that she had just stood before him wearing nothing, but bikini style panties and one of Dean's shirts. Thankfully, Dean had been a bigger build. Nonetheless, the shirt didn't cover much.

Her breath hitched as carnal thoughts of Trevor snuck into her head to clench the pipe in her throat. What in the world was the matter with her? Maybe she *was* having a breakdown. Trevor was in her room. Trevor, not some strange man, or even a familiar man who had any interest in her as a woman.

The weight of Trevor's body caused her to roll toward him when he sat on the bed. She gripped the sheet before their bodies made contact. He adjusted and made himself more comfortable by sliding fully onto the mattress.

"Don't feel guilty."

*Don't touch me, she prayed. Please don't be kind to me tonight.*

"What happened today? I know something must have from the bit of info I got out of Amber and Tim."

She rolled over so her back was to Trevor. Now that her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, she couldn't trust herself to look at his face. Concern expressed deep inside his eyes like she had never seen before in all the years she had known him.

"Was it work?" he continued to pry.

"You're not going to leave until you get the whole story, are you?" He didn't have to respond. They both knew he wouldn't let it

drop. "Honestly, I'm having a bad day and it's as simple as that." *Please leave.* Her armpits were growing damp with nervous perspiration.

"I don't believe you. Since you don't want to tell me, I'll just keep asking you questions until I figure it out for myself." His hip pushed against her backside as he made himself comfortable on the bed. "Scoot over."

As unexpected as a snowstorm in July, he simply climbed into her bed in a nearly pitch black room as if it were commonplace. It wasn't. She had been alone in her bed for a year. Most nights it seemed far too big and empty. Suddenly, it was as if she was lying on a twin mattress. Even as she slid to the other side of the bed, the heat from his body permeated the blankets and caused her whole body to sweat.

He didn't crawl under the covers, for that she was thankful. Beads of perspiration dotted her forehead. She would melt before she'd get out from under the blankets now that she remembered what she wore. And if Trevor hadn't taken notice before, she wasn't about to give him another opportunity. This simply wouldn't work. She had to get out of this room.

"If I spill my guts will you leave me alone?"

"No," he nonchalantly stated. "But after you tell me what happened today, I'll go make us coffee. Hopefully the kids left you some pizza, too."

"Fine. It was nothing really. Timmy's principal called today."

"He's not getting into trouble, is he? Is someone picking on him? Shy kids are always the ones."

"Trevor, it was nothing like that," she interrupted. "It was my fault. He's out of lunch money. It never crossed my mind." The bed groaned as Trevor shifted his weight. Vivian was aware of every move he made. "The worst part was when I was at the school and Mr. Rockchild sat me down in the chair across from his desk. He stood above me and with a gentle hand on my shoulder," she said in

a mocking voice. "Told me there were programs for people in my situation. I asked him exactly what my situation was since he obviously thought he knew."

Trevor listened patiently, sighing and agreeing at the appropriate times to acknowledge he understood.

"The implication was that I couldn't afford to feed my kid. His 'suggestion' for me, to apply for the school lunch program." She used her fingers to draw imaginary quotation marks in the air. "Maybe he just tried to help," she conceded. "But it bothered me knowing he thought I couldn't afford to take care of a stupid school lunch account. I admit it." She turned to look in his direction. "Things are tight around here and there isn't much money to spare, but we're definitely not destitute."

"That hardly makes an excuse for locking yourself up in here all night."

Trevor still sat, while Vivian lay on the bed. Even in the dark, he could see her eyes reflecting the small amount of light coming from the crack at the bottom of the bedroom door. He wanted to reach out and smooth the deep crease of her brows with his thumbs. As awkward as it should have been, but wasn't, being in a bedroom together with the lights purposefully turned off. It felt wrong to want to touch her. Still, the urge was there.

"It wasn't just the lunch money or what Mr. Rockchild said." She sat up on the bed, careful to keep the covers up to her waist. "I hate my job. I hate my boss even more. I wanted to walk out today."

"Why didn't you?"

She sighed as if that was the stupidest question she'd ever heard. "Because I need the job."

"There're other jobs." He sat up straighter on the bed taking a forceful posture. "You're a smart woman who's willing to work. What you don't know, you're willing to learn. Those are important qualities."

"So is experience and that's what I'm lacking." She nervously

looked around the room, squinting to see the jeans she'd had on earlier. "It's too dark in here. Turn on the light," she stated matter-of-factly.

He reached over to the nightstand, found the cord and switched on the light. "Good idea. It's hard to talk when I can't see you."

"Could've fooled me. Don't look," she grumbled. "Close your eyes while I get my jeans. No peeking!"

"I promise I won't look." His eyes already burned with the image of her legs. Once was enough. Her legs were slender and sculpted all the way to the curve of her bottom. He didn't want to see legs like that again unless he was going to be wrapped in them before the end of the night. Of course, that would never happen with Vivian. What was he thinking? This was Vivian, his dead brother's widow. *I'm sick. Get out of this situation before your brain goes where it has no place being.* "Can I open my eyes?"

"One second," she said. "I'm still buttoning my jeans. Okay. Do I look ready to prove to the children I'm not suffering a nervous breakdown?" She opened the bedroom door. "Did I hear something about pizza?"

The jeans weren't tight and her shirt too big, but damn if Trevor didn't think she was the most beautiful woman he knew.

Inside, Vivian was beautiful as well. She'd always been a devoted wife. Never harped on Dean because he was a few minutes late for dinner. When he wanted to go hiking on a Saturday afternoon instead of staying home with her and the kids, she understood, at least she let him believe she did. Dean loved the outdoors and she was more of the indoor type. She liked to work out at the gym. Dean liked to run early in the morning before work. Dean always dreamed of having a boat, he'd never gotten around to getting one because he knew Vivian would rather have season tickets to the theater, and a new car every few years.

They'd both made sacrifices to see the other one happy, even if their interests were quite opposite. It was bittersweet knowing

Dean died doing something he loved. Rock climbing had always been one of his favorite adventures. Twice a year, he climbed the face of a mountain to stake his claim at the peak. An unlucky step and a loose tie he'd taken for granted caused him to fall to his death. The coroner had said he never felt the impact. People always made the statement 'at least he didn't feel it,' or 'look at it as a blessing that he went quickly, he could've died of something terrible like cancer.'

The truth was none of the statements had given much comfort. Vivian had once confided to him that if she thought about Dean's death for too long, she'd have to admit she was angry.

He'd heard her tell Dean countless times that he didn't have a right to be careless with his life. Dean liked adventure; driving fast cars, snow skiing off the most dangerous slopes, he even parachuted once on a trip to Mexico for a spring holiday. She'd been right. His recklessness had cost him his life. And he'd always been one to laugh at her concerns. Trevor remembered Dean saying she was paranoid. Nothing was going to happen to him. Ironical, her greatest fear had become reality. She was a widow at forty-two with three children. Her boys needed to be shown how to be men. How does one go about teaching something they know nothing about? That's where he came in. And he liked the role.

Now sitting at the table, the mouth-watering aroma of pizza filled the kitchen. She and Trevor each reached for a second slice. Trevor looked at her. There were dark circles under her eyes. Some of the swelling was due to her afternoon of tears, but there was a deeper sadness. She was tired. Looking now, Trevor could tell just how hard she'd been working at keeping up a strong front.

"Let me help with the finances until you find a job you enjoy." He said the words before he even took a moment to consider what he offered. He knew without question she and Dean would have done anything for him. In the past, they'd come through when he was in a scrape. He could repay the favor now. Except the look she

was giving him clearly expressed it would not be easy to get her to accept. "What?" he asked as if he didn't have the slightest notion what was said to offend.

"We've been over this. I don't want your money. I'm capable of taking care of this family. You have your own responsibilities." She stood and poured herself a cup of coffee. "Can I get you one?"

He nodded and she pulled another cup from the cupboard.

When she sat across from him at the table again, she chuckled. "You look like I took away your favorite toy." She reached out and touched his hand with the tips of her fingers. "I'm not broke and we're not going to starve. I have money if I need it. Money isn't what I'm most longing for anyway."

He looked up from his coffee and stared into her face. No, he could see it was something else entirely. "I'm sorry. I should be more sensitive. Here I am parading women around, and you've lost your mate. I know I wouldn't want to go without sex."

"Oh God." She pulled her hand back and ran her fingers through her hair. "Don't give me your pity either." She laughed. "If it was just sex I think it would be easier to find a remedy." Her hands dropped back onto the table. In almost a whisper, she said, "It's being a team with someone. Knowing that you don't always have to be the quarterback calling the plays, but there's backup standing by to take over if you're not having a good game." Like he's done tonight, she thought. "I miss Dean the most when it's quiet in the house and the kids are in bed. You can hear the crickets outside and you feel like you belong together in that moment. It's the connection of knowing you're part of a family."

"I guess." He paused. "I don't know." Trevor stood from the table and with his back to Vivian looked out the window. "I've never wanted a wife and kids. You make it sound pleasant." He stuffed his hands in the front pockets of his jeans and looked at her over his shoulder. "You had it good, Viv. You'll make it good again. It'll always be different. He's dead and you're not. You're beautiful,

healthy, and full of life. Now go find yourself one. Don't live like you're gone, too."

She knew what he said wasn't meant to hurt her even though it stung to hear. She nodded because she understood why he said it.

He walked to where she stood. "I guess I'll go." His fingers curved under her chin, and then slipped away. He kissed her on the top of her bent head. "By the way I left Jenny a big bag of dog food by the door. I figure if you have to clean up the dog poop, I'll buy the kibble."

"If you'll clean up the poop, I'll buy the kibble," she countered.

He laughed as he headed for the door. "Goodnight."

## Chapter Three

A few days passed and Vivian didn't see much of Trevor. She thought she understood why. They'd both made regretful statements and maybe both shared a bit more than wise. However, what was in the past would stay there, and now Vivian focused on the present. She tried to make a place for Dean in her heart that wouldn't conflict with what she wanted for the future. As long as she ached for what she couldn't have she'd never be free to be happy.

Trevor was right. She didn't want to live without Dean. She understood her life with Dean died with him. There were parts of that happy existence she could keep and build upon.

She sat at the kitchen table and watched out the window. Her bathrobe frayed on the sleeves and had a small tear at the hem, but it was comfortable. Her hair was held off her face with an assortment of clips. Overnight the temperatures were dipping into the low thirties. A layer of frost settled across the grass. It wouldn't be long before the first snow fell.

The furnace roared to life. A blast of warm air spread across the kitchen floor reminding Vivian she had to call on Trevor for his assistance. There was no way she was going to get Joshua on top of the roof to cover the swamp cooler, or go into the cellar to change the furnace filter. She'd been using the heater for a couple of days. The air blowing from the vents smelled musty from a summer without use.

Joshua seemed to accept his father's death. In fact, a person

might think he didn't care at all. His senior year of high school was his main focus, studies, choosing a college, and preparing for his SAT's.

But recently, Vivian started to second-guess some of the decisions she had made. Joshua lived with few rules, and taking no responsibility for his own behavior. Letting Joshua have his father's truck for instance, had not been the brightest idea. Since then, she could not remember the last time he sat with her at a family dinner. Funny that giving a boy on the cusp of eighteen accountability for his own actions could be so terrifying. Yes, there were definitely overdue issues to be addressed.

Joshua and his girlfriend were spending a lot of time together. Vivian wasn't sure if there was reason for concern, but it didn't seem like the best situation for Joshua if he was serious about continuing his education. She'd explained he was going to need a scholarship or student loans. Now wasn't the time for him to get distracted.

She perused the paper when Timothy came down the stairs rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He went directly to the table and plopped down into a chair. "What'cha doin'?"

"You sound like your sister." Vivian stood from the table and got a cereal bowl out of the cupboard. "Reading the classified ads." She filled the bowl with cereal and milk and set it before Timothy. "I like to see if there's anything we need at a good price." Her voice was light and happy.

"What kind of stuff?"

"I wouldn't mind getting a snow blower if I can find a cheap one."

Timothy obviously finished with the conversation because he read the cereal box.

After a few moments of silence, Timothy asked, "Can I go to Scott's today?"

Jenny came through the doggie door when she heard Timothy's

voice. Once under the table, Timothy reached down and scratched behind her ears. The heavy wagging of the dog's tail thumped against the table.

"Sure," she said without letting on to her disappointment. "Amber won't be home either. She's babysitting today."

Timothy seemed to think for a moment because he was quiet. "I can stay home."

Vivian smiled. "Go to Scott's. I'm calling Uncle Trevor anyway to ask him to help me around the house."

"I can do it. What kind of stuff?" He sounded hurt.

"Oh, thank you, Timmy. But I don't think you can help. I need Uncle Trevor to get on the roof." He was about to protest when Vivian held up her hand. "I would be so afraid if you climbed up there. It would make me nervous." Timothy accepted her explanation and called Scott to say he was coming over.

Vivian picked up the phone and called Trevor. After the fifth ring, about to hang up, she heard Trevor's voice. She put the phone back to her ear.

"I just about hung up." Trevor was notably quiet. "I didn't mean to interrupt anything."

"You haven't. It's okay, Viv. What's up?" She heard muted words coming through the receiver.

"Trevor, you've got company. No big deal, I can take care—"

"Just a minute," he interrupted. "I just need to say goodbye."

Trevor obviously covered the mouthpiece to have a conversation with his guest. Why did his having a date make her chest tighten? She'd assumed he'd be available. That didn't make it so.

"Vivian?"

"It's not a problem," she said, even though she was disappointed. In her head she'd already planned the whole day for them. She would fix a special lunch, and then perhaps they could go to a matinee. "I can do it, really. I shouldn't have assumed you'd be

around. I better go,” she said. “I’ll call you later.”

“Now wait a minute,” he interrupted. “I wasn’t saying no. I need to finish up here and then I’ll be over.” He sighed and then said, “I’ll be there in an hour.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to keep you from your plans.”

“You aren’t. Don’t worry about it. I’ll see you soon.”

Vivian smiled when she hung up the phone. She hurried up the stairs and rushed to her room. Twenty-two minutes later, she was showered, with her hair fixed, and she even had mascara on her lashes. It was the possibility of going to the mall, she told herself. That was what the effort was for. Not Trevor. He was her friend and that’s all. Why did she have butterflies in her stomach?

She set the table, poured cold beer into a glass, and set it next to her half glass of zinfandel. The doorbell rang. Good grief, why she was nervous? Completely ridiculous. It was only Trevor. She took a deep, steadying breath before throwing open the door. Her wide smile fell off her face.

“Hi,” she stuttered on the one syllable word.

Trevor stepped in the house, kissing her quickly on the cheek. The tantalizing smell of his after-shave surrounded him. A tall red head with an obscenely built body, followed him in. “Maggie, this is Vivian.” He was as cool as a cucumber and Vivian felt like live electrical wire. “First the furnace. I’ll be right back.” He disappeared down the hall. They heard him take the stairs two at a time.

Vivian stood looking at Maggie wondering what in the world to say. She felt like crying at the same time wanted to strangle Trevor. She’d ruined his afternoon. And hers was shaping up to be a fine catastrophe. She had chicken and rice in the oven and cold beer on the counter for heaven’s sake. What in the world was he doing bringing a beautiful date to her house?

As if Maggie heard her question she said, “We’re going horseback riding.”

Vivian nodded her head. "Would you like something to drink?" she asked Maggie. They went to the kitchen and Vivian immediately regretted the invitation. She briefly closed her eyes and knew Maggie was going to get the wrong idea. But of course, Maggie assumed what was completely obvious. Two place settings, delicious aromas coming from the stove, and two filled glasses on the counter spoke volumes. Not to mention the scent Vivian wore behind her ears and on her wrists, the v-neck sweater she wore outlined her small, firm breasts, and jeans that fit her hips perfectly, gave the illusion of curves on her slender frame.

Why wouldn't Maggie think anything except what appearances said? Trevor would obviously be explaining his little bit crazy sister-in-law didn't need much encouragement to get dressed up and make an extravagant lunch.

"Beer, wine?"

"Water would be fine," Maggie replied.

Vivian had just filled the glass when Trevor came into the kitchen. He didn't appear to notice anything odd about the way Maggie and Vivian seemed to be in their perspective corners like boxers at a heavyweight bout waiting for the bell to ring so they could come out fighting. Like a shroud, the tension hovered in the air.

Trevor picked up his beer as if he expected it to be there and took several large swallows. "Is the cooler cover in the garage or out in the shed?"

Vivian couldn't speak. Her eyes were resting on Trevor and her tongue seemed to fill her mouth. Jeans fit to emphasize the strength in his thighs and the slimness of his hips, and she couldn't seem to keep her eyes off the faded and worn denim on the fly. His shirt rolled up on his forearms, and the top two buttons left undone revealing a glimpse of silky hair.

She recovered quickly. "Shed, I think." She looked toward Maggie whose eyes were fixated on Trevor. "Are you staying for

lunch?”

“I don’t think so,” Maggie said.

“Sounds good,” Trevor said at the same time. He looked from one woman to the other. “Well, maybe we better go as soon as I finish with the cooler.” He turned to walk out of the room. “Unless you have something else for me?” he asked Vivian.

She shook her head.

Once he was out of the room, Maggie leaned against the counter and sighed. “I guess you weren’t expecting me.” She unfolded her arms from across her chest and spread them wide. “It does appear you intended on having a nice afternoon with Trevor. Your house seems so . . . cozy. I guess is the word I’m looking for.”

Vivian took a wet cloth from the sink and wiped down the counter where the wine and beer glass had left water rings. “I suppose it does appear that way. Well, it’s a habit.” She tried a little laugh that sounded forced as she neatly folded the cloth and laid it to the side of the sink. “You’re right. I wasn’t expecting him to have company.”

Vivian wasn’t sure if it was compassion or pity. She didn’t care for it either way. Maggie’s posture had changed. Obviously, she’d been empowered because Trevor had abided by her wish to leave as soon as he finished.

“You might not think it’s any of my business, but I think you depend on Trevor too much. He won’t ever say no to you.”

“How long have you known Trevor?” Vivian asked trying to change the subject.

Maggie lowered her voice a bit and said, “I know it must be hard losing a husband. If I ever got married, I bet I’d be devastated too. You’ve got the kids and everything. If you ask me, I think you ought to get married as soon as you can so you have someone to help you besides Trevor.”

Vivian’s mouth fell open. Never before had she met such a brazen woman. Who does she think she is? “You know, Trevor’s

never mentioned you before. But silly me,” She put her hand to her cheek. “I just can’t keep up with his calendar.”

Maggie’s mouth twitched. “You don’t need to be rude,” she continued. “I’m sure Trevor wouldn’t complain. I just think a person would grow tired of having to change their plans every time a family member needed their help.” Her lips smiled with pity while her eyes told a different story.

Vivian was not going to listen to any more. “It isn’t any of your concern, Maggie.” Vivian leaned against the counter and folded her arms across her chest. “Trevor and I are family. If he didn’t want to be here, he wouldn’t. I’d understand.” Any further comment she wanted to make was halted because Trevor came back into the kitchen carrying the cover for the swamp cooler.

“I’m going to have to come back later in the week, Viv. This is shot.” He held up the tarp. Crumpled on the floor of the shed all summer had rotted the material. Large patches of discolored mold were visible. “I’m putting it in the trash. You can’t use it like this.”

“Are they expensive?”

He smiled as he shook his head no. “I’ll pick one up. I don’t want you up on the roof, either. You’ll break your neck. I’ll get to it.” He raised an eyebrow daring her to argue. “There are a few other things I need to do. So don’t worry. Consider it done.”

“On the news last night, they said we could have snow by the middle of the week.”

“And we’ll be ready.” He kissed her cheek as he pulled on his jacket. “Don’t worry about it. I said I’d handle it. And the furnace is ready for sub zero temperatures. You’ll be toasty warm without the smell.” He looked at Maggie. “Ready?”

She slipped her arm into his and said goodbye to Vivian in a pleasant voice.

Trevor escorted Maggie out and waved to Vivian as she closed the door behind them.

Now Vivian faced an afternoon alone and nothing to do. She didn't even feel like eating the chicken and rice waiting to be taken out of the oven.

## Chapter Four

It started as a light drizzle, enough to wet the sidewalks. Then the rain turned into a few snowflakes. The sky varied from shades of gray and blue, not the intense blue of a crisp, late fall afternoon, but instead the kind of ominous color that brings to mind heavy accumulation, and power outages. Without the sun's rays to tell her it was still mid-afternoon, it felt like eight o'clock in the evening.

The flower shop sat on the bottom floor of the mall facing the street. It had both a mall entrance and a double door leading out to the street. Still, they hadn't had a customer all afternoon. Cheryl kept busy by talking on the phone, and Vivian thumbed through one of the flower books between watching the snow steadily fall thicker and faster and the clock. Minutes ticked slowly by until the time she could go home. A flashing, amber light atop a snowplow throwing sand passed by the front window. The streets and the sidewalks dusted with a thickening layer of accumulation. The forecast predicted the first serious snowstorm of the season.

Vivian glanced at the clock again. She hoped the roads remained safe until she got home from work. She hated driving in this kind of weather. Her car wasn't the surest vehicle on the street. To the big four-wheel drive trucks and sport utility vehicles on the road, she wasn't more than a speed bump in the way. Times like today, she wished she had thought to take Joshua to school keeping the truck for herself.

Her mind kept roaming to Joshua. Amber said he'd broken up with his girlfriend. Vivian seemed to be growing more distant from

her son everyday. She remembered a time when she considered them friends. That was before Dean's death. Since then they didn't relate to one another. She had done some of the changing she admitted, but he was different too. Becoming the only source of income took her out of the house, and in the process out of their lives. No matter how much she wanted to be home again, it wasn't possible.

School was going well for Joshua. He never had to study to get good grades. Academic learning seemed to come naturally to him. She'd seen his report card and his grades were better than good. Down from last year, yet his GPA still got him on the honor roll. She and Dean had made mistakes. There always seemed to be time to worry how they'd take care of the children's higher education. Cutting back on the extras had been their plan. Thankfully, Joshua had the grades. Cutting back wasn't an option anymore. He needed a scholarship and would most likely have to utilize student loans as well.

Growing tired from watching the snowfall, Vivian stood. "I'm going to stretch my legs."

Cheryl covered the mouthpiece of the phone and whispered, "Go ahead."

While she was in the break room, she heard the door chime announcing a customer. Vivian wondered if she was going to be summoned. She sighed in relief when Cheryl didn't call for her, and stayed in the back and brewed a fresh pot of coffee. Trevor crossed her thoughts. Her love of the dark, rich brew was probably how he felt about his cigarettes.

She carried two cups to the front of the store, but stopped before she reached the register area. "Hi," she said to the customer leaning against the counter having a conversation with Cheryl. "What are you doing here?"

"Hi, Mom."

Cheryl sat up straight and looked at Vivian, and then turned

her attention back to the handsome man bracing his weight with his arms. "Mom?" She looked back at Vivian. "She's your mom?" She raised an eyebrow at the question.

"Yeah." He smiled at Cheryl, and then at his mom. "It's really starting to get slick out there. Thought you might want a lift."

Vivian nearly lost it right then and there. Tears stung the back of her throat. It was the first thoughtful gesture from her son in some time. "Thank you." She choked on the second syllable. "That's very considerate of you."

"Mom," he sounded dismayed that she would act as if it was far fetched for him to consider her fear of driving in inclement weather. "I know you hate to drive in the snow. My truck handles much better than your piece of junk."

He was doing her a favor but he'd managed to insult her as well. She wanted to point out it wasn't his truck, and would later when Cheryl wouldn't be witnessing the exchange.

"I'm not off for a few minutes yet. You'll have to wait." She finished walking to the counter, and set Cheryl's coffee down next to her. "Cheryl this is, Joshua."

"Josh," he corrected. "And I don't mind waiting. I'll talk to Cheryl." He leaned toward her again. "Mom didn't tell me she worked with someone so cool."

Cheryl grabbed the cup of coffee and warmed her hands. "She didn't tell me she had a son my age."

"He's not your age," Vivian interrupted. "He's still in high school."

"I'm eighteen, Mom." He gave her a hard look. "I'm an adult."

"You might think so, I don't." She put up her hand to stop any protest. "I'll get my coat and be right back." She hated doing it, but she left them to talk while she went and gathered her belongings.

Vivian rinsed her coffee cup and grabbed her purse. In the bathroom, she ran a comb through her hair. Reflecting in the mirror, she noticed she had more lines at the corners of her eyes.

Laugh lines is what she used to call them. She hated to admit they looked like wrinkles. Deep and angry lines appeared at the side of her mouth. When had she started looking so old, she wondered? Gone was the happy and youthful woman she'd been. She'd aged in the past year and wasn't wearing it well.

She pasted a smile on her face and rejoined Joshua and Cheryl. They were sharing a private joke. Cheryl threw her head back seductively and laughed. Joshua wrote something down on a piece of paper and handed it across the counter. Great, her son was attempting to pick up her boss. The day couldn't get any worse.

"I'm ready."

Joshua and Cheryl startled apart.

Vivian rolled her eyes. "I'm leaving. I hope it's not a problem for you."

"Go ahead," Cheryl said. "We're slow. I wish I could leave early, but paper work and bookkeeping—" she shrugged her shoulders. "Management."

Vivian rolled her eyes again and walked out the door ahead of Joshua and didn't hear his final words to Cheryl.

Vivian climbed into the passenger seat of the truck. Immediately her throat tightened. Dean had loved his truck. As Joshua climbed in beside her, it struck her how he resembled his father. Everything, but the attitude.

"Put on your seatbelt."

Joshua chuckled and turned the ignition key. When Vivian tapped her foot, he groaned, reached for the belt, and buckled it. With a jolt, he put the truck into first and shot out of the parking lot.

"Slow down!" Vivian scolded. "Before you kill us." She tucked her purse close to her side.

Joshua pulled into traffic. He had one hand on the steering wheel while he fiddled with the radio.

"Joshua, you need to keep both hands on the wheel."

"It's fine. I'm a good driver." He finally found the station he wanted and turned up the volume. Vivian immediately turned it down again.

"I'm nervous enough with your driving. I don't need that garbage blasting in my ears."

"Not so low I can't hear it." He turned it back up, although not as loud.

They were quiet while they drove the ten minutes home. It wasn't until they were in the house, before anything was said.

"If the weather is bad tomorrow, I'll take the truck to work."

Heading to his room, Joshua stopped on the stairs when he heard her. "You're not taking my truck," he said with conviction. "I'll take you to work." He started back up the stairs, signaling he'd finished with the conversation.

"It's not your truck," Vivian called as she walked to the living room and sat on the couch. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes trying to will the tension out of her neck. She was not going to fight him over this. It was Dean's truck and that made it her truck. Joshua was about to figure it out. She was still the mother and he still had responsibilities to the home and his family if he wanted to keep the privilege of driving the truck.

His footfalls sounded like a heard of elephants as he came back down the stairs, and stood before her. "You are not taking my truck! You gave it to me!"

Her eyes opened to see him standing over her, nostrils flared, breathing hard like a bull ready to charge. "Watch how you speak to me." She sat up straight and faced him squarely. "That was your father's truck. He paid for it when he was alive, now I do. Not once have you offered to pay the insurance. I pay to have the tires replaced, the oil changed, and who do you think is going to pay for repairs if something breaks? You? Ha! So don't stand there and tell me what I will or won't do with the truck or you'll find a FOR SALE sign in the back window. And don't think I'm not serious."

Joshua stood there glaring at her. When it was clear he hadn't anything to say, he stormed off to his room slamming the door.

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Timothy came through the door just as the teakettle whistled. He found Vivian making a cup of herbal tea. "Hello, Timmy. How was school today?" She pasted on the best smile she could with the headache pounding in her skull.

"Can I play outside?" She turned around, dismayed to see her son dripping water through her kitchen. His hair plastered to his head. Rosy cheeks and a fire engine red nose colored his face. Since he was already wet and cold what difference would a few more minutes make?

"Be careful." He ran back through the living room. "Stay close. I'll call you when it's time to come in," she yelled after him.

"Okay, Mom." The door slammed.

Vivian looked at the clock and wondered what kept Amber. She usually beat Timothy home.

Amber kept her babysitting calendar on the counter. There wasn't an appointment scheduled for today.

"Joshua?" She yelled from the bottom of the stairs. "Come here for a minute." She heard him yank open his door, throwing it into the wall. A moment later, he stood at the top of the stairs. "Please don't destroy my house while you're angry with me."

"Is that what you wanted?" he snidely remarked.

"No. Did Amber say anything to you about whether she had plans after school?"

"Nope." He turned and walked away from the stairs without giving Vivian a chance to ask another question.

Vivian went back into the kitchen and sat at the table. Her herbal tea cooled and she took a sip. When Amber got home, she was going to hear an earful. She knew better than to go anywhere without permission. At the very least, Amber should have checked in.

