

With Love From Sam
Rachel Carrington

Prologue

“Mommy, look!” Sam lifted a chubby finger and pointed toward the darkened window of the Rover in an attempt to draw his mother’s attention.

Karyn’s hands clenched the steering wheel as she maneuvered the four-wheel drive through the blinding rain. She could almost feel the sting of the drops and smell the air coated with the dampness. “Mommy can’t look right now, honey. I have to drive.” In a lower voice, she berated herself for making the trip. “We should have stayed home. This isn’t the time to be out. Sara and Ben would have understood. What was I thinking to drag my child out on a night like this?” But it was too late for self-recriminations. She was already on the road, halfway between her house and her best friend’s. She might as well keep going.

Sam hummed to himself, a childish song that ended in giggles. “Mommy, please look!” His voice rose an octave as his body bounced up and down in the car seat in his excitement.

“I see, honey, I see.” She didn’t really, but it was easier to acknowledge whatever her son was pointing out to her. She knew him well enough to know he wouldn’t stop seeking her attention until he was content she’d noticed the object of his interest.

Squirming in his car seat, the toddler fussed against the restraints. “Out, Mommy.”

“No! Sit still. You have to stay in your car seat.” She sharpened her tone, hoping the sound would convince her son to stay put. Fear propelled her to toss a look over her shoulder to reassure herself Sam was still buckled in safely. She saw the two-year-old’s grimace and knew she wouldn’t be able to contain him for much longer. “Sam, you stay in that car seat. Do you understand me?”

Sam’s lips puckered. “Out, Mommy.”

“I know you want out, but for now, you need to stay buckled in. The rain is really coming down hard and I want to make sure you’re safe.” She spoke more softly now in an attempt to placate him.

A gust of wind carried a large spray of rain across her windshield and Karyn automatically lifted her foot from the gas pedal, slowing to a snail’s pace on the dark country road. The windshield wipers

struggled to make a difference, but they were ineffective against the onslaught of water slapping against the glass. “Blast!” Karyn’s white-knuckled grasp tightened on the wheel. Then she felt the fleeting touch of a hand on her shoulder, a small hand that grasped the corner of her blouse in a childish grip. Whipping her eyes from the road for a split second, she focused her angry gaze on her son’s grinning face. “Samuel Jason Morgan, you get back in that car seat right this minute, young man! You know you’re not supposed to unbuckle yourself.”

Sam’s face contorted into a displeased grimace and his lips pursed. The long-winded whine drowned out the sound of the rain on the roof of the car.

Karyn heard the wail of the horn too late and, shifting her gaze back toward the road, she saw the blinding headlights of the oncoming tractor-trailer. With a screech of pure terror, she tugged the steering wheel to the right. The wheels skidded on the slick pavement and headed straight toward the embankment. Karyn fought with the wheel to no avail and, realizing there was nothing she could do, she snatched her son from the backseat and tucked him beneath her body, hoping to shield him.

The wind whistled against the windows as the Rover made a rapid descent over the side of the mountain. Karyn said a quick prayer before metal slammed against packed dirt. She heard her son’s cry and tried to reassure him before darkness claimed her.

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The rain slanted across the cold marble, pooling into a muddy puddle at the base. Karyn huddled deeper inside the thin raincoat seeking shelter from the downpour. One hand moved to caress the gray stone, the slight indentations the only identification of the boy beneath the ground ... her two-year-old son. She slid her palm across the unyielding marble, wishing she could feel her son’s softness one more time.

Karyn shivered beneath the black golf umbrella, watching the approach of a slow-moving Cadillac. Behind it, a ribbon of vehicles, headlights gleaming, followed the same path leading to a freshly dug grave. Today, another family would bury a loved one. More friends would see their friend for the last

time and perhaps even enemies would still the hate in their heart long enough to acknowledge the passing of another human being. She wanted to express sympathy to those feeling the same type of pain, but deep down inside, Karyn only felt a burning hatred for the unknown power that had taken away her son. There was no room in her heart for sympathy.

She wanted to pound her fists against the ground and shout at the sky demanding to know why. Why did Sam have to die? She would have gladly given her life for her son's life, but the choice wasn't given to her.

Tears streamed down her cheeks and she knelt beside the grave, not caring about the mud soiling her caramel-colored slacks. Pressing her forehead against the icy marble, she whispered, "No matter what road life takes me down from here, you will always be my son, Sam. I will always love you and I will never forget you." She stood, her hand still resting on the marker. "I'll be back, I promise. I'll visit you often because this is the only place where I know you'll be." Pressing a kiss to her fingertips, she placed her hand against the stone once more and turned to leave.

As Karyn walked away in silence, the rain increased, drowning out the sorrowful cries of a wife burying her husband, of children grieving for their father.

One

Jace stumbled into the bedroom, struggling to release the knot in his tie. Stubbing his toe against the wooden chest at the foot of the bed, he let out a strangled curse and hobbled toward the rocking chair. His other toe connected with the edge of the rocker and this time, the curse bounced off the walls, effectively waking his wife.

The bedside light came on, illuminating the room in a dim glow. “Jace, do you know what time it is?” Karyn’s voice held weariness as she sat up in the bed, pushing tangled hair away from her face.

“Honey, go back to sleep.” He avoided answering the question by lurching to his feet and slamming his way toward the bathroom. He gave an ineffectual swipe at the door in an attempt to slam it shut behind him. It took several wild swings before metal clicked against metal, shutting out the glow of the fluorescent light above the sink.

Karyn lay back against the pillow, listening to the sounds of her husband’s repeated attempts to locate aspirin in the medicine cabinet. She winced as bottles clattered to the tiled floor. It was just another mess she would have to clean up the next morning ... or at least when it was daylight. It was already the next morning. Four a.m. For Jace, this was early. She rolled over and tried to concentrate on breathing evenly, but she knew it was only a matter of time before Jace would call to her, unable to locate the medicine that, along with the effects of the alcohol he’d consumed, helped to dull the memory of his son.

The bathroom door opened and Jace stood silhouetted in the opening. “Where’s the damned aspirin?” His voice slurred and his eyes squinted against the glare of the bedside lamp as his gaze sought her face.

Karyn sighed and rolled to a sitting position once more, pushing back the comforter. Looking over his shoulder, she caught a glimpse of the disarray he’d left in his search for a relief for his hangover.

“It’s where I always keep it, Jace.”

“I didn’t ask you to get up.” He was on the defensive, blocking her path to the bathroom.

“It’s quicker this way.”

“I just asked where it was, Karyn. Just tell me where the damned aspirin is. I don’t need you to mother me!” The angry words lashed out at her, but the shell she’d built around her heart when Sam died protected her from any pain.

Ignoring his attempts to strike out at her, she brushed past him into the bathroom, quickly located the aspirin bottle and handed it to him on her way back to the bed. “You really shouldn’t be taking these after all the beer you drank tonight. You should just sleep this off.”

With a harsh curse, he slung the bottle toward the far wall. “I said I don’t need you to mother me!”

She whirled around, facing him with hands on hips, fury in her green eyes. “Do you think you’re the only one who felt the pain when our son died, Jace? Do you think you’re the only one who has a right to hurt? I hurt too, damn you! When Sam died, a part of me died, too. I gave birth to him, but I can’t stop living just because he’s no longer with us. God knows I wanted to, but it doesn’t work that way. He wouldn’t have wanted that.”

“How do you know what he would have wanted? He was two years old! Hell, even he couldn’t have told you what he wanted! You can live in your sanctimonious world and claim you’re happy, that you don’t even think about our son anymore, but it’s not so simple to me, Karyn! He was my son!”

“He was my son, too!”

“Then why didn’t you slow down!” The harsh words penetrated her shell, cracking through the layers to reach her heart, piercing, drawing blood.

Karyn blanched, taking a step backwards as if the words had struck her a physical blow. “Dear God, do you actually believe I killed our son?” One hand went to her chest, the other covered her mouth in open horror.

Jace's hand lifted, shaky from too many whiskey sours, and dragged through tousled hair the color of sun-kissed sand. "The officer said the conditions called for reduced speed. You were driving the speed limit." He stumbled over his words as much as he stumbled away from her.

She shook her head, wishing she could shake his blame away just as easily. "No, I wasn't, Jace. I was driving at least fifteen miles below the speed limit."

"The report said you were driving fifty-five miles an hour."

"I don't give a damn what the report said! I know how fast I was driving. My God." Her voice broke as she pinned her husband with a stunned gaze. "You actually believe I'm responsible for Sam's death, don't you?" She knew by the damning look on his face she already had her answer.

His breath hissed out audibly. "I don't know what to believe."

She retreated to the bed, tugging the comforter off to pile it in a heap on the floor. His pillow quickly followed. "I don't want you sleeping with me. It's probably best if you sleep downstairs."

He took one stumbling step toward her, then shrugged as if he didn't really care one way or another. "Yeah, maybe you're right." Somehow, he managed to collect the linens and find his way back down the stairs.

Karyn sat down on the edge of the bed and lowered her head to her hands. Finally, tonight, after many long silent months, she had the truth. In her heart, she'd always known. Her husband thought she'd killed their son. Didn't he know how much she loved Sam? Didn't he know she'd much rather have died than to face each agonizing day knowing she didn't have her son? How could Jace think she would have ever purposefully hurt Sam?

Did he not know how the guilt ate at her soul? Not one day had gone by that she hadn't wondered if there was something she could have done differently, anything to have changed the outcome. Her son would still be alive, and she wouldn't have this hole in the center of her chest.

She dragged her hands through her hair and lifted her head to stare at the far corner of the room where a pair of small hiking boots nestled against the wall. Sam's hiking boots. She'd bought them for

their first camping trip, just a month before he'd died. Even at two years old, Sam had been so excited, clapping his hands at every bird or animal they'd passed. And she'd had her husband then, too. But now, her gaze swiveled to the open doorway, she feared she'd lost him as well.

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Sunlight filtered in through the blinds, reminding Jace why he hated to drink. His head throbbed, cotton obliterated his mouth and every muscle screamed in agony. The smell of freshly brewed coffee made him swing his legs over the side of the sofa. Holding his head in his hands, he got to his feet, swaying until he gained his balance. His eyes burned with each stab of the light and he shielded them with one hand as he staggered out of the living room toward the inviting aroma.

The floor-to-ceiling window in the kitchen alcove allowed the sunlight to slant across the white marble floor tiles. Jace cursed the brightness.

Karyn sat at the polished oak table, her hands wrapped around a ceramic mug. Staring off into the distance, she didn't even acknowledge her husband's presence until he approached her, seating himself opposite her.

"Coffee looks good," he noted.

"It's in the pot," she returned icily.

He'd been drunk last night, but he remembered what he'd said to her which was why he wasn't surprised at the tone of her voice. Knowing when a moment called for diplomacy, he tried for an even voice. "Karyn, listen, we both said a lot of things last night—"

She met his gaze squarely. "Forget it, Jace. There's nothing you can say that will make this any easier."

He blinked at her, assessing the coldness in the depths of her green eyes. Had he gone too far this time? Could he make a U-turn or had he reached the end of the road? "Make what any easier?" He had a sinking suspicion he wasn't going to like what she said next.

"I want a separation. Either you can leave or I will."

He dropped his head in his hands, trying to focus. “God, this is ridiculous. We had a fight; it happens to all couples. We’ve had them before and doubtless we’ll have them again. We certainly shouldn’t let one argument end our marriage.”

Getting to her feet, she carried her mug to the sink. “It wasn’t just one fight. – It was one of many. Besides, this fight didn’t end our marriage; Sam’s death did.” Turning on her heel, she retreated, leaving him alone with his aching head and scattered thoughts.

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Jace leaned against the door jamb, watching Karyn from the doorway to the bedroom. “If you’re really serious about this, I’ll leave.” He stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans, the stance casual, but his eyes were anything but relaxed as they searched her face, hoping to see some sign of relenting.

She nodded, her expression sober. “I’m really serious; I think it’s the only way.”

“You sound as if this separation is the first step.” When had that lump grown in his throat and why was his heart racing like a two-year-old thoroughbred toward the finish line?

The sun caught the coppery strands of Karyn’s hair and Jace swallowed hard, dreading her next words.

“We have to be separated a year,” she said in an almost meek tone of voice.

“Before what? A divorce? Is that what you want?” His voice cracked like a whip. He moved his gaze from her face to sweep around the bedroom, trying to imagine the ending of this home they’d built together, but his brain was still too foggy.

“Do you want to continue to live like this, Jace? Sam’s been gone six months and you won’t even look at me. We can’t talk anymore without screaming at one another and you’ve stopped coming home after work. You just head straight to the bar. You might be able to drown your sorrows in beer, but I can’t.”

“Well, it’s a helluva lot better than spending the majority of my days sitting beside a cold gravestone,” he snapped in reply, instantly regretting his words. “Oh, hell, Karyn, I ...”

She held up one hand to silence his apology. "It's the only place I can visit Sam now."

"Sam's not there, Karyn. He's in our hearts."

"Don't give me that, Jace. You never visit him. You don't even want to talk about him!"

"Maybe that's because Sam's all you want to talk about! I know he's gone and I know it hurts, but God, we can't stop living or thinking about other things."

"Other things?" Her brow rose in question. "Like what? How much whiskey you have left in the cabinet or what time the bar is going to close? Because it seems to me those are the only things you think about now. You certainly don't think about me. You barely even speak to me and now I know why."

"No, you don't. I said some things last night I shouldn't have said."

"Why? You believe them, don't you? Why can't you be honest with me now? I've known for a few months now that our marriage was on shaky ground." Karyn tilted her head to one side as she voiced the next question. "You don't love me anymore, do you?"

Jace stared at her. "What?" *How could she even think that? How could she have forgotten the love they'd shared before this tragedy tore their lives apart? Didn't she remember how they used to hold one another, dreaming of a child, how happy they'd been when Sam was born and ...*

"You don't have to deny it, Jace. I've known for quite a while now. You don't want to be with me." She gave a shaky laugh. "You certainly don't want to touch me; we don't even make love any more."

"Obviously, you've forgotten about that night six weeks ago." He felt like an ass for bringing that particular night into the conversation, especially since he sensed that hadn't been one of his more stellar moments in the bedroom.

She tossed up her hands, agitation stamped across her face. "That wasn't making love! That was a desperate attempt to shut out the memories that haunt both of us and, for a few minutes, it worked." She shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I can't live like this anymore."

His head lowered, he turned to leave. “I’ll come back for my things when you’re not here. I’ll try to make this as easy as possible for you.” He stood at the doorway for a second longer, searching her face as if memorizing the details—the full lips and soft green eyes. Then, his heart heavy in his chest, he spun on his heel and headed down the hallway.

Karyn stood by the bed, listening to the sound of his retreating footsteps. She heard the front door open and close behind him. The garage door slid open on hinges that needed to be oiled. The engine to Jace’s car purred to a start and she winced, mentally restraining herself from running after him, from flinging herself into his arms and begging him to stay. They could go to counseling, get help, but she knew better. Jace would never agree to counseling. He was too tough for that. Besides, he’d never been one to air dirty laundry in front of anyone, even his best friend. She doubted even Ben knew the extent of their problems. Perhaps it was because Jace didn’t want anyone’s sympathy, or worse, he didn’t want someone pointing out the mistakes he’d made in his marriage. Instead, Jace chose to keep everything bottled up inside of him, thinking that in time, things would get better. But she knew differently. Grief never went away unless it was faced.

Legs that felt as if they were made out of wood carried her to the window in time to see the expensive sports car’s disappearing tail lights. He was gone and the shell around her heart melted. Sinking to her knees, her hands clenched into fists, Karyn wept for the first time in months.

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The town diner, known for its strong, black coffee and fried green tomatoes, opened at its regular six a.m. time. The old-fashioned light fixtures, dingy with dust and years of use, didn’t allow the overworked bulbs to offer much by way of illumination. Most patrons liked it better that way. Seeing what they were eating wasn’t necessarily a good thing.

At six-thirty, the town’s citizens started wandering in, their shoes scuffing over the cracked tiles, and promptly at seven, Annette, the diner’s only waitress, took center stage, her eyes glittering with

delight. Feeling more glee than she'd felt in months, she cleared her throat and tugged at the waistband of her dress with the blue and white checks. "I heard tell Dr. Morgan moved out almost three weeks ago."

Spoons clinked against cups and newspapers rustled as farmers and local businessmen trained their gazes on the town's crier. "Where'd ya hear that, Annette?"

She waved a finger. "You know I never reveal my sources. You mark my words, that couple is heading for divorce court."

"Be a shame," Jeremy Withers responded in a nasally voice.

Annette clamped her hands on her hips. "Well, I, for one, saw it coming. Karyn had no business hooking up with the likes of Dr. Morgan. He's way too fancy for this town. I heard he comes from money."

"Heard that, too," Henry Chandler inserted with a pensive look. He scratched his lined face and nodded his head. "You might be right."

"Anybody know how it happened?"

Annette whipped around to find the source of the voice. "How what happened, Eddie?"

"The separation and all."

Annette smiled smugly. "She kicked him out." She inspected her nails while the diner patrons held their collective breaths. "Because he's a drunk and," she lowered her voice to a scratchy whisper, "I heard—now, don't quote me on this—but, he was slipping around on her."

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"Hey, why don't you and Jace come over for dinner one night this week? It's been a while and I know Ben wouldn't mind having someone to watch football with again. He would never admit it, but it's just not the same watching a game with me as it is with his friends. Possibly because I ask too many questions." Sara held up a hand to stop her friend's refusal. "And before you say no, at least think about it. You've got to get out once in a while, Karyn. How long has it been since you've been outside your house other than to go to work or shopping? You've got to start living again." Leaning forward, she

covered her friend's hand with one of her own. "I know you loved Sam, but it's been, what, seven months now? You've got to rebuild your life. I know Jace must be hurting, too." She returned to her meal.

"Jace and I are separated," Karyn replied quietly, lowering her napkin to the table. She knew the announcement was abrupt, but she'd felt the overwhelming need to silence her friend's flow of exuberant conversation.

Sara froze, her fork halted in midair. Her mouth hung open in preparation for the bite of salad and she stared in patent disbelief. "Separated? Since when? Why didn't you tell me?"

"He left about a month ago." Actually, it was four weeks and two days. "I didn't tell you because I'm still coming to terms with it myself." She didn't know if she would ever come to terms with it. Even though it had been her decision, it didn't make it any easier. "It's not something that's easy to discuss."

Sara placed her fork beside her plate, lunch forgotten. "He left on his own or did you ask him to leave?"

Karyn's mouth quirked into the sad semblance of a smile. "What difference does it make?"

"Does he want to come back?"

"I don't know; I haven't talked to him."

"He's your husband and you haven't talked to him in a month?" Sara didn't bother hiding her disapproval.

"That's what separation means, Sara, living apart, separate, going about your own lives independent of one another."

"Yeah, and how is your life going?"

Karyn winced, trying to convince herself her friend's question didn't hurt as much as it really did. "It's been better." She trained her gaze on her hands, trying to avoid the look of pity she would see on her friend's face.

"Well, I would think so. You miss him." Sara deduced. Karyn looked up in time to see her friend's brown eyes cloud with sympathy and her own face hardened.

“That changes nothing.”

Sara didn’t acknowledge the comment. “Why don’t you call him? Talk to him. You can work this out. I’ve never seen two people more in love than the two of you were.”

“That was before I killed his son.”

Her right hand clasped her throat and Sara’s face contorted with dismay. “Karyn, don’t talk like that! You didn’t kill Sam and you know it! It was an accident!”

“That’s not what Jace thinks,” Karyn said woodenly, her entire body numb in spite of the amount of time that had elapsed since the last confrontation with Jace. The words still hurt, but more than the pain of the words was the knowledge that her husband blamed her for Sam’s death.

Sara took a quick sip of her water. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“He thinks you’re responsible for Sam’s death?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my God.” Sara leaned back in the wooden-backed chair, her face the color of paste. “I never knew ... I mean, you never told me.”

Pushing her chair away from the table, Karyn got to her feet. “Yeah, well, there are some things I’d rather not talk about ... even with you. I’m sorry. I really should get home. I’m not feeling well.” She swayed on her feet, her fingertips clutching the edge of the table.

Sara leaped up, rushing around the table to her friend’s side. “Are you sure you can drive? Do you want me to take you home? Ben can drop your car by later on tonight.”

Karyn waved away her concern. “No, I’m fine. I’m just a little nauseous. I suspect it’s nerves. I’ll feel better when I’ve had a good night’s sleep.” She brushed her friend’s cheek with a kiss. “I’ll call you later.” Her legs were unsteady as she made her way to the door.

“If you don’t, I’ll call you,” Sara warned.

“I said I would call you. Just ... I need... just give me some time, please,” Karyn hurried away without looking back.

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Ben barged into Jace’s office, ignoring the outraged squeak of the efficient receptionist trying to stop him. “Why in the hell didn’t you tell me you and Karyn were separated?” His usual optimistic, wide-eyed-view-of-the-world attitude had disappeared behind a blanket of fury. Even his hands shook when he clamped them on his hips.

Jace removed his wire-rimmed glasses, pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers and mentally counted to ten. “It’s personal, Ben.”

“Yeah, and so is our friendship. I thought we could be honest with one another. Here we’ve been meeting for racquetball and you haven’t said one damned word. I’ve been rattling on about having you and Karyn over for dinner one night soon and you let me continue to think the two of you were still together. What the hell is that all about?”

Jace got to his feet, palms planted on his desktop. “It’s about privacy, Ben. What goes on between Karyn on me is between us and no one else. Now, I’m sorry if that pisses you off, but that’s the way it is. I’m just sorry Karyn felt it necessary to tell your wife.”

“I’m not. At least one of you has the decency to come clean with us. You know, with the way you’ve been acting lately, it’s no wonder Karyn kicked you out.” Ben turned to leave. “And another thing, your private life may be your business, but as your friend, your happiness is my business. That’s the only reason why I think you should have told me. You don’t need to play this stoic crap with everyone you come into contact with, Morgan. Some of us see right through it. You’re not as tough as you want us to believe you are. Now, if you could just convince yourself you don’t need to be tough with your friends, maybe we’d get somewhere.”

The scathing words didn't faze Jace. His friend hadn't said anything he hadn't already told himself over and over. Jace watched Ben leave with a detached feeling. He heard Sharon announce his next patient, but he remained frozen in his seat, desperation squeezing his heart in a relentless grip.

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Karyn sat in the middle of the four-poster bed she'd shared with Jace, her legs folded beneath her. Photographs were scattered all around her, images stamped with memories of happier times. Wedding pictures, snapshots of Sam's first birthday, his first smile. A tear rolled down her cheek and she quickly wiped it away before she tucked the photos back into the decorative box. She wished she could hide the memories away as easily. As she lifted the box, a photograph slid to the floor, settling against the carpet to face up at her, mocking her. Karyn dropped to her knees, lifting the picture. She ran her fingers over its glossy surface and another tear followed the path of the first one.

Jace held Sam in his arms. A few months short of their son's death, they'd gone to the beach to celebrate Sam's second birthday. As the day wound to a close, Jace snagged a passerby to take a picture of the family to commemorate the occasion.

Karyn stood by Jace's side in the photograph. She could still feel the warmth of his arm settled snugly around her shoulders. In the picture, she smiled. Sam held a conch shell, an amazed expression on his chubby face. He'd never been to the beach before and the entire day had been one of startling discoveries.

Sam spent the remaining few minutes before they had to leave playing leap frog with his daddy and squealing with joy as Jace threw him high into the air. By the time dusk fell, Sam had fallen asleep in his father's arms on the way back to the beach house, too tired to stay awake for the chocolate cake Karyn had baked that morning.

When Jace had tucked Sam into his crib, he'd returned to the bedroom and Karyn had been waiting for him. They'd had made slow, passionate love, renewing their vow to one another, to love until

death. But the pastor who had married them hadn't specified whose death. Little did he know what would separate them would be the death of their child ... an agony no parent should have to endure.

Stifling a sob, Karyn pressed the picture to her breast, her heart aching at the thought of happier times. She couldn't erase the memories. They were all around her. In the house they'd bought together. In every room, every corner. God, how they'd loved together, laughed together and promised to be together forever. Her legs shaking, she pushed herself to her feet. Promises. They weren't worth the effort—no one ever kept them.

Making her way to the door of the bedroom, she opened her fingers, allowing the pictures to slide into the trash can. There was no sense in keeping visual memories of the past—her mind wouldn't forget.

She had one foot outside the bedroom when the phone rang. Not really wanting to talk to anyone, she ignored the incessant call for attention and started down the stairs. The answering machine clicked on, reminding her to change Jace's voice on the tape.

"Karyn, it's Jace. I wanted to talk to you. I guess you're either not home or you're just ignoring the phone. I can't say I blame you. I still need to talk to you. I'm at the apartment. Call me when you can."

Karyn stood staring at the phone on the kitchen counter. How long had it been since she'd heard his voice? It seemed like a lifetime. Now he wanted her to call. She knew she wouldn't. She couldn't talk to him yet. A part of her knew she would only end up begging him to come home, to hold her and to promise her once more they would be together forever. She was a fool for believing in forever. Unsteady legs carried her to the machine, now silent on the counter. With a deliberate twist of her wrist, she unplugged it, tossing the cord to one side. She started out of the kitchen, paused, and turned back long enough to switch off the ringer. Jace might call again, but she wouldn't know it. She didn't want to hear his voice either. She didn't need him to remind her of what she missed. Her memories were too vivid for that. No, she didn't need help to remember what they used to have.

Forgetting what she'd come downstairs for to begin with, she spun around and walked back in the direction she'd come. She had climbed halfway up the stairs when the soft sounds of weeping caught her attention. Knowing she was in the house alone, she paused, turning around slowly, not really knowing what to expect. But the foyer was empty as was the living room and the kitchen when she'd finally summoned up the courage to check. Deciding it was all in her head, she deliberately headed back toward the stairs, humming a tune loud enough to drown out any other noises which might be in her head.

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The sparsely furnished condominium bore no traces of Jace's life outside the cream-colored walls, and as he replaced the telephone receiver onto its serviceable black base, he reached for the glass of whiskey. Karyn wouldn't call. He knew it as well as he knew his own name. She was avoiding him. Karyn always avoided situations she couldn't control. Maybe he should have gone over there. He should have taken the element of surprise, shown up on the doorstep, but he wasn't sure he wanted to see her—or could see her, for that matter. His fingers flexed around the glass of potent alcohol and he glanced down, staring into the amber-colored liquid. He could drink, dull the pain for now, but in the morning, he would be faced with the same problems and a fresh hangover. With a low curse, he tossed the glass toward the fireplace; it shattered against the bricks, the wetness dripping down to hit the flames with a loud hiss. He dropped his head into his hands and tried to concentrate, to formulate a plan. He wasn't ready for his marriage to end, but there was little he could do to stop the snowball Karyn had started rolling.

His own telephone rang and he quickly snatched the receiver, his heart slamming against his rib cage before climbing its way to his throat. "Karyn?" He didn't quite manage to keep the hope from his voice.

"Hi, may I please speak with the man or the woman of the house," came the cheerful voice.

"They're not home," Jace mumbled in reply before disconnecting the call. It hadn't taken long for the tele-marketers to begin hounding him. His name hadn't been dry on the lease barely a week when his

phone had begun to ring. The sound always echoed. With just a sofa, television and a few basic necessities, the condo didn't present an air of comfort.

He allowed the receiver to slide from his fingers to the sofa. It bounced against the cushion before settling against his thigh. Who was he kidding? He'd been right; she wouldn't call. Karyn had nothing to say to him and despite his need to talk to her, it wouldn't be enough. She would hide out in the solitude of the house they'd bought together, keeping the barrier of the wooden door between them. His hands clenched into fists and he had a powerful desire to hit something. Leaping to his feet, he made his way down the hall and gathered up his gym clothes. A long, hard workout might not solve his problems, but it would ease the tension that was building inside of him like a pressure cooker.

* * * * *

"Mrs. Morgan, Jimmy won't stop kicking my chair!" Ten-year-old Amber whined from the third row.

Karyn's breath released on a frustrated sigh and she stood, walking toward the little boy who smiled up at her guilelessly. "Jimmy, were you kicking Amber's chair?"

His grin broadened. "Only a little, Mrs. Morgan. She was humming and she wouldn't stop."

It had been a long day. "Please stop kicking her chair. And Amber, please stop humming. You're both supposed to be concentrating on your math."

Amber's hand went back up in the air. "Mrs. Morgan! Mrs. Morgan! He's still kicking my chair!"

"Jimmy, do you need to stay after school with me?"

Jimmy grinned, a pint-sized Casanova, "If you want me to, I will."

Karyn rolled her eyes and presented her back to the students, praying for strength. She couldn't stop the rush of relief when the bell rang, signaling the end of class, the end of school for the day.

As the kids filed out of the classroom with happy shouts, Sara poked her head inside the door, managing to dodge exuberant children. "Hey, you want to go grab a cup of coffee before we dive into tomorrow's lesson plans?"

Karyn's shoulders relaxed. "I'd love to. Let me just grab my coat. You can't even begin to imagine what kind of day I've had. It'll be nice to unwind."

Sara strolled into the classroom. "You know, I saw Jace last night."

Karyn froze. "I don't want to hear about it, Sara."

"If it's any consolation," Sara continued as if her friend had never spoken, "he looks as miserable as you feel."

"He couldn't possibly," Karyn muttered. She placed one hand across her abdomen as the early morning's sickness came to mind. It had been quite awhile since she'd been that violently ill.

"You're still feeling sick?"

"Yeah, I think it's a touch of the flu."

"I've never heard of the flu going on this long. Maybe you should go to the doctor." Playing the mother hen, Sara tugged the coat over Karyn's shoulders. "Have you been running a fever? You could be contagious. Maybe you shouldn't be at work. I would call a doctor. Even if you don't think of yourself, think of what you could be passing on to your students."

"I'm not running a fever and I'm going to give it a few more days to see if this passes. If I still don't feel better, I'll go then."

"Well, if you want my opinion, I think you're feeling poorly because of this situation with Jace. You love him, Karyn." Sara shifted from one foot to the other and Karyn knew she'd been building up to this since she'd walked inside the classroom. Sara had never been one to let a subject go, especially if she thought she was in the right.

"I said I don't want to talk about it."

Sara positioned herself in front of Karyn so she couldn't escape. "Then just listen. Last night when I saw Jace, I was floored by how haggard he looked. He's a doctor and he's not taking care of himself. He knows better, but I think he just doesn't give a damn. I wonder what he's telling his patients."

Karyn couldn't allow herself to feel any sympathy. "Jace was always good at bluffing; I'm sure he's managing."

"He still loves you, you know."

"Look, could we just go grab that cup of coffee and change the subject? I really don't want to continue to discuss my marriage." Pasting a smile on her face, Karyn headed toward the door.

"Sure, whatever you want."

* * * * *

Fluffing the pillow beneath her head for what must have been the tenth time, Karyn rolled to her side and tried counting sheep. She made it to fourteen hundred of the wooly animals before she gave up and pushed herself to a sitting position. She glanced toward the digital clock, her peripheral vision catching another glimpse of her wedding photo. She really should put it away, but so far, she hadn't been able to bring herself to do it. Jace's sexy grin warmed her as always. He'd had women falling for him from the moment he'd taken over Dr. Lowery's family medical practice. She'd just been the lucky one to catch his eye. Of course, at first, she hadn't thought herself so lucky. In fact, she hadn't been taken with him at all. She smiled to herself as the memories washed over her, settling around her shoulders like a comfortable old sweater ...

"Dr. Morgan will be with you in a few minutes, Karyn." The stout receptionist eyed the young woman's injured hand skeptically as if not quite sure the hand was really damaged.

"I really was bitten by a dog, Marge. You're welcome to see for yourself; the teeth marks are there." Karyn offered her hand up with a wry grin. She knew many women were faking injuries just to get to spend a few minutes with the handsome doctor, but she had better things to do with her time. Besides, she was in a steady relationship ... a comfortable relationship, if nothing more.

"I'm sure that won't be necessary," Marge retreated back behind the safety of her desk, but continued to peer at Karyn over the top rim of her glasses as if warning her there would be dire consequences if she wasn't really injured. "The wait shouldn't be much longer now."

The heavy wooden door separating the patient waiting room from the exam rooms swung open. "Karyn, you can come in now." Sharon Woodside had been Dr. Lowery's nurse for several years and most of the citizens of Stafford were comfortable with her. When Dr. Morgan had asked her to stay on, many people were grateful she'd accepted readily. No one had wanted to break in a new doctor and a new nurse at the same time. She flashed Karyn an easy smile and her white loafers squeaked on the tile as she led the way back down the hall. "Now, let's see that hand. Of all people to get dog bit, I'm not surprised it's you."

Karyn opened the dishtowel she'd confiscated from the school's kitchen and extended her hand obediently with a wry smile of her own. "A stray dog wandered onto the playground at recess and one of the kids tried to pet him. I heard him growl and trying to be the hero, I guess, I stuck my hand out. This is what I got for my efforts."

Sharon grimaced. "Well, I'm sure the parents will appreciate your heroism." She leaned closer for a better view. "That's a nasty bite. Dr. Morgan will want to update your tetanus shot. Do you remember when your last one was?" She wrapped the bloody towel back around Karyn's hand.

Karyn wrinkled her nose as she tried to remember. "No, I'm afraid not."

A light tap sounded on the door and before either woman answered, Dr. Morgan entered. All six feet plus inches of the most attractive male package Karyn had seen in a long time. It was a good thing for her she was in a serious relationship or she might have been reduced to a blubbering idiot. Still, her eyes couldn't help but process the shoulder-length sandy-brown hair, the small cleft in the chin, the firm lips and the startling blue eyes, eyes the color of a mountain sky. She stifled a giggle at the metaphor and hoped she pasted an appropriately welcoming smile on her face. With his eye-catching good looks and athletic build, Dr. Morgan would have his hands full with the single women in town. No doubt, he'd already gotten a taste of the budding matchmakers and hopeful mothers.

"Miss Daniels, I'm Dr. Morgan. It's a pleasure to meet you." He extended his hand.

Karyn accepted the handshake. "Thank you. Welcome to Stafford, Dr. Morgan."

"Thank you. The town's made me feel welcome." His deep voice sent shivers down Karyn's spine. She might have known he'd have a voice like that—a nice, husky timbre with rich undertones. It made her think of summer nights and illicit activities between satin sheets.

While Dr. Morgan removed the towel wrapped around her hand, Karyn dragged herself back to her current situation. "That doesn't look too good. Did animal services pick up the dog?" He patted the examining table. "Why don't you have a seat up here?"

Karyn scooted her rear onto the sheet-covered table. "In answer to your question, animal services did pick up the dog, but I don't think he has rabies."

One brow lifted. "You can't see rabies, Miss Daniels."

She frowned at him. "I realize that, Dr. Morgan, but he was just hungry."

"So he decided to chew on your hand? They'll have to test the dog anyway."

"Absolutely not! I'm not going to let them put that dog to sleep simply because he was hungry!" Every protective instinct inside her rose to the fore and she found herself glaring at the doctor with all the ire she could muster, which was difficult considering the sensual way his eyes crinkled at the corners. She tried not to imagine what it would be like to smooth the lines away with the tips of her fingers.

The doctor smiled at her and placed his hand on her shoulder. "They would first quarantine the dog, but either way, I'm going to have to start you on the postexposure injections just to be on the safe side."

