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Kacey Hammell



**ISABELLA'S
ILLUSIONS**

In the Arms of the Law

Kacey Hammell

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS
Book 1: IN THE ARMS OF THE LAW

By

Kacey Hammell



ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

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~ Dedication ~

This is my first book. Please bear with me as I thank my family and friends that have stood by me...

~ James, the man of my heart ~

Thank you for believing in me, pushing me forward and giving me the courage to try my hand at writing. I wouldn't and couldn't have done it without you. I love you, babe. Forever.

~ My children, Ashley, Jacob and Christopher ~

Thank you for being the greatest kids in the world and always understanding when Mommy said, "Just let me finish this scene." I love you all more than life itself.

~ My Mom ~

Thank you for always loving me and for being the absolute best friend and Mom a kid could ever have. You are the best and I love you.

~ My Dad ~

Thank you for showing me that family and love are the most important things and unconditional. No matter the bumps in the road you have always stayed strong by my side. You and Mom showed me what marriage was all about and taught me so much. I could never ask for a better Dad. I love you.

~ My brother Jim ~

Thanks for always protecting me, being willing to fight for me and being a great Uncle to my kids. I know you hate the name, but thanks Jimbo!!

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~ *My In-Laws, Chris and Jane, and Grandpa George* ~

Thank you for allowing me into your lives and for your son. He's a wonderful man who you taught well. I'm honored to be among your family.

~ *My Two Angels* ~

My grandpa, William Edgar Way and my brother, William Donald Way.

Your time with us was way too short and I think of you every day. I miss you both very much but know you are taking care of us all from Heaven. Thank you for watching over us.

~ *Sue* ~

Thank you for helping me a long the way and for getting me started. Without you, I wouldn't be here. You have been my best friend and confidant; I thank you for always being there for me.

~ *"J" (J.J.)* ~

Thank you for inspiring me every day that I have known you. You inspire me with all you have endured, all you have conquered. Thank you for bouncing scenes around with me, and thank you for being a friend.

~ *Deborah Taylor* ~

Thank you for all you have done for me. For the trust you have placed in me and giving me the chance to be a published author. Your confidence in me is amazing. You are a class act, a real lady and I stand with you, always.

~ *Christine* ~

Thank you, editor extraordinaire. Thank you for the books of yours you allowed me into, the men you allowed me to steal. Thank you for inspiring me and for being there through it all.

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~ Debbie Tolls ~

You would never have expected this, but you have been there for me numerous times, so it's easy to do. Through my life changes of the past, my wedding and now my writing, your support means so much to me. I can't thank you enough.

~ Live, Love and Laugh ~
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~ One ~

“You haven’t found anyone have you?”

Not even two minutes into the building and already her cousin Alicia was on her case. What’s a girl got to do to get a few moments of peace? She walked through the hall, posters covering most of the mottled grey paint of the walls. The posters didn’t do anything to brighten up the atmosphere, but the 15th precinct had been like her second home most of her life. The ambience left much to be desired, still she was comfortable here. Most of the time. Right now she was aggravated. Cell phone still glued to her ear with Alicia’s favorite question of the week ringing through her mind, Isabella prayed for patience.

“Look Alicia, you’ve been buggin’ me all week. Give it a rest all ready.” Desperately hoping that Alicia would hear the frustration in her voice and drop it, Isabella knew Alicia didn’t let go of things that easily.

“Isy! You know your father wants grandbabies to bounce on his knee and wants you out of the precinct. You can’t just ignore the great William Knowles, cop of all cops, who walks on water.”

Smiling over the awe that many people still felt about her father, Isabella couldn’t agree more. There was no person who was more responsible for shaping her into the woman she now was. After the death of her mother when she was thirteen, her father, a Detective in the 15th, became father and mother, friend and protector with a vengeance throughout her life. Her father lived in fear of losing his only child in the same way that her mother had died...at the hands of one of his many enemies.

Her father’s illustrious career as one of the top cops in Trenton made headlines almost weekly back then and did to this day even though he was no longer a cop. Having successfully put many of the scum behind bars with his brother, Allan, they were both commended with medals and looked upon with hero status by many. But with all the fame came heartache and years of pain and fear.

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Isabella would never forget the day her mother died, which was also the day her father became her fiercest champion and protector. Unfortunately over the years of it just being the two of them, life became so stifling. Isabella broke out on her own, made mistakes and became everything her father hoped she wouldn't...including following in his footsteps as a cop.

"My father doesn't run my life these days, Alicia. You are being way too melodramatic and putting too much importance on this party for your dad. It'll be fine." Isabella couldn't help but feel some anger over the plan Alicia wanted her to come up with to "pass inspection" and get back on her father's good side.

The retirement party for Allan Knowles, Alicia's father was a big deal in the Knowles family. In one month, Detective Allan Knowles would retire from police work after thirty-three years of service. Isabella didn't admire any man more, save her father, than she did Uncle Al. With her father and uncle as role models, she couldn't help but follow in their footsteps and join the police academy, carrying on the family name within the city and police work.

Walking through the rough painted brown door that led to the "bullpen", Isabella was hit with the rush of adrenaline and sense of home that came every time she entered the room. Her happiness was found in her job. She was a dedicated Detective who took her job seriously, some said too seriously at times. But she had worked her ass off, worked hard to become the first female Detective in her family, a title that would be the only one she would probably carry in her life. She didn't want white picket fences, ankle-biters, or a man taking over her life.

Why think of this crap, Isy? She thought. You know better...

"Isy? Are you listening to me? Your father wants you to bring your boyfriend to this party. And gosh, last time I looked smarty-pants, you don't have one! What the hell are you going to do?" Alicia's voice had become too high-toned. Isabella knew it was only a matter of time before the whole precinct knew her business.

Making a detour to the left between the rows of desks in the bullpen, Isabella headed toward Alicia's office determined to put her mind at ease and grab a cup of coffee that she knew she would find there.

Waving to a few Detectives milling around Alicia's door--*probably wondering what the hell she's screeching about*, Isabella thought--she wedged her way between two

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male Detectives and crossed the threshold of the office. She closed the door firmly behind her.

Snapping her cell phone shut, Isabella faced her one and only pal and cousin who understood her better than she at times did herself.

“Cut the drama, Alicia. You’re gonna have every cop in this place thinking your being murdered right here in the precinct. What the hell is with you today?” Isabella smiled, knowing that the drama was just beginning to unfold. Alicia Knowles was drama queen on the inside, a tough as nails Detective on the outside, always ready to kick ass and take names later.

Very few people ever gave thought to the two females being cousins, until they heard their last name. Where Alicia had dark, beautiful, long flowing hair, Isabella had thick, unruly red hair that needed constant maintenance and taming. Many said her hair looked like a lot like Julia Robert’s in *Pretty Woman*, but Isabella could only hope it looked half that good on its best day.

Another difference between the cousins was in temperament. Alicia’s temper was usually a cool simmer. It took a lot to rile her, but when it did, boy look out. Sometimes it was like a time bomb just waiting to go off. Alicia Knowles was fierce yet the sweetest woman alive.

Isabella at times wished she had Alicia’s inner beauty. Her own temper was something that she never quite tamed. She was glad for it sometimes though, it was a very huge part of her. Isabella couldn’t change the past, or the death of her mother, and she lived the life she had. But in the years since her mother’s death and her father’s obsessive over-protectiveness, Isabella cut herself off emotionally from many of those around her.

Including her family.

Not one for entanglements, determination to making Detective being her number one priority in life, Isabella fought hard. She aced every exam, rarely dated growing up or in the years since, and kept her emotions from swaying her dreams or way of life.

Especially on the job.

While Isabella wanted a man’s arms around her some nights, she was better off on her own. No one to answer to, no one to demand her time, no one to tell her to cook, clean or to dress up for. She was content to sleep in all day when she had a day off, eat in bed, watch movies at all hours of the night and come and go as she pleased.

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Men always added chaos and disruption to her life. Marriage never ran through her mind. She had seen what devotion and love had done to her father after her mom's death. He had become a totally different man, a compulsive man who smothered her with obsessive and overbearing protection when she really needed him most. To help her through the death of the one person she loved above all else, excluding her father, who was her hero.

No, love and marriage wasn't for her. Of course, she thought with a chuckle, place a buff man, preferably one with short dark hair, between her thighs and his hands guiding her hips as he pounded into her any day...well, that was always welcome.

Commitments weren't.

"Dammit Isabella! Where is your head?" Hearing Alicia's screech again brought Isabella from her thoughts with a vengeance.

"I'm trying to tell you that my father called me this morning. It seems your father called him yesterday, in total glee that his baby girl had finally woke up and smelled the roses. Seems he thinks romance is in the air. For you!" Alicia's face was becoming flustered with each word spoken.

"What? I don't understand. What do you mean? I haven't told my father I have a boyfriend at all. He knows I went out with Ethan last month to a show, but I never told him anything else after that." Isabella tried to comprehend the discussion she was supposedly a part of. Unfortunately, nothing was making sense to her.

With an exasperated sigh Alicia flounced to her seat behind her desk and glared at Isabella. "I told you two days ago that your father had mentioned your bringing a guest to dad's party. You told me that you were bringing a date, which I passed on to my father."

"So? What's the big deal? I'll just tell my dad, and yours, that the plans fell through and that there is no boyfriend!" Crossing to the second desk in the office, which belong to Alicia's partner, Ethan Carter, Isabella couldn't help but feel a small twinge, a very small one, of sadness when thinking about Ethan. She knew he had the hots for her, big time, and they tried going out last month. Unfortunately, Isabella's mind was on another man. The image of one man between your thighs while out on a date with another did not make for a great date however.

Get over it Is, move on, she thought to herself. *You know better girl...*

Moving aside the unstable pile of files, Isabella propped her right, running shoe encased foot on the desk, settling in to get through the conversation with her cousin.

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Alicia seemed overly concerned with the events of the last twenty-four hours apparently. It was all Isabella could do to keep from rolling her eyes. She had work to do, cases to solve and could care less about a family gathering a month away. She'd worry about the party that day, get through it and move the hell on.

"Alright Alicia, you have my oh so undivided attention. Spill. What's got you so riled you look like a caged lion?" Isabella wanted to laugh at the look of pure pissed off that Alicia sent her way, but knew it would only prolong the discussion.

"You could at least care, Isy."

As Isabella tried to reply, Alicia raised her hand, cutting her off at the knee...or tongue, so to speak.

"While you feel it's no big deal, your father does. He thinks you have finally 'seen the light'."

Isabella couldn't hold in her chuckle as Alicia used two hands to make quotes in the air over "seen the light". God, Cameron Diaz didn't do drama as well as her cousin Alicia.

"You know, you really need to get that dumb-founded look off your face, Isy. Have you not woken the hell up yet today?"

"Jesus Alicia, cut to the chase and let me get the hell outta here." Dropping her foot to the floor, Isabella stood, ready to walk out and slam a door somewhere in total frustration. It was nine a.m., too fucking early to listen to this shit.

"When you get over your melodrama Detective Knowles, let me know and we'll talk. Until then, save it and kiss my ass. I have work to do." With a scowl, Isabella made her way to the office door, but Alicia's words stopped her in her tracks.

"When did you start dating Brady, Isy?" Alicia asked quietly.

Heart stopping in mid beat, Isabella whirled around, her mind slowing. "What did you say?" she asked breathlessly.

"When did you start seeing Brady Jacobs?"

Taking a deep breath and feeling that the interrogation of her life was on its way, she said, "I'm not seeing anyone Alicia. You know that." Isabella laughed, only it held no humour whatsoever.

"Have you seen the paper today, Isy? Page four." Alicia tossed the paper in question across the desk.

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Isabella could see the Trenton Gazette opened to what she could only assume as page four. With what seemed like lead feet, Isabella walked the few steps to Alicia's desk, a feeling of dread hanging over her head.

Caught and *guilty* ran through Isabella's head as she read the headline that had taken her cousin by storm.

"Daughter of One of Trenton's Finest Makes Time with Cities Favourite P.I."

Isabella's only thought was that the photo of herself and Brady Jacobs looked rather cozy as they walked down the street. His arm slung over her shoulder and her laughing upturned face, looked as if they were a match made in heaven.

Too bad it was the farthest thing from the truth.

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~ Two ~

“Cat got your tongue, Isy or what?”

Isabella's head came up, Alicia's voice chasing away her meandering thoughts. Alicia stood behind her desk with hands on her hips. It was a stance Isabella knew well. It was her 'I want some answers now' stance.

Taking a deep breath, Isabella fought to regain the air that had suddenly left her body and the light-headedness from the photo she had just seen.

“For God's sake, Alicia. You know Brady and I are friends. We joke around and have a great time. People, a lot of them, naturally assume we are a couple. You've thought it yourself. You also know it's the farthest thing from the truth as you can get.”

Isabella felt herself floundering, afraid to look her cousin in the eye and explain away the lie that she was telling her.

Heading to the window that overlooked West Street, Isabella wished she had an easy answer for Alicia. Brady Jacobs was one of the men who she trusted with her life, and also had great respect for.

When he came home from the Marines ten years ago, he had changed. A different man from the one she'd known in high school, Brady had lost some of the humour and laughter that she had come to identify with him.

While in the Marines, Brady had fallen in love with Sandy, a woman he met in Thailand. They became engaged. But once she learned the truth about Brady, Sandy had dumped him and moved overseas, declaring that she never wanted to see him again.

Brady had come home, a harsher, more abrupt man. One who Isabella didn't care to know at first. But as she trained hard for her Detective's shield, he was suddenly a rooting supporter who hoped that she would ace the exam and obtain her dream.

Isabella felt that Brady knew long before she did that she had aced the Detective exam. If it hadn't been for Brady, she may never have kept after it as she had. There were times when she had wanted to give up her dream of making Detective, but Brady

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wouldn't let her. It was as if he'd known she'd ace it. His ability to see things made him an asset to the police and to her during her struggles. Visions of deaths, abuse and other gruesome acts that he took very seriously. But there was the odd time when Brady would see something great, something that would make the gruesome visions he had, seem small in comparison.

Looking out into the bustling street, Isabella spoke quietly, "Sometimes Alicia, you forget. I don't need a man in my life at all. Least of all romantic entanglements. That's your area. One you can gladly have all to yourself."

"What a load of crap, Isy. You and your stupid belief that marriage and love isn't for you. That's just ridiculous." Alicia said adamantly. "And you know, it's getting old. That excuse will be written on your tombstone the day you bite the dust."

Chuckling and feeling some tension leave the room, Isabella had to rib her cousin just a bit. "Bite the dust, Alicia? What the hell is that about? You saying my time is coming? You know something I don't? I plan to live for decades yet. Alone!"

"Whatever Isy. Your father now thinks that Brady Jacobs is *the* boyfriend who will be coming to the party next month. He's very happy that you have chosen someone who is a hometown boy, a celebrity himself and an upstanding kind of guy. I think he'll be picking out china patterns for you next." The disgust could be heard in Alicia's voice.

"So what will you do Isy? I told you before to come up with someone to take with you. A pretend boyfriend if you will, just to bide you some time and get your dad off your back about babies and leaving this job behind."

"I won't do that Alicia. Lying to my father is not an option. He'll get over it. There is no man in my life now, nor ever. At least not one for a happy ever after. Just not possible." Isabella's voice cracked as she spoke of the impossibilities. She only hoped Alicia didn't catch it. Her mother's death was never far from her thoughts. She would never put a man through what her father had gone through, nor did she ever want to feel that kind of pain herself over a man that would be her husband.

To her, it wasn't worth it. To love and then lose that loved one just didn't seem worth it.

"Isy..." Alicia began.

"Forget it, Alicia. I don't want to discuss this anymore. I'll deal with my father and will call the *Gazette* to find out about this photo. Maybe they can do a retraction or

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something. Brady Jacobs and I are hardly newsworthy. Especially when there is no story.”

God don't strike me down for that statement, Isabella prayed.

“Sometimes, Isy, I think you have your priorities all wrong,” Alicia said sadly.

“Maybe I just need to get laid, Alicia. Whatcha think?” Isabella hoped to bring a smile to her cousin’s face, but as she looked over her shoulder, all she saw was sadness. It was a look she had come accustomed to, as Alicia hoped Isabella would find “Mr. Right”.

Mr. Right Now sounded much better to Isabella however.

“Laid, Isy? What’s that? Don’t think either of us remembers what that is all about,” Alicia said, a smile finally to be heard in her voice.

“Well, isn’t this an enlightening discussion ladies? Shall I throw my last sexual encounter into the ring and we can share in the misery?”

Isabella jumped and spun around at the sound of Ethan Carter’s voice as he entered the office.

Blushing with embarrassment, Isabella could barely look him in the eye. “Hey Ethan. How you doing?” she asked.

“Obviously better than you, Isabella.” Ethan’s gaze cut to Alicia’s desk where the *Trenton Gazette* was still opened to page four and the photo of her and Brady. His gaze flickered to Isabella, making her feel lower than dirt. He set his coffee down on his desk, pasting a falsetto smile on his face. “You two always commiserate together or what? Kinda early for sex talk isn’t?”

Isabella knew he was only trying to show that he didn’t care about the photo on the desk, but as always, Ethan’s face told of every emotion he felt.

“You know us girls, Ethan,” Alicia ribbed her partner, obviously picking up on the tension. “Sex, sex, sex, we girls talk about it all the time. We want it all the more too,” She said with a chuckle.

Laughing an authentic laugh now, Ethan ribbed his partner in return. “Alicia, babe, I tell you daily, all you have to do is call me. Day...” his gaze cut to Isabella, “or night.”

Isabella looked toward Alicia only to see a look of frustration, and hurt, cross her face.

Oh god, she thought. *Don't tell me...*

“What’s this? A party and no one told me?”

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Isabella's pulse began to beat double time as she looked toward the door of Alicia's office at the newest addition to the conversation.

Man, I don't need this today.

Brady Jacobs walked, no *sauntered*, into the office and heading toward Ethan, not sparing her a glance.

Dressed in black denim jeans that encased his firm, shapely ass like a second skin and a black t-shirt with sleeves rolled over his beautiful biceps, he looked good enough to eat. Isabella felt a flood of heat course through her body. Brady was a man who was confident in himself and when he entered the room, there was a ripple effect. Everyone in the room sat up to take notice of him and women swooned, eager to catch his eye. But Brady rarely gave any one woman the time of day these days. He was adamant about keeping his personal life just that and his no commitment rule was always in full force. Something he was always upfront with the ladies about.

"Hey pal. Great game this morning." Brady said, slapping Ethan on the back in the manly sort of way men did that.

"Shit, Jacobs. You kicked my ass and then some," Ethan said with a chuckle. "My head just wasn't in the game today." Isabella could see Ethan's gaze move toward the paper still sitting on Alicia's desk.

If it wouldn't be obvious, I'd snatch it and run to burn it, she thought.

"Morning, Ms. Alicia. How's my sugar-girl today?" Brady headed toward Alicia's desk, ruffling her hair as he stepped behind her like she was his little sister. *Leave it to Brady,* Isabella thought. *Always make the ladies feel special.*

"Get lost, Brady. I'm sick of seeing you around here," Alicia said snippantly. She must really be pissed about the photo.

Isabella let out a frustrated sigh, causing three sets of eyes look her way.

"Morning, Brady." Isabella smiled, hoping she looked like a woman with not a care in the world. "What brings you to the 15th this early in the morning?"

Brady's gaze held hers for seconds longer than she would have liked.

"Actually, I came to see Alicia. I need to go over the Vaughn case with her. I had another vision last night, Alicia," Brady said with no hesitancy.

Trenton's finest P.I. had become their favourite after his first vision had saved the Walker twins eight years ago. The Walker twins, then seven years old, had wandered off into the woods behind their family home one afternoon. When they didn't return to the

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house for dinner that night, their frantic mother had called the police, begging someone to help her find her missing boys.

Within hours, an Amber Alert had been called and hundreds of citizens, men, women, teenagers and every cop available had been combing the Walker's woods looking for the twin boys. After six hours and no success, exhaustion had set in with many of the volunteers looking. Isabella and her partner Connor, as well, felt the night creeping in, their bodies craving sleep after already working twelve hours.

When no hope seemed to be in sight, Brady showed up in a frantic pace, at a near run through the woods, he charged in and within sixty minutes, came back out with twin boys in his arms.

Only after the Walkers had been calmed, the boys tucked into bed, did Isabella and Connor question Brady. With much resistance, Brady confessed to his ESP, visions that began during his stint in the Marines.

Most times, out of nowhere--Brady could be sleeping, driving, taking a shower--and a vision would claim him. In the eight years since the Walker incident, Brady had probably saved more lives than Isabella herself.

While he didn't have visions for every beating, every murder, kidnapping or mugging in New Jersey, high-profile incidents seemed to be drawn to Brady.

With each high-profile case that was solved successfully, Trenton's citizens claimed him as a favourite son. If a child ran away, parents would hire Brady to assist them to bring them home. If someone were murdered, police precincts at a dead end would call Brady in to take a look.

No one was immune, or thought anything untoward of Brady Jacobs and his visions.

It made his P.I. business a huge success and Brady took it all in stride. Isabella admired him for it all.

"Damn, Brady. Why didn't you call me immediately?" Alicia asked in a disgruntled voice.

"I am telling you, Alicia. I had to get the whole thing in order, before contacting you." Brady shook his head and headed for the window overlooking West Street that she had just moments ago been staring out of.

"Well? What have you got for me?" Alicia demanded.

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With a chuckle, Brady turned back to Alicia, "Impatient damn woman, aren't you? Just like your cousin. Always impatient for more."

Isabella felt her cheeks burn and prayed that Brady wasn't being an ass on purpose to start more questions running through Alicia's mind. She didn't need more questions from her.

"If people would deliver, Brady, I wouldn't need more," Isabella said with some satisfaction as Brady's eyes turned a darker grey than their normal silver colour. *Don't mess me with me and think you'll win big guy.*

"Brady! Hello! If you have information on the Vaughn case, can we please have it?" Alicia sounded like she was about to start screeching again. Isabella took it as her cue to get out while the getting was good.

"I'll be in my office if you need me, Alicia. Buzz me later." Isabella started for the door. "Gentlemen, as fun as it's been, I'll talk to you both later I am sure."

Desperate to leave, Isabella didn't stop to hear any goodbyes from the occupants of the room. She needed space and she needed it ASAP. Five more minutes and she'd start screaming.

"Wait, Isabella!" Isabella turned to see Ethan come out of the office, standing just outside the door.

"What's up, Ethan? You need something?" Isabella asked, feeling awkward with him, and not for the first time since their "date" last month.

"Uh, well." Ethan coughed nervously, as if he was working up the nerve to ask her something.

Dear God, no! Isabella screamed in her head. *Don't let him ask me out again!*

"The picture I saw this morning..." Ethan began.

Isabella knew it was time to cut him off, set him straight and get the hell out of Dodge. "Ethan, you know better than read that kind of stuff in the paper. The media turns things all around, making bigger deals out of the small stuff than they really need to."

Ethan looked chagrined even having asked, but Isabella knew that he had hopes that she might "see the light" and give him a chance.

"I don't have to tell you just how long Brady and I have known one another. We are friends, always have been. The paper got that photo somehow and blew it all out of proportion. Brady and I involved romantically?" Isabella laughed, praying that her hysteria couldn't be heard.

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"Well," Ethan began. "It is kind of funny isn't it? You and Brady have very little in common to base a relationship on."

If you only knew, Ethan. If you only knew.

Looking over Ethan's shoulder into Alicia's office, her gaze connected with Brady's as he stood watching her conversation with Ethan. She knew he could hear what was being said, and lowered her eyes, unable to look him in the eye at that exact moment.

"Brady and I are totally wrong for one another. We make better friends. Why ruin that with emotions and all that other stuff?" Isabella felt nauseated. Time to get moving. "I'll talk to you later Ethan. I have to get to my office. Haven't even better there yet." Isabella laughed nervously. "Tell Alicia to buzz me later."

"Will do, Isabella. See you later."

Without so much as a backward glance and feeling two sets of male eyes at her back, Isabella hurried to her office, wishing that she could lock herself in and never come out.

She looked at her watch. Not even ten a.m., and she felt as if she had just gone twelve rounds with Sylvester Stallone.

While that wouldn't be a bad thing for any hot-blooded female, after all Sly Stallone still looked good for a man his age, it was all too much drama.

Men, family gatherings...who needs 'em?

Dammit, she really hated all the drama.

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~ Three ~

In his office at “Brady’s Investigations”, Brady Jacobs leaned back in his chair and propped his feet on his desk. Resting his head on the back of the chair, he glanced around the room, taking in the four walls he looked at daily.

In the seven years since he became a P.I., Brady lived his job quite literally. With an apartment upstairs of the building he owned, which held his office as well, Brady made his own hours and did his own thing.

He loved the freedom to do what he wanted when he wanted and having to answer to no one. He learned long ago that no woman in her right mind would want anything to do with him. When Sandy walked out on him after he’d told her the truth about his visions, she’d looked at him like a freak of nature and couldn’t get away fast enough.

Since then, Brady knew better than ever that for every criminal he had helped the police take down, or taken down himself, danger tended to follow him.

