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Leaves in the Wind

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# *LEAVES IN THE WIND*

Gail DeYoung

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## **Chapter One**

*There was so much blood.*

*Everywhere.*

*Tara Singer scanned the carnage of the massive train wreck, searching for the little girl hugging a teddy bear. In the eerie night scene, helicopter spotlights illuminated the wreckage high and low, highlighting jagged gashes in the thick steel that crumpled like paper discarded in a trash can. Glass crunched underfoot as she sidestepped puddles of oil and blood.*

*The smell of burnt flesh tinged her nose.*

*Smoke rose from uncontained fires that had broken out in several of the passenger cars. The shock from the impact still hadn't worn off; otherwise, the pain from the deep gash in her arm would have been worse.*

*Moans and cries for help pierced the darkness. Rushing toward the source, she stumbled over a beheaded corpse. Lifeless eyes on the severed head stared back at her. Choking back the urge to vomit, she forced herself to keep searching. She dared not give up hope.*

*Then a miracle!*

*"Over here. I found a little girl," a rescue worker called to the paramedics as he dug through the rubble to uncover a blonde-haired child.*

*"Amy!" Tara could see the little girl sprawled out across a torn seat, her little, limp hand resting upon a teddy bear with exposed stuffing. Her sweet oval face was smudged with dirt, her eyes closed and her beautiful pink dress torn to shreds. Pain pierced Tara's heart. Oh dear God! Please say she isn't dead! She dropped to her knees and stroked the child's head.*

*"She's my daughter. Will she be all right?" The words came out strangled with emotion.*

*The paramedic checking for a heartbeat took the stethoscope out of his ears, then gingerly felt the back of the child's head.*

*"She's alive, but she's got a concussion and most likely some internal injuries. We need to get her to the hospital." He called to one of the rescue workers standing nearby. "Get an ambulance here now!"*

*Tara allowed the tears to flow unabashedly down her cheeks. Fear for the child's life choked her heart. So young, so innocent. It just wasn't fair.*

*"You're bleeding. You need medical attention too. Sit here for a moment while we patch you up. We need another medic here!" A young man in his early twenties responded to the call. He knelt beside her, looked at the gash in her arm and opened his emergency kit.*

*"I'll get you wrapped in a moment."*

*Tara watched in a daze as the child was placed upon a stretcher and lifted into the ambulance. Once her wound was tightly bandaged, she was allowed to get into the vehicle.*

*Sirens and red flashing lights announced their departure. Tara sat in stunned silence in the back of the emergency vehicle, watching the paramedic work on the child.*

The image faded and Tara slowly came back to the present. She hadn't been physically at the site of the crash. She was seated in her office listening to a patient in front of her. With her gifts of empathy and telepathy, Tara had opened her mind to see and feel what Dan Turner had experienced while he related the details of a recent accident which put his five-year-old daughter into the Intensive Care Unit at St. Mary's Hospital. As a social worker, she used *her* gifts to help *her* understand what patients went through. She sighed and handed him a tissue, then placed her palm on top of his hand as his body shook with sobs.

"That's it, Mr. Turner, let it all out."

"I felt so helpless." His voice was low, tinged with sadness.

"Yes, I know."

Big, blue eyes brimming with tears turned to her. Two weeks' worth of beard growth covered his chin and she sensed he had given up caring about his own personal hygiene after the accident. Though his shirt was crumpled, it looked clean, so he apparently made an effort to get halfway presentable to come to his first appointment with her. He must have noticed her close inspection of his appearance, for he smoothed back a lock of greasy blond hair that had fallen on his brow and rubbed his chin.

"I'm sorry. I'm not like this usually. These past two weeks have been so hard. You just can't imagine what's been happening."

"Mr. Turner..."

"It's Dan. Call me Dan, please."

Tara smiled sympathetically at him. "Of course, Dan. I know it's hard for you to understand, but I really do know what you've been going through. You see, I'm an empathic telepath. As you described what happened, I was right there with you. Seeing the sights, feeling the pain in my arm, hearing the sounds, everything. That was a horrific accident and you almost lost your child. It's only natural that you're so upset."