Feeling slightly embarrassed at her outburst, she gave one firm nod of her head. "Fine. Then we should get started." Her common sense had returned and she was able to focus on the situation at hand instead of the good doctor's better than average looks.

"Rabies post-exposure vaccines are given on days zero, three, seven, 14, and 28 following the bite. So I'll need to make sure you return for each of those days." His smile continued. "I'd hate to have to send my nurse out looking for you."

She gritted her teeth. "I'll be here."

His eyes glinted with admiration and he inclined his head. "As you wish. Sharon will get everything set up and we'll get started. I'm going to patch up that hand first and then we'll move on to the shot. Just try to relax."

Karyn's tried not to glower. "I've had shots before, Dr. Morgan."

"Force of habit. When I'm dealing with kids, I always have to calm them down before I bring out the needle. Sharon, is everything ready?"

"Ready." Sharon spared Karyn a sympathetic glance. "I can take care of this if you'd like to see the next patient, Dr. Morgan."

He shook his head. "No. I'll do it myself just to be on the safe side."

Sharon eyed him strangely, but stood back out of the way.

Dr. Morgan took his time cleansing the wound and placing neat, line-by-line stitches to close the tear. All the while he worked, he kept up a steady stream of conversation, questioning her about the town, its history and its citizens. When he finally finished, he scooted the stool back and stood. "Now, the shot and we're done."

Karyn squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath. When at least a minute had passed and nothing had happened, she cracked one eye open to find blue ones watching her. "Well? Are you going to do this or not?"

"Just wanted to make sure you were still breathing. I'll try to make this as easy as possible. Shots are never pleasant."

"I just had stitches in my hand. I doubt a shot is going to disable me. I just want to get it over with and get back to my class. The kids were terrified."

Dr. Morgan swabbed a cotton ball over her upper arm and from the corner of her eye, Karyn saw him test the injection. Liquid squirted from the tip of the needle and she closed her eyes again. She'd always hated shots. Even the sight of needles made her wince. She gripped the edges of the table and braced herself. She'd thought the needle Dr. Morgan had used to

number her hand would have elicited the same response, but his soothing voice had distracted her.

“If you tense, it’s only going to hurt more,” he warned.

One eye cracked open. “How am I supposed to relax?”

“Try some deep breathing.” He demonstrated by breathing in, holding it and releasing the breath. Karyn watched the action increase the already impressive size of his chest. As he continued to breathe, he slowly adjusted the needle over her arm and while Karyn busied herself watching the good doctor’s excellent relaxation demonstration, he depressed the plunger.

Karyn gave a slight yelp and looked down at her arm. “That’s it?”

He grinned. “For now. See you in three days.” He tugged off the latex gloves and tossed them in the trash can next to the door. He looked over his shoulder. “Are you okay to walk?”

She made a sound of disgust. “Of course I’m okay to walk. It was just a simple shot.” She slid off the table and her world spun crazily. She clutched at the air but found nothing solid to hold onto ... until Dr. Morgan caught her in his arms. As she looked up into those vivid blue eyes, she thought she was dreaming. Darkness claimed her before she could contemplate the matter further.

Karyn’s hand rubbed the spot on her arm where she’d been given the shot, feeling the sting of the needle as if it had been yesterday. The “stray” dog turned out not to be a stray after all. In fact, he’d been owned by a farmer in a neighboring community and had wandered off the morning Karyn had gotten bit. Of course, she didn’t discover this information until almost thirty days after the bite, long enough for her to receive all of the injections. Not that she had minded at the time. She’d seen Jace each time and he’d personally given her the shots, much to Sharon’s bewilderment.

With a long, sorrowful sigh, Karyn forced back the memories and climbed out of the bed. As the eyelet lace comforter tumbled to the floor, Karyn resolved herself to another night without sleep. She

could live without sleep for another day, but she refused to dwell in memories. They were in the past, a past that could never be relived.

* * * * *

Jace sat staring at the correspondence in his hand, the words printed neatly on etched stationery. Karyn had retained an attorney. She was really going to go through with the divorce. She wanted to end their marriage. Fury took up residence inside of him with the determination of squatters on government land. If she thought for one minute he would sit idly by while she put an end to the last five years of their lives, she was wrong.

Crumpling the letter in his hand, he jabbed the intercom button with his index finger. “Marge, you’re going to have to reschedule today’s appointments.”

“But Mrs. Calloway is coming in this morning for her arthritis and you know how she gets when she can’t see you.”

“Fine. Then reschedule her for late this afternoon. Tell her something came up.”

“Is everything all right, Dr. Morgan?”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He released the button, reaching for his coat. It was time he put an end to all of this.

* * * * *

“Mrs. Morgan, Mr. Morgan is at the door.” Amber giggled and pointed toward the open doorway where Jace lounged against the frame.

Eyes widening, Karyn got to her feet and walked across the stone colored tile. She heard the sound of chairs scooting and new her eager students were preparing to spy. “Class, I want you to read Chapter Five to yourselves. There will be a quiz on it tomorrow. I’ll be right back.” She stepped out into the hallway, quickly pulling the door shut behind her. “Jace, what are you doing here?”

“I had to talk to you and since you won’t return my phone calls, this was the only way.”

“There’s nothing for us to talk about.” She kept her voice to a whisper though the lockers lining both sides of the hall shielded most of their words from the classroom next door.

“That’s where you’re wrong. Do you want to tell me why you decided to hire an attorney? He called me this morning shortly after I’d received his letter informing me of his representation.” His voice was scathing, holding dislike for the man he didn’t even know.

Brushing past him, she walked toward the door of Sara’s classroom. Tapping lightly, she stuck her head inside the room. “I’m sorry to interrupt, Mrs. Hartley, but would you mind keeping an eye on my class for a few minutes?”

Sara’s gaze swept over her friend’s head to the tall man standing behind her and she nodded, somehow managing to keep her expression free from any desire for more information. Karyn knew she’d be grilled unmercifully when the next opportunity presented itself.

Closing the door, Karyn turned to face her husband. “Now, let’s take this outside. There’s no reason my class should hear any of this.”

“If you would return my calls, they wouldn’t have to hear it, Karyn.” He followed her to the metal double doors leading to the playground. A cold gust of wind greeted them and Karyn shivered. “You should have gotten your coat,” Jace reprimanded.

“I don’t plan on being out here that long,” she informed him, her voice as cold as the chill in the air.

“So why the attorney?”

“I thought that would be obvious. We should make all of this legal, so when we’ve been separated a year, it makes it easier to file for divorce.”

“Easier. I see. You think this is going to be easy? We’ve been married for five years, Karyn, and you want an easy divorce. Unbelievable.”

“I never wanted a divorce in the first place, Jace.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“Because you can’t let go of what happened to Sam. You blame me and a part of you will always blame me.” She shook her head to still his denial, “Don’t. Don’t tell me what you think I want to hear, Jace. I won’t believe you. This has been hell on both of us, but I can’t live with a man who can’t let go of an accident. You need someone to blame for Sam’s death and I’m the only one available. Well, that’s fine. Blame me, but I won’t be around to listen to it. Now, I’ve got to get back to my class.” She tried to walk around him, but he caught her arm.

“Karyn, there’s more to our relationship than just the death of our son. We should be able to work through this.” He realized, in that instant, just how much he didn’t want to lose her.

“I tried. For six months, I tried. But it’s hard when you’re the only one making any effort.”

“You can’t blame me for hurting, Karyn.”

“And you can’t blame me for what happened! It was an accident! My son, our two-year-old little boy, died in my arms! I tried to shield him, protect him, but how can you protect someone from a thirty-foot fall while you’re trapped inside a car? I had my arms wrapped so tightly around him his heart beat against my wrist. I heard him cry out because he was scared and there was nothing I could do to save him. I don’t even remember his last words to me. I just remember the sound of his voice. And you want to blame me for his death when I did everything possible to protect him. Well, where in the hell were you that night? Why weren’t you home from the office on time like you said you would be? Then, I wouldn’t have had to drive to Sara and Ben’s house by myself. We could have ridden together and you would have been driving, Jace. Who knows? Maybe you would have been the one to kill him. Now, I’ve got to go teach. These kids are the only kids I have now.” She didn’t give him a chance to stop her this time.

His chest tight, Jace turned to leave, not looking back. An invisible hand closed around his heart and a litany sounded within his head. His marriage was over and he had destroyed it.

Two

Jace finished one bottle of whiskey and reached for the second, making short work of its contents. When the incessant pounding began at his front door, he chose to ignore his uninvited guest. Instead, he clutched the bottle closer to his chest and leaned back against the sofa, his world a nice, hazy blur.

The pounding intensified as the visitor grew more agitated.

“Go away, damn it!” Jace waved the bottle at the door and slumped down lower on the sofa, determined to hide behind the liquid courage instead of facing whoever was behind door number one.

“Jace, it’s Ben and I’m not going anywhere. Now let me in unless you want your neighbors to hear what I’ve got to say.”

Stumbling to his feet, Jace wove his way to the door, muttering dire threats below his breath. Sometimes, his best friend was a pain in the ass. Swinging the door wide, he glared at the man facing him. “What do you want? I didn’t invite you.”

“That’s never stopped either one of us before.” Ben wrinkled his nose and waved a hand in front of his face as he stormed inside the room. “You smell like a distillery. Drowning your sorrows again? What is it this time? Karyn didn’t return another call? Or did she just ignore your knock like you were trying to do to me?” He made his way into the living room, stopping just short of the sofa. “God, the smell’s just as bad in here.”

Jace staggered back towards the seat he’d vacated. “She hired a lawyer.” The words came out on a slur as he flopped back down against the sofa, assuming his original slumped position.

Ben shoved a stack of magazines out of his way and seated himself in the recliner. “So what did you expect her to do? She’s got a drunk for a husband.”

Jace somehow managed to take umbrage at the remark. “I’m not a drunk!”

“Yeah? Is that your first bottle tonight? I didn’t think so. What in the hell are you thinking, man? I can’t imagine the agony of losing a child. In fact, I don’t even want to imagine it, but I can tell you one

thing. Your wife is going through just as much pain as you are and instead of being there for her, you shut her out completely. You're so wrapped up in your own misery, you can't see hers. It's no wonder she doesn't want anything to do with you."

"You don't know what in the hell you're talking about." Jace straightened so suddenly his knee bumped the octagon-shaped coffee table.

"Then, why don't you fill me in?" Ben folded his hands across his abdomen. "Well? I'm waiting. And did I mention you look like hell?"

Lowering the whiskey bottle to the floor, Jace shut his eyes against the whirl of colors blinding him. "It doesn't matter what I look like. Can't you see that? Nothing matters anymore. I love Karyn; I have from the first moment I met her."

"You've got a helluva way of showing it, friend."

Jace opened one eye to glare at him. "You going to let me finish or do you want to continue to berate me?"

Ben waved a hand magnanimously. "By all means continue the story."

Jace's eye closed again and he lay back, the first smile in days crossing his lips. "She was so beautiful when I met her." He laughed slightly. "She still is. But, God, was she stubborn. I know you've heard about the dog bite and how she refused to let the dog be put to sleep. I should have realized then she was determined. She'd had some tough blows in her life, but they never got her down. Losing Sam, well, it was the first hard blow I've ever been dealt. I've never lost anyone I've cared about before."

"And now, you've lost not only Sam, but Karyn. Is that how you want things to be?"

Jace dragged his fingers through his hair. "She wants this to be over."

"And by 'this' you mean the marriage or the pain with the loss of Sam?"

"Hell, I don't know, both, I guess."

"Well, if you're not sure, then I suggest you find out, my friend, because you're about to lose one hell of a woman."

Jace folded his arms defensively. “Do you think I don’t know that? Karyn has been my world for the last five years. She was different from any other woman I’ve ever met before and when I met her, I knew I didn’t want anyone else. She didn’t fall all over herself to get to meet me. She didn’t try to push herself on me, either. Of course, she was dating that Scott guy.”

Ben smiled. “Scott Jones. Now, there was a treasure worth keeping. He used to always wear those glasses with a chain. Never wore jeans, either. Always those sharply-creased slacks that looked capable of cutting glass.” He chuckled. “Definitely a prize. I’m surprised she threw him back into the fishing pond.”

“Did you know they dated for almost two years and he never made a move beyond a kiss?”

Ben whistled. “I knew the boy was stupid.”

Jace laughed even though it hurt his head. “Tell me about it. She was ready for a real man.”

“Yeah? Did she get one? Because right now, I’m having a hard time deciding.”

“Go home, Ben. I’m too tired to concentrate on this conversation anymore. Besides, I don’t need you to tell me what a wonderful woman my wife is or that I’m a jerk. I figured that out a long time ago.”

Ben slapped his knees and got to his feet. “Then my work here is done. You know if you need anything, well, Sara and I will do all we can. We just want you and Karyn to be happy. You belong together.”

“Try telling that to Karyn.”

“That’s Sara’s job. You’re my job. You know you can call if you need anything.” Ben dropped a hand to Jace’s shoulder in a quick, affectionate gesture. “Right now, I’d suggest a shower and a maid.”

“Get out of here.” Jace didn’t watch him leave. Instead, he dropped his head down to his hands and drowned in his memories.

Jace kept one arm around Karyn’s shoulders as he looked down into her upturned face.

“Feel better now?”

Karyn cleared her throat. "Yes, I'm fine, thank you. Sorry about that." She held her hand up for inspection. "Big bandage for such a little bite."

"Actually, it wasn't so little. It'll be sore for a few days, as will your arm. Sharon will give you a list of instructions and if anything happens, you know where to reach us."

"Should I expect anything to happen?"

"You shouldn't expect anything beyond the normal healing process, but it helps to keep any eye out. Sharon will tell you what signs to look for. It's probably best if you weren't alone tonight. I don't know if you live alone or..."

"I live alone," she responded simply, "but I'm sure I'll be fine."

"What about a boyfriend? Do you have one of those?"

"I have one of those."

A sliver of disappointment skated across his face, but he quickly schooled his features. Always the professional. "Could he stay with you?"

Karyn didn't bother hiding the snort of derision. "Hardly. Scott doesn't handle 'situations' very well."

Jace nodded slightly. "I see." His voice indicated he didn't really.

Karyn defended her boyfriend quickly. "We all have our different strengths. Being a nursemaid just doesn't happen to be one of Scott's. I can stay with my grandmother."

"Good." Jace gave his approval. "Now, let's see if we can get you up again." He brought both of his hands to her shoulders. Her gaze touched him and he felt the connection, an instant spark of pure, physical longing. He knew her boyfriend wouldn't be around that much longer. He hid the smile of supreme satisfaction behind a cough and slid one arm around her shoulders while the other allowed her to brace her hands against him.

Karyn allowed him to help her to a sitting position. Her face paled and she tilted her head, her long auburn hair falling into her eyes. She winced as she swung her legs over the side of the table. "Thanks, Dr. Morgan. I really appreciate this."

"I'm just doing my job."

She smiled at him then, a heart-stopping smile that made him catch his breath. "Well, thank you anyway. I know you probably don't get too many hysterical females passing out on you simply because of an injection."

He held up one hand, effectively silencing her flow of words. "You might be surprised, and you're not an hysterical female. Believe me, I know hysterical."

"Thank you." She lowered her face behind the veil of her hair and Jace found himself wanting to sweep back the silky tresses to see her smile. He saw her uninjured hand grasp the edge of the examining table and his arm tightened around her shoulders. "Did you say anything about dizziness?" She managed a weak smile.

"Maybe you should stay here for a little while longer, just to make sure you're not going to have a reaction to the injection. Adverse reactions are rare, but they can happen."

She tried to take a step forward and stumbled, falling back against his chest. "You could be right. I'm not feeling ... sorry ... I really am feeling a little bit dizzy right now." As if assisting in her body's betrayal, her legs gave way and she started to sink to the floor again.

Jace caught her in his arms, carrying her back to the table. "Sharon, let's do some blood work; I want to make sure Miss Daniels is really okay before I release her. Do you have anyone Marge can call for you? Surely your boyfriend would come for this? Or maybe your grandmother? Didn't you mention a grandmother?"

Karyn licked her lips and squinted up at him. "My boyfriend is still at work; he's the vice-president of the bank. It's not easy for him to get away during the day. And my grandmother doesn't drive. I guess we could try Scott. Did I mention he works at the bank?" The words came out in a jumble, overlapping and slurred.

Jace kept a bland expression on his face while he checked her pulse. "I believe you did, yes. So would you like Marge to call him then?" Natural curiosity insisted he get a look at his competition, but professionalism demanded he remained impassive.

Karyn shook her head, a little too rapidly in Jace's opinion. Obviously, the thought of Scott's presence didn't reassure her. Jace found it difficult to control a smile. "No, I don't think so. As I said before, Scott's not really good with situations such as these. He would be much better off staying at work," Karyn replied.

Jace didn't voice his thoughts on the matter, but if he were lucky enough to have a woman like Karyn Daniels, she wouldn't be going through any situation alone. He gave a grunt of acknowledgment and turned away. "Well, you might want to have Marge call him to take you home. I don't want you driving." This could be a point in his favor, anyway. Sometimes, it took a situation to make a person realize they were wasting their time with someone. He believed this was just one of those situations.

Karyn smiled again. "That's okay. I walked. I only live about a block away from here."

Jace filed that information in his mental Rolodex. "Then, I'll have Marge take you home once we're finished here."

"That isn't necessary, Dr. Morgan."

"Doctor's orders, Miss Daniels."

"Well, thank you and my name is Karyn. I get enough of Miss Daniels every day at school."

School? His antenna went up and he quickly scanned her chart, relieved to discover she was twenty-five. "You're in college?"

She gave a light laugh, extending her arm as Sharon drew near her. "No, I teach at the elementary school. Fifth grade."

"That must be interesting."

"Sometimes." The needle slid into her vein; she didn't even flinch.

"I'll bet we could trade war stories."

Jace jostled himself out of the thread of remembrances and struggled to get to his feet. He had to pull himself together. This wasn't doing him or Karyn any good. Picking up the bottle of whiskey on his way out of the den, he paused long enough to dump the contents into the kitchen sink. He aimed the empty bottle toward the trash can and tossed. It hit the plastic with a dull thud and he nodded his satisfaction.

He wasn't a drunk, and he couldn't continue to hide behind the dulling effects of alcohol. Karyn had been right; there was no one to blame for what had happened to Sam. He just hoped he wasn't too late to make her see he realized he was wrong. Unsteady legs carried him toward the stairs. Feeling betrayed by the weakness of his body, he tossed a scathing glance toward the trash can and forced himself to climb the steps.

* * * * *

"I'm really sorry to bother you about this, Dr. Sanders, but I just haven't been feeling so well lately and normally, I would just ask Jace, but well, you probably already know the story behind that." Karyn gave her gynecologist a wobbly smile and closed her mouth.

Dr. Sanders, a fifty-plus woman with a shock of white hair and a gamine grin that was conspicuously absent, nodded understandingly. "I'm sure this is an emotional time for you, Karyn. Just as I'm sure it's nothing to worry about, but I'm going to run a couple of blood tests just to be on the safe side." She focused her attention on the chart in front of her. "Now, you said your last period was almost three months ago."

"Yes, I've been under a lot of stress and it's done this before when I was stressed out. In fact, I think it was right before my wedding. I didn't have a period until a month after I got married. I was so nervous."

Dr. Sanders inclined her head again. "Yes, I remember. Now, why don't you relax and we'll have the results of those tests shortly. The wonders of modern medicine." She bustled out of the room.

* * * * *

Karyn stared at the piece of paper in her hand before allowing her stunned gaze to flicker back up to her doctor's face. "There must be some mistake." The room smelled faintly of antiseptic and she wondered why she found herself thinking about the odor.

"I'm afraid not, Karyn. You're pregnant. It's right there in black and white."

Karyn's turned her head, seeing chrome fixtures and walls painted bright white. She needed something to take her focus away from the news she hadn't wanted. "But it was just that one time. And it seems like it was a long, long time ago. Surely, there must be some mistake."

"There is no mistake. I'd like to go ahead and take an ultrasound. We can get an idea on how far along you are and ..."

Karyn's smile was sad. "I know how far along I am, Dr. Sanders. It was just one time, eleven weeks ago. I'm eleven weeks pregnant." She swallowed a sob. "I'm carrying my husband's baby and I don't even have a husband anymore." The tears spilled over, sliding traitorously down her pale cheeks.

Dr. Sanders quickly pulled a tissue from the box behind her and offered it to her patient. Then, with the understanding only a doctor can give, she wrapped a comforting arm around her patient's shoulders. "I know this is a difficult time for you, but maybe, this is the right thing. I know you still love Jace. Maybe, with this baby, there's a chance to put your marriage back together."

Karyn's horrified gaze whipped upwards. "Jace is not going to find out about this child. I don't want you to tell him, Dr. Sanders. Promise me you won't tell him."

She held up her hands. "I don't have to promise you, Karyn. You know your records are personal; I can't share them with anyone without your permission. But really, how long do you think you're going to be able to hide your condition from your friends, your family? If you're eleven weeks, like you say you are, you'll start showing soon. Jace is a doctor, for Pete's sake. He's going to start noticing, probably sooner than any of your friends will. Doctors pick up on the signs much quicker than the average Joe."

"Jace and I rarely see each other. We have no reason to, especially since I hired an attorney."

Dr. Sanders winced. “Well, I think maybe you should go home and get some rest. This has come as a shock to you, I’m sure. I’ll have Jenny get your prenatal vitamins for you and you can be on your way. You can reschedule for the ultrasound when you’ve had a chance to come to terms with this.”

Karyn slid off the table, reaching for her jeans. “Thanks, Dr. Sanders. I appreciate your understanding.”

The doctor placed a hand on Karyn’s arm. “I understand why you’re upset, but I can’t say I understand everything that’s going on. Maybe I’m from the old school, but when I married, it was till death do us part. I can’t say my Gene hasn’t driven me batty over the years, but I still love him. We’ve been through a lot together and I reckon we’ll stay together until one of us doesn’t wake up.” She winked. “The advice is free of charge.” Patting her arm, Dr. Sanders got to her feet. “Give Jenny a holler once you’re dressed.”

Once her doctor had left the room, Karyn sank back against the table, not even feeling the cold steel against her back. Pregnant. She should be feeling joy now, but instead, a cold, numbing sensation dulled her senses and left her with an unshakeable emptiness. Trembling hands somehow managed to close buttons and return zippers to their proper positions as she got dressed.

She barely listened to the nurse’s excited babbles about new bundles of joy and how babies were precious and once she had arrived home, Karyn couldn’t remember what she’d said in response to Jenny’s effusive congratulations. Maybe she hadn’t said anything at all. She would be surprised if she’d said a single word.

With the house dark and lonely, she crawled beneath the blankets of the cold [four-poster bed and drew her legs close to her chest. She was pregnant and she had never felt more alone in her life.

So wrapped up was she in her misery, she missed the soft glow of golden light that swept the wall, coming to rest at her feet before it retreated to a pin point and disappeared.

* * * * *

“Did you hear about Karyn Morgan?”

The words captured Jace's attention and he strained his neck to see the speaker, but standing in the checkout line behind Ebenezer Winston didn't enable one to see very much. Eb had packed on a few pounds since retirement and he blocked the entire aisle.

"What about her? I've had my ear to the ground, but I haven't heard word one." Jace instantly recognized Annette Hampton's voice. The waitress had nothing better to do with her time than gossip about the townspeople and the juicier the gossip, the better. And she wasn't above spreading tales she hadn't confirmed.

Jace pinched the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger and waited for Annette's companion to respond to the question.

"She went to the doctor the other day."

Annette patted her hair and sniffed derisively. "That ain't news, Vera. I went to the doctor a week ago."

Jace's heart began a slow thud in his chest. Thankfully, the cashier was having difficulty with an elderly lady's double coupons. It allowed plenty of time for the conversation to continue.

"She's been feeling poorly for quite some time," Vera whispered, although the words were spoken loudly enough for even the customers at the back of the store to hear.

"What do you think is wrong with her?"

Vera bumped one hip against the checkout and folded her arms. "I'm not rightly sure, but I heard tell that it's bad."

Dread settled in the pit of Jace's stomach. As a doctor, he'd delivered bad news many times over. Though unpleasant, it was an unavoidable part of his job and he prepared himself mentally for the task each time. But having faced the loss of his son, he knew he couldn't lose Karyn and no amount of mental preparation would be enough.

Annette leaned in closer to her friend and Jace caught the scent of cheap perfume, the same scent the waitress had been using for the past five years. "How bad?"

Vera sidled toward the edge of the counter as the cashier began to ring her purchases. “Ain’t too sure about that. I couldn’t get a lot of information because you know people have to be careful. Don’t know who you can trust in this day and age. Time was when you could trust your next door neighbor as much as you could your sister, but nowadays ...” As Vera began to drone on about the problems faced in today’s society, Jake tuned her out.

He had to see Karyn. Now. Dumping the bag of chips and loaf of bread into a nearby basket, Jace backed out of the line and managed to escape from the grocery store without being seen by either Annette or her companion.

* * * * *

Karyn’s hands gripped the steering wheel in a white-knuckled grasp and she tried to follow along with her friend’s animated conversation. But her mind was on other things. Things like baby strollers, another crib, car seats and bibs. Midnight feedings and diapers and pacifiers. Items she’d gotten rid of once Sam outgrew the need for them. A small bubble of hysterical laughter caught in her throat and she quickly angled her head toward her window, hoping her friend didn’t notice.

“And Ben was going to ...” Sara paused, shooting a discerning gaze at Karyn’s profile. The glassy-eyed stare gave her all the answer she needed. “Head into the woods and shoot us a bear for dinner, but I told him we still had that leftover elk and so I cooked that. It was delicious even if I do say so myself. I flavored it with oregano and oranges. Ben said it was the best elk he’d ever tasted. Have you ever tried elk?”

“Hmm?” Karyn struggled to remember the last snatches of conversation. Then, failing, she ad-libbed. “Oh, sure.”

Brows knitting together, Sara stuffed her hands beneath her arms. “Oh, you have, have you? I didn’t think elk was in season.” The last few words were bitten out from between clenched teeth.

Karyn swerved in the road to avoid a squirrel. “Elk?” She tossed her friend a questioning glance. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, I *was* talking about Ben’s visit to see your husband until you tuned me out. That’s when I turned the discussion to last night’s meal. Want to tell me what’s going on?”

Karyn didn’t apologize for her lack of attention. “Not really.”

“Okay, let me rephrase that. Tell me what’s going on.”

“I’ve just got a lot on my mind.”

“Nice, but no cookie. Try again. I know you have a lot on your mind, but that’s not what’s got you so distracted now. This is something different. I can read it in your face.”

“Well, it’s a long story and ...” Karyn broke off as realization dawned. “Ben went to see Jace again? About us?”

Sara blew out a breath in a frustrated huff of air. “I’ll tell you about that later. For now, I want you to tell me what’s going on with you. I know something’s up, Karyn, and don’t give me that crap about it being a long story, etc., etc. I’ve heard all that ad nauseam. Something’s changed and, as your best friend, I demand to know what.”

Karyn’s hands rotated on the steering wheel. “I asked for a leave of absence this morning.”

Jaw slack, Sara stared in disbelief. “You’re kidding, right? Of course, you’re kidding. You love teaching. You were born to teach and there’s no way you would stop teaching.” Her hands flopped to the seat beside her. “You might as well stop breathing. Those kids are a part of your life. No,” she wagged a finger in admonishment, “that was a nice try to get me off track. You’re not stopping.”

“I didn’t say I was stopping, Sara. I’m just taking a break.”

“From what? Life? Just because your marriage is going down the drain doesn’t mean life stops. You still have to work. You still have to get out of bed every morning, eat breakfast, go to work, and everything in between. That’s the way life goes. And I’m speaking from experience, as you know. I thought my life was falling apart, too, when my first marriage fell apart, but it doesn’t work that way. I had to rebuild my life before I could even think about a relationship with another man. And that’s exactly what you have to do ... rebuild your life.”

“Even if you’re pregnant?” The quiet question stanching the flow of words from the passenger side of the Camry.

Sara’s mouth worked in stupefaction as she tried to assimilate the words. “Are you? Pregnant, that is?”

A tear leaked out of Karyn’s eye and slid down her cheek in a solitary trail. “Yeah, I am.”

“Oh.” Sara sat back against the seat, folding her hands in her lap. “Well.” She toed the edge of the carpet protector. “Does Jace know?”

“No.”

“He is the father, isn’t he?”

Karyn’s head whipped toward her friend for a brief second before returning to the road. “I’m not even going to answer that one, Sara.”

The blonde mentally bit her tongue. “Sorry. It slipped out. I know Jace is the father. I probably should quit taping those soap operas.” One hand lifted to toy with her hair, a nervous gesture she’d acquired in early childhood. “So when are you going to tell him?”

Karyn kept her eyes glued to the road. “I don’t know that I am.”

Sara’s incredulity gurgled in her throat. “Wh-what do you mean you don’t know if you’re going to tell Jace he’s about to be a father again? Of course you’ll tell him. I mean, don’t you think he deserves to know?”

“Why?” The question was a hiss. “Why does he deserve to know anything about me, Sara? He blames me for Sam’s death.”

“Not really.”

“You weren’t there when he told me I should have been driving slower.”

“It was a knee-jerk response, Karyn. I don’t honestly believe that. Ben has talked to him and—”

“Well, you know what,” Karyn interrupted abruptly, “it doesn’t really matter what you or Ben believe. I only know I don’t want this child to become the focus of a custody battle.”

Blue eyes glazed with further amazement. “Will you listen to yourself? You’re talking as if Jace has morphed into some low-rent hoodlum. He hasn’t. Jace is one of the classiest men I know and, beyond that, he’s the man you still love and who still loves you. Good grief, he’s not going to come swooping down on you because you tell him he’s about to be a father again. Honestly, I think you lie awake nights convincing yourself Jace is sin to your sainthood.” Sara’s fingernail tapped out a rhythm on the vinyl dashboard. “You should tell him.”

“No. You’re wrong about this.”

“Not this time.”

“You didn’t have kids when you divorced John, Sara. You have no idea what it’s like.”

“And you’ve never been divorced before. You have no idea what that’s like,” Sara asserted sharply. “You think your life is going to be easier because you’ve dumped the man you’re still desperately in love with? You think you won’t lie awake, staring up at the ceiling, wishing he was there to hold you, touch you, make love to you? You think you’ll just magically forget how he makes you feel inside, how happy you were when you married him? Do you really think because you and Jace have fought and grieved over the loss of your son that your life is going to get better because you’ve decided to end the marriage?”

“Our marriage ended when Sam died. And I never said I would forget.”

“No, you didn’t, but your marriage didn’t end. It’s still alive. Sure, it took a few blows, but you’ve still got the basics to make a marriage. You’ve got love and trust and caring. You speak one another’s language, Karyn.”

Karyn lifted a hand. “Stop. I don’t want to talk about this anymore. It’s all I’ve talked about and thought about for the last two months and I can’t do it anymore.”

“Well, I can’t ignore it. Do you expect me to avoid this topic of conversation every time we see one another? You’re my best friend and I hate to see you so miserable. And whether you admit it or not, you *are* miserable.”

More tears followed the first lone tear even as Karyn shook her head staunchly. “I’m just scared. I think I’ve made the right decision for me and this baby.”

Sara folded her arms once more. “Well, for what it’s worth, I think you’re making a selfish decision. With everything that’s happened over the last few months, the last thing you should do is take away Jace’s chance to be a father again. He’s already had it taken away once.”

Three

Jace punched the pillow beneath his head, cursed, rolled to his side, and stared at the digital clock facing him. Three a.m. It had been three long hours since he'd gone to bed seeking sleep, but the blessed blackness continued to elude him. With another curse, he pushed himself to a sitting position, the sheet dropping to his waist. The ceiling fan wafted a cool breeze across his bare chest, a welcome relief from the heat of his own skin. He slanted a glance toward the clock once more. One minute later. Damn. It was going to be a long night. Usually, he had the numbing effects of alcohol to escort him into a mindless sleep, but practicing self-control, he'd abstained and now he was paying the price.

He'd spent the better part of the afternoon calling Karyn, but she either hadn't been home or she'd been ignoring his calls. He'd fought the consuming urge to drive over to the house and demand she tell him what was wrong. Now, he wished he hadn't. Sometimes, knowing the truth wasn't better.

He reached for the bedside lamp, his hand brushing the eight-by-ten wedding photo on the bedside table, the only memento he'd taken with him when he'd moved out of the house. It now served as a reminder of what he'd left behind him. Switching on the lamp, his hand shook as he lifted the silver frame for a closer view.

Had it really been five years? It seemed like yesterday that he'd summoned the courage to ask Karyn out. She hadn't known he was shaking in his boots. To her, he'd appeared calm, confident even, but inside, he was terrified she would say no.

Pushing aside the remnants of the root beer float, Karyn swiveled on the bar stool, laughing with her friend. "I still can't believe Scott asked me to co-sign a loan so he could invest in that stupid, what was it again? Oh, yes, a miniature fishing business. Exactly, what is miniature fishing? I know Scott explained it to me once, but I don't think it sank in."

Sara giggled and took another healthy slurp of her float. “Don’t ask me. I’m clueless when it comes to sports. By the way, you do know who’s watching us, don’t you?” She didn’t bother lowering her voice.

Karyn shook her head. “I have no idea and furthermore, I could care less ... especially if it’s a man.”

Jace didn’t let the conversation deter him from forging his way across the diner to join the two ladies at the counter. “It’s nice to see your hand is doing better.” His deep voice brought her face up and her eyes crinkled with a smile.

“Oh, hi, Dr. Morgan.” Karyn favored him with a charming smile, which earned her one in return. Her heart skipped.

Eyebrows lifting, Jace smiled. “I just noticed you here and thought I’d check on you since you didn’t come back for your follow-up visit.” His voice held a reprimand.

Karyn shrugged. “I had other things on my mind and since my hand was feeling better, I didn’t see the need.” She flexed the injured hand in question for his benefit. “See? All better?”

Suddenly, Jace caught hold of her wrist, turning her hand over in his palm. His fingers probed the reddened flesh and he frowned. His index finger traced a line down the inside of her wrist to her elbow. “You should have come anyway. You’ll just have to come with me now.” Still holding her hand, he tugged her from the stool.

Dropping to her feet, Karyn gave a strangled gasp and tried to free her hand. “What are you doing? What are you talking about?” She shot a glance toward her friend who was observing the exchange with owl-eyed interest. “Sara, don’t just sit there!”

Sara opened her mouth to speak and opted instead to take another sip of her soda.

“Thanks for your help, friend.”

Sara lifted her shoulders in a helpless shrug and gave the thumbs-up signal.

Karyn’s breath escaped her lungs in an outraged gurgle and she gave her one last promising glare before she shot her gaze back toward the handsome doctor.

“Miss Daniels, your hand isn’t doing much better. It’s infected. That’s why you have these red streaks going up your arm. I’m surprised you haven’t been feeling some pain.” His blue-eyed gaze pierced through her bravado, accurately reading her expression. “They don’t give medals for enduring pain bravely, you know. That’s why we have medicine and hospitals.” Hand firmly in his grasp, he headed toward the door, tugging her behind him like a rowboat in tow.

“Dr. Morgan, do you always seek out the patients who don’t show up for their appointments?” Karyn asked waspishly, trotting to keep up with him.

He grinned down at her. “Not always, but in a situation like this, I’m glad I did.”

Karyn deliberately slowed her walk to trail behind him once more. “So you didn’t just happen upon me in the diner.”