While the city of Trenton, New Jersey seemed to love him like a favourite son, other cities, towns, countries weren’t so keen on his sweeping in and making the world a better place.

Three months ago he experienced the hardest time of his life. During the night he had been instantly awakened by the most horrid vision he could ever recall having. In the vision, he had seen a young boy who couldn’t have been more than six years old, being held captive in a small nine by twelve room with no windows and being whipped by a black leather whip.

As the vision had played out and he awoke trying to piece it all together, he could feel the boy’s fear, feel the tears run down his cheeks as if he was the young boy and could see inside the boy’s thoughts. Desperate to save the boy, Brady had called his partner, Dylan Madison. They both booked flights to New Mexico and contacted the local police.

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With only colours and the image of the room and brief pieces in his head, Brady had gone through photo after photo of every large building in New Mexico, trying to find where the boy was being held. With only small pieces of images from what the boy had glimpsed on the way to captivity, it took nearly six hours to locate the right building.

Brady and Dylan accompanied the Mexican police to the building and found the boy laying facedown on a dirty mattress on the floor with the man who was his father, standing over him, brandishing the whip with ease and no remorse.

Police had arrested Antonio Spera, who had been sentenced to twenty years in prison for child abuse and various other criminal charges of neglect.

His son, Anthony though, fared much worse. Hospitalized for eleven days, Anthony Spera died from infection that had set into the wounds on his back. It became known that Antonio had held his son for six days, relentlessly whipping him, not feeding him, nor allowing him to answer nature's call. With dehydration, malnutrition and the infection from his wounds, young Anthony Spera could not fight to stay alive.

Brady had stayed with Anthony the whole time he was in the hospital, keeping vigil at his bedside. Only once had Anthony awoke long enough to speak, and Brady would remember the conversation for the rest of his life.

Closing his eyes, blocking out the noise from the street below his office, Brady remembered the day Anthony died...

Pacing the hospital room, feeling more helpless than he had in all his life, Brady didn't notice the first whisper coming from the bed. Only when he heard the soft voice speak a bit louder did he turn toward the bed.

Seeing Anthony's eyes open, Brady approached the bed and sat down in the chair to talk to him.

"Hey there little guy. Glad to see you're awake." Brady wanted to put the boy at ease, make him see that he meant him no harm.

"M-m-my father?" Anthony's soft voice cracked from emotion and going so many days not vocalizing a sound.

"He's in jail, Anthony. It will be along time before he sees the outside world again. Can I get you anything? Water? Are you cold, do you need another blanket?" Brady felt at a loss as to what to do for the child. Not one with a lot of experience around children, Brady didn't know what to talk about or how to care for him.

Kacey Hammell

"Let me get a nurse in here to look you over Anthony ok? To make sure you are ok." Reaching for the call button by the bed to call the nurse, Brady paused in motion as Anthony laid his hand on his arm.

"W-w-wait," Anthony spoke. "Who are you? How did you know w-w-where to find me?"

Brady wasn't sure how much a six year old would possibly understand about his abilities and opted for a different version of how he found him.

"My name is Brady Jacobs. I'm a private investigator. I had heard that there was a boy missing and worked with the police to find you. Someone had seen your father take you to that building, only didn't think anything of it until you were gone for so long. No worries Anthony, you are safe now. Let's talk about something else, ok?" Brady wanted to change the subject quickly, to save being asked more questions that he couldn't possibly answer.

Anthony's eyes closed for a moment and he drew in a deep breath. "Brad-d-dy. Thank you. You saved me." Placing his hand in Brady's, Anthony began to cry softly. Through his tears he smiled, an image that would remain with Brady forever.

"You're my h-h-hero Brady." Anthony closed his eyes and his breathing evened out after a few moments, Brady knew he had fallen asleep.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Brady got up from the chair and moved to the window, looking down into the street in front of the hospital.

I'll never have children of my own, Brady thought. The world is too cruel and I couldn't handle having a child, only to see him or her in so much pain.

Life is better with just me on my own. No entanglements, no commitments. It's better that way.

Pulled back into the present by the ringing of the telephone, Brady reached for it.

"Brady's Investigations. This is Brady, how can I help you?" Reaching for his pen and pad of paper, Brady froze in mid-motion when he heard the voice on the other end.

"You could help me a lot, Brady, if you want to know the truth," said the voice on the other end, one that was very familiar to him and brought a smile to his face.

"Oh really? Well, I aim to please and help in any way I can. Why don't you tell me what you need assistance with, ma'am?" Brady couldn't help but feel the familiar zing that ran through his body whenever he was within touching distance of this woman or just hearing her husky voice.

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

While he wanted no entanglements or commitments in his life, his new “relationship” with this woman was something that men only dreamed of. The sex was hotter than a roaring fire, both came and went as they pleased, made no demands and asked no questions.

What man didn’t dream of having a sexual relationship with a woman and no nagging, no worries over taking her out to dinner, movies, or to meet the family? Their relationship was unexpected, starting after he returned from New Mexico and the funeral for Anthony Spera. Brady had never expected that the conversation with Anthony, the sleep he succumbed to, would be the last the boy would ever have.

“I have this itch you see, it needs to be scratched and not just anyone can take care of it. I think it’s a job for Trenton’s favourite son. I think you are the right man for the job.”

The sweet voice that held a tinge of laughter brought Brady out of his musings of the past and he felt his cock tighten behind his jeans. He knew he was the only man for the moment to appease her itch.

“Are you willing to pay the price for my services? My price is steep, but I get the job done.” Brady responded in the firmest tone he could find that would cover his anticipation of seeing her very soon. He glanced at the clock, six p.m. The day was done, time to play.

“I can meet your price, many, many times over. Price is no object. I promise you will be dutifully...paid, for every service rendered.” The husky tone was playing havoc with Brady’s pulse and the throbbing in his cock was creating an adrenaline rush that only she could incite.

“When shall I...provide this service to you?” Brady asked in a tone that he barely recognized as his own.

“Well, within the hour, I’ll be home, anxiously and desperately waiting for your services. I left early today.” Her voice dripped sugar and honey tones, Brady’s pulse soared. He could hear the rush of traffic through the phone. Suspecting she was on a cell phone only made his anticipation greater, knowing she was already on her way home. He wanted to be with her *now*, forget waiting an hour.

He didn’t need to have a vision to know that in sixty-one minutes to be exact, he’d be touching and kissing every part of this woman’s glorious body.

Kacey Hammell

In sixty-five minutes he planned to be inside her, pounding eagerly between her thighs and swallowing every moan and cry with his mouth as she came in a flood.

"I'll meet you there in an hour. Be ready." Brady started piling files on his desk while still holding the phone in his left hand, eager to be on his way. He planned to stop upstairs for a quick shower, change clothes and then drive the twenty-minute drive to her place. Not a moment could be wasted. He also knew the shower would be cold and lonely, but he'd make it up to his cock later.

"Always ready for you, Brady. Always." Her voice took on a softer tone, one that he was only noticing more and more of these days. It was that soft tone that he ignored, not wanting to delve too deeply into what it meant. "See you in an hour, Brady. Don't be late."

At the sound of the dial tone, Brady placed the receiver back on its base, staring at it for a few moments.

What I am doing? he thought.

For nearly three months he had been seeing her two or three times a week since that first night they were together. Neither demanded more than a few hours in each other's arms and didn't make it public knowledge, not to even their friends and family, what they were doing behind closed doors. Repeatedly.

She brought out in intensity of feelings in him that he never felt before. It scared the hell out of him. He counted on her friendship. They could talk for hours after sating one another. He felt like he had known her forever. He was pretty sure she knew him better than most people. She accepted his visions, his leaving in the middle of the night, and he understood her reasons as well for wanting no commitments and no demands in the way of a relationship.

Picking the receiver up once again, Brady dialed a few numbers, directing any calls that came in to the answering service to his cell phone. Taking his keys from his left pocket, he locked his desk. Grabbing his leather jacket from the back of his chair, Brady headed out the door.

Glancing at his wristwatch, he noted the time.

Goddamn it. Six-ten. I wasted too much time, he thought, with my stupid, mushy thinking. Get your ass moving Jacobs. Honey and cream awaits.

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

~ Four ~

Walking through the door of her apartment, arms laden with grocery bags, backpack and a bottle of wine, Isabella couldn't hurry fast enough in her opinion.

Moving through her living room, glancing to the TV where on top a photo of her mother sat, she couldn't help but smile. "Hi Momma. 'Nother day done. No bad guy's brought in but, hey, no one died either. It was a good day."

Chuckling, used to this ritual she played out daily, she told her mother, "The night looks to be even better, Momma." Isabella could feel a faint blush on her face, sharing with her mother's image the plans for the evening.

Shaking her head at herself, she entered the kitchen and set the grocery bag on the counter, flicking the percolator button to on to give her a pot of coffee that was rarely ever empty. She always prepared the coffee maker for when she would get home from work. The pot was always warm, always waiting every time she would prepare the next pot.

To say she was addicted to coffee was an understatement.

Taking off her jacket and placing it on a kitchen chair, she slipped her runners off. Isabella took her groceries out of the brown paper bag, opening the fridge and placing the eggs, butter, milk and cheese she had purchased on the middle shelf.

Taking the last item out of the bag, an economy bulk size bag of Peanut M&M's, Isabella had to laugh at herself, tearing into the bag immediately, and munching on a few.

So coffee wasn't her only addiction. M&M Peanuts were second only to coffee. Bowls were placed throughout her apartment, full of the naughty and sinful treat that she loved so much.

Addictions, she thought. I'm developing more and more every day.

With that reminder of the night to come, Isabella glanced at the clock on the stove. Noting that it was six-fifteen, she folded up the bag her groceries had been in, and placed it under the kitchen sink where she stored them.

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Glad that the coffee had finished perking, Isabella filled her favourite and largest mug, which said "*Detectives Love Handcuffs*", that Alicia had given her when she made Detective. After adding two teaspoons of sugar and a couple drops of milk to her coffee, she made her way down the hall to the bathroom.

Placing her mug on the vanity, she moved to the bathtub. She placed the stopper in the drain and turned on the hot and cold water. Testing the temperature with her fingers, making sure it was on the hotter side rather than cold, Isabella poured strawberry bubble bath and bath salts into the tub. Strawberries were her favourite scent to bathe in and she took pleasure in it often.

Content to let the tub fill, she picked up her mug and headed to her bedroom at the left of the bathroom.

Taking a sip of coffee, Isabella groaned as the heady taste of it burst in her mouth. Holding it for a few seconds on her tongue, she couldn't help but relish the taste of her favourite beverage. Nothing tasted as good as coffee after a hard day's work.

Well... one thing did come close to the heady rich flavour of coffee and she savoured that as well whenever she had the chance.

Smiling, she placed her mug on the bedside table. She sat on the side of her bed with an image of herself on her knees, mouth wrapped around the thick and lengthy cock of her current lover.

Lifting her right leg over her left, Isabella began taking off her socks, eager to hit the bathroom for a hot bath before he came over. Taking her shoulder holster off, she placed it in the drawer of the bedside table, then locked it before she began to undress.

Flushed from her thoughts, her nipples tingled as she slid her shirt up her torso and over her head. Feeling hindered by her bra, her breasts feeling heavy and achy, she wasted no time in dispensing of her bra and throwing it, and her shirt, to the hamper that sat in the corner of the room.

"Two points, Isy!" Laughing at herself, she sat for a moment thinking about the evening to come. Taking her breasts in her hands, feeling the weight of them, she pinched each nipple, shuddering and clenching her legs together as she felt the overwhelming zing of arousal spread through her from nipple to pussy.

Better stop there girl or you'll be coming in your pants, she thought to herself. *Too much planned tonight to get off on your own!*

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

Glancing at the clock again and knowing the tub should be up at a good level by now, Isabella stood, unbuckling her belt and undoing her slacks. Shucking her slacks as she walked toward the bathroom, she kicked them up with her foot and caught them in her arms. She threw them over her shoulder, missing the hamper by a few inches.

Grabbing the waistband of her thong underwear, she pulled them to her feet and stepped out of them. Lingerie was another of her secret sins. The feel of silk and next to nothing on under her work clothes always made her feel sexier than hell, even if in her own mind. The knowledge of what she wore beneath her clothing while interrogating a suspect, chasing one down or booking them, gave her a rush of pure naughtiness that only she knew about.

Turning off the taps when the tub was finally filled, Isabella stepped into the tub, sliding her back along the end of the tub into a reclining, sitting position. Resting her head on the edge of the tub, she let her water flow over her, wetting and warming her body instantly.

Sighing with a deep, guttural breath, she closed her eyes for a moment and let the image of her lover seep into her thoughts.

Short, dark hair that she loved running her hands through, especially at the nape of his neck. That always had him driving his cock into her harder and deeper than ever, silver eyes that turned dark whenever he was aroused or at times when he looked in her direction.

Six pack abs... Sighing deeply, Isabella's fingers twitched against the side of the tub, imagining her fingers running over that washboard stomach. Very little felt as good to her as his abs, the ridges, trail of hair that led to one of his best attributes. Giggling like a schoolgirl over the fact that he was all hers for the moment, Isabella felt heat rush through her stomach, leaving a throbbing ache between her legs.

His arms, specifically his biceps were another attribute she loved to hang onto. Strong, muscled forearms, and biceps that showed off his physique made the desire to have him all the more anticipated. Whenever she was close to climax she grabbed his biceps, digging her nails in, holding on while passion took over. He seemed to like the bit of pain her nails would inflict, always driving forcefully into her as never before, crying out his own pleasure.

Knowing that she would soon run out of time before he'd be there, and her getting more aroused by the second, Isabella hurriedly reached for her bath sponge, soaping it up

Kacey Hammell

and cleansing her body with an eagerness that she was growing accustomed to feeling whenever she had plans to see him.

Sponging all suds from her now clean body, Isabella pulled the plug in the drain, and stood in the tub, reaching for a thick, blue towel that was always present on the shelf. Not one to ever be without the thickness of her favourite towels after a bath, she always made sure they were laundered and stacked at the ready whenever she needed one.

Though it was 2005 and women were seen most of the time as equal to men, she still felt she had to be stronger, less emotional than ever at work. She never let her colleagues see her emotions, always putting on a brave face, no matter what kind of call they would take. She always saved her emotions, her whims for the privacy of her home, where she could indulge to her hearts content.

Her partner of three years, Connor Warrick, who became her partner a year after she got her shield, had yet to see Isabella shed a tear, even when faced with abused children, murdered mothers, or anything else equally devastating.

Isabella rarely gave in to expressing any sort of emotion over the last sixteen years since her mother's death, not even privately. A wasted effort really. What did tears really accomplish, was always her way of thinking. Why waste time on tears when someone could be out making a difference, changing things to make the city better, or just someone's life?

Shaking her head from her musings and stepping out of the tub to the bathmat, Isabella rubbed vigorously at her body, drying it, angered with herself for letting such doldrums thoughts to cloud her evening.

Reaching for the strawberry body lotion that went with her bubble bath and salts, she poured a generous amount into her palm, rubbing her hands together to coat them in the sweet smell. Then she smoothed it over her arms, her breasts, stomach and legs, the scent of strawberries brought a pleasing smile to her lips.

Humming to herself, Destiny's Child recent hit, *Soldier* playing her head, Isabella wondered how many more minutes she'd have to wait before her soldier made an appearance.

Recapping her body lotion and tucking her towel loosely around her once more, her heart skipped a beat as she heard the sound of her front door closing.

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

Looking at herself in the mirror, mussed, damp tendrils of hair around her shoulders, the towel haphazardly wrapped around her, she knew she looked like a woman who was eager for a man. Her man's touch.

Hearing the sound of a boot hitting the floor with a thud she smiled, making her way to the doorway of the bathroom.

Peeking into the hallway, she heard another boot drop and the sound of heavy breathing. When he came into view she was struck breathless, even though she had been expecting him.

Dressed in his usual black denim, form-fitting jeans, dark hair damp as if he too had taken a few moments to clean up, he was a sight to behold.

Isabella's heart thudded double time and her legs threatened to give out. She noticed his leather jacket, undone over a naked torso.

There they were, those abs, the washboard stomach that had her literally teetering on the edge of orgasm already and he hadn't even touched her.

Finally lifting her gaze to his face, his smoldering silver gray eyes captured hers and she had to lean against the doorjamb of the bathroom for support.

He always made her speechless. His beauty, his charm oozed from him with no effort at all. How she had gone so long, so many years as friends with him and never really noticed him in that way before? Some Detective she was, not seeing what was directly in front of her.

As he kept coming toward her, his pace slowed, as if he knew the effect he was having on her and wanted her to want him more desperately than ever. His face broke into that sinful grin of his that told her he knew exactly what he was playing at.

Never one to let anyone, least of all this man, have the upper hand Isabella let go of the towel she was still holding in front of her. It slithered down her body, pooling at her feet. Noting his small stumble mid-stride, Isabella relished the effect she had on him.

Naked as the day she was born, she smiled at the man whom she needed to feel against her. Desperate to have his hands on her, she called to him.

"Brady..."

Kacey Hammell

~ Five ~

Exquisite.

The only word that came to Brady's mind as he saw Isabella standing in the doorway, steam billowing behind her from the hot bath or shower she'd obviously just had.

Stunning beauty, her long red hair hung around her face and shoulders in wet disarray, giving her a well-mussed look that he wanted to envelop himself in.

Since his own cold shower before revving up his black '69 Mustang and making the twenty-minute drive to her place a twelve-minute one, Brady was on the edge, painfully eager to ease the burgeoning erection that hadn't eased at all, not even during his cold shower.

Brady's eagerness to find his lover had him barreling through traffic, taking the stairs to her apartment instead of the elevator. He had been pleased to note that she'd left the front door unlocked for him. Taking off his boots as he moved through the apartment, it was all Brady could do not to run through to find her.

Disgusted with himself for a few moments at the lovesick thought, confident it was just his other head thinking, he knew it couldn't be anything more than that.

Yet, seeing her standing in the doorway, he'd felt the sun shining that just her image brought forth.

What kind of sap are you Jacobs? Jesus, he thought, next you'll be quoting sonnets and pledging undying love. Get a fucking grip.

Hearing her say his name in that soft, silky tone had him near bursting in his pants. Picking up the pace, he moved toward her, knowing oblivion was near. Being inside her was where he wanted to be and as he got closer, he could tell by her eyes that she wanted him there too.

~*~

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

Feeling his hands on her, his mouth taking hers, Isabella felt her knees go weak and was thankful for his strong arms holding her.

As his tongue played with hers, his hands palming her ass cheeks, bringing her hot center in contact with his jean covered penis, Isabella knew in seconds she'd go over the edge if he kept it up.

Breaking free of his kiss, she craned her neck back to accommodate his exploring mouth and grasped the shoulders of his leather jacket, relishing for a moment in the smell of leather and hot man. Pushing the jacket off his shoulders in a hurry, she felt her body shaking at the precipice of release.

"Brady," she breathlessly moaned. "Off... want the clothes off now. Please."

"Bella... Christ, ok... alright."

Brady moved a mere half an inch it seemed, his torso pressing her into the door of the bathroom as he shook his arms, freeing himself of his jacket, letting it fall to the floor.

Helpless to keep her hands to herself, Isabella ran them over his glorious chest, his abs and began quick work of the button fly that held his erection from her.

Dipping his head, he caught her mouth with his again, making her moan and her heart quicken.

Hands clawed at hands and the waistband of his pants, as both tried to shed Brady's jeans in hurry.

Taking a breath and looking at her, Brady's dark grey eyes smoldered for her. She could see so much passion and desire in his eyes, she couldn't look away for even a moment.

Leaning down to pull his jeans off his legs, over his feet, Brady placed a mirage of kisses against her stomach, causing her muscles to quiver and her pussy to clench tighter, letting her know that she was too close to allow him play time.

"Brady..." His name on her lips died on a moan as he took her right nipple into his warm, moist mouth, drawing it in until it was a tight bead.

Pulling his face up to hers, she breathlessly mumbled between kisses. "No time for this Brady. I'm ready. I can't take more. Fuck foreplay." She heard his moan against her mouth at her words and knew he wanted it as much as she did. "Just fuck me, Brady."

Moving back away from her, Brady looked at her, his gaze never leaving hers and asked, "You sure you want it now? No playing first?"

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Isabella's mind drifted to the first time they'd had sex, when his size had caused her a lot of pain from being sexually inactive for more than two years. In the couple months of being together two or three times a week, she had gotten used to his thickness and length, always eager for more. A bit of pain at the beginning always turned to more pleasure than she thought she could bear.

That first night played in her mind for another moment, but she banished the thoughts because of the pain that Brady had been in that night, the night he returned from New Mexico.

Focusing on Brady, she reached down and grasped his cock in her hand. Gliding her hand up and down his erection, watching him arch his neck, forcing his hips into her hand more and more as she pumped him, she felt a trickle of her own juices slide between her thighs.

Leaning her torso forward, she licked his neck while still pumping him in her hand, eliciting a guttural moan from deep within his chest and gloried in the reactions to her that he rarely hid and got better each time they came together.

Placing both hands on his shoulders, Isabella pulled him toward her.

Chest against chest, mouth-to-mouth, toe-to-toe, Isabella put everything she felt into their kiss, their embrace. She wanted Brady to know that she wanted him, everything he had to give. Rough, soft, hard, up against the wall, she wanted him.

Feeling his hands grasp her waist, Isabella knew he had read her message clearly, as he lifted her and placed her thighs on both sides of his own.

Breaking their kiss too soon for her, Brady pulled his head back and looked down at her body spread over his. Her shoulders against the door, her lower back arched and her pelvis angled over his awaiting cock, she knew she looked like a wanton woman ready to be fucked hard and furiously.

"Look at yourself Bella," Brady said huskily. Looking up at her with those intense, dark eyes, his words held her as captive as did his eyes. "Beautiful. I don't think I'll ever forget this image. You spread open, waiting, chest heaving in anticipation. I need to be inside you, Bella. Buried to the hilt. Connected to you."

Isabella's body clenched at his words, desire as never before building within her. She couldn't believe the words he had spoken. She felt her heart literally miss a beat, but refused to dwell on it. She wanted him and now.

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

"Take me, Brady. Hur... Brady!" She screamed his name as he entered her. The twinge of pain barely registered while her body accommodated his length and width. Pleasure soon followed causing her to arch her back and lift both hands, running them through his smooth mane. Moving steadily in and out of her, Isabella savoured the feel of him pounding into her, she wanted him to lose control and let loose. It was one of the things she loved most about sex with Brady. When he let down the tight control he always kept in check, he was a relentless lover, never stopping until she was a pile of mush.

"Oh god, Bella." Hearing the passion and shock in Brady's voice caused Isabella to smile. She loved his reactions to her and knew he wouldn't hold out too much longer. "You feel so fucking amazing. Wet, throbbing, shit... I have to slow down."

Feeling Brady slowing the pace, she moved her hands from his head, reached up and grasped the top of the bathroom door. Palms flat against the door and her fingers curling over top, she hung on for the ride of her life. Arching her back and tightening even more, she took control, moving her hips frantically over his.

"Dammit Bella! Slow down. Christ...fuck." Isabella would have laughed at Brady's frustrated voice, but she didn't want to lose her pace. Moving her hips harder and faster over his hard cock, she felt the need and viewed the pleasure precipice just on the horizon to fall over.

"Don't stop, Brady. I love riding your long, hard cock. Feels good, doesn't it baby?" Isabella saw his eyes close, his neck arch and the veins in his neck showed his iron-willed control. She wanted more dammit, and she would have it all.

"Look at me Brady. Look at me." When he opened his eyes, it was all she could do not to come right then. The fire in his eyes, the look of herself she could see in his eyes, made her more frantic to prolong the moment, yet desperate to keep riding his cock, not wanting the feeling to end.

Brady placed one hand over one of hers on the top of the door and one on the doorjamb, desperately gasping for air. She could hear his hitched breaths and picked up the pace. "Watch me while you come, Brady. Come inside me, long and hard."

Moving her hips faster and holding Brady's fiery gaze with her own, Isabella pounded her pussy over his cock, taking in every moan, every flare in his eyes. Feeling her inner muscles clenching his cock and feeling him grow even thicker inside her, Isabella couldn't hold back any longer.

Kacey Hammell

Using the door as leverage, she made one last hard plunge downward and let her body take control. “Brady!” she screamed his name, overcome by the dam bursting within her. Feeling the warmth of his own release and his triumphant shout, Isabella rode his cock still, absorbing every shudder and everything within his gaze.

When she could move her hips no more, fighting to stay upright, Brady caught her body within his hands, cupping her ass as she wrapped her arms around his neck, while his hips moved in slow motion against her, causing them to both gasp.

“Bella...” Finding her mouth with his own, their kiss was soft and gentle, their need sated for the moment and the pleasure of being with him took over.

Breaking the kiss, Brady kissed her nose and smiled. “You never cease to amaze me, lady. That was ...” Seemingly at a loss for words, Isabella took pity on his speechless state.

“Fucking unbelievable, I know.” Isabella couldn’t help the smug, satisfied look that took over her face. Knowing that she caused him to be at a loss for words was empowering and she loved the fact that she could do it.