Vivian made herself busy by starting dinner. As usual, short on inspiration after a long day at the flower shop, she looked for something simple. Last night grilled cheese and tomato soup. Tonight's fare, tuna casserole.

While the water boiled, so did her temper. For every hour late, Amber could count on a week of grounding. She called Timmy in from outside and Joshua down from his room.

"I'll eat in my room," Joshua said, filling his bowl. At this point, Vivian didn't care. Her argument with Joshua didn't seem quite so pressing with time slowly ticking by with no word from Amber.

"Can I be excused?" Timmy pushed his empty bowl aside. Distracted, Vivian hadn't spoken at all to Timmy while he ate his dinner.

"Sure. Do you have any homework?"

He pushed away from the table. "Yeah, but I can do it."

Three hours overdue and Vivian passed anger, growing steadily more concerned. She'd called Amber's friends, at least the ones she had numbers for. No one had seen Amber since the final bell at school. She did find out Amber hadn't taken the bus like she was supposed to.

By nightfall, Vivian teetered on the verge of hysterics. Granted, it got dark early, but her mother's instincts honed in on Amber. Her mind jumped to several different possibilities. What if she had been kidnapped from the schoolyard? Not likely. Amber was very responsible. She would never get into a car with someone she didn't know, which left Vivian wondering if maybe Amber had met someone and not told her about it. Kids found their way onto the internet where they could meet anyone. Her heart started to beat faster as she couldn't keep her thoughts from jumping wildly to worst-case scenarios.

Vivian called the police. The officer thought she should wait. "You know how some kids are," he said. "Forget the time, get their parents all worked up for nothing." The officer staffing the phones

took her number. "Someone will be in touch if we hear anything. Don't worry," was the last thing she heard. Did they really think a parent wouldn't worry?

Minutes felt like hours. "Joshua," she called, climbing the stairs. She opened his door just as he reached for the handle. "I've got to look for her. Watch Timmy." She started to cry. "Do you know where she liked to hang out?"

His shoulders sagged, and a tender smile tugged at his mouth. At least he wasn't still in a fighting mood. "Amber doesn't hang out anywhere. She baby-sits." He leaned against the doorjamb.

"Think. Is there a boy she likes? Where could she be? Do you know if she's made a new friend at school? Where they might live?"

He shook his head.

"I guess I'll just drive around." She left his room and took the stairs two at a time. "Stay off the phone in case she calls. I'll check back here every twenty minutes or so." She grabbed her keys off the hallway table and hurried into the still falling snow and slippery darkness. She left Jenny wagging her tail by the door.

The roar of the pick-up truck was followed by the tires slipping, and then gripping on the driveway.

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Vivian had been gone for ten minutes when the telephone rang. Joshua answered. He watched Jenny lie by the front door with her snout on her paws. Her tail lay limply on the floor while she waited for Vivian and Amber to return.

"Vivian Ashton, please."

"She's not available," Joshua said to the caller. "Is there a message?" With Amber unaccounted for, it might be important. However, his mother had taught him phone etiquette. Get a name, ask for a phone number, and see if the caller would like to leave a message. He picked up the pen and pad of paper always left beside the phone.

"This is the Mountain Valley Hospital."

“Is it Amber?” he interrupted. “My mom is driving around looking for her.”

“Amber is here in the emergency room. Please have your mother come to the hospital as soon as she returns. Amber was involved in a serious car accident.”

“Is she okay? How bad is it? My mom just lost my dad. She can’t lose my sister, too.” Joshua blinked back tears.

“Honestly, I don’t know the extent of her injuries.”

Joshua thanked the nurse for the information. As soon as he hung up with the hospital, he called Trevor and told him Amber had been in a car accident.

“Where’s your mother?” he asked.

“She got worried and went looking for her.” He spoke quickly because his insides were jumbled. He worried for his sister, and regretted his fight with his mother. He’d been a jerk and didn’t want to admit it to Trevor. “It sounds serious, Uncle Trevor.”

“I’ll go to the hospital. When your mom gets back, have her meet me there.” He paused giving his next statement weight. “Do not tell her your sister has been injured. Only tell her that they wanted to be sure she was fine. Whatever we’re dealing with, and we don’t know yet, isn’t going to change no matter how quickly she gets to the hospital. I don’t want to worry about her, too.”

“I understand. Mom hates driving in the snow anyway. She’s already nervous. I’ll tell her Amber’s fine, because she probably is, right Uncle Trevor?”

“Right.” He sighed heavily. “I’ll get over to the hospital. I’ll call you when we know more.”

Joshua sat on the couch petting Jenny watching the clock’s second hand slowly circle. Every few ticks it appeared to stop altogether. Where was his mother? Why didn’t she hurry?

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Timothy was in the kitchen watching the snow out the window. Silent tears fell down his cheeks. Tears he didn’t want anyone else

to see. Amber was going to die. He knew it. That's why Joshua paced the floor and watched the clock. She was going to die before Mom had a chance to get to the hospital and say goodbye. No one got to say goodbye to Dad either. He rested his head against the cold glass of the window and closed his eyes. He tried to remember what his dad looked like. The only picture he could make in his mind was the family portrait in the living room. He couldn't make a picture of Amber either. She was probably dead now, too.

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Vivian got out of the truck. Before she could walk to the door, Joshua pulled it open and came running out of the house. His face was white, his expression grave. Like a tidal wave, she remembered the last time she saw a similar expression on someone's face, only then it had been Trevor bearing the bad news.

"Oh God." She fell to her knees.

"No, Mom. It's nothing like that." She looked at Joshua who bent to help her up. "She's okay."

Vivian's shoulders shook as she absorbed what he said. "You have to go to the hospital. She was in a car wreck. I don't know where. I don't know when, so don't ask." He helped her up and walked her back to the truck. "I'll drive. Give me a minute to get Timmy." He ran into the house and hollered for Timothy. "We're going to the hospital. Get your coat and let's go." He grabbed his parka off the hall closet doorknob and ran to the truck. Timothy remained close behind zipping his coat as he ran.

Joshua, Timothy, nor Vivian noticed the front door standing open. Jenny stood in the doorjamb with her tail wagging, the hall light burning brightly.

Timothy sat in the small, side seat behind Vivian. If Amber was hurt, Timothy wasn't going to handle it well. She'd already decided Joshua should take him back home as soon as they got to the hospital.

"Drop me off at the emergency room doors." She pointed to the

giant illuminated red letters over the receiving bay. "Take Timmy home."

Joshua pulled up to the wide automatic doors and Vivian jumped out. "See you later, at home. I'll call when I know anything." She slammed the door and ran into the building before Joshua or Timothy had a chance to argue.

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"I want to stay," Timothy complained as he climbed into the passenger seat. "She's our sister. If she's dying—" He started to cry.

"She's not dying."

Timothy was quiet, but continued to stare at Joshua with huge eyes that begged for Joshua to make him believe.

"I promise. She's going to be fine."

Timothy continued to cry. He knew in his heart she was already dead and they didn't want to tell him. "I'm old enough to know the truth," he pleaded.

Joshua swore and put the truck into gear.

"Mom's going to be pissed."

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Vivian ran down the hall. The overpowering odor of antibacterial soap and disinfectant burned her nostrils.

"My daughter, Amber Ashton?" she asked the woman behind the counter wearing a tidy, white cap pinned to her head. Her dress was starched stiff unlike the other nurses wearing comfortable scrubs and white sneakers.

"Viv." Trevor jumped from the chair where he had been waiting. "She's okay." Vivian ran into his outstretched arms and buried her face in the earthy scent of his soft leather jacket. He caught her to him and wrapped his arms tightly around her. Suspended there for a moment, it felt comfortable to be held. Then Vivian brought her arms around to his chest and gently pushed away.

"I'm so scared. Tell me everything you've found out."

Trevor held her hand and led her to a sofa in the waiting area. Walls painted a muted blue soothed. Dried flower sprays and paintings of English gardens added color. Upholstered chairs and deep cushioned couches tried to take the harshness from the room. Nothing masked the sense of urgency in the alarms, buzzers, and medical personal.

"The girl she was with," Trevor pointed to a man staring blankly at the wall. "Well, she's pretty bad. She's in surgery now. I overheard the doctors telling him the girl was going to lose her spleen." Vivian gasped and put her hand over her mouth.

"Mom!" Timothy and Joshua came charging into the waiting area. "How is she?" Joshua asked.

"I thought I told you to take Timmy home." Timothy wrapped around her side, holding onto her waist. She caressed his head and ran her fingers through his hair. "This is no place for a little boy."

"She's dead!" Timothy rubbed the tears off his face. "I know something bad happened and you don't want to tell me."

"He freaked out in the truck. I figured he'd be upset all night if I didn't bring him in to see for himself that she's fine."

Vivian led Timothy to the couch and sat him down. "Your sister is not dead. Uncle Trevor was just about to tell me what happened when you came in. Sit here quietly and I'll talk to you in a minute. First I'm going to talk to Uncle Trevor." She turned to Joshua. "Stay with him."

Trevor held out his hand, and she wrapped her fingers tightly to his. As soon as they were out of earshot from the boys, he continued to tell her about the other girl. "She doesn't have a mother. I didn't hear her father say why. The guy's all alone. I feel bad for him. His daughter's got a battle ahead of her."

"What about my daughter? How is she?"

"A few stitches. The doctors say she has a concussion. He didn't tell me much, only enough to keep me pacified. I'm sure they'll let

her go home tonight.”

“Are you sure it’s just stitches?”

Trevor nodded. “And bumps and bruises.”

“Where is she?” She looked around as if she would see Amber sitting in a corner waiting.

“Getting x-rays. Her ankle is swollen. They want to make sure it isn’t broken. I offered to go with her. She wanted me to wait for you. She knew you’d be freaking, as she put it.”

“Thank God.” She dropped her face into her hands and rubbed her eyes. “Let’s go tell the boys, but not near the other girl’s father. I’m sure our good news won’t bring him any comfort.” They walked toward the waiting room. “Who is this girl and where in the world were they? Amber didn’t say anything about going anywhere after school. I didn’t give her permission to be in someone’s car.”

Trevor placed his hand on the small of her back as they walked. To someone on the outside looking in, appearances would have them thinking Vivian and Trevor were married. They seemed supportive to each other and comfortable, the kind of connection that comes with years of knowing and loving a person. Vivian’s heart swelled with gratefulness.

“Timmy will go home now. After Dean, I should’ve realized how he’d react.”

“You were scared.” Trevor moved his hand from her back to wrap his arm around her shoulders. “We all thought the worst. Let’s just be thankful it wasn’t serious. We’ll figure out the rest later. Amber has some explaining to do, but you’re not going to get anything out of her tonight. She needs to rest and you need a day to calm down. Figure out how you want to handle it. If you need me, you know where I am.”

“I need you tonight. Will you go home with the boys? I’m not worried about Joshua. Timmy might have a nightmare.” It happened often without the added worry over Amber.

Trevor gave her a squeeze. “You got it. Call me as soon as you

know when they're releasing her."

"Don't wait up. It'll be late. If anything is different from what they've told us, I'll call. Otherwise I'll see you in the morning."

Trevor agreed. After he left with the boys, Vivian sat alone in the waiting room sipping a cup of terrible tasting coffee out of a machine.

"I'm glad Amber is going to be fine," the other girl's father said without looking at her.

"I'm sorry your daughter didn't fare as well." She sighed and rubbed her hand across her forehead pushing her bangs away from her face. "They were lucky. It could've been much worse." She waited a moment that seemed to stretch for two lifetimes. "She's going to do just great. I believe that, don't you?"

He nodded, but was unable to speak because the tears had started to fall again. Vivian stood and went to his side. She took his hand in hers and squeezed. He nodded his head. "I know what lays ahead for my daughter; a long, hard recovery."

"Pardon me?" Vivian tried to get him to look her in the face.

"I was just thinking that Amber is going to be good as new in a couple weeks. A sprained ankle and a few stitches heal fairly quickly. Don't take what I'm saying the wrong way." He looked straight into her eyes now, a jarring sensation because his eyes were ice blue and extremely intense. "I'm so grateful Amber wasn't seriously hurt. Rachael's only had her license a couple of weeks. I shouldn't have let her have a car!" He slammed his right fist into his left hand. "Damn it!" He abruptly stood and ran his hands through his hair. "What in the world did those girls think they were doing driving around on a day like today?" He looked back at Vivian. "That's all they were doing." He splayed his hands wide. "Driving around looking for boys, I guess." His voice took on an edge of hostility.

"Amber has never gone off looking for boys."

He rolled his eyes. "Those two collect boys. Amber is where

Rachael was last year. Believe me; your worries are just beginning.” He seemed to find the idea amusing because he laughed mostly to himself.

“How long have our daughters been friends?” Vivian was a bit embarrassed because it appeared she didn’t know what was going on in her own daughter’s life. “It’s just that I don’t remember Amber ever mentioning Rachael.”

He sat down beside her again. “Not very long.” He pointed down the hall. “Here she comes.” Amber sat in a wheel chair pushed by a young a medical assistant.

“Thank you.” Vivian gave his hand a final squeeze and ran to her daughter.

## Chapter Five

The house looked alive with light when Vivian finally pulled into the driveway. Amber slept in the seat next to her. It had been an incredibly long night and every bone in her body screamed for sleep.

“Amber,” she gently nudged her shoulder. “We’re home. Come on.” She got out of the driver’s side and walked around to the passenger door. She raised her arms above her head and stretched. “I’m going to sleep for days.”

“I don’t think I can walk, Mom. My legs are still a little shaky.”

“Here,” Vivian wrapped one of Amber’s arms around her neck and leveraged her weight. “Use me for support. Be careful for your ankle,” she warned. “Ready,” They balanced against the truck. “It’s slippery. Take it slow.” They took small steps to the front door.

Vivian closed her hand around the doorknob. Thankfully, it was unlocked. “Wait here,” she said as she leaned Amber against the hallway wall. “I’ll get Uncle Trevor to carry to your room.” Amber was about to protest, but Vivian held up her hand. “No arguments. You need to take it easy.”

Vivian collided with Trevor as she walked to the kitchen. “Sorry,” he said, as he balanced her before she fell.

Tired was an understatement. Her keen awareness of his fingers searing into her skin, warmed the chill and tension from her shoulders. Her eyes riveted to the rolled cuffs of his flannel shirt. Corded muscular forearms sprinkled with hair. And tanned, how did he manage a tan in the middle of winter? Why had she never

noticed before? She furrowed her brows and scrutinized his face.

“I heard you come in. How is she?”

Reigning in her wandering thoughts, Vivian pointed to the hall, took a deep breath, and willed her racing heart to calm. “She needs help getting to her room. She’s wobbly from the concussion. She’s shaky and feels nauseous. I know it’s braced, but she needs to stay off her ankle as much as possible.”

“She’ll feel better once she gets some rest.” He went to Amber and lifted her into his arms. A quick kiss on her forehead, and then he started up the stairs.

Vivian made her way to the kitchen. She had the teakettle on the stove when Trevor returned.

“Is it cold in here, or just me?” She rubbed her arms to chase away the chill. “Is the furnace on? Maybe the pilot light went out.”

Trevor grinned as he told her, “The front door was left wide open.”

“What?” she asked unbelievably.

“There was three inches of snow in the hallway when we got home.” He walked past her, and took the whistling teakettle off the burner. “The boys and I cleaned up. You should’ve seen Timmy’s face.” He chuckled. “He knew he was the last one out.”

Vivian placed a teaspoon of instant coffee in each cup. Trevor poured the water. “Maybe you should build a fire?” she said, standing next to him. She had to angle her head back to see his face.

“I can do that.”

Trevor’s body was so close to hers, too close. His scent filled her nose. Suddenly she couldn’t think. What had she just asked him? He looked at her strangely. Was he waiting for her to say something?

“Are you all right?” He touched her. She saw his hand coming toward her face. His fingers grazed her cheek and her forehead. “You’re not warm.”

Want to bet? "I'm fine." His hand fell away, and she wondered if it had been as soft as she thought. Had he just checked her temperature or was it a caress?

"I think you need a little something more than coffee." He opened cupboards. "Here we go." He took out a bottle of whiskey.

"That's Dean's." She watched as he poured two fingers into a glass.

"He isn't here to drink it." He handed her the glass while she continued to look at him.

"That's not a very nice thing to say." She handed the drink back to him. "I don't," Before she could finish the sentence, he lifted her hand forcing the glass to her mouth.

"You need a drink."

She swallowed the contents quickly. Tears came to her eyes and she coughed. "I don't drink," she stuttered while choking.

Trevor poured the same amount for himself and drank it quickly. Obviously he had more practice. He didn't even flinch from the horrible taste. He hesitated a moment and then poured himself another.

Vivian's body shuddered as a chill raced up her spine. Instinctively, Trevor reached out and rubbed her arms. Liquid heat flowed from his fingertips. Shocked by the tenderness, she jerked away. Trevor tightened his grip. "You're still upset over Amber." His hands ran up her arms and rested on her shoulders. He gently squeezed. "She's home and she's fine."

"It's not Amber." She looked down rather than gaze into his eyes.

"What is it?" When she lifted her head, his hands stilled.

His face angled perfectly, mouth slightly parted, and breathing slow. Before she could embellish the fantasy, she broke the spell. "I'm still cold," she said.

"The fire," he stumbled. "I'll go put a log in the fire place." His hands dropped to his side. Trevor turned and left the room.

Vivian stared at the space he had just vacated. It could have been the lack of sleep or maybe the numbing quality of the alcohol, whatever the reason her fuzzy mind wouldn't let her make sense of what she felt. She didn't want to acknowledge the tingles filling her stomach and heat radiating from her skin. Feverish is definitely how she felt whether Trevor thought her warm or not.

She took their drinks with her as she went to the living room. Trevor knelt in front of the fireplace. Fire slowly licked a log to life. She glanced at the clock above the fireplace and nearly groaned aloud. The sun would be up in a few hours.

"I checked the kids," Trevor said without turning toward her. "They're asleep. Amber seems to be resting comfortably." He poked the fire. When it burned well, he tossed in another log. He sat on the floor with his back against the couch opposite Vivian. Legs that seemed to go on forever stretched out in front of him.

Vivian noticed he'd undone the top few buttons of his flannel shirt. He'd changed his clothes since he was at the hospital. A comfortable pair of relaxed fitting Levi's replaced the khaki pants he'd been wearing earlier.

She handed him his coffee. "Thanks." He took a sip. "It's been a long night. Maybe I should go after this." He pointed at her with the mug. "You need to rest."

Suddenly she felt very brave. "I don't want you to leave. I'm not really tired anymore. I could use the company."

The fire was the only source of illumination in the room. They sat in silence for a while watching the flames dance. Intermittently, they glanced at each other. Vivian pulled her legs under her as she sat in the corner of the couch.

"Are you still cold?"

She wasn't now. The opposite was true. Every time she looked at Trevor, she grew warmer. He looked handsome sitting on the floor with the fire burning behind him. "I'm fine. You?"

He stood.

Her breath hitched. Never before had Trevor made her nervous. Until recently she'd never thought of him as someone of the opposite sex. *Sex* had never been a word she'd associated with him at all. Tonight was different. His appeal scared her. Maybe it would be better if he went home.

"I'm getting a drink of something stronger. Are you ready for another one?" He raised an eyebrow.

She handed him her cup. "Maybe just a little."

A moment later she saw the kitchen light. She followed it like a beacon.

Trevor tipped a glass of whiskey to his lips, but stopped when Vivian came fully into the room. Then he slammed it back, relishing the burn of what he hoped would numb his senses.

She walked around him and stood at the sink to look out the window. "It'll be morning soon," she said.

Trevor closed in behind her. She looked vulnerable. The night had taken its toll. If it were anyone except Vivian, he'd put his hands to good use and work the tension from her shoulders. He wanted to thread his fingers through the silky hair cascading over her shoulders, expose the feminine length of her neck, and taste the scent drifting around her. He wouldn't.

This was Vivian, his friend. Nothing would jeopardize that more than getting physical with her. She wasn't ready. Hell, he never would be. There was too much to lose. It was foolish to even entertain the idea of following through with what his body hadn't realized was out of the question. Or was it? Yes, dammit, it was.

Vivian, not only his best friend and the mother to his niece and nephews, she had been the love of Dean's life. They'd shared a sacred bond. He coasted through life. Someday Vivian would want to settle down again. Commitment wasn't his strength. Yet, at the moment all he wanted to do was touch her. No, it wasn't out of the question.

Dean died. Vivian couldn't hide her secret need for him any

more than he could control his reaction to it. Or maybe she reacted to him. He couldn't deny he thought about her, in ways he shouldn't.

"Have you ever watched the sun come over the mountains at dawn?" She paused not to wait for an answer, but to revel in the memories of the countless mornings she'd spent standing right where they were. "It's peaceful." She wasn't feeling peaceful at the moment. Her head spun.

Trevor was close enough for her to smell the clean scent of his aftershave. "Trevor," she whispered. She took a deep breath. Her shoulders visibly lifted and then lowered when she exhaled. And then he touched her.

Trevor's hands were on her shoulders. Slowly he caressed until his fingers wrapped around her neck. Her eyes drifted closed as Trevor moved closer. She leaned back against his chest.

He turned her in his arms. His thumbs traced arches over her eyes. Even though she was tired and had been through a terrifying night, she was beautiful. Round and ripe, he ached to taste the sweet nectar beyond the barrier of her lips. He'd kissed women, too numerous to count, but never had the anticipation been agonizing. His eyes fixed on the beat of her pulse at the delicate spot at the side of her neck, and then refocused to meet her eyes wild with suspense.

Vivian's head screamed to stop his mouth from coming closer to hers. She couldn't breathe with her heart thumping painfully in her chest. Blood pounded through her ears, drowning out any other sound. Eerie silence engulfed the small space they occupied.

She saw it coming. Perhaps she could even admit she'd fantasized about it enough times that she willed it to happen. She swallowed tightly as her hands slowly trailed up his chest. She reached around his neck. Did she initiate or did he? Their lips barely touched. It was so brief she wondered if she'd only imagined it. Like the wind, it was elusive.

The air rushed from her lungs as Trevor dipped his head and slanted it to the side. Pressing harder, opening her mouth with his skilled assault, his lips fought to claim as much as he could. She met his need with drive of her own. She wrapped her arms more tightly around his neck and pressed her body to his. He groaned as his lips left her mouth and trailed down her neck.

“Viv,” he whispered, as he easily lifted her onto the counter. His mouth moved lower to bite at the flesh of her décolletage. While he caught his breath, his hands glided up her sides. His forehead rested against her chest.

A small voice whispered for her to stop, but frozen with fear and aching with need, she could only watch his hand inch up her side and cup her breast. Her head fell back against the cupboard as his thumb brought her nipple to a hardened peak beneath her shirt.

Before a word could be spoken, he reached for her lips again. This time he lingered, sipping first her top, and then her bottom lip. Their tongues touched before Trevor deepened the kiss and tasted all of her. He seemed to be in command as his hand firmly kneaded her breast. She wished she felt even a small degree of self-control.

Sliding his hand inside her shirt and under the lace of her bra, he held her breast fanning his thumb over the raised peak. Vivian sucked in a breath of air as she wished for his mouth instead. With his other hand on her rear, he pulled her to the edge of the counter so he could nestle himself between her thighs and grind against her.

She broke from the kissing. “Oh God!” she whispered, as the first tiny shockwaves built in her core. Sparking and flashing, she burst into flames of heat. “Trevor!” She quickly pushed away and jumped off the counter. Her legs were weak because her body still twitched from the first orgasm she’d ever had without actually having sex. She rubbed her hands over her face. “What am I doing? I can’t do this.” She talked to herself as she paced the kitchen floor. “Oh my God!” She covered her mouth with her hand and looked at

Trevor. "Do you know what just happened?"

"I think so." He couldn't hide the smile that snuck across his face. "I admit it's a first for me. We're both still dressed."

She turned bright red. "Not that." She pushed past him. "You and me, I'm talking about us."

"Vivian, calm down. We'll take it slow."

Her brows drew together. "What are you talking about? We can't take anything slow. And the way we just behaved I think we passed taking it slow." She threw her arms wide encompassing the counter area. "What are we doing? You're . . . and I'm . . ." She trembled as she spoke. "I'm married to your brother," she said more to herself than to Trevor. "Dean's your brother. How can we do this?" She felt sick to her stomach.

Trevor's features became dark. "My brother is dead. Makes you a widow, Viv. Beyond that, you are a very attractive woman. I care about you." He took a deep breath. "I think you're right, though. We need to explore this before we say or do," he said with more emphasis. "Anything we might regret."

"I already have regrets."

He didn't ask her to elaborate. "I'll go." He reached for her, but she backed away. "It'll be different between us, but that doesn't have to be a bad thing. Our feelings have changed. We spend a lot of time together. It happened."

She looked away as tears escaped from the corners of her eyes. "I'm sorry," she choked. She kept the fingers of one hand in front of her mouth while her other arm wrapped around her middle. She couldn't look at him.

"Nothing really happened, Vivian." He trailed his hand down her face, catching a tear on the tip of his finger. "I'll call you in a couple of hours." He hesitated a moment. "Are you going to be okay?"

She nodded not trusting herself enough to speak. She stood where she was until she heard the front door close. Then she sank to the floor and cried.

## Chapter Six

“Can I come over?” It had only been a few hours since Trevor left. Vivian lay in bed waiting for sleep to come and steal her away from her guilt. Her mind played with her emotions. One moment her thoughts focused on a justification for what happened, a natural occurrence between two people who had begun to depend upon each other. Her heart knew it was something else entirely. Determined, she would find a way to forget her heart and listen to her head. Trevor wasn’t a salve for her loneliness.

“Trevor, I need some time to understand what happened and so do you. We played with fire last night and got too close. You can’t come over. I’m not ready to see you. Amber needs me. She’s supposed to rest, Timmy’s at school, and God knows where Joshua is, not that I particularly care. At least I don’t today.” She rubbed her eyes in an attempt to wipe away the sleepiness. “I’ll call you back this afternoon.” She didn’t. Instead, memories tortured, twisting in her gut.

Recalling summer evenings in the backyard, Dean and Trevor arguing over which team had the best shot at the World Series. Dean methodically picked his choice by checking player stats. Trevor decided on the fly. He picked against Dean just to rile him. Those had been good years. And they were gone, just like Dean.

She shook off the melancholy. However, she didn’t know how to drop the guilt. It was time to face the truth. Her problem with Trevor had nothing to do with what happened on the counter. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t been sending out the signals. If there was

one thing Trevor was adept at, it was recognizing a woman's interest. One could classify him an expert. No, her problem, she wanted it again.

Later as evening settled, Amber seemed to be feeling much better. She sat at the table for a spaghetti and garlic bread dinner. It wasn't until after Vivian had cleaned the dishes, and was on her way up the stairs to soak in the tub, that Joshua came through the door.

"Hey," he said as he took off his coat and hung it on the doorknob. Giant flakes of snow fell from his hair as he tossed his head.

"Hang your coat in the closet," she said, leaning against the stair rail, and tried to decide if Joshua was hiding something. He had glanced at her when he came through the door, but hadn't looked at her since. "Where've you been?"

He didn't answer immediately. Instead, he asked, "How's Amber? Is her ankle still hurting?"

"She's sleeping. Timmy is watching cartoon network. I'm heading up to take a bath, and Jenny is searching for crumbs under the table. She'll be disappointed when she doesn't find any. Now why are you avoiding the question? Where were you tonight?" She recognized the accusing note in her voice.

"I'm not avoiding anything," he denied as he tried to walk past her. When she continued to stare at him he said, "I was out with some friends. No big deal. Why are you tripping?"

"I needed you home tonight. Your sister needs me and Timmy could have used some company. Don't talk back to me, just answer me. Who were you with?"

"Friends, I said. Drop it, Okay!" He shrugged his shoulders and moved past her. She followed him down the hall.

"Who do you think you're speaking to?" She grabbed his forearm and stopped him. "I asked where you were and who you were with. I expect an answer, not attitude."

He pulled his arm out of her grasp. "Fine! I was with friends. We watched the hockey game at Steve's house. And no, you don't know him," he said, when she was about to interrupt. "And yes, he's a good kid."

He enjoyed mocking her. She could see the pleasure in his expression. Her temper boiled. The urge to wipe the smug look off his face overwhelmed.

"If you're satisfied, I'm getting something to eat and then going to bed." When she didn't say anything, he left the room.

Vivian knew he was lying, though he obviously wasn't ready to confess any secrets. Honestly, she didn't want to fight either and clearly, Joshua spoiled for one.

He lied to her. Her mother's intuition sensor flashed neon red. Eventually, she'd find out the truth. Tonight, she'd just as soon make it later.

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Joshua opened the refrigerator and took out the fixings for a turkey sandwich. That was tough, he thought as he took a table knife from the drawer. His mother would absolutely freak if she knew he had taken Cheryl out on a date. He brought his hand to his neck and gently kneaded the skin beneath his turtleneck shirt. After he made the sandwich, he took an unopened bag of potato chips from the pantry. Swallowing the first bite made him flinch. He rubbed the tender spot on his neck again.