As he held open the glass door, he relinquished her hand. “Well, it sounded better to say I just noticed you.” He slid her a glance to observe her reaction. She was looking back at him.

“I appreciate the concern, but there was no need to lie.”

“I’m sorry. I should have been up front with you. I was concerned about you. A dog bite can be a serious injury and when you didn’t show for your follow-up visit,, I thought it best to check to make sure everything was as it should be.”

“Oh, well, I guess that’s one of the hazards of your job. Your sense of duty won’t let you rest.” Karyn’s green-eyed gaze lowered to her arm. “So what happens now?”

“I’ll irrigate the wound and put you on an antibiotic. Hopefully, that’ll clear things up in a few days.” They reached his office.

“Then I guess I owe you a thanks.”

“Just doing my job.”

“Above and beyond, I’d say.”

He unlocked the door and stepped aside to allow her to enter. “Maybe, but I take what I do seriously. Come on into the exam room. Sharon’s not here, so I’ll just have to wing it myself.”

He switched on the overhead light and proceeded to search the cabinets for the necessary equipment. He felt her eyes on his back and he bit back a smile. He knew when he was being observed ... with a woman's interest. "I'm sorry I interrupted your conversation with your friend." The gloves made a snap as he slid them over his hands.

"Don't be. We were only discussing my ex-boyfriend."

Jace turned, syringe in hand. "Ex? I thought you and Scott were happy together."

"I don't recall saying that."

"Then I misunderstood. I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "There's no need to be. He wasn't my type anyway. It was a different kind of relationship."

Jace placed her hand on the exam tray and seated himself on the low stool. "How so?" He made sure his voice relayed only a polite inquiry as his fingers probed the flesh of her palm. He kept his eyes trained on her flesh, knowing at this close range, she could probably read through his façade. It was important to maintain a professional demeanor. It was important to— oh, hell, who was he kidding? He wanted to jump up and click his heels together. It had taken her long enough to get rid of the slug she was dating and a grin formed on his face. He forced himself back to the task at hand and waited for her to reply.

Karyn's full lips curved into an impish smile. "Scott and I dated for almost two years even though I knew he wasn't the one for me."

"It was a comfort relationship," Jace surmised, using the syringe to irrigate the reddened skin. Obviously, Scott wasn't the man for her. Karyn needed someone who made her feel more than just comfort. Things like passion, desire, and that hot, weak-kneed longing that could only be satiated by the tangle of sheets and limbs. Jace swallowed hard and cursed his vivid imagination.

Karyn winced as the cold fluid sluiced across her heated skin. "You could say that."

His gaze lifted and caught hers, held for a scant second before dropping back down to her hand. “Why did it take you so long to get rid of him?” The question was blunt, maybe too blunt, but Karyn didn’t seem to mind.

“I don’t know. Fear maybe.”

“Of being alone?”

Karyn leaned closer to observe his work. “Possibly, or fear of the unknown, stepping out into the waters of dating again. But in all actuality, I think I had just grown used to him.” She chuckled lightly. “He was like an old pair of jeans I have. I can’t really wear them out in public anymore, but I can’t bring myself to get rid of them. They’re comfortable to me, worn in, and I don’t have to break in another pair as long as I have them.”

Jace accepted the analogy with a wry twist of his lips. “There could be more to it than that.”

“If you have any thoughts, I’d love to hear them.”

With her permission, he plunged in. “Maybe you were waiting for the right man to come along.”

Karyn’s eyes fell to the top of his head as he bent over his task. “I’m not sure I would recognize him if he did.”

Placing the syringe on the metal tray beside her hand, Jace rolled the stool away from the exam table, snapping off the latex gloves. “Then, he could already be here.”

Karyn’s head lifted and she met his bold gaze. “It’s possible.”

She wasn’t shy; he liked that. “Why don’t you have dinner with me and we’ll find out?”

“I was wondering how long you were going to beat around the bush before you finally made your move.”

“I had to make sure the bush was moveable. Didn’t want to step into someone else’s territory.”

“Scott’s history.”

He inclined his head in acknowledgment. He liked that kind of history. "Good. I'll pick you up tonight at eight."

"Did I say yes?"

"You didn't say no." He grinned at her again.

Karyn's own smile answered his. "You're right." She slid off the exam table. "See you tonight."

Jace replaced the picture frame, tucking it safely back in its exalted position beside the digital clock. He wished he could tuck the memories away as easily. Flopping back down against his pillow, he stared up at the vaulted ceiling, willing sleep to claim him.

* * * * *

The bitter air numbed Karyn's hands as she walked briskly down the deserted street. At five a.m., it was no surprise to her she was the only person up and moving around out here. Stafford wasn't exactly a thriving metropolis. It rolled up the streets at nine each evening and didn't throw out the welcome mat until well after eight each morning. But Karyn didn't mind. She enjoyed the solitude, being able to walk alone, shrouded in the darkness with only her thoughts for company.

She saw the low-slung sports car turn onto her street and, for a brief second, her heartbeat accelerated. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to be walking alone in the dark, but she quickly thrust aside that notion. Stafford was a safe town. In fact, their last crime spree had been the Butler twins stealing candy from the soda shop.

The headlights illuminated her pathway as it slowed to a crawl behind her. Shielding her eyes from the glare, Karyn turned slightly, hoping the driver could see her annoyed face. Then, suddenly, the lights were extinguished and the engine grew quiet. Karyn's mouth fell open. The driver stopped in the middle of the street. The door to the sports car swung open and it took her the space of ten seconds to recognize the lean frame emerging from the low confines.

Karyn marched over to the car, hands on hips, eyes flashing. “Jace, what in the hell are you doing here at this time of the morning?”

Jace draped an arm across the open door and rolled his shoulders into a shrug. “I took a chance you still came for your early morning walks. I guess luck is on my side.”

She tapped one sneakered foot impatiently, while resisting the urge to kick him with the other. “I wouldn’t bet on that if I were you. I don’t want to see you.”

“That much is obvious given the way you’ve been avoiding me. Did you turn the phones off or just the answering machine?”

“It doesn’t matter. If you have anything to say to me, you should have your attorney contact my attorney.” Tossing her hair over her shoulders, she turned to walk away, but Jace caught hold of her arm, preventing her escape. “What are you doing?”

“I’ve been trying to talk to you for days, Karyn, and now that I have my chance, I’m not about to let you walk away.” He tugged her toward the car. “But I will at least provide the heat while we talk.” He indicated the passenger seat with the point of one finger.

“I’m not sitting in the car with you, Jace, and I’m certainly not climbing across these god-awful seats to get to the other side. It will take a crowbar to get me out of there.” She eyed the silver bullet like it was a bad dose of castor oil she was about to take.

Jace’s lips twitched into a smile. Karyn’s dislike of his Lamborghini had been the object of several long-standing arguments. He couldn’t explain why her continued disapproval of his taste in cars reassured him somehow. “Listen, it’s butt-cold out here and I don’t want to freeze certain body parts off while I talk to you.”

She smiled sweetly up at him. “Well, I can certainly solve your dilemma because I have no intention of talking to you. So feel free to head on back home and get warm in front of the fireplace.” She peeled his fingers away from her arm. She took two steps away, but Jace blocked her path, making her tilt her head back to see his face. She’d always disliked her lack of height, but now, standing before her

husband, she hated it even more. Her neck ached with the effort to see his face. “Move out of the way, Jace.” She didn’t know how forceful she sounded with the slight catch in her voice. Standing this close to him, she smelled the tantalizing scent of his aftershave, a brand that was distinctively his. It clung to the sheets, lingered in the closet and drifted everywhere he’d been in their house, making it impossible not to think about him.

The leather jacket crinkled as he folded his arms across his chest. “Not until we can either sit in the car and talk or go somewhere warm. I need to talk to you. I’m not asking for anything other than a talk.” He lowered his voice, the timbre creating a sound of urgency that made Karyn’s heart reverberate in her chest.

“It won’t do any good. I don’t think there are too many things we haven’t already said to one another, including some things we shouldn’t have said.”

He pointed toward the house they’d shared for almost five years. “Can we just go inside for ten minutes? I promise I’ll leave once my time is up.” His breath fogged in the air as he waited for her answer.

Karyn closed her eyes, trying to shut out the sound of his voice, the image of him standing before her that would be etched in her brain forever. He’d always looked good in black, but the black jeans coupled with a white turtleneck sweater and black leather jacket made her mouth water. If she didn’t restrain herself, she knew she’d reach for him, just to touch him, to feel the beat of his heart beneath her palm. Knowing she was taking a risk she shouldn’t take, she turned and walked toward the house, assuming he’d follow.

The house was dimly lit, with a table lamp in the living room providing the only illumination. Dropping her keys on the foyer table, Karyn stepped aside until Jace walked inside first. Then, she closed the door and slid the deadbolt into place. She didn’t venture from the foyer, choosing instead to lean against the paneled door. “Your time has started.”

The acidic tone didn’t phase him. “What’s wrong with you?”

She blinked up at him. “What are you talking about? Is that your way of saying all of this is my fault again? That I’m causing the breakup of our marriage? Because if it is—”

“Karyn,” he interrupted her brusquely, “I meant, are you sick?”

Her mouth went dry. “What makes you ask that?”

“I’m the only doctor in this town. Do you think I don’t hear things—especially when my regular patients choose to go to another doctor?” He placed his hands on either side of her head. “So I repeat, are you sick?”

“I’m ...” she broke off, her gaze dropping beneath his penetrating gaze. Then, taking a deep breath, she continued. “I’m fine. Just a touch of the flu and considering we’re months away from a divorce, I thought it best I go to another doctor.”

Jace’s eyes searched her face, eyes that knew her so well, he saw into her soul, easily breaking through the barriers surrounding her heart. “The flu. I see.” His tone indicated he didn’t really. He leaned closer for a better view. “Your eyes look fine.” His fingertips probed the areas on each side of her neck. “Lymph nodes aren’t swollen. Is your throat sore?”

Karyn swatted his hands away. “I said I’ve already been to a doctor. I don’t need another exam, Jace. She told me what to do.”

His eyes narrowed. “She? Who did you go see?” He searched through his mental Rolodex of the doctors in the surrounding counties. “Another family practitioner or Dr. Sanders?”

Sliding from beneath his arms, Karyn waved a hand airily. “Why do you need to know which doctor I saw?”

“You didn’t think I’d be concerned about your health?”

She whipped around to face him. “Why are you asking me twenty questions?” She flicked a glance at her serviceable wristwatch. “I mean, is this really how you want to spend your ten minutes?”

His arm snaked out, wrapping around her waist. In a sudden move that stole her breath, he tugged her closer to the hard length of his body. “Not exactly.” His lips were fastened on hers before she thought about struggling and by then, she couldn’t think anyway.

It had been forever since he’d kissed her ... this way. Oh, they’d still shared the perfunctory kisses at the door as they started their day, but the passion had waned. Now, it was back, sweeping over her in a wave that threatened to engulf her. His lips moved across hers in sensual motions, reclaiming, forcing her to acknowledge the power of their attraction. With weakened hands she clung to the collar of his leather jacket.

With a low, guttural moan, Jace lifted his head, reluctance in every movement. Long fingers snagged their way through his wind-blown hair. “God, Karyn, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to force myself on you like that.” His voice was shaky with the apology.

Karyn laughed, trying to lighten the tension that hung in the air like thick smog. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’ve never forced yourself on me, Jace. You’re not that kind of a man.”

The look he gave her bespoke his frustration. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Her hands slipped to his chest. “It’s ... too late for this conversation. I think we both need to accept what we had was over a long time ago.”

He caught her hands in his, pressing them against the solid beat of his heart. “Accept it? How can you accept what shouldn’t be? You’re saying something we both wanted with all our hearts is now over and we should just square our shoulders and lie down in surrender. Why? Why can’t we reclaim what’s been lost? Isn’t our marriage worth trying to save?”

Her eyes filled with tears as she slid her hands out of his grasp. Slowly, she backed away from the magnetic heat of his body. “I can’t talk with you like this. I can’t ...” One more step and she’d reached the stairs. Turning, she dropped a hand down to the banister and immediately took a step backwards, staring at the wood as if it were a separate entity.

Jace joined her on the stairs. “What’s wrong?” His hand brushed her flushed face. Maybe she really did have the flu.

Karyn eyed him strangely. “I ... it was humming.”

He looked at her. “What was humming?”

“The banister.”

It was his turn to be confused. “The banister was humming?” He placed his hand on the wood; it was cool to the touch. “Maybe you’re running a fever.” His hand lifted to her forehead, but she drew away and placed her palm face down on the banister once more. The sweet strains of Chopin rang out loud and clear.

“What the hell...” Jace slid his hand atop her hand, his fingers resting just over hers. “Karyn, I don’t understand how this could happen. Something’s going on here. Did you leave the CD player on?” His eyes swept the room even as the vibrations caressed his palm.

She glanced up the stairs, but what she was looking for, she didn’t know. “I’ve never believed in ghosts.”

He dropped her hand. “So don’t start now. Ghosts do not exist. They never have and they never will. We’ve always been two logical people; let’s keep it that way. Besides, I’m sure there’s an explanation for this.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Care to take an educated guess then?”

“It could be any number of things. Like I said, the CD player could be on. Maybe there’s an electrical short that triggered it. Minute tremors in the earth. Any number of things.”

Karyn folded her arms across her chest. “Minute tremors in the earth? What are you talking about? An earthquake?” She eyed him skeptically. “I think you’re reaching.”

“Okay, maybe I am.” He blew out a loud breath. “But since neither one of us have any better explanations, let’s just chalk it up to an unexplained phenomenon and let it go.”

“And you’re comfortable with that?”

His gaze followed the earlier path of hers up the stairs. Hell, no, he wasn't comfortable with that. He wanted to know what was going on, but, until he discovered the truth, he wasn't about to start believing in ghosts or the bogeyman. "Barring the presence of any evidence, that's all we can do. Now, I'm going to go get my bag out of the car. I've got some medicine that will help you sleep. You look tired. You could probably use a good night's sleep." Without giving her the opportunity to respond, he hurried out the door.

Karyn climbed the stairs slowly, sliding her tingling hand along the banister. "Sam?" Her voice was quiet in the stillness of the house. She'd reached his room. The door was still firmly closed as it always was, as it had been since the day of his death. Her hand closed around the doorknob and turned. The cold metal rotated and the door opened. The first light of dawn filtered in through the opened curtains and as Karyn cast her gaze toward the race-car bed and for a brief instant, her heart stopped. As the sweet melody continued to play, she saw Sam's blond head nestled against the pillow, his stuffed Woody doll tucked beneath his arm. Listening closely, she heard the sounds of his even breaths.

"Karyn?" Jace called from the bottom of the stairs. Before she could respond, he reached the top landing, joining her at the door to the son's room. "Karyn?" He touched her shoulder gently and she whirled around, her face ashen even in the early light of dawn. "What's wrong?" He caught her shoulders in a steely grasp, giving her a slight shake. "Talk to me, damn it! What's wrong?" He looked over her shoulder, expecting to see an intruder.

Karyn pulled in a deep, shaky breath. "I saw Sam."

Jace had read about women seeing images of their dead children, but he'd never thought it would happen to Karyn. It had been eight months since Sam's death, and although she'd spent a lot of time mourning for their loss, Karyn was a strong woman and he just suspected she would be able to go on ... with or without him at her side. His hands tightened on her shoulders. "Karyn, I know you thought you saw Sam, but you know that's not possible."

She looked up at him, met his serious gaze and nodded slowly. “Yes, I know, but for a moment there, it was so real. He had his Woody doll. He loved Woody.” Her voice broke on a sob and she pulled away from him.

“Wait.” He caught her hand. “Here, I brought the pills. Just take one a night before you go to bed.”

Just as suddenly as it had begun, the music stopped. Karyn smiled. “Thanks, but I don’t need them. In fact, I think I’ll be able to sleep just fine.”

Jace stared at her, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck rise to attention. If he wasn’t just a trifle spooked before, he was now. He turned around in the hallway, as if searching for a hidden speaker. This had to be a practical joke. “Maybe you should get out of here.”

She shook her head. “No, I’m not going anywhere—at least not right away.”

He caught the ending to her statement and his brows lowered. “What do you mean ‘at least not right away’? Were you thinking of going somewhere?”

Karyn smiled at him and glanced at her watch once more. “I believe your ten minutes are up, Jace.”

He sighed heavily. “We haven’t solved anything.”

“And we aren’t going to solve it in ten minutes.”

“I’m not giving up.”

“I didn’t expect you would.”

“I’ll call you.”

“I know.”

“Turn the phones back on.” He instructed firmly. He didn’t wait for her acceptance. With a brief, hard kiss, he left her standing just outside Sam’s bedroom door.

* * * * *

Karyn heard the squeal of tires as the aging pickup truck rounded the corner and knew immediately she had a visitor. Opening her front door, hands on her hips, she greeted her best friend. “When are you going to get rid of that decrepit vehicle?”

Sara tossed her a saucy grin as she kicked the squeaky door shut behind her. She bounded up the driveway, ponytail swinging. “I will never get rid of Old Blue. You should know that by now. It’s the place where Ben and I first ... well, I won’t go into any details.”

“Thanks.” Karyn moved aside to allow the petite blonde to enter. Then, toeing the door shut, she leaned against the paneled wood. “So do you want to tell me why you’re here so early on a Saturday morning?”

“Oh, well, I was going to run to the mall and just thought you might like to join me.”

“It’s only seven. The mall doesn’t open for two more hours. Try again.”

Sara bit her lower lip. “Um, well, I thought we could grab breakfast first.”

“That’s a good one. I’ve been trying for years to get you to eat breakfast. I guess you forgot you never eat breakfast.”

Like a deer caught in the headlights of a slow-moving truck, Sara stared at her friend. “Well, I—”

“Sara, why don’t you just tell me Jace called you?”

Relief evident on her face, the blonde bobbed her head in acknowledgment. “Okay, he did, but he told me not to tell you.”

Karyn snorted. “Then he obviously doesn’t know you very well.” She paused, tilting her head to one side. “Or else he didn’t know you were going to show up here this early.”

A dull, red flush crept up Sara’s cheeks and she lowered her eyes. “I was up and I didn’t have anything to do. So,” slender shoulders shrugged, “I told Ben I was coming over here.”

“And his thoughts were?”

“That I was crazy. He told me you would read through any excuse I gave you. He knows me as well as you do, I suppose.” Sara spun on her heel and strolled into the living room. “Got any coffee?” She didn’t bother stifling the yawn that split her face.

Rolling her eyes, Karyn headed to the kitchen. “I don’t know. Why don’t you come with me and find out?”

“You know,” Sara parked herself on the first barstool she came to, “Jace is worried about you.”

Karyn’s hands stilled on the mugs as she placed them on the counter. “He shouldn’t be. I can take care of myself.” She lifted the carafe and filled the two ceramic mugs with the rich coffee, sliding one cup across the counter. “Here. Enjoy.”

Sara inhaled deeply of the fragrant brew and gave her friend a grateful look. “You know, only a friendship could drag me out of bed so early on a Saturday morning.” She lifted the mug with the words, *Those who can, do, and those who can’t never had the right teacher*, emblazoned on the side and took a long swallow. “God, that tastes good. Nothing quite like that first cup of coffee in the morning.”

One hip against the counter, Karyn added a dollop of cream to her coffee and waited for her friend to continue. She didn’t have long to wait.

“When I said Jace was worried about you, I didn’t mean financially. He knows you can pay your bills and all that. He’s worried about you ... well, how can I put this delicately?”

Karyn bit her tongue and continued to wait. If the truth were told, Sara didn’t have a delicate bone in her body, but she didn’t feel like now was the time to elaborate on that point.

“He’s worried about you emotionally. There.” Sara sat back against the stool satisfied she had chosen the right word.

The mug touched the counter top with a clink of ceramic against Formica. “Emotionally? I’m the one who asked him to move out.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, but that’s not what I meant ... or he means, rather.” Sara’s cheeks puffed out with an exhalation. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that Jace told me about what happened here earlier this morning. You wouldn’t let him stay, either.” The last few words rang with accusation.

“His ten minutes were up.”

Sara choked on a swallow of coffee. Spluttering helplessly, her face turning red, she gasped for air.

“You all right?” Karyn hadn’t moved from her position.

The blonde glared up at her friend. “Yeah, no thanks to you. Did I understand you correctly? You’re timing your husband?”

“Oh, I guess he didn’t tell you that part.”

“You guessed right. Karyn, what in the hell were you thinking?”

“I’m thinking if this is going to turn into a lecture, I have better things to do.”

Sara quickly changed tactics. “Jace told me you thought you saw Sam.”

Karyn shook her head and walked to the sink. “I didn’t think I saw him, Sara. I saw him.”

Her mouth fell open. “But ... but ... that’s not possible. You know that, right?”

Depositing her mug in the sink full of sudsy water, Karyn didn’t turn around, choosing instead to allow her hands to remain in the heated wetness. “Before it actually happened to me, I would have agreed with you.” Then she turned. “But it did happen to me. It wasn’t a mirage or a vision, Sara. Sam was there in his bed, holding Woody. He was as real then as he was eight months ago.”

Sara chewed the inside of her jaw. “Okay, if you say you saw him, I believe you, but now the question is ... why was he here? He’s gone, Karyn. He doesn’t live here anymore.”

Karyn tossed up her hands in the age-old gesture of frustration. “Do you think I don’t know that? How the hell am I supposed to know why he’s here? Maybe he’s here because this is his home. It’s the only home he’s known.”

Sara slid off the stool, one finger tapping her cheek. “And maybe he’s here because he has some unfinished business.”

“Unfinished business? He was two. What kind of unfinished business could a two-year-old child have? You know what? Never mind. This is crazy. Maybe it was a mirage. I know the mind can conjure up things it wants to see. Maybe that’s what happened.”

But Sara was getting into the spirit of the paranormal activity and her blue eyes danced with excitement. “Do you realize what this means? Your son is trying to communicate with you. I’ve always heard about these types of things happening, but I never imagined it would happen to my best friend.” She hopped from one foot to the other in a little dance of anticipation. “If he’s trying to communicate with you, he’ll be back. This will just be the first visit of many until he can tell you what he wants you to know.”

“You’re crazy. It was just my imagination.”

“That’s not what you were saying a second ago.”

“A second ago I was trying to convince you I wasn’t crazy.”

“And I don’t think you are.”

“You really think Sam is here?”

Sara resumed her earlier position on the stool and took a long slurp of the rapidly cooling coffee.

“You got a better explanation?”

Karyn gnawed her lower lip and looked away from her friend’s probing gaze. “I’m working on it.”

“Yeah, well, while you work on it, how about heating up my coffee? It’s going to be a long day.”

As the two women sat at the island counter discussing the probable reasons for Sam’s appearance, a small circle of light danced above their heads.

Four

“Well, look who the cat dragged in,” Annette crowed with delight as the door to the diner swung open and the bell jangled loudly. “Haven’t seen you around here in a coon’s age, Scott.” She shared a conspiratorial glance with the patrons.

Scott seated himself on a padded stool and inclined his head. His hair didn’t move. “I’m only passing through, trying to decide whether or not I’m staying.”

Annette leaned over the counter, her ample bosom resting minute inches away from Sam’s forearm. “Is that right? Any idea on what it might take to make up your mind?” Snickers came from over Annette’s shoulder but she didn’t look back.

Scott perused the menu. “Now, that’d be telling, wouldn’t it?”

Henry snorted and thumped his booted feet against the tiled floor. “Oh, come on, Jones. Everyone here knows you were sweet on Karyn Morgan before she became Karyn Morgan.”

Scott didn’t look up from the menu. “That’s not what brought me back to Stafford, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

The low hum of conversation resumed as the patrons sensed Scott wouldn’t divulge any information they didn’t already know. Annette didn’t back away. In fact, she leaned in even more. Her breast scooted dangerously closer to Scott’s arm. “You know they don’t mean no harm, Scott. Everyone around here’s tickled pink you’re back. So,” she tugged the pencil out from behind her ear, “have you seen Karyn yet?”

Scott chewed on the inside of his cheek and shook his head slightly. “Not yet. I’m settling in.”

“Yeah? Where ya staying?”

“At the Inn.”

Annette screwed up her face. “That place is getting positively seedy.”

Scott lifted a shoulder beneath the linen sports coat. “That’s the only place that’s available.”

Annette’s eyes narrowed with an avaricious gleam. “Well, if you play your cards right, Karyn might have a place for ya.”

A small smile played about the corners of Scott’s mouth, but he didn’t look up, not even when the doorbell jangled once more.

But every other customer in the diner did look up curiously. And the conversation stilled again.

“Good evening, Jace,” Henry growled, jerking his head toward the counter in an attempt to warn Jace of the enemy’s presence.

Jace’s eyes searched the interior and connected with the back of the head bowed low over the menu. Recognition dawned the second the man straightened and slid off the stool. “Scott Jones. It’s been a while.” Jace came forward and extended his hand. “Nice to see you.”

Scott whirled and dragged one hand down the leg of his expensive slacks before accepting Jace’s handshake. “Dr. Morgan, I hope you’ve been well.”

Jace waved a hand. “Please. Call me Jace.”

“I was just about to have a cup of coffee. Care to join me?”

The patrons held their breaths while Annette pinned both men with an obvious glance. She clanked the coffee mugs and plunked two of them down on the counter. “Pull up a seat, Jace. How was your day?”

Jace straddled a stool and flipped open the menu. “Same as always.”

“Heard Jessica Sanders came to see you.” Annette snickered.

Jace sighed. “You wouldn’t know anything about why she came to see me, would you, Annette?”

Annette grinned and sauntered over to the coffeemaker. “Well, now, let me see here a minute. I believe she might of been in here a day or so ago and heard tell that you and Karyn were separated.”

Jace's face hardened and Scott angled his head. "What goes on between Karyn and me is none of anyone's business."

Scott lowered his voice. "You're separated?"

Jace threw him a glance. "Not for long."

Scott's shoulders didn't relax. "She's an incredible woman."

Jace slid off the stool and pushed the mug back from the edge of the counter. "That she is."

Scott drew a tongue across his teeth. "I was thinking I might stop by and see her."

Henry groaned from the back. "Now you boys don't start fighting or nothing. Wilma's already madder than a wet hornet at me for staying here so long. If I come home with blood or something on my clothes she'll make me sleep outside for sure."

"Hush, Henry," Annette demanded with a gleeful look in her eyes.

Jace stuck his hands into the pockets of his lab coat. "Karyn might like to see an old friend."

Scott rose to take away Jace's advantage. "Maybe so. Good to see you, Jace."

Jace's eyes narrowed and he watched Jones stroll toward the door. "You, too."

Annette let out a whooshing breath of air. "Good Lord, the man just as good as said he's going after your wife."

Jace's smile slipped easily into place. If there was one thing he didn't have to worry about, it was a possible relationship between Karyn and Scott. An Easy-Bake oven couldn't run off the electricity Scott Jones generated. "I believe I'll take some of that coffee now, Annette."

* * * * *

Sara drew in a long slurp of her milkshake and fixed her curious gaze on her best friend. "So what gives? What was so important you dragged your sorry carcass down to where the working folk are?"

Karyn leaned back on the cracked vinyl seat and smiled. "The way I figure it, I've got at least two months before I start showing."

Sara gave her a suspicious look. "Why don't I like the sound of that?"

“Well, you’re probably going to like this even less. I’ve decided to take these next two months and find out what’s going on.”

“With what?”

“You know.” Karyn lowered her voice. “I want to find out why Sam has returned, why I’m hearing music from my banister and weeping late at night.”

Sara’s eyes lit up with interest. “You’re going to hire a ghost buster?”

“Of course not! I’m going to talk to him. Maybe he can tell me why he’s returned.”

The blonde’s face fell with disappointment. “He could barely talk when he was alive, Karyn. What makes you think he’s going to be able to talk to you now?”

Eyes glittering with an inner fire, Karyn leaned forward, her hands grasping Sara’s. “I have to do something, Sara. I saw him, heard him breathing. My son was in his room, in his own bed and I want to know why. It’s like you said. He’s come back for a reason and,” she looked over her shoulder, reassuring herself they were alone in their conversation, “I don’t think he came alone.”

“Great. A ghost with friends.” Sara tugged the straw from the cup and sipped from the opposite end. “You know, this probably isn’t something you want to hear, but you just might end up driving yourself crazy.”

“I think not knowing would do that before finding out the truth ever could.”

“Well, you know I want to help.”

Karyn shook her head. “This is something I need to do alone.”

“You’ve done too many things alone as it is.”

“What does that mean?”

Sara drank down the last of the creamy drink and dabbed her mouth with a paper napkin. “You know exactly what I mean. If you had asked for my help before deciding to end your marriage, you might not be in this predicament. Hey, where are you going?” Sara jumped to her feet and dashed after her

friend's departing figure. She managed to catch up with her two doors down from the diner. "Where are you going in such a hurry?"

Karyn stopped, whirled around and glowered at her. "I came to you for support, not a lecture, Sara."

Sara lowered her gaze, but only for a brief second. When she lifted her head, her own ire was building. "I'm sorry. I thought you came to me for the truth. I've never hid my opinion from you, just as you've never hid yours from me. I thought we had that kind of friendship. You know, the kind where we could be honest with one another and not have to worry about the consequences. It appears I was wrong. I can't hold your hand and tell you everything's going to be okay when I don't know that it is. And furthermore, if you think I'm going to apologize for thinking you're making a mistake by ending your marriage, well, I hate to disillusion you, but that's not going to happen."

Karyn's eyes narrowed, filling with a quiet, simmering anger. "I would never expect an apology from you."

It was Sara's turn to be affronted. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"You always think you're right. People who think that way never apologize. You and Jace are just alike in that respect." She gave a sharp laugh. "Maybe you should have married him."

"Well, if I had, you can bet your boots I wouldn't be letting him go now."

"How can you be so sure of that?"

"Because if you really love someone, you make it work."

"Is that why you divorced your first husband, Sara?" Karyn regretted the question the instant it slipped past her lips and she found herself apologizing before her friend could respond. "Oh, hell, Sara, I didn't mean that. Look, we're both emotional right now. I'm going for a walk and try to clear my head. I'll call you later tonight."

Sara didn't reply. She just turned and walked away.

Karyn gave a low curse and folded her arms across her chest, dropping her gaze to the pavement. God, when had every relationship in her life become so difficult?

* * * * *

Henry nursed a cold cup of coffee, his black eyes glittering with unconcealed interest at this latest topic of conversation. “Yeah, Mrs. Wickers told me she’d taken a leave of absence from the school and is holed up inside that house of hers with the shades drawn.”

“Well, I heard she’s holding some kind of séance for her son.” Annette refilled the mugs all around and leaned in closer over the Formica table top, her eyes scanning the face of each party in the group to see if she’d gained their interest. Seeing several pairs of eyes light with the gleam for more information, she continued in a low, husky tone. “In fact, I’ve heard tell there’s even been candles in the windows late at night.” She patted a heavily ringed hand over her burnished red beehive and nodded importantly.

“Aw, hell, my wife burns candles in the window. It don’t mean she’s holding no séance,+

” Skinny Brian Burns threw in with a thump of his fist against the table. “Course, I don’t think there’s even one member of her family who’s passed on that Cora cares anything about talking to again. Maybe that has a lot to do with it.”

There were chuckles all around.

“Séance,” another farmer snorted his derision. “Now, what on earth would ever possess such a level-headed woman like Karyn Morgan to hold a séance? She should know by now that those things ain’t real. Her son is dead and she should let him rest in peace. People trying to raise the dead. Why, that just ain’t natural.”

“I agree,” the waitress said with another bob of her head that threatened to dislodge the too-tall hairdo. “But no one can talk to her, least of all Dr. Morgan. Why, my Anita went into his office the other day. She said he was real withdrawn and just had the saddest look in those beautiful blue eyes of his.”

Henry shot the waitress a look of pure disgust. “You looking to fix your daughter up with the good doctor, Annette?”

She shot him a look strong enough to bend steel. “You hold your tongue, Henry Wilder. I ain’t doin’ no such thing. Anita was feeling poorly, so I suggested she run on by the doctor. Of course, she was fine, just a touch of the flu bug, but when she invited Dr. Morgan over for supper one night this week, she said he just went all quiet-like. Said he wouldn’t be much company and begged her forgiveness. In spite of all of his pain, he’s still such a gentleman.” Her face took on a wishful expression the group recognized as a mother’s hope.

“Well, I think someone needs to talk to Karyn.” Another farmer joined the conversation despite his wife’s disapproving look.

Henry’s head swiveled. “And say what? What she does in her own house ain’t none of our concern, I reckon. It’s still a free country.”

“I still think we should do something. I don’t want to be sleeping all peaceful like in my own bed while dead people are roaming the streets. In fact, I don’t think I could sleep too peaceful now. This is just something better left in God’s hands. She ain’t got no business messing with things that don’t concern her. The dead are dead and that’s the way they should stay.” John Houden continued to voice his concerns while his wife kicked him under the table. “What? Whatcha kicking me for?”

“This ain’t none of our concern,” Diane Houden announced in a threatening tone of voice.

“Do you really think she’s trying to raise her son?” Annette, having forgotten all about her job, scooted her plump rear onto the vinyl next to Henry and she was following the topic with open glee.

“What else could she be doing?” Jack, another farmer who’d been following the conversation, finally wagged his tongue.

“Well, maybe we should” The bell on the glass door clanged, signaling the entrance of another customer. All voices quieted as Jace walked into the diner. Eyes shifted uncomfortably when the doctor walked past.

Jack's gaze fell to the menu beside his glass of water as if searching for something to order even though his meal was growing cold in front of him. Henry's eyes drifted toward the window, seeming to take a special interest in the parking lot while Annette shuffled to her feet and removed the pencil from behind her ear.

Feeling the tension in the air, Jace could only hazard a guess that he—or his marriage, rather—had been the latest topic of diner gossip. Another downside to living in a small town, he guessed. Sliding onto a stool, he reached for one of the stained menus and perused the offerings needlessly. He already knew what he wanted; he was just giving the patrons time to recover from their embarrassment. He wouldn't waste his breath chastising the group. No amount of warnings would prevent Annette from spreading gossip like cream cheese on a bagel. And the townspeople would always listen.

Annette sidled up to the counter, pencil and order pad in hand. "What'll it be for you today, Dr. Morgan?"

He closed the menu and slid it across the counter. "Oh, I guess the usual."

"Coming right up." She rounded the counter and hung the order in place, hollering "Order up," even though the cook was standing directly in front of her. Then, planting her rump firmly against the silver refrigerator, she pasted an appropriately concerned expression on her homely face. "So how is Karyn, Dr. Morgan? We've been so worried about her."

Jace managed to hide a smile. "Well, I'm sure she appreciates your concern."

"I heard she ain't working no more."

This was news to him. Maybe there was something to be said for the gossip mill, after all. "Oh, really? I hadn't heard."

Annette was practically drooling at the thought of imparting information to unblemished ears. "Yes, I believe it was two months she took off, but it could possibly be longer. I guess that would depend on what she finds out."

Jace didn't take the bait. Instead, he stuck one hand into the pocket of his expensive sports coat and took out his cell phone. Casually, he punched in a phone number and placed the receiver against his ear. "Ben, hi, it's me. Are we still on for tomorrow morning?"

Annette harrumphed her disapproval and turned back toward the order window. "Ain't that order 'bout ready? It ain't like you were swamped back there."

"Keep your shirt on, Annette." The cook growled. Then, as if realizing the wisdom of his words, he added, "Yeah, please do that for all of us."