Tough, sexy, ‘can have any woman he wants’ Brady Jacobs was rendered speechless by her. With a heartfelt bout of laughter, something she knew didn’t happen very often, she pointed to her bedroom door to their left.

“Take me to bed Brady. Rest. Gather your energy for later. You’ll need it.” She told him with a wink.

With another carefree laugh, Isabella let her lover carry her to bed.

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

~ Six ~

“Isy! What do you want to drink?” Brady called toward the bedroom. Upon hearing, “Water please”, come from that direction, he moved to the cupboard. Grabbing two glasses, he set them on the counter and took the water from the fridge.

Obviously Isabella was in need of refreshment as much as he was. That last session of mattress tumble lasted even longer the bathroom gymnastics, Brady thought with a grin.

He was still amazed over the amazing power of her thighs and arms as she held onto the bathroom door and rode him like an established jockey. Thinking of that moment, Brady felt his cock twitch in his boxers.

“Relax pal, two times in one night, don’t get your hopes up for a third.” Brady scolded his rising penis with a chuckle.

Grabbing the bowl of Peanut M&M he knew Isabella loved so much and tucking it under his right forearm, he sauntered down the hallway to Isabella’s bedroom. As he looked into the living area, he spotted the framed photo of her mother sitting atop the TV.

Glancing down the hallway, he considered how long he had before Isabella came looking for him. He set the drinks and bowl on the hallway table by the phone, and headed toward the TV.

Picking up the photo of Stacey Knowles, he couldn’t help notice the resemblance between mother and daughter. Both carried the trait of the wild and untamable red hair, the sassy grin and the sparkling blue eyes. The only real difference between the two women was that Isabella had dimples on both cheeks and her mother had none.

Unbidden and out of nowhere, the thought occurred to Brady.

This is probably what Bella will look like in five to ten years, the same wrinkles – crowsfeet around the eyes and laugh lines around the mouth. Wonder if her eyes will sparkle like that after she has children?

Kacey Hammell

Feeling a sense of fright over that thought, Brady set the picture of Ms. Knowles back on the TV. The thought of Bella older and a mother scared the hell out of him. Those were images that he wasn't going to ponder. What he had with Isabella was going smoothly and nothing had changed for him.

He still didn't want commitment or a full-time relationship with anyone, even Bella.

Then why is she the only babe you've dated in nearly three months bub?

Closing his eyes, trying to clear the wayward thoughts now plaguing him, Brady heard Isabella calling him.

"Where did you go, to the springs to get that water, Jacobs? Dying of thirst here!"

Laughing, Brady headed back to the hallway, picked up the bowl and two glasses and hollered, "I'm coming, I'm coming. So impatient, baby."

His voice died away as he walked over the threshold of her bedroom, and came to a standstill.

Amid the mountain of white sheets and the white comforter that were haphazardly spread out from their sexual romp, Bella sat with her back to him staring out the window. She looked like a goddess among the clouds. What she saw and what she was thinking he didn't speculate. He couldn't. The vision of her stole his thoughts, and his breath, away. Transfixed by the beauty of her golden skin, tanned from exposure to the sun and her auburn-red mane hanging down her back in a thick tumbled mass, his heart felt the pinch that was becoming familiar to him whenever he was near her.

He'd dated many beautiful women in his time but Bella, for all her toughness, seemed more beautiful and fragile to him when she was like this. When no one was watching, she would get the look of a lost child, and a scared one at that, and her mask fell away.

She was stunning and she confused the hell out of him when he caught her unaware as he did now. He wanted to take away her worries and her fright. He wanted to protect her, take away her pain. He'd do anything for her, he realized.

God Jacobs, you got it bad.

Like hell I do, he thought.

"What are you looking at, Brady? You going to stand there all night with my treats, or you gonna bring them on over here?"

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Snapping out of his thoughts, Brady focused on Bella's face. Her sassy grin, the one he hoped she'd always have, and the twinkle in her eyes as she turned around on the bed and lay back against the headboard tugged at his heart.

"Treats huh? You talkin' about my body or your damn peanuts?" Striving to ease the tension in his body, he hoped his lighter tone would keep her from noticing any seriousness that had been on his face moments ago.

"Oh, give me my M&M's man. Don't keep a woman waiting." Isabella tried grabbing for the bowl as Brady set the glasses on the bedside table near her.

"Nuh uh. No way. This kind of reward doesn't go without some kind of fee." Holding the bowl over his head, Brady gave her his most innocent smile, knowing the fanatic in her for her one guilty pleasure. "Whatcha got for me, if I give you this bowl, Bella?"

Watching her blue eyes turn dark with desire, Brady watched the wanton woman who only came out in their private moments come to life. With a smile that promised so much, made him feel so much he realized, she lowered the sheet barely covering herself, exposing the full-length of her body to his greedy gaze.

Taking a deep breath and lowering the hand that held the bowl, he couldn't contain the moan that escaped his throat. "God Bella, you are beautiful you know?"

"You think so Brady? Thank you. Not very often do I hear those words spoken." Seeing her shy smile, Brady felt his heart beat, stutter and barely get going again.

She has no idea of her value as a woman, he suddenly realized.

"Ummm, Brady?" he heard her soft voice ask.

Quick as lightening, she snatched the bowl he had forgotten he still held in his hand. He hadn't even seen her move, she was so fast.

"Ha! Got 'em! You are getting slow in your old age, Brady. Thanks for the treats." Isabella said gleefully, content in her one-up on him.

With a growl and a lunge, Brady launched himself on top of Isabella, causing the bowl of M&M's to tumble out of her hands and roll across the bed.

Hearing her joyful laugh, one such that he rarely heard from her, he couldn't help but tickle her ribs, causing her to cackle louder and longer. A sound he could get used to, Brady kept tickling her until tears of laughter were rolling down her cheeks.

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“Brady! Brady, stop! Oh my god. Quit!” As she took in great gulps of air, Brady ceased his tickling, rolling to her side, watching her catch her breath while picking M&M’s up off the bed.

“That’ll teach you woman to mess with me.” Brady told her with a smile.

“You can’t take me on my best day, Jacobs,” she told him confidently.

The sassy Isabella was one of his favourites of her personas. The playfulness and energy that came from her soothed his soul and made him glad to have her as a friend. She added light to his sometimes dark world and he didn’t know what he would do without her in his life. That was one of the reasons he was surprised they had crossed the line from friends to lovers.

The night he had come back from New Mexico, he didn’t head home, but went straight to Isabella’s. He didn’t question his impulsive decision at the time, only determination to get to her flooded his senses.

Burying young Anthony Spera had changed him forever and he knew it. Such a sweet, young boy, robbed of life, taken from the world was almost more than he could bear. Standing at the graveside watching the casket lowered into the ground, Brady knew the world would be a sad place without Anthony in it.

On the way home, Brady had been filled with an energy and anger that scared him. Thoughts had run rampant in his mind, of going to the jail and killing Antonio Spera, in cold blood or not. The man didn’t deserve to live, nor walk the streets.

Brady had vowed by Anthony’s graveside that he would make sure his father would never see the outside of his cell again. It was a promise Brady planned to keep until the day he was dead.

When he had fallen asleep on the plane home, Brady had had a vision involving Antonio Spera. In all the years Brady had been having visions, he had always made it his goal to save each person if he could, or at least lead police in the right direction.

But that last vision of Antonio Spera had shaken Brady to the core. One that had chilled every bone in his body. When he had jolted awake, Brady wrestled with his conscious and even gloried with the justice that had been done.

But Brady hadn’t handled his thoughts well. He’d been sickened that he would actually relish another human being’s life being taken. Desperate to make sense of it all he headed straight for Isabella’s and her understanding eyes that made him seem ten feet tall, while he never thought he was really in the same league with her.

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That night had brought a new level to their relationship that he didn't think either had been expecting. He knew he sure as hell hadn't.

One moment he had been crying in her arms over the six-year-old boy who captured his heart in mere seconds, the next they had been on the floor of her living room having sex and breaking a lamp in their exuberance.

Those gymnastics of ours again, he thought.

"Brady? Earth to Brady."

At the sound of her voice, Brady realized he had been looking at her for a few minutes without speaking.

"I'm here, babe. Just thinking." Reaching over to move the strands of hair away from her temple, Brady smiled at her, looking into the ocean of her blue eyes.

"You seemed far away. What's got you so pondersome, hmm?" Snatching an M&M off the bed, he watched her mouth as she chewed the tiny morsel, feeling his cock twitch. He remembered the time she had wrapped that same mouth around it, sucking him until he had emptied himself dry into her mouth.

"Nothing too important. Just thinking about the first time we had sex," He told her with a Cheshire grin on his face.

Watching her face rise in colour of embarrassment, Brady couldn't help but wonder when she would ever stop blushing around him. After everything they had done together, hell the bathroom antics still scorched his nerves, he thought she'd stop blushing long ago.

"By the way, Detective Knowles," Picking up a red M&M and popping it into his mouth, Brady said, "Where did you learn that little trick of using a door to enhance your gymnast abilities, hmmm?" Crunching down on his M&M, he watched myriad emotions cross her face.

Embarrassment, pleasure and wonder crossed her face, and he didn't think she'd answer him after a few moments of silence.

"I was inspired I suppose. Being with you brings out emotions in me that I never realized I had, Brady."

Not once looking him in the eye as she answered his question, Brady reached for her chin, bringing her gaze to his.

Not sure how to respond to her declaration or the soft, content look in her eyes, Brady responded the only way he knew how.

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Leaning forward, still holding her chin, he captured her lips with his own. Delving deep within her mouth with his tongue, he poured out all the desire, passion and confused emotions he had whenever he was with her. Hoping she would receive the message that he did care and felt the same, though he couldn't voice it, he eased his lips away from hers, watching her eyes slowly open.

"You taste like M&M's babe." Licking his lips for effect, Brady caught the grin blossoming on her face.

"Really?" Smiling coyly, he had to wonder what she was up to. Brady didn't expect her words spoken in a husky voice. "Make me melt in your mouth, not in your hand, Brady." Her eyes held promises and desires he wasn't strong enough to ignore.

Claiming her mouth with his own once again, he laid his body over hers, pressing her back into the mattress.

Sliding his hands over her left hip, fingers slowly working their way to her sweet center, he didn't hear the shrill ring of the telephone until he felt Isabella pushing against his shoulders.

"Brady... phone babe. I have to get the phone."

Easing out from under his now hard body, Brady watched Isabella put the phone to her ear and listen.

Rolling onto his back and covering his eyes with one arm, he couldn't help but feel a bit of anger over the interruption. Damn, what he wouldn't give to throw the phone against the wall right now. He wanted more time tonight with Bella, with no interruptions, and by the rigid posture of her back, he could tell that their night together was over.

Duty called and all that jazz. Brady knew all too well how Isabella could go from hot seductress to kick ass Detective in mere seconds.

He loved to watch her in action, but he wanted to keep the seductress all to himself just a bit longer.

You got it bad, Brady, he thought to himself.

For once Brady Jacobs didn't contradict that nagging little voice in his head.

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~ Seven ~

Replacing the receiver back on the hook, Isabella heard Brady's voice behind her. "Got to go to work, Isy?"

Not for the first time, Isabella wondered if Brady realized the variants of her name he used.

She had noticed a lot in the last few weeks and didn't think he did. Tonight for some reason, it bothered her more than ever before.

When he was hard and driving into her, he called her Bella, which she found herself coming to enjoy every time she heard it roll off his tongue. It was special to her but she didn't want to dwell on why at that moment. Instead, she counted off in her head, his use of Isabella. When they were around others, coworkers or just talking in general, he used her full name. But at times like this, when they were warm and cozy, sharing a few moments just the two of them and were interrupted by her job, he used Isy in a distant, unaffected tone that was really starting to grate on her nerves.

Turning on an angle toward him, Isabella couldn't help but caress his body with her eyes. Only his hips and navel were covered by the bed sheet, his abs and biceps exposed to her hungry eyes.

What I wouldn't give for ten more minutes with him tonight, she thought.

"Umm, yeah. I got to go. That was Connor. A woman whose been missing for thirty-six hours was found dead down by the docks."

Turning away and heading to her closet, Isabella heard Brady get off the bed.

"Damn Isy, Connor suspects foul play?"

Pulling a denim shirt from her closet and a pair of jeans, Isabella turned to face Brady grab his jeans and his tight ass become hidden by his jockey's and jeans. Such a shame, she thought, to see such perfection hidden.

Shaking herself from her musings, she reached into her top dresser drawer for panties and bra. "Yeah. She's been missing for over a day and from what he said, she's

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naked.” Isabella noticed her hands shaking as she put on her panties and willed herself to calm down and think it all through.

“Connor didn’t say much else.” Turning her back to Brady, she shook out her jeans, putting both legs in and pulling them up. So lost in her thoughts and trying to get a grip on her emotions, she didn’t hear him come up behind her, only felt him place his hands on her shoulders.

“Do you want me to go with you, Isy? I’ll assist in any way I can.”

Touched beyond means by his offer, Isabella turned in his arms. “Thanks but no thanks. You know I’ve been through all this before Brady. Don’t make it a bigger deal than it has to be. I’ve seen this kind of thing many times, over and over.”

She knew she sounded like a bitch but she couldn’t let the fact that they were having sex get in the way of her job. She and Brady had an unspoken agreement, no commitments and let one another do what they had to do, never coddling each other or making bigger issues of anything.

“I know you have Isy, but sometimes... Hell never mind. It’s cool.” She could tell by the look in his eyes that he was frustrated, but didn’t want to show it.

Good, let him be pissed, frustrated or anything other than caring. Isabella knew he was a man used to taking care of others, but she’d be damned before she’d lean on him.

Adjusting her holster on her shoulders, pulling her hair back into a scrunchie, she turned to face Brady, certain now that she had her emotions in check. “Thanks for coming over tonight, Brady. It was, as always, the exact thing I needed.”

For just a moment, she saw an emotion—what looked like anger--cross Brady’s face, but it was gone so quickly she was sure she was imagining it.

With a smile, which looked false to her, Brady spoke in that cold, detached voice she was coming to dislike.

“Always here for you babe, when you have an itch.” Grabbing his leather jacket near the door, he stopped before crossing the threshold. Turning to her, he stared at her in a way she had never seen before. “I know you won’t, I seriously know you won’t, but if you happen to need me I’m only a phone call away.”

Isabella couldn’t even ascertain what emotion seemed to spread through her body at Brady’s words and as she watched him walk out of her bedroom, she knew only one emotion at watching him walk away caused within her.

Loss...

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Feeling like she was on a tightrope, which could easily break, she shook her head over her musings, heard the front door close and patted her pockets.

Keys, badge, gun, she was ready to face the night ahead.

Detective Isabella Knowles, one of Trenton's finest was ready to catch the bad guys. Too bad, she couldn't allow herself to be caught.

Love and the badge didn't mix. For a few short hours she could let her hair down, let her lover drive himself into her body and fill her thoughts.

But she'd never let a man drive himself into her heart. Never.

~*~

"Okay, so this is what we got." Connor stood at the front of their office, in front of the case board that they used to outline their cases. Posting information and pictures helped them think by seeing it all laid out before them and retold the story as they knew it.

"Melody Mason was last seen forty hours ago by her husband, who left for work that morning, with a kiss good-bye and an "I'll see you tonight honey"."

Isabella had to roll her eyes at Connor's retellings. Leave it to him to make things more dramatic than they needed to be. But Isy knew that it was one of Connor's ways of dealing with murder, especially when a young woman was brutally raped and murdered. This case had hit close to home for Connor and Isy knew that it would haunt him just as another case did that happened not so long ago.

"Melody went to the doctor for her yearly physical, we corroborated that with her doctor after a notation was listed on that date on the kitchen calendar. After that, Melody went to a gas station on Lubbock Street, we found that receipt in her purse in her car which was left at the grocery store. Storeowner reported the abandoned car when it was still sitting there after twenty-four hours. She'd gone in and got her groceries, which were still in the trunk. That was the last time she was seen. She'd already been reported as missing before her body was found since she wasn't with the car." Connor took a deep breath and looked at Isabella.

"Anyone in the parking lot see anything? Any witnesses?" Isabella knew that the ones interviewed had seen nothing, but like two veteran partners who did this routine time and time again, talking things out made for better thoughts and hearing all their evidence made both of them catch things that the other might have missed on their own.

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“Nothing. No one saw a fucking thing, Isy. Goddamn it!” Connor’s voice rose with frustration and disbelief. “How can a woman, a striking brunette to be exact, go missing in a busy parking lot and no one see a fucking thing? Jesus, it doesn’t seem possible.”

“Relax Con, these days people tend to keep to themselves and go about their business without keeping their eyes open.” Isy knew she had to rein her partner in before she lost him to the past.

“Buck it up, Connor. Focus on the case at hand and let’s catch this son-of-a-bitch before he does this again.” Isabella knew that coddling and pussyfooting around Connor would in the end only piss him off. Better to tell him like it is or he’d crack. “Get on with the facts, Detective. I haven’t got all damn night ya know. It is four in the morning.”

She watched as Connor’s eyes darkened and his jaw clenched. *That’s it big guy, get good and royally pissed but get the job done.*

“Kiss my ass, Isy.” Turning back to the board, Connor started from where they left off. “First time Melody Mason was seen since the grocery store was tonight, found naked and tied up on Emerald Street. Victim was brutally raped, vaginal tearing and internal injuries confirmed this in autopsy. Her hands were bound behind her back and had lost all circulation at least ten hours prior to her being found.” Connor took deep breath and wiped his brow, which was showing signs of perspiration. “This indicates that she was held against her will many hours before she was found, which no doubt means that the perp enjoyed having her to himself to do with whatever he wanted.”

“Any thoughts on the husband being the perp?” Isy had to ask, as with most cases they always looked at the husband and family first.

“None at this time. His alibi confirms that he was in Washington, having gone straight from home to the airport that day, spent a lot of time in seminars while there. He’s a writer who was giving workshops, only coming out of seminars long enough to eat and sleep for a few hours then back to work.” Connor rolled his eyes.

“You’d think he was a cop, keeping them kind of hours, but the hotel staff confirms his comings and goings. We have receipts of his room service, his check out time, etc. He did fly back early, after not being able to reach Melody, after she had been missing twenty-seven hours.”

“What made him decide to fly back Con? Wives sometimes take the phone off the hook right?” Not that she would know, but Isy figured if she wanted time alone, even as a

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single woman, a married woman may just take the phone off the hook too, for a few hours of no interruptions. She didn't think she was the only woman in the world to ever do it. Though, she was probably the only one who did it as frequently as she did. Every few days, when she had a couple consecutive days off, she'd take the phone off the hook to just unwind and relax.

"Apparently it was unlike the wife to be away from the phone that much while he was away. She has only one family member here, her father, and is an only child." Connor's voice brought Isy out of her musings and back into the matters at hand.

"She and her father didn't have a close relationship. Alcohol ruined those chances, from what the husband..." Connor looked at his notes, "Reginald, tells me. His wife wanted nothing to do with her father, so seeing as they were estranged, he knew she wouldn't be with family members. Only one close friend, who is Joan Massa, and she was out of town on vacation with her family. Reginald Mason says that Melody didn't socialize a lot, loved being a stay at home wife, keeping house and loved reading. Not a surprise with his profession."

"Ok." Isy took a deep breath, getting up from behind her desk, she began to pace the floor, mulling over the information they had. "It's not a lot to go on is it? No witnesses, nothing really concrete to indicate any enemies. So, why her?"

Isabella moved closer to the case board, looking at the serene face of Melody Mason taken the day of her wedding. The looks of a runway model, glorious, well-maintained brown hair, perfect smile, perfect teeth, perfect everything from the looks of it, and so brutally attacked. What secrets did this woman have? Why her?

"She's the typical all-American housewife, Isy. Beautiful, home when the hubby returns from a long day, meals prepared the moment he walks in. They had the picture perfect life." Connor stood shoulder to shoulder with Isabella, both of them staring at the case board, hoping to find answers within that they were missing.

Isabella could smell Connor's Tommy Hilfiger™ cologne and the scent of coffee from the percolator in their office. Closing her eyes, she tried to picture the all-American family life in her mind, seeing in her mind and even in her heart, what may cause something in the happy life of the Mason's to go awry.

Opening her eyes, scolding herself for trying to find what she knew nothing about, she knew no answers would be forthcoming. She came from a one parent home,

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dysfunctional due to tragedy. What did she know about happiness, all-American families and what went on behind closed doors?

She knew better than try to figure it out, as she told Alicia constantly, marriage and her didn't mix.

Turning back to her desk and picking up the Mason file, consisting of duplicates of everything on the case board, Isabella put it on the top of her open case files, knowing that later in morning when she returned, it would be the first thing she delved into.

No answers would come to her right now. She'd had no sleep in so many hours she couldn't count and knew that a few hours of shut-eye could make or break a case.

"I don't know, Con. I really don't. Who knows anything in this day and age? Nothing is like it used to be." Grabbing her suede jacket off the back of her chair, she looked over at her partner, who still stood looking at the board. Connor would probably still be there looking at it when she returned, but she had to at least nudge him to think that it was time to go home. A waste of breath she imagined, but she cared to try and help.

"Connor, it's time for some rest. Let's go home, get a few hours of shut-eye and be back in four or five hours. Neither of us is going to find any answers staring at that board."

Isabella held her breath, waiting for any indication that he had heard her. With a sigh when none was forthcoming, she made way for the door.

"I'll see you in a few hours partner. Try to get some rest ok?" Stopping at the threshold of their office, she turned back to her partner. Seeing him entranced in the board, she shook her head, grabbed the doorknob and closed it behind her.

The past will haunt him forever until he gets passed it. Isabella felt her eyes burn with dampness at the memory of all Connor had endured the last few years. Hopefully someday he would fight back, fight the memories and be her old partner again.

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~ Eight ~

Armed with coffee in hand and the Trenton Gazette paper, which she had yet to read, Isabella made her way through the bullpen of the precinct at ten a.m. After a mere four hours of sleep, which she gladly claimed the moment she got home, she was groggy, cranky and in no mood for bullshit.

Falling asleep face first on her bedclothes and all when she got home at four forty-five that morning, she awoke with a stiff neck and back and smelled as if she hadn't showered in two days. Death did that of course. Death could be smelled from a mile away, but after so many years on the job she stopped noticing the odor, but could always tell after a few hours away from it.

"Isabella! Isy!" Isabella shut her eyes, praying for patience when she heard Alicia's voice behind her. Turning, she glared at her cousin and hoped she'd get the hint that she was not at her best yet.

"What is it, Alicia?"

"Give these to Connor will you? They're more autopsy reports on the Mason case. I knocked on your office door, but got no answer." Alicia's eyes held concern and Isabella's gut clenched at what it could mean. "I asked the night desk clerk if Connor had signed out last night, or this morning, and he said he hadn't. He should be in there, Isy."

Isabella half turned to look at her office door. Willing it to open perhaps, but curious as to what she would find in there when she entered.

"I'll take care of it, Ali." At Alicia's skeptical and worrisome look, Isabella's small fraction of patience nearly overflowed. "I said I'd handle it. Anything else?"

Alicia stared into her eyes for at least thirty seconds, what she hoped to find, Isabella wouldn't hazard a guess, but finally looked away.

"Fine, Isy. Let me know if you need anything on the Mason case. I remember what happened too, you know. Don't be such a bitch and let others share some of the load once in a while."

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Isabella took a deep breath to say lord knows what, but Alicia wasn't done yet.

"You and Connor are the perfect match you know that? Hiding behind the past, never letting anyone in, never letting anyone share what burns you so much." Isabella could see the gleam of tears starting in Alicia's eyes and looked around the bullpen.

All other Detectives seemed absorbed in their work, or so they made it seem, and stayed out of the heated family debate going on right in front of them.

I so don't have time for this. Isabella was getting furious now.

"Look, Ali..." Isy began.

"No, forget it. Go do whatever you need to, Isy. I'll help out if needed. I have work to do." With that and a quick and furious stride to her walk, Alicia left Isabella standing on her own, wondering what the hell had just happened.

Sighing and praying for calm, she turned and headed for her office. Getting to the door, she put her ear against it lightly to hear any signs of Connor behind it. Taking a sip of her coffee and a deep breath, she opened the door and crossed the threshold.

"What the hell...?" Isabella croaked as she took in the scene before her.

~*~

"Isy!" Connor exclaimed, bolting out of his chair, arms around a buxom blonde she vaguely recognized.

"Connor? What the hell are you doing? Who the hell is this?" Isabella was outraged. While she was having a bad morning, dealing with her cousin, thinking about the Mason case, Connor was in their office, getting his rocks off with some blonde bimbo.

"Isy, relax. Ummm," Clearing his throat, seemingly at a loss for words, Connor turned his back, tucking his now flaccid penis into his pants.

The blonde bimbo had her back to the door, putting her tits back into her bra and shrugged into her shirt. Thankfully she wore a skirt, or Isy's day would have held the image of another woman's anatomy all day. An image that would infuriate her to no end, remembering what Connor had been up to.

When the blonde turned back to Isabella, she looked pointedly to the door. The blonde at least read her message clearly.