He attempted to shrug off his guilt. Yeah, so he had lied to his mother. Who cared if she found out? He was eighteen, old enough to consider himself a man. He could make his own decisions. He didn't need her approval. *Dad's dead*. Now, he was the man of the house. Shouldn't that come with respect? He stood straighter and squared his shoulders. He could handle it.

He had taken Cheryl on a date. Unbelievable, his mother's boss had gone out with him. Pride caused his lips to tilt into a smile. Cheryl's older, so what? She had a good job and, at least tonight,

she seemed totally into him. This relationship he'd deal with as a man.

It had been an incredible night. Parking the truck above the college was aggressive for a first date. Cheryl wasn't like most girls at school. Lights from the football field game illuminated the snow falling in waves outside the vehicle. The distant thrill of the crowd could be heard even with the hum of the truck's heater. They'd eaten pizza, drank a couple of sodas, and feverishly made out. Cheryl had the lead and he had tried like hell to keep up.

He wiped his mouth on a napkin after he finished with the sandwich. The living room was dark. Vivian had turned off the lights in the downstairs of the house before going to bed. Joshua went into the bathroom to see his neck.

A hickey, the size and shape of two quarters placed side by side, had definitely darkened. Morning was not going to make the dark purple and red bruise look any better either. "Shit," he said under his breath. He had given a few, but had never worn one. They were nothing more than a banner saying, 'Look everyone, I'm someone's property and I spent a couple of hours in the back seat of a car.' or in his case, a truck. Cheryl obviously took pride in that. His mother would completely over react.

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Vivian sat across the table from Amber the next morning wondering whether it was too soon to discuss the events leading up to the accident. If appearances indicated how Amber felt, it was definitely too soon. Contradicting her appearance, she had a healthy appetite and a smiling face. Amber ate a second bowl of cereal.

"When can I go back to school," she asked without looking up. Her tentative voice wouldn't soften Vivian's position.

Vivian didn't know the answer to Amber's question. Of course, she'd eventually go back to school. How was Vivian supposed to trust her? When her children went out the front door, she needed

assurance they'd go to school and come home safe. Vivian had to work. Life would never be as easy as when Dean was alive. They all had to adapt. That meant Amber and Joshua had to be accountable for themselves and also help her with Timothy. Only, Joshua and Amber had ideas of their own.

"When do you think Rachael will be able to come home from the hospital?" Amber asked.

Vivian stood from the table and walked to the counter. "I'm sure I don't know," she said on a sigh. "She's hurt. I won't lie to you." She came back to the table and wrapped her hands around her coffee cup. "What were you doing with Rachael? You never mentioned her name before."

Amber looked into her cereal bowl and pushed a few Cheerios around with her spoon. She finally shrugged her shoulders as a response.

"Have you been friends long?"

She barely looked up from her bowl. "Not very." She laid the spoon on the table and folded her hands in her lap. "She's really nice, Mom. I have history class with her."

"That doesn't explain what you were doing in her car without permission. You've never run off like that before."

"No one has ever asked me before." Amber's face blushed. A soft glow lit her cheeks. "She's cool, Mom. Her dad lets her wear make-up and she has her own car." Her mouth lost the smile. "Well, she used to have a car."

Vivian's head swam with questions. She had never thought Amber a follower, but apparently that was the case in this situation. "You didn't ask me if you could ride in anyone's car. Where were you going?" When Amber didn't answer, she repeated the question.

"We were cruising around."

Vivian's mouth fell open. "Cruising for boys?"

"She thinks I'm pretty. She helped me put on make-up and she

let me try on her clothes.”

“When was that? I didn’t know you had gone anywhere after school.” Make-up, boys, what else didn’t she know? Just last week in the news, they demonstrated how easy it was for perpetrators to get to young girls through the internet. How was she supposed to protect Amber? Cars, boys, the internet, it wasn’t safe for her to wander with unknown friends.

“You weren’t home,” Amber said.

“That’s an excuse if I ever heard one. You know the rules.” Vivian sipped coffee. “I don’t have a choice. I work.”

“Her dad’s never home, either. Did you know her mom just ran off? Rachael said her dad is sad a lot. He buys her things.”

Vivian listened while Amber continued to describe the wonderful life her friend led. No rules, no curfews, and obviously not much concern for scholastics, Rachael’s father sounded like an idiot.

“Amber,” Vivian said gently. “I know it must look very appealing from the outside. But living without rules is dangerous. I don’t believe you’re old enough to make these types of decisions for yourself.” Vivian took a deep breath. “I’m not going to tell you not to keep Rachael as a friend, however I forbid you to see her without my permission.” Vivian held up one finger. “First, no more after school activities for the rest of the quarter.”

“Mom,” Amber protested.

Vivian held up another finger silencing her. “Two—” She raised an eyebrow when it looked as if Amber was about to say something. “You will not socialize with Rachael in any way for one month. After that we can discuss when, where, and what you girls will be allowed to do. I can assure you there will be no further expeditions for boys.”

Amber sat back in her chair and folded her arms cross her chest. Her lips formed an angry line as she looked at Vivian through hooded eyes and slanted eyebrows.

“Wishing won’t change it. And that only deals with the issue of Rachael. I also expect retribution for the lies. I’ll make that call when the time comes. Right now, I’m more disappointed than angry.” She leaned forward and clasped her hands on the table. “Amber, truthfully I’m scared. I never took you for a follower. I always thought you had more sense. A car accident is serious. It could have been much, much worse. It is for Rachael. I know we live in a small town. That doesn’t mean we’re not unsusceptible to crimes.”

They were interrupted by the telephone ringing. For a split second, they looked at each other, and then Amber hopped up from the table and hobbled to answer.

Vivian tried to listen while Amber spoke quietly into the receiver. She could not quite hear what Amber said, but she could clearly hear the tone in which she spoke. Whoever was on the other end of the line received a far more gentle conversation than she just had. Amber lowered herself to the floor and continued to talk in a muffled voice.

Vivian went to the kitchen sink to appear busy even though every nerve in her ear strained to hear any little bit of information. What if she talked to one of the boys she’d met while with Rachael? In her mind, Amber was too young to date. Perhaps some girls were ready at fifteen. Amber had absolutely no experience dating. How often had Vivian noticed men look at her daughter? Too many times to count. If Amber ever found herself in a situation where she was uncomfortable, Vivian didn’t think she had the insight or instincts to get out safely and responsibly.

“It’s for you,” Amber said to her mother, startling her out of her reverie. “It’s Uncle Trevor.” Amber left the phone on the floor and limped toward the other room.

“We’re not done, Amber. We need to finish this conversation.”

“Yes, Mother.”

Vivian picked up the phone even though she wanted to run

after her daughter who appeared dejected. Her shoulders slumped forward and head bowed.

Vivian sighed and said, "Hello."

"She sounds better today."

"It depends upon whom she's speaking with. It has been a morning to forget."

"Tell me."

He sounded rested. Hating to admit it, she relaxed just hearing his voice. He always had that effect. Even when she and Dean disagreed, Trevor had the ability to calm the situation and perhaps shed light on another perspective.

Actually, he sounded like nothing had happened in the kitchen. How had he found a way to move past the kiss and the incident that followed? She couldn't. In truth, she'd begun to believe it hadn't been her at all in the kitchen. She'd suffered what she referred to as an out-of-body experience.

"Has she told you where she and the other girl went?"

"She's been vague. I want to do the right thing. It doesn't feel right to let the lying, not to mention the dangerous behavior slide just because of her injuries from the accident. She's been out on the streets looking for boys and who knows what Rachael's into. I'm sure as hell not going to let her bring my daughter down." Her knuckles turned white as she gripped the telephone. "I have to punish Amber."

"I agree," he said calmly. "I think you're doing the right thing. She has to know where your boundaries lie. Don't beat yourself up."

"That's easy for you to say," she interrupted. "You aren't the one she hates."

"You're her mother, not her friend. Your job is to parent. She doesn't hate you. Even if she does, she'll get over it."

"I'm not convinced. She thinks I'm taking away the one true friend she's ever had. Now she has no perspective dates on the horizon. She honestly believes the only way boys are going to talk

to her is if she's with Rachael." Her voice softened as she remembered the expression on Amber's face. "She doesn't think she's attractive, Trevor. And I don't know what to say to convince her otherwise."

"You won't have to say anything. Boys are just starting to like girls, while girls have been noticing them since thirteen. Give it some time, she'll come around." He chuckled.

She could guess at his private thoughts. The low sexual timber of his laugh brought similar thoughts to her mind. Her skin tingled at the memory of his hands on her flesh. Heated blood pooled like warm honey. It had been a long time; so long, she barely recalled a memory of a time when the simple thought of making love caused a desperate ache. "What?" She hoped he didn't hear the hitch of sexual awareness in her voice.

"I was thinking about the women in the Ashton family." His voice turned sultry as he inhaled off a cigarette she could hear him smoking. "You're all stubborn. And you don't know the power you possess. Amber is beginning to discover the pleasures of human sexuality that you already know."

"We both know what happened two nights ago. I wasn't in the kitchen alone." He became insistent. "You wanted me, too. We have a right to be happy, Vivian. I know what I want." He sounded emphatic. "Do you need me to spell it out, because I can? I'm not the one who's scared, at least not of us. We don't have anything to be afraid of. Neither one of us has any reason we can't be together. Don't shut me out." He paused. "I don't want to lose what we already have and I can feel you pulling away."

She didn't know what to say to him. She didn't want to think about Trevor and their secret desire for one another. Talking about it only made it real. She wasn't ready to acknowledge her feelings. More than likely, she never would. If he continued to speak of it, she wouldn't speak to him at all.

"Viv," he almost pleaded.

"I can't talk to you now." She needed to hang up before she said words she didn't want spoken. "I don't want to talk about my daughter becoming a woman. It's going to happen whether I want it to or not. I know that. But I'm not the type of parent to put their child on birth control because the so called experts say kids are going to have sex regardless of what their parents teach."

"I wasn't talking about Amber having sex."

"I know that," she hollered into the phone. "I know exactly what you were trying to say, but Trevor, we are not going to have sex either. I won't do that to our family. We'd be a typical guest for daytime talk and I'm not about to become a candidate for the Jerry Springer show." Exasperated, she ran her fingers through her hair. "I don't want to see you. I need some time to put my life in order. My kids are a mess and I am too. I want you to leave me alone."

"That isn't fair. Amber, Tim, and Joshua are important to me. You can't take them away. I don't see what difference it'll make anyway. We haven't lost anything and we aren't going to. What does shutting me out solve?"

"Not forever. I can't think clearly when you're with me."

"I think that's when you're perfectly clear."

"No, I'm selfish when I'm with you. I'm going to put my children first, and think what it would do to them if they knew how we felt. Trust me. This is for the best. You'll see." She slowly hung the phone up on the wall even though Trevor's voice still came through the receiver. Her hand remained on the phone for a few moments to be sure the call disconnected. Then she lifted the receiver again and clutching the cord, lowered it to the floor. She didn't want to talk to anyone else today.

## Chapter Seven

The bitter cold week that followed seemed appropriate to Vivian's mood. Trevor consumed her thoughts. She wanted to call him in the morning to ask him over for breakfast as she'd done numerous times in the past. She didn't. Seeing his face would make her ache to kiss his lips.

At night, while Amber sulked in her room because of her grounding, and Joshua was out with his friends, Vivian pined for a connection to Trevor. Their kiss awakened a sleeping, sexual woman. A complete bonding with her mind and body would fill the lifeless hollows existing within since the night of Amber's accident. Not even Timmy's persistent chatter distracted. Her stomach felt queasy, and her throat a little tight all of the time. She was in mourning all over again.

Some decisions regarding Amber and her association with Rachael needed addressed. Perhaps Amber would like to visit with her at the hospital, and Vivian could have a talk with Rachael's father. Tonight, she'd ask Joshua to stay with Timothy. An hour at the hospital might be the bounce Amber needed and it would keep her mind off Trevor.

Amber sat quietly, watching out the window as they drove to the hospital.

"You okay?" Vivian asked.

Amber's slumped shoulders heaved on a heavy sigh. "I feel bad. Rachael is really hurt and I hobble. She's in the hospital, had surgery, and won't be well for a long time. Doesn't seem fair that

I—” She gave her mom a lopsided smile. “Walked away.”

“Fair? It’s a miracle.” She reached across the console and gave Amber’s knee a squeeze. “Be her friend. Maybe you can help Rachael by getting her schoolwork. But sweetheart, you can’t feel guilt for something you had no control over.”

“It isn’t guilt. I just feel sorry for her.”

“Me too. And her father.”

Vivian pulled into the hospital. Wind howled, blowing snow through the dark, deserted parking lot. Vivian thought she’d be able to extricate Trevor from her thoughts. The isolation at the hospital only served to remind her that she too felt *vacant*, until Trevor’s incredibly stimulating touch. Now she felt a void she hadn’t attached with an emotion tag. Those sensations threaded their way into her thoughts, weaving a tapestry of fantasies, all starring Trevor. Night allowed her to slip from reality into strong arms, whispered words, and complete surrender—her secret surrender.

Pulling her coat tight, Vivian stepped out of the car and went around to the passenger side to help Amber.

“You called and let her know we were coming?”

“Yes. I talked to her dad. He said he’d be here too.”

Good, Vivian planned to discuss the future friendship between their daughters. She had to know Charles Andersen understood the ramifications of letting a teenage girl run without preset boundaries.

Charles stood in the corridor outside his daughter’s room. Hands stuffed into the front pockets of his Dockers and his head resting against the wall. He smiled when he saw them approaching.

Vivian waved.

Amber smiled and hobbled with her crutches. “Hi. Can I see Rachael?”

Charles pulled his hand from his pocket and offered it to Vivian. After shaking hands, he turned to Amber. “Rachael is

getting her dressing changed. Shouldn't be more than a few minutes."

Amber braced her weight against the wall and took the crutches out from under her armpits.

"So how are you doing?" Charles took the crutches from her and laid them on the floor.

"Better. I have to use the crutches for one more week. I'm sorry about what happened to Rachael."

He pinched her chin. "Wasn't your fault, Rachael drove the car."

The nurse stepped out of the room. "She heard you talking out here," she said to Amber. "Better hurry in before she decides to get out of bed and come to you."

Charles handed Amber her crutches. "Can I buy you a coffee?"

Vivian nodded. "We'll be back in a little while."

"Okay." Amber went into the hospital room.

Charles and Vivian walked down the corridor. "Rachael really is doing amazing." The fear and worry from the previous week weren't evident in his twinkling blue eyes.

There were a few people in the cafeteria, mostly hospital personnel wearing scrubs in colorful prints. "Are you hungry?"

"Just coffee." They filled Styrofoam cups from the large stainless steel urn. Napkin dispensers sat in the center of every small circular table scattered throughout the large brightly lit room. Charles pointed to a table near the front windows allowing a view of the main parking lot. They sat.

Awkward silence hung between them. Vivian didn't know why. Maybe because both were aware the other didn't have a spouse. It didn't matter. All she wanted to do was insure her daughter's safety.

"I have concerns about the girls." He nodded before she had to say anything else.

"You have every right to be angry. Believe me; I've learned my

lesson. Rachael will have a new set of rules. As her parent, I promise you, I'll know what she's doing. Never again will she put another child in danger." He shook his head. "At least the car won't be an issue. It's a totaled loss and I won't be getting her another one. Stupid." He raked his fingers through his hair. "I'm so sorry." He reached across the table and took her hand. "I'm so sorry for what I put you through."

Vivian stared at their linked hands. His were warm. Dark hair dusted the knuckles of his long fingers. She couldn't stop her mind from imagining them on her skin. The only image in her mind was Trevor. Her eyes followed Charles' hands, up his arms, until finally she made eye contact. A grin stretched his lips. Had she missed something he said?

"What?" she whispered, squirming under his gaze.

"Would you have dinner with me?"

*Oh my.*

## Chapter Eight

Going to work was like being on autopilot. There was nothing neither stimulating nor challenging about arranging flowers and answering the telephone. There was a bright side. Watching Cheryl paint her nails, or fluff her hair didn't irritate her anymore either.

She remembered a time when she was in one of the deepest valleys in the road of her life. She couldn't wait to climb to the peak of the next mountain. There were occasions she wasn't sure she would make it. Trevor's hand was always there to keep her climbing. He held her lifeline. Now she traveled a road without peaks or valleys.

Today ended no different from yesterday or the day before. Work passed at a snail's pace, and then it was time to go home. She had no reason to think tomorrow would be different.

After work, Vivian was surprised when she walked into the house. Delicious smelling aromas coming from the kitchen were the first things she noticed. She set her purse on the table in the hall and hung her coat in the closet. She walked into the living room and stopped at the threshold. The carpets reflected a recent vacuuming by the tracks in the pile. Light flickered off the walls from a candle burning on the polished coffee table. The cushions on the couch were perfectly placed. Vivian's heart hammered in her chest. Only one person would go to such lengths for her and Trevor had the time to do it. Even if her children wanted to do something so nice, which they never did, they wouldn't have time once they got home from school.

She braced herself to see him in her kitchen creating whatever masterpiece she smelled. As much as she ached for a glimpse of him, she was scared.

“Hi,” Vivian said a bit shocked by what she saw.

“Hi, Mom.” Amber lifted the lid of a saucepan and stirred.

“What’s going on?” she asked, feeling a deep disappointment she didn’t let show. “What have you done?” She leaned over her daughter’s shoulder to glimpse the creation.

“I wanted to make you a special dinner.”

“The house? Did you do all that, too?”

Amber nodded as she bent to open the oven door.

“It’s wonderful. Thank you.” She wrapped her arm around Amber’s waist. “I love you.” She kissed her daughter’s cheek. “Can I help?”

“No,” Amber said as she carefully hopped, moving around Vivian to open the cupboard. “You go change your clothes and relax. I can do it.”

“At least let me set the table. You shouldn’t put pressure on your ankle.”

“I guess that’s okay.”

Vivian helped Amber to the counter near the stove. “Thanks.” Amber turned and smiled.

Vivian went to the cupboard for plates. She set the table and Amber continued to stir the pots on the stove.

“What’s on the menu?” Vivian asked while she took three glasses from the cupboard.

“Teriyaki chicken, rice, and I made a cake for dessert.” She took the chicken from the stove and placed it on a hot pad on the counter. “Oh Mom,” she said when she saw Vivian putting silverware beside the plates. “You forgot to set a place for Uncle Trevor.”

Vivian’s heart fell to her knees, and then bounced into her throat in a split second. “Uncle Trevor?”

“Yeah, he hasn’t been around so I called him. He’ll be here at six-thirty.”

Vivian felt the color drain from her face. She looked at the clock.

“Joshua called and said he’d be home, too.”

Vivian didn’t hear the rest of what Amber said. She fled the room. Trevor was on his way. After a day at the flower shop, her hands were green and she smelled like a shrub.

Later, Joshua and Trevor stood at the fireplace, which now roared with life, talking about skiing sometime soon. Timothy lay on the floor with Jenny gently petting her coat, talking quietly in her ear.

Vivian stood on the bottom stair and listened to the easy bantering of her family. A wave of nostalgia washed over her. Then her gaze rested on Trevor. If anything, he was more handsome. In the past week, he’d trimmed his hair. Nice and tight around the ears, but the distinguished gray still reflected the firelight. Wrinkles creased the corners of his eyes as he laughed at something Joshua said. Green eyes twinkled. Her heart tripped.

Tramping down her errant emotions, she calmly breezed into the room. Her body zinged with uncontrollable energy. Amber stepped in behind her.

“It’s ready.” She wore a smile from ear to ear.

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Trevor looked away from Joshua. His eyes focused like laser beams on Vivian. *Breathtakingly beautiful*. She wore her hair down, softly curled under to frame her face. The light from the fireplace reflected off the golden highlights. Her skin glowed warm as if she’s just been passionately kissed. He thought she should have been. He wanted another opportunity to see her face soften as her body responded the way it did on the counter. Given a chance, he could make her feel alive again. He grew hard just thinking about her beneath him.

“Lead the way.” Trevor stepped toward Vivian. She countered by moving around Amber and walking into the kitchen. Trevor placed his hand on Amber’s lower back to escort her instead.

“Come on, squirt,” Joshua nudged Timothy with his foot. “Put your mutt outside.”

“I don’t think she feels good.” Timothy reluctantly led Jenny into the kitchen by the collar, and let her out into the backyard.

Amber had the table covered with food. Fresh bread, butter in a dish, it resembled Thanksgiving.

“Is this a special dinner?” Trevor asked Amber. “She told me she did it all when she called,” he said to Vivian.

“I was completely surprised.” Vivian sat in the chair he held.

Even with the strong aromas of dinner, he detected the subtle fragrance of her perfume. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Opening them again, he leaned close to her ear. “You smell better than dinner.” His whispers stirred her hair. A hitch in her breath, and then she sighed. She turned. Their faces were close. She licked her upper lip. The glimpse of her tongue sent a jolt of adrenaline through his veins. His body responded.

“Thank you.” She focused on his face and the concern in her eyes shifted. A hesitant smile touched her lips. Then the smile brightened when she looked at Amber. “I hadn’t any idea she planned something special. And my house,” she raved. “Well, it’s never sparkled quite so bright. Thank you, Sweetheart.” She reached out and touched Amber’s hand. “You’ve done a beautiful job.”

“We’ll see. I think we better taste the food first,” Joshua teased. “I say we all stay home tonight in case we get sick.”

“Shut up, Joshua.”

“Joshua, stop teasing Amber.” Vivian’s eyes narrowed, looking sternly at him. “It isn’t nice.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had someone put quite so much effort into a meal for me before,” Trevor said. “I’m definitely going to be

spoiled tonight.” He reached for the chicken and took the first piece. “Here.” He handed the plate to Vivian who sat beside him.

Timothy grew quiet while they sat around the table as a family, filling their plates with food.

Joshua talked about school and his eagerness for Christmas break. “There’s a group of kids going to Colorado for a ski weekend. I’m thinking about joining them.”

“Is the school sponsoring it?” Vivian asked while she buttered a piece of bread.

“No. Just a group of us getting together.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Mom—” He was about to argue.

Trevor interrupted, “Better get a few more facts, Joshua. I don’t think you’re going to find many friends whose parents are agreeable either.” He took another bite of chicken and looked at Amber. “You might have to come live with me.” He finished chewing and swallowed. “This is great.”

The approval suited Amber. She smiled and continued to eat her dinner.

“I think Jenny’s in heat,” Timothy blurted out.

Everyone at the table quit talking. Vivian dropped her fork with a clang.

“What makes you think Jenny’s in heat?” Trevor asked.

Vivian’s mind raced. This was exactly what she had been talking about when Trevor gave the stupid dog to Timothy for his birthday. Please, no. What had the dog been doing? She immediately thought about the long nights of howling, a chorus with other dogs in the neighborhood. Now they would have one right out in the back yard.

That wasn’t the worst thing that happened. What if the dog bled all over the furniture? Moreover, if Jenny already had a belly full of babies, Vivian would personally launch a campaign to neuter every male dog in the neighborhood. Vivian repeated Trevor’s

question. "Why do you think Jenny's in heat?"

Timothy's eyebrows drew together as he spoke. Clearly, he was concerned if not perplexed by the situation. "Well, she snapped at me," he said. "I ran up to her after school and was gonna rub her belly. She almost bit my hand. So I didn't do it because I figured she must be hurting from being in heat." He looked at Amber. "You know how you get all the time. I heard you tell Mom you got your period and you needed clamps or something."

Trevor almost lost the tightly controlled laugh erupting inside him. He looked down at his plate afraid if he even glanced at the expression of horror sure to be on Vivian's face, he would fail completely.

Joshua wasn't quite as delicate. He cried from the explosion of laughter that nearly rocked him off his chair.

"I get cramps you idiot!" Amber tossed her napkin on her plate. "And thanks for telling everyone."

"Amber," Vivian said gently. "He isn't being mean and you know it."

"I just figured since you and Amber get kind of grumpy each month, Jenny probably does to. She's a girl."

"I don't go into heat!" Amber turned a little pinker in the cheeks. "Can we please change the subject?"

"I'm in favor of that," Trevor said. "Business is going great. We got another government contract. I'll probably have to go back east in the next few weeks, but nothings definite yet."

Timothy's head slumped between his shoulders as the conversation turned away from him. "I just thought it was mood swings," he said under his breath, but Trevor heard anyway and laughed.

"Timmy, you aren't far off and Jenny just might need to go to the doctor." Trevor fluffed the boy's hair. "No need to be embarrassed. I've often made mistakes in judging a woman's mood."

“Yeah, don’t worry about it squirt,” Joshua said. “Woman and dogs are close to the same species. They even share a common name.”

“Joshua!” Vivian scolded. “Don’t you dare say *it!*”

Joshua took another bite of food while he laughed.

“May I be excused?” Amber asked. “I’ll do the dishes later.”

Vivian nodded and Amber scooted back her chair.

“Dinner was fabulous.” Trevor stood from the table and kissed Amber on the forehead. “Can I help you to your room?”

“I got it. Mom, if you want to serve the dessert, I don’t mind. I’m already full. I’m tired too.”

“You outdid yourself,” Vivian said. “I appreciate it. The dinner was a lovely surprise and thank you for cleaning the house.” She stood and gave Amber’s shoulders a gentle squeeze. “You go rest and don’t worry about the dishes.”

“That’s right,” Trevor said. “Your mom and I will take care of them.”

“Great.” Joshua scooted back his chair. “I’m outta here, too. I’ve got a date tonight.”

“Where are you going?” Vivian she sat back down. Trevor stood from the table and went about filling the teakettle with water and setting it on the stove to heat.

“Christmas shopping at the mall.” Joshua wiped his mouth and pushed in his chair with his hip. “I won’t be late,” he said as he headed out of the room.

“Must be someone special,” Trevor said, coming back and sitting in the chair next to Vivian once again. “He hates to shop.”

Vivian nodded.

“I guess I’m done too.” Timothy pushed his plate a few inches away.

“What about dessert?”

“No thanks.” He squeezed himself between the table and the chair without pushing the chair back. “I’m watching cartoons.” He

left. They heard him go down the stairs.

Vivian leaned back in her chair and took a deep breath. "I thought I'd die when he blurted out 'the dog's in heat.'"

"We should get her spayed." In the now quiet kitchen Trevor's chuckle echoed off the walls. "Mood swings." The whistle on the teakettle screamed through the kitchen. Trevor went to the cupboard and got two cups and herbal tea bags from the pantry. Perfectly at home, he opened the refrigerator and splashed her tea with milk.

"Thank you." Vivian took the hot mug he held out to her.

"I'll get an appointment for the dog. I'm sure she snapped at Tim because he ran up on her. We might want to consider sending her to obedience school."

Vivian took a sip of her tea and then set the cup on the table. "You know I can't afford it. I wish I could, but I've got my hands full. Timothy has an award ceremony for scouts next month. He needs to get four more merit badges to get his accommodations." She ran her hands through her hair. "He wants to play soccer at the REC center. To do that I have to get him a membership and uniform."

"He'd be good. The kid's got natural ability."

"I know," she snapped back a bit sharply. "I'm sorry. You don't want to hear about my money problems anyway." She stood and gathered the dishes together on the table, scraping leftover food onto one plate.

"I want to help." Trevor helped her carry the dirty dishes to the sink. He opened the dishwasher and turned on the faucet to rinse the dishes before he loaded them. "Let me pay for the soccer expenses." He held up a hand dripping with suds. "Don't argue. It would be a good thing for the both of us. Timmy needs a man in his life. I can't replace Dean, I know. But who better than me to be second best?"

"Honestly," she said a bit too quiet to sound assuring. She

leaned against the counter. "I don't want you to be that man." She walked back to the table and gathered the tablecloth so it could be laundered. "Trevor, you've been an angel. I wouldn't have made it this year without you." She stopped and looked directly into his eyes. "You always knew I'd be fine. You said one day I would wake up and Dean's death wouldn't hurt as much. You were right. I never thought I'd ever get over losing Dean." She put her hands on top of her heart, one overlapping the other. "I never thought I'd feel anything in here again." Tears filled her eyes. "I had a good marriage. Dean and I had our problems like every couple, but they never got in the way."

"He was the best." Trevor kept rinsing the dishes, but wasn't paying attention to the quality of his work. He focused intently on Vivian's voice.

"The kids are going to struggle," she said. "They'd be difficult whether Dean were alive or not. Teenagers test limits." She took a deep breath. "I'm ready." She turned and looked at him. "You gave me quite a wake up, Trevor. I didn't want to say anything, but maybe it's better if I come right out and tell you."

Trevor set the plate he rinsed into the dishwasher. He placed both his hands on the counter top as if he knew he needed to brace himself for something. "What's going on, Vivian? You've got that look I hate, the one that tells me I'm not going to like what I'm about to hear."