She spluttered her ire and snatched the pot of coffee from the burner. "I'll just go refill some cups. Try not to take until Christmas to finish, will ya?"

Ending the conversation, Jace placed the cellular phone on the counter top just in time to hear Annette complaining about the rudeness of those 'portable' phones. This time, he didn't bother smothering the grin.

"He's off the phone," Jack's whisper was only slightly lower than the whine of a chainsaw.

Annette punched the farmer on the shoulder. "Where'd you learn to whisper? In a saw mill?"

Jack's face flushed a dull red and he subsided into silence.

"Ain't you gonna ask him about them there séances?" Henry queried, his own whisper decidedly lower.

Annette tugged on her apron and pulled her lips together in a disapproving grimace. "You just don't worry about what I'm going to ask him. Since I'll be the one doing the asking, I think it should be up to me what questions I ask." Turning with a flounce of her pink cotton skirt, she strolled back toward the counter.

Jace had prepared himself for the barrage of questions once the waitress returned and he neatly headed them off at the pass. "Annette, I appreciate your concern for my wife, but I'd really rather not discuss her or my marriage, if that's okay. I would just like to eat my dinner in peace."

Annette's mouth fell with disappointment. Placing the plate of home-cooked meatloaf and vegetables in front of him, she spared him a smile. "I understand, Dr. Morgan. Enjoy your meal then." She walked away, heading back to the group of farmers gathered around the round table in the corner.

His cell phone trilled loudly, bringing several sets of eyes toward the doctor. Jace answered the summons on the third ring. "Dr. Morgan. All right. I'll be right there." He clicked the phone shut and slid off the stool. One hand dipped into his pocket to retrieve his wallet. "Annette, unfortunately, I'm going to have to run."

The waitress hurried back over to the counter, an interested gleam in her eyes. "Oh? I hope it's nothing too serious." She made the sentence sound like a question.

Jace removed a ten-dollar bill from his wallet and tossed it on the smooth counter top. "Tell Kev the meal was excellent as usual." Spinning on his heel, he exited the diner without satisfying Annette's avid curiosity.

* * * * *

Jace knelt down until he was eye level with his young patient. "Now, I know you don't want me to touch that leg of yours, Brian, but if I don't touch it, I can't help you. And I know you want me to help you, don't you?" His voice was softly encouraging.

The eight-year-old boy hiccupped and shrugged pitifully thin shoulders beneath an equally thin t-shirt. "It's just a scratch."

Brian's mother placed a shaky hand on the top of her son's tousled hair and spared the doctor a smile. "He was playing behind the apartments again. I've told him to stay away from there, but you know how young boys can be." She winced as she realized the mistake of her words. "Oh, Dr. Morgan, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories for you."

Jace lifted a hand in dismissal. "It's all right, Mrs. Shamblin. I know what you were trying to say." His eyes never left Brian's tear-stained face. "So what do you say, Brian? Are you going to let me help you?"

Brian's gaze dropped to the bloody knee of his right leg. "I guess so, but I don't want no needles."

"We'll see." Jace didn't make any promises as he lifted the small boy onto the examining table. Several seconds passed in complete silence before he spoke again. "Well, it doesn't look too bad, but I do think I'm going to have to put a few stitches in." At Brian's squeal of terror, Jace placed both of his hands on the young boy's shoulders. "I couldn't promise you there would be no needles, but I can promise you this. You won't feel the stitches going on."

Brian drew his knee closer to his body and shook his head resolutely. "I don't want no needles, Dr. Morgan. No needles."

Mrs. Shamblin approached slowly, her face a pale mask of worry. "I'm sorry. He's terrified of needles. Ever since his father ... well, you know."

Jace did know. Lenny Shamblin had been the talk of the town when he'd overdosed on heroin. Unfortunately, what the townspeople hadn't known in their thirst for gossip was that Brian had been the one to find his father's body. Their free discussion of a topic about which they knew little had proved devastating to a small boy of six years, and it had taken the town's only psychiatrist over a year to even coax him out of his room and back into everyday life. Sending the widow an understanding smile, he touched the boy's cheek with gentle fingertips. "I promise I'll be as gentle as I can, but I really need to stitch this cut, Brian."

The office door jangled, signaling the entrance of a visitor. Jace turned, frowning. "I'm sorry. Will you excuse me? I forgot to lock the door behind me." He stepped out into the waiting area just as Karyn reached the door to his office. "Karyn?"

She whirled, one hand over her heart. "Jace! You scared the life out of me!"

"Why did you come here if you didn't expect me to be here?"

"I just didn't expect you to be here so suddenly. I'm sorry. Can you talk?"

“Actually,” Jace gestured toward the examining room with his thumb, “I have a small patient in here I’m trying to coax into a few stitches.”

“How small?”

“It’s Brian Shamblin.”

Karyn’s face blossomed into a smile. “Maybe I can help.” She didn’t give him time to respond as she swept past him into the exam room. “Hi, Brian. Mrs. Shamblin.”

Brian looked up from his wound with a distrustful eye. “Hi.”

“Hello, Mrs. Morgan.” Donna Shamblin winced as her son let loose with a keening wail that bounced off the high ceiling. “Sorry. Brian’s a little upset. He needs stitches and I’m afraid he isn’t too keen on the idea.”

Karyn approached the table, her expression one of complete understanding. “I don’t blame him. When I was younger, I hated needles, too.”

Brian’s face lost some of its wariness. “You did?”

“Sure, I did. I didn’t want a doctor coming anywhere near me if he was carrying a needle.”

“So what happened? Are you still afraid of needles?”

Karyn placed her hand on his hair. “Not anymore. You see, one day, a few years ago, a dog bit me and I had to get several shots over a few days in my arm. After that, I figured what’s one shot compared to so many.”

Brian’s eyes were wide with wonder. “Did the shots hurt?”

“Not really.”

“Who gave them to you?”

“Dr. Morgan,” Karyn replied simply. Her spine tingled and she knew Jace had joined them. “He’s very good with needles.”

“Really?” The boy relaxed his leg.

Karyn ruffled his hair affectionately. “Really.”

“Well, I guess it’s okay then.” Brian focused his attention on the doctor. “You can go ahead and give me the stitches, but remember you promised I wouldn’t feel anything.”

Jace walked forward. “So I did.” He reached for the bottle of Lidocaine. “Karyn, you can wait in my office if you’d like.”

“Can’t she stay?” Brian reached for her hand.

“Or she can stay,” Jace allowed with a gentle smile.

* * * * *

“You take care, Brian, and don’t go behind those apartments anymore. You got lucky this time.” Jace called after Brian as he raced toward his mother’s aging Honda.

Mrs. Shamblin turned, extended her hand. “Thanks again, Dr. Morgan, and if you would, just have your assistant send the bill to me as soon as possible.” She didn’t voice what was in her eyes, that she had no idea how she would pay the bill, but pride wouldn’t let her ignore it.

Jace nodded, wished the woman well, and closed the office door. Turning the lock into place, he pivoted to face his wife.

“You have no intention of sending her a bill, do you?” Karyn leaned across the counter top.

He shifted, stuck his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “Some things never change.”

“But some things do.” She straightened. “I came to talk to you about Sara.”

His eyebrows rose inquiringly. “Why would you want to talk to me about your friend?”

“Well, it’s not just about her. It’s about. Well ... I hurt her and I didn’t mean to.”

“Why don’t we go into my office? You look like you need to sit down.”

“No, I’m fine. I can’t stay long.” She dragged her fingers through her hair and closed her eyes. “I feel like I’m going insane.”

“Because of Sara?”

Her eyes met his. “Because of Sam.”

Jace took a deep breath, preparing his response. “Karyn, you know Sam is dead.”

Vivid green eyes burned with anger. “I know that better than you. After all, I’m the only one who puts flowers on his grave.”

Jace swallowed hard. “Did you come here to fight?”

She forced her shoulders to relax. “No, I didn’t. I see him, Jace. He’s there. He’s with me. I can’t explain it.”

“You’ve been under a lot of stress. Why don’t you let me give you something to help you relax?”

“That’s your solution? To pump me full of drugs so I don’t have to think or feel? I don’t want to hide my head in the sand until this goes away. Don’t you understand? If Sam has come back, he’s come back for a reason.”

Jace stormed past her, pushing open the door to his office with a violent flick of his wrist. “Sam hasn’t come back, Karyn!” He rested one hand against the dark paneling lining the walls.

She followed him. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because he’s not a ghost! Ghosts do not exist!”

“Where’s your scientific proof, doctor?”

He whipped around to face her and his shoulder bumped into the oak bookcase. “So far, the only proof you have is the banister and a vision of our son ... a vision which could have been brought on by too little sleep and too much stress.”

“You felt the banister, too. You heard the music.”

“Yes, I did, but I’m intelligent enough to pass it off as an unexplained occurrence and move on. I’m not dwelling on it. Freak things happen. It’s a part of life.”

“Seeing Sam in his bed wasn’t an unexplained occurrence.”

“No? Then, what was it? The last I knew, you weren’t psychic. You never have been able to communicate with the dead ... at least you never told me if you were. Is that a part of your past you hid from me?”

Karyn's shoulders stiffened again. "You know, you really are a bastard." She headed toward the door.

"Karyn, wait," Jace called after her. "For Pete's sake, will you wait a minute?" The bell slapped against the office door as he ran after her. He reached her at her car door. He caught hold of her arm. "Just listen to me for a minute. I'm not trying to say you didn't see what you think you saw. All I'm saying is you've been under a lot of pressure. You need to try to look at this objectively."

The look she gave him was tinged with sadness. "I saw our son and you want me to be objective." She removed his hand from her arm and slid behind the wheel. "Sometimes, Jace, I feel sorry for you." Punching the key into the ignition, she started the engine and roared out of the parking lot.

"She's seeing things and she feels sorry for me," Jace muttered on his return trip to his office.

* * * * *

Jace's breath fogged in the crisp air as he walked through the graveyard. His feet crunched over the frozen ground and reaching his son's grave, he stopped, seeking the inscription on the cold marble.

"Beloved son of Jace and Karyn Morgan." His voice cracked and he knelt down, his hand resting against the stone. He didn't know what to say or even why he came. He only knew something had drawn him to where his son lay. He hadn't come before, not since the day of Sam's funeral, and even then he hadn't stayed very long. Karyn had. She'd stayed for most of the evening until he'd had to pull her away from their son's tombstone.

His eyes closed and his hand fisted against the unyielding rock. "God, Sam, I miss you. I guess I didn't realize how much until now. Your mother doesn't think I miss you, but I couldn't tell her. I couldn't." He lowered his head and the tears came then like a cleansing rain. "You meant more to me than I could ever say. One day you were there and the next you were gone, and it was like ripping out a piece of my heart. How can I tell your mother that?" He swiped at the tears on his face. "She expects me to be strong ... even when she's told me that it's over. Well, I can't be strong, not when it means watching her walk out of my life. I won't do it!" He raised an angry face to the sky. "Do you hear me? I won't do it! I

won't let her walk away from me! I won't let this be the end of my marriage! My son's death won't be for nothing! I won't let it!" He got to his feet, his gaze still glued to the marble. "Don't worry, Sam. I'm not about to let Mommy end our marriage. I'll fix it somehow."

* * * * *

"Dr. Morgan! Dr. Morgan! Yoo-hoo!" A heavysset woman chugged up the sidewalk as fast as her plump legs would carry her. Her breath came in short huffs of air while her thin, brown hair stuck to her perspiring forehead. With one hand, she waved frantically to gain Jake's attention. The other hand was clamped firmly around the arm of a young woman who she towed behind her like a broken-down vehicle.

Jace stopped, turned and barely restrained himself from rolling his eyes. Another mother was about to make a bid for his services for her unmarried daughter. "Mrs. Alston. It's nice to see you again."

The woman slowed to a stop, still breathing heavily, her face red from the exertion. "I'm so glad I caught you. My daughter, Callie," she shoved the young woman forward, "is feeling poorly. Just hasn't been herself for the last two days and I don't know what's wrong with her. I know that it's after hours, but I was wondering if you could take a look at her."

Jace's eyes searched the daughter's face, at least what he could see from beneath the thick fringe of bangs that partially obscured her eyes. He smiled. "Callie, what seems to be the problem?" His deep voice coaxed a response, but it wasn't the response for which Mrs. Alston was hoping.

Callie lifted her gaze, eyes flashing brightly. "There's nothing wrong with me, Dr. Morgan, that a wedding ring wouldn't cure—at least, that's what my mother thinks. I, on the other hand, am perfectly happy with my life." She squared her shoulders, peeled her mother's fingers away from her arm, and walked away.

Jace couldn't prevent a grin as Callie's mother stared after her daughter in disbelief. "If you will excuse me, Mrs. Alston, I'm late for an appointment." He turned away, but paused to throw over his shoulder, "by the way, I am still married and I have no intentions of becoming single at any time in the near future. You might want to think about that before you auction your daughter off to a married man."

* * * * *

The doorbell pealed incessantly, bringing Karyn down the stairs in a rush. Swinging the door wide, she stared at her visitor in surprise. “Scott? What on earth are you doing here?”

Scott Jones held his hands wide, a huge smile on his face. “I came to see you. Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

Karyn tossed a look over her shoulder as if expecting Jace to magically appear behind her. “Well, I’m not really fit for company right now. I’ve been cleaning all day and look at me, I’m a mess.”

Scott continued to grin. “You look fine to me. Come on, I promise I won’t stay long.”

“Well, all right.” Stepping back to allow him entrance, Karyn brushed a hand over her hair and winced. Having just slapped it back in a ponytail, she was sure, by now, it had refused to stay in the confines of the band. Damp tendrils clung to the sides of her face and sweat slid down her temples. She felt gritty and the worn jeans and torn T-shirt didn’t invite visitors. But knowing Scott’s insistent nature, she beckoned him to follow her. “I’m sure I have some lemonade if you’d like a glass.”

Scott’s pale blue eyes took in his surroundings and with a low whistle, he seated himself on a barstool, leaning his elbows on the counter top. “You’ve moved up in the world.”

Holding a glass underneath the automatic ice maker, Karyn tossed a glance over her shoulder. “You’ve been gone for quite awhile.”

“Six years.” He tilted his perfectly coiffed head and favored her with a charming smile. “I’ve missed you.”

She chuckled. “Scott, what we had was over a long time ago.”

“I heard you’re separated.”

“I am. Is that what brought you back to town?” From the corner of her eye, she observed him, noticing Scott still favored the GQ look. Khaki pants, loafers and button-down shirts with a sweater knotted just below his collarbone. She couldn’t imagine Jace ever wearing the same type of outfit. Though a doctor, Jace was more of a rugged type of guy. He didn’t mind getting sweaty, working hard,

playing hard. She fanned herself to flush away the memories of glistening muscles and Jace peeling his t-shirt over his head after a particularly hard game of handball.

Scott rubbed his chin, taking his time before responding to the question. “What if I said yes?”

“I’d say you’ve just wasted a trip.”

He seemed to accept her decision. “Then I thought you could use a friend. Maybe you wouldn’t mind if I took you out to dinner sometime.”

Karyn placed the glass of lemonade in front of him and clamped her hands on her hips. “Actually, I would.”

He took a sip of the tart liquid and nodded. “Still in love with the doctor, huh? So much in love you can’t have a male friend?”

“It’s not that, and I really don’t feel comfortable having this conversation with you. What goes on between Jace and me is going to stay between the two of us.”

Scott grinned. “You mean the two of you and the entire town of Stafford.”

“I can’t stop them from gossiping. They’re going to think what they will.”

“They think you’re crazy and Jace is free again.”

Before Karyn could respond, she heard tires on the pavement and knew before she turned back toward the window that her next visitor was Jace. “Great.” Shaking her head, she walked toward the front door.

Scott was right behind her. “Someone’s here?”

Karyn opened the door and waited for Jace to reach the front step. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

Jace’s gaze slid past his wife to where Scott stood. His eyes narrowed. “Obviously. Jones.” He inclined his sandy-brown head shortly. There was no welcome in his voice and his face was cast in stone, lending a testament to his displeasure.

Scott tugged at the collar of his dress shirt and managed a wobbly smile. “Jace, long time no see. I was, uh, just leaving.”

Jace stood to one side and waved his arm toward the expensive import parked in the driveway.

“Then, by all means, don’t let me stop you.”

“I was a guest,” Scott inserted a trifle defensively.

“And now you’re leaving.”

“Jace, please...” Karyn tried to intervene.

“You don’t like me very much. Do you, Jace?”

Jace’s smile held no humor. “I don’t like you at all.”

Scott bristled. “Why? Because I once dated your wife?”

“No, because you’re trying to date her now.”

Scott flushed, his eyes whipping to Karyn’s stunned face before skating back toward his adversary. “Like I said, I was just leaving.”

“Didn’t mean to break up the party.” Jace’s voice held no apology.

Scott squeezed Karyn’s arm and whispered, “I’ll call you,” before darting down the driveway to his car.

Karyn held up one finger. “I don’t want to hear one word from you. Not one word. Scott just got here.”

Jace lifted his shoulders in a shrug. “I’m not threatened by Scott Jones, Karyn. He’s in your past.”

She stiffened. “And at the rate you’re going, that’s where you’re going to end up.”

Five

Jace strolled past her into the living room with the overstuffed sofa, antique roll-top desk and Monet paintings Karyn favored. He removed his leather jacket and with a flick of his wrist, tossed it onto the back of the sofa. Then, slowly, deliberately, he pivoted, blue eyes twinkling with laughter. “Do you really want me to be jealous of Scott? This is the same Scott you were so anxious to dump almost six years ago, isn’t it? You know, the one who dated you for two years and didn’t touch you beyond a chaste goodnight kiss because he, what was it again, oh, yeah, respected you too much to tarnish you.”

Her lips twitched and she looked away. Even she knew the thought of Scott moving in on her was ludicrous. He might try, but the chance of having any kind of connection with the banker was between slim and none. It was one of the reasons why she’d broken up with him to begin with: no spark. Then, from out of the blue, a vivid memory brought a full smile to her lips. Her first date with Jace. There’d been much more than a spark. The fire between them could have kept Smokey busy for a year. She glanced up and sucked in a sharp breath. Jace was standing directly in front of her, close enough to touch. “What are you doing here, Jace?”

He lifted a finger, tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “I came to see you. What were you thinking about?”

“When?”

“Just now.”

The smile was back. It didn’t occur to her to hide it from him. “Our first date.”

Jace returned the smile. “Good memories.”

“Yes, but unfortunately, that’s all they are.”

“So we’ll make new ones.”

“You’re not giving up, are you?”

“I told you I wouldn’t.” He touched the hair swinging long down her back, letting the silken strands sift through his fingers.

“Have you been drinking?” She queried bluntly.

It was a fair question, but it bothered him, nonetheless. “I haven’t had a drop in weeks.” His hand dropped back to his side.

“Why?”

“Because I can’t drown my sorrows any longer.” He took a deep breath and caught her hand in his. “There’s something I want you to know.”

She looked down at their combined hands and waited.

“I went to Sam’s grave this morning.”

A long, sharp stab of pain pierced her heart and Karyn’s breath wheezed in her lungs. “You haven’t been there since ...”

“Since he died, I know.”

“So why did you go this morning?”

He led her to the sofa. “I wanted to talk to him.”

Karyn sat down beside him. “What were you looking for, Jace?”

“Hell, I don’t know. Closure maybe.”

“There can’t be closure as long as he’s here.”

“I know. That’s why I want to move back in.”

She tugged her hand away from his and clutched it to her breast. “What? No, forget it. I heard you. Why would you want to move back in when you think I’m crazy?”

“I never said you were crazy.”

“As good as.”

“I said you were under pressure. That’s not crazy.”

“Oh, come on.” She got back on her feet. “Why don’t you tell me the real reason you want to move back in? Do you think you need to protect me? Do you think I’m going to do something stupid? Do you think I don’t know what the townspeople are saying about me? You know, too. That’s why you’re here. You think I might be crazy enough to try a séance or some other voodoo mechanism in order to communicate with Sam.” She folded her arms across her heaving breasts and waited.

What could he say? He’d thought of those things and more. And what the townspeople were saying did play a big part in his decision to approach her. He’d always known Karyn could read him; he just didn’t realize how easily until now. He improvised. “Yes, I’m worried about you, but it’s much more than that. If you think there’s something going on here, then I want to be with you to find out what it is, too.”

Nervous fingers lifted to tug the band out of her hair. Tangled auburn curls tumbled around her shoulders and she shook her head. “No, Jace. It wouldn’t work. You may have gone to see Sam at his grave this morning, but that one visit isn’t enough. You still haven’t come to terms with the loss of our son ... and you still blame me.”

He pushed himself to his feet, settled his hands on her shoulders. “No, I don’t. That night, it was the alcohol talking.”

She stepped back, out of his reach. “No, it wasn’t. It was what you felt. For the first time in a long time, you finally revealed your true feelings. I don’t hate you for that. I was angry with you at first, but then, once I calmed down, I realized you were only saying what you believed.” She took two steps toward the kitchen and stopped. “Don’t you see? You can’t move back in here because nothing has changed. You still blame me for the death of our son and I still blame you for the break up of our marriage.”

Jace’s blood ran cold and he froze. “What? What are you talking about?”

“If you had opened up to me, told me how you felt months ago, we might still be together.”

“Oh, Karyn, you can’t believe that! You think that because I didn’t pour out my heart to you that you had the right to close the door on our marriage? Maybe you’ve convinced yourself you’re in the right,

but you couldn't be more wrong. When we married, it was until death do us part, in sickness and in health, for better or worse. Sam's death was the worst thing that could happen to us and you chose not to honor our vows. I would have still been here. Yes, I'm the one who left, but only because you wanted me to leave. We should have stayed together, worked through this. Like it or not, I was still in our marriage. So where in the hell were you?"

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. "I think you should leave now."

"Yes, that's your way, isn't it? When you're hearing something you don't want to hear, you either leave or make the other person leave. It's no wonder our marriage is falling apart. You won't listen to someone who just might be right."

"That's where you're wrong. I'm not listening to someone who might be right. I'm listening to someone who thinks I'm crazy and who won't own up to his part in the failure of our marriage."

"That's because you're blaming it on me!"

"And you're blaming Sam's death on me!"

He reached for his jacket. "I don't know what you want from me, Karyn. I loved Sam as much as you loved him. I miss him, too. I'm sorry I blamed you. I realize now I was wrong. I struck out at you when I should have helped you. But we've been together for far too long to shrug our shoulders and end everything. Sam's death was traumatic for both of us and the last thing we need right now is another trauma." He took a step toward her, but she held up a hand to block his intention.

"Don't. You can't see that it's too late. I needed you eight months ago. I don't need you now."

"I don't believe you. You don't want our marriage to end any more than I do." He reached her side and despite the tension in her body, he touched her, his hand cupping her cheek. "You still love me. Fight it if you will, but you can't deny what's in your heart. Look at me." He waited until green eyes clashed with blue. "I can see it in your eyes right now. You want me to hold you as much as I want to hold you."

She shook her head, trying vainly to deny his accusation. "No, I don't."

He brushed his fingertips across her cheek and she shivered. "You still ache for me."

She closed her eyes against the lull of his words, powerless to stop her body's responses to his. "I don't want this."

"Liar," he whispered, his face inches from hers. He brushed a petal soft kiss across her lips and felt her tremble against him. One hand drew her closer, the other pressing against the small of her back. "You can feel how much I want you. You know as well as I do that nothing is over between us." Another kiss feathered its way down her cheek and Karyn bit back a groan of pure longing. "Why do you keep fighting what your heart wants?"

Her breath shuddered in her lungs and she squeezed her eyes shut, swallowing hard. "It doesn't matter what my heart wants. My head knows what's best."

"Does it? Do you really think it's right to deny ourselves the only thing we want most in the world ... one another? Karyn, look at me and tell me you don't lie awake at night thinking of me, wishing I was pressed against you, my heat mingling with yours." He cupped her face. "You can't tell me that because it's not the truth. There's a power between us that's stronger than either one of us alone. We can't fight it and I'm not even going to try." He stepped away from her then, allowing the coolness of the separation to wash over her. "Over the last week, I've had women throwing themselves at me because they think I'm single again. Well, I don't want to be single again. I love you. I will always love you. Maybe you need more time. Maybe you don't realize how much I love you, how much I need you. I don't know. I do know it doesn't matter what you say, what you think. I'm not going to stand by and watch this marriage crumble. You may think the damage is irreparable, but I make my living in putting people back together. I think the least I can do is put our marriage back together." Spinning on his heel, he left her then. The silence was deafening.

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Annette poured another mug of coffee and planted her round body in the direct line of vision of the farmers, a gleeful expression on her face. "A friend of mine told me Dr. Morgan went over to his old

house and caught Scott Jones there. And Scott had been there for quite awhile. In fact, he looked quite comfortable.” She leaned closer to the avid listeners and lowered her voice, which was only slightly softer than the roar of a backhoe’s engine. “I can’t imagine what the boy was thinking to go over there like that when the gold isn’t even cold in Karyn’s wedding band. Mark my words, that boy’s up to no good. He wants something from Karyn.”

The general consensus agreed with Annette’s prediction with nods and various murmurs.

Jack scoffed at the notion with a grunt. “Have you taken a look at Scott since he got back to town? He couldn’t be more polished than if he was a pair of brand-new leather shoes. He’s gone and gotten himself citified, all spiffed up in his new clothes and fancy haircut.” He shivered at the notion. “He don’t belong here anymore.”

“Maybe he just came back for Karyn.” Henry threw in his opinion with a gap-toothed grin.

Annette swatted his flannel-covered shoulder. “That’s ridiculous! He didn’t even know Karyn was separated until he came rolling back into town.”

“What, you don’t think they have newspapers in the big city?”

“You think this is in the newspapers, you old coot? In the city, they have much more important things to print than stuff like this. Why, I wouldn’t be surprised if no one outside of this town knows about what’s going on here!”

Henry glared at her over the rim of his coffee mug. “Is she still watching for ghosts?”

Jack chuckled and leaned back against the cracked upholstery. “Wouldn’t surprise me none. I heard tell she and her friend done had a fight right out in the middle of the street like some old western movie. Someone told me they almost came to fisticuffs.” His grin broadened. “Wish I could have seen that.”

“Jack Bartlett, you old fool! They weren’t about to fight. The way I heard it, Karyn just snapped at Sara and Sara got her feelings all hurt. Course, with the way Karyn’s been acting, it’s no wonder Sara got her feelings hurt. I just can’t imagine what’s going on in that girl’s head.”

“Maybe she’s gone loony. I’ve heard tell some women do lose it once they have to bury a child.”

Brian offered with no sympathy in his voice.

“Or maybe she’s tired of people talking about her behind her back.” Jace’s voice vibrated with fury.

As the diner fell silent, Annette straightened, tugging her apron down into place. “Well, if it ain’t Dr. Morgan. You’re gettin’ quite a habit of showing up at the wrong time. Have a seat and I’ll pour you a cup of coffee.”

Jace viewed the gathered group with disgust. “No, thanks. I’m not staying.” Feet scuffed on the cracked tile and farmers busied themselves with reading yesterday’s newspaper.

Annette faked a laugh and touched her stiff hairdo. “Oh, come on, Jace, don’t be that way. You know there’s not much to do in this town. We didn’t mean any harm. Just the goings-on around here are interesting to us folks who don’t have a lot of things to do. Surely you’ve been here long enough to know that.”

“I know that once upon a time Karyn helped your son when he was failing the fifth grade, Annette. She spent every evening after school tutoring him so he could pass.” He turned his attention toward Jack. “And I also know that when I made countless house calls out to your farm when your wife was sick and couldn’t come into town, Jack, Karyn came with me to watch after your kids. And Henry, what about the time your daughter ran away from home and everyone, including Karyn, spent the night looking for her? Did you forget about that? Oh, and let’s not forget, Brian, the myriad times I have lifted your sorry ass out of the gutter because you’ve had one too many down at Happy’s Bar. And I seem to remember Karyn helping you sober up so Cora wouldn’t find out about your detour on the way to the grocery store.” Hands on his hips, Jace swung his livid gaze from individual to individual until the upholstery squeaked with the squirms of uncomfortable people. “I see everyone here has forgotten the many times you’ve been helped by the one person you’re now discussing like today’s weather.”

Jack and Henry coughed, straightened their collars and checked their watches as if the time was of the utmost importance. Brian's denims rasped against the upholstery as he searched for a more comfortable position, one that would allow him to retain his dignity and ignore the truth behind Jace's words. Annette suddenly busied herself with wiping off the counter.

"I guess no one has anything to say now." Jace didn't let up.

Annette's eyes flashed as she lifted her gaze. "Don't point a finger at us, Jace Morgan. I'm sure you yourself have been thinking that Karyn has gone off the deep end. What other reason could there be behind her seeing ghosts?"

Jace walked toward the counter, his steps slow. Then, leaning over the edge, he positioned his face inches away from Annette's heavily made-up one. "Listen to me. My wife is none of your business. My marriage is none of your business and I'd appreciate it if you didn't discuss us over your evening cups of coffee. But, if your curiosity is such that you can't contain yourselves, then at least have the decency to come to me instead of speculating about Karyn's mental wellbeing." He swung around and stormed toward the door. The bell jangled with his departure.

Annette patted her hair nervously. "Well, he sure is worked up." The only sound that greeted her observation was the clink of spoons against coffee mugs.

* * * * *

Karyn climbed the stairs slowly, her heart heavy within her chest. She'd watched Jace leave, saw his car pull away from the curb, and she'd wanted to run after him, to call him back. He was right; she didn't want her marriage to end. She did still love him, but the hurt ran too deep. The pain drilled into her heart, leaving it bleeding and raw. Sitting down on the top step, she leaned against the banister and allowed the tears to flow. If only turning back time was a possibility. Oh, for a chance to rewind the clock to the days when the only problem she had to think about was what to wear on her first date with Jace.

Karyn tossed another skirt in the general direction of the bed and bit back a groan. Jace would arrive in less than thirty minutes and she still wasn't dressed. Nothing in her closet seemed right. The tight, black skirt practically screamed easy; the red skirt was too short and the paisley too old-fashioned. Maybe she should have listened to Sara and gone shopping. But she'd been determined this was going to be a casual date, nothing special. The knock came at the door ten minutes later and Karyn swallowed hard. Think casual.

Finally having decided on a knee-length black sheath, she smoothed her hands down the clingy material and managed to walk out of her bedroom without tripping over her own two feet. Mentally counting to ten, she swung open the door, a smile on her face. "Hi."

Jace's eyes skimmed her from head to toe. "Hi." Wearing black jeans and dark blue cotton shirt, he was the relaxed picture of health and vitality. "You look great." It wasn't the words, but the way he said the words that made Karyn catch her breath.

Her smile wobbled. "Thanks. I'll just get my purse."

"That's okay. I'm early." He stepped across the threshold, dominating her small apartment. The spicy scent of his aftershave wafted toward her and Karyn's heartbeat quickened.

"We still should go. Traffic could be bad and ..." She felt his breath on her neck and she turned, encountering his hard body. *"Wh-what are you doing?"*

"You're nervous," he noted huskily.

"Very," she admitted.

"Don't be. I don't usually bite on the first date."

She bit back a giggle. "I'm not as worried about the bite as I am the scar."

His hands cupped her face. "I'll make sure it's in a place that doesn't show."

"I'll be able to see it."

His lips were inches away from hers. "I'll give you something else to think about." He kissed her then, his lips warm and firm against hers.

Karyn felt herself leaning into him, her head swimming. Her hands fluttered against his chest and suddenly, the kiss was over and she was left staring up at him. "What was that for?"

"The anticipation of that first kiss is always a bitch."

"The anticipation of the second one is going to be even worse." Was that really her flirting? "You know, there's the whole comparison thing. Could the second one possibly be as good as the first one and ..."

Jace drew her into his arms, his movements, slow, easy. His hands bracketed her face, his thumbs resting at the corners of her mouth. His head tilted, lips just inches away from hers.

"Let's just find out," he murmured before his lips slanted across hers. Heat exploded in the center of her abdomen and curled downward to her toes. The slight pressure of his lips drugged her, the sensation more powerful than any narcotic. Karyn's body moved, leaned into his, but he pulled away, easing back from her, giving her time to descend back to the present. His smile intoxicated her better than a bottle of wine. "Any comparison?"

Her head spun with the effort to form a coherent thought. "I thought you couldn't top the first one."

"I always make it my goal to do better the next time around."

Karyn tucked her arm through his. "If you don't mind my saying so, Dr. Morgan, I'm looking forward to number three."

Karyn stood, her hand still holding onto the banister. A coldness seeped into her body, stealing her breath and making her knees shake. Clenching her teeth against the frigid blast of air, she closed her eyes and waited.

"Oh, darling, do have a seat before you fall down." The rusty voice grated like the hinge on an old door badly in need of oil.

Karyn blinked open her eyes. "Gran?" She slammed her lids closed again and shook her head resolutely. Then, she cracked open one eye. "This is impossible. You can't be here. You're dead."

Jolene Weatherford held her hands away from her body and twirled as much as possible with a bum knee. “I know, I know. Highly unfortunate for me, but I’m here nonetheless. Now, sit down. I fear we must have a talk before you do something dreadfully stupid.”

Karyn didn’t sit. “Gran, you’ve been dead for years. I’m imagining this. Maybe the town is right. Maybe I am crazy.”

Jolene pushed her wire-rimmed glasses farther up her aquiline nose and glared at her granddaughter. “Pish. You’re no crazier than I am. You aren’t imagining things, either. You’re seeing exactly what you think you’re seeing.”

“You mean I’m seeing a ghost?”

“Well, technically, but I prefer to think of myself as a helpful spirit.”

“Okay, helpful spirit, do you mind telling me why you’re here and just how long you’ve been here?”

“How long doesn’t matter. I’m here because you’re about to ruin something that’s taken a lifetime to build.”

“Why haven’t you come before now?”

“Well, I don’t like to interfere in your life.”

Karyn made an exasperated sound. “Since when? When you were alive, you never stopped interfering.”

Jolene didn’t look pleased. “Well, I wouldn’t be here now if ...” she paused, searching for the right words.

“If what?”

“If Sam hadn’t sent me.”

Karyn let go of the banister and walked away. “I was right. I am imagining things. Maybe I should have taken those drugs Jace offered.” She was still muttering to herself when she closed the bedroom door.

Jolene pressed a wrinkled hand against her mouth. “Oh, dear. That didn’t go very well I’m afraid.”

* * * * *

“Sara!” Karyn pounded on the unyielding wood until her hand was numb. “Sara, come on, open up! I know you’re in there. Your car is out here.”

The door cracked open and Sara shoved her face in the minute amount of space. “What are you doing here, Karyn? The last time we parted ways, it wasn’t pleasant. I’m surprised you would show your face around here. It isn’t like I’ve had the welcome sign out on the front porch. In fact, I—”

Karyn shoved against the door, forcing her way inside her friend’s home. Then, kicking the door shut, she grasped Sara by the shoulders and forced her to face her. “Will you forget about all that? I’ve got something important to tell you. You’re never going to believe who I just had a conversation with.”

Sara winced as the hands on her shoulders tightened. “Who?”

“Gran.”

Sara’s mouth formed an O. “Your Gran?”

“My Gran.”

“But she’s ... she’s ...”

“Dead, I know, but Sara, she was standing right there in front of me. Same blue dress she’d been buried in, same lace shawl and even the broach. Her hair was perfectly styled just the way she liked it. She was even wearing her glasses. And get this.” Karyn released her friend and spun around, taking two steps toward the kitchen before pivoting back to face Sara once more. “She told me Sam sent her.”