"Ah, Connor. I'll see you later maybe." She said in a rush, making her way for the door.

"Don't let the door hit you on the ass on the way out." Isabella sneered.

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"Lana, I'll call you alright? Take it easy." Connor called after the blonde before she could close the door.

"Is, goddamn it..." Connor began.

"Don't start with me idiot. Do you have any idea the shit you could get into, fucking some chick in our office for fuck sakes? Have you lost what's left of your fucking mind?" Isabella was thankful the door was closed. She was pissed, out of patience and ready to tear a strip off the nearest person.

Too bad for Connor, the fuckboy, that he chose that day of all days to get his rocks off.

"Don't fucking start with me, Knowles. Kiss my ass would you? I'm sick to death of you and your righteous shit." Isabella didn't want to hear his shit and turned her back on him.

"Don't tell me you have never got off in this very office yourself before, Isabella. We'd both know you'd be lying. Shall I remind you...?"

"NO! Fuck, no, all right... Asshole." Isabella didn't need any reminders of a night so long ago when she had ended up back in their office, drunk, with Connor in tow and nearly forced herself on him.

Forced was too strong a word of course, Connor was an amazingly willing participant that night, exactly two years ago to the very day. Memories ran rampant through her mind.

"Is..." Connor said from close behind her.

"Forget it Connor. It's forgotten already ok? Let's move on. Sorry I over-reacted. Didn't get much sleep." Not one for mushy apologies, she gave Connor a weak smile, hoping he would let the matter drop. So much for that idea.

"Isy, let's talk about it. We never have you know. That night, here, us, it was... Mind-blowing, I do remember that much. We never let it come between us, shrugged it off to bad timing and alcohol, but us..." Connor seemed at a loss for words, she took pity on him and tried to close the subject.

"We had sex, Connor. We did, we moved on, forget it."

"Well if I didn't know better, I would say this was a bad time to enter." Came a voice, the voice Isabella so desperately, yet so did not want to hear, from the doorway of their office.

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“Brady.” Connor’s hesitant, without humour chuckle did little to appease Isabella’s thoughts. Brady, her current lover, had just heard about a night, albeit long ago, between her and another man. She couldn’t help but wonder what he thought, if it would bother him.

From the angry look on his face when she finally met his eyes, she had her answer. It bothered him a lot.

“I hope I am not interrupting anything crucial Detectives.” Brady’s detached voice raised her ire.

Who was he to be pissed off? She didn’t care about his past relationships and what she and Connor had was so not a relationship, but a night of unbridled, crazy sex that didn’t even compare to what having sex with Brady was.

Not that she’d give him the satisfaction of knowing that however.

“What brings you down here, Brady?” With nonchalance, as if she had no cares in the world, Isabella made way for her desk and sat down, throwing the Gazette on top of the desk and taking a sip of her coffee.

“Have a seat, Brady.” Connor motioned to the small loveseat in their office, moving to his desk and having a seat on the corner of it.

Poor guy seems nervous, Isabella thought with amusement, kinda awkward, but really, they were all adults.

Brady looked from one to the other. Holding her stare for too long, Isabella looked away. She picked up a file from her desk, hoping he would get on with why he was paying them a visit.

“I came to tell you I had a glimpse of Melody Mason in the grocery parking lot.” Brady didn’t seem too happy about sharing the information but both she and Connor leapt at him with questions.

“What do you mean? What did you see?” her voice seemed louder than Connor’s, “Did you see the perp? Anything of his face?”

“Whoa, whoa, you two.” Brady held up a hand, staying their questions and handing Connor a file.

“Everything I know is in there. After I got up about six this morning and had a shower, I sat down to get my thoughts on paper. It’s all there.”

Isabella hurried to Connor’s side, placing a hand on his shoulder and reading over his shoulder. This could be the break they were looking for. Looking up, she saw Brady

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watching them, with a naked look in his eyes, a raw intensity that she had never seen before.

When he glanced at her hand on Connor's shoulder, she quickly removed it, cursing at herself for letting his obvious upset get to her.

God, one would think he was her boyfriend.

She couldn't breath. *Oh God....*

~*~

Brady could barely keep his anger in check. Sitting there, watching the woman he wanted in his arms that very minute, standing so close to her partner, one he had just learned had been inside her too, made him want to beat the hell out of someone.

He couldn't believe it. All these years he had watched Connor and Isabella compliment one another in the field, as best friends and he never knew they had been intimate. She never told him.

Of course he had never asked, but to him that was beside the point.

She never asked about any of his past lovers, but he didn't work beside them every day either. She was with Connor daily, sometimes for days on end.

He should have been told he thought. They were too close.

Who am I kidding? Brady asked himself. They are friends, but one night, they were closer than that. I shouldn't be pissed, but dammit, she was his now.

He had to get out of there.

"I'll let you two get down to the business at hand with the information I gave you." Rising from his seat, Brady headed for the door.

"Brady, wait." At Isabella's voice, he stopped and turned back to her.

"Hang on, Is. There are a couple things here I want to check out with the M.E. I'm going down to his office and will be back in a bit." Connor grabbed another file off his desk and headed for the door.

Stopping beside Brady, he clasped his shoulder. "Man, thanks for this." Holding up the file he held, he smiled at Brady. "Hopefully we have all we need in here to get this guy. Thanks again. Back soon, Isy."

With Connor gone, silence reigned in the small office. Heading to the door, he heard Isabella's voice. "Brady..."

Closing her office door, he turned back to her.

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“How are you doing, Isy? Things were pretty rough last night?” Brady didn’t want idle chitchat, but he was too furious to do much else. He wouldn’t take his anger out on her or let her know that what he learned bothered the hell out of him. He wouldn’t give her the satisfaction.

Wrong Jacobs. Dammit, I can’t even be pissed at her. He knew that Isabella would never hold his feelings against him like that. She may not want to hear them, but she wasn’t vindictive enough to relish in his hurt.

Moving to the board at the front of the office, Brady looked at the photos of the Mason case. “She was beautiful, wasn’t she?”

He felt Isabella move up beside him, a bit of a step behind him at his shoulder, as if she was afraid to approach him too close. It seemed ridiculous to Brady, if that was what she was thinking. She never seemed afraid of anything.

“Yeah. She was gorgeous. Many women wish they could look that good. Especially at age thirty-seven.” He could hear the smile and the reverence in her voice. Turning his head, never moving his body, he looked at her.

“You know you’re gorgeous, Isy. You’ll look hot even at age thirty-seven. Don’t ever doubt it.”

When she looked at him quickly, a blush shading her cheeks, he nearly forgot what it was he was pissed about. Resigned to a past he couldn’t change, he knew being pissed would get him nowhere with her, but damn if he didn’t want a confrontation, one he felt was coming soon, just to air everything out in the open.

But that was neither the time, nor place.

“I have to get back to the office, Isy. Call if you learn anything ok?” Brady walked a wide berth around her, heading to the door.

“Brady, what you heard when you came in...” Isabella began.

“What happened in the past doesn’t concern me does it, Isy?” Not turning, keeping his back to her, he let out some of his mixed emotions. “You didn’t tell me because it’s none of my business. Isn’t that right? We don’t have a relationship like that do we? We don’t share those kinds of secrets do we, Isabella?”

At her gasp, he knew that some of the anger he felt was showing. At that point he didn’t give a shit and turned to look at her.

“I’m just a cock you ride when the mood strikes you isn’t that right? Don’t let anyone in, don’t let any of those tightly concealed emotions come forth, isn’t that right?”

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

Fuck me till you can't breath, can't think besides the smell of our sex, but don't let me into your head or what you're feeling." He was on a roll and from the whiteness of her cheeks, his words were having a hell of an affect on her.

He couldn't stop, couldn't contain his emotions any longer.

"Friends first, now lovers. I don't think I'll ever get close to you, not really. I can pound into your body over and over, but you won't ever let me in." Brady took a deep breath, holding up his hand when she tried to speak.

"Did you let Connor in, Isabella? That night so long ago when he fucked you, did you let him in? Did you share with him everything you'll never share with me?" He looked around, anger and confusion clouding his senses.

"Where? Where did you do it, Isy? On the loveseat?" At her pale face and closed eyes, he paused but then continued on as his anger continued to lead the way. "Against the wall? On the desk? Which desk? Where, Isy? Tell me dammit!

Brady's voice rose, causing her to jump.

"Get out, Brady. Go now before we'll both say things we regret." She turned her back to him, obviously eager to close the discussion. "I hope you calm down before I see you again."

Then she turned back to him and he saw the Isabella that the world saw. Cold, detached and...alone. As his anger subsided a fraction, he wanted to comfort her, but knew the time had passed.

"You, or Connor, call me if you find anything new in the Mason case." Looking into her eyes, seeing hurt, anger and confusion, which probably mirrored his own, he said, "I'm involved now. I didn't ask for it, I didn't want it. But I am and I will see it through to the end. No matter what."

Heading to the door, letting his double meaning words sink in, Brady walked out of Isabella's office, fearful that she would close the door to him forever.

Kacey Hammell

~ Nine ~

“Another day done and no one dead. No one in jail either.” Isabella walked through her living room taking off her jacket and throwing it on the tan sofa.

Tired to the bone after barely four hours of sleep all she wanted to do was have eight straight hours of unconsciousness.

Heading to the kitchen, flicking on her beloved percolator she sat at her kitchen table. Untying her running shoes she looked around her kitchen.

Man does this place need some help. Dishes overflowed her sink, cobwebs could be seen in the corners of the ceiling where she rarely ever cleaned and the floor could use a good scrubbing.

All her life she was never one to do a lot of housecleaning, her father had always brought in a lady that lived down the street from them once every two weeks to do a thorough cleaning after her mom died. Besides keeping up with some laundry and the daily dishes, Isabella never did much of the cleaning herself.

“Well girl, anyone who visits here, would know you aren’t Martha damn Stewart.” With a deep, guttural sigh, she picked up her shoes and carried them through the living room to the front closet. Dropping her shoes she snapped her fingers, “Jacket.” She said, reaching over to grab her jacket from the sofa to hang it up.

“Might as well pick up after myself.”

No one else to do it for you, Isy.

“Shut up. Geez, hearing my own thoughts is starting to grate on my nerves.” Isabella walked back into the kitchen, saw the coffee was done and poured herself a steaming cup, adding two sugar and milk.

“Ahhh, nearly better than sex.” With a tired chuckle, she headed to her bedroom to get undressed, knowing that nothing was better than sex with Brady.

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

Sighing at the memory of her last encounter with him, she knew they would need to have a long chat and end things. Emotions were starting to develop beyond friendship and casual lovers. She could see it in his jealousy and with what he said.

Throwing her dirty shirt towards the hamper, missing it by a good three inches, Isabella unbuttoned her slacks, peeling them down her legs until they pooled at her feet. Sitting on her bed, she thought of Brady's last words before leaving her office, *"I'm involved now. I didn't ask for it, I didn't want it. But I am and I will see it through to the end. No matter what."*

"Fuck. I don't need this bullshit. It was supposed to be a simple thing of sex, sex and more sex." Throwing her jeans to the foot of the bed, she lay back on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

"Why can't life be simple?"

Today had garnered not a lot of luck in the Melody Mason case. She and Connor had spent most of the day going over Brady's information, a new composite of the suspect was made up and posted all over the city and on television.

Brady's description of the killer, though he had only seen his face in shadow, but had seen his hair color and build, might just be enough to bring a few men in. Reginald Mason was ruled out long ago, but Brady's description of the killer simply deleted Reginald Mason from being a suspect for sure.

Reginald had come to their office today. Isabella had never seen a more broken man. In many ways he reminded her of her father, as she grew older and saw each anniversary of her mother's death take its toll on him day after day.

She hadn't done well in the room with Reginald Mason and had left him in Connor's care, while she sought a quiet office to look over Brady's note. Connor always handled the victim's family better than she did. She didn't like emotion clouding her judgments when it came to finding a killer.

She came off as a cold and detached cop; she knew it and welcomed the reputation. Better that than a soft one that was for sure.

Sitting up, she reached for her coffee sitting on the bedside table. Taking a gulp of the sweet nectar that got her blood pounding she closed her eyes to savour the taste when the phone rang.

Not wanting to talk to anyone, she prayed it was a wrong number and snatched up the receiver.

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“Hello.”

Isabella pressed the phone harder to her ear.

“Hello. Who is this?”

Still receiving no answer, Isabella grew frustrated and tried once more.

“Tell me who this is or I’m hanging up now.” Waiting for a count of ten seconds, she snorted in disgust and slammed the receiver down.

“Probably a kid messing with the phone.”

Lying back again on her bed, throwing her arm over her eyes, all she wanted to do was fall into a sweet, oblivious night’s sleep. But thoughts of Brady, their first night as lovers crept into her mind. She would never have believed in thirty years if someone had of come back from the future to tell her that she and Brady Jacobs would set the sheets on fire, she wouldn’t have believe them.

She would have thought they were crazy. But that night, when it all started and growing over the last three months, was unexpected, yet as sappy as it sounded—dreams were made of stuff like that.

Opening her door, Isabella was surprised to find Brady on her doorstep.

“Brady? What are you doing here? It’s two a.m. What’s wrong?” Dressed in a camisole and jockeys under her robe, she wasn’t prepared for visitors.

But judging by the desolate and frantic look in his eyes, Isabella knew it wasn’t a social call that brought her pal Brady to her doorstep.

“Shit, Isy, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come. It’s early. I don’t know what the hell I’m doing.”

Seeing that he was about to turn away, she grabbed his arm. “Whoa big guy, come on in. My door is always open to you. Let’s sit down and talk.”

Leading him through the living room to her sofa, she sat down, pulling him along with her.

“Isy, I ... I don’t know... Christ.” Dragging his hands through his hair, resting his elbows on his knees, he buried his face in his hands.

“Brady, listen. Whatever is wrong, you can talk to me. I’ll listen. What is it? Is it your family?” A sudden thought struck her, “Oh my god, is it my dad? Uncle Al?”

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

Brady's head shot up, a look of surprise on his face. "Oh damn, oh no, baby." He grabbed her hand, squeezing tight. "No, no, nothing like that. Everyone is fine that I know of."

With a sigh of relief, Isabella closed her eyes, thanking god that all seemed to be well with her loved ones. Too bad she couldn't say the same for her dear friend Brady.

"Tell me what it is, Brady. Connor said you and Dylan were in New Mexico. What..." Isabella drew in a deep breath.

"What happened there, Brady? Something really terrible right? Talk to me dammit."

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Brady leaned back against the sofa and looked at her. "I saw a young boy, six years old, locked up in a rundown room, being beaten with a whip." Brady closed his eyes and the hand holding hers shook as he remembered.

"I had heard on the news that a young boy in New Mexico was missing, I recognized his face when I had the vision. Once I had all my thoughts on paper, the descriptions of the building, what I could see of the man, I called Dylan to book us some flights down there. Six long damn hours, Isy, looking at pictures of buildings, I saw what the boy saw before he was put in that room. I saw glimpses of the area where he was being held. It took me that long to find the right building, took another hour to wait, just fucking wait, for a team to be assembled to go in and bring the boy out."

Seeing that he was going to need it, Isabella crossed to her dining room and opened her hutch. Bourbon that was only supplied for when her father visited since she hated the stuff. It might just be what Brady needed to take some of the edge off. Pouring two fingers worth of bourbon in one glass, and a couple drops of vodka—her preferred poison into another, she went back to the sofa and handed Brady his drink.

Taking it without looking up, he continued his tale.

"As long as I live I'll never forget the look of Anthony Spera, the young boy, the room he was in and all he endured. He was given no food, no water, nothing. Not even the chance to go to the bathroom anywhere. He slept when he could and sat in his own urine Isy. What kind of monster does that to a kid right?"

Looking at her, but she didn't think he really saw her from the wild look in his eyes, she agreed. "Only a monster would do that. You're right, Brady."

"That monster was his own fucking father! His father! Can you imagine, Is? I know it's not the first time you or I have ever heard of a parent doing that, but goddamn

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it, this is the first I had really seen it up close.” Tipping back his glass, Brady finished the bourbon in one gulp.

“What happened to Anthony Spera, Brady?” Isabella knew what it was like, being a cop, to want to talk things out, to try and get images of violence out of your head. She knew Brady wasn’t done yet.

With a humourless laugh, Brady turned the glass in his hand over and over.

“We got Anthony out of there, Isy, his father is locked up good and tight. He’ll never see the light of day as long as I live. I vowed that till my dying day.” Drawing in a deep breath, he reached for her hand. “Anthony spent eleven days in the hospital, I stayed with him. He was malnourished, the wounds from all the whippings were open, sore and got infected.”

A shuddering breath was the only sound in the room. Isabella squeezed Brady’s hand and watched a tear fall down his cheek. To see her pal, whom she’d known forever, the big and tough Brady Jacobs cry for a young boy, squeezed something within her lonely heart. Seeing him like this opened her eyes to the real man beneath the tough façade he showed everyone.

“After eleven days, he died, Isy. That young boy called me his hero.” Lifting his head, where his cheek rested against the back of the sofa, she saw the tears glistening in his eyes and the plea for her to understand.

“A fucking hero. Some hero I am aren’t I? Too late to save him. Too late to take away his pain. What good are my visions if I get there too late?” In a flash Brady sat up and hurled the empty glass he still held at her fireplace.

“Brady! Brady, dammit, relax. Relax.” Folding him in her arms, she rested against the back of the sofa and held him. Letting him shed the tears for the young boy who captured his heart, which she knew he would remember forever, Isabella shed a couple tears of her own and simply held her friend.

What seemed like hours later, but could have been mere moments, Isabella felt Brady stir. Lifting his head off her chest, he looked up at her, angling to the side so that her arms were still wrapped around him.

“Jesus, Isy. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get all girly on you.”

“Its okay, Brady. This boy obviously affected you big time. It’s understandable and probably won’t be the last time. To shed tears over him makes you human.” Isabella

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hoped he would see that it was okay and that he could move on. He had done his best and a happy ending didn't happen, but he had tried.

"It wasn't just Anthony that stirred me up, Is. On the plane home, I had another vision. I don't know if I'm as human, or as compassionate as you might think." Getting up off the sofa, he headed to the dining room hutch.

"What did you see on the plane, Brady? Can you tell me?" Isabella wasn't sure how much more he could remember tonight, or how much her so-called cold heart could take without shattering. But be there for Brady, she would be.

Coming back to sit down with bottle bourbon and vodka in each hand, Brady settled beside her, each of them sharing one cushion on a three cushion couch.

She didn't want to dwell on the fact that he could move down, knowing he would possibly need comfort again, but she was surprised that having him close felt right.

Pouring more than two fingers full in each glass, Brady set each bottle down and handed her the glass of vodka and leaned back, resting against her. Taking a large gulp of his bourbon, he took a deep breath.

"On the plane home I fell asleep. And I had a vision. What I saw scared the hell out of me, Is, while I relished in it."

He looked at her, their faces so close they were nearly touching.

"Tell me."

"I saw Anthony Spera's father die in prison. He was sitting in his cell, the door was open, and someone walked right up to him and slit his throat. Ear to ear." Looking down at his glass as if he couldn't bear to look at her, he raised it and tossed back the remainder of his drink.

Taking a large, heated gulp of her own drink, Isabella let the burning in her throat settle her heartbeat from thudding straight out of her chest and felt tears from the burning well in her eyes.

Looking back to Brady, seeing him watching her, she asked, "Relished the justice of it all did you? Is that what shook you, Brady?"

"What do you think? Of course it did. I'm not one to relish in the death of another human being, my visions aren't something I enjoy having, I accept them, but enjoy them I don't Isabella. Christ, I saw a man murdered and I wanted to laugh and throw a party."

"I would have, Brady. This man tortured, beat, and defiled his own son. Death was too good for him. Get over it, move on. You didn't kill the bastard, someone else did.

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It's one less monster on the street if he got out someday. You're human Brady. You wanted justice for Anthony."

Staring into his eyes for long moments, Isabella saw a calm Brady, without the wild look and knew that in some way, talking about what happened helped him move forth a bit. He would live with the memory of the young boy forever but he would find peace within himself to move on.

"Since when did you get so smart? You should have been a shrink instead of a cop." With a small grin on his face, Isabella couldn't help but smile back, glad the intensity in the room was gone and he was becoming the Brady she knew.

"Hardly my man. Shrink, cop, aren't they the same thing? I hear so many problems on the job, I'm not sure if they are so different." Smiling at him, she raised her hand, cupping his cheek. "You okay, champ?"

Leaning into her hand, eyes closed, Brady didn't speak right away. Feeling his stubble, his five o'clock shadow against her palm, Isabella felt a new tension rise within her. Chalk it up to the alcohol warming her body or the heart that she thought was shrouded in cement within her chest, but she felt drawn to Brady as never before and was enjoying his closeness immensely.

But he was one of her best friends. They shared many a secret over the years, laughter and family gatherings. He was a part of her family, not immediate, but he was a huge part of her life already. She didn't want to lose that by letting alcohol and a couple years without feeling real desire for a man cloud what they had.

Dropping her hand, he opened his eyes and looked at her. Clasping the hand that she dropped, Brady entwined his fingers with hers.

"Thank you, Isy. I'm all right I guess. Thank you for being here when you should have kicked me out on my ass." Brady laughed, his sweet, addictive laugh that was at times contagious. "You, umm, won't go telling everyone we know that I had a few moments of babying will you?"

Smiling at him, resting her head against the back of the sofa, she chuckled. "Welllllll, I could broadcast it to the newspaper that the cities favourite son is human. That he sheds tears, quite handsomely by the way, just like the rest of the world."

"You wouldn't dare! Let me convince you not to say a word."

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

From years of knowing one another, Brady knew what would keep her quiet. Clasp ing her waist, he tickled her, making her laugh out loud and fall on her back on the sofa.

Leaning over her, Brady relentlessly tickled her, with what seemed no intention of stopping any time soon.

"Stop. Oh god, Brady! Stop! Okay, okay, I give." Isabella could barely speak through her laughter and breathlessness, but she prayed he would relent before she stopped breathing all together.

"I promise! Uncle! Uncle! Brady!" she screamed.

Laughing, Brady rested his hands on her waist, looking down on her. "Now that is what I like to hear. A woman screaming my name while lying flat on her back, bending to my will."

Isabella looked at him and let his words sink in. To be beneath him, clutched in his arms, screaming his name, suddenly became something she wanted most.

Seeing his smile fade and his eyes darken, she knew that her emotions were written all over her face. Tingling from her chest, across her navel, down to between her thighs, she was swept away by desire. Desire that if not appeased soon, would consume her. But she wasn't sure she had the guts to act on them.

"Brady," she whispered. "We should get up."

"Bella," She sucked in a deep breath as he called her such an endearing name. A name that only her mother had ever called her. It was personal, it was private, but coming from his lips it was added to the fire blazing within her stomach and between her thighs.

"Goddamn you, Brady." Reaching up, clasp ing the back of his head, she drew him down to her face, taking his mouth with her own.

The first touch of his lips on hers, she knew she'd never tasted anything like him. Fire nearly consumed her. She'd never felt so alive, she was burning up. And that was only from his lips.

Opening her mouth a little wider, she tentatively touched his lips with her tongue...from there she lost control of everything.

Brady devoured her, moaning her name into her mouth. Isabella let him ravish her, breathing in all that he was, all he had to give, within her.

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Brady drew back and looked at her, but Isabella couldn't take not having his lips away from her for a moment. Drawing him back down, she kissed him with all the pent up emotions she so carefully held a tight rein on.

In all her life she had never felt the need to demand, seek what she wanted or take everything she could from a lover. Men in the past had given as good as they got, but with Brady, she wanted it all. She wanted to lose all inhibitions, all thought and just let go.

Still feasting on his lips, she pushed against Brady's chest, she pressed him back against the sofa, sliding his leather jacket off his shoulders and working at the buttons of his shirt.

Straddling his lap, she felt the evidence of his desire for her. It didn't take a cop to realize he was as affected as she was, and she planned to have everything he had, and more.

Pulling his head back, Brady gasped for air. "Bella, holy shit. What are you doing? What are we doing?" Watching her undo the buttons of his shirt through hooded eyes didn't register in his lustful thoughts.

"I'm having my way with you, Brady. That okay with you?" Pulling him forward just a bit, she peeled the shirt off his shoulders and ran her hands down his chest, running her nails down his abs, relishing in his physique.

"Fuck, that feels great. But wait, wait. Are you sure you want to do this? There is no turning back once it's done Bella. What do you want? What do you really want?"

Pausing in her ministrations of undressing him, Isabella looked into Brady's eyes.

She knew that the desire and arousal in his eyes mirrored her own and she wanted him to see it. Brady was a man who understood her, wanted – or didn't want – the same things in life that she did and would be the perfect lover for her...in the short-term.

"You know what I want, Brady? What I really want?" Isabella kissed his jaw, his neck, and made her way around to his ear where she suckled the lobe between her teeth, giving it a small nip with her teeth. She smiled as she heard his guttural groan and his cock jerk in response.

"What..." He cleared his throat and tried again. "What do you want, Bella?"