Her lips smirked and then she disarmed him with a smile. "Nothing too terrible." She went back to wiping the table down with a wet cloth. "I got asked out on a date."

Vivian said it so quickly Trevor wasn't sure if he heard her correctly except he knew he had. Impatiently, he waited for her to finish the statement. She took the wet cloth back to the sink to rinse it out. Trevor was in her way so she gently tried to nudge past. It took her a moment to realize he purposefully blocked the way.

“Hey.” She smiled and pushed him with her hip.

He stood where he was and folded his arms in front of his chest. “I’m waiting for you to finish.” His tone reflected his irritation. “You know the part where you say something like, ‘It was really flattering, but I declined!’” He finished the statement sounding furious. He nearly shouted at her.

“It was flattering.” She tossed the rag past him into the sink. “It does feel good to be noticed as a woman.” She turned and walked away.

“I notice you every day! Damn it Vivian, did you accept the date?” She didn’t answer him. She picked up her cup and took a sip of tea. “Who is it then? Do I know him?”

She didn’t look at him. “It’s sort of funny.”

He heard her attempt at sounding light and cheerful, it failed miserably. “I’m not laughing.”

“I was thinking of letting Amber off her grounding. I needed to set up some ground rules with Rachael’s father.”

“Rachael’s father? He asked you out?”

“Won’t you even let me finish a sentence?” she said with equal irritation. “I’m having a hard enough time wrapping my mind around the idea of dating.”

“I’m sorry. You tell me you’re going out with some guy and you don’t want me upset. Too bad!” He slammed the dishwasher closed and walked around the breakfast bar to stand in front of her. He grabbed her by the shoulders and spoke with his face close to hers. Their noses almost touched. “Unless you tell me that you declined the invitation, we’ve got nothing more to say.”

She shoved him away. “I said yes!”

A muscle ticked in his jaw as he clenched his teeth. His heart pounded. A sharp pain stabbed above the eye and the wonderful dinner he’d just eaten soured in his stomach, threatening to come back up. “Unbelievable.” He turned from the kitchen and walked out.

Vivian stood where she was, but jumped when she heard the door slam. Damn, but that was hard. The look of betrayal in his eyes almost undid her. Difficult as it was to do, she knew it was the only way to push her feelings into a new direction. She couldn't allow herself to develop real emotional ties to Trevor.

## Chapter Nine

“Mom?” Timothy poked his head into the kitchen. “Why did Uncle Trevor get mad?”

She motioned him into the kitchen. They met at the table and sat next to each other. “He’s mad at me. But Uncle Trevor has gotten mad before and he gets over it quick.” She fluffed his hair. “I wanted to talk to you anyway.” She leaned back in her chair. “Do you remember Rachael, Amber’s friend?”

He nodded.

“Well, her Dad is feeling sad right now. Rachael has a long way to go before she’s back to her old self. He asked me to have dinner with him. Sometime adults need other adults to talk to. I have Uncle Trevor. Rachael’s dad doesn’t have anyone. One of these nights I’m going to go out for a little while, but Amber will be here with you.”

“Okay,” he said as he jumped down from the table.

Vivian wished Trevor could have been as understanding.

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The woman reflected in the mirror looked both expectant and frightened. A Christmas green, cowl neck sweater swooped low revealing an eye-catching amount of cleavage, but not so much as to look inappropriate. Trim black, pleated pants and fashionable black ankle boots finished the look. Vivian ran her hands through her hair again. A new cut, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d worn her hair short. Twenty years perhaps, and the look took ten years off her face.

“Wow, Mom,” Amber said as she gingerly stepped down the stairs. She’d didn’t use her crutches when moving about the house, but kept them with her if she planned to be on her feet for an extended period. “Rachael’s dad is going to flip when he sees you.”

“I hope he recognizes me.” She touched a brown gloss to her lips. “I’m not overdressed, am I?” She turned in a circle. Amber shook her head. “Remember what I said. Timothy doesn’t need any details. I trust you to keep this low key. I don’t want him concerned. If you tell him I’m going on a date, he might get the wrong idea.”

“Can I talk on the phone tonight?”

“The telephone is fine. However, I don’t want you watching any more than one hour of television. I might have lifted your grounding, but I haven’t given you free reign. You still need my permission for privileges.”

“TV isn’t a privilege. It’s a right for teenagers.” She laughed letting Vivian know she understood the rules and prepared to follow them. “What am I suppose to do if I can’t watch TV?” She plopped herself down on the first step of the stairs leading to the upper level of the house. “I’ll be bored.”

Vivian took her heavy wool wrap from the hall closet. “When I was growing up we didn’t get our first television until after I turned twelve. Books were our television.”

“Funny, ha ha. You lived on a farm in the middle of nowhere in rural North Dakota. You had to use the outhouse when you were a kid.”

“See how lucky you are not to be growing up on the farm.” She bent down and kissed Amber’s forehead. “I won’t be late.”

“How come he isn’t picking you up? That’s how dates are supposed to be.” Amber stretched out her leg and rotated her ankle. “Then the guy buys you dinner and maybe a movie. Do you think you might go to a movie?”

Vivian shook her head. “Just dinner. I don’t want to be out late.

And let's not forget I'm new at this."

"Do you think he'll kiss you goodnight?"

"No!" she shrieked. "I definitely won't be kissing anyone tonight." Vivian placed her hand on the doorknob, and then opened the door letting in a cold draft of air.

Amber walked with a slight limp to the door.

"Watch your brother and lock this door behind me."

"Mom," she said on a breath. "I know how to baby-sit."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, just do what I say. I won't be late."

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The streets were quiet as Vivian drove to the restaurant where she was meeting Charles for dinner and drinks. She'd agreed to go, but had no intention of having any liquor. She vividly remembered the last time she had wrestled with the toxic liquid and she still carried the battle scars. Every time she thought of Trevor, her mind streamlined into thoughts of kisses on her kitchen counter. His hands had been strong and sure on her body, but more than that, they had felt right. Yet in her head, there could be nothing more wrong.

Charles waited for her at the bar of the dimly lit restaurant. Vivian suddenly knew this had been a bad idea. The atmosphere was far too personal. Tables in alcoves with candles burning between lovers filled the room. Even tables sitting in the center of the room seemed intimate. Charles stood when he saw her. She hadn't remembered him quite so handsome. Of course, she'd only seen him twice. Once had been a terrible night. He'd been stressed because his daughter lay in a hospital bed fighting for her life. She couldn't have looked too good herself. Then the visit a week later had been brief.

"I didn't realize how beautiful you are," he said taking her hands in his. "I'm surprised you accepted my offer to dinner. Can I help you with your wrap?"

"Why were you surprised?" She turned her back to him and he

removed her cloak.

“The hospital doesn’t bring out the best in people. The accident, Amber, Rachael, we didn’t meet under the best of circumstances. I admit I was distracted. Tonight I promise better company.” He helped her with her barstool. “I had a drink while I waited.”

“I’m not late, am I?” From the glow on his cheeks, she guessed he might have had more than one drink or else he was as nervous, too. He didn’t act nervous.

“No,” he rushed to say. “Should we get a table?”

A loaded question. If they sat at a table they would definitely be entering a zone where she had no intention of going, but sitting at the bar held absolutely no appeal. What was she doing here? She made a choice. “A table I guess.”

Charles put his hand on her waist and escorted her to the edge of the room to a private table for two. She walked as fast as she could without looking like she was trying to escape his touch. Her stomach tied in knots as she wondered how she would get through the night.

They sat across from one another. Vivian paused for a moment while she tried to think of something to say.

“How’s Rachael?” Vivian folded her hands in her lap.

Charles’ face brightened. “It’s a miracle really. The doctors thought she might have to finish off the school year at home with the help of tutors. They were wrong. She’s doing better than anyone expected. She’ll only have a few scars to show any of this happened at all.”

“Children are amazing, aren’t they?” The cocktail waitress approached for their order. Charles ordered another drink. “Zinfandel, thank you,” she told the waitress. Her good intentions not to drink flew right out the window. Maybe a drink would help her to breathe a little easier.

As Charles had yet another drink and Vivian sipped a second wine, the conversation became much easier. They naturally started

to discuss their pasts. Vivian talked about Dean and the children. Purposefully, she didn't mention Trevor. It wasn't exactly clear what she had with Trevor, but it was private. What happened between them and the secret pleasures Trevor made her feel every day, were too mysterious to explain.

"I had a nice time." Vivian scooted her chair from the table. Without a moment's hesitation, Charles stood and finished pulling out her chair.

"Are you sure you have to go? It's still early."

Vivian chuckled showing her nervousness. She'd feared the end of the date for the past thirty minutes. "I told the children I wouldn't be late." He helped her with her cloak. "I had a nice time," she said to him as she wrapped her cloak around her shoulders and pulled it closed in front. Subconsciously, she used it as a shield of protection from any touch Charles might be inclined to bestow upon her.

"Perhaps we can do this again."

She nodded as she pulled the cloak a little tighter. "That would be lovely." *But unlikely.* This felt wrong. Her skin was clammy. She'd needed alcohol to communicate. Basically, Charles wasn't Trevor. Being with Trevor didn't take effort or thought. It was easy; not like tonight.

"Can I call you?" She nodded again. "Vivian—" He reached out and gently touched her shoulder. "You look absolutely terrified. Your eyes are as wide as teacup saucers." He smiled.

Embarrassed, Vivian looked away.

"It can take a long time to get over a deceased spouse. I'm not looking for anything more than friendship. No pressure, okay?"

Charles walked her to her car. He didn't try to kiss her, as she feared he would. Obviously, he read the signals that she wasn't receptive. He probably had the reasons wrong. She wasn't grieving for Dean. Instead, she felt as if she were being unfaithful to Trevor.

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Vivian sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the telephone. She wanted to call Trevor and tell him she'd been miserable on the date. Charles was attractive. He just didn't make her heart jump when she looked into his eyes. Trevor made her heart beat in every part of her body, especially in places she thought would never pulse for a man again. Through dinner, all she could think about was sitting on the kitchen counter with Trevor's lips and hands on her body. She picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hi," she said when she heard his voice. "Are you busy?" She lay back against her pillow and curled into a ball cradling the phone next to her ear.

"Actually, I am," he sounded distracted.

"Oh," Surprised, Vivian sat up. Uncomfortable silence loomed between them.

"What did you need?" he asked.

Vivian's throat tightened. She stammered for a reply. This must have been how Trevor felt when she told him she was going out with Charles. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"If you want to talk, I'll call you tomorrow." She noted the touch of satisfaction in his voice. "Sorry, Viv, but I am busy right now."

Her voice softened when she asked him, "Are you alone?" And then wished she could suck the words back into her mouth.

She heard him light a cigarette. "Do you really want to know?"

"No. Yes. I don't know. No, that's a lie. I do want to know."

"Would you be upset if Maggie was in my bed?"

"Yes," she said very softly. "Is she?"

Avoiding the question, he asked, "How was your date?"

Vivian's eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"I'm alone, Vivian, wallowing in self pity because I can't have the woman I want."

Vivian fell silent as she tightly held the phone.

"It's okay," he said when he heard her crying. "If you want me to listen, I will. But you need a few ground rules. If you spent the night making out, I don't want to hear about it. If he talked so smooth, he got you in bed, you'd better cut out your tongue."

She wiped her eyes with her fingers. "No one's that smooth."

"I am," he said confidently. "Don't forget I can get you off with foreplay."

Vivian half groaned, half sighed. "I've been trying to forget and I can't."

"Keep that thought whenever you decide to go out with your new friend."

"I won't be going out with him again." She took a deep breath. "I don't want to talk about Charles. Going out tonight only made me realize it isn't dating I'm ready for. It's you."

"Want to come over?" he asked.

She could hear the smile on his face. "No, Trevor. Wanting you is a problem. I've got the kids to think about. It's truth time. We have to find a way to get over this."

"Come over and I'll make love to you until you're out of my system. On second thought, maybe I should come over there. It could take a while, and you'll want to see the kids raised."

"I'm hanging up. You said you were busy. As long as it isn't with another woman, I think I'll be able to sleep." She covered her mouth as she yawned.

"I suppose I should be grateful to you. I've got a mountain of legal forms in front of me I need to get through tonight. Now that I'm hard as steel, I wouldn't be able to sleep anyway."

"Goodnight, Trevor."

"One more thing,"

Vivian sighed and climbed beneath the covers. "Yes." Why was she trying to sound seductive? Talking sweet wasn't helping her get Trevor out of her head.

"What are you wearing?"

A slow smile spread across Vivian's lips. "Nothing."  
He groaned.  
"Good night, Trevor."

## Chapter Ten

Vivian looked at the clock for the third time in twenty minutes. Her feet were killing her. She couldn't count how many floral arrangements she had made in the last two weeks. Christmas music pumped through the recessed speakers in the ceiling. Santa's house opened for business in the middle of the mall. The holiday season operated in full retail force.

Every night Vivian worked as many as three hours overtime. The money would come in handy, but she wasn't getting anything else accomplished. The flower shop was short-staffed and Cheryl depended heavily upon her.

She hadn't done any shopping and Christmas Eve seemed her only option unless she wanted to give the kids money. Joshua and Amber would probably enjoy money. Timothy expected Santa to come even if he didn't believe anymore.

Turning the vase in front of her for a final inspection, she then walked it to the front.

"Here's another one," she said to Cheryl who rearranged the display window to cover bare spots where recently purchased arrangements once were.

"Fantastic." She genuinely looked impressed. The red carnations looked beautiful with Christmas greens and baby's breath. "I love the pine cones." Cheryl took the arrangement from Vivian and put it in the window.

"Shouldn't we put it in the fridge?"

"It won't be here long enough to wilt." They both laughed as a

customer came through the door. Vivian excused herself to the back to start another piece.

Later, while she worked on a table centerpiece, Cheryl came into the back with lattes from the Coffee Cup.

Cheryl set the cup in front of her. "I thought you could use a break." She smiled coyly. "Well, the kind of break you can't stop working for."

"Thank you." She took the cup between her palms and inhaled the heavenly aroma.

"I sent the nitwit for the coffee," Cheryl said. "Since she doesn't seem to be able to do anything else. I can't wait until Christmas is over so I can let her go. Some seasonal help she turned out to be."

"I'm glad you noticed. I feel like a pin cushion from thorns and I don't know if my hands are ever going to lose this lovely shade of green." She held her hands out for inspection.

"I'm sorry about it." Vivian heard the sincerity. They both had been disappointed in the temporary girl's work. She'd been hired to work the cash register and take orders so Vivian and Cheryl could make the flower arrangements. The girl couldn't even count back change. That left Cheryl to run the counter and Vivian to fill the orders and the nitwit, as Cheryl had renamed her, to answer the phone. The demands of the Christmas season forced them to set aside their personal differences and forge ahead. There were two other part-time high school girls, but Vivian rarely worked with them.

"A few more days."

"We can make it," Cheryl added. "Duty calls," she said, as the door chime rang announcing another customer. "By the way," she turned around and said. "It really hasn't been that bad. I mean working as a team and stuff."

Vivian smiled her agreement. Cheryl was right; it hadn't been that bad.

The next few hours flew by as Vivian hunched over the

worktable snipping and arranging. Periodically, Cheryl would bring her a custom order. Someone ordered a dozen red roses. Her imagination wandered. Before she worked in a flower shop she'd never given much thought to who did the arranging. She found herself reminiscing on times when Dean had brought her flowers. Valentine's Day, Mother's day, her birthday, but he was never one to give flowers just because. A smile tugged on her lips. The only reason Trevor would send flowers to a lover would be if he were trying to make up after a fight. He'd add a good bottle of wine, nice dinner, and make-up sex. "Stop," she said aloud to herself. "You're not having sex with Trevor, so get your head out of bed." Still, the thought of a good fight held appeal.

Vivian rubbed her neck as Cheryl finally locked the door for the day. Ten o'clock was too late to stay open even if it was four days before Christmas.

"Okay, you've got me for another hour. What do you want first?"

Cheryl looked around the room. "I vote we leave everything until tomorrow." Her arms dropped to her side.

"Very funny." Vivian stood and stretched her back. She had spent most of the day sitting at the back counter. Her joints and muscles stiffened. "We'll be busier tomorrow. And lest we not forget I've got a babysitter for Timmy tonight and I can't stay late tomorrow."

"What?" Cheryl sounded like this was the first time she heard Vivian say she wouldn't be at her disposal.

"Remember, it's my son's Christmas program at our church."

Cheryl slapped her palm to her forehead. "I forgot." She dragged her hand down her face. "Okay, let's get as many arrangements done as we can. The nitwit can clean in the morning. And I'll have Mindy run the register. Will you come in early since you can't stay late?" she asked.

Vivian hadn't been coming in until noon since she worked until

close. She'd been looking forward to what would feel like a short day, but she sympathized with Cheryl. "Sure, come on. I bet we can fill that display in an hour." She motioned Cheryl to the back room. "You've got me until my green thumb falls off."

Side by side, they sat at the table with buckets full of fresh flowers at their feet. A bit longer than expected, but not too late, the stock replenished, and out of flowers, Vivian grabbed her coat and purse.

Tired, hungry, and past ready to go home, Vivian and Cheryl locked up for the night. "See you tomorrow," she said.

"Good night, Vivian. And thanks." Vivian waved, got into her car, and drove home.

Vivian envisioned a bath so hot she could see vapors coming off the water. Bubbles to her chin and a candle on the edge of the tub, she wanted soothing music to serenade the tension from her body.

The house was dark as she expected it would be. She hung her coat in the closet and silently tiptoed up the stairs to her room. She dropped her clothes and slipped into her robe before going to the bathroom.

While the water filled the tub, she made herself a cup of tea and brought it along with a candle back to the bathroom. Trevor was her babysitter and since she didn't see him in the living room, she figured he'd gone downstairs to sleep on the couch.

Bubbles filled the tub to the edge. She shut off the water and lit the candle. After closing the door, she turned off the lights and dropped her robe. She slipped her foot into the achingly hot water. Slowly she sank into the tub and leaned back. Instantly, fatigue engulfed her. Her eyes drooped closed. Sighing deeply, she let her body conform to the tub.

Music, she wanted music. However, with the family asleep, she enjoyed the silence. The water seemed loud when she lifted her leg and ran her hands the length of it. Light from the candle flickered and cast dancing shadows on the walls. The scents of jasmine from

the candle and vanilla from the bubbles carried on the steamy air.

“Viv?” There was a soft knock at the door. Trevor’s voice was husky from sleep.

“Yes?” She gathered bubbles to her chin and slid a little further down.

“You okay?”

“Fine.” She paused a moment. “Thanks.” She looked around. Her robe lay out of reach. She chastised herself for not locking the door. Don’t be ridiculous, she scolded herself. He wouldn’t walk in.

“Are you hungry? I can make you something to eat.”

Now that he mentioned it, she remembered she was hungry. Famished, in fact. “Sounds good, I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Take your time.” She heard his foot falls as he walked away and down the stairs.

Quickly, she washed her body. She dipped her head under the water then stepped out of the tub. While the water drained, she wrapped her hair in a towel and put on her robe. It wasn’t a sexy garment even though it felt that way because of being naked underneath.

She decided she’d quickly change and then go downstairs and eat. When she opened the bathroom door, Trevor walked back up the stairs.

“That was quick.”

“I was ready to get out anyway.” She looked at him then looked down at herself. “Give me a minute and I’ll change.” She pointed toward her room.

“Come on. The food’s hot. You’re going to bed. You don’t need to get dressed.” He reached for her hand and she took it. He gently pulled her down the stairs and into the kitchen. “I like knowing you’re naked.”

“Imagine I’m fully dressed. It’ll be safer that way.” Safer for her, anyway. When he looked at her with the seductive gleam in his eyes, her blood surged. She twitched in the juncture between her

legs. She didn't want to acknowledge her body's need to join with his. Trevor's sexual prowess manifested itself in the cocky way he walked. When he hitched his hip against a wall, she could imagine the way he'd watch a woman undress. With a glance, he conveyed his thoughts. His gift was making a woman believe she was beautiful, thus explaining his successful, amorous love life.

In the kitchen, Trevor had reheated left over spaghetti. "Yum," she said. Adjusting her robe, making sure everything stayed covered, she sat down.

"My thoughts exactly."

"Be good."

"Oh Viv, with you, I'd be very good."

An unladylike snort, followed by a chuckle, nearly cost Vivian her mouthful of spaghetti. She didn't really have a response. She could tell, he'd had enough practice to be good, but she didn't like the image of him with another woman in her mind. Telling him, *it'll never happen* would be waving a red flag. Trevor was always up for a challenge. Moreover, she didn't have the strength to resist if he waged a full assault on her resolve.

While they sat at the table, Trevor watched her eat left over spaghetti while he drank a beer. His eyes focused in on her lips making her self-conscious. Was it a drop of sauce on the side of her mouth, or were his thoughts as carnal as hers?

"It's late, do you mind if I crash the rest of the night on the couch?"

No, she didn't mind. However, her nighttime fantasies might take on a new dimension. Thinking of him asleep on the floor beneath hers, caused warmth to spread through her limbs. Pushing her food around on her plate, she then took another bite.

She shook her head while she chewed a big delicious meatball. He looked away from her. "I've got something to tell you and I don't want to."

She swallowed her food, lifted her glass of water, and took a

drink to rinse her mouth. "What?"

He didn't answer right away.

"Something bad? Trevor?"

Trevor stood from the table, walked to the sink, and looked out the window. "I've got to go to Boston." His insides were churning. The holidays had never really been important to him. This year was different. He was part of this family whether Vivian acknowledged it outright or not.

"Oh." She took another drink of water. "That's okay. We can manage a few days without you." She smiled and plopped another meatball in her mouth.

"My flight out is tomorrow afternoon."

Vivian swallowed what she'd put in her mouth regardless whether she'd chewed or not. She swallowed hard. "You can't." Her stomach rose to her throat and lodged there. "What about Christmas?"

"I know." He came back to the table and sat again.

Vivian had another thought. "Timmy's going to be heart broken."

"His pageant." Trevor's head slumped between his shoulders. "I feel like shit."

"Can you change your flight? How come you have to go tomorrow?"

"It's a big contract. If I want it, I have to go." He ran his hand along his jaw and scratched two days worth of growth. "I can't pass it up. It'll mean a minimum of three years work. This is the big one, Viv. If I get it, more doors will open than I'll be able to walk through."

She wiped her mouth and pushed away her plate. She didn't have much of an appetite anymore.

"He'll be disappointed." She gave Trevor a hint of a smile. "We'll all be disappointed. Trevor, there will be other pageants. We can celebrate when you get back. Don't worry. The kids will

understand.”

But it was harder than Vivian expected. Timothy cried for an hour. His eyes swelled and he looked red and splotchy when it was time to go to the church. Vivian brought the video camera to capture the entire event. She promised Timothy he could watch it with Trevor when he returned from Boston.

“I’ve never seen a better Joseph,” Vivian said to Timothy in the car on their way home. It snowed again and the roads were starting to pick up accumulation. She carefully navigated her way, feeling relief when they finally pulled into the garage. Amber jumped from the car and hurried into the house. Vivian knew she was eager to call Rachael. Their friendship seemed to be on track and Vivian wasn’t concerned as long as Amber remained truthful about their activities.

“Where’d Josh go?” Timmy asked as they walked into the house.

“He had a date.” Vivian had a hard time with Joshua’s social life. He was secretive about whom he dated, but when he did come home he was nice. His grades were near perfect and he kept an optimistic outlook on his college opportunities. On the whole, he seemed to be doing great. Vivian didn’t really have a reason to question his dating life. He hadn’t been coming to her for money and he usually let her know what time he’d be home at night. There wasn’t any reason for her to complain. Except she knew he hid something, of that she was sure. However, as long as it didn’t interfere with his schoolwork, she wasn’t going to push him.

“Rachael and her dad want to know if they can come over,” Amber yelled down the stairs to her mom.

“Why?” Vivian called back.

“I don’t know. I assume to see us.”

“Ask, just don’t be rude when you do. Make sure there isn’t an ulterior motive.” She didn’t want to see Charles tonight. He was a nice man, but it was late. More than that, there were unresolved

dynamics with Trevor. Not that she would ever follow through with her feelings, but it didn't change the way her heart beat whenever he crossed her mind. She struggled with wanting and having. Today it was enough having Trevor in her life as a friend even though she wanted so much more. Either way, it wouldn't be fair to Charles for her to give him the impression she was available.

Amber disappeared for a moment while Vivian waited at the bottom of the stairs for a reply.

"They have Christmas presents for us," Amber replied, a lift to her voice. "Can they come over? Rachael says they won't stay long."

Crap! Add two more people to the list she needed to buy for tomorrow. She wasn't about to have them show up at her house and not have something for them in return. "Ask them if they'd like to come over tomorrow? About seven o'clock." She needed time to shop. "Wait a minute." She walked up the stairs. "I'll talk to Charles myself."

Vivian climbed the stairs and followed Amber into her room.

"Hey, Rach. My mom wants to talk to your dad. I know, it's totally cool that they went out. Okay, get your dad. Here's my mom." Amber handed the phone over, and then stood closely behind Vivian while she waited for Charles.

"Hi, Charles, yes it's lovely to speak with you, too."

Amber crowded, clinging to every word. She fidgeted with the bedspread. Vivian pursed her lips, and pointed a finger to the space beside her.

"Sorry," Amber mouthed. Then she waited for her turn to talk.

"Are you sure Rachael is up to going out? I don't want her to jeopardize her recovery." She nodded. "Okay, if you're sure, we'll see you tomorrow." When Vivian finally handed back the phone, Amber squealed with delight.

Vivian groaned. Why did she get herself into unwanted obligations?

"I'm so excited," Amber said to Rachael.

Vivian left the room and started picking up the house. It wasn't a disaster. It also wasn't ready for company. As the evening wound down, she started to resent spending her night off doing housework. Tomorrow she had to work all day and come home to spend Christmas Eve with the Charles and Rachael. It was tough enough not having Dean around, but this was not the holiday she had hoped for. She froze for a moment. What had she expected? A quiet Christmas at home with Trevor and the children suited. Instead, Trevor was across country and she had another *date*. What she wanted most was to spend the holiday with her family.

That night, she lay in bed and tried to make her mind stop thinking of Trevor alone in Boston. She chastised herself because she obligated herself to Charles on Christmas Eve when she should be grateful. Trevor was alone and she knew without a doubt, he wanted to be home with her and the children. Her eyes were just beginning to close when the telephone beside the bed rang. It was after eleven and she wondered which one of Amber's friends had the nerve to call so late.

"Hello," she unpleasantly grumbled.

"Long night?"

"Hi," she purred. "Sorry, I thought you were one of Amber's friends." She looked at the clock again. "What time is it there?"

"One. I got back late and I'm not tired. Did I wake you?"

"No." And even if he had, it would be worth it. She needed to hear his voice.

Trevor leaned back and propped his feet on the corner table next to his bottle of beer. A cigarette burned between his fingers. He watched the lights of the city from the thirtieth floor of his hotel room. The curtains pulled to the edge of the window, billowed in the blast of the heater directly beneath. Trevor put his cigarette between his lips and cradled the phone in his shoulder while he loosened his tie and threw it to the bed. And then he unbuttoned his dress shirt. "How was the pageant?" he mumbled with his

cigarette magically staying in place.

“We missed you, but it was nice.”

Vivian relayed the events of the evening.

“Sorry I missed it.” He closed his eyes and imagined sitting next to her while she spoke. He pictured her lying in bed. Her hair fanned out across the pillow. His heart rate jumped remembering the way her breasts swayed beneath her robe while they’d sat at the kitchen table. Skin flushed, and she smelled like a woman. Scents from her bath lingered in his mind still. Curiosity won out. He had to ask.

“Yes, I’m in bed.” She laughed. It sounded seductive and sexy. “It’s the middle of the night. You should be in bed, too.”

He wanted to tell her that’s exactly where he wanted to be. Instead he said, “I’ll call the kids tomorrow night. I want to tease Timmy to be good so Santa will bring him a present.” He laughed, but Vivian didn’t. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she lied. She wouldn’t be able to talk when he called because she had been stupid and let Charles find a way into her Christmas.

“Something is.”

“No, it’s just that I . . .” She didn’t know what to say. “I’m taking the kids to see Christmas lights,” she stammered. “Why don’t we call you when we get back?”

“Okay.” He hesitated. “I should let you get to sleep.”

Disappointed, she replied, “I suppose.”

“Are you working late tomorrow?”

“No, the shop is closing at three. I’ve got to do some shopping for the kids, too. That’ll take the rest of the day.”

“Sounds fun.” He groaned.

She smiled. “Say what you really think.”

“I wish you were here or that I was there.”

“I thought we were talking about shopping.”

“It sounds like hell.”

“It’s worth it Christmas morning. The children are doing better this year. I thought this holiday would be different.” She grew quiet and closed her eyes, listening to his breathing. “I wish you were here.”