“Get out of here!” Sara squealed. “She told you that? Oh, this is big! We’ve got to call someone.” She dashed toward the phone.

“Sara.” Karyn managed to reach her before Sara’s fingers could dial a number. “Who exactly are we supposed to call? The town already thinks I’m crazy. Now if I tell them that not only did I see my son,

but I also saw my grandmother, who incidentally has been dead for four years, what do you think they're going to say?"

Sara tapped her chin thoughtfully. "You've got a point there. They'd probably call for the men in the little white suits."

"Exactly."

"So what did she say after she told you Sam had sent her?"

Karyn's teeth worried her lower lip. "I don't know. I left her."

"You left her? Well, that was kind of rude."

"Sara, I was having a conversation with my deceased grandmother. I really thought I was going insane, but now that I think about it, I actually believe she was there. In fact, after I came back down the stairs, I smelled the rose water she used to wear. Oh, God, I need to sit down." Karyn hobbled toward the staircase and sat down on the bottom step. "What's happening to me? I'm seeing my dead child and now my grandmother and I hear music after I touch the banister and people crying in my house. It's no wonder people think I'm crazy." She dropped her face into her hands. "You know, I should have asked her about the crying."

Sara plopped down beside her and slung an arm over her shoulders. "Well, if it's any consolation, I don't think you're crazy."

"You don't?"

"Nope, but I do think it's time you allowed me to help you. A woman in your condition shouldn't be getting scared by herself. I'll just tell Ben I'm going to stay with you for a couple of days. He'll understand."

"And what if nothing happens in those two days? Maybe no one will show up with you there."

"You think the ghosts are scared of me?"

"I didn't say that, but obviously Gran came back for a reason." Karyn leaped to her feet. "Oh, wait! She said I was about to ruin something that had taken a lifetime to build."

Sara clapped both hands against her mouth, obscuring her reply.

“What did you say?”

Sara’s hands dropped back down to her lap. “I just said that was deep. I think she’s talking about your marriage.”

Karyn nodded shakily. “So do I.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“What do you mean what am I going to do about it? I can only deal with one crisis at a time!”

Sara smacked her. “Personally, if I got a message from the grave, I believe I’d be listening to whoever brought it.”

Karyn rubbed her arm. “I didn’t say I wasn’t listening.”

“Well, are you still going to get a divorce?”

Karyn swallowed, licked her lips and looked at her friend. “I don’t know.”

“If I were you, I’d be thinking long and hard before going through with a divorce after a warning like that.”

“It wasn’t a warning.”

“Then what do you call it?”

“More like a ... well, a helping hand.”

“Then take the helping hand!”

Karyn squared her shoulders. “Get packed. You’re coming with me.”

Sara leaped to her feet with a crow of delight. “All right! Finally, I’m going to get to see someone from the beyond.” She dashed down the hallway, calling over her shoulder. “Do you think she’ll remember me?”

* * * * *

“Sara’s gone to stay with Karyn for a few days,” Ben announced around a bite of the double-decker sandwich.

Jace's hands stilled, his own sandwich less than an inch away from his mouth. "Why?"

"She gave me some story about being worried about Karyn."

"And you don't believe her?"

"Sara's never been a good liar."

"Then why do you think she's there?"

Ben searched for his napkin and then, with a shrug, dragged his hand over the back of his mouth.

"Probably something to do with your resident ghost."

Jace placed the sandwich back down on the paper plate. "There is no resident ghost."

"You saying Karyn's crazy?" Ben queried politely.

Jace's brows lowered to a scowl. "No, that's not what I'm saying. She's been working too much and with our separation, well, I'm not surprised she's seeing things."

Ben rocked his chair back on two legs. "Usually, when people start hallucinating, they're either going insane or they're on drugs."

"Karyn's not going insane."

"She's on drugs, then?"

"Will you stop putting words in my mouth? Karyn has never taken drugs. She doesn't even like to take aspirin."

"Okay. Next possible explanation for what your wife has been seeing in your house."

Jace pushed the paper plate away from him and leaned back in the chair, his fingers laced across his flat abdomen. "Maybe she's seeing what she wants to see."

Ben tipped his head to one side as if pondering the idea. "I don't think she was really wanting to see her grandmother."

"What are you talking about?"

"Karyn told Sara she saw her grandmother yesterday."

The chair scooted away from the table and Jace got to his feet. “That does it. I’m going over there and I’m not leaving until she agrees to let me move back in.”

Ben smirked. “And you really think that’s going to happen?”

“It has to.” Jace’s palm slapped the counter top. “Damn it, Ben, don’t you see what’s happening? Ever since I moved out, strange things have been going on and I think it’s a cry for help.”

“Yeah, but my question is, who’s doing the crying?”

Jace stared at his friend as if the man seated across from him had suddenly morphed into an extraterrestrial. “Karyn, of course.”

“You really don’t think she’s seeing what she says she’s seeing, right?”

“Of course not. There’s a logical explanation for all of this.”

Still wearing the smirk, Ben took another bite of his sandwich. “Well, that’s the right attitude. Why don’t you go over there and tell Karyn the exact same thing you just told me? I’m sure she’ll let you move right back in.”

Eyes glittering with anger, Jace turned around suddenly. “You can see yourself out.”

“I’ll just wait here for you. You’ll be back.”

“Maybe not.”

Ben grinned. “Oh, trust me on this one, friend. You’ll be back.”

* * * * *

Jolene walked through the rooms slowly, her cane impeding her progress. She stopped outside the room that used to belong to her great-grandchild. Such a sweet child. Her arthritic hands touched the wooden crib, running along the slats. She imagined him sleeping there, his soft curls resting against the small pillow, his mother watching over him as he slept. Her granddaughter had been a protective mother she was sure and now, it was Sam’s turn to watch over her. Turning back toward the door with renewed purpose, she tapped her way back toward the staircase.

* * * * *

Karyn turned the key in the lock and pushed open the door. A familiar scent floated out into the late, afternoon air and she whirled back toward her friend with an accusing look. “See? Smell that. I told you. She’s been here.”

Sara sniffed the air obediently and her eyes widened. “That does smell like her. You think she’s been here while you were gone?”

“I don’t think she ever left.” Leading the way into the living room, Karyn tossed her keys onto the sofa table and removed her jacket. “Gran? Are you still here? Gran?”

Sara frowned. “I don’t think she’s going to come when you call her. I’ve heard that ghosts are choosy about when they appear.”

“Since when do you know so much about ghosts?”

“I don’t know. I’ve heard about them, though.” Sara strolled past her friend and flopped down onto the sofa. “Where’s the remote?”

“You’re not here to watch television. You’re here to help me find out what’s going on,” Karyn admonished. She took two steps toward the stairs when the ringing of the phone summoned her. “Could you get that? I really don’t want to talk to anyone right now.”

“Sure.” Sara rolled to her feet and hurried toward the cordless phone on the kitchen counter. “Hello? Oh, hi, honey. What? No, she doesn’t want to see him right now. Gosh, he’s persistent, isn’t he? Well, she won’t like it, I’m telling you. Oh, we were just ... um ... watching some television.” She shrugged her shoulders with the lie. “Yes, I know. Okay, I’ll tell her, but she isn’t going to like it. I love you, too.” She replaced the receiver and met her friend’s questioning gaze. “Jace is on his way over here. It seems Ben told him about your meeting with your grandmother.”

“What? You told Ben?”

“He asked what was going on.”

“Why couldn’t you make something up?”

“He sees right through me when I lie. Like, just then.” Sara pointed toward the telephone. “When I told him we were watching television, he told me I was lying to him. See? He reads me like a thin paperback book.” She held up her hands in a gesture of contrition. “Sorry.”

“Well, I’m not hanging around here to have another conversation with Jace. Once a day is enough. You know he thinks I’m crazy. This probably seals his opinion.” Karyn snatched her keys from the table and headed out the door.

Sara positioned herself by the front door, watching with a pensive look on her face.

Karyn slid behind the wheel of her Camry, determination on her face. Plugging the key in the ignition, she attempted to start the engine. A strange, gurgling sound greeted her ears. Frowning, she twisted the key once more. Silence. Opening the car door, she stepped out into the crisp air.

“What’s wrong?” Sara called from the open door.

“The car won’t start.”

“Well, take mine.”

Karyn tossed her friend an annoyed look. “I parked behind you, Sara. I can’t get your car out.”

“Oh, yeah, that would present a problem, wouldn’t it? I guess you can’t leave, after all.”

“There’s something strange going on here. I just had this car serviced.” Karyn slammed the car door, walked toward the hood and kicked the front tire.

Sara snickered. “What do you think that’s going to do?”

Karyn glowered at her. “I don’t know, but it’s something women are supposed to do when their cars won’t start. I saw it in a movie once.” She marched back into the house. “When Jace gets here, tell him I don’t want to see him.”

Sara winced as she trotted after her friend. “I’d rather not get in the middle between you and Jace.”

“You’re here to help, Sara.”

“Yeah, with the ghosts, not with your husband. Jace has just as much right to be here as I do. More, actually. I think you should talk to him. Who knows? Maybe he’s coming over here because he wants to help.”

“That’ll be the day.” Karyn’s breath exhaled in a sharp burst of air. “He’s coming over here to offer tranquilizers. He’s a doctor. That’s what doctors do.”

“I think you should trust him a little bit more. I mean, Sam was his son, too, you know.”

“Yes, but he hasn’t seen him since Sam died. I’m the only one who has, the only one who understands.”

It was Sara’s turn to exhale loudly. “You don’t understand; you’re still trying to figure it out yourself.”

“Look, just tell Jace I don’t want to see him and close the door. It’s as simple as that.”

Six

Tires squealing on the pavement, Jace slid from behind the wheel of the low-slung Lamborghini and strode toward the house. The porch light cast a small glowing patch at his feet and he saw the drapes covering the picture window drop back into place. His mouth twisted into a knowing smile. It had to be Sara, keeping watching, no doubt. He didn't knock this time. Using his key, he let himself in.

Sara met him at the door like a sentry, her arms folded across her chest. "Karyn doesn't want to see you."

Jace accepted the announcement with the briefest of glances as he started up the staircase. "Thanks for the warning, but I'll take my chances."

Sara hurried after him. "I don't think she's going to like it if you just go barging in on her."

Jace stopped with one foot on the bottom stair. "Sara, Karyn is still my wife. I'm worried about her and I'm going to go check on her. She's been sick and she probably needs more rest than she's getting."

"Karyn's not sick," Sara corrected.

Jace's eyes narrowed. "She's had the flu."

Sara clamped her hands on her hips. "No, she hasn't. She would have told me. Karyn's fine. You just want to think she's sick because it would explain why she thinks her grandmother has been visiting her."

"Actually, Karyn told me she had the flu, which is why she went to the doctor a few days ago."

Sara, realizing her mistake, slapped her hand to her forehead and bobbed her head in acknowledgment. "Oh, that. Well, it wasn't like it was a full-blown case of the flu. It was more like a

virus. Karyn probably just told you it was the flu because she was hoping you'd think she was contagious and stay away. For two people who are supposed to be separated, you sure are over here a lot."

Jace removed his foot from the step and angled his body toward Sara. "Do you want to tell me the real reason why Karyn went to the doctor?"

Sara pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Not really. You should talk to your wife about that."

"You know more than you're telling me."

"Well, if I do, it's not my place to tell you. Ask Karyn. You are still married to her ... for a little while anyway. Besides, one would think your being a doctor yourself, you would know what was wrong with her."

Jace took a step backwards. "I know she's not sleeping well."

Sara rolled her eyes. "Men can be so obtuse. Never mind. Just go see Karyn so she can tell you to leave. I'm not going to stand in your way."

Karyn heard Jace's footsteps climbing the stairs and she planted her feet firmly on the floor to halt the rocking chair. He wouldn't come in Sam's room, and as long as she stayed put, she could avoid him. She watched the doorknob turning and her breath caught in her chest. "Jace?"

"No, he's on his way," Gran replied in her crackly voice. "You know, hiding from him won't solve anything. You're going to have to face him sooner or later."

Karyn watched her grandmother make her way to the crib. "You're here."

The elderly lady's gaze held her exasperation. "Of course I'm here. Where else would I be as long as you're acting this way? I swear, Karyn, if I could, I'd turn you over my knee. Do you think you're the only one hurting in this relationship? Jace is trying to make things right and you're hiding out from him as if you're terrified of him. It takes two to tango, you know. Personally, I think you're both just a little bit at fault."

"He thinks I'm insane," Karyn replied defensively.

Gran cackled her appreciation. “I’ve thought that many times myself. But do you honestly think my Henry, God rest his soul, didn’t ever think I was crazy? He used to tell me so practically every day. ‘Woman,’ he would say, ‘you’re crazier than a bed bug.’ Do you think that broke up our marriage? Heavens, no. I loved him far too much for that and in spite of what he thought, Henry loved me. Besides, bed bugs can be fun if you know what to do with them.” She winked and cackled again. “I miss him.”

“Aren’t you two in the same place?”

Gran didn’t look pleased at the question. “Well, of course we are, but I’m not exactly with him right now, am I? In fact, I won’t be seeing your grandfather again until we get this mess settled.”

“Were you the one playing the music?”

“I thought it was a nice touch.”

“And what about the crying? I heard crying.”

Gran frowned, tapping her chin with one finger. “Hmm. Maybe it was Henry crying for me. I don’t know about that one. I could check.”

Karyn waved a hand. “Never mind. It isn’t important. It’s just one more thing I’m probably imagining.”

“When are you going to get it out of your head that you’re imagining things? Right now, I’m as real to you as that husband of yours is, probably more so.”

Karyn’s gaze whipped toward the door. “He knows I’m in here.”

“Of course he does. He’s checked every room but this one.”

“He won’t come in here.”

Gran smiled. “Yes, he will. His love for you is stronger than his uneasiness with this room.”

Jace turned the doorknob and opened the door a crack, peering into the darkness. “Karyn?” Seeing the tangle of auburn curls over the back of the rocker, he pushed the door open wider. “Are you trying to hide from me?” He walked into the room, stopping to sniff the air. “What’s that smell?”

Karyn smiled. “Gran was here.”

Jace nodded his head slowly. "Is she here now?"

"Do you see her?"

"No, but I didn't see Sam, either."

Karyn pushed herself to her feet with a sigh. "She's not here, Jace, but she was, right before you came in."

"Why is she here?"

"Because she thinks I'm destroying our marriage."

Jace walked toward her, the silvery light of the moon illuminating his path. "And what do you think?"

She watched him approaching her and felt some of her reserve crumbling. "I'm not crazy, Jace. I saw my grandmother just as clearly as I saw Sam. The only difference is that I actually had a conversation with Gran." She laughed softly. "I told her you wouldn't come in here. She said you would."

"She was right." He reached out for her, surprised when she didn't pull away. He pulled her gently into his arms, pressing her head against his chest. "I don't think you're crazy, Karyn. I know you're seeing your grandmother. I just don't understand why."

She sniffled against his shirt. "Neither do I. You know," she lifted her head to see his face, "I went into town this morning to pick up a few things from the grocery store and people were treating me like a leper. I heard their whispers. They think I'm crazy."

Jace placed a hand against the side of her face and lowered her head back to his chest. "You've never been one to care about what other people think. Don't start now. Hey," he lifted her face, his hands on either side of her cheeks, "don't you remember when I first kissed you in public?"

Karyn chuckled. "You would have thought you were tearing my clothes off in the middle of Main Street."

"The thought crossed my mind." He smiled broadly. "Mrs. Campbell came unglued. I thought I was going to have to revive her with smelling salts."

“I’ve always been a different brand of people than they are.”

“So have I. Maybe that’s why destiny brought us together.”

Karyn’s hands covered his. “Then what’s tearing us apart?”

“Nothing, if we don’t allow it.” He lowered his head then, his lips brushing hers, gently at first then with increasing intensity. His hands splayed across her back to pull her closer, drawing her in until soul touched soul.

Karyn was drowning. No matter what had been wrong in her marriage, it hadn’t been this. She’d missed him, missed holding him, kissing him, and now her spirit revived as she clung to him, allowing him to deepen the kiss.

“Hey, you guys okay up there?” Sara called from the bottom of the stairs, worry lacing her voice.

Jace bit back an expletive against her lips. “That woman has horrible timing.”

Karyn managed a shaky laugh. “I don’t know. Her timing might actually be for the best.”

He didn’t release her. “I don’t want to leave you.”

Her hands rested against his chest. “You can’t stay.”

“Guys?” Sara called again.

“We’re fine, Sara,” Jace responded, his voice vibrating with irritation. His hands cupped Karyn’s face as he gazed down into her smoldering green eyes. “Give me one good reason why I can’t stay.”

“Sara’s here.”

“I can send her home.”

“One night isn’t going to solve our problems, Jace. Besides, sex was never our problem.”

He exhaled on an annoyed breath and released her. “You’re right. It wouldn’t solve anything, but it would make both of us feel a helluva lot better.”

“Us or you?”

He arched an eyebrow. “You tell me.” He reached for her then, his hands cupping her upper arms to tug her closer to the warmth of his body. “Tell me you don’t miss this, that you don’t roll over in the

middle of the night searching for me.” His lips brushed her eyelids, her cheeks, her mouth. “Tell me you don’t want me as much as I want you, Karyn.”

She released a shuddering breath as his lips found their way to her the hollow of her throat. “This wouldn’t change anything.”

“Why does it have to change anything? I don’t want to make love to you to solve our marital problems. I want to make love to you because I want to make love to you,” he responded tightly.

Her forehead touched his chest and she waited for her heartbeat to return to normal before she responded. “Not now. Not yet. I need some time, Jace.” She blinked open her eyes and met his gaze. “I know you could convince me that tonight would be just one night, but deep down inside, we both know that now is not the time. There are too many things we have to work out before we can even think about resuming that part of our relationship. I’m not sure of anything anymore, but I know I can’t rush back into the way things were.”

He nodded slowly. “Fair enough. I’ll give you time. Will you call off the shark?”

She smiled. “My attorney?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

Her smile faltered. “I’ll talk to him, ask him to put things on hold for now. I can’t make any promises.”

“I’m not asking for promises, just a chance.”

She stood on tiptoe and kissed him. “All right. We can try.” The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. She could almost smell Gran’s approval hovering in the air like an eagle ready to take flight.

For the first time in a long while, Jace felt some of the tension leave his body. “I love you. I think I’ve always loved you.”

“And I’ve never stopped loving you.”

“Will you let me help you?”

She took a faltering step away from him. “I appreciate it, but, for now, it’d be better if I tried to figure this out on my own.”

“You’re not alone; Sara’s here.” He reminded her.

“She just wants to see a sideshow.”

He knew this was one battle he wouldn’t win. “Promise me one thing.”

“I’ll try.”

“Will you call me if you need anything?”

“Yes. Now, go, before Sara has a stroke trying to figure out what’s going on up here.” Karyn led the way to the door. “I guess you were right in stopping by.”

His lips curved into a smile. “I guess. Don’t forget your promise.” He placed his hands on her shoulders.

She leaned against him. “I’ve missed you like this.”

He swallowed hard. “I know. I’m sorry. There are so many things I want to say to you, but now’s not the time.”

She turned in his arms. “I’m not sure this is going to work, Jace.”

He touched a finger to her lips. “No doubts. As long as we’re both willing to try, we have a chance.”

Tears filled her eyes and she quickly averted her gaze from his. “Losing you once was bad enough.”

His lips replaced his finger. “You never lost me, Karyn. As long as there’s breath in my body, you have me.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist. “Can you take it slow?”

He breathed in the fresh, citrus scent of her hair. “I can do anything as long as our marriage stands a chance.”

“You’d better go.”

“I’ll call you.”

She smiled again. “I know.”

* * * * *

As the door closed behind her husband, Karyn descended the stairs to find Sara standing at the bottom, her wide-eyed gaze focused on the front door.

Sensing her friend’s presence, Sara whipped around to face her. “Are you all right? Jace sounded, well, more relaxed. Y’all didn’t, well, you know. Not with me down here.”

Karyn chuckled. “No, we didn’t you know. We just talked.”

“And?” Sara prompted.

“And we’re going to talk some more, then some more after that. I guess what I’m trying to say is we’re going to try.”

Sara gave a whoop of joy and spun around, her arms outstretched. “I knew you could do it! I knew you could work this out if only you tried.”

Karyn avoided her friend’s embrace as she made her way to the bottom of the stairs. “Nothing’s resolved. We’re going to try. That’s it. No promises.”

Sara’s smug smile didn’t dissipate. “Well, if you love someone ...”

Karyn held up a hand. “I know. Now, if you’ll excuse me, there’s something I want to do.” She retrieved her keys from the table once more and headed toward the front door.

“Where are you going?”

“To start my car.”

“I thought it wouldn’t start.”

“Something tells me it will now.”

Sara’s mouth dropped open. “You think your grandmother hexed your vehicle.”

“I don’t think it; I know it. There was something in her eyes when she was talking to me upstairs.”

“She was back?” Sara squealed.

Karyn sighed. “Yes, right before Jace got there.” She opened the door and paused with her hand on the doorknob. “You know, maybe this isn’t such a bad thing, her being here.”

Sara nodded her head slowly. “Maybe not.”

* * * * *

Ben danced back a step and faked to the right before sweeping to the left, his hand catching hold of the basketball. His sneakers squeaked on the gym floor and with a whoop of joy, he raced forward, leaped in the air, slam-dunked the ball and caught hold of the rim. His feet dangled in the air momentarily before he jumped to the floor. Sweat dripped into his eyes and he wiped his forehead on the sleeve of his white cotton jersey, bestowing a smile of victory on his best friend. “And that, my friend, is how you play basketball.”

Jace leaned down, resting his hands against his thighs as he caught his breath. “I was off my mark today.”

Ben waved away the explanation. “Why can’t you just accept defeat graciously?”

“Oh, give it a rest, Hartley. I can’t count the number of times I’ve won and didn’t gloat.”

Ben tapped his chin thoughtfully. “That’s because there aren’t any. You usually gloat.”

Even, white teeth flashed in a grin. “Maybe that’s why I can’t count them.”

Ben slapped his friend on the back with a hearty smack and shoved him forward. “Now, tell me what’s going on with you and Karyn. Is she really going to give you another chance or did she just tell you that to get you out of the house?”

Jace frowned at him, even though it wasn’t as if he hadn’t thought of that himself. “I really think she wants to try.”

“Are you willing?”

Jace mopped his face with a towel before folding it around his bronzed neck. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her.”

Ben wagged a finger in admonishment. "And therein could lie part of your problem."

Jace shot him a bewildered glance. "What are you talking about?"

Ben picked up his own towel and brushed it over his damp hair. "You said you would do whatever it takes to keep her. You make her sound like a possession."

"Since when did you become Dear Abby? You know what I meant."

"It doesn't matter if I know. It only matters if Karyn knows. I mean, if you go back into this marriage with the same kind of attitude you had when you left, you're only going to be packing your bags another day."

"Stow it, Ben. I know what I'm doing."

Ben snorted. "Since when? You turn a blind eye when it comes to your faults."

"You know, for a friend, you can be damned hard on a person."

Thick shoulders lifted in a shrug. "It's a gift."

"Yeah, well, keep it to yourself. I'm going to grab a shower."

* * * * *

Karyn's eyes focused on the bedside clock. Three-fifteen. Something must have woken her. Pushing herself to a sitting position, she tugged the comforter up to her chin and peered into the darkness. "Gran?" Her voice came out on a whisper and she fervently prayed she wasn't alerting an intruder to her whereabouts. Lord, please let it be a ghost. "Gran?" Silence greeted her inquiry and she shivered, sliding back down against the thick stack of pillows. "Now, where are you when I need you, Jace?"

Jace! That was it! He'd told her to call anytime she needed him. Now was as good a time as any to test that promise. Shaky fingers punched out the number to the apartment on the outskirts of town.

Jace's hand fumbled for the receiver. "Hello?" His voice was husky from sleep and for a brief moment, Karyn regretted waking him, but then, the unmistakable sound of footsteps creaked on the stairs and she forgot about her guilt. "Hello?" Jace's voice was more irritated this time.

“Jace, it’s Karyn.” Her own voice cracked with fear. Hushed whispers just outside her bedroom door made her heart pound in her chest.

“Karyn?” He was instantly awake. “What’s wrong?”

“Someone’s in the house.”

The words sent Jace off the bed in one long leap. He yanked his jeans up over his hips and strode toward the closet. “Is it Sara?”

“She went home today. I hear footsteps and voices.”

Could you hear a ghost’s footsteps? He didn’t ask. “What about your grandmother?” He couldn’t believe he was asking that.

“I called her name. She didn’t respond.”

“All right. Lock the bedroom door and call the police. I’m on my way.” He ended the conversation abruptly, tossing the cordless phone to the bed even as he shrugged into his shirt.

A ten-minute trip to the house took less than five and as the sports car squealed to a stop, Karyn pressed her hand against her heart and thanked God.

Using his key, Jace let himself in, his eyes sweeping the darkness for any signs of danger. Nothing. Everything was in perfect order. No sign of forced entry. Nothing had been disturbed. Maybe it had been the ghost after all. Taking the stairs two at a time, adrenaline pumping, he ran to the bedroom door. “Karyn, it’s me.”

Falling out of bed in her rush to open the door, Karyn stumbled to her feet and released the catch. Her hand twisted the doorknob in time with his, then she was in his arms, her head pillowed against his chest. “Did you see anything?”

He held her tightly, relief that she was all right flowing through him. “No. Everything’s as it should be.”

She tilted her head back. “What about the footsteps? I heard footsteps.” She paused. “And voices.”

“I know. Did you call the police?”

“They should be here any minute.” On cue, blue lights flickered in the darkness.

“Stay here. I’ll go down and talk to them.” Jace pressed a kiss against her forehead and gently guided her toward the bed. “I’ll come back up when we’re done.”

Karyn didn’t think to object at his authoritative tone. She was glad he was there with her and she prayed the footsteps weren’t her grandmother’s. The police would never understand that one.

* * * * *

Jace ascended the stairs much more slowly this time, one hand rubbing the back of his neck wearily. He heard Karyn’s voice before he reached the top of the stairs. She called his name softly. “It’s me.” He eased her fears.

“Did the police see anything?” Her voice wobbled slightly.

He was at her side then, one arm around her waist. “Nothing. They’ve checked all around the house and every room inside. There’s no sign of forced entry, but the back door was unlocked. It might have been a teen prank.” He led her back into the bedroom. “Do you want a glass of brandy, something to help you sleep?”

Karyn shook her head, holding tightly to his arm. “I couldn’t sleep even if I wanted to, which, incidentally, I don’t.” She sat down on the edge of the bed, forcing him to sit down beside her. “Thanks for coming when I called.”

He smiled at her. “Thanks for calling me.”

She pulled in a deep breath. “Jace, I know it’s probably not fair of me to ask this of you, but do you think, could you stay, just till morning?”

His hand cupped her cheek. “What makes you think I had any intentions of going anywhere?”

Her own smile matched his. “Thank you.”

“Come on, lie down and close your eyes. I’ll be right here.” He lifted her legs to the mattress and covered her with the comforter once more, trying not to notice how the silky t-shirt slid up the golden

expanse of limbs. He tucked her in and rested his hand familiarly on her hip. "I know you said you don't want to sleep, but you should at least try. You need your rest."

She scooted farther over to the opposite side of the bed and patted the mattress beside her. "Will you lie down with me?"

He tensed. When she'd asked him to stay, he hadn't thought this far ahead. His body ached for her. He wanted to lie down beside her, but he didn't want to sleep. He wanted to take her in his arms, hold her, kiss her, make love to her. But she wasn't asking for that. She was asking for comfort, to be near him, no strings. Somehow, his lips formed a smile and he nodded in agreement. "Sure." He hoped he sounded more certain than he felt. Kicking his shoes to the floor, he rolled to his side, stretching his long length out beside her. His hand lifted, brushing over her eyes, making her lids close. "Just relax."

Karyn hadn't forgotten how it felt to sleep next to him, to feel the warmth of his body mingling with her own. The spicy scent of his skin beckoned her and her hands itched to climb over the muscles, to feel him, to touch him. But that wasn't what he was offering. He was here for comfort, nothing more. He'd never said making love to her was part of the deal. She felt a light, feathery touch on her face and her eyes flew open, clashing with smoky blue.

"I'd forgotten how beautiful you are, even without makeup." His hand slid over the unblemished skin and his breath shuddered in his chest. "Maybe it's not such a good idea for me to stay."

She caught his hand in hers. "Please don't leave."

"I want to make love to you, Karyn." He let the sentence hang in the air, a warning or a promise.

Delicious sensations glided down her spine and Karyn slid closer to the heat he offered. "I want you to make love to me, Jace."

He knew he would kick himself for this later, but he had to offer her an out, just in case it was nerves talking. "You're feeling vulnerable right now because you're scared. Now is probably not the best time for this. You could regret it in the morning, and you did want to go slow, remember?" Her hand slid over his hip, up to his waist. He swallowed hard and tried to concentrate on his next words, words that

were intended to cool her passion. And he wondered why in the hell he even bothered. “You really should try to get some sleep.” Her hand reached the top button of his denim shirt. “You’re tired, overwrought and ...” He broke off, the air whooshing out of his lungs as her small fingertips encountered the male nipple nestled in the dark whorls of hair on his chest. “Karyn, I’m trying to be the voice of reason here and you’re not making it any easier.”

She pressed her body closer to his, so close he felt every outline of her curves against his hip. His biceps nudged the firm mound of her breast. His mouth went dry. “Will you please shut up and kiss me?”

It was all the invitation he needed.

His arms snaked out, gripping her around her waist. Suddenly, without warning, Karyn found herself lying atop him, pressed fully and intimately against Jace’s hard frame. The rough texture of his skin scraped hers and his masculine scent enveloped her senses. Her breath escaped on a sigh. He had to give her one more chance to call a halt. “Are you sure about this?” His lips barely moved against her ear as he formed the question.

Karyn nodded shakily. Her hands lifted, swept across his face before diving through the thick hair. “Now, what do I have to do to get you to kiss me?” She queried throatily.

“You’ve already done it,” he responded on a growl. He crushed his lips over hers, drinking in the taste of her. His tongue clashed with hers in an intrinsic duel, battling for supremacy. Karyn surrendered. His hands cupped her softly rounded bottom, drawing her in bold contact with the evidence of his desire. He heard her gasp and he whispered reassurances in her ear. She nipped his neck, eliciting soft moans of pleasure from him. Limbs tangled with limbs against the mattress as it dipped to accommodate their combined weight.

With barely a whisper of sound, the nightie sailed across the room to land in a silken heap in the corner. The moonlight kissed golden curves and Jace was surprised to find his hands were shaking.

Karyn’s own hands tugged at the edge of his shirt, pushing it over hard muscle and sinew. Lowering his head, Jace assisted her in removing it completely. But her hands didn’t stop with the shirt.

Dropping to the button on his jeans, she met his waiting gaze with an impish smile. “Maybe you’d better do this.” Her knuckles brushed him intimately.

His breath whooshed out of his lungs. “Yeah, maybe so.” The jeans went quickly, following the path of the t-shirt.

Jace’s hands roamed the contours of her body, retracing her vulnerable spots, giving vent to passions long restrained. His lips replaced his hands, trailing wet kisses down her petite frame, lingering, caressing, branding. Karyn moaned his name, her hands moving everywhere across the hard planes of his body, restoring memories from times past.

Jace rolled, taking her with him. His body slid atop hers, settling against her yielding curves, fitting, matched by the hands of destiny. As if guided by a map, he found his way back to the beginning of his journey. Her body bucked beneath the onslaught of his kisses; Jace’s fingers delved into her warm moistness and Karyn’s bit her lip to keep from screaming his name. His thumb worried the small heart of her passion, feeling the muscles contract beneath his body. Her hands clutched his shoulders, nails scoring the taut skin. He caught her lips just before the release engulfed her. Karyn ducked her head, hiding in the curve of his shoulder. Jace tilted her face upward for his kiss. He whispered her name; she moaned his.

Karyn smiled in the darkness, her hands finding him, guiding him to her. He paused, staring down into her face, searching for any signs of hesitation. She lifted her hips; he touched the gate of her womanhood and groaned. His lips curved around her name once more and he slipped within the welcoming folds of her body. His intention was to take it slow, but Karyn had other plans. She shifted. He stiffened. She rocked back on her heels and he began to move, slowly, guided by her pace. Moonlight illuminated the room and their eyes met. Jace kissed her, slowly, gently, in tune with the demands of his body. She met his thrusts with those of her own, drawing him deep, holding him. Her fingernails created small half moons in the small of his back and she arched beneath him. Jace gritted his teeth, trying to fight

back the overwhelming demands of his body. She tensed, her nails dug deeper and he heard his name seconds before his own release consumed him.

Jace relaxed against her, pressing tender kisses against her temple, her cheeks, her eyes before finally finding her lips. He tried to roll over, but Karyn held him fast. “Karyn?”

“Don’t move yet.”

“I’m too heavy for you.” He argued.

“Trust me on this one, Morgan. You’re not too heavy.” In fact, his weight was the last thing on her mind. Karyn smiled to herself, running inquisitive hands down his back, the curve of his buttocks, the backs of his thighs. She remembered everything about his body, from the appendectomy scar on his right side to the corded muscles that lined his thighs. There was nothing new to learn and yet, she felt as if this was their first time. Each time with Jace was like the first, each moment meant to last until the next moment in time when they would be reunited in body and spirit. She caught his head in her hands, drawing him down for another kiss.

Jace quickly caught her hands and rolled to the side in spite of her protests. “I am too heavy.”

She sighed. “Do all doctors worry this much?”

The sheets rustled as he tugged them up over their naked bodies. “Maybe, but right now, you should try to get some sleep.”

She wanted to tell him how much she’d missed him, missed the times like these, but the words wouldn’t come and as the digital clock changed to four-thirty a.m., she heard the even sounds of his breathing. The moment had passed; Jace was sound asleep.

* * * * *

Jace woke alone. The side of the bed where Karyn had slept had long grown cold. He doubted she’d slept a wink. Extricating his legs from the tangled sheet, he sat up, blinking at the clock. Eight o’clock. It was rare for him to sleep in so late. Standing, he yawned, stretched and strolled across the room.

Karyn opened the bathroom door, almost plowing into Jace's naked form. With a shriek of terror, she plastered herself against the wall, one hand covering her heart. "You scared the life out of me!" She checked to make sure the towel, knotted firmly just over her breasts, was still securely in place.

He dipped his head and kissed her, tasting mint toothpaste. "Good morning. You've been up awhile."

She trailed on hand across his chest as she brushed past him. "I couldn't sleep."

"I hope that doesn't happen too often."

She avoided his inquiring gaze. "Not really. Why don't you get a shower and I'll fix breakfast?"

Jace didn't need an interpreter to know that something was different. His hand snaked out and caught hold of her wrist. "Karyn, are you uncomfortable about last night?"

Her eyes flicked to his face before dropping back down to her hands. "Don't be ridiculous, Jace. We made love. It isn't as if we haven't done it hundreds of times over the last five years."

"But for some reason, you feel like you slept with the enemy, right?" He accurately pinpointed her discomfort. "Because we're separated. Am I close?" His fingers opened, dropping her wrist.