Pulling back, taking in his naked torso, his closed eyes, she knew she had him. "I want you inside me, Brady."

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

When he opened his eyes, his gaze bored into her with so much heat, she thought she'd catch on fire right then and there. She made sure he knew exactly what she wanted.

"I want you to fuck me. Pound into me over and over. I want your mouth on me, everywhere. I want to taste, lick and suck you, everywhere. No inhibitions, no thoughts to the past, the present or the future. Simply two friends who want the same thing and understand one another."

Rotating her hips, pressing his hard erection into the cleft between her thighs, she welcomed the flood of juices he no doubt could feel coming from within her.

Untying the belt of her robe, she let it fall off her shoulders and onto the floor. Drawing the straps of her camisole down her arms and bunching it at her waist, she watched as he took her in with mesmerized eyes. She felt like more woman than she had ever felt in her life.

If he got any harder between her legs, she thought he would burst. Time to tame the beast and make it an eventful evening.

"That's what I want, Brady. All that and so much more. I want everything." Taking her breasts in her hands, she tweaked each nipple, moaning at the sensations coursing through her and grew bolder as she heard his similar moan, watching her give herself that little bit of pleasure.

"Give it to me, Brady. All of it."

Coming up off the couch with her in his arms, he swung her up and turned around, knocking her tableside lamp to the floor in the process.

Neither heard the crash, neither cared about broken glass. As Brady pinned her back against the sofa, ravishing her mouth with her legs over his shoulder and working at the buttons on his jeans, the world could have exploded and she didn't think either of them would care.

Pushing his jeans down far enough for his huge cock to spring free, she had one fleeting moment of uncertainty that he would fit. He was larger than any man she had ever had sex with, but thoughts were soon forgotten as he pushed the leg of her jockeys to the side and flicked her swollen clit with a fingernail.

"Oh god, Brady!" Arching her back as much as the sofa would allow, she tried to push her aching clit closer to his hand, knowing that it wouldn't take much to send her over the edge.

Kacey Hammell

“Christ you’re soaking wet. I have never...” Brady never finished his sentence, leaning down to ravage her mouth, thrusting his tongue into her as if it was his cock inside of her.

Isabella felt the head of his cock probing the opening of her pussy, eager for what was to come, for the tidal wave to consume her. But nothing prepared her for the moment of pain as he pushed within her, his sheer size stretching her as she had never been stretched.

“Fuck. Bella, you okay? Damn, I’m so...”

“Shut up and move, Brady. Don’t baby me. Just fuck me. I can handle it, a little pain for a whole lot of pleasure.” She smiled up at him, praying he would shut up and move his ass – in and out preferably.

“I’m demanding everything, Brady. Don’t start unless you are going to finish. Make me come. Come inside me and do it hard. Don’t hold back.”

She never thought that his gaze could grow any hotter, any darker, but it did and when he started to move, she thought she’d die from sheer pleasure.

The sound of a phone ringing shook Isabella from her thoughts. Realizing she’d fallen into a light doze, memories of her and Brady together that first time, making her ache with desire, she sat up, shaking her head to clear her thoughts.

“This better be fucking good.”

Snatching up the phone, she barked, “What?!”

“Isy?”

Her breath caught as she heard Brady on the other end of the phone. “Brady. What’s wrong?” She knew she probably sounded breathless--he did that to her, then add the fact that she was highly aroused thanks to her heated memories, didn’t help much either.

“Nothing is wrong. I just...” She heard a deep sigh coming from his end of the phone and wondered what exactly he was trying to say. She was still a bit peeved with him from earlier that day. She didn’t want to take pity on him, but she felt that their time away from each other had put things in perspective.

“What are you trying to say, Brady? What happened to our total honesty in the past?” Scooting back on her bed so she was resting against the headboard, Isabella felt

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the dampness of her earlier arousal between her thighs. Closing her eyes she tried to stay in the moment and think about anything other than her unfulfilled desires.

Hearing Brady's voice brought her meandering thoughts into focus. "Yeah, yeah. We were always friends first. Listen, Isy, today... Today I was stupid. I shouldn't have been pissed off about you and Connor. I should have..." Another deep sigh and she could hear his frustration. Not wanting to let him off the hook too soon, she said nothing. Let him dig himself out, she thought.

"Fuck, I wish you had told me is all. I know I don't have the right to demand that, but dammit, Bella, the thought of another man inside you makes my gut wrench. It's not easy imagining another man inside the woman you..."

Isabella sat up, alert, heart pounding. Desperate to put them on an even keel and so he wouldn't finish whatever it was he wanted to say, she let him off the hook.

"It's okay, Brady. I can't imagine I would be thrilled to hear about a woman I knew who was your former lover. Not while we're having sex anyway. I know you have a past and that is fine, but coming face to face with it unexpectedly had to be tough. I understand."

"That's it exactly, Isy. I'm just sorry okay? I won't go all crazy on you all right?" Hearing his chuckle eased her inner turmoil, yet she was still fearful of what he wasn't saying. She could still hear the strain in his voice and wondered if it was fair to him to keep seeing one another if he had deeper feelings for her and just couldn't bring himself to tell her.

"Brady, if you feel that we shouldn't see each other anymore, I'll..."

"No, no. Isabella that's not what I meant. I want us to continue with our...private life. I just know that we went into this with no strings attached and I'll honour that. Hell, we both want a carefree and no strings attached life right? You do still want that, don't you, Isy?"

Sitting on her bed, hand gripping the phone pressed against her ear, Isabella found herself hesitating. Why was it so hard for her to agree with Brady, when she knew that was exactly what she wanted.

But looking at her reflection in the dresser mirror across from the bed, she found that the words just wouldn't come.

* * * *

Kacey Hammell

Brady waited, afraid to breathe. Isabella's pause to his question had him hoping that she had changed her mind in the long run, but he didn't think she had. One thing about Isabella that he knew well was that she was stubborn as a mule, her Irish heritage kicked in one hundred percent in that regard.

But he hoped. All day he thought back to everything they had shared with one another over the course of their lives, the last three months and that very day. In his musings he realized that he would never find another woman like her, and he would do whatever it took to hold onto Isabella.

He loved her. Loved every inch of her from her fiery red hair, her cute pixie dimples and a body that made his pulse pound even miles away just thinking about it all the way down deep to her fiery soul.

He would do whatever he had to do to hold onto her, including taking the biggest risk of his life by giving her some time to think. Letting her think that he was still on the same page as her, that his feelings of a carefree bachelorhood hadn't changed...was playing it safe. But he had changed.

He wanted the white picket fence, the three kids and a lifetime in the arms of the woman who had changed his life forever. But first he had to convince her that they belonged together.

"You still there, baby?" Praying she would change her mind, Brady held his breath.

"Of course. Sorry, I was just...thinking." Hearing the hesitancy, the strangled note to her voice, his heart sank. "Of course I want no commitments Brady. We agreed, an unspoken agreement really from the beginning but we've always known. Why change things now?"

Disappointment fell like a ton of bricks on Brady. Knowing that even after three months of passion, that her feelings hadn't changed as his had, his heart broke just a little. He'd hoped that she'd feel the same way but was resolved to taking things slower, giving her the time she needed because he believed everything would work out in the end.

"Very true, baby. No need to change anything. No one knows about us, there's no one to pressure us or anything. We'll go on as before and chalk today up to no sleep, a murderer on the loose and a shitty male ego." He chuckled, believing what he said for the most part, but trying to lighten the mood as well. To bring out his sassy Bella once more.

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Hearing her husky laughter was more than he hoped for when he dialed her number. In his heart he knew what a struggle the future would be to convince his stubborn woman what they could have, but he knew. She'd always be his.

"Men. I don't know why I put up with you, Brady. You're crazy," She said with laughter in her voice.

Crazy for you my love. Though he wouldn't say it out loud, he had to smile over his own thoughts.

"Yeah, yeah, but you'd miss me if I wasn't around, babe. Wouldn't you?"

"You only wish, Jacobs." She laughed, a sound he could get very used to on a daily basis.

"What were you doing when I called? You sounded breathless and even groggy when you answered. You okay?"

"Oh, nothing much. Just lying down." Maybe it was his P.I. instincts, but he detected a hint of chagrin and laughter in her voice, prompting him to delve deeper.

"Why do I get the feeling you are keeping something from me woman? Spill. What were you up to? Lying down? Why?" A wild thought struck him. The breathlessness of her voice, the huskiness...he only heard that when they were intimate. Was she...? Could she have been lying in bed pleasuring herself?

His cock came to life with the image of Isabella lying back giving herself pleasure. He should mind his own business he knew, but he couldn't resist asking.

"Bella," his voice sounded deep and husky to his own ears. "What were you thinking about lying there, before I phoned? You only get breathless like that when you're in the thralls of passion babe. Tell me all about it."

At her indrawn breath, obviously shocked that he seemed to know her so well, Brady knew he had hit the nail on the head. She had been in the throes of passion. Thinking about it or doing it, he didn't much care. He just wanted details.

"Don't you think that's a bit personal, bub? Men should never ask women their most intimate thoughts."

"Aha! So you admit it, they were intimate thoughts!" Brady couldn't help but love the camaraderie that had come back just like old times in their relationship. It made him hope all the more that things were back on track and would be a-okay.

With exuberant and high-pitched laughter so hard he could barely understand her, he finally heard her say when her laughter calmed down. "Men, all you think about is

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sex! I could have been thinking about my grocery list for all you know.” With a gleeful chortle, he suspected she was feeling very confident in herself.

Settling into his lazy boy chair behind his desk in his apartment, Brady prepared to trip up his ladylove with the most powerful weapon he had in his arsenal...desire. He knew just what made her tick when it came to sex, he'd use it, drive her crazy and reel her in. He could chortle with glee himself, but refrained, letting her think she was in control.

“Bella, I know you better than that. The only time I hear that breathless, sexy tone is when I'm buried deep within that tight and glorious pussy of yours.” When he heard her suck in a long slow breath, he forged on.

“You know I'm right, Bella. Sliding in and out of you, letting my cock hit that one pleasure spot that sends you over the edge. You know the one I mean. You can feel me pounding into it, can't you? You remember all the times I've been inside you and you've flooded my thighs, my cock with your juices when you go over the edge.”

Hoping his voice and his words were helping her relax enough to open up to him even though they weren't face to face, Brady prayed that the hardness in his boxers didn't explode. Talking about sex with her was driving him insane. Who knew talking a bit dirty on the phone could be so arousing. It was something he'd never done before but with Bella, he found that he liked it. A lot.

“Talk to me, Bella. Tell me what you dream about when you're all alone.”

“You. I was dreaming of you.”

Brady's chest expanded, he felt elated and could not contain his grin. One step closer.

“What about me?” he asked.

“I was thinking back to that first night, when you got back from New Mexico. It all played out in my mind. Just as if it was happening all over again, Brady.” He heard her take a deep breath and her next words came out in a rush.

“It was as if you were here, deep inside me. I woke up with my clit pulsing and my body dying to feel you inside of me.”

Brady's heart clenched within his chest. Once she started she really lived up to all he hoped. Everything he was feeling, he believed she was too. She wouldn't admit it, didn't want to feel it and was fighting it every step of the way.

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“God baby, what I wouldn’t give to be with you right now,” Brady said, his voice low. He could hear his own need in it.

“Brady, I ...”

He heard her voice, but it seemed at a distance as his head was wracked with enormous pain. Feeling as though someone had taken a sledgehammer to his head, Brady fell back, groaning Isabella’s name, hoping to god that the vision he knew was coming, would be over soon.

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~ Ten ~

“Brady?” Isabella clutched the phone to her ear. The last she heard from Brady was a guttural groan that seemed more agony than passion as she remembered his words before all had gone quiet.

“Brady. Answer me, dammit. Don’t play games with me.” With a pounding heart, much like a racecar going at warp speed of one hundred fifty miles an hour, Isabella knew that something wasn’t right. The only other times she had ever heard such a pain-filled agonized groan from Brady like that, was whenever he had a vision.

It was rare for her to be present whenever Brady had a vision. More times than not all of his visions occurred in his sleep, when he was tired and at his weakest or when he was feeling high emotions.

Hanging up the phone, Isabella climbed off her bed, searching for her clothes. Determined to get to Brady, she knew the twenty minute drive to his place would be slowly agonizing for her. Pulling a pair of splash pants and a t-shirt from their hangers, she threw them on the bed, and grabbing a pair of tennis shoes from the floor of her closet.

Hurrying to the bed, stubbing her toe on the post, Isabella closed her eyes, pausing to catch her breath.

“Relax, moron. Rushing and acting like an idiot isn’t going to do him much good. Treat it like a case, you get the call in the middle of the night and have a job to do.”

Realizing she was only talking to herself, Isabella shook her head and reached for her clothes. Knowing this wasn’t a typical case of her job, she didn’t want to delve too deeply into why her heart felt like it would fall from her chest, or the fact that her hands were shaking.

Fully dressed, Isabella started from the room, only pausing at her dresser to grab her badge, pocketbook and set of keys. Considering for a moment, she questioned whether taking her side arm would be needed, but opted that it wouldn’t be needed as she

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was certain that Brady was wracked with a vision even as she stood there contemplating. Knowing it and being sure of it were two different things however and she felt the urge to be at Brady's side this time.

But she'd be damned if she would say that she was more concerned for Brady other than simply his friend.

Lie to yourself much?

"Shut the hell up." Isabella told the mocking voice in her head and walked out the front door.

~*~

Pounding. All he could hear was pounding.

Brady opened his eyes, only to see the white, cracked ceiling of his bedroom. Feeling disoriented, he sat up, praying that the pounding in his head would stop. Only then did he realize that the pounding in his head was not the only insistent pounding that could be heard.

Realizing someone was at his front door, he paused with his hands on his knees, giving himself a moment to focus and know where he was.

Normally he would sit and let the memory of his vision come to him in time, but for the first time in a long time, he didn't need time to remember this one. The vision he just had was as clear as his feet in front of him. Only this time, he felt a fear like none other for what he had seen. His heart felt as though it would pound right out of him, as well as break, if the vision were to come true.

"Brady?"

Hearing Isabella's voice beside him, Brady jerked his head up, seeing the only person in his life that truly mattered to him. It scared him but he needed to touch her. Now, the sooner, the better.

Throwing his arms around her waist and burying his face in her stomach, Brady inhaled the scent that was solely hers, the one that he craved twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. It was all her, his woman, the one he loved more than love itself.

And he planned to hold onto her for all he was worth.

"Brady? What happened? What's wrong?" Hearing the worry in her voice, Brady squeezed his arms around her tighter, swearing that if he could pull her into his body, he would have done so, so that she would remain safe forever and they'd never be apart.

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“Christ, Brady, you’re killing me. Talk to me.” Isabella tried to step away from him, but he couldn’t bear to let her go.

“God dammit, Brady. Let go. You’re squeezing too tight.”

Realizing that she was probably right, and he was acting like an ass, he loosened his grip, but tugged her down to his lap.

“Brady.” Squirming on his lap, trying to rise and get away from him, Isabella couldn’t move. “Brady, really, you are being ridiculous. What happened?”

“How did you get in baby?” Looking into her baby blue eyes, he saw varied emotions running rampant. Concern, confusion, even anger, but it was the concern that had his heart warming.

“You were just gone, Brady. I heard your groan my name and that was it. I thought I best come over and check on you. Just to be sure you were okay.”

Hearing the nonchalance in her voice, he almost smiled. Underneath it all, he could hear her worry and wouldn’t let her get away with it.

“But the door was locked, Bella. How did you get in here?”

Watching as a blush stole over her face, he did smile. He didn’t want her to question him too far about his vision. He knew that she understood his visions better than anyone else, knew what his painful groan would mean, but until he sorted through it, he wasn’t sure he wanted to share it with her. But he knew he would have to warn her, tell her some of what he saw so she would be prepared.

“I owe you a new door actually.” Blushing more than ever, Brady watched Isabella stumble over what she’d done. “I kept pounding but got no answer, so I kicked the door in.”

“You broke my door by kicking it in?” Brady wanted to laugh. And she said she didn’t care for him at all, he would beg to differ.

Coughing and wiggling a bit in his lap, Isabella looked chagrined. “Well, yes, actually I did. If you had of answered instead of sitting here, I wouldn’t have felt the need.”

Seeing that she seemed to be pretty happy shifting the blame from her to him, Brady finally did laugh and wrapped his arms around her, holding her close.

“Leave it to you to use force to gain entry, Bella. Sorry you were worried.” He watched her eyes narrow at him, knew that she would adamantly deny that she had ever been worried. “I needed a moment to compose myself before getting up.”

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Seeing the worry seep back into her eyes, Brady braced himself for the onslaught of questions his lady would ask.

"A vision?" At his nod, she continued her interrogation. "What was it? Did it have anything to do with the Mason case? Did you see the perp's face this time?"

When she took a deep breath, no doubt to ask more questions, Brady could finally get a word in.

"No, nothing directly to do with the Mason case." Looking away from her, though tightening his hold on her, he tried to keep his face plain and not let too much show.

"Not directly to do with the Mason case? What the hell does that mean, Brady? Either you saw something or you didn't that had to do with the case." Hearing her frustration, he knew she wouldn't let up. Moving his arm around to her lap, he took her hand in hers.

"All I saw was the same man, though only a view of him from the back I know it's the same man, I know he's going to strike again, and soon." Brady looked into her eyes, knowing that he had to tell her, but couldn't. Not yet. He wanted to handle it, his way.

"That's it? That's all you saw?" she asked, the skepticism in her voice was very telling. "Did you see who he attacks next?"

Lifting her off his lap and setting her on the bed, Brady got up, moving to his adjoining bathroom for a glass of water. Filling the glass, he looked into the mirror. Looking at his own reflection, he prayed for her understanding and the lies he was about to tell her.

"Brady. Are you going to answer me?" Isabella called from the other room.

Taking a deep breath, he turned and walked back into his bedroom. "No. No, I didn't see who his next victim was. I couldn't see the woman, though I know he was struggling with someone and I heard screaming."

Going to his dresser, he pulled out a clean t-shirt. "Everything took place from a back view. I never saw anything from the front."

Closing his eyes, he pulled his shirt over his head. Hearing her indrawn breath, he wished he could have smiled. Knowing that he had that kind of effect on her was a balm to his soul, but he didn't have the time to act on it. As much as he would have liked to lose himself in her luscious body, he had to make plans. Set things into motion that he knew she would hate him for.

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He needed to focus on the task at hand instead of her body and all the pleasure he would find within, which erase the scenes that played out before him in his vision.

"I need to go meet Dylan," Brady said, turning toward her, tucking his shirt into the waistband of his slacks.

"What? Now?" From the look on Isabella's face, he could tell she was having a hard time believing that at nine p.m. he would have to meet his partner.

"Right. We are working on a case where the client's wife works nights and the husband suspects she's cheating since her work has called there a few times saying she was late."

Brady closed his eyes and nearly groaned at the oldest cliché in the P.I. business. His job was far more than cheating spouses and trying to catch them in the act.

But dammit, what was a man in love supposed to do when the woman he loved would cut him off at the knees if she knew what he was about to do.

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

"Since when do you take jack-off cases like that, Brady? Slummin' or is business that bad?" He heard the laughter in her voice but knowing that most cops didn't appreciate private investigators, it got under his skin that she would think that little of him.

But in lying to her, he asked for it. He knew what she felt for his job, appreciated the assistance he had given the cops time and again and chalked it up to the tension flowing between them, that she would criticize his job, whether she meant to or not.

With a falsetto laugh, he said, "Yeah, well, sometimes it's good for the ego to take shitty cases to keep you on the top of your game."

"Why don't I tag along, hmmm? Maybe I'll learn something from you and Dylan."

Brady looked at her, hands on her hips, standing by his bed. All he wanted to do was tumble her onto it and have a knockout session of lovemaking.

Feeling the tightness in his slacks, he knew he had to get out of there before his best intentions were gone.

"Not this time, babe. I really have to go and you have to work tomorrow, right? No need this time around. Though I would love the cities finest to tag along with a little wimpy case like this," he gave her the best smile he could to lighten the moment, he only

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hoped he didn't fall short. It was so hard to get anything past her. "You need to be in perfect shape for the day ahead."

More than you may know baby. He swallowed tightly, turning to reach for his cell phone on his dresser, else she'd see the look of terror crossing his face.

"Yeah, work tomorrow. Brady," he heard her take a deep breath but didn't dare turn back to face her. Scooping change into his pocket off his dresser, looking for any excuse not to look at her, she said, "Brady, you know, I get the incredible feeling that you are lying to me. You wouldn't be, would you? Of anything we have been through we have always been honest with one another."

He was so deep in thought, he never heard her come up behind him until she placed her hand on his shoulder, applying pressure until he turned to face her.

Drowning. Looking into her deep-sea blue eyes, he could drown in their depths for years.

"There's that Detective's mind, always at work. Nah, I just never thought you would be here, so I never mentioned the case. I thought I would be off the phone with you long before I had to leave." Pasting a smile on his face, he lifted his hand, grazing her cheek with the back of his hand.

"I'm forgiven for earlier today then?" He wanted to be sure, but he knew he also needed to change the subject. He wanted to leave her with her being none the wiser or unsure of what he was up to.

"Yeah." Grabbing his hand, she kissed his knuckle. "I suppose a man has the right to beat his chest once in a while right?"

He felt his pulse quicken as her tongue flicked out, licking his knuckle while also kissing it.

Temptation. It was there in her eyes. He wanted it, craved it and wanted to worship it. Knowing he'd regret it, he couldn't resist just a taste. For now, just a taste to assuage his heart.

Grabbing her around the waist, he brought her in close. Pressed against his chest, he could feel the hard nubs of her nipples against him.

"Playing with fire, babe? Know what happens when you play with fire?" Leaning in, he kissed the side of her neck. Hearing her breath hitch, he knew that she was fighting the same raging emotions that he was.

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He felt soaked with the sensations coursing through him, but needed the brief closeness to her to keep him going in the hours to come. He'd do whatever it took... for her.

"When you play with fire, *mia* Bella," Kissing his way up to her earlobe, he sucked into his mouth. Nibbling it and sucking it, he felt the air crackle with tension and arousal. "You get burned."

Leaning her head back, looking up at him, his beautiful Bella said, "Light the match, Brady. I want you to burn me up."

Pulling his head down with pressure to the back of his neck with her hand, she set him on fire, pulling him into the wet heat of her mouth, and swallowed the guttural moan that he couldn't keep inside.

Tongues tangling, he basked in the taste of his woman. Intoxicated in the addictive taste that was solely hers, he wanted to stand there forever with her in his arms. Even forever didn't seem long enough.

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~ Eleven ~

Climbing into his black mustang after seeing Isabella safely into her car and watching her drive away, Brady opened his cell phone and hit number two on speed dial. Praying he could reach one of his most trusted friends. Aside from Isabella, he knew no one would have his back more than Dylan.

With his heart in his chest, he glanced up and down the street, using his bits of sixth sense to know that his impending actions would alter his life forever. The vision he saw would haunt him he knew, but for his woman and his friend he'd do what he must. He could stand by and do nothing, watch those he loved fall victim to a madman, and he couldn't risk the woman he loved entering the scene that he knew he would walk into.

Isabella Knowles didn't need a knight in shining armor. Her armor was plenty tough enough, but he needed to keep her out of harms way and not allow her to see what he would. He knew she would blame herself and hoped he could ease some of her burdens by taking care of the matter himself.

"Hello."

Hearing the groggy, sleep-coated voice on the line, Brady snapped out of his musings.

"Dylan. I'm on my way. Get dressed now."

Starting the car, looking in the rearview mirror for any moving traffic and seeing none, he pulled out onto the street.

"What's up Brady?"

Hearing the alertness and the rustling over the phone, Brady knew Dylan was already on the move and would be waiting for him when he pulled up. Appreciating his friend's trust, emotion clogged his chest. Brady cleared his throat to mask his emotions.

"I'll be there in five minutes. We'll talk then. I don't want to do this over the phone."

"Roger that, buddy. Already opening the lockbox. Armed and waiting."

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Hearing the dial tone, knowing that Dylan was behind him, he shut his cell phone, placing it in the console between the two front seats.

A common ritual between him and Dylan, the same occurrences of acceptance happened between them a lot.

Friends since grade school, he and Dylan had become fast friends then and had remained strong throughout the years. Both considered the other as the brother they never had. Being only children in their families, it had forged the bond between them and Brady never trusted anyone more.

Dylan was the first one he called years ago when Sandy had broken off their engagement. Dylan had professed to never care for Sandy, said she wasn't the right woman for Brady, but had let it go when Brady adamantly spoke out that he was going to ask her to marry him.

Dylan listened to him, wished him the best and said that it didn't matter, and that through thick and thin, he'd be there for him. And he had, more times to count and always there. A man strong on his word, Dylan proved that time and again.

That night's actions would test the bonds of more than just his relationship with Isabella, Brady knew. What he would tell Dylan would cut him to the quick, but Dylan would put personal aside and get the job done. Brady knew he would.

Pulling up to Dylan's townhouse, he never beeped his horn or looked toward the front door. He knew Dylan would be watching and it would take under thirty seconds for him to jaunt out to the car.