“But it’s better if I’m not. I want more, Viv. I want you.”

“I can’t.”

“I know. Get some sleep.”

It was the perfect place for her to tell him how she really felt. Instead, she said goodbye and hung up.

Sleep eluded Vivian most of the night. In the morning, she felt like she hadn’t rested at all. Her eyes were red and her temperament a bit on the testy side. No matter how she tried to justify it, she couldn’t. She hadn’t been protecting Trevor when she’d lied to him. She’d been protecting herself. She vividly remembered the last time she’d gone out on a date. Understandably, Trevor had blown a gasket because he thought they were exclusive even though they’d never ventured further than the first kiss.

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Vivian filled with trepidation as evening approached and with it her evening with the Andersen’s. She had explicitly left Joshua with instructions that he would be accompanying them tonight. He was her witness to Trevor that nothing inappropriate happened. Actually, it had been a stroke of luck for her. Joshua had a date and planned to make introductions. He intended to bring the secret girlfriend along.

Everyone dressed warmly to walk Christmas Village and see the lights. It encompassed the space of two downtown city blocks. Every tree donned different colored lights. Little buildings sparsely placed depicted different scenes of the Christmas season. Santa with his elves, a stable with reindeer, and of course a nativity scene, highlighted a few of the attractions. The same every year, but that didn’t seem to matter to the community. Tradition meant

they walked the park even if they did it in record time because the temperature dipped so cold a person's eyeballs froze.

Vivian remembered one blustery, cold December twenty-fourth. Dean had led the family around the park and had them back into the car in three and a half minutes. They'd gone for hot chocolate and pizza afterward and laughed because no one had bothered to look at anything. They'd just wanted to get back into the warm car. Vivian felt a little sad because a family tradition turned into an event with friends and acquaintances. This was never the way it was meant to be.

Charles and Rachael were supposed to come by at seven. When the doorbell rang at six thirty, Vivian groaned. Thirty extra minutes to spend with Charles. She was hopeless and knew it. She plastered a smile on her face and cheerfully opened the door.

"Merry Christmas, Cheryl." Surprised, Vivian motioned her into the house.

"Hi." She stood in the hall with her hands in her pockets. She looked expectantly at Vivian and then at her shoes.

"I'm sorry," Vivian said. "I don't want to seem rude, but," she smiled and blurted, "What are you doing here?"

"Oh Mom," Joshua came down the stairs. He stopped in front of Cheryl just as realization washed over Vivian.

"Un uh, no way." Vivian shook her head. "Joshua?" She looked from one to the other. Joshua and Cheryl didn't have to say anything. It was painfully obvious. "All this time?" She glared at Cheryl. "You've been pretending to be nice to me. All along, you wanted your hands on my son. Be nice to Vivian and she'll look the other way. Is that what you thought?" Her voice grew louder. Amber stood at the top of the stairs watching the commotion.

"Mom, you've got it wrong."

"Stay out of it!" She pointed her finger at Joshua's face, and then turned her attention to Cheryl.

"No." Joshua stepped between them. "Cheryl hated lying to

you. I told her you wouldn't understand. I was right," he accused.

"You're right. I don't understand. Am I supposed to understand a grown woman dating my high school son who is college bound and has a future?"

He put his hands on Vivian's shoulders. "I am still going to college. Cheryl is the reason I'm trying so hard. I'm going to get a great education." He turned and looked at Cheryl over his shoulder. "We're getting married."

"Over my dead body."

Amber sat on the stairs and started to cry. Timothy peered from around the corner. He too, was afraid of the fight going on between Vivian and Joshua.

"Mom," he said. "I'm eighteen. It's my decision. I'm telling you. When I'm out of school, I'm moving in with Cheryl. We are going to get married and hopefully someday have a couple of kids to call you grandma." He stepped next to Cheryl and took her hand.

"Vivian, please listen. It isn't what you think." Cheryl took a step toward her.

"I'm not going to listen to this. Joshua," she said more calmly than she actually was. "She is not going with us tonight."

"Either she goes or I don't."

"Suit yourself. Get her out of my house and we'll talk tonight. I am not discussing anything in front of her." Just then the doorbell rang.

"We're going. Timmy!" she hollered and then opened the door. "Amber, get your coat." She smiled at Charles standing on the porch. "We're ready."

"Mom?" Joshua's voice sounded deflated. Good. What? Did he assume Vivian would wrap her arms around Cheryl and welcome her into the family? Well, Vivian wasn't about to overlook the fact that Cheryl treated her like crap for months. Only getting it on with her son had made Cheryl nice. And Vivian worried about Amber. Ha! Guess the joke's on Mom.

Amber came down the stairs rubbing tears from her face. She went to Joshua and wrapped her arms around him. "Please come with us," she sobbed.

"Not like this." He hugged her back. "Don't worry. She'll get over it. Go have fun." She followed her mother when she walked out the door.

Amber crawled in the back seat and sat next to Rachael. Timothy sat next to the door.

Vivian remained quiet next to Charles. They pulled out of the driveway. Tears freely flowed from Vivian's eyes. Everyone was empathetic enough not to mention it.

"Who's hungry for a Coney dog?" Charles jubilantly asked.

"I am." Timothy was the only one who responded.

Charles pulled into the drive-in burger hop. Vivian wiped her eyes, smiled at Charles, and decided to make the best of the ruined evening. She hadn't grand expectations at the beginning, but she surely hadn't seen this coming.

Just as she'd done for the past year, she swallowed the hurt. Christmas Eve festivities, traditional or not, weren't the time for tears. She looked into the backseat. She smiled and Timmy's forlorn expression swiftly changed. "I do too."

Charles ordered Coney dogs and colas for everyone.

"I think we should get hot chocolates and take them with us to see the lights," Amber said.

Vivian shifted in her seat so her back was to the door. "Good idea." Nostalgic for Christmas' past, Vivian blinked back tears and pasted a smile on her face. It was a wonderful idea, hers and Dean's.

Vivian nibbled a bite of her dog. Amber and Rachael whispered and giggled in the back seat. Timothy rolled his eyes now and again after overhearing a part of their conversation.

"It would be totally cool if our parents got married and we were sisters," Rachael whispered.

"It would not," Timothy answered, and then took a drink of his soda. Vivian agreed.

"Quit listening, brat," Amber said.

"Amber, I think I've had enough fighting for one night. Please speak nicely to your brother." Vivian spoke as if on autopilot. Her nerves were fried to the point of meltdown.

"Are you okay? I know we happened in on something." Charles put his hand on her thigh.

Vivian stared at his fingers as they gave a gentle squeeze. Shifting in her seat, she said, "Joshua brought his girlfriend to meet the family tonight." She pushed her bangs out of her eyes. "Cheryl happens to be too old for him, not to mention my boss." She chuckled. "Any way you look at it, I figure I'm unemployed."

"She fired you."

Vivian looked at him. He couldn't seriously ask that of her. Was he from another planet? "No," she said. "It wouldn't have mattered if she did. I won't be working with her. She has been dating my son, and by the look of it, I think they're doing a lot more than dating." She took a drink of her soda while shaking her head in disgust. "She's lied to me for months. No way." She set her drink back in the holder between them. "In fact, I bet I can get statutory rape charges filed against her."

Charles considered what she said for a moment. "Legally, it wouldn't go anywhere and he'll be angry."

"What are you, a lawyer?" she said, a bit on the nasty side. She bent down and got a napkin from the food bag on the floor mat. When she sat up, he smiled. "Oh, you are, sorry." She shrugged. "What kind? I may need a defense attorney after I run Cheryl over with my car."

"Mom," Amber said on a breath. "Joshua really likes her. Maybe she'll be different when she's not your boss. Joshua can be a jerk. I still can't believe he wouldn't come with us."

"So what if he is angry? I am too. He knew I would be. That's

why he kept the relationship hidden from me.”

Amber and Rachael listened from the back seat. Their eyebrows rose at what they heard. Timothy quietly looked out the window.

At Christmas village, Charles put his arm around Vivian. Amber and Rachael walked ahead huddling and laughing as boys glanced their way.

“We’ve got a problem with those two, don’t we,” Charles said.

“They’ll be fine. We’ve just got to keep a close eye on them at all times. If you turn your back, someone will step in and take over.” She didn’t expect him to comment. She applied what happened with Joshua to the girls.

It wasn’t long before the cold, December night air clouded the enchantment of the park. All of their hands were getting cold, and the hot chocolate wasn’t keeping them warm on the inside. It was time to go home and end a horrible night.

The house was dark as they approached. It meant Joshua either slept or left. Vivian knew the truth would be the latter.

“I’ll start a fire,” Charles said as he took off his coat and hung it over the stair banister.

“Great,” Vivian said not really meaning it. Still, she did her best not to let her fight with Joshua ruin Charles’ and Rachael’s evening. “Coffee, cocoa?”

“Either, with a splash of something would be great. I don’t think I’ve ever been this cold.”

While Vivian made the coffee, Charles went back to the car and retrieved a bag of gifts from the trunk. Within a few minutes, he had a raging fire in the hearth and a pile of presents on the floor near a mountain of beautifully decorated presents under the family Christmas tree.

Vivian brought the coffee from the kitchen and set them on the table in front of the couch. “Should we call the kids to come in and exchange gifts?” she asked, and then sat on the couch.

“What’s the hurry?” He patted the floor next to him in front of the fire. “Sit next to me.”

The request made Vivian uncomfortable. But she felt awkward refusing. So she sat next to him.

“A toast,” he said, looking into her eyes. “To our kids, may God keep them safe. And to us, may we both find happiness.”

Vivian swallowed the lump in her throat as she swallowed a drink of coffee. This was not going well at all. She could hear the double meaning in his toast and realized at once it was a mistake agreeing to see him tonight.

She leaned back against the couch, watched the fire, and sipped spiked coffee praying the evening ended quickly.

“This is nice.” Charles put an arm along the cushion of the couch behind Vivian. His hand gently touched her shoulder. Oh my, this didn’t bode well.

How far would he try to go? She decided this was far enough. If he attempted to kiss her, she’d stop him. Amber and Rachael came into the room a few minutes later.

“We want to open gifts. Can we?”

Yes, Vivian thought. I want this evening over with. “Go get Timmy.” Amber walked as quickly as she could to the stairs and hollered for her brother.

Amber and Rachael exchanged gifts. Charles handed one to Timothy. He immediately tore into the paper.

“I wonder what it is.” He lifted up the present. “Look Mom.” He squealed with delight. “A remote control car. Thank you. I always wanted one.” Charles winked at Vivian, who smiled fondly at her son. She mouthed the words, “Thank you,” to Charles.

“We have something for Joshua. I guess he’ll have to open it tomorrow with the rest of his presents.” Charles finished off his coffee. “And for you, special lady.” He handed a small box to Vivian.

“I have something for you.” She crawled around him and looked under the tree for her gift. “Here.” She handed him a much bigger

box.

“Dad, look.” Rachael stood up and showed him the beautiful sweater Amber had given her. “And this too.” She held out a small bottle of perfume.

“Mom—” Amber reluctantly showed her present to Vivian. An assortment of eye shadow, blushes, and lipstick filled a small purse. Every thing a girl doesn’t need to smear all over her face.

Wonderful,” Vivian lied.

“And this.” She held up a skirt that Amber might get away with, but it was on the short side. “Feel it.” She held it out to her mother.

“Suede. It’s beautiful.”

Vivian carefully peeled the paper off her present, almost afraid of what she might find beneath the pretty folds of metallic shimmer. The shimmer that met her eyes caught her breath.

“It’s beautiful.” She could throw up. Her stomach twisted and turned so many times in that split second that she couldn’t form words.

“I want to see,” Amber said. Even Timothy looked expectantly at Vivian. She carefully lifted the gold and diamond tennis bracelet from the box. “Charles,” she stuttered. “It’s too much.” She looked at the beautiful bracelet and then at him. “I can’t accept this.” She put the expensive piece of jewelry back in the box. It represented the kind of gift given to a lover, not a friend.

Charles went to her side and bent down on one knee. “Don’t refuse.” He laid a hand on hers. “Please.” He picked up the bracelet and clasped it around her wrist.

“I don’t know what to say.” Their faces were only a few inches apart.

“Say you’ll accept my gift because you’re my friend.” He kissed the side of her mouth.

Amber and Rachael looked at each other and smiled wide.

“Now,” he said, and went back to his seat. He grabbed his

present.

“Wait,” Vivian said drawing everyone’s attention to her. Realizing there was nothing she could do to alter the moment, she said, “I guess you can open it. It’s just I’m embarrassed now. My gift isn’t, well, as personal.”

“You didn’t need to get us anything.” He tore the paper. “Wow,” was all he said.

“I thought with it just being the two of you, I thought you might use it, that’s all.”

“I love it.” He set the George Foreman Grill to the side and went back to Vivian. This time they embraced in an affectionate hug. “Thank you.”

The weight of the bracelet on her wrist brought it back to her mind. She let go of him and looked at it again. “It really is too much, Charles.”

“But you love it and it looks wonderful on you.” He kissed her lips this time.

She could sense he wanted to deepen the kiss, so she gently pushed on his chest to discourage his intentions.

“Hi.” Everyone turned to see Trevor standing a few inches into the room. “I guess I’m interrupting.”

“Trevor,” Vivian whispered. All at once, she read the look on his face, judged his reaction, and understood where it came from. He saw Charles kissing her.

“Merry Christmas, Vivian.”

“Uncle Trevor,” Timothy said and ran to hug his legs. “Look—” Trevor ruffled his hair, but his eyes hadn’t moved from Vivian. “Look!” He held up the remote control car. “Charles gave it to me.”

Trevor glanced at the toy not really seeing it. His mind filled with the image of Vivian in another man’s embrace.

“I got make-up and a skirt,” Amber said. “We went to Christmas Village.”

“Yeah? Your mom told me you were going.”

“Trevor,” Charles said. “I believe we met at the hospital.” Charles made his way through the piles of paper, across the room, and held out his hand.

Trevor took it. “I remember.”

“You’re back?” Vivian said.

“I can see you’re surprised.” He pushed his hands into the front pockets of jeans. “I’ll be going so you can get back to your,” he paused a moment. “Guests?”

“Trevor wait.” He headed toward the door as Vivian ran after him.

“Don’t go,” she said, when she caught up to him outside. She put her hand on his arm, as he was about to open the door to his truck. She crossed her arms over her chest and tried to rub away the cold. Her shallow breaths puffed into the frigid night.

“Did he give you that?” He motioned to the bracelet.

She looked at the diamonds sparkling in the glow of the street light. “Yes.”

“Nice. I guess you can go thank him proper.” He threw open the door and got behind the wheel. The engine gunned. He stared at her from the darkened interior. Narrowed eyes, tight-lipped scowl; every line of his face reflected the pain she’d caused. Yet, he wouldn’t let her explain, not that she could.

The truck fishtailed on ice when he pulled out of the drive. Snow and gravel sprayed from the tires as he drove off. A sinking, hollow feeling twisted in her chest. Unaware of the cold and too stunned to cry, she walked back into the house.

“Would you mind terribly if we called it a night,” Vivian asked Charles when she went back into the living room. “It’s been a long day and I’m tired.” Timothy sat with Jenny near the fire with his remote vehicle. Rachael applied shadow to Amber’s eyes. Charles had positioned himself where he could see out the front window. He’d obviously watched the entire exchange with Trevor. That bothered her. Trevor was no one’s business, but hers.

"I hope you understand," she said. "I'm sorry tonight didn't work out the way we planned. Is that okay?"

"Of course." He kissed her forehead. "Merry Christmas, Vivian." He turned to Rachael. "Get our things. It's time to go." He looked back at Vivian, giving her a wink. "What's your plan for tomorrow?"

Trying to figure out how to put order to my life, she thought. She said, "Christmas morning the same way it's been for the last eighteen years. Santa, pancakes, I'm doing all of it this year." Moreover, it would be special.

He nodded. "Us too. I'll call you sometime tomorrow." He touched her cheek, his fingertips soft against her skin, but not comforting. Then he helped Rachael gather their gifts.

When Vivian closed the door behind them, she leaned her head against the wall, and closed her eyes. Could this Christmas get any worse?

"Good night, Mom," Amber said, passing her on the way to the stairs. "Merry Christmas."

"See you in the morning." Vivian watched her walk with barely a limp now.

When Amber reached the top, she turned and said, "I had fun tonight, did you?"

Vivian nodded. At least, she had moments where she wasn't miserable. As long as she was convincing to the children, she'd put her sorrows away until alone in her room.

"I like Charles."

"I do too." That seemed to satisfy Amber because she went up to bed.

"Do you like him better than Uncle Trevor?" Timothy asked. He'd been standing just out of sight listening to the conversation.

"No sweetheart. I like Uncle Trevor differently. Charles is my friend. Uncle Trevor will always be a part of our lives no matter who we have as friends. He's special."

“Good.” He ran up to her and reached for a kiss. “I better get to bed so Santa can come.” He laughed. “I’ve been good this year, haven’t I?”

“You are the sunshine in my day, Timmy.” She pulled him into a hug and held tightly.

“I miss Dad.”

“Me too.” She pulled back and winked. “He’s with us. If I close my eyes, I can see him and when it’s quiet, I talk to him. Tonight, when you get into bed, talk to him. He’s always going to be with you.” She put her hand on his small chest. “He’s in here.” Tears filled her eyes and spilled onto her cheeks.

Timothy went up the stairs.

“Do you want Jenny to sleep with you?”

Timothy turned around, smiling. “Yeah.”

“I’ll bring her up when I let her in for the night.”

Vivian went to the kitchen and put the teakettle on the stove to heat. “Come on Jenny, outside.” She held open the door for the dog. “Hurry, it’s cold.” Using her foot, she helped Jenny make the decision to brave the winter night.

Closing the door, the bracelet jangled. The weight of the stones on her wrist didn’t measure the weight on her heart. If looks could do physical harm, Trevor would’ve inflicted serious damage on both her and Charles. All she’d wanted to do was wrap her arms around him and tell him how much she missed him even though he’d only been gone two days. She hadn’t been able to say or do anything for fear she’d start to cry. And if she did that, she’d acknowledge what she still wanted hidden from the children—she’d fallen in love with Trevor.

While the water came to a boil, she went up to check Joshua’s room. She knew he wasn’t home, but he usually left a note.

She opened the door. Her heart thumped against her ribs. The first thing she noticed, his empty desk. Normally, it remained covered with books and papers. Her mind immediately inventoried

the room. His pillow was gone. His drawers were slightly a jar. Closet doors were left open and clearly there were many items missing. She frantically looked for a note. Joshua had obviously left in a hurry.

Tears streamed down her face as she ran to the kitchen to stop the scream of the teakettle. Instinct drove her to the phone where she dialed from memory.

“Hello?” Trevor’s abruptly answered.

“Come quick.” Vivian’s words caught in her throat. Unable to catch her breath, she hyperventilated. “Oh God, Trevor. He’s gone.” She sat on the floor.

“Vivian, calm down. Who’s gone?”

“Joshua.”

## Chapter Eleven

Vivian's hands shook while she waited for Trevor. She knew he would be there as fast as he could drive. She tried to make sense of what happened. It didn't take a genius to figure out she'd called Joshua's bluff and lost.

She looked up when she heard the front door slam. Only a second passed before she saw his face in the doorway. He was as white as a ghost.

"What happened?" Trevor rushed to her side and knelt in front of her.

"He's gone." Her whole body fell into his.

Still kneeling, Trevor gathered her up and put her back on the chair. "Vivian, look at me." He rested his palms on the sides of her face making her focus on him. "Where's Joshua?"

"We had a fight. He moved out. All his stuff is gone." Trevor dropped his head into her lap. For a moment, his heart had stopped. When she had said he was gone, he'd assumed the worst. Yet his mind refused to believe it. He knew he must have been hearing her wrong. Joshua wasn't dead when she said he was gone.

"Where?" he whispered.

"With his girlfriend." In one long spill she told him the events of earlier in the evening. "I caused this. Can you imagine the situation? She's my boss." She took a deep breath. "Past tense, of course."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not going back to work. Even if I'm not fired, which I can

assure you after what I said I will be, I couldn't go back." She waved her hand to dismiss the idea. "I hated the job anyway. I've only liked it the last few weeks and now I know why, she's getting it on with my son."

"Come on." He stood and held out his hand to her. "Do you know her number?"

"Yes. Don't even think it. I'm not calling." She sounded like a baby. "He's a man now and obviously, he's going to do exactly what he wants."

Trevor led her downstairs. "I was watching a movie when you called. I want to finish it." She sat on the couch while he got the remote and turned the television to the channel.

"A Christmas Story?"

"Yeah? Have you seen it?"

She furrowed her brows. "Everyone's seen it."

He sat next to her. "I like it." Grabbing the afghan off the back of the couch, he covered their legs. "Got anything to drink?"

"Soda, orange juice, water, those kinds of drinks?"

"Rum with the soda, vodka with the orange juice, or scotch with water."

She laughed through her tears. "Beer?"

"Good. You need one too."

"Tonight, I think you're right." She disappeared up the stairs.

Before Vivian got the beers, she went to her room and quickly changed. Tossing the sweater and slacks aside, she put on flannel pajama bottoms and an oversized button-down shirt.

Christmas Eve and Trevor was with her. Salvaging what remained of the holiday, she steeled her determination. Feeling vulnerable, and just a bit reckless, she hastened to think what could happen if she didn't prepare. Sipping drinks, snuggling on the couch, her stomach swooped at the prospect. Somewhere along the way, she'd given up the fight. She couldn't deny the way he made her heart jump. Butterflies fluttered. Excitement surged. She

rushed to return to the couch.

When she sat next to Trevor, he gave her a second and third glance. "I'm glad you changed."

"I thought you liked the sweater."

Trevor inhaled deeply as if he drawing long and hard on a cigarette, and then he slowly exhaled. He ran his hands through his bangs, up over and around his head, until he wrapped them around his neck. Then he pulled as if trying to wring the tension from it. "Do you want to talk about your friend?" he said between tightly drawn lips. "Eventually we're going to. I thought you might want to give me a few years to cool off, but that's fine if you'd rather do it now. I know I would. Vivian, I'm warning you, I'm absolutely, fucking ballistic." He rubbed his palms on his thighs. "You need me tonight, and I'm trying like hell not to let you down. Viv, you've got a lot of nerve calling me. Why didn't you call your boyfriend?"

"Trevor..." She turned to the side so she faced him and rested her arm along the back of the couch. "He's not my boyfriend and you know it."

"Fuck this!" He stood up and paced once around the room. "Take it off." His voice dipped low and dangerous.

She didn't need to ask what he referenced. She unclasped the bracelet and set it on the table. "It isn't what you think." He didn't look at her, just continued to pace. The coiled tension within radiated like waves washing over and through her.

"Vivian, I'm not stupid. A diamond bracelet is a gift a man gives his lover." The razor-sharp glare in his narrowed eyes cut deep. "Are you?"

"His lover?" she finished. She didn't answer him for a moment. He paced the floor like a caged animal, stalking back and forth, ready to pounce if she revealed weakness in her defense. Not tonight, she didn't have anything to hide. "No," she said, hating the hurt visible in the pull of his lips. She caused it. She would fix it. "Please," she whispered. "Sit down." Grudgingly, he sat beside her.

“No, and I never gave him a reason to think otherwise.” Naturally, her hand rested on his leg. His eyes fixed on it lying there. “We’ve only had the one date.” She held up her finger. “One date,” she whispered. “Unless you count tonight.”

“Must have been some date.”

“Not for me. The date wouldn’t end fast enough. I didn’t kiss him.”

“That changed tonight,” he quickly rebutted.

“He kissed me. And you know what you saw had no passion.” He didn’t answer. “I wasn’t planning on accepting the bracelet. He refused me when I tried to decline it. Ask Amber if you don’t believe me. I don’t want his gift.”

“Did you give him something?”

She grew quiet. “I wasn’t planning on that, either. When he called last night, I picked something up today. I got him the George Foreman Grill.” She tilted her head to the side. “Not exactly personal. How would you feel if I got you a grill? It means cook your own food because I’m not going to.” She remained quiet for a moment, as did Trevor. “I’m sorry. I felt trapped and I didn’t know how to get out of the situation. I honestly didn’t think it would go the way it did. Mostly, I went for Amber. Believe me; I regret the decision. You have no idea how sorry I am that I hurt you.”

“Tell me.”

She bowed her head. “I feel wretched.” She glanced at his face. The angry lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth softened. “Had I known his intention, I wouldn’t have gone. I’m sure Charles is wondering what happened. Basically, I had the ugliest fight of my life with my son. I’ve never had a worse Christmas. Honestly, I can’t wait for it to end.”

“I’m not apologizing. You lied to me. I hope I never see you kissing another man again.”

Trevor softly touched her wrist. When he’d seen her with Charles, his insides turned to fire. He’d wanted to physically harm

the man kissing the woman he loved. Bury his fists in the smug smile on Charles' face. His only option had been to get out and get out fast. Now as he looked at her, he made a decision. "If you don't want me, I guess I'll find a way to accept it. It'll be the hardest thing I'll ever do. But Vivian, I won't be around to watch you try to make a life with someone else. I can't."

He watched emotions flit across Vivian's facial features. Her hesitant smile and thoughtful eyes reflected how he felt. Without speaking, he turned his attention back to the television. She worried her lip between her teeth. Leaving her to think about his words, he pretended to watch the show. His mind too, worried about what it meant for Vivian to choose to turn him away. They didn't want to lose each other, but that meant something altogether dangerous.

Finally Trevor changed the subject. "What did you get me for Christmas?"

"What makes you think I got you anything?"

He touched her hair, silk and shine. A short, soft curl wrapped around his finger. "Because you love me."

"I always have."

He shook his head. "No, you once loved me like a brother. I'm something completely different now." His hand wrapped around the back of her neck. "Burn the sweater." He leaned in. "I never want to see it again." He pulled her mouth to his. A soft hum vibrated from her throat. He held tighter. The gentle pressure of his lips played against hers until she opened and invited a deeper kiss. Velvet touch, sweet taste, tongues seeking, although tender, a kiss too brief.

He leaned against the arm of the couch and stretched his legs the length of it. He pulled Vivian until she lay next to him. He cradled her head against his chest. Her body partially rested on the couch, mostly against him. Her breasts to his chest, legs entwined.

Vivian righted the blanket so they were covered from the waist

down. When he laughed at the movie, the rumble of his body vibrated through her. She reveled in the feel of his strength. Heat radiated off his body bringing with it the masculine scent uniquely his. She wondered if he was as keenly aware of her.

She didn't know at what point she fell asleep. When she woke during the night, Trevor still lay beside her. The room was dark. He'd obviously turned off the television after the movie and simply fell asleep with her next to him.

She tried to shift her body without waking him. Santa needed to make his visit.

As she pushed up with her arms, his hands closed around her back, and pulled her down directly on top of him.

"Where are you going?" His eyes remained closed.

"Santa Claus needs to work." She pushed a little harder. He didn't let her budge. He shifted his hips and startled her with his body. "Trevor, what are you doing?" She sounded concerned.

He didn't answer. Instead he let his hands run the arch of her back and onto the curve of her derriere. He lifted his hips and ground his center against hers.

Her arms grew weak and she rested her forehead on his chest. All of her weight crushed against him. "What are you doing to me?" she whispered into the dark.

"I want you to know what you do to me. Feel how my body reacts whenever I think of us together."

"We've been down this road before. Trevor, we don't belong here."

"I disagree." His mouth met hers in a swirl of erotic tenderness. "I love you." He put even more passion into his kiss. "I want you. Damn the consequences."

She met his kiss with equal ferocity. "We shouldn't." His mouth left hers and moved to her neck. She didn't recall shifting their bodies, yet somehow Trevor was now on top of her.

"The truth," he said. "Tell me you don't want this as much as I

do.”

Trevor braced his weight with his arms so he could look directly into her eyes. When she looked up at his face, she nearly cried. She did love Trevor, not as Dean’s brother or as her friend, but as a woman loves a man. She stilled. “Trevor, I’m scared,” she whispered.

His hand touched the side of her face, caressed over her shoulder, and grazed the side of her breast. “Are you scared of me or what we’re doing?” She tried to sit up only his body wouldn’t let her.

The erratic rhythm of her pulse beat in the hollow of her neck. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m scared of me. I’m trembling in my stomach. My body is starting to sweat and I know it’s not because it’s hot in here. I don’t know what to do. All I know is that I would rather die than not have your hands on me.” His hand cupped the swell of her breast. Her chest contracted as she sucked in a sharp breath of air.

He moved his hips between her thighs. She gradually absorbed the weight of his body. Quick kisses of her lips followed deep, penetrating mating of their mouths.

Trevor stopped and rested his forehead against hers. Vivian realized he gave her an opportunity to say something or stop them before they went any further. She answered by raising her hips, wrapping her arms around his neck, and pulling his mouth to hers once again. This time she acted as the initiator. Wildly, she ran her hands over his back. She couldn’t touch enough.