Her even, white teeth worried her lower lip. "Just go take your shower. We can analyze last night later." Wobbly legs carried her toward the bed. She sat down on the edge. The only covering she wore slipped a notch. Jace's eyes flicked to the creamy expanse of her exposed breasts before Karyn quickly readjusted the towel.

He didn't close the bathroom door as Karyn wanted. He didn't move at all except to fold his arms across his chest and pin her with a quelling look. "Don't brush me off, Karyn."

"I don't want to talk about this right now." Both hands pressed against the towel, holding it in place.

"Why? We can't deny that last night happened." He tried to remain calm.

Karyn pushed herself to her feet and walked to the closet. Slowly, she removed a pair of jeans from the hanger and grabbed a sweatshirt from the shelf overhead. "I said I don't want to talk about this

right now. Now I'd like to get dressed." She turned to face him, her expression challenging, as if daring him even to attempt to continue the conversation.

Jace was far from being through with the topic. He began walking toward her, his footsteps muffled by the thick carpeting. "Go ahead. Get dressed."

"I'd like a little privacy."

He smiled at the prim demand. "It's just you and me. You've never felt the need to hide anything from me before." With a quick catch of his fingers, Jace tugged the towel, slipping it easily from her grasp. The thick terry cloth fell to the floor, pooled at her feet, leaving her defenseless.

Karyn didn't try to cover herself. "Okay. We're on equal footing now." She clamped her hands on her hips. "What next?"

"This." His arms snaked out and pulled her toward him, enveloping her in his hard embrace. Flesh pressed to flesh, skin burning skin. He watched her eyes widen as she came into full contact with the proof of his desire. Her breaths came in quiet pants as she stared up at him. With one arm still around her waist, he cupped her cheek with his free hand. "I won't ever get enough of you. Last night, I realized how much I'd missed you."

Karyn dipped her head, her heart slamming against her chest wall, her legs growing weaker by the second, along with her resolve. If she didn't get out of his arms now, she would end up back on the bed with him and time would stop again. Shivering beneath his masterful fingertips, she closed her arms, licked her lips and managed a quiet, "Jace, please let me go."

"Do you really want me to?"

"I need you to."

He didn't hide his reluctance as he removed his arm. "Okay, you're free. What next? We just go on as if nothing happened?" He paused, one hand lifting her face to see the emotions dueling there. "Is that it? Do you want to pretend last night didn't happen? Are you worried your lawyer will find out and that our separation will have to start all over again?" His voice hardened.

Green eyes flashed with dismay as she tilted her face back to see his. “You don’t know how far off the mark you really are, Jace, but then, that doesn’t surprise me.” Somehow, she managed to walk to the door, though her knees were shaking. “I’ll see you downstairs.”

Jace watched her leave and bit back a curse. “Score another point for you, Morgan.” He muttered below his breath, taking great pleasure in slamming the bathroom door.

Seven

The scent of rose water tickled her nostrils again and when Karyn turned around, Gran stood by the kitchen counter, a disapproving look on her lined face. “Gran, you’re back.”

“I never left. You just couldn’t see me.” Limping toward a bar stool, Gran eyed it distastefully. “How is a woman of my age and infirmities supposed to get up on one of those things?”

Karyn’s lips twitched into a smile. “You’re not. You’re dead, remember?”

Gran waved her hand in dismissal. “Posh. That’s semantics, dear. I may be deceased in body, but I’ve never been deceased in spirit.”

Karyn’s eyes narrowed as she leaned across the counter top of the island separating her from her grandmother. “Did you do something to my car?”

Patting her white hair, Gran didn’t bother feigning innocence. “Well, of course. You would have left otherwise and I thought Jace deserved to have his say. But that’s not what I’m hear to talk about right now.”

Karyn nodded slowly. “And you wouldn’t happen to know anything about my bogeyman last night, would you?”

Gran lifted one shoulder in a modest shrug. “I will neither admit or deny anything. Now about that talk, dear.”

“Well, you’d better make it quick. Jace is upstairs in the shower.”

“And if you had any common sense, you’d be up there with him.”

“I’ve already showered.”

Thin brows lowered into a scowl that, once upon a time, would have wrought fear in Karyn’s heart. “Don’t be snide. I’m surprised at you. After last night, you’re still as wishy-washy as a noodle in a wind storm. Can’t you see how much that man loves you?”

Karyn ignored the question to pose one of her own. “You said before that Sam had sent you. Did he really?”

“Yes, he did.”

“Why?”

“Well, that much should be obvious. He doesn’t want to see his parents split up over an accident. Neither one of you was at fault and both of you are trying to blame one another. And you’re so busy pointing fingers you can’t see how much you’re destroying the most precious thing you have ... your love.” Gran’s cane tapped across the linoleum as she rounded the island. “And not to mention you’re both so miserable right now, even while pointing those blasted fingers.”

Karyn’s expression didn’t invite further conversation. “I still think I’m imagining things.”

Reaching out one blue-veined hand, Gran rapped her granddaughter across the knuckles. “Did that feel like your imagination?”

Karyn pulled her hand closed to her chest and stared at her grandmother. “I’m not a child anymore, Gran.”

“Then stop acting like one!”

“Why didn’t Sam come back?”

“Because he knew he couldn’t help you. That’s why he wanted me to come.”

Karyn bit back a sob and turned away from the old woman’s probing eyes. “I wanted to see him again.”

“Sweetheart, don’t you think he knows how much you miss him? Don’t you think he misses you, too? But he wanted me to tell you that you have to let him go. You can’t hold on to him and to your marriage. He’s not coming back and you have to think about that life inside of you.”

Karyn whirled around, her hand dropping to cover her abdomen in a protective gesture. “W-what?”

Eyes so like her granddaughter’s twinkled with amusement. “Did you really think I wouldn’t know?”

Her shoulders slumped. “I guess not. I can’t believe I’m having a conversation with a ghost.”

“Well, you’d better believe it. Now, I have to run, but I’ll be back.”

“I’m sure you will. Oh, Gran?”

“Yes?”

“When are you going to let Jace see you?”

“I’m not sure I am.”

“He thinks I’m crazy.”

“Well, if the need arises, I may just have a conversation with him, but until I do, you need to have one of your own with him. Give him something more to pin his hopes on than just great sex.” She arched a white eyebrow. “I presume it was great sex.”

Karyn smiled, realizing for the first time how much she’d missed her grandmother’s acidic tongue. “The greatest.”

“There’s my girl. Now, go pour him a cup of coffee.”

Still smiling, Karyn turned to do as instructed. She knew before she turned back around that her grandmother was gone.

“Who were you talking to?” Jace walked into the kitchen, his hair still damp from the shower. Dressed in an old pair of blue jeans and a white, cotton shirt that was still unbuttoned, he looked casual, carefree and right at home.

Karyn shook her head. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Your grandmother?” He surmised.

“You actually believe I was talking to her now and not just hallucinating?”

“I believe that you believe.” Thick shoulders rounded to ease tired muscles. “That’s enough for me.”

Karyn felt herself relaxing. “I made coffee.” She proffered the mug of steaming brew like a peace offering.

Jace eyed her strangely, but accepted the cup. “Thanks.” He settled his large frame on one of the barstools, missing Karyn’s secretive smile. “Do you want to talk about last night now?”

“We never had to talk about it before. When we made love, it was natural and no words were ever needed.”

“Things are a little different this time.”

Karyn accepted the comment with a nod. “I don’t think we’re ready to pick up where we left off, Jace.”

“Do you want to start over?”

“From scratch?”

It was his turn to shake his head. “There’s too much water under the bridge to do that, but there are other ways to start over.” His hands cupped the mug. “Before we made love, we said we would try. That shouldn’t change because of last night. In fact, last night should only solidify our decision.”

Karyn walked around the island and seated herself beside him. “Gran says Sam sent her because he doesn’t want to see his parents split up. What are the odds I’m really seeing my dead grandmother, Jace?”

He exhaled loudly, took a sip of coffee and massaged the back of his neck. “I don’t know. I do know you’re not crazy. You’re one of the smartest, most rational women I know. If you say you’re seeing your grandmother, then, I’d lay odds she’s here.”

Leaning over, Karyn kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you."

He touched the damp area of skin. "You're welcome." He drained the last of the coffee and slid off the stool. "We'll go at your pace. You let me know when you want to see me again." He started toward the door.

"Why?"

He stopped. "Why what?"

"Why are we going at my pace?"

His lips curved into a smile. "Because my pace would be at the speed of light." He winked and sauntered out of the room.

As the Lamborghini's engine roared to life, Karyn heard the applause behind her. "Don't get excited yet, Gran. He hasn't moved back in."

"Oh, that's just a matter of time, dear. For now, I'm happy you left things on a positive note. That's always a good sign. Besides, it doesn't matter where his bags are, only where his body is." With a delighted chuckle, her cane tapping against the linoleum, the old woman made herself scarce once more.

* * * * *

Annette tucked her fake rabbit fur closer under her double chin and hurried down the street toward the diner. The dinner crowd was already arriving when she pushed open the glass door. There were general greetings and queries about her health as she made her way behind the counter. She didn't wait to tie her apron around her waist before approaching the usual table of farmers. "Did y'all hear what happened last night?" She didn't wait for a response before revealing her juicy morsel of knowledge. "One of the Lambert boys told his mama that he saw candles in Karyn Morgan's window."

Henry snorted. "Candles ain't nothin'. Now quit jawing and pour me another cup of coffee."

Annette smacked the counter top, clearly not done with the information she had to impart. "Let me finish what I was going to say." She didn't wait for permission. "Johnny Lambert ambled on up to the

window and,” her voice lowered to a hushed whisper, “he said he saw Karyn in the middle of a circle of candles. Like she was holding a séance or something.”

Eyes huge as saucers, Jack planted his elbows on the table top and leaned forward. “You mean, she was really trying to raise the dead?” He shivered even as he spoke.

Annette bobbed her head in affirmation. “Yep. Johnny hightailed it back home to tell his momma. Mona Lambert wanted to call the police, but her husband convinced her that the police wouldn’t do anything.” Annette completed tying her apron strings and hitched one hip on the corner of the table. “Can you believe it? A séance? That’s just not right. What’s going to happen if it works? Well, I won’t have it. I told my Lance that he’s to stay away from her house at all costs. If I catch him anywhere near there or hear tell that he’s gone near there, he won’t see a television screen for a solid month. I’ve done told him and I think I put the fear of God into him.”

“Well, if that don’t take the cake! Do you think Mona’s going to do anything about what Johnny saw?” Jack shoved the half-read newspaper aside, deciding this information was much more pressing.

It seemed the fount of information was dry as Annette shrugged. “Don’t know. I think it all depends on whether or not Karyn continues to try to raise her dead son.”

Murmurs of disgust greeted this supposition.

“I think maybe Karyn needs to consider moving,” Jack replied in a demanding tone of voice.

Henry took a hearty bite of dry toast and harrumphed his disagreement. “That’s a real good idea you got there, Jack, but who’s going to tell her that she has to leave? You?”

Jack raised his cap and rubbed his thinning hair. “Well, I thought we could do it as a town. We could just go out to her house tonight and ask her to move.”

“I couldn’t do it tonight because I promised Lance I would help him with his homework,” Annette fibbed.

“Yeah and I told Clara I’d be home to help her with the painting. We’re painting the living room,” Henry inserted firmly.

Another farmer was quick to toss in his refusal. "I've got that card game tonight."

"And Cora's been after me for weeks to take her into Asheville. Seems she's got her heart set on shopping in one of them malls. Don't know why though." Yet another customer managed what he hoped sounded like a convincing chuckle. "I ain't going to let her buy nothing more expensive than twenty dollars. Hell, she could go to Wal-Mart and save me a trip."

"Aw, you know Cora runs your house, Ed." Henry smacked the middle-aged man between the shoulder blades and laughed.

Jack shoved his cup of coffee aside and ambled to his feet, staring his displeasure at the gathered group. "Well, I guess I should have figured you folks ain't nothing but a bunch of talkers. When it comes to actually doing something, you hem and haw and dive out the door. What this town needs is people willing to get off their asses and make a difference." He took two steps toward the door before Henry's petulant question stopped him in his tracks.

"Why are you fussing at all of us when you ain't no more willing to do it than we are? I mean, you could go by yourself if you was so hepped up on getting something done."

Jack whirled around, sparing glares for all listening. "Well, at least I had an idea instead of sitting around here discussing it! Talking ain't going to get nothing done! It's like the song says, thunder just makes the sound, but it's lightning that really gets the job done or something like that. So sit there on your lazy carcasses if you want to, but I aim to get something done." With more bravado than he was actually feeling, Jack stormed out of the diner, letting the glass door swing shut wildly behind him.

"I think we pissed him off," Henry noted with another sip of his coffee.

Annette shrugged. "If the old coot wants to get his ass filled full of lead, then that's his business. But in this day and age, you don't go poking around on someone else's property."

Silence dropped on the group like a rain-slick tarp until another farmer, one who had remained silent throughout the entire interchange, offered another question. "Do you really think Karyn would shoot at us?"

Annette quickly busied herself behind the counter, avoiding all eye contact with anyone who might be looking in her general direction. “There’s no telling what that woman would do nowadays.”

Henry inclined his snowy-white head in agreement. “Maybe Jack ain’t so far off the mark with his suggestion.”

Annette’s head lifted and her eyes focused on the glass pane just above Henry’s head. “Maybe.”

“Yeah, like maybe you don’t really have to help your son with his homework tonight.”

The dishcloth in Annette’s hand swiped across the counter top without any real direction. “And maybe you don’t really have to help Clara with the painting.”

Henry grinned. “Maybe not.” He fixed his eyes on Ed who was still wearing an undecided expression. “And maybe you didn’t tell Cora you would take her tonight to Asheville.”

The farmer scooted down in the booth and tugged his John Deere cap lower over his eyes. “I reckon I didn’t, but she ain’t gonna be happy if I don’t tell her where I’m gonna be.”

“You’ll make up something. You’ve always been good at hoodwinking yer wife.” Henry chuckled, directing his attention back toward the counter.

The dishcloth ceased all movement. “You’re saying we should help him, then?”

“Well, what are you saying?” Henry continued to hedge, not wanting to be the first one to capitulate.

“I’m saying,” Annette untied her apron, “that we go have a little talk with Karyn Morgan right now.”

“Now?” Henry’s voice squeaked like an adolescent trying to impress a girl.

“No time like the present.” Annette rounded the counter, tossed her apron over the edge and marched toward the door.

“But, you’ve got a job here.” Henry continued to protest.

“Kev can handle it; it’s not like he ain’t never done it before.” She caught hold of the farmer’s flannel-clad arm and propelled him toward the door. “Now, let’s get going. Anybody else want to join us, we’re on our way to Jack’s house. You’re more than welcome.”

“And more than needed,” Henry added below his breath.

* * * * *

The wind whipped the American Flag on the street post at town center when the group of four upright citizens of Stafford, North Carolina, made their way down the street leading to Karyn Morgan’s home. The temperature had dropped to well below freezing, making talking difficult. They communicated by hand signals and gestures. It was Annette’s finger that pointed toward the house. At just past nine o’clock in the evening, the glow of the streetlights illuminated the black lettering on the newel post. “Two-oh-two. That’s their house,” Annette stage-whispered.

Feeling slightly superior, Jack led the way up the driveway, Annette right beside him. Squaring his shoulders, he lifted his hand to knock when the door swung open to reveal a white-haired lady wearing a dark blue dress and an annoyed expression. “Jack Morris, what are you doing here at this time of the night?”

Jack paled, his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth. “It-it can’t be,” he stammered, his eyes huge orbs in his pasty face.

Jolene planted her hands on her rounded hips and peered down her nose at the quartet of visitors. “It most certainly can be and you and your friends should be ashamed of yourselves. I know what you intended to do tonight and I’m here to tell you I’m not about to allow it. My granddaughter may not have been in this town for as long as you folks have, but she has every right to be here. And I know for a fact she’s helped most of you out of a jam at one point or another in your lives. I think each of you needs to go to church on Sunday morning and repent for your horrible attitudes and lack of faith.” She leaned closer, the scent of rose water wafting out into the frigid air. “You really did think she was crazy, didn’t you?” Her laughter trilled all around them. “I should have had my camera.”

All the blood had drained from Annette's face and she looked in imminent danger of passing out. "You can't be Jolene Daniels. I went to her funeral four years ago."

Gran focused her attention on the woman with the whispery voice. "Now, Annette, I know you can talk louder than that. Hell, most of the townspeople can hear you even when you whisper. And don't stand there and act all shocked that you're seeing a ghost, either. Stranger things have happened in this town. Don't y'all remember when Mr. Parsons passed away and the Snyder children said they were seeing him down by the creek? No one believed them, either, except me. And I believed because I saw him." She lifted her arms and twirled around, bringing gasps from the frozen lips of the quartet. "Now, look at me! I'm a ghost. Boo!"

Jack took a staggering step backwards, almost falling over his own two feet in his haste to depart. "Well, we won't keep you any longer, Jolene. I'm sure you've got lots of things you need to be doing right now." Although he couldn't think of one damn thing a ghost would need to do.

Gran bobbed her white head in agreement. "I would say it was nice of you all to drop by, but since I know the real reason for this visit, I'll just skip that lie and move straight into the threat. Don't think this house is the only place I can come to. Piss me off and you just might see me under your own roof ... each one of you. I can move very fast. Goodnight." She slammed the heavy, wooden door with a smile of glee and promptly disappeared.

Annette's knees wobbled and with a squeak of dismay, she passed out on the hard concrete, giving the accompanying men no other option but to drag her back down the street toward their waiting vehicle.

* * * * *

Ben shivered against the blast of arctic air that stole his breath away, and angled his head toward the broken cement. With record-setting temperatures, tonight was bound to be one of the coldest nights of the winter season and he was stupid enough to be out in it. Staggering the final steps toward his friend's

office, he slumped against the door and impatiently rang the doorbell. “Come on, Jace, I know you’re in there!”

The door swung open and Jace, still wearing the white coat with a stethoscope draped around his neck, stepped aside to allow his friend entrance. “What in the world are you doing out on a night like this?”

Ben shivered and kicked the door shut, preventing another gust of wind from climbing its way down his spine. “Well, you weren’t home.”

Jace eyed him strangely. “I’m not home a lot nights, Ben, and you never pay me a visit. So what’s up?”

Ben didn’t beat around the bush. “Rumor has it you weren’t home last night.” He sauntered toward the waiting area and perched on the edge of one of the sofas. “What gives?”

Jace mentally counted to ten. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Are you seriously telling me you hauled your ass out in teen-digit weather to ask me about my comings and goings?”

Tongue-in-cheek, Ben angled his head toward the ceiling, taking great interest in the white swirl designs. “Yeah, that about sums it up.”

“Why? I mean, why are you so interested in where I was last night?”

“Because Sara and I are betting you were with Karyn.”

Jace shook his head sadly. “You and Sara need to find yourselves a hobby.”

Ben ignored the sarcasm. “So fill me in, appease my curiosity and I’ll go home a happy man.”

“You’re getting as bad as the gossipers who sit in the diner all day long with nothing better to do than to speculate on other people’s lives.”

“Yeah, so?”

Jace chuckled. Nothing would faze his friend, not when he was on a mission. He was almost positive Sara had sent him out in this weather to track down the necessary information, and Ben would not deviate from his course until he obtained said information. He sighed. “Karyn called me early this

morning because she heard footsteps on the stairs. I went over there to make sure she was all right. After the police left, she didn't want to be alone."

"And?" Ben continued to pry, oblivious to the look of displeasure on his friend's face.

"And so I stayed. End of story."

Stafford's only attorney didn't bother hiding his disappointment. "Are you serious?"

"I'm serious when I say I'm not discussing this any further."

"Did you hear about what happened with Annette from the diner?" Ben wisely switched topics.

Jace turned on his heel and headed back to his office. "I'm sure I haven't. Just as I'm sure you're going to put an end to my ignorance on the subject."

"Of course I am, but you might want to sit down. This involves your wife."

Jace stopped and whipped back around, pinning his friend with a sharp-eyed look. "What do you mean?"

"It seems—now remember that all of this is second-hand knowledge—but anyway, it seems that Annette and a few of the guys decided Karyn should move because one of the Lambert boys thought he saw her holding a séance or some crazy nonsense like that. Anyway, this group got themselves together and marched out to the house. They arrived back in town less than fifteen minutes later carrying Annette, which was a tough load, I'm sure. I went into the diner earlier this evening and no one was saying one thing about Karyn or what happened last night. Annette was there and she was pale as a... well ... a ghost, for lack of a better word. Now the rest of the town wants to know just what in the hell happened, but no one's talking. In fact, it's quieter than the inside of a church in there. Annette was keeping herself busy actually doing some work and all the farmers—you know the bunch—well, they all had their heads buried in the newspaper, not even speaking to each other. You know, now that I think about it, it was kind of weird, almost like something out of the *Twilight Zone*."

"They were going to ask Karyn to leave Stafford?" Jace focused on what he considered to be the most important part of the revelation.

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

Jace made it to his office this time. “I think it’s time I had another talk with the good citizens of Stafford. Seems my first conversation did little good.” He tugged his leather jacket down off the hook behind his door. “Lock up when you leave, will you?” He didn’t give his friend time to respond before he walked out the door.

Ben raced to the door, poking his head out into the frigid air. “Hey, Jace, have you forgotten something?”

Jace stopped, turning to give his friend an irritated look. “What?”

“It’s after ten. The diner’s closed.”

Jace looked like a kid who’d just been told he couldn’t have another piece of candy. “Damn.” He trudged back toward his office. “Well, I guess I have no choice but to wait until tomorrow morning, but,” he shook a finger in his friend’s face as he reached him, “don’t even think about trying to stop me.”

Ben held up his hands in the age-old gesture of surrender. “Wouldn’t even think about it. Besides, I’m going along to watch.”

* * * * *

Karyn rolled to her side, seeking a comfortable position, but the pain in her abdomen prevented any relief. The agony was so sharp, so intense, she couldn’t draw a deep breath. She couldn’t remember ever having these pains when she’d been pregnant with Sam. Something must be wrong. Trying to sit up, she gasped as another stab of hot fire sliced through her. With a whimper, she collapsed back against the pillows. She had to call her doctor. She couldn’t recall the number. It was by the phone in the kitchen. Could she make it to the phone in the kitchen? There was a phone here beside her. She could call information. Thoughts spun around in her head as she tried to focus on her next step, a plan of action.

“Just lie still, child.” A soothing voice accompanied the cool hand pressed against her forehead. “Everything’s going to be all right.”

Karyn opened her eyes to see her grandmother's reassuring face. For once, the woman's presence didn't unnerve her. "Gran, I think I'm losing the baby."

"Nonsense." Gran placed the phone beside her granddaughter and inclined her white head gently. "You know who you need to call."

"Can't you get me my doctor's number?" Karyn whispered around another stab of pain.

Gran didn't look happy. "I could, but she's not the only doctor who should be there. You know who you need to call."

"But if I call Jace, he'll know."

"Of course he'll know. He should know. He's the father, isn't he?" It was a rhetorical question. Gran smoothed the tangled tresses away from Karyn's damp face and continued to smile down at her. "You shouldn't fight it, dear. Jace has waited long enough to find out he's going to be a father again."

Biting her lip, Karyn nodded. "I don't want him to know yet."

"Girl, what does that man have to do to convince you he still loves you, that he's changed? You know you don't have the right to withhold his child from him. Besides, how much longer do you think you can wait before he finds out anyway? He is still a doctor, isn't he?"

Karyn was too weak to manage a glare, so she settled for a half-hearted wave of her hand. "Of course, he's still a doctor and I've managed just fine so far and I—ahhhh!" She bit back a curse as the torture intensified, wringing whimpers of distress from her lips.

Gran leaned down, her face so close to Karyn's they could almost touch cheeks. "Now, do you want to call Jace or do you want to stay here in misery for the remainder of the evening and possibly lose your child?"

Karyn's eyes flew open. "Gran, you're not helping!"

"Yes, I am. Now, dial that number or so help me, I will march through the streets of Stafford singing Old Shep at the top of my voice," Gran threatened, with a promising gleam in her eye.

Reluctance warred with surrender, but Karyn already knew her choices were limited. Calling Sara was an option except she wasn't so sure she wanted Sara to be the one with her. If the truth were told, she wanted Jace with her, no matter the consequences. "All right, Gran, you win. I'll call him."

Jolene patted the smooth hand beneath hers. "Actually, my dear, you win." She didn't hang around for the conversation.

* * * * *

Jace scanned the thick medical journal with only half-interest. The muscles of his neck were tight, tense. Damn. He wished he could have talked to the townspeople tonight instead of having to wait. He was fuming inside, furious at their audacity and their intentions. Had they actually been able to say what they'd gone to say, there was no telling what damage they might have done. Damn them. He took comfort in Karyn's stance. She obviously hadn't backed down, but that didn't surprise him. Karyn had always been one to speak her mind.

He chuckled. Whatever she'd said had worked if it had caused Annette to keel over. The chuckles became outright laughter and he leaned his head back against the sofa cushion and allowed the mirth to overtake him. He'd pay half his annual income just to have been able to see the looks on the townspeople's faces when Karyn blasted them.

Straightening on the sofa, he leaned forward, dropping his hands between his splayed knees. He wondered what she was doing now. It was after midnight; she was probably in the bed, her knees curled up close to her chest. Her golden skin would be flushed and by now, she would have gotten too hot, so the nightgown would have been discarded. She always went to bed with the intention of sleeping fully clothed; it never worked. If the gown hadn't already been removed by his hands, then, in the middle of the night, she tossed it to the floor. Memories betrayed him as he remembered many of the countless times he'd rolled over, encountered warm, flushed skin and he'd come wide awake. He groaned low in his throat. He couldn't think like this. It didn't do him any good. He jumped to his feet. The medical journal

hit the floor with a thump. A shower, that was what he needed, a good, long, cold shower. Stepping across the book, he practically raced down the hallway.

* * * * *

“Where could he be?” Karyn looked at the receiver as if willing it to make Jace answer.

Gran was back, concern stamped across her elderly face. “He’s probably in the shower. He’ll be out any minute now, I’m sure. Try to think about something, anything but the pain. I know.” With an effort, she hitched her hip up on the edge of the bed. “Tell me about your wedding day.”

Karyn’s grip tightened on the phone. “You know about my wedding day, Gran. You were there.”

“Yes, but I’m sure there are parts I didn’t see.”

“And for good reason,” Karyn responded waspishly.

“Oh, come on, who am I going to tell now? It’s not like I can do a lot of gossiping where I live.”

“And you should be there now.”

Gran patted her hand consolingly, allowing it was the pain talking and not her normal sweet-tempered granddaughter. “You need to try to focus on something other than the pain you’re in, Sweetie.”

Karyn had to admit her grandmother was right... for once. Closing her eyes tightly, she allowed her mind to recall the images she’d never fully forgotten.

“Where in the hell is Mom? She should have been here an hour ago.” Karyn checked her watch impatiently, noting with some irritation the hands hadn’t traveled much further than the last time she’d looked.

Sara rushed to console her best friend. “You need to calm down. You’re going to walk down that aisle and pass out from all the stress. Just take a few deep breaths and try to concentrate. This is your wedding day.”

The bridal room door swung open with a loud crash of wood against wood. “Karyn!” The voice was slurred, testimony that the owner wasn’t exactly sober.

Karyn's gaze whipped around and she took in her mother's disheveled appearance with a loud groan of dismay. "Oh, Mom, not today! You promised not today." Tears welling in her eyes, she looked away.

Alice Daniels tottered forward, her legs shaky, her gait unsteady. "I just had a couple of drinks before I came over, just to give me courage. I am the mother of the bride, you know."

Karyn gripped her best friend's arm with desperation. "Sara," her voice was barely above a whisper, "what am I going to do? I can't let her go into the church like that! She's sloshed!"

Sara's eyes slid from her friend's horrified face to Alice's flushed one. "I know. I'll see what I can do."

What Sara could do knocked on the door seconds later. "Who is it?" Karyn didn't bother to hide the panic in her voice.

"Honey, it's me." Jace's deep voice reached to her through the door, reassuring her.

"He can't see you before the wedding," Alice hiccupped.

"Actually, I came to see you, Alice."

She looked interested. "Really? Why?" She lowered her voice to inform her daughter, "I never really thought he liked me."

"Of course I like you," Jace contradicted. "Now, why don't you come on out here so you and I can have a talk?"

"About what?" Suspicion laced the woman's voice.

"Well, I am marrying your daughter. Don't you have a few questions you'd like to ask me?"

Alice giggled and clapped a hand over her mouth to still the sound. "Well, maybe, but only for a few minutes. I have to see my daughter walk down the aisle." She staggered toward the door while Karyn presented her back to her mother. She didn't want to see Jace's look of pity. It wasn't like he didn't know about her mother. Jace had seen her many times before this. Seen

probably wasn't the right verb. She'd lost count of the times Jace had taken her mother home from the bar and made sure she was tucked in safely before leaving her. And he'd never judged her for it ... even when she'd promised she wouldn't do it anymore.

Karyn doubted Jace would pity her now, but eventually, he could grow tired of the constant drain on her time. Her mother's alcoholism was an ongoing battle that didn't just affect her; it affected everyone surrounding her ... and Alice Daniels didn't seem to care. Karyn bit down on her lower lip and tried not to cry. It was her wedding day and wedding days were supposed to be happy occasions.

"Karyn?" Jace's voice was close, too close and Karyn turned with a gasp.

"What are you doing in here?"

"I wanted to make sure you're okay." He stood directly behind her.

"I think we should be more worried about my mother. Where is she anyway? She just went out to see you." She tried to look over his shoulder.

"She passed out just outside the door. Sara and Ben are taking her to the pastor's study to sleep." His large hands settled on her shoulders. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, Jace, I wanted her to see me get married. I wanted her to be there and she promised she would be." She allowed herself to be pulled into his embrace, her head nestled against his shoulder. "It was one promise I wanted her to keep."

"I know and I'm sorry. I wish she could be there, too, but we'll have the video. I know it won't be the same, but ... I'm sorry ..." he broke off and Karyn knew he really didn't know what to say. For some reason, that comforted her more than meaningless words.

Standing on tiptoe, Karyn kissed him. "Thank you."

He blinked down at her, his hands finding their way back to her shoulders. "For what?"

"For loving me in spite of everything." Her smile was wobbly in spite of her determination to remain brave.

“Karyn,” his hands cupped her face, “I don’t love you in spite of everything, I love you because of everything. Your past is what makes you who you are. You can’t change it anymore than I can change mine. You never have to apologize or feel ashamed of anything or anyone in your past, present or future. I love you. I will always love you.”

As the memory faded to a close, Gran couldn’t resist adding, “And what makes you think he’s stopped now?”

Karyn grimaced, whether from the pain or the accuracy of her grandmother’s question, she wasn’t sure. “I doubted Jace’s love at first. I don’t now.”

“So what’s the hold-up on this reunion?”

“It’s not as simple as that.”

Gran looked like she wanted to stamp her foot in frustration. “Well, it could be if you weren’t so stubborn. I got angry at your grandfather many times, but I never let it destroy our marriage.”

“Things were different back then.”

Gran coughed and leaned closer to pin her granddaughter with a frown of the most disapproving sort. “Try Jace’s number again before you make me any madder.”

Karyn’s hand rested on the receiver and she stared into space. “I don’t know how angry he’s going to be.”

“And you won’t know until you call him.” The elderly lady nudged the phone even closer.

“This could change things between us.”

“Without a doubt.”

Her hands fisted in the sheets. “I won’t tell him over the phone what’s wrong.”

Gran practically screamed her frustration. “I don’t care if you rent a billboard and paste it atop the tallest building you can find, just call him!”

Karyn’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Do you know something you aren’t telling me?”

Jolene straightened away from the bed, tugging her dress back down into place. She looked the picture of innocence, which always sent up a red flag for the people who knew her best. “What makes you ask that?”

“Your response, for one.” Karyn lifted the receiver. “I’m going to call him, but before I do, please tell me this isn’t your doing.”

Gran looked horrified. “I would never hurt you or cause you pain, darling. You should know me better than that.”

Karyn looked suitably chastised. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“I will, however, push things along when I feel they aren’t moving fast enough.”

“Gran.” Karyn’s voice dipped lower with a warning note. “What did you do?”

“We can talk about that later. For now, just dial Jace’s number and get him over here. He’s a doctor and he should be able to help you. In fact, I think he’ll be more than willing to help you.”

With suspicion still stamped across her face, Karyn proceeded to dial the number.

Eight

Hair damp, feet bare, Jace raced to answer the ringing phone, cursing as his toe connected with the telephone table he'd bought at a local department store. In retrospect, the placement of the table probably wasn't his best choice. "Hello?" His voice was strained as he hobbled on one foot.

Karyn pressed the receiver closer to her ear. "Jace?"

His heartbeat accelerated and the blood rushed from his head with just the sound of his name. He forgot all about his injured toe. "Karyn? Is there something wrong?"

Her voice cracked on a sob. "I think so."

He was already diving for his shoes, reaching for his shirt. "What is it? Do you hear someone in the house again?"

"No, Jace, I'm ... I'm in a lot of pain and I think ..." She broke off.

"I'll be right there. Don't try to move." He tossed the cordless phone in the general direction of his king-size bed and stuffed his feet into his athletic shoes. He spent several laborious seconds searching for his car keys. Then, shoving his arms into his jacket, he was on his way.

* * * * *

"Gran, what if he doesn't understand?" Karyn gripped her grandmother's hand, beyond caring the woman at her side shouldn't be offering her comfort. She was dead, had been dead for several years. And yet, Karyn was glad she was there.

"Hush now. Even if Jace is upset at first, I think, eventually, he will see the reasoning behind your decision ... even if I can't." Gran teased with a touch of her fingertip to her granddaughter's chin.

"Karyn?" Jace yelled up the stairs as he took them at a rate of speed that was neither safe nor wise.

“That’s my cue,” Gran murmured, taking time to press a kiss against Karyn’s slightly damp cheek. “See you soon, my dear.” She faded into a mist just as Jace burst into the room.

His hair, still damp from the shower, stood on end. One side of his jacket collar was standing upright and his shirt was buttoned askew, but Karyn knew she’d never been more glad to see him. He was at her side, his hands gently pushing aside the comforter. “Tell me where it hurts.”

“Here.” She moved his hands to cover her abdomen.

He pressed gently. “Any fever? Nausea? Vomiting?” He was assessing her as he would any other patient, but the clipped questions hid his fear.

“I’ve had a small fever, no nausea or vomiting. Mostly pain.” She grunted on the last word as another upsurge of white, hot pain sliced through her lower abdomen. “Oh, God,” she moaned as the wave subsided.

“Are you bleeding?” The words were gently spoken as if afraid he might cause her embarrassment.

“No.”

“Okay. You just lie still. I’m going to call an ambulance.”

“Jace, no, it’ll take forever for an ambulance to get here.”

“You have to go to the hospital.”

“Then, you can take me.”

“It would be safer for you to travel in the ambulance, in case something happens.”

“Jace, I think I know what’s happening.”

His hands stilled on the comforter. “You do?”

She nodded, keeping her eyes lowered to his hands. “I think—” She swallowed hard and tried again. “I think I’m losing the baby.”

* * * * *

The hospital was located on the outskirts of Stafford and for such a late hour, it was bustling. The ambulance bays were full and the automatic doors didn't have time to close completely as gurneys filled the doorway. Somehow, Jace managed to make it past the melee to the front desk. "I'm Dr. Jace Morgan. Could you page Dr. Sanders? My wife is a patient and needs to be seen."