Once Dylan was seated, he checked the mirror's pulling back into the street.

"Spill it, Jacobs," came the gruff reply to his right.

"I saw the man who killed Melody Mason. I know where he is, don't know who he is, but he looks familiar, and..." Pausing for breath, he checked his mirrors again to the side and the rear, feeling a foreboding sense of unease wash over him.

"And what? You're not telling me everything, man. What is it?"

"He has another woman. We're going to get her before he kills her. He's playing with her, has her tied up and seems to be waiting. For what I don't know exactly, haven't figured that out yet, but he hasn't killed her." Leaving the "yet" unspoken, Brady pushed down on the accelerator, knowing he was short on time.

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“Okay. So we’ll go in and get her before he does kill her. But, what the hell are we doing this for without cops blazing around us? What’s with the cloak and dagger shit?”

Hearing his friends frustration, Brady closed his eyes for a mere second, taking in a deep breath, the words he just couldn’t force out.

“What the fuck is going on, Brady?”

Looking over at his best friend, he saw the questions in his eyes and had to tell him. Braking for the red light they came up to, he caught Dylan’s gaze again.

“It’s Alicia. The sick fuck has Alicia.”

Seeing Dylan’s eyes blaze and turn dark, Brady wished he could have spared him. Dylan and Alicia once tried dating but found that they had more friendship than love, and had been the best of friends ever since. A bond that was like that of a brother and sister. He only wished he could be as sure of his relationship with Isabella as he was of that of Dylan and Alicia.

Brady watched as Dylan put his right leg on the dashboard and pulled out his extra sidearm. Checking the ammunition, clicking it shut and seeming satisfied, he put it back in the leg holster.

Accelerating on the green light, Brady turned left onto Dundas Street, heading toward the abandoned warehouse where he knew Alicia was being held.

Hearing another bullet cage being closed, he glanced over at Dylan. Dylan placed his gun in the waistband of his jeans, leaving his leather jacket unzipped.

“Let’s do this, Brady. I’ll be fucked if he’s going to kill her. Not in my lifetime goddammit.”

Pounding his fist on the dashboard, Brady allowed Dylan the moment’s release of anger. He wanted to let loose himself, but knew he had to keep his head in the game, not give into the overwhelming urge to explode.

“Where’s Isabella, Brady? Is she meeting us wherever it is we are going?”

Though he expected the question, Brady wasn’t fully prepared for the punch to the stomach over hearing her name, knowing that he should call her and let her know what was going on, but adamant to keep her safe.

“She’s at home. She doesn’t know.”

Hearing Dylan’s indrawn breath, signaling right with his blinker and turning onto James Street, he looked over at Dylan.

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“You have to be kidding me. We should have backup, Brady. Where’s the cell? I’ll call her.”

“No! Don’t call her. This we do alone. Without her.” Though it pained him to say the words, he vowed it would be the last time he dwelled on the guilt he felt until Alicia was safe. Emotions always clouded things and he couldn’t afford it. Get the job done, in and out, then he’d deal with the outcome.

“You have to be kidding. Christ, Brady, what are you thinking?”

“With my heart more or less, Dyl. I love her. She’s everything to me and I can’t let her walk in there and see Alicia bound, naked and at the hands of this fuckup.”

Seeing Dylan lean his head back on the headrest from the corner of his eye, he cut the lights, coming up to the worn down warehouse. Pulling up to the curb two buildings down from the warehouse, he shut off the engine and pulled his own gun from this holster.

“She’s naked in there?” Looking at Dylan after his breathless question, Brady grabbed his forearm, catching Dylan unaware and making him look at him.

“Yeah. Sorry Dylan, to just blurt it all out. We got to do this. Forget who she is, go in and do it.”

“Yeah.” came his soft reply. Clearing his throat, Dylan tried again, more forcefully. “Yeah. You’re right.”

Satisfied that his gun was as it should be, Brady holstered it, pocketed his keys and grabbed the door handle, preparing to get out. At the touch to his own arm, he looked over at Dylan.

“You and Isy? You holding out on my buddy?”

Holding Dylan’s gaze, seeing his endless questions, he nodded. “Yeah. Best fucking thing in my life and I think I’ll be blowing it tonight. You know how she is.”

“She’s gonna kick your ass. You sure about this? Do you want to call Ethan in on this?”

Looking in the direction of the warehouse, Brady went over different scenarios in his mind. Knowing that he had to be smart about it and may need the backup, Ethan was his only option. He only prayed that the man’s feelings for Isabella wouldn’t get in the way.

“Yeah. We’ll need the backup, though we’ll be going in long before any arrive.”

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Grabbing his cell phone from the console between them, Brady hit number four in his speed dial. Glancing at Dylan, he saw worry and even fear on his face as he glanced in the direction of the warehouse he, too, was looking at. Catching Brady's gaze, Dylan pointed to the warehouse. Brady nodded, acknowledging that that was the place.

Hearing Ethan's voice on the line, Brady didn't take the time for pleasantries. "It's Brady. Listen up. Call in a few guys, meet Dylan and I at 197 James Street. I know who the killer of Melody Mason is, and there is no time to waste." Hearing rustling and crackling of Ethan's radio to the station, he knew the man was doing as he asked, with no questions asked.

"He has his next victim. It's Alicia Knowles. Make sure you mention that he has a cop in his clutches and that no one goes in guns fully cocked, Ethan."

"Brady what the hell! Alicia? Christ!"

Hearing the anger and disbelief in Ethan's voice, Brady relentlessly rolled over him. "Keep it in check man. Do the job, remember? Can I count on you?"

"Fuck you Jacobs. Of course you can. I'm no damn rookie."

Knowing anger might just keep Ethan going tonight, he gave him more ammunition, which no doubt, they would discuss later.

"And Ethan..."

"What? I'm on my way, what is it, so I can use both hands to drive. It'll already take me fifteen shitty minutes to get there."

Knowing he was on his way, Brady exited his own car, moving around the backend of the car, up onto the sidewalk, already planning their next move.

"Do not call Isabella in on this. She doesn't need to know what's going down till it's done."

"What? Are you outta your mind? You know how she's wanted this son of a bitch. And Connor is at the office tonight. He'll hear this dispatch. What are you about Brady?"

"I don't want her brought in Ethan, got it? I love her, she's mine and she doesn't need to see this."

Hearing Ethan's indrawn breath, Brady plowed on.

"She doesn't hear this Ethan. None of it till it's done. I find out you told her, I'll kill you. We're going in. Get here and we'll deal with the rest later."

Shutting his cell phone and turning it off, Brady shoved it into his pocket.

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“The man will kill you after that asshole. You know he has a thing for her.” Dylan couldn’t hide the exasperation in his voice, but Brady didn’t have time to hold anyone’s hand.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass. Time to move. Go around the left side, stay low, and go in the back. I’ll hit the front and go in quietly if I can. Do the crow call once you’re back there and I’ll wait to move in until I hear from you.”

When Dylan didn’t move, he glanced at him. Standing no more than five feet apart, they stared at one another, taking strength and trust from one another.

“Got your back brother.” Dylan said the words that were a familiar, a soothing balm on his heart.

“And I have yours.” Repeating the line that he had said many times over the years, from girls to opening the P.I. business together, he nodded and started around the first building, hoping not to be seen, heading to the warehouse, in case the perp was watching the streets.

Get the job done Jacobs, he told himself. Thoughts of his lady love couldn’t be dwelled upon, but he sent a silent, seconds prayer to God, hoping the man would watch over them this night.

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

~ Twelve ~

Isabella opened her apartment door, grateful to be home.

"Hey Momma. All's well tonight." Though it was her usual ritual when she came home, talking to her mother that night left her wondering if maybe she needed to continue to do it.

Kicking off her shoes and throwing her jacket on the back of the couch, she went to the TV where the picture of her mom sat faithfully since she moved into her apartment three years ago. The picture was a constant in her life, moving from her bedroom when she moved out of her father's house, through college, the academy and the two apartments she'd had before her current one.

The ritual of speaking to her mother was a habit that she was finally realizing might be a somewhat unhealthy one. Taking to a photo from time to time was probably considered okay but Isabella was realizing that the daily occurrence, sometimes more than once, could be hindering her to moving on.

Perhaps with Brady?

The unexpected thought should have sent her into panic mode, but for once, in those three months since their first night together, she was coming to realize that maybe, just maybe, it was time for her to move on in a positive way.

Touching her mother's face in the photo, Isabella felt as if she could reach out and feel her mother beside her. The presence of her mother was over-powering, and a calm feeling settled over her body. She was certain it was her mother's blessing for moving on, for trying to change her stubborn ways a bit and think of herself, what she wanted, for a change.

"I wish you were here, Momma. I really do." Swiping the tear running down her cheek, Isabella smiled at the image of her mother she held in her hand.

"No one knew me better than you did. I wish for so many things and I know you wanted what was best for me. I can try and get past the anger over your death. Anger at

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Dad for it happening. I'll try, Momma. That's all I can promise. There's been a lot of years pass, that while I know it wasn't his fault, if he had only been honest with you about the dangers, the threats he received..."

Closing her eyes at the memories rushing back, of the phone calls coming late at night, her father's quiet, panicked expressions that he thought he so carefully hid, Isabella's chest ached, her heart threatened to break all over again.

The image of her mother, lying on the kitchen floor when she returned from school that day, would remain with her forever. In every case, every dead body, she saw her mother and always felt that helpless feeling that she remembered seventeen years ago.

She'd never forget it but was coming to realize that perhaps, she was letting the past cloud her judgments, cloud the future that she could have. Maybe.

"I love you, Momma. Always and forever."

Kissing the photo of her mother, Isabella placed it on the TV, knowing that her mother would always be watching over her, and showering her with the love she always did.

Heading to the bedroom to turn in for the night, she heard her police scanner crackling from her home office. Taking the right, instead of the left toward her bedroom, she entered her office. Isabella listened intently to the happenings of the night. Even though she was off duty, the scanner was rarely off, just in case a call came in about an active case. The only nights she turned it off or on very low volume was the nights Brady came over.

In the back of her mind, she knew it was an obsessive, compulsive thing, always working, knowing that she would dash out at any given moment, but maybe the day would come sooner than she expected when she could turn it off on her days off. Perhaps she would find solace in the fact that she wasn't the only Detective around to take care of the city.

"All units, all units available. 197 James Street. Abandoned warehouse. Call placed by Detective Ethan Carter."

At the sound of Ethan's name, Isabella stopped her actions of unbuttoning her shirt, considering the possibility of assisting if needed.

"Cops en route. Detective Alicia Knowles on scene as well. Detective Knowles is victim to suspected perp in the Mason case. Suspect is believed to be armed and

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dangerous, proceed with caution. Plain clothed P.I's, Jacobs and O'Connor also on scene, now approaching warehouse. I repeat, proceed with caution."

Isabella couldn't believe her ears. She couldn't breathe. No air could get to her lungs. Dropping to the chair at her desk in front of the table where her scanner sat, she bent over, putting her head between her legs.

"Detective Knowles is victim to suspected perp in the Mason case."

She had to of heard wrong. And Brady... No, no, that was wrong. He was with Dylan on a cheating spouse case.

Grabbing the handset of her phone, she dialed Brady's cell number. Hearing the rings, she counted to twelve, knowing that he wasn't going to answer. With her heart beating at a rapid beat, adrenaline poured through her and she feared the worst.

Heading to her bedroom, moving to the closet where she kept her lockboxes, she pulled both off the shelf. Hearing the phone ring, she dropped both boxes to her bed and grabbed the cordless phone off the nightstand.

"Knowles," she said in a gruff voice.

"Isy? It's about Ali, did you hear? Are you on scene yet?"

Hearing her uncle's voice, Isabella's worst fear was confirmed. Ali was in danger and she had no clue. Taking the key to the lockboxes out of her pocket, she unlocked both cases and took out her police firearm, as well as her own personal pistol that her father had given her, which had once belonged to her mother.

Closing her eyes, pushing back the memories that her mother never made it to the bedroom to protect herself years ago, she focused on her uncle's voice.

"I'm on my way, Isabella, but have been stopped by a slow ass moving train. I can't get to her! I'm way the hell on the other side of town."

"I'm on my way, Uncle Al. I should be there in ten minutes tops. It isn't that far from here."

"Did you know where she was tonight, Isy? She is usually on full alert. I don't know..."

"Don't think about it. We'll get the answers later. I gotta go, I'll have my cell. Be careful, Uncle Al. Be safe."

Hitting end on the cordless, Isabella dropped it onto her bed, grabbed her holster off the bedpost, she headed for the front door.

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Sliding on her holster and securing her weapons, she grabbed her jacket and slipped on her running shoes. Never one for tying laces, she was glad they were at a comfortable feel to slip on and off easily. On a night like this, she was grateful for it.

Glancing once more at her mother's photo, she opened the front door, locking it behind her.

Not once focusing on the how's and why's of Brady's involvement in Alicia's dilemma, she was in cop mode and on the job.

Stay safe Ali. Stay focused. Use your cop's instincts to stay alive. She thought to herself, wishing that her cousin could hear her.

She'd be damned if she would lose another family member to the scum of the streets.

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

~ Thirteen ~

Crouched in front of the building, Brady heard the familiar crow's call that he and Dylan used over the years and knew his friend was in place. Easing gently into the warehouse through the heavy door that was partially open, Brady stayed in a crouch position, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Taking his gun out of the back of his jeans, he flipped the safety, knowing that he may have to use the weapon, something he rarely did. Not one to want to use a weapon, but knew in his line of business it was sometimes necessary, he would rather of used the words of reasoning. Being a P.I., he rarely met up with such threatening criminals, usually calling the police in when he had a lead that would take them straight to the perp.

But this time, Brady was ready to use any means necessary to catch this guy.

Creeping in a crouch, he slowly and silently made his way to the wooden crates to his left, he could hear a gruff voice speaking, but couldn't make out any words and needed to get closer.

With his back pressed to the crates, he looked around them, looking into the room straight ahead. Seeing nothing, he knew he would have to get closer to the room, since it was the direction the voice was coming from.

Easing around the crates, by way of which he came up to them, he didn't want to be seen in the doorway if someone happened to walk by, and kept to a low crawl. Pressed against the wall at the doorway, he heard a light creak and something brush up against his leg.

Jolting, but keeping his actions in check, he noticed a large rat, heading into the open doorway, probably looking for a midnight snack. Shuddering against his will because of his hate for the creatures, he tightened his resolve, anxious to get Alicia out now, before the fat animal decided to use her as his snack.

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Hearing a feminine shriek, Brady closed his eyes, imagining that Alicia had spotted the rat and from the scrapping of a chair on the floor, he knew she was attempting to release the ties that bound her.

Taking a deep breath, praying that he could sneak a peek without being seen, he slowly turned his head, looking in through the doorway. The room was bare except for a loan chair that faced the doorway, which held Alicia, with her eyes closed.

Not seeing her captor, Brady moved a bit more into the doorway to have a better look. Noticing a window just over Alicia's head, and saw Dylan looking into the room as well. Knowing that his backup was close by, Brady took solace in that, and cut his gaze to the right.

Seeing a large man, at least six feet tall, about two hundred fifty pounds, Brady knew it might be a tough takedown. The man looked built like a boulder and could very well be unmovable.

Hearing Alicia moving her arms again, he look towards her, noticing her eyes were open and looking straight at him. Putting his finger to his lips to indicate her silence, she closed her eyes once more and reopened them. The sheen of tears in her eyes was noticeable and Brady knew she was grateful that the cavalry had arrived.

He only hoped it would be as easy.

"Stop trying to get loose bitch." Brady eased back against the wall he was leaning against, away from the doorway when he heard the gruff voice speak.

"You aren't who I'm waiting for. You'll do if I can't get your feisty cousin, the good Detective Isabella, but sit still as you'll live for a few more hours."

Just keep talking scumbag, you'll be distracted, Brady thought. Though his gut clenched at the thought that this pervert was hoping for Isabella to make a showing, he took faith in the fact that she wouldn't be showing up. Knowing she was the real intent for this guy, made him want to act fast to take him down a peg or two, so he'd be put away, far out of reach.

"Your bitch cousin locked me up years ago, but they couldn't keep me locked up. Revenge was what kept me going in there each day. Determination to see her pay for my being locked up. I didn't rape the scank that they claimed I did. It was mutual lovin'. But I did make use of that Mason bitch, to draw Isabella closer to me."

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Hearing the man's crazed and bountiful laugh, Brady knew the man was bordering on psychotic, that he really believed what he was saying. A dangerous kind of criminal, out of touch with reality and hell bent on revenge. Not a good combination.

Standing to his full height, back still pressed against the wall and preparing to take action, he heard flesh meeting flesh and knew that the man had struck Alicia and it made him angrier than ever.

Remembering the words the man had said, about Alicia living for hours yet, he turned, standing in the doorway, gun drawn and pointing at his perp.

"Don't move asshole or it'll be the last thing you ever do."

The man turned quickly, Brady braced his stance more tensely in case the man made a run for him.

"You." The venom in the man's voice surprised Brady since he didn't know this man, though he did look familiar to him. What he had against him, Brady had no idea.

"Step away from her. Slowly. Now." Brady inched further into the room to the right, away from Alicia, hoping he could draw the man from her as well.

With his back to the door now and focusing totally on Brady, the man didn't see Dylan in the doorway. Brady watched Dylan crouch, knowing he would take action if need be, but bided his time looking for the right moment to act.

"None of us are going to get out alive. I didn't plan for your bitch in heat cop to survive the plans I have for her. You won't stand in my way." The man moved backwards, closer to Alicia. Brady didn't want him closer to her while he had his gun pointed at him, in case one wrong move could harm her.

"Why don't you tell me about your plans for this woman? Why do you want her so badly? Who is she?" He hoped by keeping him talking, he'd give Dylan the chance to sneak in and get her loose.

The man stopped dead in his tracks and cursed Brady's name. "Don't play dumb with me, dickhead. You know exactly whom I mean. I've watched you and her. For months you've been putting the screws to her, pretending no one knew." With a wicked laugh, he moved to the table just to his left, picking up a knife, he continued with a wicked grin.

"That bathroom fuck was something dude. Your bitch cop really has a body on her and stamina that many men would be jealous of you for. But I'm going to break her. I'm going to make her pay with a cut on her body for every day I was in the slammer."

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Trying not to let the man see his anger from his words, Brady couldn't help but be shocked by his words. Possibly all the times he'd been making love to Isabella they'd been watched by this pervert. It pissed him off, made him want to exact his own revenge, but knew that he had to keep a cool head and give into his anger later.

"Well since you know so much about me, you'll know that I can't allow you to do that. You'll never get your hands on her asshole. Never."

Walking backward toward Alicia and coming to a stop beside her, the man never took his eyes off Brady, grabbing her by the hair and pulling her head back. Pointing his knife at her neck, the man spoke with a wild look in his eyes.

"Then I'll take my pound of flesh out of this bitch."

"Like fuck you will." Dylan's voice rang loudly within the confines of the steel walls, echoing throughout the room. "I'll kill you first."

Laughing a crazed laugh, he let go of Alicia's hair and used both hands to open his shirt. "We'll all die then."

Seeing the timer strapped to the man's chest, counting down the minutes already from ten minutes, Brady and Dylan shared a quick look, Dylan raising his gun higher, his stance tighter.

"Turn it off now. Turn it off and we can all walk out of here." Dylan's voice was hard, but Brady detected a bit of a panicked pitch to it, knowing that he was reliving a past case that he had been too late on to save another young woman.

"This is my only bargaining chip. If I turn it off, what's to stop you from killing me?"

Brady could feel the tension pouring off Dylan and knew he would have to try and take control of the situation. "In ten minutes it won't matter, we'll all be dead. I thought you wanted the ultimate revenge? Blowing us sky high won't get that for you. My woman will still be walking around. She'll get past the grief and move on. You won't be as lucky. Where's the revenge in that?"

Watching the scumbag look from him to Dylan and back again, set Brady's teeth on edge. He really just wanted to blow the suckers head off, but knew to do that would be exacting his own revenge for personal reasons.

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

~ Fourteen ~

Putting her car into park, seeing the cruisers and Connor on scene, Isabella's heart rate never slowed down. Exiting her vehicle, she caught Connor's eye as she approached.

"I'm going in. Which building is it for sure?" Withdrawing her sidearm from her holster, she checked her ammunition. Finding everything in order, she dropped her arm to her side, still gripping her gun. *No sense putting it away*, she thought, knowing she'd probably need it.

"Isy, don't go around half cocked. We got this. Why don't you coordinate things out here?"

Looking up into Connor's eyes, Isabella speared him with a look that would have made most people back down. But with the history the two of them had, being partners for so long and friends even above that, she knew he'd stand toe-to-toe with her if he thought it was the best thing for her.

Turning from him, heading to the corner of the neighbouring warehouse to get a good look at the layout where Alicia was being held, she heard Connor's frustrated sigh as he followed.

"Anyone close enough to see inside? Anything from the rooftops?"

"We have men up top from all sides, north, south, east and west. No one has a visual on the bastard yet." Connor stopped speaking and Isabella could feel the tension radiating from his body.

Turning to look at him, she knew he had something to say that he didn't want to. "Let's have it."

"You're not going to like this." Taking a deep breath, he looked away then back again and would probably confirm her worst suspicions. "One sniper does have a visual of the room. Jacobs and Madison are both in the room. We've been able to at least pinpoint the exact location where Ali is."

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“So what aren’t you telling me? Don’t pussyfoot around, Connor. We don’t have time.”

“Okay, okay.” Reaching up, Connor pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he opened them and looked at head on. “We know that Madison and Jacobs are in there, guns drawn, pointing at our perp.” Hearing her curse and start to turn away, Connor grabbed her arm and his voice rose, so he’d be heard above her curses. “S.W.A.T. did a scan of the building. They have determined that there are explosives in that building. What kind they don’t know or if the perp has them, or if they are already in the building. We’ve called in B.O.M.B. as well.”

Isabella’s heart dropped. It was worst than anything she could have ever imagined. Looking towards the building, feeling speechless for the first time in her life, she never felt such fear.

Did Daddy feel this helpless knowing that Momma’s life and mine were in danger years ago? Can I keep those I love safe? Isabella closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She felt tears form behind her eyelids, but she refused to give into them, and her heart constrict in her chest. *This is why I never wanted to care about anyone. The fear of losing them is too much. I can’t do this anymore. If only...*

“Isy? Isabella?”

Connor’s voice seemed too far away since he was standing right beside her. Opening her eyes, now clear and focused, his voice pulling her from her darkened thoughts.

“You okay partner?” Connor’s worried voice should have pissed her off, he knew she could take care of herself, but she was numb to feel anything. Getting the job done was all that mattered in the here and now. The past would have to stay where it was and the future was something she wouldn’t think about right now.

“I’m fine. I’m going in closer. Warn the cavalry that I’m approaching and not do anything unless ordered to.” Heading to Connor’s unmarked police car, she grabbed the police radio of the trunk and studied the layout of the building from the blue print laid out.

“You’re not primary on this, Isy. You can’t just go in there off cocked for Christ sake.”

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

Looking up, feeling the anger boil up throughout her veins, she glared at Connor. "What do you mean I'm not primary? Who the fuck is?"

"I am."

Turning quickly at the voice to her right, Isabella looked at Ethan James. "Fuck off, James. Don't tell me you're going to give me orders. I outrank you."

Looking back at the blue prints, ending the discussion, she focused on the room circled with red marker, the room where she needed to be. Focusing on the scenario to come in her mind, how she planned to play it, she looked toward the building and prepared herself.

Not looking at Connor, but knowing he was the man she wanted behind her, she spoke softly.

"Got my back partner?"

"Isabella, you can't go in there. I'm the primary on scene tonight. It's your night off." Isabella could hear the anger and the frustration in Ethan's voice but she could give a rat's ass. "You're going in there letting personal feelings cloud your judgment. You're going to get someone killed. Yourself, Alicia, maybe even your boyfriend. Wouldn't want that to happen, now would we?"

Whipping around at lightening speed, Isabella stood toe-to-toe with Ethan, anger churning through her body and looking for a good fight.

"Isy..." Connor began.

"Shut up, Connor." Staring intently into Ethan's eyes, seeing the dark pools of nothing but anger and energy, she knew that perhaps even time would never heal the friendship they once had. The personal feelings he believed he had for her probably were something that he would never think about again.

Love, it always fucked people up. She was starting to hate that word.

"You got something you want to say to me Ethan? Now's your time and you won't have another chance. I have a job to do and you're in my way. Say it and move it."

Looking her dead in the eye, Isabella watched as Ethan's cold eyes grew even more glacier and tried not to feel that hitch in her chest for the loss of friendship they once had. "No. No, I have nothing to say to you."

"Let's do this. Connor, take the right, Ethan ..."

"I'm going left. I know how to do my job Knowles. Just make sure you do yours without getting my partner killed in there, would you."

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Watching Ethan head to down the sidewalk, Isabella let the anger at him direct her to keep her focus. *Get the job done Isy.*

“You okay, Isy?” she heard Connor ask softly.