An animal sound came from somewhere deep within Trevor as he pulled his mouth away from hers. He took the front of her shirt and with swift fingers had the buttons undone baring her skin.

Vivian arched her back as Trevor matched his mouth to her nipple. Her fingers tangled in his hair. Leaving her wet, he gently blew sending a flash of lightning from the peak of her breast to the heart of her secret. “Don’t make me wait,” she pleaded as she

wrapped her leg over his thigh.

Putting his hand over his head, he grabbed his shirt by the collar and pulled it from his body.

“No regrets.” He asked for a promise.

“None.”

In the dark room, Trevor stood from the couch and finished removing his clothes. He took her hand and pulled her to stand in front of him. Slipping the shirt from her body, he planted kisses on her bare shoulder. Feeling his way down, he removed her pajama bottoms and panties. Slowly they lowered to the floor, flesh to flesh.

“You’re soft against my tongue,” he said, tasting the inside of her wrist when he pinned her arms at the side of her head. “For months, every time I smelled your fragrance, I’d think of you like this. Tell me, Viv, how often do you think of me?” His fingers trailed down the inside of her arm, across her collarbone, over the rampant beating of her heart.

“I haven’t stopped thinking about you since my out-of-body-experience in the kitchen.” She reached up and tentatively kissed the dusting of hair on his chest. Nicely chiseled, lightly tanned, his skin was distinctively male. “I’ve had you inside of me every night for weeks.” She reached down and wrapped her hand around him.

Blood pounded in Trevor’s brain. He clenched his jaw to endure the sweet agony of Vivian’s touch. He wrapped his hand around the outside of her thigh and spread her legs.

Vivian cried out at as he surged into her. She held tightly to the side of his waist as he rocked slowly and deeply taking time to stretch every inch of her. Taking on a rhythm of their own, her hips matched to his allowing him deeper into her hot, wetness.

“Trevor,” she whispered as her body tightened around him. “Don’t stop,” she pleaded. Instinctively, her legs locked around Trevor’s back.

Her breathy pants, quivering lips, and murmured words of pleasure told him he was close to the making her shatter into a

million sparkling pieces. Biting the inside of his cheek, he held on to join her.

"Trevor. Oh Trevor! Oh!" Her back arched. Her internal muscles clenched.

Trevor caught her cries, savagely plundering her mouth. "I love you," he whispered, gripping her hips. Lifting her off the floor, he thrust one last time in an explosion leaving him weak.

"Are you okay?" he asked, collapsing beside her. His arm bent at the elbow covering his eyes.

Damp with perspiration, she laid her head on his chest. "Nothing like my fantasies," she confessed. She draped her arm across his body and rested her chin on his sternum. "And you?" His only thoughts were of Vivian and the incredible feeling of being inside of her, buried deep. How he'd never want to be anywhere else.

"It's hard to believe I'm lying here with you." He drew imaginary circles on her back.

They were quiet for a few minutes while reflecting on the impact their lovemaking would have on their lives. "No regrets," Vivian whispered as she kissed his stomach. She sat up and felt around for her shirt. "Want to play Santa with me?"

"Give me a couple minutes and you can sit on my lap."

She laughed as she handed him his jeans. "I'm afraid I've been a naughty girl."

"That's good." He swatted her on the butt. "I'm going out for a smoke." He zipped his pants. "I'll meet you back here on the couch." He held the side of her face while he covered her mouth in a kiss. Their tongues briefly danced before slowly pulling apart.

They held hands as they walked up the stairs.

## Chapter Twelve

“Amber?” Timothy shook his sister. “Wake up. Uncle Trevor’s downstairs. Mom’s with him.”

“What?” She rubbed her eyes as she sat up. Looking at the clock, she realized it was Christmas morning and there were presents to open. “Timmy,” she said excitedly. “What did Santa bring?”

“Uncle Trevor is here.”

“Really?” She thought for a moment. “I wonder when he came over. After the way he left last night, I thought I’d have to make another dinner to patch things up.”

“They’re sleeping on the couch.”

“So what,” she said, throwing off the covers.

“Together,” he said in a conspiratorial manner. “After I checked out what Santa brought, I went to watch cartoons and there they were. I’ve never seen them sleep together.”

“Me neither.” She jumped from the bed. “Come on. Get Josh and we’ll go get our presents.”

Timothy crossed his arms in front of him. “Don’t you even care they’re sleeping together?”

“Uncle Trevor and Mom? No way. They probably fell asleep watching TV.” She grabbed him by the shoulder and tugged. “Come on,” she whined. “Let’s get Josh.”

They opened the door to Joshua’s bedroom. At once, Amber knew why Uncle Trevor had come over.

“Hey, where’s Josh?”

Amber pushed Timothy out of the room. "That's what I want to know."

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Trevor enjoyed the sensation of Vivian waking in his arms. Her rear pressed against his morning erection. There wouldn't be time for making love, but enduring the sweet torture, pleased. He ran his hand over her hip while gently pressing his length more firmly against her. He smiled when she inched back and wiggled.

"Morning." Vivian opened her eyes.

"Merry Christmas." He wrapped his arms more tightly around her. "I don't hear the kids?" he asked, placing a kiss on her neck.

"I should hope not." She sat up. "I wouldn't want them to discover us like this." She reached her arms over her head and stretched. Trevor reached out and cupped one of her swaying breasts through the shirt she'd put back on last night after they'd made love. She immediately dropped her arms down in front of her.

Trevor chuckled. "I hear the kids," he said.

Amber and Timothy burst into the room. "Where's Josh?"

"Good morning," Trevor said.

Her eyes narrowed. "Did you kick him out?" Amber asked accusingly.

"Merry Christmas." Vivian tossed the afghan off her legs and walked up the stairs.

"That was uncalled for," Trevor said. "Of course, she didn't kick him out. He left because he's a spoiled brat wanting to be a man."

Amber appeared remorseful for her outburst. "Then where did he go?"

"More than likely, to his girlfriend's house." Trevor stood and folded the blanket and draped it over the back of the couch. "Can we open presents?" Timothy asked. "I don't want to fight anymore. It seems all we do around here is argue. I'm sick of it," he said with an air of authority.

"Amber, go apologize to your mother." Trevor ran his fingers

through his hair, combing it off his forehead. "Tim here," he ruffled the boy's hair. "Will stay and help me build a fire."

Regrouped and feeling better, everyone picked a favorite spot in the living room to sit an open presents. Trevor sat next to Vivian on the couch. Timothy made his way next to the tree to be closer to the gifts and Amber sat across from the fireplace.

"Could we call Cheryl's and ask Joshua to come home and open his presents?" Amber sipped hot chocolate while she waited for an answer.

"Both of you saw what happened. I gave Joshua a choice. He decided Cheryl was important enough to give up his family. I'm not calling him nor will I beg him to come home. He and I need to have a conversation and come to an understanding before we're square."

Trevor eased her hand into his.

"I love Joshua, but he can't live here and make his own rules along the way."

"Are you going to take his truck?" Amber asked.

Vivian tilted her head and smiled. "You don't need to worry about that. I'm not going to take the truck. He'll be fine. I've got his number and you can still call him."

"He's a member of this family," Trevor added. "Nothing changes that. He can even come home. Until he apologizes to all of us, he's better off where he is." Trevor let go of Vivian's hand and took a sip of coffee. "Why don't you two see what Santa here brought," He gave Vivian's thigh a pat. "And I'll step outside for a few minutes." He went to the kitchen and took his pack of cigarettes off the table.

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Vivian stayed with the children.

"I'm sorry, Mom."

Vivian smiled and took a sip of coffee. "I know. I don't like that he's gone either. I'm not going to tolerate lying in this house."

Amber nodded and stuffed her hand into the same stocking

she'd had since her first Christmas. Timothy wasn't as patient. He tipped his upside down, and shook. Yu-Gi-Oh cards, candy, and a roll of quarters for the arcade spilled into his lap. Vivian sat for a few minutes watching them. Both kissed her cheek delighted with their gifts. She glanced toward the kitchen. He'd barely been out of the room and already she missed him. "I'm going outside to talk with Uncle Trevor," she said and stood. "Keep an eye on the fire."

She hurried downstairs and took the afghan from the back of the couch. Just looking at the place where they'd made love caused her blood to heat. If only she could turn back the clock and feel the first touch of his hand again. She brought the blanket to her nose and sniffed. The faint scent of cigarette and earthy male, mixed with her perfume. Last night, he had warmed her with the blanket while he smoked. The difference had been their lack of clothing. A chill ran up her spine as she remembered it now.

The crisp morning air slapped her hard in the face, stinging her cheeks, and making her lips tighten. The snow covered yard twinkled like glitter in the sun. The sky glowed light blue and the breeze smelled of evergreens. "It's too cold out here." Trevor took the blanket from her arms draped it around his back and pulled Vivian into the circle of his arms enclosing the two of them into the colorful patchwork.

"You feel warm." Her breath mingled with the smoke from his cigarette.

"If you wiggle any closer, you're going to feel a lot more."

"Promise."

"Viv, I'm hard already." To prove his point he nestled his erection in the crease of her rear.

"Not now," she said, turning to look at the house insuring neither Amber nor Timothy had ventured into the kitchen. "What was hard, was telling the kids about Joshua. I could kill Joshua for doing this on Christmas. Just goes to show how selfish he is."

"I want to be selfish. I want you alone again."

“I know. Me too.”

Cocooned in the stillness of the winter morning, Vivian reveled in the difference a day makes. Yesterday, between Charles and Joshua, Christmas destined to be another low point. The morning light washed over her chasing away the chill in her heart. She leaned her back against his chest.

Trevor dipped his head and nuzzled her neck. “I love the way your skin feels against my lips.”

She couldn’t resist the temptation. “Don’t let the children see.” Her head dropped to the side giving him better access. With his hand wrapped around her middle, he pulled her tighter. She placed her hands over his.

“How am I supposed to keep my hands off you?”

Slowly, she rotated her body until she faced him. He kissed her passionately. His hand worked under the hem and inside of her shirt, finding her breast. Her nipple hardened beneath his calloused fingers. Her breath hitched, frozen on the frigid air. Honeyed heat flowed, melting in her core. The contrast of hot and cold heightened her awareness. “Okay,” she said, trying to catch her breath. “Time to go in.”

“Come on, Jenny,” Trevor called. The dog followed them back into the living room.

Timothy played with the Game Boy Santa had left him and Amber put a disc into her new portable stereo. “Who’s ready for some serious present unwrapping?” Trevor asked.

Timothy jumped up and waved his arm. Jenny barked at the excitement. “Since you’re closest to the tree, you can hand out the presents.” Timothy reached under the tree and gave the first present to Amber. And so it went. Everyone watched while she opened her gift and then another one was handed out.

Timothy made Vivian an herb planter box for her window. And Amber had crocheted her a scarf to match her wool wrap. “Thank you.” She kissed both of them.

"Here, Uncle Trevor." Amber handed him a gift.

He tore the paper and looked at the artist on the cover of the CD. "You think I'll like it?" he said holding up the disc. "Because I've got to tell you, I don't know who in the hell they are." He laughed.

"If you don't like it, I know someone who does." She tilted her head to the side and smiled coyly.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Keep it in my truck. When you ride with me, we'll listen to it."

"Cool."

"Here is mine, Uncle Trevor." Timothy sat right next to Trevor as he opened his present. "Two tickets to the hockey game," he said, delighted with the gift. "Do you think your sister will go with me?"

"No!" he shrieked. "One's for me."

Trevor pulled him into a hug. "Sound's fun. Thank you."

"I hope everyone is happy?" Vivian said, piling paper into the corner.

Trevor cleared the space around him. "Where's my present?" he asked Vivian with a big smile on his face.

"You get a lump of coal," she teased. "Timothy, hand Uncle Trevor his present from me."

Trevor patted the couch beside him. "Sit by me," he said to her.

Vivian left the pile of colorful paper and joined Trevor. "I hope you like it," she said, when he tore the foil paper and ribbon from the box.

"Viv." His voice was solemn as he ran his hand across the lettering of the first edition Steinbeck. "Thank you," he said, chastely kissing the side of her mouth. He set the book to the side. "I believe I have one more." He pulled a beautiful helmet from the side of the couch. "You need one of these if you're going to ride with me."

Vivian laughed. "I told you I'm scared to ride your motorcycle." She handed the helmet back to him and walked away from the

couch. "I don't need a helmet." She dropped to her knees and started gathering snips of ribbons and bows off the carpet.

Timothy cheered when Trevor stood and stalked towards her. "You are going to get on my bike. In fact, I'm going to take you for a ride right now."

"If she won't go, I will," Amber said.

Kneeling, Trevor leaned into her. "You better say you want to go for a ride."

"You win. I'll go." She snatched the helmet out of his hands. Losing her balance, she grabbed onto Trevor. Vivian fell backwards and Trevor landed on top of her.

"This is exactly the kind of ride I had in mind," Trevor whispered so only she could hear. Vivian pushed against him, but laughed hard enough to zap her strength rendering her useless. Jenny rushed over and feverishly licked anything within reach of her snout. Vivian turned her head from side to side to keep the dog from licking her face.

"Say uncle, Mom," Timothy coached from the side.

"Don't let her up," Amber said.

Vivian laughed until her sides hurt. Finally, she hollered, "Uncle!"

"I'll let you up if you take a ride with me."

"Not now," she reasoned. "It's Christmas morning."

"Later?"

"Yes." Her heart tripped with anticipation.

"Since you concede, I want eggs, pancakes, fresh squeezed orange juice and, yes, I want bacon."

Vivian groaned. "I know what you want."

"Yeah, and you want it, too." He rolled to his side, but kept his hand on her stomach. It quivered with awareness of the heat of his hand branding her flesh.

"Mom hates the smell of bacon." Timothy laughed. "But Jenny loves it. Don't you, girl." He vigorously scratched the dog's head and

ears.

"I don't smell bacon now." His low, seductive voice drifted into her ear and went straight to her sex. "And I'm not hungry for food. Come with me."

"Promise?" She smiled knowing he understood the double meaning.

He groaned. "Absolutely."

"I don't want to leave the children." Vivian looked at Trevor, and then at the kids. "It doesn't feel right."

"Do you guys mind?" Both shook their heads.

"After breakfast," she countered.

"Okay," Trevor agreed.

After breakfast, Vivian returned wearing a sweatshirt and jeans. Leather boots and heavy socks would keep her feet warm. "Here's Joshua's number if you want to call him while we're gone." She kissed their cheeks. "We won't be long."

"But we might be."

She rolled her eyes. "It's Christmas."

"But the best part is over," Amber said.

Trevor leaned into Vivian's ear. "Not for us."

Heat radiated into her cheeks. He shouldn't refer to sex in front of the children. "We won't be gone long. I still need to get dinner started."

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Desire strummed Trevor's body to a fine-tuned fervor. He hadn't felt this giddy since having Tina Meyer behind the stage curtain in the high school auditorium.

Vivian tilted the shiny black helmet studying the airbrushed mountain scene along the back edge as she carried it to the truck. She really thought he was taking her to his place to get his motorcycle. He almost laughed.

The streets were deserted. A fresh dusting of snow made the sidewalks and curbs look clean. Yards were free of footprints. He

pulled the truck into his garage. The motorcycle sat parked next to the wall. When she exited the truck, she walked toward the bike.

“Come inside. I need to change, too.” She followed him into his house. As soon as he closed the door behind her, he took the helmet from her hands and dropped it to the floor. “We’re not actually going for a ride in this weather.” Without hesitation, he took her face between his palms and kissed her as he’d wanted to all morning. Gentle and soft, he sipped her lips. Her hair curled around his fingers when he tilted her head with his palms.

A deep, throaty moan vibrated her throat when his tongue snaked into her mouth searching for hers. Entwining, stroking, he plunged deep. Hot and wet, he wanted complete possession, not just the thrilling mating of their mouths.

Her body strained towards his. “Make love to me,” she whispered.

Trevor scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom. Dropping her on the bed, he left her to close the window blinds.

Vivian crawled across the bed and kneeled in the center. She pulled off her sweatshirt. Dusky centers strained against the sheer lace of her bra. Reaching behind her back, she deftly unhooked the strap and slipped the bra down one arm at a time until it fell away. Her breasts swayed as she scooted toward the edge. Releasing the snap, sliding down the zipper, her smile shy, but damn sexy.

Trevor leaned against the dresser, folding his arms in front of his chest. His heart slammed around in his chest as he watched Vivian shimmy out of her jeans. An intense flare of possessiveness radiated up his spine. If he’d ever bought into the idea of soul mates, she was his, every part of her beckoned to him. He took a step toward her.

“Not yet,” she said, stopping him. He retreated to his position against the dresser.

Vivian smiled and then giggled. Trevor recognized it for what is

was, nervousness. Her brazen behavior inflamed the fire already blazing hot. She slid off the bed. “I know last night was all about me,” she said, stepping closer. “It’s your turn.” She gently bit his bottom lip and then sucked it into her mouth.

“What do you want from me, Trevor?” she asked, locking her eyes on his. She flattened her palm and pressed against the front of his jeans.

“Christ, Vivian.” Blood surged into the rigid length of his already painfully confined arousal. Sliding up, she fingered the waistband. He reached down and slipped the top button free.

She inched her hand inside.

He white-knuckled gripped the dresser.

“I like to touch you.” Her fingers grazed the heated head of his erection.

Trevor grabbed her hand and pressed it more firmly against his need for her. He swore as she unzipped his fly releasing him into her hands.

Before Trevor could assimilate what happened, Vivian dropped to her knees. Completely naked, and oh God, she took him into her wickedly, sweet mouth! One of her hands skillfully stroked, while her other gently lifted and massaged. “Vivian, stop,” he begged. “I want to be inside you.” Putting his hands under her arms, he lifted her off the floor and backed her against the bed.

Vivian’s eyes sparkled as she looked up at him. Trembling, lips slightly parted, a flush to her cheeks, she was ready. She climbed onto the bed, and slid across the bedspread to the pillows. Trevor kneeled between her creamy, smooth, widespread thighs. He gritted his teeth when she wrapped her fingers around his girth and guided him into her slick core.

“We’re a perfect fit,” he said, burying himself deep. He pulled a cry from her lips as he pulled himself from her body. Then he invaded again, testing all of his senses simultaneously.

“I can’t believe I tried to convince myself I didn’t need you.” She

held to his forearms. “I love you,” she said, arching off the bed.

Her declaration punched him in the gut. It was the first time he’d heard the words from her lips believing they implied the same sentiment he held for her. “Ahh, Viv.” He sealed their mouths, tasting her passion, savoring her essence as it floated across his tongue. Increasing his tempo, he thrust again and again.

“Forever,” she breathily proclaimed just as she rocked with a powerful orgasm. Trevor relished the sensation of her body convulsing around him.

At that moment, claiming her love, possessing her body, he gave her his heart.

## Chapter Thirteen

Vivian perused the classified ads. The week after Christmas definitely wasn't the best time to be unemployed. Nitwit at the flower shop probably had her position by now. Cheryl couldn't be stupid enough to think *she'd* ever step one foot into the shop again. Picking up her final paycheck was going to be difficult. Maybe Cheryl would mail it to her.

"Find anything?" Trevor asked shaking off the cold. He smelled of cigarette smoke and aftershave. He looked devastatingly handsome in a starched, white, dress shirt and khakis.

In just a week, Trevor seemed to have adjusted to their new relationship. Unless working, he spent most of his time with her and the children. Keeping up propriety, he didn't stay overnight. In the past, there wasn't the underlining current of sexual energy flowing between them. The children were too sensitive to the shift in her moods. Since falling in love with Trevor, or rather admitting she loved him, she wore a smile like a favorite pair of jeans.

"I won't be gone long." He bent down and kissed her lips.

"We need to talk when you get back."

He stopped his exit from the room and came back to the table. "I've got a few minutes. We can talk now." He pulled out a chair next to her and sat.

"Trevor," she said with an air of confidence she didn't feel, not with him sitting so near. "We need to be careful." She looked toward the hallway, and then back at Trevor. "The kids are going to get suspicious."

“You know how I feel. I think we should tell them.”

She stood and paced across the floor. “I don’t.” She came back to the table and sat down next to him again. “You can’t come in and kiss me. Uncle Trevor doesn’t kiss their mom. They’re in bed when you leave and you’re here when they wake. They’d have no idea you go home except your clothes change.”

Trevor nodded at her point. “I guess you’re right. There’s not much I can say. It’s your call, but I think you’re making the wrong choice. Eventually Amber, Joshua, and Timmy are going to figure something’s going on. There’s nothing we can do to change how they’ll feel. And when you finally decide the time has come to tell them, they’ll be angry they weren’t told sooner.”

She appeared to be listening intently, nodding now and again. Whether or not she agreed with him was another question. He just didn’t know.

“Personally, I’d face the music now so we can move past it and finally have what we want.” He shrugged as if he wasn’t fighting for his life. The world almost fit in the palm of his hand and Vivian was telling him not to reach out and grab it.

“Maybe we can tell them we’re going to date.”

Trevor let the breath he held rush from his chest. “It’s a step.”

“It’s as far as I can go right now,” she said.

He took her hand and rubbed small circles into her palm with his thumb. “I’m telling you now, Vivian. I know what I want. I’m waiting until you’re ready.” He kissed her before she could speak. “Just don’t make me wait too long. Now I’ve got to get to work. I’m late as it is.”

“You said you had a few minutes.”

“I lied. I would have stirred all morning wondering what you wanted to talk about. Better to get things out in the open.” He paused. “I hope you figure that out for yourself. Soon. I don’t want to hide forever.”

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Vivian looked at the paper again, but couldn't stop thinking about Trevor. Telling the kids she and Trevor were going to date didn't sound so horrible. He was right. If they somehow stumbled into the information, their reaction would be different than if she'd just asked them. Maybe it wouldn't bother them. And if they said it did, what would she do? Trevor would damn the consequences. Children didn't dictate to parents, but then he'd always been favorite Uncle Trevor. That could all change with her confession.

Better if she told them while Trevor was out of the house. She wanted to give Amber and Timothy an opportunity to express their true feelings without Trevor intimidating them into saying something they really didn't feel. Trevor was important, but nothing came before the children.

"Hi," she opened the door to Amber's room.

"Just a minute." Amber covered the phone with her hand and asked, "What?"

"I want to talk. Is that Rachael?"

Amber nodded.

"Can you call her back in a few minutes? This is important. I'm going to get your brother while you hang up. I'll be right back."

A couple of minutes later, Amber sprawled out on the bed. Vivian sat next to her. Timothy plopped down cross-legged on the floor.

"I'm returning the bracelet to Charles."

"How come?" Amber asked. "Don't you like it?"

"I can't accept a gift that cost so much money from someone who is just my friend."

"How much did it cost?" Timmy wondered.

"A lot." When he continued to look at her as if expecting a number, she tossed one out not knowing if it was really accurate. "Five hundred dollars."

Amber gasped. "Maybe you'll get to like him as more than a friend."

Vivian shook her head and took Amber's hand in hers. "There's a problem." She fidgeted with the ring Amber wore on her index finger, a gift to Vivian from Dean before the kids were born. Amber never took it off. "I don't want to date Charles or anyone else." Vivian took a deep breath. "Well, there is one person, Uncle Trevor."

"You want to date Uncle Trevor?" Amber interrupted and she sat up.

"Yes!" Timothy made a fist and punched the air like he'd just scored a winning point in a match game.

"Uncle Trevor," Amber said a little quieter.

"Not if we all don't agree," Vivian said.

"What about Joshua?"

"He's a man now and doesn't live under this roof. He supports himself and I support the two of you. I guess if he didn't approve of Trevor, he'd know how I feel about Cheryl."

"I hoped Rachael would be my sister after you married her dad."

"I know you did. Honey, I just don't feel that way about him."

"But you do about Uncle Trevor?"

Vivian nodded. "He's been my best friend since Daddy died. I like it when he's here and I miss him when he leaves."

"Is he going to be my Dad now, not my uncle?" Timothy asked.

"Yeah! Are you guys getting married or something?" Amber sounded horrified.

Vivian sat up straighter. "Not immediately. But I want to be honest here." Just thinking of Trevor made her smile. "I love him." Her face flushed just saying the words aloud. She put her hands to her cheeks feeling the warmth.

"And he loves you?" Amber asked.

"He loves all of us."

"I think it's cool." Timothy stood. "Can I go back to my room? I had a good game going on my Game Boy."

"I need a hug first." He wrapped his arms around Vivian. There was a bounce to his step as he left the room. "How about you?" Vivian folded her arms around Amber when she leaned forward. "You have to be honest. I want to know how you really feel and you don't have to worry about upsetting me. Truth time."

Amber leaned back against the headboard. She looked up at the ceiling. Vivian could tell she thought about what she wanted to say.

Vivian said, "I miss your dad." She paused. "Every single day."

Amber twirled the ring on her finger. "Even though it would be cool to be sisters with Rachael, I didn't really want you to marry her dad. I liked the idea of you being her mom even less."

"Well, that worry is over. There is no way I am going to be mother to anyone, just the three I have."

"What if you and Uncle Trevor did get married? Maybe he wants kids."

Vivian shook her head. "I'm too old," she said with a laugh. Amber giggled too. "Would you mind watching your brother tonight so I can talk to Trevor?" Amber's eyebrows rose. "I thought I might take him out for a drink. He wanted to be here to talk to you. I wouldn't let him."

"I'm scared, Mom." Amber fidgeted with the edge of her pillowcase. "I don't want anything to change. What if you and Uncle Trevor have a fight?"

"I can guarantee we will." Vivian smiled. "We've had plenty of fights in the past."

"Yeah, but those were mostly about his girlfriends," Amber said.

"Well there's another guarantee I can make you. We won't be arguing over his girlfriends anymore."

"Because you'll be his girlfriend." Vivian and Amber laughed for a minute, and then the room became silent. "Do you think Dad would care?"

Vivian looked directly into Amber's eyes. When she spoke her words rang with truth and conviction. "I believe your Dad is the one bringing us together. I think he knows Uncle Trevor is going to take very good care of our family now that he's not here anymore. Your dad is gone, but he wants you to be happy." Vivian blinked a tear from her eye. "He'd want me to be happy too." If she'd been the one that died, it's what she'd want for Dean.

Vivian stood to leave the room. "Call Rachael back. Don't tell her about our talk." She winked at Amber.

"I hope Joshua isn't mad. But even if he tries to make you feel bad, I still say it's okay for you and Uncle Trevor to be in love."

Vivian left the room filled with pride. Trevor was right. It was far less terrifying than she expected.

Later that afternoon, Trevor returned. The engine of his bike roared into the garage. Vivian's stomach flipped like a pancake a couple of times before he found her folding a load of laundry on the couch. A weepy, love story played on Lifetime Television.

He paused before he approached her. "Am I safe to kiss you?" he whispered. "Where are the kids?" He leaned down and gently pressed his lips to hers for a brief, chaste, kiss.

Vivian patted the sofa beside her. "I talked to Amber and Timothy."

Once he was next to her, she told him about the conversation with the kids. "What was their reaction?"

She smiled. "They had a few questions, but the idea didn't seem to bother them. They wanted to know if we were going to get married. I dismissed those fears. I basically told them we were already a family and we'd see what the future brought." She kissed him when he leaned into her. Much deeper this time, feeling the smoldering passion between them rage to life.

"You surprise me," he said. "Can I take you to dinner to celebrate?"

"Of course."

Later that evening, while they were at the restaurant Trevor said, "We actually have more to celebrate tonight."

Vivian took a sip of wine and waited for him to elaborate.

"I have a business proposition for you. Before you say no, here me out." Trevor took a bite of garlic bread. "On the trip to Boston I acquired a contract that's going to keep me very happy for the next several years."

Vivian smiled. "I'm happy for you." She held up her glass. "A toast to your success."

Trevor lifted his glass to hers. "To a partnership." He clinked the glasses together.

"What are you talking about?" she asked bewildered.

"Ashton Enterprises," he said, as if that said it all.

"What about it?"

He rolled his eyes. "You're an Ashton. This is going to be a family business and quite frankly, I need you."

"But Trevor—"

"Don't argue. I've got more work than I can handle by myself. I need someone to help me get organized. I've never wanted more than enough to get me through the day-to-day bullshit. Whether I wanted it or not Ashton Enterprises is making good money. Great money actually."

"I don't want to work for you."

"You won't work for me, you'll work with me." He downed his entire glass of wine. "The legalities are done. All you have to do is agree to spend every day with me." He reached out and took her hand. "I'll beg if it'll help."

She paused and looked at their hands wrapped together on top of the table. Every day with the man she loved, she couldn't think of a better job. "There could be complications."

"Nothing we couldn't solve. And there'll be benefits." He squeezed the hand he held. "We'll make it work. Say yes."