"Jace?" Patricia Sanders rushed into the waiting area, casually dressed in sweat suit and loafers. "Where's Karyn?"

"They've taken her to an exam room." Jace turned to face the doctor. "Patty, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because Karyn's my patient. I shouldn't have to explain this to you, Jace. Have you forgotten all about doctor/patient confidentiality?"

"She's my wife." He bit out.

"Unfortunately for you, that changes nothing. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to examine my patient."

He blocked her path. "I want to know everything once you're done."

Dr. Sanders' gaze was frosty. "If Karyn agrees, I'll be more than happy to fill you in."

Jace didn't hide his irritation as he watched the doctor walk away. Damn it. When had he lost control? When had the situation changed to exclude him? Karyn should have told him. He had every right to know. Damn it.

* * * * *

The exam didn't take long, but Jace felt as if he'd been waiting for hours when Patricia reappeared at his side. He leaped to his feet. "Well?"

"She's resting comfortably. I'm going to admit her for observation, but I think everything's going to be fine." She rested a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I know this must be difficult for you."

His eyes were glacier cold. “You can’t even begin to imagine how difficult. My wife has known she’s pregnant for—well, I don’t even know how long, and she refused to tell me. How do you think that makes me feel, Patty? Furthermore, you didn’t even have the professional courtesy to tell me the truth.”

Her hand dropped to her side. “Don’t lay this at my feet, Jace. I did the only thing I could do, the same thing you would do in this situation. I did what my patient wanted me to do.”

“And you’ve never bent the rules for a friend?”

“No. You don’t keep your license by bending the rules. You know that. When Karyn walked into my office, she was a patient, and like it or not, I had to follow her wishes. I took an oath, just as you did. And there are some rules you just don’t bend or break. Incidentally, when was the last time you bent them?”

He had the grace to look discomfited. “You’re right. I’m sorry. God, this is insane! Why didn’t she just tell me?”

The hand was back on his shoulder. “Maybe that’s something you need to ask her.”

His head lifted. “Oh, I will.”

“Just take it easy on her, okay? She thought she was going to lose her baby tonight.”

“Our baby,” he corrected.

Patricia smiled. “Of that, there’s no doubt. She’ll sleep for a while now, but you’re welcome to sit with her.”

* * * * *

The wind rushed through the trees and Karyn ran through the woods, searching for something, someone. The branches whipped at her face, lashing the tender skin, leaving bloody trails that stung. The blood mingled with her tears. She wished she knew what she was looking for, who she was looking for. Maybe it was Jace. Or was it Sam? No, Sam was dead; she knew where he was. She didn’t know where Jace was. Was he dead, too?

She saw the lone figure ahead. Dressed all in black, he stood tall and straight, unmoving. Cold, blue eyes watched her approaching him. There was no welcome on his face.

“Jace?” Her voice pled with him to understand.

“You kept my baby from me,” he snarled.

“No, I didn’t. I haven’t had him yet. You can still see your baby be born.”

He eyed her strangely. “What are you talking about? We buried our baby today and because of you, I didn’t even get a chance to know her!”

“Her? I’ve never had a her!”

“You need to get help, Karyn.” His voice was sad, though still tinged with the fury that would take years to dissipate. He turned to walk away. Frantically, she grabbed his arm. “Jace, no! Please don’t walk away like this.”

But he was already gone, disappearing into the mist as if he’d become one with the swirling grayness that surrounded her.

* * * * *

Pulling herself out of the vivid dream, Karyn kept her eyes closed, allowing her breathing to return to normal.

“Karyn?” Jace called to her from the chair by her bed.

Her eyes blinked open. “What time is it?”

“Just after nine. You slept the whole night through. How do you feel?”

She licked her lips, turned her head toward the wall. “I think I should be asking you that.”

“We can discuss that later. Now is not the time.”

Her head rolled back on the pillow to face him once more. “I want to talk about it now. You’re angry. I can see it in your eyes.”

His breath escaped his lungs in a rush of air. “What do you want me to say, Karyn? Do you want me to lie and say I’m not upset? Or do you want me to tell you the truth, which you really don’t want to hear?”

She closed her eyes. “Maybe you were right. Maybe we should wait.”

He was out of the chair and at her side in an instant. “Are you all right?” Concern laced his tone and he reached out a hand to brush the tangled hair away from her face. She winced at his touch and he dropped his hand back to his side.

She searched his face for any signs of warmth, but the set of his jaw told her Jace wouldn’t be receptive to any apologies at the moment. “What’s going to happen now, Jace?”

“You’re going to concentrate on getting better.”

“I meant with us.”

He’d known what she’d meant. “I don’t know. We’ll talk.”

She caught his hand as he tried to straighten, to walk away. “I want to know the truth, Jace. Before you found out I was pregnant, you wanted to work on our marriage, to give it another try. What about now, now that you know that I am pregnant, that I kept it from you?”

“What happened to waiting to have this discussion?” The question was as harsh as a cold, winter wind.

Her shoulders lifted in a semblance of a shrug. “I think the suspense might not be good for me.”

He pulled her fingers away from his arm, stuffed his hands into the pockets of his wrinkled slacks. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I didn’t want you back because of a baby. And I know if I had told you I was pregnant, you would have insisted on moving back in with me, making our marriage work no matter what. A baby can’t hold a marriage together.”

“You can’t base a marriage on lies, either, Karyn.” He withdrew one hand from his pocket to slide it across his lower jaw. The crisp hairs rasped against his palm; he needed a shave. Dropping his hand back down, he focused an almost expressionless gaze on his wife’s face. “I’m going to need time.”

Karyn laughed abruptly. “Time. Jace, you blamed me for our son’s death and after a while, I was able to forgive you for that, to try to work on our marriage. And now I withhold my pregnancy from you because I knew you needed time and suddenly, you’re the martyr? You’re the one who wanted to work things out. You’re the one who wouldn’t leave me alone even when we were supposed to be separated.”

He took two steps toward her, reconsidered and backed off. “Because I loved you, damn it!”

“Loved?” She picked up on the past tense word and bit down hard on her lower lip to quell the trembling. “And what do you feel now, Jace? Are you disillusioned because I didn’t share something with you? Traumatized because I’m not the angelic woman you’ve placed on a pedestal? Tell me, what exactly have I done that’s so terrible? I’m almost twelve weeks pregnant. The only thing you’ve missed out on is the morning sickness and the constant nausea. I’m not even showing yet. You can still see me in the maternity clothes, still watch my stomach grow with your child and even see the baby born if that’s your choice. So what exactly have you missed?”

“The truth. I’ve missed the truth.”

“So you’re willing to walk out now because you feel you’ve been wronged?”

“It’s more than just a feeling, Karyn. How many times have you proclaimed our marriage was based on honesty and commitment and trust? Do you even know what honesty means?”

Her voice, when she replied, was quietly cold. “Yes, I know exactly what it means. It means having the courage to tell the truth no matter whom it hurts. I’m telling you the truth now. I didn’t tell you about the baby because I wasn’t sure our marriage was going to last.”

“What difference does that make?” He snapped. “I still had a right to be a father again.”

“A father doesn’t desert his son just because his son is no longer with him!”

“And a mother doesn’t continually blame the father for something he had no control over.”

“Oh, so we’re back to that again, are we?”

“No, we’re not back to anything. In fact, I don’t think we have anything more to say.” Spinning on his heel, he walked out of the room, needing time, needing space.

A tear leaked out of the corner of her eye and rolled down her cheek. It was like the dream. She’d lost him.

* * * * *

Jace reached the chapel before the tears came and as he slumped down into one of the pews. He rested his head against the unyielding wood and gave them free rein. Sliding unchecked down his cheeks, the tears damped the collar of his shirt. He should have known, not because Karyn told him but because he was a doctor. He’d made love to her and yet, he’d missed all the signs. He should have noticed her breasts were fuller, her stomach just a little more rounded than normal, but he’d missed it. He was so wrapped up in loving her he couldn’t see her secret. There was no doubt in his mind he’d hurt her this time. He’d wanted to take her in his arms and tell her everything would be okay, but in truth, he wasn’t so sure it would be. He wasn’t so sure he was ready to be a father again. The pain was still too deep, the memories too strong. When he pictured his son, he saw Sam. He couldn’t imagine another child taking Sam’s place, sleeping in his crib, suckling at Karyn’s breast. His hands clenched into fists against the velvet upholstery and his breaths came in great gulps of air. He couldn’t face this, dammit! He wasn’t ready to face it.

* * * * *

“Man, you were this close,” Ben held up his thumb and forefinger less than a half an inch apart to emphasize how close, “to making your marriage work, then you have to go and screw it up.” He checked his watch. “So go on, tell me your side of it, but make it quick. I’ve got a meeting in thirty minutes.”

Jace placed the mug of coffee firmly down on top of the diner table and folded his arms across his chest. “You think I screwed this up? I’ve already told you Karyn lied to me.”

“She was scared.”

“Of me? That’s ridiculous!”

“To you, maybe, but she saw you as a falling down drunk who would demand his rights as a father ... with or without her.”

Jace stared at him. “Are you telling me she was afraid I would try to get custody of the baby?”

Ben nodded sagely. “I’m sure the thought had crossed her mind.”

“Well, that’s beyond ridiculous. That’s absurd. I couldn’t take care of an infant by myself.”

“Women do it all the time,” Ben pointed out, tongue-in-cheek.

The glare intensified. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not a woman. Women have built-in maternal instincts.”

Ben bit back a guffaw and leaned back against the cracked upholstery. “I’m sure you’re not going to feed her that line to convince her. Built-in maternal instincts. What a riot.”

“Knock it off, Ben. This isn’t funny.”

“I’m not laughing in mirth, pal. I’m just sitting back and watching my friend screw up the best thing in his life.”

“How does this always turn out to be my fault? Weren’t you listening when I told you Karyn lied to me? Put yourself in my shoes. How would you like it if Sara didn’t tell you she was pregnant?”

Ben shook his head and pushed his plate away from the edge. “Wouldn’t happen. Sara couldn’t keep a secret even if Ed McMahon offered her the winning ticket in the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes to keep quiet.”

Jace closed his eyes and mentally counted to ten. When that didn’t work, he proceeded to twenty before opening his eyes. “It was a hypothetical situation.”

“I’m a lawyer. I deal in facts, not hypotheticals.”

“Didn’t you say you had a meeting?”

Ben grinned, reaching for his wallet. “When all else fails, avoid the situation, right, friend?”

“Go to hell,” Jace muttered.

Still grinning, Ben extracted a ten-dollar bill from the snakeskin wallet and tossed it beside his plate. “Tell Annette she shouldn’t strain too hard to listen to other people’s conversations. It’s a good way to lose a tip.” He got to his feet, reaching for his wool overcoat. “If I were you, I would think long and hard before allowing my anger to overrule common sense. Karyn loves you and no matter if what she did was right or wrong, you could still make your marriage work.”

“I hurt her,” Jace admitted glumly.

Ben paused on his way to the door. “Then fix it.”

Jace waved his friend away, tired of listening to the good-intentioned advice. What he wanted was a drink, a good, stiff drink and he knew just the place to get it.

* * * * *

Jace had no idea why the shady bar situated on the outskirts of town was named Happy’s. No one inside gave even the pretense of being happy. Several regulars were slumped over the bar, glassy eyes indicating they’d been there a while. Several men were playing pool, rowdy, raucous laughter combining with the pungent smell of stale beer and cigarettes. Women, dressed in miniskirts and halter tops despite the weather, draped themselves over the bar, looking for the next unsuspecting victim who would buy them another brew and perhaps, take them home for the evening. Painted faces looked toward the door with hopeful expressions when Jace stepped across the threshold. One man hiccupped and raised his beer, willing to toast anything that would give him another reason to drink.

Jace searched the crowded bar for signs that someone was here for another reason other than just to get drunk. He was met with bleary eyes, flushed faces, and staggering steps as people jostled one another on their way to the bar for a refill. Happy wouldn’t cut them off; it was bad for business. Maybe that was one of the reasons Jace liked this place. Happy didn’t ask questions. He just poured the drinks and took the cash. Jace didn’t come to Happy’s to make friends; he came to get drunk—at least, that was what he used to do. Now, as he stepped inside the dimly lit interior, with stale smoke swirling about his head, he realized he didn’t really want to be there.

“Well, howdy, stranger. Haven’t seen you in here before.” A buxom blonde with too much make-up and too little clothing pressed her overly ripe curves against Jace’s body, running her hands up and down his arms in a gesture of familiarity.

With a scowl born of disgust for himself, Jace peeled her fingers away and stepped aside. “I was just leaving.”

Scarlet red lips formed a pout. “So soon? Ya just got here. Why don’t you stay awhile? I’ll let you buy me a drink.”

“I don’t think so, but thanks anyway.” He turned to leave.

“Suit yourself, but the offer is open if you change your mind.” She sauntered back to the bar, her hips swaying in time to the gaudy tune blaring from the jukebox.

Before he could get caught up in the lure of the nameless faces and quiet anonymity, Jace buttoned his coat once more and hurried out into the dark night.

He didn’t want to go home yet; there was nothing for him there. And he didn’t think he was ready to go back to the hospital. Patricia would release Karyn tomorrow morning. He knew he should be there. He should be the one to take her home, but he knew even as he thought it, he wouldn’t. He would call Sara, ask her to take Karyn home and maybe, later on tomorrow, he would see her. They could talk and possibly work out a solution to this problem.

He didn’t know what he expected from her. An apology? Contrition? Hell, he just didn’t know. The only thing he did know was he wasn’t quite ready to forgive her.

Walking down the main street of town, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his thick overcoat, his eyes swept the quiet town. Everyone was closing up shop, heading home to their families. It was Friday night, but you couldn’t tell from the looks of the town. It could have been a week night. Stafford wasn’t known for its bustling activity or raging parties. It was a quiet town, almost sleepy. Maybe that’s one of the things that had drawn him here from Muskogee, Oklahoma. He didn’t regret the decision. He’d met

Karyn and known from their first meeting she was the one he would marry. Now, the problem was, he was about to let her go.

The gravel crunched beneath his feet as he crossed the street to his office. Head lowered, he wasn't paying attention to where he was going and when he encountered the body blocking his path, he didn't have time to stop.

Scott stumbled back from the force of the contact and cursed low in his throat, but not so low Jace couldn't hear him.

"Sorry." Jace mumbled an apology. "I didn't see you."

"Obviously," Scott muttered his irritation as he knocked an imaginary speck of dirt off his impeccable, tailored overcoat. "I thought you would be with Karyn."

Jace's face closed. He wasn't about to discuss his marriage with the one man who wanted to see it fail. "I was taking a walk. Now, if you will excuse me ..." He moved around the man, hoping to reach his office this time.

"Morgan, you should know if I think there's a chance in hell that Karyn will consider another relationship with me, I'm going to go for it."

Jace paused, his hand on the doorknob to the medical clinic. "Then you should know there isn't a chance in hell that's going to happen. Karyn and I are married and we're going to stay married."

"Is that why you're living apart now?" Scott didn't even try to keep the gibe out of his voice.

Jace pivoted slowly, his eyes narrowed. "What are you trying to say, Jones?"

Scott's shoulders lifted in a shrug beneath the wool overcoat. "Just that Karyn is a beautiful woman. She shouldn't be sleeping alone."

Jace's lips curved into a sardonic smile. "You dated her for two years and she slept alone."

Scott's face suffused with color. "I was giving her time. She said she wasn't ready."

"She wasn't ready for you," Jace returned crisply. "She was always ready for me."

"You bastard," Scott snarled, taking a threatening step forward.

Jace held up one hand. “You might want to rethink what you’re about to do. I can’t think of one reason why I wouldn’t want to kick your ass. All it would take is that first punch.” His eyes frosty, he waited, knowing the punch would never come. Scott might be a lot of things, but he wasn’t a stupid man. He was capable of judging the difference in their sizes, their weight and realizing he was outclassed.

Scott settled for a heated response. “Karyn deserves better than you.”

White teeth flashed in the darkness as Jace grinned. “Maybe, but I’m the one she has and I have her. So stay away from her or I might not wait for that first punch next time.” He turned back to the door, inserted his key in the lock and stepped inside, pausing to give the man behind him one last, hard look before closing the door.

He leaned against the solid wood, drawing in several deep breaths. Yeah, he might have Karyn for now, but the question was, would he be able to keep her? His fist slammed against the unyielding oak and he wished he’d taken the time for one drink after all.

* * * * *

The moonlight shone down on the grave markers, enabling Jace to find his way easily to his son’s grave. He didn’t kneel. For the longest time, he stood staring down at the gray stone, one hand resting on the cold marble. When he spoke, his voice was husky, uncertain, even though he knew what he wanted to say.

“Sam, I didn’t think I’d come back. I thought I could say good-bye to you once and that would be enough. Now that your mommy is pregnant, I realize just how much I’ve missed you.” He laughed a little. “Do you know what I miss the most? The way you would shake in the bathtub like a dog. The soap and water would go everywhere and you would giggle like it was the greatest treat in the world.” The laugh was shakier this time. “I miss the way you used to want to sleep with us. Somehow, you would always end up halfway on top of me and in the middle of the night, you would giggle sometimes, like someone had just tickled you.” He drew in a deep, unsteady breath. “I’m not really angry with your mother for not telling me about your new brother or sister.”

A dog howled in the distance and Jace dropped to his knees in the dirt. “Do you know what really scares me? It’s getting close to another child and losing him or her. I don’t know if I could go through it again. I couldn’t take it when we lost you, Sam. Your mother knows the truth of that statement. I guess what bothers me the most is that I wasn’t as strong as I thought I was. I thought I could handle anything, that nothing would shake me. God, how wrong I was. And when your mother told me she was going to have another baby, I was more than just angry. I was terrified. I just had to let her believe it was the anger. What else could I do? Tell her the truth and risk her thinking I’m weak? I’ve just spent weeks proving to her I’ve changed.” He rocked back on his heels and dropped his head in his hands. “I wish none of this had happened. I wish I could go back in time and change things. I would have gotten home on time that night. I would have driven us to Sara and Ben’s house. You would still be alive and we would still be a family.”

A sob crawled up his chest and burst from his throat and, for once, Jace didn’t try to stop it. He’d spent the months since his son’s death fighting the grief, the despair that Karyn felt. Now, he gave vent to it, pounding his fists against the stone until his hands were raw, until he was spent. He’d cried when he’d visited his son’s grave before, but it was nothing like the wrenching agony that threatened to overwhelm him now. And as grief gave way to calm, he sat down on the dirt and lifted his face to the sky. He didn’t know what his next move would be, but he knew he would have to be the one to make the next one. Karyn would leave it up to him.

Slowly, he got to his feet. He was suddenly very tired, spent from the raging anguish that had torn through him like the horns of an angry bull. His hand dropped to the marble once more. “I’ll always miss you, buddy. Nothing’s going to change that. And I guess I’ll be back from time to time. Just to say hi and to let you know how things are going. I love you, Sam.”

He started to walk away then stopped, angling his head back toward the grave. “Oh, one more thing. Your mommy says she saw you. I don’t know if that’s true or not. Maybe she just wanted to see you. I just want to ask you to not do that anymore. I know how much your mommy misses you, but

allowing her to see you, well, I don't know if it helps her or hurts her. I hope you understand what I'm trying to say. I know you were only two, but I'm hoping that being where you are, well, you're able to understand things you couldn't understand here." He dragged a raw, aching hand through his hair. "It's just that your mommy loves you so much and there's a hole in her heart where you used to be. And when she saw you that day, it shook her up and I want to try to help her put things back together." He kissed his fingertips and touched the marble. "I sure do hope you understand, son." He did leave then, his footsteps carrying him away so quickly he missed the soft glow of light surrounding the gray stone.

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"Knock, knock," Scott singsonged softly, poking his head inside the hospital room.

Karyn looked up, hope dying in her eyes as she realized her visitor wasn't Jace. "Oh, hi, Scott."

"I heard you were in the hospital and I thought I'd drop by to make sure you were all right."

"I'm fine." The words sounded false even to her own ears.

Scott walked forward, removing his gloves one finger at a time. "When are they letting you out of here?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"I suppose Jace is taking you home, then?"

Karyn turned her face to the wall. "Probably not."

Scott faked a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry to hear that. Listen," he sat down on the edge of the bed, taking one of her hands in his, "why don't you let me take you home tomorrow? I know there can't be anything between the two of us. I've already come to terms with that, but you look like you could use a friend right now, one who isn't going to tell you that what's going on is all your fault or partly your fault or anything like that. In fact, we won't even talk about your marriage. We'll just be friends." He slanted her an all-out grin designed to reassure her, calm her fears. "Sound good to you?"

Karyn knew she should send him away, but he was right. She did need a friend, one who could accept that maybe, just maybe, her marriage wasn't going to survive this. She rolled to face him and somehow, she managed a nod. "I'd like that."

His face relaxed into an approving expression and he patted her hand companionably. "Great. So what time should I be here tomorrow?"

"Scott, there's something you should know."

"Shoot."

"I'm pregnant."

Scott's mouth fell open. "Oh. I was under the impression you and Jace were, well, weren't together anymore."

"It's a long story."

He slipped back into his understanding mode. "Of course, of course. Well, no matter. We can still be friends. In fact, you probably need me now more than ever." He held up one hand. "And don't worry. We won't talk about the baby, either. That's between you and Jace. Of course, if you were my wife, I'd be here with you right now instead of heading down to some bar to get drunk."

"Jace was going to a bar?"

Scott slapped a hand against his mouth and winced. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. Just forget that I did."

Karyn covered his hand with one of hers. "It's okay, Scott. I'm not angry with you for telling me and I'm not surprised. Let's just not talk about Jace, either, okay?"

Scott beamed. "Your wish is my command, my lady."

If only it were that simple, Karyn's heart whispered.

Nine

The diner buzzed once more. A new morsel of gossip had found its way in amongst the crowd and Annette had snatched onto the choice kernel as if she were drowning and it was the only life preserver remaining. Her two chins were quivering with excitement as she waited for the usual trio of farmers to place their orders. Then, unable to contain herself any longer, she dipped her head and in a conspiratorial whisper, began relaying the information.

“Have you guys heard what’s going on?”

Jack looked up, uneasiness stamped across his lined face. “I don’t know if I want to hear what’s going on.”

“Yeah, the last time we ‘heard what was going on’,” Henry put in with a look of pure disgust, “we ended up having to tote your big behind almost a full block.”

Annette threw him a fulminating glare and waved away their concern. “No, this is even better than last time.”

“Better than ghosts?” Jack whispered loudly, causing several heads to turn in interest.

“Ghosts.” Annette raised her voice. “You need to stop reading those novels, Jack. You know there ain’t no such thing as ghosts.”

“Well, I was talking about the damned book,” he grumbled.

The heads turned back to their meals and Annette’s shoulders relaxed. “You don’t know how to whisper,” she admonished the homely farmer.

He didn’t take offense. “So what’s this chief piece of information you seem so desperate to share?”

“And can’t it wait until after you place our order? I don’t want to be waiting here until Christmas to eat.” Henry complained.

Frustration in every movement of her ample hips, Annette stomped across the tiled floors and hung the order on the rack with a shout. “Order in!”

Kev leaned his head out the order window with a glare. “No kidding. I wouldn’t have known had you not squawked at me.”

It was a long-standing argument and one Annette didn’t have time for at the present. Not even wasting the time it would take to shoot the cook a frown, she hurried back to the table in the corner. Lowering her bottom to the upholstery, she scooted in beside Jack. “Okay, here’s what I’ve heard.”

“Oh, geez, I thought it was real stuff, not just stuff you overheard. Hell, your hearing’s about as bad as mine.” Jack whined.

This earned him an elbow in the ribs before Annette continued. “Y’all know that Scott Jones’s back in town.”

“That’s old news.” Henry yawned. “Hell, he’s even been in the diner—or have you forgotten that already?”

Annette glared at him. “Will you just listen?”

“I seen him down by the post office the other morning. He’s looking mighty spiffy, I must say,” Ed inserted with a glance at his watch.

“Yes, but the new news is that Scott has been keeping company with Karyn ever since she got out of the hospital.”

“Hospital?” Jack looked interested. “What was she in the hospital for?”

“I’m still working on that.” Annette helped herself to Henry’s mug of coffee. “Now, the way I see it, Scott came back to Stafford strictly for the purpose of hooking back up with Karyn. And now that Karyn’s about to be divorced, well, it’s going to make things a little bit easier for him.”

Jack choked on a swallow of the hot brew. “Divorced? Who said anything about getting divorced?”

“That’s the first I heard about it, too. Are you sure you ain’t just hearing things?” Ed demanded suspiciously.

“Oh, hell, guys, will you keep up? Ever since Karyn left the hospital under mysterious circumstances, Jace hasn’t been around. In fact, I’ve heard he’s been keeping company with Jen Masters. You know, the pretty young hairdresser who just moved to town. It seems,” she leaned back against the seat, “our Dr. Morgan is moving on.”

Henry shook his head. “It’s a shame.”

“It’s not like you knew them all that well.” Annette scoffed at his sympathy.

“That’s not what I meant. I meant that it’s a shame about Jen Masters when my Carrie has been interested in Dr. Morgan for years. if I’d known this before, I would have given her the go-ahead.”

“For what?” Jack shivered. “There’s no way on God’s green earth Dr. Morgan would go for Carrie when he’s had someone like Karyn Morgan.”

Henry’s eyes narrowed, his body tensed, ready to do battle to defend his daughter’s person. “Just what in the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Annette got up, her mission complete. “Well, I’ll be seeing you boys later.” She strolled back to the counter, a predatory gleam in her eyes.

“I was just saying, look at Karyn! She’s about three times hotter than hot!” Jack continued, not noticing his friend’s rising ire.

“And you don’t think my Carrie’s hot?”

Ed smirked behind the paper, which earned him a thump on the head from Henry’s bony elbow.

Meanwhile, Annette smiled at the trio across the counter.

* * * * *

Karyn adjusted her collar and straightened her skirt, trying to ignore the concerned look in her friend’s eyes. “How do I look?”

“Like you’re scared to death. Are you sure you should be going back to work now?”

“No, I’m not, but Jace already knows I’m pregnant. Soon, the whole town will know. So I have nothing to hide anymore. Besides, I’ll be taking more leave soon enough.”

Sara flopped down on the bed, tucking her legs beneath her. “And what about your visitors?”

“You mean my grandmother?” A ghost of a smile flitted across Karyn’s lips. “Actually, I’ve kind of gotten used to having her around. I missed her. She and I were close, you know. Closer than my mother and I ever were.” She reached for her handbag. “We’d better get going if we don’t want to be late for school.”

Sara sighed, pulled herself to a sitting position and reached for her own purse. “So what’s the story about you and Scott?”

“What story?” Karyn checked her appearance in the mirror once more and ran her tongue over her teeth to remove any traces of lipstick.

“I’ve heard he’s been hanging around here an awful lot.”

“We’re friends.”

Sara’s eyes widened. “Do you think Jace would approve?”

Karyn eyed her strangely. “Jace never picked my friends, even before we were separated.”

“Yeah, but you also weren’t friends with your ex-boyfriend,” Sara pointed out, pushing her aside to check her own appearance.

Karyn gave a light laugh. “Well, like I said, Scott and I are just friends.”

“That’s not what the town’s saying.”

“I’m not responsible for what the town thinks.”

“No, but what happens if Jace finds out? Odds are good he’s not going to like this.”

“Then he can deal with it. Now, we’d really better leave.” Karyn checked her watch once more.

“Great. We’re going to be late for sure now.”

“Well, speaking of your husband, have you heard from him lately?”

“Not in three days.”

“That’s not so long, really.” Sara tried to run interference.

Karyn favored her friend with a genuine smile. “Sara, it’s okay. I knew what I was doing when I hid this pregnancy from him ... at least, I thought I did. But then, I thought my marriage was over. I never for one second thought there was a chance he and I could, well, reunite. And now it’s too late. We’ve both made our choices.”

Sara clamped her hands on her hips. “If you’re not the most stubborn woman on this planet, then I don’t know who is. Did you apologize to him?”

Karyn switched off the bedroom light as she walked into the hallway. “He’s not ready to talk about apologies, Sara. He only wants to hold a grudge.”

“That doesn’t sound like Jace.”

“I think there’s more, but there’s nothing I can do until he’s ready to talk.”

“What do you mean more?” Sara snatched another doughnut on her way out the door.

“I mean, there’s something going on inside Jace he can’t talk about right now.” Karyn turned the key in the lock to secure the door behind them. “So I’ll just give him time.”

Sara’s face cleared. “You mean, you’re not giving up yet.”

A mysterious look passed over Karyn’s face. “Let’s just say I know more than Jace thinks I know.”

Sara’s brow furrowed with confusion. “Well, that’s about as clear as mud.” She seated herself in the passenger seat of Karyn’s Toyota Camry and connected the seatbelt. “Could you be any more vague?”

Karyn slid behind the wheel and punched the key in the ignition. “Jace is hiding something he doesn’t want me to know, something that culminated when I told him I was pregnant.”

“Ohh, you think it has something to do with Sam’s death.”

Karyn swiveled in the seat to face her friend. “Jace never really grieved for Sam.”

“You think he’s scared about this new baby?”

“I think it’s a distinct possibility.”

“And he thinks you’re none the wiser.” The doughnut paused on the way to her mouth.

“Exactly.”

“Geez, he should realize you know him better than that.” Sara rested her head against the head rest. “How much more time are you going to give him?”

“I’m not sure yet. I thought I’d just play it by ear.”

Sara grinned. “You mean you don’t have a plan.”

“Right.” Karyn returned the grin and started the engine. “But some of the best coups were achieved without a plan. Take General Custer for instance.”

“He died.”

“Exactly. And the Indians didn’t even have a plan.”

Sara tossed back her head and laughed.

* * * * *

Jace was grumpy. In fact, he was downright mean, and Sharon didn’t mind telling him so. Marching into his office, she slapped a file on top of his desk and stood across from him patting the toe of her white shoe on the carpet.

Jace’s head lifted, a distracted look on his face. “Was there something you needed Sharon?”

“How about a vacation?” she suggested sweetly.

He pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. “I wasn’t aware you were that overworked.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean a vacation for me. I meant a vacation for you.”

“I’m sure there’s a point to this somewhere.”

Her arms folded across her chest. “You want a point? I’ll give you a point. I’ve been working for you for over six years now and I’ve never seen you in such a foul mood. You’ve been snapping at me all day and I’ve had just about enough of it.” Sharon took a few steps forward until she was close enough to plant her hands, palms down on the file he’d been reviewing, preventing him from seeing the paperwork

beneath them. “Now, the way I see it is you can either take a vacation and give me a break or I can look for another job and take a permanent break.”

Jace sighed heavily. “I didn’t realize I was being ...” He paused to search for a proper adjective.

“Rude? Annoying? Obnoxious? I could go on.”

He held up one hand. “There’s no need. I get your point. I’m sorry.”

“Look.” Sharon’s attitude softened. “I know you have a lot going on in your life right now and I’m sorry, too. If there’s anything I can do, well, you know what I’m saying.” She let the offer dangle in the air.

“Thanks, I appreciate it. But I’m afraid I’m in this one on my own.”

“Well, just remember if you need help rowing that boat, you know where to find me and,” she tossed him an impish grin on the way to the door, “that’s strictly on a friendship basis. I’m definitely not out for your body.”

He sent her a mock glare. “Should I be offended?”

“No, I’m still desperate enough to believe that one day, Jimmy will get over his phobia of marriage and ask me to tie the knot.”

“Hope springs eternal.”

She laughed her way out the door.

* * * * *

Jace rounded the corner by the diner, coming to an abrupt stop when he brushed against soft curves. He snaked out an arm and caught Karyn around the waist before she fell. For a moment, one, brief, silent moment, his gaze connected with hers and their souls touched, remembering. His head dipped and without thought to the consequences, he kissed her. It was a gentle touching of the lips, but to Karyn, it was much more. It was hope, the undeniable truth that what they had was far from over. But just as quickly as it had begun, it was over and Jace was backing away from her. “Sorry, I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“How much longer are you going to pretend I don’t exist?” The quiet question brought his gaze whipping back to her face.

“I’m giving us time.”

The wind lifted a lock of his hair and brushed it over his forehead. Karyn restrained herself from moving it aside with her fingers. “Did I ask for time?” The huskiness of her voice startled her. The pain she felt inside leaked into her speech.

“Well, maybe it’s not about what you asked for. Maybe this is about what I need now.” His own tone was one of clipped disapproval.

“Oh, yes, I forgot, you’ve been hurt, wronged, disillusioned and now, you have to take the time to lick your wounds and get over it, right?”

His jaw clenched shut tightly. “I’ll see you later.” He walked away again, leaving her to stare after his retreating back.

* * * * *

“So have you heard the news?” The heavysset lady hurried her way down the street, her arms overloaded with packages, her face glued to the face of her friend.

“No, what news?” The older woman’s eyes lit up eagerly and she slowed down to make sure she didn’t miss a tidbit of the news.

From behind them, Jace tossed Ben an irritated glance.

“Karyn Morgan is seeing Scott Jones again.” The chubby lady’s face fairly shook with the anticipation of her friend’s response.

“No!”

Jace’s face froze as he met his friend’s gaze with a questioning one of his own.

Ben lifted muscular shoulders in an “I’m clueless” shrug.

Jace’s response was a whispered, “I’ll bet.”

“Now, Marge, you know it’s not nice to spread ugly rumors. So how did you come by this information?”

“From a reliable source. Why, Annette down at the diner was just saying ...”

Jace didn’t hang around long enough to hear the end of the conversation; he’d heard enough.

With a heartfelt sigh, Ben took off after him, pausing long enough to call out to the two women.

“You know, you should really pay attention to who’s behind you before you start talking about something you know nothing about.” He jogged onward then, leaving the two women to stare after him in open-mouthed astonishment.

* * * * *

“It’s good to have you back, Mrs. Morgan.” Josh smiled bashfully as he handed in his paper.

“It’s good to be back, Josh.” Karyn smiled down at the bright-eyed ten-year-old with freckles and a cowlick. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As the last child left her classroom, Karyn sank down in her seat behind her desk and rested her head on her arms. She’d only been gone a little over a week and it felt like a month. The kids were especially hyperactive, whether it was from excitement at her return or too many sweets the night before, she wasn’t sure. A light tap sounded on the door frame and Karyn lifted her head. “Scott?”

He walked into the room, holding a single, red rose. “I hope I’m not disturbing you. I waited around until classes let out. I hope that’s okay.” He smiled his charming smile and presented her with the flower. “This is for you.”

Karyn eyed him speculatively. “Scott, what’s this all about?”

The smile faltered, but Scott didn’t back down. “Well, I was hoping you would let me take you out to dinner tonight ... unless you have other plans.”

Karyn didn’t lie. “No, I don’t, but I don’t think us having dinner together is such a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because, in case you’ve forgotten, I’m married.”

Scott waved a hand airily. “Yeah, but not for long, right?”

She folded her hands atop her desk calmly, lifting her eyes to pin him with an inquiring glance. “I thought we had agreed to be just friends.”

“Well, we did, but now I realize I want more. Oh, come on, Karyn, you can’t believe that I’ve been spending so much time with you without hoping for another chance.” He tilted his head to one side in a boyishly charming way.

Karyn sighed inwardly. In his own way, Scott was an attractive man and any other woman would be flattered at the attention, but she felt nothing. She’d given her heart to Jace years ago and she couldn’t take it back. She didn’t want to take it back. She steepled her fingers and rested her chin atop her hands. “I believed what you said. That you wanted to be friends. You should have known that’s all there ever could be between the two of us. Just a friendship.” She managed a wan smile.