“What the hell you doing standing here?” Isabella lashed out at him. She knew she was but she didn’t need his comfort or his concern. “I thought you were already on your way around the right side of the building. Don’t fuck around, let’s go.”

Heading around the back of the neighbouring building to sneak around to the front of the building where Alicia was being held, Isabella felt that the night would change the course of her life forever. Gripping her side arm in her right hand, so hard that she thought she would break, her heart raced, nearly pounding out of her chest.

In and out Isy, just like any other job.

The inner voice inside her head did nothing to settle her nerves. It sure as hell didn’t feel like any other day or any other job.

Some baser instinct was telling her that it would set the course of the rest of her life. Or end it.

Isabella’s mind went blank as an explosion filled the air.

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

~ Fifteen ~

"The best thing for you to do man, is put down the knife and turn off that timer." Dylan's voice rang out through the steel walled room. Brady knew that this guy wasn't about to be reasoned with, but held a small bit of hope that by some miracle he would.

"Go the hell. Call Isabella Knowles down here now. I want her to see what I do to her cousin here, so she knows what will happen to her too." Seeing the knife being held against Alicia's throat, Brady could feel anger course through his body. Thinking upon Alicia as a younger sibling, he tried to keep his feelings in check, trying to keep a level head.

"Come on man." Taking a deep breath to quell his shaky voice, Brady tried the only thing he knew would kill time for Ethan and the cavalry time to get there. Talking, reasoning with a psychotic criminal was not usually the way to go, but force and anger weren't doing the trick. "She's not going anywhere. We can't even reach Isabella with no phones. Let's just try and discuss this. Look, look," bending down at the knees, Brady dropped his gun to the cement floor, "I'm dropping my weapon. I can't very well kill you with that thing strapped to your body right? You hold the cards man, just put the knife away."

"What the hell are you doing, Brady? Pick up your gun! Dammit!" Dylan's voice rang loudly, echoing within the dense room. Brady prayed Dylan wouldn't decide to kill him.

"Yeah, that's right. Listen to the bastard. I hold all the cards. It's my night, my revenge. You drop your weapon, too." Hearing the perp's cockiness in his voice, Brady felt reassured that his tactic may work, but for how long, he didn't want to estimate.

"Go to hell, both of you. Put the knife down." Seeing Dylan's feet shuffle forward, Brady knew that Dylan would not put down his weapon. All Brady could do was back his best friend and hope that fate was on their side.

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“Stay where you are! I’ll cut her man, I swear!” Alicia’s whimpering was all that was heard throughout the room as the three men collectively held their breath, awaiting the others move. “This timer will go off in two minutes. You can’t take me down in that time. I’ll still have won.”

“If we’re going to die, we’ll go my way, asshole.” Brady watched Dylan take aim and fire his weapon and the perp stagger backwards and fall to the floor.

Grabbing his gun off the floor, he ran across the room to the fallen man with a gut wound, standing over him with his gun trained on him and contemplating the timer still counting down from one minute, thirty seconds. “Dylan, check Ali! Get her loose and get out of here!” Pulling his gaze from the perp, he checked Dylan’s progress with Alicia before lowering his weapon. He’d be damned if he would help this psycho before Dylan had Ali free.

“You can’t beat me!” Brady never saw the man’s arm come back and the knife arc toward him until it was too late and had cut into his left arm.

“Dammit!” Ignoring the pain in his arm, Brady clenched his teeth and bellowed, “Dylan! Are we clear?”

“No goddammit. These knots are tied and triple tied. Shit!”

His gaze trained on the man below him, Brady knew time was running out. One minute, five seconds. “Pick up the chair and all, get her out of here.” Using two fingers of the hand holding his gun, he pulled the sleeve of his leather jacket from his left arm and shrugged it off his shoulders and down to his right hand. Switching the gun to his left hand for a second since he couldn’t get a good grip on it from the pain and blood, he bit back a curse as he threw his jacket to Dylan.

“Cover her and go man.”

“Brady...” Dylan began.

“Just go, I’ll drag him out of here.” Bending down to grab the crazy lunatic at his feet, Brady pulled upright as he pulled something from his pocket.

“Too late. No one will get out of here tonight alive.”

Seeing the small black box with a red button on the top, Brady didn’t hesitate, reaching down to take the box from his hand.

“Dylan, get down.” Brady didn’t hear or feel much besides the button being pressed under his hand as the perp pushed it with his thumb.

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

Feeling the ground shake and the explosion ring in his ears, as he was forced to the floor, his one thought was of the time spent with Isabella and that he never got to tell her that he loved her.

~ * ~

“Alicia! Brady!” Hearing her own scream, spurred Isabella off the ground where she landed when the ground shook. Not even stopping to consider her actions, she set off in a dead run towards the warehouse, hearing a stampede of footsteps behind her.

“Ali! Ali!” Stepping over debris, fallen bricks and around barrels, Isabella barely realized that the whole building hadn’t caved in.

“The bomb didn’t detonate right. The guy couldn’t have set it up right, thank god.” Hearing Connor’s voice behind her gave little comfort this time. Her heart beating 100mp/h, she couldn’t hear anything but that. “Strong enough to drop some of the ceiling, but not enough power to blow it totally. Ali! Brady!”

Heading in the direction she remembered from the blueprint, Isabella headed to the left where she recalled it should be. “Con, the room was over here. Dammit, there’s Dylan.”

Kneeling beside Dylan, she checked his pulse. Finding a steady rhythm, she looked around and called to the paramedics who knew they would be needed. “Over here!”

“Isy, Alicia’s here!” Swinging around on her heels, Isabella saw Alicia still tied to a chair, naked, save for the leather jacket at her feet. Heart clenching when she realized it was Brady’s, adrenaline forcing her to her feet, she rushed to Alicia’s side.

“Ali, Ali?” Thoughts racing and tears filling her eyes, she pushed Alicia’s hair from around her face. Caked with dirt and blood, Isabella reached for the tape binding her mouth.

Knowing that it would hurt like hell, she knew that it might also be cutting into Alicia’s ability to breathe.

“Do you want me to do that, Is?” Connor’s voice barely registered in her mind as she took a deep breath and clenched the corner of the duct tape between her index finger and thumb, then pulled.

As if a fire had been set ablaze beneath the chair she was strapped to, Alicia came to life with a scream that would burst most eardrums. To Isabella it was the sound that

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brings happiness like a child playing where a proud mother could see. Knowing Alicia was at least alive and breathing filled her with more joy than she thought possible.

“What the...” Seeing Alicia’s dazed look, Isabella grasped her hand.

“Relax, Ali. It’s okay. You’re fine now.”

Drawing in a shuddering breath, Alicia tried to move her hands. Realizing she was still strapped to the chair, she whimpered. “Isy!”

“Hang on, Ali, I’m going to get this tape off you.” Whipping her head around, Alicia focused on Connor just behind her, cutting the tape around her hands and the chair.

“God, Isy, can you cover me up? I don’t want anyone to see me like this.”

“It’s okay, baby. Here is Brady’s jacket. It’s all I have here right now.” Drawing Brady’s jacket around Alicia’s body, tucking it around her arms and shoulders, Isabella tried to ignore the scent of Brady coming off his jacket.

“Oh God! Dylan? Brady?” Alicia glanced around quickly, obviously searching for one, or both, men.

“Dylan’s over there, just to your left. It’ll be hard to see him from where you’re lying right now. The paramedics are working on him now. I checked his pulse and it was steady. That’s something hopeful.” Isabella tried to reassure her, knowing that she and Dylan were tight, more like siblings than just friends.

“And Brady?” Alicia asked in a soft voice.

Isabella looked into the tearful green eyes of her friend and cousin. Feeling tears form in her own eyes, Isabella couldn’t look away from Alicia, wishing that she could share the joys with Brady over the last three months, while scared that she wouldn’t understand her need for secrecy.

“I don’t know Ali. I haven’t really searched around to find him. I saw Dylan first, then you...” clearing her throat of the emotions threatening to strangle her, Isabella grabbed Ali’s hand, squeezing tight. “I didn’t want to leave your side.”

“There. Got all the tape off, Ali.” Connor rubbed Alicia’s wrists gently, trying to rub the circulation back into her hands and arms that he must have suspected she would be suffering from by that point.

“Help me sit up, please. Can you find me a blanket, Connor? I don’t want to get up with everyone around like this.”

“I’ll see what I can find, honey. Be right back.”

“Isabella.” Hearing Alicia’s soft, spoken voice, Isabella turned to look at her.

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

"Go find Brady. You know you're wondering. Find him."

"I'm sure everyone is searching for him. I'll stay here with you. Connor will probably be back in a moment. I'll help you cover up." Hoping she had hidden the fear she was feeling, Isabella pretended to be nonchalant in the fate of Brady's life that she was anxious to learn more about.

"Don't fool me, Isy. I've known about you and Brady since nearly that first night three months ago." Isabella turned to look at Alicia, surprised that she had known and not said anything.

"I wanted you to tell me yourself, Isy. I thought you would have at least told me."

Seeing the disappointment in her friend's eyes, Isabella once again clasped her hand, gripping tight. "I wanted to. So many times. I ... I couldn't. I didn't want the whole happily ever after speech, Ali. I know you think that there is someone out there for everyone, but sometimes it's not true. Sometimes, living alone is better than having loved then lost."

"You can't really believe that! Isy..."

"Here you are, Ali." Connor returned with a blanket and dropped down to his haunches to wrap her up in the blanket. "I'm going to wrap this around your shoulders from the back and help you up. Keep that jacket against your front. Ready?"

Isabella grabbed Alicia's left side while Connor took her right. Together they lifted her to her feet. From having her legs bound to the chair for so many hours, she couldn't stand on her own two feet without support.

"Hold onto her, Connor, I'll tuck the blanket around her while you hold her." Taking a corner of the blanket on each side, Isabella drew the blanket around Alicia's body, tucking underneath her arms and wrapping it around her body, and she grabbed it at the front, holding it tightly against herself.

"Listen to me, Isabella. Go find Brady. That should be your urgent thought right now." Holding Alicia's left side, she could feel her shaking, nearly uncontrollably.

"Don't worry about it Ali. Let's get you out of there first. You need to get to the hospital."

"Detective Knowles, we found Jacobs." Turning to look at the young patrol cop speaking to her, Isabella's heart stopped and time seemed to stand still. Afraid to ask, but needing to know she asked, "Is he...?" She couldn't bring herself to finish the question.

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Looking at Ali, seeing the same concern and even fear in her eyes, that she knew was in hers, she had to see Brady for herself.

“Connor,” hearing the dryness in her voice, she cleared her throat and tried again. “Con, take Ali outside, get her to the paramedics. I’ll be out in a few minutes. If not...” Closing her eyes, Isabella took a deep breath. Lifting her eyelids she met the gazes of two of the most important people in her life, seeing their concern and worry for Brady, who was also their friend, but she suspected for her as well. “If I’m not there in five minutes go onto the hospital and I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“I can come with you, Isy.” She knew Connor meant well but she needed him to care for Ali, then at least she’d know that one thing from this night was being handled and she wouldn’t have to worry as much.

“No. Take her. Please.” Kissing Ali on the cheek and giving her arm a squeeze, she voiced a sentiment she hadn’t said to anyone, not even her father, in years. “Love you, Ali-girl.” Turning to the young cop, Isabella squared her shoulders and directed him. “Take me to where Jacobs is. Did the perp make it?”

Walking through the abandoned warehouse, stepping over pieces of debris, Isabella couldn’t bring herself to speculate what she would find when she saw Brady. This young cop didn’t see to want to share too much information, only shrugged in reply to her questions.

“He’s over this way, ma’am.” With a hold on her elbow, he assisted her to step over a fallen beam. The room where she speculated Ali had been held, from the blueprints she’d looked at, was obviously the hardest hit.

Beams and tables were scattered throughout the room. Scraps of metal from the walls and ceiling were everywhere, piles of scrap and broken glass from the windows were spread across the cement flooring. Isabella couldn’t see much of the two fallen bodies on the floor. Two clusters of paramedics made two groupings, each working furiously, giving orders and never breaking from their task.

Feeling a sense of urgency she never felt before, Isabella needed to be near Brady. Even if it would be for the last time, knowing that to withstand a bomb so close by, however faulty, wasn’t a sure thing, but she needed to be close to him. He was her lover, her friend, and the man of her dreams.

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

Dreams. She never realized exactly what dreams she had, about love, marriage and hell, even a ridiculous picket fence. She wanted all of it. All of that and more. But without Brady Jacobs, she couldn't bear to think about it.

"Jacobs is over this way, Detective." Startled from her musings by the young cop's voice, Isabella looked to her right, where he pointed and headed in that direction.

A weight like none other settled upon Isabella's chest and shoulders. Fearing the worst and with tears forming her eyes, she glanced at the female paramedic, a woman who she knew from the job, who had been on many calls as she had and knew that Brady would receive every possible means of care she could provide. It was a small comfort really, but she would grab onto it with both hands and not let go.

"He's critical. Steel is lodged in his chest, my guess would be right under his heart. A few inches either way..." The paramedic, Isabella thought her name was Debbie, stopped speaking and shook her head. "I'm no doctor but, the steel is close to his heart and his lungs. Both are in danger and he's lost a lot of blood. He also has a knife wound to his left arm. We have to get him stable enough to get him out of here and don't have much time to spare in my opinion."

Isabella nodded her head, what she could possibly be agreeing to she didn't know, she felt too numb to think beyond what she was seeing.

For the rest of her life, she would forever remember the image of Brady lying on that concrete floor, eyes closed and the paleness of his skin. Kneeling beside him, her gaze swept over him from head to toe. Dust and dirt coated his black t-shirt and black jeans. Blood soaked his t-shirt, the piece of grey steel was predominate and seemed too gruesome to be real.

During her years on the force she had seen many things that would make anyone sick to their stomach. She'd endured it all, kept the nightmares away and the recriminations of not being able to do more. But this night, she had never felt as helpless as she did at that moment.

Grabbing Brady's hand, its coldness sending shivers down her spine, she let the tears fall down her cheeks and onto his hand. Pressing it against her cheek, she closed her eyes, her breath hitching as she felt his skin against hers.

"Isabella." Feeling a hand on her shoulder, she lifted her head and looked up into Dylan's face.

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“Dylan.” Her voice rusty with emotion, she spoke softly. “Are you okay? What happened? You should be at the hospital.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. We’ll talk about everything later.” Glancing at Brady, Isabella saw concern and fear cross the man’s face. “They need to move Brady to the hospital. I’ll ride with him in the ambulance if you don’t want to.”

Looking down at Brady’s lifeless body, watching but not really seeing the paramedics’ continuous work on him, securing bandages and padding around the piece of steel that would be too detrimental at the moment to remove from his chest, Isabella felt her heart begin to break.

“Brady.” His name was a sob from her lips as she gave into the tears that she’d let fall, yet hadn’t given them free reign. Crying for the years of deep, gut-wrenching fear, the need to distance herself, the one man that broke through now lay between life and death and she couldn’t stop it.

Feeling Dylan’s hand on her back brought her out of her musings, her fear, knowing that she had to let him go. Forever. She couldn’t go through anything like this again. Love was beautiful, it was something that when found, could bring happiness. But to lose that love, to live in fear of losing a loved one, was more than she could bear.

She knew it was cowardly, but she couldn’t do it. She couldn’t lay her heart on the line and lose so much.

Kissing Brady’s brow, she turned back to Dylan. “You better ride with him. I need to be with Alicia. I’ll see you at the hospital.” With one last glance at Brady, she rose to her feet and touched Dylan’s shoulder. “Watch over him, Dylan.”

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

~ Sixteen ~

Walking through the doors of Trenton Memorial, Isabella gripped Alicia's hand as the paramedic wheeled her into emergency. She was struck by the smells of disinfectant and blood that seemed all around her, making her insides tighten to a hard ball with nervousness.

She hated hospitals, hated the smells, the rush of the nurses and doctors whenever she visited and she especially hated how doctors always evaded giving answers to questions that anyone asked about a loved one.

Being a cop, she knew that sometimes it was better to not say anything to a family member until there were hard, cold facts to give them, but she still hated doctors for the false hope they gave. Call it hypocritical of her, but when her mother died, the doctor had given her hope and reassurances that she'd be just fine and he'd take care of her.

Only, it hadn't happened and she never trusted doctors again.

Rounding the corner, led to the cubicles where patients would be treated, Isabella saw Dylan. He stood outside one cubicle, his body language upping the vibration of the case of nerves that danced inside her.

Her heart nearly stopped when he looked her way, an expression of horror and near tears in his eyes. Knowing that things couldn't be going well for Brady, Isabella looked away, not willing to thinking of what might happen.

Watching the paramedic help Alicia from the wheelchair, Isabella took a few deep, cleansing breaths, hoping to ease her fear. Reaching out to stroke Alicia's hair off her brow, she noticed her hands shaking and pulled them back.

Fear had never seemed as strong to her as it did this night. The only other time she experienced fear this strong was when her mom died, and she hoped she'd never have to relive it again.

Caring about someone always leads to this kind of pain, Isy.

"Isabella?" Hearing Alicia's soft voice pulled her from her somber thoughts.

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Looking into Alicia's eyes, she saw tears running down her cousin's cheeks. "I'm sorry Ali. I am so sorry for what has happened to you. If I had of known..."

"You would have moved heaven and earth," Alicia interrupted. "I know you would have and I'm glad it wasn't you. I'm very glad it wasn't."

Leaning down, Isabella hugged Alicia, giving into the tears that she tried holding back. Isabella rarely let her emotions flow, but she knew that Alicia needed her to do it, as much as she herself knew she needed to. The tension that was between Ali and her before, needed to be laid to rest.

They couldn't be more different from one another, Alicia believed in white picket fences and marriage, while Isabella ran from the very thought. But they were family and had been best friends as well growing up.

Isabella knew that Alicia only wanted what was best for her and she did appreciate it, no matter how irritating it could be.

Tonight made her realize that she could have lost her best friend and confidant and she would never have had the chance to say good-bye.

Pulling back from their embrace, her tears finally stemmed, she kissed Alicia's face and looked her in the eyes.

Alicia's dark brown eyes were glazed and she looked ready to sleep for a week.

"I love you, cousin," Isabella whispered.

"I love you too, you pain in the ass." Alicia countered, a smile in soft voice.

Chuckling, Isabella heard footsteps and a doctor appeared with her Uncle Al. Isabella hugged him, savouring his warmth and kissed his cheek.

"Take care of her," Isabella said, squeezing his hand as she walked around him. She needed air before she lost it. "Ali will need you. Be there for her."

With one last glance at her cousin, Isabella pulled the curtain back and came face to face with Dylan.

"How's Alicia?" He asked.

Moving across the room away from the cubicles, Isabella replied, "Exhausted. Her dad's with her. With rest and a lot of healing, I hope she'll be ok. I don't think she has any internal injuries." Claspng her hands together to ward off the shaking she still felt, she wanted to get the conversation over with and get out of there. "The paramedic checked her over in the ambulance and didn't find any deep wounds. The bruises and small cuts will heal in a few weeks I'm sure."

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

"Are you okay, Isabella?"

Gazing into Dylan's eyes, Isabella saw his concern for his two friends, friends who might never be the same. She also saw concern for her as well as he laid his hand on her shoulder.

Don't do this to me. I can't lose it, she thought.

"I'm okay, Dylan. What do the doctor's say about Brady? Is he..." She let her voice trail off. She couldn't say the words and stay upright too. Her legs were feeling the weight of the night, the worry and tension within her body.

"The doctors are grim. The steel went in deep, was rusty and they are worried about infection. They're also concerned about the explosion, how hard Brady hit his head. He's not responding to anything that they use to try to wake him." Dylan took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "I've never been so scared. What if..."

"Don't say it." Isabella gritted out between clenched teeth. "Don't you dare say it Dylan."

"I'm sorry, Isy, but it's something we have to face."

"Mr. Madison?" Dylan and Isabella both looked at the doctor standing before them with blood on his scrubs.

Brady's blood, Isabella thought, and reached out to grab the wall beside her. *I need air.*

"Mr. Jacobs is still unconscious. We've tried everything we can to wake him. I'm afraid it will be a waiting game now." Taking the glasses off, the doctor closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"The wound in his chest is patched up. The steel was lodged in farther than we thought and he's lost a lot of blood. I'm concerned about the wound becoming infected, with the state that the knife was in. Again, it will be another waiting game. Some of the nerve endings in his shoulder were severed, he may never have full use of that arm like he did before. We measured and another five inches and the steel would have pierced his heart."

The doctor looked at Dylan and Isabella head on and Isabella knew it might be the final blow to her composure.

"He's very lucky. In all reality, he shouldn't have made it. That close to his heart, it still caused damage in that area. We'll have to monitor him closely, especially since he

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hasn't awakened. I am very surprised he's still with us. He's strong, but even the strongest men, well, we'll hope for the best."

"Thank you doctor." Shaking the doctor's hand, Dylan then turned back to Isabella.

"Are you staying here, Dylan?" She asked in a raw and scratchy voice.

"Yes, of course. Aren't you?"

Closing her eyes, the tears spilled over. She didn't care anymore who saw her tears. She had to get out of there. She was so tired. Tired of fighting herself, the bad guys and watching those she loved get hurt.

"I can't. I just..." With a hitched sob, she cleared her throat and looked at Dylan through cloudy eyes. "I have to go. I can't be here waiting and hoping and it all be for nothing if... Take care of him, Dylan. Don't let him be alone."

Turning, she fled, walking as fast as she could. Hearing Dylan's voice behind her calling her name, she increased her speed and hoped he didn't follow her. She wanted to peek into the room, just get a look at Brady, but she knew if she did...she'd be lost. Seeing him lying there hanging at the edge of death, Isabella would hit the floor like a ton of bricks and there'd be no saving her. She had to leave. Had to.

Walking away was the hardest thing she'd ever had to do. As much as she wanted to run back, take Brady into her arms and never let go, she knew it wasn't that easy. She couldn't do it, but she would make sure he was cared for forever.

Take care of him Momma. If he makes and if he doesn't, the last thought caused her heart to shatter into the only miniscule pieces that were left, *take care of him.*

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

~ Seventeen ~

~ Three weeks later ~

Sitting on the patio of her father's fishing cabin holding a long since cold cup of coffee, Isabella watched the sunrise. Appreciating the beauty of its rising and the silence that she had embraced the last three weeks, gave her a small comfort and in no way eased her loneliness.

Two days after the horrific night that she would play over and over in her nightmares, she fled the busy city for time and solace to herself. Only going back once during the three weeks to settle Alicia into her apartment after her release from the hospital and saying good-bye to Brady in private, she rushed back to Darlington, where her father's vacation and fishing cabin was located to seek some time to perhaps heal the wounds on the surface of her heart.

Knowing that without Brady, the wounds deep within her heart and her soul would never heal, she had to find a way to move on. Moving on without Brady seemed to be the biggest challenge she would face. Having faced large burly, abusive husbands, stared down the barrel of a gun or two, which seemed like a walk in the park compared to the heartache she presently felt.

She knew that losing a loved one would hurt, but she never realized the true pain that she would endure.

Dropping her foot to the deck, she set the porch swing into motion and laid her head on the back of it. Closing her eyes, she thought about Alicia. Her wounds had started healing well by the time she was discharged from the hospital. Hearing that Albert Finney was the man who had kidnapped Alicia, had cut Isabella to the quick. Knowing that she was Finney's real target and that Alicia, Dylan and Brady had endured everything they had because of her, was another tremendous weight on her shoulders. Finney had wanted her. Dylan had finally gave her all the details the next day, and

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Isabella knew that she could cater to them every day for the rest of their lives, and nothing she could possibly do, would make up for everything.

Though she knew it was unrealistic to blame herself, even the department shrink that she'd seen had told her everything that Alicia and Dylan had, that it was in no way her fault. In her heart she knew it to be true, but her mind was another matter.

For Melody Mason's death, she would blame herself for that as well. A woman in the wrong place at the wrong time sure, but Albert Finney had been trying to get close to her. With Melody's death, the blame for it also fell to her feet. Isabella would remember her face and think of her every day. And the face of her husband Reginald. Knowing that Melody's husband might never recover from his wife's death, was another kick to her already bruised heart. Isabella knew she'd never be able to make things right for that man.

Hearing tires crunching on gravel, she glanced up, and saw the red Miatta pull up in front of the porch. Not really ready to see him at the moment, she didn't rise from the swing, only braced herself for the uncomfortable moments to come.

"Isabella."

"Dad. What brings you all the way up here?" *Great small talk, Isy. The man owns the place, he can come up whenever he wants.* Pissed at herself, she went on the defensive. "Who told you I was here?"

"Since you didn't see fit to tell me yourself, your cousin finally relented after a lot of badgering." She watched her father, now fifty-six years old who looked about forty-five, sit on the top step of the porch, she felt the chasm between them. For the first time in as long as she could remember, she hated the wall between them. She was sure it was just the tremendous emotions from the last few weeks, but she wanted to knock down the wall and touch the man who was once the center of her world.

"When are you coming back to the city? It's not like you to run and hide, kiddo." Looking into her father's sea blue eyes, she saw compassion and wariness within.