“Okay. Yes.” She giggled.

“To us.” Trevor kissed her knuckles.

## Chapter Fourteen

Vivian put the final touches on the plate of appetizers she'd made for New Year's Eve. Amber stayed the night with Rachael. Timothy slept over at Scott's house. Since she still hadn't heard from Joshua, she assumed he'd party the night away with his girlfriend. She had never ached so much for one of her children.

She tried to call him on several occasions. He still wasn't willing to return her phone calls. His presents remained under the tree. She hoped they could talk soon, although she wasn't sure what she'd say to him. Her opinion of Cheryl changed. She hated to admit it, but she realized she'd have to set her feelings aside. She wanted a relationship with her son. Not hearing from him was more than she could bear. He'd won. He just didn't know it yet.

Vivian stepped out of the shower when she heard the garage door closing. It rumbled through the house alerting her that Trevor arrived home early. She heard him call her name as he made his way up the stairs. She wrapped a towel around her head. When she looked up, he stepped into her bedroom.

Trevor abruptly stopped and stared at her bare shoulders and legs. The towel wrapped tightly around her middle tucked between her breasts. "Sorry." He started to back out of the room when his legs suddenly felt like Jell-O. "I'll umm, wait for you downstairs."

He had his back to her when she said, "Amber and Timmy aren't home." His hand rested on the doorknob. Instead of going through the open door, he looked over his shoulder and shut them in.

Having only made love Christmas Eve and Christmas morning, Trevor wasn't used to the sight of her naked form. When she dropped her towel, his breath caught in his throat. She combed her hair into a wet, wild mass with her fingers.

In two strides Trevor was upon her, lifting Vivian into his arms, and gently laying her on the bed. Momentarily, he left her side and returned without his clothing. Her arms welcomed him, as did her body.

Using his mouth, his fingers, and his words, he caressed every inch of her flesh. "I've never had anything like this." He nuzzled the side of her neck just beneath her ear. She arched when he placed his hand on the small of her back and brought her body closer to his.

"You make me feel like an exotic flower ready to open up from the heat of the sun." She reached her arms over her head as Trevor stretched out on top of her.

Trevor held Vivian in his arms. He had so much to say, how to put it into words. Vivian was his now and always would be. He wondered where he fit into her heart. And more important, he wondered about her feelings for Dean. Did she still miss him like a wife misses a husband? Not knowing killed him. How did he ask? If the truth were that Dean would always live in her heart rather than as a memory, he didn't want to hear the answer. Moreover, did he want to know if she preferred life with Dean? He didn't think so. God, he hoped love had never felt like this for her either.

Never in his life had he cared for a woman the way he did for Vivian. Perhaps he'd never gotten close because he never took the time to be a friend. Vivian had been a part of his life for so long it almost seemed natural to progress into something more, except for the fact that there was nothing natural about it at all. He never should have fallen in love with his brother's widow, not to mention pursued that love. He couldn't stop himself. Admittedly, he expected there to be consequences. He suspected his parent's initial

reaction wasn't going to be understanding. Thankfully because they lived a few thousand miles away, he could hold off telling them his future wife was their daughter-in-law. He loved Vivian and he knew she loved him. For now, it had to be enough.

The front door slammed.

"Mom?" They both heard it at the same time. Joshua.

"Oh no!" Vivian said.

Vivian jumped from the bed and Trevor followed. Joshua's footfalls were quickly coming up the stairs. Vivian pulled on her robe and Trevor was barely zipping up his trousers when a knock sounded on her bedroom door.

"Mom?" Joshua pushed open the door just as Trevor reached for his shirt. Everyone froze for a split second before Joshua launched himself across the room with his fists flying. He managed to connect with Trevor's jaw once before Vivian's scream rang through the air. Trevor pushed Joshua against the wall knocking him into Vivian's vanity spilling the contents onto the floor. Perfume decanters broke. Powder drifted up like puffs of smoke from the carpet.

"What are you doing with my mother?" Joshua thrashed widely trying to break free from Trevor's grasp.

"Vivian, get out of here!" Trevor shouted.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she looked at her son. Devastation shone in his eyes. "Trevor, let him go." She pushed at Trevor trying to loosen his grasp. "Look, he's calming down." Joshua stared at Vivian. Her robe nearly fell from her shoulder. Although covered, she was obviously naked beneath.

Trevor let go and backed out of reach. Vivian stepped between them and put her hand on Joshua's arm. He jerked his arm back. "Don't touch me!" he spat. "You're a hypocrite." He straightened his shirt and ran his hands through his hair to comb it. "You two are sick. You raise hell about Cheryl. At least she's not a relative."

"Trevor is related to you, not me," she quietly stated. "And I'm

an adult.”

“It didn’t give you any more sense.” Joshua mocked her. Spittle collected at the corners of his mouth. He wiped it away with the back of his hand.

Trevor was about to speak when Joshua pointed a finger at him. “Stay out of it. This is none of your business.” His mouth twisted into an ugly sneer. “Why couldn’t you stick to tramps? How come you have to prey on lonely widows? My father’s body is barely in the ground, and you’re screwing his wife!” Joshua threw his hands up in disgust. “I’m out of here.”

“Joshua wait.” Vivian ran after him. “Let me explain.”

Trevor followed Vivian. He feared this scenario. Joshua was out the front door and in the truck when Trevor joined Vivian on the bottom of the stairs. They watched him pull out of the drive and disappear down the street. Trevor closed the door. Vivian sat on the bottom step and started to cry.

Trevor sat beside her. “It’s not our fault.” When he tried to touch her, her back stiffened so he clasped his hands in his lap.

“Why does it have to hurt so much to love you?” She leaned against him letting his strength keep her upright.

Trevor kissed the top of her head. “It isn’t the loving that hurts.” He stood and pulled her to her feet. “Come on. Get dressed.”

“We have to talk to him. I can’t leave it like this. He doesn’t have to like our relationship any more than I like him living with Cheryl. Trevor, he needs to hear from us how this happened. I don’t want him to think any of this went on while Dean was alive and I know that’s what he’s thinking.” She grumbled something low and spun around to go to her room. “I can’t believe I was so stupid.”

Vivian put on a sweatshirt and jeans, not the outfit she had planned to wear on New Year’s Eve with Trevor. It didn’t seem right to dress up and celebrate. The last year had been the hardest of her life and the prospect of this one wasn’t proving to be any better.

Trevor didn't know what to say to her. He didn't have the answers either. One thing for certain, their night of celebration had already climaxed.

"I'm going to find him." Vivian entered the kitchen where Trevor sat at the table. She wore her coat with her purse hanging over her shoulder.

"I'll come with you." He stood and took a step toward her.

She held up her hand and shook her head. "Joshua won't be happy to see me. I'm not going to have one or both of you arrested for fighting."

Trevor put his hands in his front pockets and leaned against the counter. Vivian couldn't believe her mind wandered to how appealing the stance was. She hadn't been out of bed an hour, and already her thoughts twisted with carnal images. Flames raced up her spine and settled in her cheeks.

Trevor smiled as Vivian patted her forehead with her gloved hand. "I've got to get out of here," she said.

Trevor appeared to glide toward her. One moment he stood eight feet away and suddenly his face closed in on hers. "You're driving me crazy."

His lips softly touched hers. "Good."

"My son hates me and all I can think about is you." Her hands rested on his chest. "My life is in shambles around me and yet, all I can do is smile. I should be devastated." Her head bowed.

Trevor held her close, and then pulled back. Putting his finger under her chin, he lifted her face. His eyes filled with compassion. Hers swam with tears. "Go."

"I don't know how long I'll be."

Trevor shrugged. "I'm not going anywhere. Well, perhaps the liquor store for a bottle." Vivian pointed to the cupboard about to tell him where he could find a bottle when he said, "No, I already looked and it's gone."

Vivian raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t look at me like that!” he teasingly said.

As Vivian walked out of the room, Trevor called her name and ran after her. She paused in the hall while he caught up to her. “What?”

He stood in front of her. “No matter what Josh says, believe me. I never imagined any of this while Dean was alive. Never! I love my brother dearly, but he’s gone. Viv, what we feel isn’t anybody’s business.” He grabbed her shoulders and made her look directly into his eyes. “I’ve always loved you. Only now am I in love with you.”

She closed her eyes. His lips brushed hers, full of promise and understanding.

“Don’t let him make you feel guilty. You didn’t do anything wrong. If he wants to hate someone, he can hate me. Tell him how hard I pursued. Tell him anything you have to. I don’t care.”

A tear slid from the corner of her eye. This man was everything she never knew she needed. They shared the same interest. He made her acknowledge emotions she never knew existed. She had married Dean while she was still a child. Trevor had found the woman in her. He opened his heart and cared about what went on in hers. Love, no, her feelings for Trevor went far beyond the word love. He had become part of her soul.

“I love you.” She barely spoke loud enough to hear.

Trevor rested his forehead against hers.

“I’m scared because I love you so much. I did have a good life with Dean.” She stared into his eyes. “He never made me feel the way you do. When you look at me, I can’t breathe. When you touch me I’m . . .”

Her words were stopped by his mouth crushing to hers.

## Chapter Fifteen

Vivian stood outside the door of Cheryl's apartment trying to muster up the courage to knock. Dean's truck sat parked out front so she knew Joshua was here. She could only assume Cheryl was too.

The cold got to her where she lacked courage and finally rang the bell. A moment later, she stood in Cheryl's living room face to face with Joshua. His school books lay scattered on the coffee table. Cheryl had obviously been doing Joshua's laundry. Neatly folded piles waited on the kitchen table to be put away.

"There's nothing to say, Mom." Joshua sat down on the couch and picked up a can of soda.

"I think we have plenty to talk about." She moved to the chair across from him and took off her gloves. She placed them on her lap and folded her hands on top of them. She looked at the finger where she used to wear her wedding ring. Suddenly her heart skipped a beat. She realized inevitably one day Trevor would place his ring there. Funny now that her mind had time to justify her feelings, she didn't think it seemed inappropriate when a few months ago she thought the idea preposterous. There would be the talk around town. She didn't care. As long as she had the approval of her children, she could bear any cross society placed upon her. "I'll go first." She took a deep breath.

"I apologize for not telling you sooner about Trevor. Honestly, before Christmas there wasn't anything to tell. He's been my friend for so long. It isn't hard to see how our relationship grew into

something neither of us expected or looked for.”

“I don’t want to hear details. I’m sick enough with what I saw. I don’t need to know anything else.”

Vivian sighed. “You’re not being fair. I’m a grown woman who has a right to fall in love again. I’m sorry it’s not with a person you approve of.”

“Uncle Trevor is a womanizer.”

“Please, Joshua. The way he’s lived his life until now is none of my business. And it certainly isn’t any of yours.”

“No! Maybe you need reminded of some of his better qualities. Let’s see...” He paused for dramatic effect. “He drinks like a fish. He’ll be dead in a few years from lung cancer. Oh! And let’s not forget his wonderful way with money. He makes a bunch. Too bad he’s busy spending, and impressing women to get laid, that there’s nothing left for a rainy day. And don’t think I don’t know what I’m talking about. I remember the way you and Dad use to laugh at his folly.”

Vivian didn’t speak while Joshua continued to bash his uncle’s principles and reputation.

“Are you through?”

“Yeah,” Joshua said cockily and leaned back in the couch.

“I won’t discuss Trevor’s past, especially with you. You are an ungrateful, spoiled child who has absolutely no idea what he’s talking about. Just how do you think we’ve survived since your father died?” She waited. “Nothing to say. Well, let me shed a little light on the subject. Why don’t you ask your girlfriend how much a person makes working at the flower shop?” She stood from the chair and pointed her finger in his face. “I made nothing! Your father had enough life insurance to insure we didn’t lose the roof over our heads. That was it. Would you rather we lived on the small amount I saved for your college education? You’re an ungrateful brat who has no idea the sacrifices made on your behalf. Honestly Joshua, how do you suppose your education would be paid?”

“We do just fine.”

“Yes, we do! Thank Trevor for it. He picked up the ball where Dean dropped it.”

“So he’s still using his money to get laid. Nice.”

“I won’t even respond to that. You’re more than happy to take his money when you’re the beneficiary.” She wiped a tear from her cheek. “I love him and I want to spend my life with him. I wish you would understand because I hate to see you hurting. Amber and Timmy like the idea.”

“They know you’re screwing their uncle?”

“Don’t use that language with me! I’m still your mother even if you don’t live in my house anymore. As for Trevor, well quite frankly, your opinion isn’t going to make a difference with me.” She sat back in the chair.

Vivian’s hands shook as she looked at Joshua. He wasn’t cooperating with her vision of how this meeting should be taking place. He was supposed to say she could have what she wants as long as she’s happy.

“I have more to say. I owe you an apology. I overreacted on Christmas Eve. I never thought it would come to this. If you want to marry Cheryl, I know there’s nothing I can do to stop you. You’re a grown man. It’s your decision.”

“Oh that’s rich. Now that you’re *screwing* my uncle it’s okay for me to *screw* your boss.”

Vivian put on her gloves and put her purse over her shoulder. “I’ll go now.”

“Good idea,” he spat.

“You know I’ve been trying to call you all week. I wanted to tell you about Trevor. I never dreamed you’d be this upset.”

“I guess you don’t know your kids as well as you thought.” He walked to the door and pulled it open.

Vivian glanced at Cheryl. “I really am sorry about Christmas Eve. I was upset at the time.” She looked at Joshua. “I hope you’ll

get over being angry with me, too.” She wanted to wrap her arms around him, but the cold gleam in his eyes told her he wouldn’t be receptive. She had barely stepped onto the porch when the door slammed at her back.

Vivian sat in her car with the heater blowing hot air. Tears rolled down her face and dripped from her chin. “I’ve made quite a mess of things,” she told her reflection in the rearview mirror. With the tips of her fingers she wiped away mascara that had smudged beneath her lashes.

Vivian didn’t want to go home. Trevor’s knack for knowing when she hid something was uncanny. And she didn’t want to tell him the awful words spoken by Joshua.

Never in her life had she had a dilemma that had no answer. The past year had been crappy, but even at the low points she believed in tomorrow. She had to with the children. Then she always had Trevor rushing to her rescue, her knight in flannel armor. If she pleased Joshua and stopped her relationship with Trevor, she would break Timothy’s heart along with her own. Amber didn’t seem to care one way or another, but Timothy neared an age that ached for a father. How did she sacrifice one child’s love for another?

Blindly driving through the streets, crying so hard her eyes were burning, and desperately praying for divine intervention, kept her from paying attention to the road. She didn’t notice the police officer as she blew through a red light. It took the flashing lights on his patrol car and a quick blast of the siren to draw her attention back into focus. Vivian pulled off the road and took her registration from the glove box.

When the police officer approached her driver’s side window, he pointed his flashlight into the car. “Driver’s license and registration please.”

Vivian handed them through the window.

“Have you been drinking tonight, Mrs. Ashton?”

Vivian's head spun to the side quick enough to cause a person whiplash. "Of course not."

"I just wondered why you failed to pull over. I followed you three blocks before I turned on the siren. Is there a reason your mind isn't on your driving?"

"I guess I didn't realize I was speeding."

The officer stepped back and told Vivian to get out of the car. She did so without reservation.

"I suspect you're under the influence of alcohol or a controlled substance. I'd like you to perform a field sobriety test. If you refuse, you will be placed under arrest until a blood alcohol test can be administered. Do you understand?"

"I haven't had a single drink. I had a fight with my son. I'm crying and I guess I'm a bit distracted."

"You also flew through a red light. You were traveling twenty miles an hour over the posted speed of 30." His voice rang with his annoyance. "Now stand with your feet shoulder's width apart and hold your arms out to the side."

Vivian passed the test and left the scene with a ticket for failure to stop at a red light and speeding. The officer told her he gave her a break because he could cite her with reckless driving.

She decided it was time to go home. It wasn't safe for her to be on the streets anyway. Soon Trevor would start to worry and then she'd have the whole police department looking for her as a missing person.

The house looked different as she pulled into the driveway. Usually every light blared through the windows, not the soft glow calling to her now. The garage door never stayed open, welcoming for her, as it did tonight. Trevor would be waiting for her and the idea that he would always be there made her heart soar.

She turned off the car and sat in the dark. Her decision was made. Joshua made his own choices and so did she. Timothy needed a father and his love for Trevor would out shine any resentment he

might feel if later on a stranger came to take Dean's place. His memories of Dean would mesh right along with the new ones he would create with Trevor. Amber would benefit as well. The last year had taken its toll on her young daughter. With Vivian working all the time, Amber had freedom she wasn't ready for. Rachael had been a powerful force and Amber had followed her unquestioningly. Trevor was offering far more than his love. He was giving her a chance to be a mother to her children again. Whatever work she did at Ashton Enterprises would be done while Amber and Timothy were in school.

Light from the kitchen spilled into the garage when Trevor opened the door to see what kept her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, concern showing in his eyes. "How did it go with Joshua?"

Vivian closed the driver's door and stepped around the front of the car. "He's angry." Trevor pulled her into his arms. "Very, very angry." She tilted her head back. "But I'm not." She grew quiet for a moment to let the warmth of his embrace give her strength. "I'm happy. And the rest of the world doesn't matter."

"I love you. And you'll see you're not losing Joshua. He'll come around, and when he does he'll have a place right here with us." He kept his arm wrapped around her shoulders as he escorted her into the house. "Besides, Tim and Amber need a family."

"We are, aren't we?" She paused a moment to savor the taste of the words on her tongue.

"So it's New Year's Eve. Do we still have a reason to celebrate?" Trevor had gone to the liquor store. An assortment of alcohols sat on the counter next to the fridge. "I figured we drown in our sorrows, or celebrate until we're stupid."

"Or you could bring up the bottle of wine, and we could just go to bed. I don't have to pick up Amber and Timothy until morning. And after the conversation I had with Joshua, I can guarantee he

won't be stopping by. Tonight I want to forget about everything, but you."

Trevor's mouth tilted into a smile.

"I'm tired of fighting." She looked into his eyes. "I'm ready for some loving."

Trevor captured her mouth in a kiss. "I guess that means I finally get to have a sleep over."

## Chapter Sixteen

“Do you think about what happens next?”

Trevor sat up and refilled their wine glasses. The blanket slipped to his waist. Vivian grabbed the edge of the sheet and covered her bare breasts. “We’ll talk about tomorrow, tomorrow. Tonight it’s just you and me.”

She glanced at the clock. Tomorrow was only a few hours away. She took her glass from his hand. With the wine bottle half empty, her mind was starting to feel the dizzying effects. She smiled more than she should. Her family was in crisis, and yet her heart burst with unbounded pleasure. For the first time in more than a year, she was completely sated. Sexually, Trevor stoked the fires of her passion with a simple caress or a kind word.

She couldn’t resist reaching up and touching the cut muscle of his shoulder. Tapering in, she trailed her fingers down, feeling each rib beneath taut, muscled, skin. His flesh rippled and bunched. Leaning forward, she stroked her tongue along his spine. Salty mixed with the sweet of the wine, tantalizing to her tongue, and heady to her mind.

She loved the indents above his toned backside. “I can see why women fall into your bed.”

His deep chuckle vibrated her hand.

“No retort?”

“No excuses.” He turned, gently tugged the sheet away from her breast, and fanned his thumb across her hardened nipple. “I can’t help it if I’m irresistible.”

“I resisted.”

“I wore you down.”

His smile didn't irritate, not when he spoke the truth. Left to her, she would've denied herself the pleasure of his body. *What you never have, you don't miss.* Too late now, he whet her gluttonous appetite.

“Do you question my ability to be faithful?” His brows drew together.

She thought of Joshua's words, and Trevor's sexual history. Hadn't she considered him the man who wouldn't grow up, and now she contemplated forever. Was the sex that great? Oh yes. But, so much more existed between them. “I can't reconcile the man I love with the one whose sex life paralleled Baskin Robbins's 31 flavors. I trust you, Trevor. I still need you to tell me that there won't be anyone else. Is Maggie still in your life?”

His fingers brushed her hair behind her ear. Tender and fleeting, grazing her temple, but the sensation lingered. “No one, not since Amber's accident.” He stroked her bottom lip with his thumb. “We've both changed.” He took her wind glass.

“Mmmm.” She sighed and leaned back against the pile of fluffy pillows. “I keep thinking about the last time you were in my bed.”

Trevor set his glass of wine on the nightstand with hers. “I wanted you like this then.” He stretched out beside her. “I hated myself for it.”

He shouldn't. Looking back, she'd given all indications of her secret desires. Never voicing them didn't mean he wasn't responding to her subtle gestures. Since Dean's death, she put Trevor in the position of her mate. Talking every day, sharing fears, frustration, and desperately wanting to share the bond created with intimacy. Maybe it was inevitable they found themselves entwined in each other's arms, seeking to fill the void. Only Trevor understood how hard it was to lose Dean. More than that, Trevor saw for himself how much better this was.

"I think that was the day I realized my feelings for you had changed," she said.

"I wish I would've known. Damn, but I wanted to get between your creamy-smooth thighs."

"Wouldn't have happened."

"You weren't ready."

"I am now." To prove it, she put her hand over his and slipped beneath the sheet. She closed her eyes. Heat coiled in her belly, igniting into white-hot flames of desire. Blinding in intensity, breath stealing in its ferociousness, Trevor's possession overpowered, consumed, and completed.

Happy New Year!

\*\*\*\*

Trevor watched Vivian sleep for a few minutes before sliding out from under the covers and leaving the bed. Before all the chaos of Christmas Eve, the plan had been to watch football, and hang out. Same as he did when Dean was around. It wouldn't be the same without Joshua's humorous commentary on the game.

In the kitchen, he started coffee. Maybe he should have a talk with Joshua. Torn at the seams and unraveling fast, he had to do something for this family. His family. Enough guilt rested on his shoulders, now.

Joshua might be stubborn, but the boy wouldn't turn down a day of skiing. Out on the slopes, with nothing but fresh powder and clean air between them, maybe just maybe he could make Joshua understand.

"Hi." Vivian stepped into the kitchen wearing her tattered bathrobe. Soft and sleepy-eyed, she looked beautiful. Her lips reddened from their night of loving. Whisker burns on the pillow of her breast peeking out from between the loosely tied closure of her robe. He was responsible for the twinkle in her eye that had been missing for far too long.

She poured herself a cup of coffee. He grinned because she

cradled the cup in her palms and watched him over the rim. "Thank you," she said, and took a sip.

"For last night or the coffee."

Her eyes narrowed. "The coffee. But I suppose if your ego needs stroking—"

"It isn't my ego."

"Ugh. Do you talk to all your women like this?"

"No, but we always have." He set his cup aside. He cherished his friendship with Vivian. He didn't want that to change. Making love, being in love, only added to their connection.

"You're right. I'm sorry."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Yes." She brought her coffee to the table. "I think we're going to have to find a way to incorporate more sleepovers."

"You could marry me."

"Or not." Her lips twitched. "At least not now."

"Can you imagine what my parents are going to say?"

Vivian groaned. Then she slapped a hand over her mouth. "I didn't call them on Christmas!"

"You couldn't, the power was out."

Her eyes grew wide. "I am not lying to them."

He shrugged. "Okay, then tell them I played Santa, you sat on my lap, and I wouldn't let you get off."

"But I did get off." She sipped coffee. Her left eyebrow shot up and a slow smile parted her lips. "Twice."

Yes, this was his Vivian. The one who made him laugh. The one who, at the moment, heated his blood with her quick wit and innuendo. "I'll do better next time."

"You did."

"What time do we have to pick up the kids?" He pushed his cup away. "Since I'm improving with practice..."

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A few days of bliss and then the holidays were behind him and

now it was back to the grind.

Trevor did most of his work from home. However, he did keep office space in a building downtown. If he worked from home with Vivian, he'd lose his contracts within a week. All he'd want to do is make love to her warm, receptive body. Better to get the office revamped to suit her needs. A nice desk and chair rather than the ratty pieces he had now. No one actually came to his office. After he won a contract, he went to them.

Entering the first floor, his office was down a well-lit corridor, second door on the left. *Ashton Enterprises* spelled out in bold, black letters across the frosted glass window in the heavy oak door. His chest swelled with a sense of pride knowing his office represented all he's accomplished. Unlocking the door, he entered the small room. He tried to make it in a couple times a week, but the mail still managed to collect in a rather intimidating pile on the floor beneath a drop slot.

He sat behind the desk, picked up the phone, and flipped through the mail while he waited for Joshua to answer. He could argue and evade, but they were going to come to an understanding. Vivian wasn't going to be in the middle.

Cheryl answered.

"Can I speak to Joshua?" Trevor set the mail to the side and gave his attention to the phone call.

"He won't talk." Cheryl took a deep breath. "I've tried to reason with him."

"Is he there?"

"Yes, but if you come over, he'll flip."

Trevor pinched the wrinkled skin of his brow while he considered his options. "He doesn't have a choice. Would you do me a favor? Gather up his ski equipment. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"What if he asks me what I'm doing?"

"Stall." Trevor hung up, grabbed the important mail, and

headed out.

Trevor changed clothes, stashed his gear in the back of the truck, and was on his way to Joshua's place. He'd told Vivian he'd be out most of the day. Why make her worry or get her hopes up when he had no idea how he was going to fix this with Joshua.

He jogged up the walk and rang the bell. He heard voices from inside the apartment. Heated voices. He knocked and rang the bell again. Joshua had a lot to learn about being a man. Even more about and how to treat a woman. "Open up, Josh."

The door swung on its hinges. "Don't bring my girlfriend into your bullshit. You want something, ask me and I'll tell you no." Joshua stood before him, nostrils flared, teeth barred, and breathing heavy. Trevor cocked an eyebrow. He hadn't needed to worry about Cheryl. She stood behind Joshua with one hand on her hips, smiling. One of Joshua's ski boots sat on the coffee table. Cheryl had the other in her hand.

Trevor moved past Joshua into the apartment. He wrapped his gloved hand around the grip of Joshua's ski pole and pulled it from the large potted plant near the door. After shaking off the dirt, he handed it to Joshua. "You're going to need this."

Joshua crossed his arms over his chest. Trevor was reminded of when Joshua was ten and stubborn as hell. Same smirk, same cocky stance with one shoulder lifted and one hip thrusting out.

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Like hell you're not. Now get your shit into the back of that truck because you and I are going to have this out. I'm not asking."

"Go to hell."

"Probably. I've done enough in this life to warrant it." Trevor took the boot from the coffee table and handed it to Joshua. "We're going."

Joshua dropped the boot to the floor. "I'm not going skiing," he said with a petulant lilt to his tone. "But I'll take my board."

Trevor was smart enough not to smile. "Fine. Get it. I don't

care if you want to take a sled.” Joshua headed down the hall leading to what Trevor suspected would be a bedroom and a bathroom.

This was a good idea. Trevor couldn’t remember a day on skis that didn’t end with laughter and friendship. Joshua was eight the first time he and Dean had him on the slopes. Vivian had been mad as a hornet. She wouldn’t go. He could still hear her voice. *If my boy gets hurt, don’t come home.* He remembered the look on her face when they brought Joshua home with a sprained wrist. At least the kid learned a valuable lesson. Avoid the trees.

Joshua returned with his boarding boots. Joshua could no more avoid the adrenaline rush as he or Dean. An Ashton trait. He hoped Joshua carried a few others. Family first, forgiveness, and a rational head when staring at the truth.

“I’m ready.”

Trevor opened the front door for Joshua. He might act like going on the mountain today was a fate worse than death, but he certainly managed a quick change of clothes. Wearing his Gortex, baggie, black ski pants, and reflective, green pullover to match the board Trevor had given him last Christmas.

They’d spent a lot of time on the mountain last year. Skiing the moguls, catching air, and searching out fresh powder, all in an attempt to outrun the painful memories for the ten minutes it took to reach the bottom of the hill. Yet after catching their breath and sharing a laugh, the agonizing pain slammed into the chest again.

Over the year, the frequency of the gut wrenching loss lessened and eased into a poignant reflection of what remained. Today Joshua might hit another tree. Hopefully, he’d wake up and realize he’d lost enough.

It was a forty-minute drive, twenty minutes through the canyon and another twenty to the resort. Joshua watched out the window. Trevor could see him working through his emotions. His lips would show the inkling of a smile, and then his teeth clenched,

eyes narrowed, and the smile disappeared.

The icy chill in Joshua's stare rested on Trevor. When he looked over, Joshua turned back to the window. "We don't have to talk yet."

"I can't believe I'm doing this. I hate you."

Trevor heard the crack in Joshua's voice. "It's okay to hate me. I'm not going to let you hate your mother."

Joshua turned to him. His face contorted. Rage. Disillusionment. Betrayal. Trevor saw it all there and it hurt like hell not to be able to pull this boy into his arms and make him understand.