Scott took a step toward her, hope in his eyes. “Why? Why won’t you give us another chance? We could be good together.” His voice conveyed his urgency. “You loved me once.”

Karyn winced. “No, I didn’t.”

He blanched. “What? What are you talking about?”

She didn’t want to hurt him. “Scott, there’s really no point in discussing this. What we had was over a long time ago. We can’t go back.”

“You mean you don’t want to go back.”

“However you want to take it.”

“You’ll be getting a divorce soon and ...” His voice trailed off.

Her eyes dropped to her hands before lifting to fix him with polite inquiry. “And what makes you think I’m getting a divorce?”

“It’s all over town.” Scott’s serenity bubble was beginning to shrink.

“Well then.” She pushed her chair away from the desk and stood, reaching for her purse. “You shouldn’t listen to gossip. I’m not getting a divorce.”

Scott frowned, the hand holding the rose dropping to his side. “But you’re not living with Jace.”

Hooking the shoulder strap of her bag over her shoulder, Karyn nodded in affirmation of his announcement. “You’re right. Jace and I aren’t living together. But we’re not getting a divorce.”

“So you’re just going to stay separated?” Disappointment clung to him like a baby monkey.

Karyn paused on her way to the door, one fingernail tapping her chin. “Actually, no. Jace and I are going to get back together and our marriage is going to last for the next fifty years or more.”

He tried not to pout. “How can you be so sure?”

She smiled then, a womanly smile that made men like Scott Jones know any chance they might have had was long gone. “Call it intuition.”

“And suppose Jace doesn’t share the same intuition? I’ve heard he’s been seen around town with ...”

She held up one hand to stop the flow of words. “Spare me, Scott. Jace would no sooner cheat on me than he would invite you to live with us. We might have had problems, but trusting one another in that regard wasn’t one of them.”

“Problems don’t just go away, you know. You might agree to allow him to move back in but whatever problem that made you ask him to leave will still be there.”

She laughed lightly. “I doubt it.” She switched off the light on the way out of the room. “I have a plan.” Her voice trailed off as her high heels tapped down the linoleum on her way to the exit.

The rose fell from Scott’s hand to the floor.

* * * * *

Jace was surprised to find Karyn’s car gone from the driveway. If she wasn’t working, she should be home—unless she was with ... no, he stuffed that traitorous thought out of his mind. Karyn would never betray their marriage vows no matter what the gossip mongers in town had said. In spite of everything that had happened, they still loved one another, of that he was positive.

Unrolling his long frame from his car, he sauntered toward the door and inserted his key in the lock. He would just wait. No matter how long it took. He would be here waiting for her when she got home. And then they would be able to talk.

“Hello, Jace.” The voice that greeted him was crusty with age, but there was no mistaking the owner. Descending the stairs in a dark blue dress, her hair elegantly coiffed, Jolene Daniels wore a smile as wide as Texas. “Long time no see.”

Jace took several staggering steps backwards, shook his head to clear his line of vision and tried again. She was still there. He sucked in a sharp breath and pointed a finger at the apparition. “You can’t be here. You’re dead.”

“Same tune. Different singer,” Jolene replied on a sad sigh. “Tell me something I don’t already know. And I can be here. After all,” she reached the landing and twirled around, her arms extended, “you see me, don’t you?”

Jace wasn’t really sure what he saw. “This is impossible.”

“Still believing in scientific facts, I see.”

“Not always,” he contradicted. “I’ve always believed in God, just never ghosts.”

“Yes, but there are things to support God’s existence if one looks around him and looks with an open heart. Not too many people care to look with an open heart when considering ghosts.” She brushed a speck of lint off her wool dress and frowned down at the material. “Why on earth I told Karyn to bury me in this old thing, I’ll never know. It’s hot and uncomfortable. Well, at least it is here.” She grinned again. “At a loss for words, Jace?”

Honestly, he was. He couldn’t even begin to think of the conversation they were supposed to have, let alone come to terms with Gran’s presence. One-half of the conversationalists wasn’t alive, but she seemed very much alive right now. His hands shook as he plowed them through his hair. His brow creased with perplexity and he tried the head shake one more time but with his eyes closed. When he opened the blue orbs, Jolene was still there, still grinning.

“You can’t make me go away, Jace. So you might as well talk to me.”

“Talk to you?” He backed toward the door. “Oh no, I’m not about to have a conversation with a vision. You might have Karyn convinced you’re here and you’re real, but I won’t fall for it. You’re a figment of my imagination and I’ll be damned if I’ll stand here and talk any longer.” He tried the doorknob; it wouldn’t turn. It was straight out of *Nightmare on Elm Street*, he thought with an almost hysterical laugh. “It’s the DTs. I have to be withdrawing from the alcohol.”

“And when was the last time you got drunk?” Jolene queried sweetly.

Jace whipped back around, his hands on his hips. “It doesn’t matter. That’s what’s happening to me.”

“You think I’m a vision?”

“That’s the only plausible explanation for you.”

Jolene marched forward and delivered a hearty smack to his cheek that made his eyes water.

“What the hell—” Jace’s hand cupped the burning skin and he glowered at the older woman.

“Still think I’m not here?”

“Where’s a good exorcist when you need one?” He muttered.

Jolene laughed, that same tinkling sound that used to bring smiles to everyone in the room. Her steps were light as she hooked her arm through his and guided him into the living room. “Come now, dear. Karyn won’t be at work much longer and I want us to have a quick little chat before she gets here.”

Jace allowed himself to be led to the sofa and pushed down atop the plush cushions. He tried not to stare up at the woman whose funeral he’d attended four years before. The woman who, by all rights, should not be standing less than two feet away from him, glaring her disapproval. He cleared his throat, scratched his head and offered a suggestion. “Why don’t you sit down?”

“Maybe I like to stand,” came back the snappish reply.

He nodded. “But in the interest of courtesy for the one you’re about to tongue-lash, you really should sit down.”

The frown on Jolene's face intensified, but she sat, directly opposite him in the matching recliner.

"You really should be slapped."

"You've already taken care of that."

"Do you have any idea what you've put my granddaughter through?"

"I suppose you're about to tell me your version of it."

"You always had a smart mouth," Jolene countered.

His eyebrows arched. "Oh, really? And having a smart mouth wouldn't be anything you would know anything about, right?"

"Just be quiet and listen to me."

Jace settled back against the cushions and gave an expansive wave as if granting her permission to continue. It wasn't as if he'd never listened to one of Jolene's tirades in the past. He'd always thought her a crotchety old woman until he'd married Karyn. Then crotchety became downright mean. She said what she was thinking and didn't give a damn if no one liked what she was saying. And she was protective of her granddaughter. He couldn't really blame her, though. Jolene had practically raised Karyn when Karyn's mother had failed at the job.

Jolene poked him with the tip of her cane. "Are you listening to me?"

Jace shifted positions, out of reach of her cane and nodded. "I'm listening."

"What did I just say?"

"We're not back in grade school, Jolene. Just tell me what you want to tell me before the men in white coats get here."

Jolene cackled her approval at the wit. "There was a part of you that thought Karyn was crazy when she told you she'd been seeing me, wasn't there? And now that you're on the receiving end of my presence, you think you're going right over the deep end with her, don't you?" The cackles continued. "I'll bet you never thought you were going to be seeing me again."

"Hoped is more like it," Jace muttered below his breath, ducking another swing of the cane.

Jolene scooted forward on the edge of her seat, fixing him with a serious gaze. “I love my granddaughter very much. She was always the light of my life—especially when my husband passed on. Then you came along and a part of me was jealous. I knew I couldn’t keep her with me forever, but when she was with Scott, I wasn’t worried. I knew there was nothing to that relationship. She stayed with him because it was comfortable and he didn’t pressure her into doing anything she didn’t want to do. But you, with you, she wanted to do everything, try everything. Oh, I saw it in her eyes every time she brought up your name into the conversation—which was frequently, I might add.”

She tossed him an irritated glance as if the mere memory still peeved her. “But as much as I hated to see her go, I realized she was going to the right place. She was marrying the man she loved with her whole heart, mind and soul. She would do anything for you and in you, I saw the same. I knew you loved my granddaughter. You can’t fake that kind of passion and adoration. I saw it in your eyes every time you looked at her, said her name. You loved her with a love that would never die. So my question is, has it?”

Jace blinked at her. “I’ve never stopped loving Karyn. You should know me better than that, Jolene. With all our differences, you know I married Karyn because I knew she was the one I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, grow old with, raise a family with.” He gave her a tired smile. “But sometimes, the things you want aren’t in the cards.”

“Oh, pshaw! You act as if life is a card game or a game of craps! That’s bull!” She pointed a gnarled finger at the center of his chest. “People have always told me life is like poker; you play the hand you’re dealt. Well, I’m here to tell you that’s a load of hogwash. Life is what you make it! If something’s wrong in your life, you have the power to change it. If something’s bad, you change it. If something’s good, you keep it. And your marriage to my granddaughter is good.” She sat back in the recliner, the cane resting across her silk-covered knees. “I’ve been watching you, you know.”

Jace’s head lifted and his eyes were wary. “Really? When?”

“Just in everyday life. Before Sam died, I saw the way the two of you loved one another.”

Jace winced. “Just how much did you watch, Jolene?”

Her eyes twinkled. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, I didn’t watch that! I said everyday life! The bedroom was off limits for me and sometimes, so was the kitchen and the living room and, well, I’m sure you get the picture. Your memory can’t be that bad.”

Jace felt the flush creeping up his neck. “I remember.”

“What I was trying to say was that you and Karyn are good together.” Short nails tapped out a rhythm on the wooden cane. “I know you’ve hit a rough patch. You couldn’t understand why Sam was taken away from you and you wanted someone to blame. Karyn was dying inside and she just wanted comfort. You were too wrapped up in your own grief to comfort her, though. And so the two of you drifted apart. And just when you thought things were finally working out, that your marriage could work again, you find out Karyn didn’t tell you about the baby. So now, you’re angry again.”

“For someone who’s so astute, you couldn’t be more wrong.”

“I wasn’t finished,” Jolene replied sweetly. “Karyn may not see it, but I see through façade. You’re not as angry with her as you are yourself. You know the real reason why you’re so angry. You think fear is a sign of weakness and that makes you angry.”

Jace got to his feet. “You are way off base here, Jolene.”

She didn’t stir from her position, even when he walked around behind the chair so she could no longer see his face. “Am I? I don’t think I am. You’re scared of losing another child and you think that makes you weak. You don’t like that feeling. Well, I’ve got news for you. No parent deals well with the lost of a child. It’s not something we ever want to imagine.” Her voice grew quieter so Jace had to strain to hear her. “I lost a son once. Did Karyn ever tell you?”

Jace’s body reappeared around in front of the chair. “No, she didn’t.”

“It’s been so long, maybe she’s forgotten. But a mother never forgets. I still remember his first smile, his first word, when he walked and how he used to kiss me goodnight. No, a parent never forgets those things.”

Jace sat back down. “How old was he?”

Jolene's smile wobbled. "Ten. He was climbing a tree in our back yard. Arthur told him many times to stay out of that tree, but you know how young kids can be. He just had to get to the top. Well, he made it all right. Climbed right up to the top. I came out of the house and he shouted at me, gave me the thumbs-up signal. I was horrified because I knew there was no way I could climb up after him. I was expecting my third child any day. And Arthur was out in the fields. Little Kendall just knew he could climb back down as well as he climbed up. And he was doing a mighty fine job of it until his foot got caught. I yelled for help, told him to stay put, that I would get help, but he panicked. That's when he fell. There's nothing more horrible than watching your child die and knowing there's nothing you can do to help him. I was still holding him in my arms when Arthur came in from the field. He'd been dead for over an hour and I couldn't let him go." Her breath caught on a sob and she dabbed her eyes with a scented handkerchief she'd produced from the pocket of her dress.

Jace lowered his head. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"So you see, maybe I do know a little bit of what you and Karyn are going through."

"Is that why you came back?"

Jolene pushed herself to her feet with the help of her cane. "No. I came back because Sam sent me."

Jace's heart stopped beating for the brief span of a second before resuming at a rapid fire pace. "That's impossible!"

Jolene laughed. "Jace, look at me. I'm standing in front of you, and I died four years ago. Don't you think the impossible just might be able to happen?"

"I've never believed in paranormal things."

"I'm not asking you to believe; I'm only asking you to listen to what I've said. If you don't believe anything else, believe this. Karyn loves you and she doesn't want to lose you. She asked you to leave because she thought that was the only solution to your dying marriage. I know differently. Any marriage can be saved if both people are willing to work at it." Jolene walked toward him, stopping in

front of him to place her hand on his shoulder. “I know it may never have seemed like it, but I always liked you.”

Jace gave an abrupt laugh. “You’re right. It never seemed like it.”

“I was just protective of Karyn.”

“That much, I knew.”

“She was all I had.”

Jace stood up, placing an uncertain hand on her arm. “She was never all you had, Jolene. In spite of our differences, I loved you, too, and when you passed away, I mourned just as much as she did.”

“That’s a sweet thing to say. You do, of course, realize I don’t believe a word of it.” Her voice was teasing.

He smiled. “Did Sam really send you?”

“Yes, he did.”

“But he was only two. How could he know to send you?”

“You’d be surprised at the differences between a two-year-old here and a two-year-old up there.”

“Karyn said she saw him.”

“She did, but Sam realized it would be too painful for her to see him again. So he sent me instead.”

“You’ve always been able to get through to her.”

“And I’ve been just as tough on her as I’ve been on you. You have to tell her the truth, you know.”

His eyes widened. “The truth?”

“Yes, it’s the opposite of a lie.”

He glowered at her. “I know what the truth means.”

“Do you? I’m beginning to wonder.” Her head tilted toward the door. “Karyn’s home. That’s my signal to depart. Remember what I told you. Tell her the truth.” She tapped her way toward the foyer. “I mean it, Jace. I want to rest in peace eventually.”

“Crotchety old woman,” he muttered under his breath as she faded away.

“I heard that.” The voice came out of nowhere, but Jace knew the owner and with a grin, he walked to the front door.

“I meant for you to,” he returned casually.

“Spoiled little rich kid,” Jolene snapped with a cackle.

Ten

Karyn straightened her shoulders and forced herself to remain calm. With Jace's car parked in the driveway as if it belonged there, keeping her cool wouldn't be easy. Once upon a time it had been. Pasting what she hoped was a polite smile on her face, she turned the doorknob, but it was pulled from her grasp. She took a step backwards and faced her husband with a wary look. "Jace, what are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," he responded simply, stepping back to allow her to enter. Once she was inside, he closed the door with a gentle push of his fingertips. He noticed her carryall. "Did you go back to work?"

"What else was I supposed to do? Sit around and wait for you to come home?"

"Do you want me to come home?"

She lifted a hand to her hair, pushing away the stray tendrils that had escaped from the soft chignon. "Jace, I really don't want to discuss this right now, not our marriage, not our baby, nothing. I'm tired and I have lesson plans to prepare. So if you will excuse me, I'll—" she found herself hauled unceremoniously against Jace's hard form and she gave a squeak of protest. "What are you doing?"

"Just this." He lowered his head and kissed her, but it was much more than a kiss. It was a proclamation of his desperation, a drowning man's search for survival on the raging sea. His lips were hard against hers, taking, plundering and yet giving so much more. She yielded against him and knew he could make love to her. He could carry her to the bedroom and she wouldn't fight him. In fact, she would welcome him, but it wouldn't change anything. He had to tell her the truth, even if it meant taking Jolene's advice and risking everything. With a low groan of reluctance, he lifted his head, but his arms still held her securely. "I've missed you." His voice was husky with dark passion.

She licked her tingling lips and managed a shaky laugh. “So I’ve noticed.” Her hands slid up the hard wall of his chest to toy with the collar of his sports shirt. “Why are you here?” Did she really want to know? Was she ready for any revelation he might give her? She wasn’t sure.

Jace released her just as abruptly as he’d pulled her into his embrace. He cleared his throat and walked around her, shoving his hands into the pockets of his slacks. “I came to see you.”

“That much is obvious.” Her voice was dry as a fine wine. “Like I said, I’ve had a really long day and I—”

“I love you.” His words stopped the flow of her protest and Karyn stared at him.

“I know.” Her response came quietly, soft in the stillness. She’d never thought he’d stopped loving her—well, maybe a little, at first, but after they’d cleared the first hurdle, she hadn’t doubted. Jace might be angry with her, but he would never stop loving her.

His hands cleared his pockets to tunnel through his hair and he gave a self-deprecating laugh. “I’ve screwed up again, haven’t I?”

She didn’t respond; there was no need. He would tell her what he came to say and he would leave. And he would take another piece of her heart with him. She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath, so deep her lungs ached. “Would you like some coffee?”

“No.” He caught hold of her hands before she could make her escape. “I just want to talk to you.”

“Maybe we should wait. I’m tired and you’re obviously in a strange mood. I don’t know if talking right now is such a good idea. We both might say things that don’t need to be said.”

“I saw Jolene.”

The deep breath that had been her sustaining force now whooshed out of her lungs so quickly her head spun. “You saw Gran?”

He nodded slowly, drawing her closer toward him once more. “We talked.”

“About us?”

He smiled. “About us.”

“Gran was always opinionated.” Karyn felt the need to apologize for something her grandmother might have said.

“I hadn’t forgotten.”

“She loved you in spite of how she acted around you.” Now, she was defensive, protective even. “She never meant you any harm.”

“Karyn.” He waited until her eyes lifted, connected with his. “I’m not angry. Jolene and I had a nice talk.”

She eyed him skeptically. “Nice?” It wasn’t exactly the word she would have used to describe any conversation her grandmother and Jace had ever had. They’d always been at loggerheads. Gran had always thought Jace was too overbearing, too protective. Karyn knew it was only because Gran was seeing something in Jace that existed in herself. Gran had always been overly protective, then Jace came along and usurped her position. It hadn’t sat too well with her grandmother.

Jace smiled. “Yes, nice, in spite of what you’re thinking. Oh, she was her usual self with me, even smacked me.”

Karyn’s eyes rounded to horrified Os. “I’m sorry. She thinks because she’s not alive she can get away with anything.”

“Well, she did,” he admitted sardonically. “And you don’t have to apologize for your grandmother. She didn’t even leave a mark.”

“Obviously her aim was off,” she admitted with a slow smile that grew to a grin. “She was always threatening to swat you.”

He chuckled, hooking an arm around her waist to guide her toward the sofa. “I’m getting off track here. Let’s sit down.” He waited until she’d reluctantly seated herself before sitting down beside her. He captured one of her hands and linked her fingers with his. “First, I need to apologize to you about the way I reacted when I found out about the baby.”

She shook her head. “There’s no need.”

He placed a finger against her lips. “Yes, there is.” When she subsided into silence, he continued. “I loved Sam with all my heart and when we lost him, I guess I lost myself for a while. I never realized until he was gone just how much he meant to me, just how big a part of my life he really was. When he died, there was this big, empty space that nothing could fill ... not even you because I wouldn’t allow it. I didn’t want anyone or anything to take my son’s place.” He held up his hand, sensing a protest from her. “I started drinking because I didn’t want to feel the pain anymore. You thought it was because I didn’t feel anything.”

“I thought it was because you weren’t grieving for Sam,” she corrected him.

He released her hand and sat back against the cushions. “All I did was grieve. I couldn’t focus on my patients. I never told you—I was turning away new patients, sending them elsewhere. I couldn’t keep up with the ones that I had. I was making Sharon squeeze all my appointments into one day a week and the rest of the days, I was spending it down at Happy’s.”

Karyn sat up straighter. “I never knew. You should have told me. You didn’t have to go through that alone.”

“I know that now, but sometimes, when you’re going through something, you can’t always see the right thing to do.”

“Life with you was hell for months.” Her voice carried a hard edge and she ran her hands down her nylon-covered thighs. “I needed you.”

He cursed below his breath. “And I needed you, but damn it,” he leaped to his feet, “I didn’t know how to tell you that! You always thought I was strong, that I could handle anything. Well, I couldn’t handle losing our child!” His voice broke and he stopped, allowing himself time to regain his composure before continuing. “I was so empty inside and so scared that I would never feel whole again. And if I was never whole again, how could I be a husband to you?” He paced the living room, his footsteps leaving deep impressions in the plush carpet. “I know, it doesn’t even make sense now, but at the time, it made sense to me.”

“And what about our baby now? You were furious when you found out I hadn’t told you. You barely spoke two words to me after we had that one conversation in the hospital room. You were so cold.”

“I was scared,” he corrected her.

“Scared? Of what? That the baby wasn’t yours?”

He couldn’t have looked more surprised than if she’d jumped up on the table and danced. “I never thought that for one second, Karyn. I knew you were faithful to me even when we were separated.”

“You thought I was seeing Scott.”

His lips thinned. “I thought Scott was trying to see you. I was angry with him, not with you.”

“You could have fooled me. You weren’t very pleasant to him.”

“Can you blame me? I was barely out of the house and he was trying to move in.”

“Scott knew he didn’t really have a chance with me.”

“Did he ever?” His blue eyes swept her face, searching for answers.

Karyn leaned back on her hands, tilting her face upwards to allow him better access. “Not once you moved to town.” She smiled. “From the moment I saw you, I knew. It was as if someone pointed a finger at you and said ‘He’s the one for you.’”

Jace snorted. “Well, it sure took you long enough to break up with Scott.”

“I didn’t know if you were involved with anyone. I saw him this afternoon.” She offered the bit of information calmly, waiting for his reaction.

His brow furrowed. “Why?”

“He wanted to take me to dinner.”

The frown deepened. “And you said?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Does he have any idea how close he came to serious bodily harm?”

She laughed shortly. “I don’t think he cared.”

“I think he was just too stupid to realize he was in danger.”

She pulled in her lower lip and watched him. “Not to change the subject, but this isn’t solving our current problem.”

He moved back to her side, sat down beside her. His hands inched their way nervously up his legs before finally settling against his thighs. He kept his head averted, not meeting her gaze. She watched him and he knew she was waiting for him to make the next move, say the next word. He took a deep breath, exhaled, tried to formulate a coherent sentence. He caught the scent of jasmine in her hair mixed with the rose water Jolene had always favored. The ornery biddy was probably standing in the corner of the room. He didn’t hide the smile that tilted his chiseled lips.

Karyn watched him, saw the flash of amusement that crossed his face, but she didn’t ask the reason. She waited. The ball was in his court.

“When I said I was scared, I was telling the truth.”

“I have no reason to believe you weren’t. You’ve never made a habit of lying to me. I think the question was ‘scared of what?’”

His hands itched to hold hers again. “Of getting close to another child and then ...” he broke off, shaking his head. A lock of sandy brown hair fell across his eyes and he brushed it away with an impatient flick of his wrist. He could no more have stopped the tears flowing down his cheeks than he could capture the stars in the sky. He didn’t look up, didn’t acknowledge the pity that would be on her face now. He felt a slight touch, as gentle as a feather falling to cotton and his eyes flew to hers before dropping back down to his forearm where her hand rested. “Karyn, I don’t want your pity.”

Her hand began a slow stroke over his arm before sliding down to his hand. Her fingers entwined with his. She watched his face with a touch of wonder. She’d never seen him cry before today. “I’m not offering you pity, Jace. I know what you’re feeling. Don’t you think I felt the same way when Dr. Sanders told me I was pregnant?”

His lips twisted into a grimace. “Dr. Sanders. That’s an entirely different conversation.” His hands scrubbed against his thighs.

“I know. You’ve been my doctor for almost six years now, but there was no way I could go to you with this ... not when we were separated.”

“I never wanted to leave you.” His voice was thick with the tears that made liquid trails down his face.

Karyn’s heart thrummed loudly in her ears. “I didn’t really want you to leave, but I couldn’t live with you like that.”

“I’m not a drunk.” He felt the need to defend himself.

“Jace, I never thought you were a drunk. I just thought you were drowning your sorrows in whiskey while I was still forcing myself to go on each and every day. You had something to turn to. I’ll have to admit that when Scott told me you were going to the bar again when I was lying there in the hospital ...“

Jace’s head whipped to her face. “I did go to the bar, but I left before I even had one drink. Jones needs to get his facts straight. When I ran into him, I was on my way to the office.”

“I think he was trying to stir up trouble.”

“Remind me to kick his ass the next time I see him.”

She slid closer to him, rested her head on his shoulder. “Scott’s not important now.” She smiled ruefully, “He never was important. You’ve been the most important person in my life since our first kiss. It was then that I knew I was going to marry you ... even if you didn’t ask me yourself.” She gave him a small grin and continued. “From that first date, you’ve always been my pillar of strength. I depended on you. I guess I wasn’t ready to not be able to depend upon you. For that, I’m sorry.”

He lifted her head with a finger under her chin. “You’re sorry? For what?”

“I didn’t allow you to grieve. I expected too much of you.”

“Karyn, I didn’t come here today because I wanted to blame you. I came because, well,” he sandwiched her hand between both of his, “in town, they’re talking about Scott coming back around, trying to get some kind of relationship going.” His face darkened. “I knew there was no way you would

allow that, but when I heard what the people in town were saying, I was furious. You are my wife and there was no way in hell I was going to stand by and let another man have what I could have if I would just stop being so stupid.” He turned his body on the sofa to face her. His hands lifted now to cup her face. “I just want to ask you one question.”

Her eyes didn’t sway from his face. “Ask.”

“Am I too late?” The question rang with a plea, an almost desperate longing for a denial.

Her breaths came in short, raspy pants. “No. You’re not too late. In fact, you’re right on time.” It was her turn to cry, to allow the tears to fall where they may.

He pulled her into his arms, crushing her against his chest. “I don’t drink anymore. I gave it up totally. I couldn’t risk it. I didn’t want to lose the most important thing in my universe,” he whispered against her silky hair.

She laughed even as the tears continued to trickle down her cheeks, mingling with the salty taste of his on her lips as he pressed his face against hers. “Do you want to move back in?”

He pushed away long enough to plant a hard kiss against her lips. “My things are in the car.”

Her eyes narrowed in mock anger. “In the car? You were that sure of yourself?” One hand lifted to swipe at the dampness on her cheeks, but his hands were already there, his thumbs brushing away the moisture.

He grinned broadly. “I just knew I wasn’t leaving here until we had our lives back and our lives are with one another. We were meant to be together. I’ll go get my bags.” He tried to get to his feet, but Karyn tugged him back down into place.

“Forget the bags, Morgan. There’s always tomorrow morning. For now, I have a better idea.”

His eyes twinkled as he waited for the tawdry suggestion. “Oh yeah? And what would that be?”

“I want to take a nap.”

His face fell. “A nap?”

“Um-hm. I’m really tired. It’s been a long day back; my first day in a while. I guess I’d forgotten how trying these days could be.” She got to her feet, stifling a yawn and started toward the stairs. She felt his eyes boring into her back as she reached the bottom step. She paused, tilted her head toward him and winked. “Oh, did I forget to mention the nap would come after the shower?”

Jace was on his feet. “Yeah, I guess you did forget to mention that part.” He started toward her slowly. “So this shower, was this something you were planning on taking alone?”

Karyn smiled, wiggled her hips and started up the stairs. “I don’t think so. I haven’t had someone to wash my back in quite some time.”

“One back-washing coming up,” Jace leered, dashing forward to scoop her into his arms. He practically raced up the stairs and the bathroom door slammed shut behind them.

* * * * *

The moon hung low in the black sky, its glow competing with the shiny brightness of the thousands of stars glittering across the darkness like diamonds upon velvet. The bedroom was dark save for the light of that full moon, its beams falling across the bed and the couple who, even after three hours of talking, still didn’t want to relinquish the night.

Karyn lay with her head pillowed upon Jace’s chest, one hand resting on his abdomen. She felt the pull of sleep and yet felt compelled to fight it. “I don’t want to go to sleep,” she admitted with a whisper.

Jace’s hands stroked her shoulders, her arms. He knew how she felt. He didn’t want the night to end. The magic enveloped them, wrapping them in its arms until the fantasy had become reality. “I’ll still be here in the morning,” he reassured her.

“I can’t believe how close we came to losing one another.”

He smiled in the darkness. “I don’t think we came as close as we think we did.”

She pushed back, lifting herself up just enough to see his face in the moonlight. “What do you mean?”

He kissed her nose. “Your Gran knew what she was doing all along. She was pushing us together at every turn.”

It was Karyn’s turn to smile. “She said we belonged together, that you don’t give up on love because a tragedy strikes.”

Jace lowered her head back down to his chest with a gentle hand. “For once, I can say the old battle-axe was right.”

“She could still be here, you know.” Karyn’s voice held a warning note.

He shrugged, the motion shifting her head on his chest. “She told me she didn’t come into the bedroom, even when she was watching our lives before.”

“She watched us?”

“Just when we were clothed,” he returned with a grin in his voice.

She pinched him and he gave a grunt of pain. “That’s awful.”

“She’s the one who brought it up.”

“Now do you believe in ghosts?”

“I’d believe in the tooth fairy if she helped save us from making the biggest mistake of our lives.” Jace tugged the sheet closer up their bodies and tucked it around her. “You need to try to get some sleep. You’ve been fighting it long enough.”

“So have you.”

He didn’t deny the accusation. “I’m used to running on little or no sleep.”

“It’s not a dream, Jace. I’ll be here in the morning, too.”

His breath escaped his lungs on a shudder. “God, I came so close to losing you.” He kissed the top of her head. When he spoke again, the words were rushed, as if he was in a hurry to say them before he lost his courage. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. You don’t know how long I’ve wanted to hold you like this again. Maybe that’s why I don’t want to go to sleep just yet. I want to watch you sleeping in my arms and know that it’s real. In my head I know it’s not a dream, but my heart hasn’t

learned it yet.” He heard the snuffle and tried to see her face, but she turned her head. “Are you crying again?”

“No, it’s the wind,” she denied lamely.

Jace let it go, knowing she didn’t want the attention. He just squeezed his arms tighter around her.

“Did I mention I love you?”

She kissed his chest and closed her eyes. “Only once tonight.”

“I love you,” he returned in a husky voice.

She smiled. “I love you, too.”

As Karyn succumbed to the call of sleep, Jace brushed the hair back from her face and watched her, whispering words of love, promise and apologies, knowing she couldn’t hear them, but he felt the need to say them anyway. He wasn’t sure if he’d waited any longer if it would have been too late, if Karyn would have ended their marriage and moved on, without looking back. An invisible hand squeezed his heart and he glanced down at her sleeping face once more. It didn’t matter now. Nothing mattered now but this.

He closed his eyes, whispered, “Thank you, Sam,” and drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

The diner wasn’t its usual bustle of activity as the trio of farmers sat slumped over their newspapers and Annette draped herself across the counter top like a damp paper towel. Movement was down to a minimum as the usual straggle of customers threaded their way to their normal booths to linger over bad coffee and good gossip. Only this time, there wasn’t much gossip to be told.

“Ain’t you heard nothing good, Annette?” Henry practically whined.

“Not since Dr. Morgan moved back into his house with Karyn,” the waitress replied glumly.

“Hell, that’s old news. Why, that happened two days ago at least! I can’t believe you ain’t heard one good piece of news.” Henry stirred his rapidly cooling coffee and frowned down into the brown

liquid. “This coffee tastes like shoe polish.” If he couldn’t gossip, he’d complain. It was all the same to him.

“Well, the old widow Farnsworth has herself a beau,” Annette began hopefully.

“That old horse face?” Jack shivered, but his interest was caught and Annette, sensing a captive audience, almost raced over to the usual corner table in her haste to impart the information.

Henry gladly slid over to make room for her, despite the fact that it left him little room on the orange upholstery.

“The way I hear it is ...” And another upstanding citizen of Stafford became the target of Annette’s overactive tongue. Karyn and Jace Morgan had been forgotten; they were old news.

Karyn sensed another presence in the room long before she opened her eyes and found her grandmother standing over the bed. She shrank back against the blankets with a shriek. “Gran, you nearly gave me a heart attack!” She glanced down at her sleeping husband and pushed herself to a sitting position. “What are you doing in here? I thought you told Jace you never came into our bedroom when we were together.”

“I had to make an exception this time. I came to say goodbye.” Gran’s voice, though sad, still carried a note of happiness.

“Goodbye?” Karyn lost all thought of sleep and she sat up, drawing her knees close to her chin. “You’re leaving? Why? I thought ghosts could stay anywhere they wanted to stay.”

“Honey, I didn’t come here with the intentions of staying. I came because I had a purpose. You and Jace were my purpose and now I see you’re going to be just fine.”

Karyn blinked away the tears welling in her eyes and she tried to swallow past the lump in her throat. “I’ve gotten used to seeing you again, to hearing your voice, to knowing you’re around whenever I needed someone to talk to. Who am I going to talk to now?”

“Before I arrived, when things were good between you and Jace, who did you talk to?”

“Jace,” she responded simply.

“Well, things are good again, Karyn. Talk to your husband when you need someone to talk to. What’s happened here these last few months isn’t going to heal in a few days. It’s going to take some work on both of your parts. Just try to remember that it’s water under the bridge. Let it go and don’t keep bringing it up again. That won’t solve anything. If he could, your grandfather could vouch for me on that one.” Gran leaned down and pressed a kiss against her granddaughter’s cheek. “I’ll be watching you, dear.”

Karyn caught her hand and brought it to her cheek. “I don’t want you to go.”

Gran touched her hair. “I know, but the decision isn’t mine. I have to go back, but remember, I will always love you.” She turned to leave and paused, pivoting back around slowly. “Oh, I almost forgot. There is one more thing.”

Karyn raised her tear-streaked face. “What?”

“Sam wanted me to tell you he loves you and Jace and though he misses you, he’s happy where he is now.” Gran didn’t wait around for her granddaughter’s response.

As soon as Gran was gone, Jace reached for Karyn, drawing her into his embrace, holding her. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“You heard?”

“Most of it. I guess there was some good in her after all.”

“I didn’t want her to go.”

“I know.”

“But she had to go. She was only here for us.”

“And she’s still here. I’m sure if either one of us even acts like we’re about to screw up again, she’ll be back.” Jace’s voice held a teasing note.

Karyn chuckled. “You’re probably right.”

“You’re darned straight he’s right ... for once,” came the crackly voice from out of nowhere.

Karyn and Jace locked gazes and they laughed aloud.

* * * * *

The darkness shifted, parting to reveal a golden light surrounding the couple sleeping in the king-size bed. Jolene walked closer, smiling down upon her granddaughter and the man she'd chosen to love. Her smile widening, she transferred her glance to the toddler in her arms, giving him an excited squeeze. "See, Sam? I told you they were happy again."

The small boy grinned, wiggling gleefully in his great-grandmother's arms.

"I know you're happy, too."

"Mommy, Daddy." He extended chubby hands and continued to beam happily.

Jolene hugged him closer. "We have to go now, Sam, but you know what? We won't be far. We'll watch them together and if anything goes wrong again, well, we'll just come back. How about that?"

Sam nodded his head in far greater understanding than children of his young years generally have..

With one last look over her shoulder, Jolene walked toward the center of the bedroom, her great-grandson clinging to her side.

Author Bio

Rachel Carrington is a multi-published author of fantasy and paranormal romance as well as the editor and business manager of Vintage Romance Publishing, a small press dedicated to historical fiction, non-fiction and poetry. Readers can visit her on the web at www.dawnrachel.com.