"I'm not hiding, Dad. I just want time to get through everything that went down before returning to the line of duty. Nothing like a cop with other things on their mind to screw up the job. I needed some down time."

"That's true. You haven't had a real vacation in what, three years? About time you took some time for yourself. I just wish," her father stopped and looked away, out into the front yard and beyond, seeing what, she didn't know.

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“Wish what?”

Looking back at her and a lift of his mouth that held now humour or laughter, Isabella found it hard to look at him and not break out in tears over the worry in his eyes. “I wish that it had of been on better circumstances that you took some time off. I’m sorry Isabella. Alicia told me everything. I wish you had of been able to talk to me. I see things more clearly now, things that I neglected over the years. Like being there for you. It’s my deepest regret, letting you down.”

Her heart hammering within her chest, Isabella felt pieces of the wall between her and father come break away. “How did you do it, Dad? How did you get over losing Momma? My heart...”

With a hitch to her voice, she couldn’t finish the sentence. Closing her eyes, trying to stave her tears, she felt the swing dip, and opened her eyes to her father sitting beside her.

Taking her hand, they both gazed at their joined hands, the first real touch, show of emotion in years. A small Christmas hug, or on each other’s birthday, didn’t mean as much to her as sitting there simply holding his hand as he tried to be there for her.

“I never have. I may never get over it. The guilt that I carry, for her death, for you losing a mother, for my not protecting her as I should have, still makes me lose sleep many a night.” Gazing into her tear-filled eyes, she never thought she would see such vulnerability and the need for forgiveness on her father’s face. William Knowles, top cop and Trenton’s favourite son once upon a time, was a man that couldn’t control everything in the world.

Isabella felt a sense of calm settle over her as she accepted the fact that even her father wasn’t invincible. As much as she would have liked him to be, she knew that she needed to finally grow up and get past the might have been and the what if. Time, they said, healed all wounds. Perhaps in the deepest parts of her heart, she knew that she would have to leave the past where it was and move on.

Hopefully she would have enough strength to let go the pain from the past. The pain of the recent weeks, she feared would last far longer than the last thirteen.

“I’m sorry, Dad. I should have been there for you as well after Momma died. I was selfish and spoiled. I should have reached out to you as well.”

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“You were a child, Isabella. It was my job to take care of you, not the other way around.” With a small smile, her father sat back on the porch swing, still holding her hand tightly in his.

“You know,” she said with a small smile, “we’ll probably never agree on the past, what we should have done, so why don’t we agree to disagree? Perhaps we should just be there for one another now, and forever?” Looking at her father, seeing the strain of the recent years that seemed to have lifted from his face, his mouth curved and he chuckled.

“Your mom said that to me once. We were debating on whether you were going to be a boy or a girl. She was adamant you would be a girl, I was equally strong in my opinion you would be a boy. We agreed to disagree.” Both of them laughed, a sound that carried around them. Each was a rusty sound, but with time, perhaps one that would be exercised well. “She was a smart woman. Usually right.”

Smiling a full-toothed grin at her father, Isabella felt the tides shift and the memories of her parent’s comedic bickering of years ago ring in her ears. Those were the times she had chosen to push back in her mind. She’d embraced the negatives and pushed away the positives, like the love that her parents had for one another, the love they had for her and everything they had taught her about love.

Full to the brim with love for the first time in so many years, Isabella moved closer to her father, tears in her eyes and a connection to him, she leaned her head on his shoulder and let the tears fall.

Feeling his arm come around her, holding her close, Isabella released the years of pain and torment that she herself had placed upon her heart and an insurmountable weight on her shoulders to stand back from everyone, family and friends, and not feel anything. It was a lonely existence, one she thought she was happy with.

Sniffling and taking deep gasping breaths, she looked up at her father. “Love hurts Dad. You have to be strong to handle it. I’m learning that I’m not as strong as I thought. I’m lost. More so now, than when Momma died.”

“Do you love him, Isabella? Really and deeply love him?” Looking into her father’s eyes, she saw knowledge and understanding. Losing a loved one was something that he was familiar with and she knew would help her, no matter what choices she made for the future.

“He was everything, Dad, and I never realized it until it was too late. How do I recover from that?” It was something she had asked herself many times over since that

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fateful night weeks ago. How did she recover from watching Brady, hurt, dying, and feeling totally helpless in the knowledge that the relationship they'd had, was over? She didn't recall much of that night. Connor had been by her side through it all. A better friend she couldn't ask for...besides Brady.

Feeling her heartbreak even more, she shook her head, wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her housecoat and leaned her head back on the porch swing.

"You get back to living life, Belle. No one can understand what is inside you, what makes your ache, what makes you tick. If you can find the will and the determination to move forth, you can make it through. I may not have made the choices years ago that you would make now, ones that you even now will probably never totally understand, but I found what worked for me and I have been happy."

Turning her head to stare at her father, Isabella knew that the years she had been indifferent, withholding herself back from him, had hurt him as much as it did her. She loved her father, knew he loved her more than anything or anyone else, she pitied herself that it had taken so long for her to realize the large part of her life he played, whether she acknowledged it or not.

"Dad?"

Turning to look at her, her father smiled. "Yeah?"

"Could you help me out with something? When we get back to town?" Isabella was hesitant to ask, but it might be the only thing she could do for Reginald Mason.

"Sure, baby, what is it?"

"Could you contact Reginald Mason? Melody's husband?" looking out into the distance she hoped she wasn't asking too much of him. "Losing his wife, seeing the look on his face...I've seen that look on your face many times, Dad. Maybe you could talk to him, be there for him if he'll talk to you? Perhaps knowing that things might get better will help him move on in time?"

Looking back at her father, watching his smile widen, she knew she'd done the right thing.

"I'll do that. Sure. Sometimes talking is all you can do. Together." He clasped her hand tighter than before. "We'll help him together."

Feeling as though she could face anything, Isabella knew without a doubt that it was time for her to go home. She couldn't, and wouldn't, sit around feeling sorry for

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herself any longer. She was a strong woman, one who always brushed herself off and started over.

Connor had called daily to know when she would be back as his partner on the job. Today she would tell him the good news. She would be back to work on Monday. Hopefully her bravado was as strong as she thought because she knew it would take a great deal of strength and determination, to face the city, friends and even those around the precinct who now knew about her and Brady.

She still hated that her private life would be a topic for discussion, but she was proud of once being Brady Jacobs' woman, and she could hold her head high, especially to all the women who ogled him when he came around, that she had once had him all to herself. With a wry smile, she looked to the skyline, fully blue and the bright white clouds seemed almost touchable, like anything could happen, and realized that she was the fool who loved and lost Brady Jacobs. No other man would compare in her eyes to him, but she knew, after watching her father alone for years, that life would go on without Brady, and that she just might find someone to spend her days and nights with.

Possibly, but she knew, but not probable. He was the one man for her. Always and forever. Her illusions that love didn't exist for her, were just that, illusions. She had finally woken up and savoured that love was unbeatable and that the time spent with that special someone, was worth its weight in gold. Timeless, priceless and it was selfless.

Love made the world go round.

"Want to spend the day with me today, Dad, or are you in a rush to get back to the city?" Looking at her father once more, she saw his eyes light up and she could see the pleasure on his face. It was a look she could very much get used to.

"I have nothing whatsoever planned for today. Though I do have to dig out my suit, dust it off and hope it fits. Your uncle's retirement party is tomorrow night. Have you forgotten?"

She hadn't, just pushed it back into the far corners of her mind. Not ready for a huge gathering, smiling faces and probably a million questions from everyone, Isabella knew she couldn't miss it, yet dreaded being there. For her Uncle Al however, she had decided to return for his party, only to come back to her hideaway immediately after a couple hours that would be acceptable.

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But now knowing that she was going to return to work on Monday, she figured she may as well pack, go back to the city, attend her uncle's party, then go home to her own place. Alone.

"Well, how about I whip us up some breakfast, hang out a few hours, then head back together? I can leave my car here and drive back with you, if you don't mind?" Isabella shyly looked towards her father and couldn't help but giggle at his expression.

From shocked to pleased, to a shit-eating grin taking over his face, she knew times would be different for her family. Today was just the start of many more days like this with her father.

"I don't mind at all. I'm starving for an onion and cheese omelet though. You got them fixin's?"

Isabella smiled at the memory of the old times when her father would get home from a night shift, her and her mother already up and fixing breakfast. She would stand on a chair at her mother's side, as she got older she could stand by her and look her mother in the eye, and help her fix breakfast of an onion and cheese omelet, for her father.

Her father would arrive home and crack a joke about his four foot ten wife whose daughter at the age of twelve, nearly towered over her. Isabella would laugh, her mother gasp in shock at the audacity of her husband, but they would all end up laughing and carrying on like crazy people.

Savouring the memory, Isabella held her hand out to her father. Once he put his hand in hers, she clasped it tight and rose from the porch swing. Pulling on his arm until he was on her feet, she said, "I have those exact fixings. Let's go eat. I find myself starving for that exact breakfast."

Walking hand in hand with her father, stopping when he grabbed the door handle and opened the door for her, Isabella felt a new day had truly begun. A new existence and of happiness on the horizon and she hoped that it would be true.

Overshadowing her happiness however, was the fact that Brady wasn't with her to see it all happen. In the early hours of the morning, after making love for hours, they would lie together and talk. He had always hoped that someday she and her father would find their way back to one another. She only wished he was there as well.

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With a heavy sigh and an even heavier heart, Isabella let go of her father's hand, laughing as he patted his stomach in hunger, she headed to the fridge to pull out the eggs, cheese and onions.

Feeding a broken heart might sooth the ache for awhile, but she knew that it would be many a day before her heart would mend. She just had to find a way to move on.

ISABELLA'S ILLUSIONS

~ Eighteen ~

Dressed in a black, strapless dress, Isabella took a sip from the glass of champagne she held, barely tasting and listened to another boring as hell speech by another of her Uncle's pals, as they toasted to his retirement.

She had sat through an hour of speech after speech, listened to the banter around the room from men she had known for years when her father was on the force, and a few who were still on the job. A lot of the guests at the party were happier than ever it seemed that the Knowles men were once again together and the memories, and alcohol, were in steady stream.

Her teeth ached from smiling, her heart ached for the one man she'd lost, and all she wanted was to escape. Thankful to hear the endnotes of the latest speech wind down, she got up, making her way to the double doors leading to the balcony.

"Isy?" Turning at the sound of her name, she came face to face with Alicia. Still adjusting to the light that was no longer in her cousin's eyes, she steeled herself for the guilt that washed over her. It was her fault her cousin was no longer the smiling, loud and carefree woman she was. If only she'd killed Albert Finney the night she'd arrested him for raping a woman.

Albert had made it his mission to seek revenge on Isabella. After kidnapping Alicia, in the many days thereafter, it came to light, all the pictures, transcripts, newspaper clippings that he'd hoarded for years, were made public. His sadistic obsession with Isabella had put him over the edge.

In no way a bomb expert, he had connected some of the wiring wrong on his self-made bomb, which led to the small, shaking blowout that had occurred. In using Alicia to get to Isabella, Albert had wanted to show her what he would do to her, for her to feel some of the pain at the hands of other man, that he had endured in prison. And blamed her for.

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Dylan and Alicia had filled in the missing pieces to the pieces once they had recovered from that night enough to really talk about it. Dylan and Alicia were tighter than ever, their brother and sister bond was stronger than ever. Isabella was glad that Ali has someone to take care of her, protect her and talk to. She ached for the same kind of relationship, but would never voice what was missing from her life.

“Hey, Ali. How are you? Enjoying this madhouse?” Trying to put a touch of humour into the tenseness that Isabella felt between them, she didn't receive the smile that she'd hoped for on Alicia's face.

“I'm tired but okay. I'm glad you and your dad seemed to have reached some sort of truce.”

“Not a truce, Ali. A new beginning. We had a long talk, a great couple days together I'm glad we had the chance. I never realized how much I missed him in my life.” Looking toward her father, she saw him laughing for the first time since her mother's death, as she had never seen him laugh before.

As if sensing her gaze, he looked toward Isabella, a slight questioning look on his face. Shaking her head a little, she raised her glass of champagne to him and smiled, hoping to convey that all was well and she didn't need him at that moment.

“Want to step outside with me Isy? Just for a few minutes, to talk?” Isabella looked at Alicia. She wanted time to talk to her cousin, yet felt a bit nervous with what might be on Ali's mind. Unsure how to act around her, Isabella really missed the once light, sarcastic camaraderie they once had. But Isabella would never forget the image of Alicia bleeding, tied naked to the chair, thanks to Finney and would never forgive herself for the kidnapping and brutality. If she had kept in touch with the prison about Finney, she may have had a pulse on what he was up to, what he had planned. Some Detective she was.

Following Ali out onto the balcony, she breathed in the night air. Looking up into the sky, a full luminescent moon shining down upon her, she felt a calm wash over her and a feeling to right the wrongs of the past.

“I'm sorry, Ali.” Looking at Alicia, Isabella hoped that her cousin, and friend, would accept her apology as it was intended, to begin anew. “I can never forget what Finney did to you. I can't change it and I don't think I'll ever apologize enough. If not for his vengeance for me, nothing would have happened to you and...”

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"Look, Isy," Alicia began, cutting her off. "There was nothing you could have done. How many men have got out of prison in the past, and not come after you? Hmm? You can't be everywhere every day with each and ever guy you ever put away. You didn't know what was going to happen any more than I did. I know you feel one hundred percent responsible, but it's not your fault. Hell to lay blame, then it would need to be laid at my feet as well. I should have had my guard up. Coming out of the fitness center where he grabbed me, my guard was down and I was oblivious. How was I to know? I didn't and couldn't have known. Neither could you."

Blinking tears from her eyes, Isabella felt Alicia take her hand, squeezing it and she clenched her hand with her own, thankful for the connection.

"You can't change what happened. Neither can I. I hope that you won't let what happened that night, create another lifeless bubble around you that you have been living in for the last thirteen years." Alicia looked her in the eyes, seeing what, Isabella didn't know.

"You have no idea how hard it's been, Ali. You went through so much, you think I don't see that everything happened that night is weighing on you?" Isabella felt some of her resolve and temper return, and realized that it was time to take her life back completely. Letting her anger get the best of her was not her usual style, but it was good to feel something real and all encompassing again.

"There are circles under your eyes, no spark in those eyes. Ali..." Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Isabella pulled Ali close, wrapping her arms around her.

"I'm sorry, Ali. I wish I had of known, wished I had of been there sooner. I'm so sorry."

Pulling back in her arms, Alicia smiled at Isabella. "Like I said, you can't change it. These things take a bit of time. I'll be okay."

"If you need to talk," Isabella began.

"I know. And I'll call you. But," Alicia took a deep breath and seemed to rush on, as if she were anxious to say what she had to say before she couldn't. "I'm glad you and your dad are on better terms, at least something great came out of all this. Isy, I think once you see past your guilt, you'll see everything your life has to offer you, if you'll just grab hold of it."

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Fearing the direction Ali was taking their conversation, Isabella turned from her, staring at the moon. "I don't want to talk about anything else about that night Ali. Please."

"Turning your back on me won't shut me up like you wish, Isy. You have to face the fact that you can't change that night and you aren't to blame. I know it, deep down you know it and ..."

"I know it, Bella."

Hearing his voice after weeks of nothing, fearing she'd never hear it again, nearly made her knees buckle. Tears began forming in her eyes, but she couldn't move, couldn't turn around to face him, knowing that he had nearly died because of her. Losing him as a lover, was far better than knowing that he would never draw another breath. She could live with not having him in her life, but she couldn't have handled his death.

"Ali, could you give Isabella and I a few minutes, please?" she heard him ask and felt Alicia's light touch on her shoulder, then her heels clicking on the concrete balcony floor as she went back inside. At the click of the door shutting, Isabella felt the urge to run, but had no escape.

"I'm sorry, Bella." Hearing his apology caused her to whip around quickly, shocked that he would have anything to say sorry for.

"What? You have nothing to apologize for, Brady." Not caring that the tears fell along her cheeks and for the first time she looked at him, seeing no wounds and no bruises from his injuries. Though she couldn't see them, she knew they were there under his jacket, it did nothing to appease her guilt and the ache in her heart at being so near, yet so far away from him.

"I'm sorrier than you'll ever know, Brady, that you were hurt. You nearly died! How could I have lived with that? Knowing that I had caused your death? How can you say sorry, forgive so easily, when it's the truth?" Her voice rising, her tears falling unrestrained, Isabella sobbed, her shoulders shaking and her urge to run was stronger than ever.

Moving quickly to stand in front of her, Brady took her into his arms. Hiding her face into the curve of his neck, she cried out her heartache and everything she'd held in for so long. Drawing in a deep breath, she captured his scent into her body, savouring the smell of man, light dashes of cologne and the leather of his jacket, albeit a new one, that she'd come to love so well.

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Feeling his hands on the middle of her back caused her to shudder as skin met skin and knew that no other man's touch would ever affect her as much.

"Baby, please. Stop crying. You didn't know what would happen. You couldn't have known unless Finney had sent you an open invitation." Pulling back and capturing her face in his palms, Isabella looked deep in to Brady brown eyes and looked into the soul of the man who changed her life.

"The sick bastard is probably laughing in his grave, do you realize that? He wanted Ali to suffer, for us all to die, so that you would have something to mourn when we were all gone, and he could laugh about it. And you know what? You are doing exactly what he wanted." Brady leaned his forehead against hers, closed his eyes and let out a shuddering breath. "We're all still here and he still wins. Bella," his voice cracked and he swallowed, then tried again, "you have to let this go. Don't let it stand in the way of the future."

Lifting his forehead from hers, Brady pulled back and looked into her eyes. "Say you'll forgive me for not telling you about what I knew, what I envisioned and we can hopefully move on. I want to know that we can get past this and be together."

Swallowing passed the lump in her throat, shock at his words flooding her, Isabella could barely comprehend what he had just said. "Forgive you? I never held it against you Brady. I was angry at first, madder than hell when I first arrived on scene, but Brady, nothing, *nothing*, could compare to seeing you in that building, under all that debris, bleeding and near death. Forgive you? All was forgiven within moments of seeing you like that. Knowing I could lose you..."

Stepping out from beneath his hands, unable to finish her sentence, she turned her back to him and looked into the light of the moon, praying to hold herself together until she was alone. Being this close to Brady again was hard for her. She wanted to throw herself in his arms and never let go. Forgiving him was easy. Forgiving herself was another matter.

"Bella." Feeling his hands on her shoulders, his heat burning into her skin, caused her heart to nearly leap out of her chest. One day she hoped that her body would never react to his touch, but she doubted she would live long enough for that to happen. How he could forgive her and be near her was hard to comprehend. She thought he would hate her, blame her, yet here he was, easily forgiving.

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“Few people know you better than I do. After everything we have shared, can you really believe that I would blame you for what happened? You talk of losing me, baby, the only thing I will blame you for, is if you let me go.”

Sliding his hands around her waist, holding her close, her back to his chest, Isabella felt a calm wash over her as the meaning of his words settled in.

“I want a forever with you, Bella. That night, I wanted to tell you everything in my heart, everything I had been thinking. I know we started out with no strings attached, no commitments, but damn it, I love you. I fell in love with you hard, fast and forever. Don’t let me go. Don’t throw what we have away. I’ll always take care of you and that night will be a distant memory, to all the new ones we’ll be making.”

Feeling his arms tighten around her as he buried his face in her neck, Isabella looked at the full moon, sure her eyes were playing tricks on her, as the light seemed to twinkle and sparkle. *Momma?* Smiling for the first time in weeks, she set herself free and let the present lead to the future.

Turning in Brady’s arms, her bottom against the stone ledge of the balcony and pressed against him, she settled her arms over his shoulders.

“I have to say though, Brady, that I am sorry. I wish I had of been sooner,” She placed two fingers over his mouth when he began to speak. “Hush. I want to say this.” Feeling his slight nod, she removed her fingers from his mouth, laying her palm against his chest. “I am sorry for the pain you endured that night, and every day since, if you thought you lost me. I’m yours, Jacobs, every day, every night of our lives, if you’ll have me. Thinking I had lost you forever was not something I really want to go through again.”

Seeing his smile and his eyes alight with pleasure, Isabella had to smile and felt that all was right in her world and hoped that the future would shine as bright as the full moon that was shining down upon them.

“I promise to shower you with M&M’s and with my love, Bella. Every day and every night of our lives.”

Laughing at his mention of M&M’s, Isabella let him draw her closer into his arms and accepted his mouth on hers with a rush of pleasure and adrenaline.

For the first time in weeks, she let herself go. The passion that would only be found in this man’s arms, her man, she met the thrust of his tongue with her own, drawing him into her body.

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His body hard against hers, Isabella couldn't help the shivers that swept throughout her body as the thrust of Brady's tongue mimicked the act of his cock thrusting into her body and couldn't wait for the party inside to end. She needed to feel him, every inch of his body over hers and she needed it damn soon.

Pulling back and ending their kiss, she looked into Brady's desire filled eyes. Knowing that hers mirrored his, she smiled and said, "Let's go inside and make our excuses, say our goodbyes, so I can get you home. Alone."

"That, my lady, sounds like a hell of an idea."

With a smile, Brady clasped her hand and headed toward the balcony door and back to the noise of the party.

Hand on the doorknob, Brady stopped and looked at her.

"I love you, baby."

Smiling and her heart overflowing, she said, "I love you too, Brady. Always."

Squeezing his hand, Isabella followed Brady back into the banquet hall, determined to let the present lead into the future and to live it to the fullest. Her illusions, forever changed by love, she couldn't wait to start loving Brady, openly and daily.

With a sly smile, Isabella began planning all the love she'd give the man of her dreams that he could handle.

And then some.

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~ Epilogue ~

As her father made the last speech of the night, Alicia Knowles sat off to one side of the banquet hall, praying that the night would end, and soon.

All she wanted was her bed, pillow under her head and a gazillion z's to be had.

Bone tired from constant lack of sleep in weeks, she didn't think she'd ever sleep through the night again.

"...introduce you to my replacement, your new Chief of Police."

Hearing those words, Alicia sat up straighter, anxious to see which pain in the ass Sergeant would take her father's place.

As far as she was concerned, no one in the 15th Precinct could fill her father's shoes. She figured that the city would put some old, codgy type guy behind the desk who would let the power go to his head over replacing the great Alan Knowles.

All family relation aside, Alicia had to agree with everyone else, her father would be a hard act to follow. He had done his service to the force and then some over the years. In training rookies and new Detectives, he gave everyone a fair shake and taught them all a lot. Alan Knowles wasn't one for sitting behind a desk and had used every opportunity to be among his people and on the scene.

He would be missed.

Her eyes focused on the front of the room where her father stood making her speech she listened with interest, yet slightly uncaring as well, as the new Chief of Police would be 'crowned'.

Probably some ass to make our lives hell, she thought.

"This man will be the youngest Chief of Police in Trenton's history, but he's highly recommended and many medals to his name. At only twenty-nine, this man has probably seen as much as I have on the streets and behind closed doors. Trenton is happy to have claimed this strong and determined officer and feel that he'll be an asset to the

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15th Precinct and the city. Let's have him come on up here. Cole? There he is, ladies and gentlemen, our new Chief of Police, Coleman Douglass."

Hearing the applause did little to drown out the harsh thumping of her heart within her chest. It couldn't be...

Getting to her feet, Alicia bumped into Isabella and Brady who had come to stand beside her.

"Ali? You okay?" Isabella asked.

Never glancing at her cousin, she nodded, her gaze never leaving the front of the room.

As the new Chief of Police, overseeing the 15th Precinct turned to the crowd after shaking her father's hand, Alicia drew in a deep breath.

Deep brown eyes, dark sandy hair, he looked exactly as he had two years ago when she'd last saw him.

Even though his eyes were closed when she'd left that morning she still remembered the rich chocolate brown of his eyes that drew her in with every look. And even though he was buck-naked when she'd last saw him, she knew underneath the tailor made suit he now wore talking to the crowd, there was a man with a body that women worshipped.

Hell, she recalled worshipping it more than once and more than twice, that one night when she let herself go and ended up in his arms. It was the best night of her life and the one she couldn't forget, try though as she might.

Staring at him now, she realized that she was right in her decision to leave before he woke up. He played havoc on her senses and she didn't recognize herself whenever he was around.

With his being her new boss, it was best to forget the night two years ago ever happened.

But as his gaze found hers through the sea of people, she saw the recognition and the pleasure in his eyes as they looked upon her.

Turning her back to Cole, she headed for the door to leave the party behind. She wasn't in a partying mood and figured that the future was going to be a crazy one.

From the pleasure she saw in Cole's eyes, she knew he hadn't forgotten their night any more than she had. But she'd never let him know how many times she'd played

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that one night over in her mind since. She'd be damned if she would fall prey to Cole Douglass again...

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About the Author

Kacey Hammell is a happily married woman, living in Canada, with her husband and three children (whom she refers fondly to as “rugrats”). Her life is never boring.

She is a self-proclaimed book-a-holic, (and hero-holic), who began reading romances at a young age and became completely addicted. It's been her only real addiction over the years, besides her one for Peanut M&M's, and has now been bitten by the writing bug.