"I don't hate her! My God, she's my mother. I think you're sick for sleeping with her. I think she's a hypocrite and I think you're a womanizer." He shook his head. "I just can't believe you're doing this to her. You ruined everything. Don't you get it? When you move on, she's going to hurt all over again. Just like when Dad died, she's going to be alone. Only this time, she won't have anyone to fall back on. You're all she has. Dammit, Uncle Trevor!"

"Joshua—"

He let out a sigh. "Don't say anything. I wouldn't believe you anyway."

They drove in silence the rest of the way. Trevor parked the truck and gathered his gear. Putting his skis over his shoulder, he walked beside Joshua.

They purchased their all day lift passes. It seemed they both had the same thought. Bypassing the lodge, they headed straight for the lift. Trevor didn't bother to ask Joshua which run he wanted to ski first. Straight to the top and straight down, they sought speed.

Before getting on the lift, Joshua put his left foot into the bindings of his board. Trevor snapped into his ski bindings and slid into position to catch the next chair. Josh quickly moved into position next to Trevor.

Adjusting his goggles, Trevor turned his head. As the chair bumped his thighs, he sat, as did Joshua. The chair moved ahead and with a swift lift into the air.

Awkward silence stretched between them. Trevor wanted to force the subject of his and Vivian's relationship, but they had all day to fight. After a few runs, they'd both be in better spirits.

Anticipation built when the lift crested the top. Trevor picked up his ski's tips and stood when they reached the platform. He pushed off when the chair moved over the unloading area. Joshua maneuvered with his free foot to a clear area on the snow and sat on a drift.

Fresh powder, several inches deep, drifted over the tips of Trevor's skis. Mild winds blew the flurries around his legs. Crisp scents of pine, multi colored parkas, God, he loved the mountains. Up here, he didn't have any problems.

Joshua quickly fastened his right boot into the board binding. After standing, he bounced on his knees. Working his body back and forth, he glided through the powder toward the edge of the run.

Trevor waited beside him. "You up for it?"

Joshua peered down the steep incline at the start of the run. The deceptive powder, free of tracks, beckoned for a fearless plight of speed. Both new the risks of racing. Like Trevor, Joshua had a lot to get off his chest. They both needed the freedom of unleashing frustration. The testosterone driven need for speed, chased away rational fear.

The sun was high and bright in the cloudless, blue, winter sky. The sting of bitter wind blistered his lips. Unzipping the front pocket of his pullover, he laved his mouth with sun block balm, and then returned it to his pocket.

"First one down..." Joshua adjusted the fit of his goggles. "...buys the lunch."

"You got it poor boy." Trevor tugged on the cuffs of his gloves and then stabbed the points of his poles into the soft snow. Bending

at the knees, elbows tucked close to his sides, he smiled at Joshua. "See you at the bottom."

Trevor stomach swooped with the first blast of powder against his face. Sinking and rising as his skis floated through the shallow drifts. Striving for speed, turning his edges into the rolling waves of pristine powder, his chest tightened with the blast of surging air.

Twisting his neck to the side, he caught Joshua going for style points. Digging deep, cutting in, they were parallel on the mountain, yards apart.

Trevor caught a moment of air, pulled his skis to a squat under his body to lengthen the suspended flight. His hair whipped around his head.

His breath hitched. He raced against the guilt he carried, not only for exacerbating the rift between Joshua and Vivian, but from the betrayal of his brother. His knees strained against the pressure. Full tuck and flying faster and faster he lost sight of Joshua in the flurry of powder. Smoothly gliding, sinking, and rising, the tips of his skis whisked through the pristine white snow reflecting like glitter in the sun. Behind him, he left a graceful line of his movements for display until the next snowfall, or until the mountain filled up with skiers looking for powder.

Trees whipped by in a blur. From his field of vision, he was alone on the mountain. Adrenaline surged. His heart pounded. Exerting every ounce of energy propelled him faster. Nearing the bottom of the run, he angled sideways to a hockey stop. A wave of snow arched. Lifting his goggles, he looked back up the hill.

Joshua worked his way down the hill with wide, curvy turns. Cutting deep, he crisscrossed Trevor's tracks. Obviously giving up on the win, he seemed content creating clean, flowing lines. Awe-inspiring, the way that kid carved up the mountain. Leaning forward, Joshua dragged his fingers through the powder. Trevor held his breath. Joshua approached a small dip. He pulled his powerful legs out of the snow and rose off the cusp in a short but

smooth flight. He glided down the hill with perceived ease. Next thing Trevor knew, Joshua was next to him catching his breath.

“Woo hoo!” Joshua bent over and undid his bindings. “God, that was awesome.” He stood up and wiped frozen moisture from under his nose and the corners of his smiling mouth. His chest rose and fell with each hard breath. “You really are an asshole,” he said, and smiled wider. “You knew I couldn’t resist this.” He bent down gathered a handful of snow and tossed it at Trevor.

The tightness in Trevor’s chest had nothing to do with the thin mountain air. “A few more runs before lunch?”

“Yeah.” He looked up into perfect sky and out to the pristine hill. “The powder’s going to get skied out quick.”

Trevor agreed.

They skied two more runs before heading into the lodge for lunch. Stowing their skis and board on the patio, they went entered the plush common area. Padded chairs and leather upholstered couches grouped around large rock fireplaces. Fires raged behind ornate screens. Not artificial gas flames, but popping and sparking wood fires warmed skiers as well as hot toddies from the bar. Polished mahogany tables, elaborate chandeliers dripping with crystals, the quintessence of lavish resorts.

“Can we talk about your mom?” Trevor asked, once seated in the restaurant. Cloth napkins, cut crystal goblets, and the restaurant boasted an impressive menu with offerings such as roast duck, poached salmon, and prime rib.

“I’d rather not. I don’t particularly want to know what’s going on between the two of you. I think I’ve seen enough.” He took a drink of water.

“You’ll walk away from your family?”

Joshua didn’t speak. He tinkered with the silverware wrapped in a napkin. He glanced around looking at the other diners, what he wouldn’t do was look Trevor in the eyes.

“I can’t tell you what to do.” Trevor leaned in resting his

forearms on the edge of the table. "I'm not going anywhere. Like it or hate it. I'm in love with your mother."

"I hate it. Don't you feel the slightest bit of guilt sleeping with your brother's wife?"

"His widow. And yep, it's pretty goddamn difficult waking up in the morning. You're right; I shouldn't have acted on my feelings. It's too late. This is where we are." He stopped while the server placed a glass of beer in front of Trevor and a Dr. Pepper in front of Joshua. Once the server stepped away, Trevor continued. "Even if I could turn back the clock, I wouldn't."

"Not even to before Dad died?"

Trevor leaned back with his glass of beer and drank. Would he? His gut clenched. Not if he knew how it would be between he and Vivian. He felt the loss of his only brother with a fierceness he couldn't articulate with words. A lump formed in his throat. His brother was his best friend. But would he give up Vivian? He closed his eyes and pictured his brother in his mind. Praying Dean understood, he opened his eyes, refocused on Joshua, and lied.

"I'd do anything to bring your dad back and save your mom this past year. What purpose does it serve to dwell on it? Look, we're going in circles. You're never going to approve. I don't care. But I'm telling you, Josh, you're not taking your anger out on her."

Joshua rolled his glass between his palms. Trevor wasn't sure if he was getting through. At least they were talking. He didn't expect to reach an understanding today, just to open the lines of communication.

"So tell me about Cheryl. Must be serious if she's moved you into her apartment. Think she'll kick you out when you leave crumbs in the bed?"

"She hasn't complained yet."

Trevor laughed.

Joshua fought the smile, but it revealed itself anyway. "She's cool." He seemed to hesitate. Then he let out a long sigh. His

shoulders slumped and his eyes took on a brighter sheen. “I can’t do this.”

Trevor nearly groaned aloud. He couldn’t let Joshua pull back, not when they were making progress.

Joshua wiped away a tear before it had a chance to trail down his cheek. “I can’t hate you, Uncle Trevor.”

Trevor wanted to cheer. Instead, he drank his beer. Their lunch arrived. While they ate, the conversation easily drifted away from the family to more urgent matters. Like getting back on the hill before the runs tracked out.

## Chapter Seventeen

Vivian was bored out of her head. Trevor said it might take a week or two to get his office ready for her. Amber and Timothy went back to school. And, who knew where Joshua's agenda led him. She hoped Cheryl had enough sense to encourage Joshua to continue with his education. Vivian arched a brow. Her former boss hadn't been smart enough to leave a high school boy alone. She wished him luck. She wished him home.

Missing him, she went to his room. Dirty laundry under the bed, a few glasses for the dishwasher, she didn't want to clean his space. In the last year, she'd had to do many things she didn't want to. Since he'd been gone for more than a week, it was time to acknowledge he wasn't coming home. At least not as long as Cheryl offered him a warm bed and a willing body. "Grrr," She growled, wanting to scream, *Slut!* at the top of her lungs. However, she knew that wasn't fair to Cheryl. Joshua made the choice to leave. It was time she accepted her boy had grown into a man.

Jenny barked startling her out of her reverie. Trevor knew her well. That dog gave her peace of mind when home alone. She'd bark at Mr. Rogers. Grabbing the dirty dishes, she headed down the stairs.

"Where is she?"

The deep timber of Trevor's voice had a way of seeking out her banked desires and fanning the flames with a single word. "She's here." Vivian set the dishes at the counter. "At least, I assume you're looking for me." She caught her breath at the sight of him in

a tailored suit. Sculpted lines of the jacket's cut, directed her eyes to travel. Drifting down, the purpose of his visit strained against the front of his dark taupe slacks.

"I am."

She stepped into his arms. Clean-shaven, the hint of tobacco mixed with the masculine scent of his cologne.

"Have you heard from Joshua?"

"Nothing. I haven't tried to call him either. I want to go over there and ground him for being such a jerk. How silly is that?"

"Not silly at all." He wrapped a comforting arm around her shoulders.

"I thought you had a meeting today. How come you're here?"

"I do have meetings. We're on a ninety minute break for lunch." He looked at his watch. "Amber hovers like a mother hen. I think she's afraid to leave us alone."

"She's not completely naïve. She sees the lecherous look in my eye whenever you're around."

"When we played Scrabble the other night, all the tiles I drew spelled dirty words. I was too ashamed to lay them down. I had a word worth triple points, but could I play it? No."

"What was the word?" he whispered, pulling her close, nuzzling her neck.

"Stroke," she said, tilting her head. "Mate. Oh Trevor." She clung to his sides, lightheaded from the touch of his tongue to the lobe of her ear.

"Nothing wrong with those words."

He opened his mouth over her neck, sucking gently, and then releasing.

"Bone."

He chuckled. "Bone?"

"I once heard you tell Dean you'd never bone a woman in a rowboat again."

Trevor threw his head back and roared with laughter. He

laughed until he had tears on his cheeks. "You shouldn't have been listening to that conversation."

"I know all about your escapades. What I didn't overhear, Dean shared."

Trevor sat in a chair and pulled her to stand between his thighs. "I wish he didn't."

"I'm glad he did." She relished in the knowledge that she was different from the women from his past.

"Is it too early in our relationship to come home at lunch for a quickie?"

"Yes." She ran her fingers along the collar of his olive green dress shirt, and then adjusted his burgundy and olive tie. "How long did it take you to get here?"

He glanced at his watch. "About ten minutes."

"So why hurry? We've got at least an hour." Her fingers pulled the knot of his tie. Tossing it on the table, she then started down the sentinel of buttons slipping them free.

He playfully nipped at her belly. "Can we take this to your bedroom?"

"You can take me to the moon."

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Vivian stayed in bed for a few minutes after Trevor left for his meeting. Another hour and the kids would be home, so she took her opportunity to bask in the afterglow of a thorough afternoon toss.

Then the doorbell spoiled it. Stepping into her sweats, and pulling on a big T-shirt, she hurried downstairs and pulled open the door.

"Can we talk?"

Vivian stepped to the side allowing Cheryl into the house. Vivian vividly remembered the last time Cheryl stood in her foyer. She wasn't going to make the same mistake. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Cheryl nodded and Vivian led the way. "I brought you this,"

Cheryl said, reaching into her purse. "I didn't figure you'd ever come in for it."

Vivian took the envelope from her fingers. "My final paycheck."

"It doesn't have to be your final paycheck. If you want to come back, the job is still yours."

"In other words, the nitwits aren't working out." Vivian took the teakettle to the sink and filled it.

"No. It means that there at the end, I really enjoyed working with you. Maybe hooking up with Josh had something to do with it in the beginning. But not at the end."

"I think we're going to have to agree to stay away from a few topics. I realize I have no choice in the decisions Josh and you make. I'm not happy about it, but I'm beginning to accept that it's none of my business." She reached into the cupboard for two mugs. "But I don't want to talk about my son *hooking up* with anyone."

"I thought you might want to know that ski day with Trevor really made a difference." Cheryl sat at the table.

"What ski day?" Trevor hadn't said anything to her.

"Last week Trevor and Josh spent the day skiing. When Josh came home, he looked really happy."

Vivian left the kettle to boil and joined Cheryl. "I didn't know. So they worked it out?"

Cheryl nodded and Vivian dropped her face into her hands. She didn't want to cry in front of Cheryl, yet she couldn't contain the wealth of surfacing emotion. This woman, who cared enough to venture into the mother bear's den, was the same woman she called slut a few hours before. She owed an apology. However, she wasn't going to voice one. Cheryl might decide to get up and walk away.

"Josh is okay. He'll be angry with me for telling you, but he's worried."

"About me?"

Cheryl nodded.

Vivian stood when the teakettle whistled. How was she

supposed to ease Joshua's fears if he wouldn't speak to her? The unappealing idea of using Cheryl as a go-between might be her only option. Joshua was *her* son. She shouldn't have to filter conversation.

"I think he's waiting for you to call him."

Vivian's head popped up from pouring water over the instant coffee crystals. "Really?"

"Yes, but when you do, don't tell him I talked to you. I know you don't like me, but I'm going to change your mind. Joshua and I aren't going to break up. And you don't have to choose Trevor over your son."

Vivian brought the coffees to the table. "Thank you for coming over today. I don't think I would've had the courage to go to Joshua again." She smiled and then took a sip of coffee.

"Everything will work out. You'll see."

"I'm still not going back to work at the flower shop," she said and laughed.

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Trevor put his hands on Vivian's shoulders. Sitting on her bed, staring at the phone, she was ready to make the call. He'd had to do some explaining about why he hadn't told her about the ski day. Until Joshua made a decision, he didn't want to offer false hope.

"I don't know what to say to him. Do I ask him to come home?"

Trevor squeezed and then ran his hands down her arms. "He won't. He wants to be with Cheryl." He hated the uncertainty in her eyes. "Ask him to have supper with us. See if there's a day good for him *and* Cheryl. You shut her out and you'll push him away."

She nodded, and he pressed a kiss to the soft, sweetly scented skin where her neck curved into her shoulder. Her hand shook. Trevor savored the anticipation. Vivian was scared, but he and Joshua had come to an understanding.

Joshua worried about his mother. Well, so did Trevor. Time would offer proof that Vivian wasn't a passing affair. His days of

avoiding responsibility ended the day he kissed Vivian on the kitchen counter.

He'd never thought he'd be good at *family*. He hadn't been, not until this family. Amber, Timothy, and Joshua had always been important.

There were bound to be disagreements. In the past year, he and Vivian had raged, but in the end, what doesn't tear you apart makes you stronger.

He wrapped his arms around her now familiar waist. He loved the way she instantly fit her contours to his. "You're stalling."

"I just don't want to say the wrong thing." She picked up the phone and punched out Cheryl's number. "Don't leave, okay."

He leaned his head close to hear the ring. He had trouble focusing on the phone when his hands found the warm smooth flesh of her stomach.

"Hi Cheryl, is Joshua home?" Trevor kissed her cheek and backed away. He could offer support from the other side of the room.

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A few weeks passed. Career wise, she was at a low point. Vivian hated the dreary little room Trevor called an office. Oh, he'd tried his best to make it comfortable. But, she never knew the time of day because she couldn't see outside in the windowless room. Bare white walls, the office felt like an asylum. And the boredom drove her mad.

Trevor was the busy one. Running to and from job sites, he precisely accounted for his time. Programming computer code for fortune five hundred companies and the United States Government didn't allow for errors. Her duties included answering the phone, reminding him of his schedule, and making love every day at lunch on the futon in the corner. Okay, so she had one rewarding part in her day.

The morning passed agonizingly slow. Closing her eyes, she

actually contemplated calling Cheryl and asking for her job back. At least at the flower shop she could people watch. The Coffee Cup was on the same floor. A ten-minute break and she could have a cookie and a latte. Listening to Cheryl's nails click against the counter would be a welcome reprieve from the brain-numbing hum of the furnace.

As the lunch hour approached, she called the deli down the street. Now, Reuben sandwiches and iced tea sat on the corner of the desk. All she needed was her lunch date.

According to his schedule, he was running behind. Finally, he burst through the door. Devilishly handsome, his suit coat over his shoulder and a smile on his lips, her bad day took a bounce. He lifted his mirrored aviator sunglasses. Wrinkles formed at the corners of his eyes when his gaze traveled up her body.

"Hungry?"

"Ravenous."

"For food?"

He tossed his coat on the wing chair opposite the futon. "Not really." He pulled her close and wrapped his comforting arms around her slumped shoulders.

The soft linen of his shirt caressed her cheek. She turned her nose into the fabric and inhaled. A wealth of emotion formed in her throat. After her miserable morning, she couldn't stop the tears forming in her eyes. "I hate this," she whispered into his chest.

Hooking his finger under her chin, he lifted her face, kissing a tear from her cheek. "What happened?"

"I can't do this anymore." She moved out of his arms and sat on the futon. Palm to palm, she put her hands between her knees.

Fear punched Trevor in the gut with the force of a prizefighter. Her happiness interweaved with his. Seeing her miserable, rested like a heavy weight on his chest. Eyes full of trepidation.

She pushed her hair behind her ears and squared her shoulders. Primed to deliver bad news. "I quit," she said.

## Chapter Eighteen

Trevor laughed. The look on her face proved it wasn't the response she expected. In two strides, he was next to her. "Why do you want to quit?" He leaned against the back of the futon and pulled her against him. "I kind of thought this was working out perfectly." He tasted the exposed skin of her neck.

"Your office stinks." She tilted her head and sighed. "Literally. The air from the furnace smells like mold. Trevor, I have to get into the car to get a cup of coffee. It's probably a good thing because the bathroom is two floors up." She twisted brushing her breasts against his chest.

"You can't quit. I need you."

"What you need, we can do at home."

He pulled back. She was serious. "We're not stuck in a lease here. We'll find space somewhere else." He slipped the buttons open down the front of her blouse. "I don't have much time for lunch today." He looked around the room. "It's too bad you hate this office. I've finally found one redeeming quality." He shucked his shirt, stood, freed his belt, and dropped his pants. "At least there aren't any windows."

This time Vivian's laugh echoed off the sparse walls. "I hate that most."

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Trevor smiled as Timothy grunted. Breathing hard, straining to be a help rather than a hindrance. They'd inched Joshua's bed out of the bedroom and down the hall. As soon as they turned the

corner, they could get the damn thing to the curb for the Salvation Army to pick it up. "You got it, Tim?"

"Yeah," he said, and groaned. "It's heavy."

Trevor gave a couple of tugs and got the mattress moving again. Vivian had the brilliant idea of moving the office, home. Joshua's bedroom was officially the new operations center for Ashton Enterprises. The futon with a few weeks of incredible memories, and the rest of the office furniture waited on the slushy, front yard.

"You want me to get your mom to help?"

"No, I . . . can . . . do . . . it."

Trevor chuckled. The kid wouldn't give up. The queen-sized mattress was heavier than hell. Joshua ought to be the one clearing out his room. No matter, Timothy wanted to help. In fact, the kid had his nose in everything. Yesterday, Trevor caught him eavesdropping over his conversation with Vivian. Good thing this particular conversation revolved around work. Any other day, it just as likely might have been playful talk between lovers.

Trevor pulled and Timothy pushed until they had the mattress in the garage. "We'll leave it here," Trevor said, leaning the mattress against the wall.

He took his pack of Marlboro's off the top of the deepfreeze. Shaking one loose, he put it to his lips.

"Why do you smoke, Uncle Trevor?" Timothy ran his hand over the seat of Trevor's motorcycle. "Can I sit on it?"

Trevor, nodded, anchored the cigarette between his lips, and helped Timothy onto the seat. Timothy immediately grabbed the handlebars and positioned himself as if he were cruising down the highway. "So how come you have clothes hanging in the closet in Josh's room?"

Trevor leaned back against the deepfreeze and crossed his feet at the ankle. "You're full of questions today?"

"Well, are you going to put your clothes in Mom's room?"

Timothy wouldn't make eye contact.

"Well, you already sleep on the couch sometimes. Are you going to sleep on the futon in the new office?"

Trevor sucked hard on the cigarette. He wasn't sure which direction to take the conversation. Obviously, Timothy fished for something. Did he want to know if Trevor was moving in? That was the plan, but it was supposed to happen slowly over the next few months. Leave some clothes, keep the bike in the garage, stay for dinner every night, and a few times a week crash out on the couch. Of course, once Amber and Timothy slept, he snuck into Vivian's room. They were careful to stay quiet, and he always made it back to the couch before the kids woke. So how did he answer?

"It's tough to quit," he finally said, putting the cigarette butt out on the cement. "I wish I never started, but when I was young smoking was cool." He lifted the lid and tossed the butt into the trashcan.

"Are you and Mom gettin' married?"

Trevor remained passive for a moment. "No Tim."

Timothy's shoulders slumped. "How come? Don't you love her? You kiss her all the time and I hear you whispering."

Trevor squatted next the bike and put his hands on his thighs. "What do you want from me, Tim?" He waited until Timothy's hesitant eyes rested on his. "I'm flying blind here kid, and I don't know where you're going with this. I don't know what you want me to say."

Trevor took a deep breath of determination. "Do you want me to marry your mom? Because here's the deal. I'm your uncle. I love you, but I don't think I can ever be *dad*. I don't think you want that either, do you?"

"Maybe." His voice was so small Trevor barely heard the word.

Unprepared for the jolt nearly toppled him backwards. He'd never considered the kids embracing him as a dad the way Vivian did as a husband. He'd read the situation completely wrong. Now to

backtrack because nothing would complete his life more than marrying Vivian.

“Look squirt, right now things are going pretty good for your mom and me. Working together, you and I just might convince her it could be a whole lot better.” He patted Timothy’s thigh. “Just so we’re clear, if I thought your mom was ready to get married, I’d ask her today.”

Timothy smiled, wrapping his arms around Trevor’s neck.

Trevor took him off the bike. His heart thundered in his chest. One less fear to face.

“She don’t cry anymore,” Timothy said, walking beside Trevor into the house. “It used to keep me up at night. She laughs now. Like she did before my dad died. Just thought you should know.” He went to the fridge and grabbed a soda. “Are we done moving stuff?”

“Yep.”

Timothy tore off down to the basement. Trevor went to the fridge and grabbed a can of beer off the bottom rack. Timothy’s words recycled through his mind. A kid shouldn’t have to hear his mother crying at night. It brought another thought to Trevor. If Timothy heard her crying, could he also hear Trevor making love to Vivian? A kid definitely shouldn’t hear that. He could always have Vivian join him on the downstairs couch.

“What is that smile for?”

Trevor jumped. “Shit, Vivian.” Trevor set his beer to the side. “Don’t sneak up on a person.”

She put the laundry basket full of clean clothes on the floor. “So are you going to tell me what you were thinking? I bet I can guess.” She narrowed her eyes. A slow smile spread across her lips.

“Don’t guess. Yes, I was thinking about sex.”

She laughed. Trevor reached out and ranked her into his arms.

“Was she a bleached blond, with big boobs?”

“My taste in women has changed.”

“I should hope so.”

“I love you.”

She hummed in her throat when he kissed her. “What brought all this on?” She snuggled into his arms.

“Timmy asked if I was going to marry you.”

She didn’t speak for a moment. “What did you say?”

“That I’d marry you today.” He kissed her forehead. “But that we weren’t in a hurry.”

“Good answer.”

“And I think he hears us having sex.”

“Oh God.”

## Chapter Nineteen

One year later.

The doorbell, the phone, and the timer on the stove all dinged, rang, and buzzed simultaneously. “Amber, get the phone. Timmy get the door, and Trevor get the hell in here!”

Trevor opened the door leading out to the deck. Cigarette smoke escaping through his nose and mouth, mixed with cold arctic air. It drifted into the kitchen, battling for supremacy with the delicious warm scents of her Christmas Eve dinner.

“Yeah?”

“I need you.”

His lecherous smile found his lips. “I already heard that one today.”

“Ha ha. And you’ll be hearing it again later.” She took a potholder from the counter. “I need you to help me lift the turkey out of the oven.”

Trevor dropped his cigarette in the coffee can half full of snow.

Vivian opened the oven, bent over, and pulled the rack out a few inches. The red timer indicated the bird finished cooking. “Mmmm, smell that. Hey, now.” Coming up behind her, Trevor put his hands on her hips. His fingers curled around the swell, pressing into the flesh creating fissions of desire. Both her body and mind anticipated the contact.

“You shouldn’t bend over in front of me. I can’t help myself.” He ground against her bottom. She stood but didn’t move away. Sliding his hands around her waist, he pulled her tighter.

She turned in his arms. "Kiss me because I hear Joshua in the other room." She opened her mouth, greedily taking what she could before the family Christmas Eve traditions got underway.

Jenny bounded into the kitchen followed by Timothy. "Josh and Cheryl are here."

Vivian wiped a smudge of lipstick from Trevor's mouth before he turned around. "We'll finish this later," she whispered. Actually, Trevor virtually guaranteed the right to kiss her whenever he wanted. Mistletoe hung in every room. Only Trevor wasn't the only one reaping the benefits. Joshua seemed to find the notion ingenious.

"Hi," Cheryl said, coming into the kitchen with a giant centerpiece of red rose buds, white carnations, baby breath, and Christmas greens. She set it on the table draped with a midnight blue tablecloth. Silver chargers beneath cream-colored china, silver-plated flatware, it had been such a long time since Vivian put effort into displaying not only the food, but also the presentation.

"Will you open the wine?" She handed the bottle to Trevor. "Where's Amber? And Timmy, put the dog outside."

"Can I help?" Cheryl asked.

"No!" Vivian went around the counter. "I don't want you do anything. You don't rest enough."

Cheryl laughed. "I'm not an invalid."

"Don't argue with her," Joshua said, coming to her side and rubbing her belly. "She finally has someone to fret over."

"I'm barely showing."

Everyone laughed. Cheryl dug into the appetizers on the counter. Vivian made sure to put out fresh fruit and vegetables. Cheryl was concerned about the early weight gain. After gorging for the first two months, she was watching how much she ate.

"How are you feeling? Still sick in the evenings?"

Cheryl smiled while chewing a piece of cauliflower dipped in ranch. "Afraid so. I think we're going to bag Christmas village

tonight. About the time you go, is about the time I get sick." She swallowed. "We have something to tell you."

Joshua put his hands on her shoulders. "We're getting married."

"Before the baby comes," Cheryl said. Her adoring eyes turned to Joshua. "A family should share a last name."

A hint of nostalgia flickered through Vivian's chest. She understood Cheryl's position, and she could bet Trevor sympathized with Joshua. When two people loved, they wanted the world to know. Vivian had it easy. She and Trevor weren't in any rush. She already carried the Ashton name.

Joshua seemed ready for the responsibility. For the past year, he and Cheryl had made a life for themselves. True to her words, they were still together and growing as a couple. Joshua matured living on his own. He'd learned to fly the first time out of the nest.

Trevor gently kneaded the back of Vivian's neck. She leaned into his calloused fingers. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," Joshua said. "We haven't decided on a date or whether we want a big wedding."

"We don't," she said.

"We might."

"Well, whatever you decide, let us know how we can help," Trevor said. His hand left Vivian's neck, wrapped her waist, and pulled her close.

Vivian longed to be a team. She was with Trevor. "Do you still want to stay tonight?" she asked Joshua.

"No, we'll come back in the morning." Joshua turned to Timothy. "Don't worry squirt, we'll be back at the crack of dawn."

"I'm not a kid anymore. I can wait." Timothy let Jenny out to the backyard and then found his seat at the table. Joshua whispered to Cheryl with his hand gently tracing small circles on her stomach.

Trevor helped Vivian transfer the food to the table. Brushing

against him, enjoying the touch of his hand in plain sight of her children, happiness bubbled forth. She giggled.

“What?” He leaned in and kissed her cheek.

“I’m happy.” She blinked to keep tears from filling her eyes.

His gaze softened. “You deserve to be.”

Vivian held perfectly still when his fingers brushed her cheek. A quiver in her belly rippled up her spine. Even after a year, she marveled at her body’s responses.

“You’re giving yourself away,” he said, noting her visible nipples puckering beneath her shirt.

Vivian glanced at her family taking their places around the table. “They already know.”