He took a deep, calming breath and swiped the tears from his cheeks. Though his file said he was thirty-five, she found it difficult to believe. The strain of the past few weeks' events had worn deep furrows into his forehead. Dark circles shadowed his eyes and he was pale. For all she knew, the accident could have added years to his age. There were no streaks of gray or signs of balding in his thick, blond hair. But despite the haggard appearance, she could tell he was a handsome man, with strong, chiseled features and light blue eyes framed with thick lashes.

"I can't lose her. I'll die without her. She's all I've got."

"I know. Mr. Tur...Dan, tell me what's been going on."

"When they brought her in, she was in surgery for eight hours. After the operation, the doctor said she wasn't out of the woods yet. She had suffered internal injuries and a

blow to the head. She crashed twice in two days and they chased me out of her room while they worked furiously over her. I saw them use the paddles to shock her heart. I was so scared."

*Once again, Tara closed her eyes and visualized the scene as Dan described it. She saw the chaos in the Emergency Room when the paramedics rushed the child in, giving vital details to the doctors as they pushed the gurney into the operating room. She watched the minutes tick away on the clock, hour after hour, waiting for word about the child. Then the heart-stopping moment when the doctor walked toward him with the news. The little girl was in a coma because of her head injury and only time would tell if she would live. She drew back out of the scene.*

Raw emotion overwhelmed Tara. She placed her hand over her mouth. The fear of loss squeezed her heart and the desire to break down and cry was strong. She took a moment to compose herself before she continued.

"It's been two weeks. Has there been any improvement?"

He shrugged.

"The doctors said the longer Amy's in the coma, the less chance she'll have of recovering. She's stable now, so I guess you could say that's a step in the right direction. They said she could be moved out of Intensive Care soon."

Tara smiled warmly. "There, that's something to be optimistic about. She's making progress. It may be slow, but serious injuries like hers take time to heal."

"I guess so." He shifted in his chair, not making eye contact.

"And what's going on with you, Dan? How are you holding up under all this stress?"

He rubbed his hand over his eyes and sighed. She noted he favored his right arm where he wore a large bandage.

"Okay, I guess. I mean, under the circumstances..." his voice trailed away as he grew pensive.

"Dan, I know it's hard to think about *your* needs right now, but it's important. She's going to need you to be strong for her when she wakes up, you know."

She saw an attempt at a smile, but it slipped away. This was going to be a difficult assignment. Before her sat a defeated man, a man on the edge of hope, a man who could lose all desire to live with one phone call from the hospital. She had to help him before it was too late.

"After surgery, they put her on a respirator to help her breathe because she had internal injuries."

"I know. But she's in good hands. The doctors are doing everything they possibly can for her. And I'm going to do everything I can for you."

He shook his head in acknowledgment.

"Have you been getting any sleep?"

He blinked his eyes and wiped the sleep from the corners.

"A little. I've been staying at the hospital, sitting near her bed, keeping watch over her. They offered me a recliner in the lounge, but I don't want to be that far away from her. I don't sleep well, worried that she might wake up and need me."

She sensed how the lack of sleep and nourishment had drained his strength. He needed to take care of the basics first. There would be plenty of time to delve deeper into his other problems.

"All right. First things first. Do you have any relatives or friends who could sit with her while you get some sleep?"

"No...my wife died and family members live far away. The only friends who might help are my best buddy and his wife, but they're on their way back from vacation right now. I'm not sure exactly when they'll be home. I won't leave her alone. She'll be scared if she wakes up and I'm not there. I can handle this a little longer."

Tara sighed. If he kept up the brutal pace, he'd be in the hospital bed next to his daughter soon.

"Dan, I'd be willing to stay the night."

"Don't worry about me. I'm strong. I can deal with this."

She looked at her watch. Her next appointment would be sitting in the reception area right now. Mr. Bartlett was a stickler for promptness.

"Dan, promise me that you'll try to take better care of yourself. If not for your sake, do it for Amy."

His face scrunched into a mask holding back emotion.

"Okay, I will. Thanks for the warning."

"You're welcome. My next appointment is here, so we'll have to wrap it up for today. We'll meet again tomorrow around the same time. Does that sound good to you?"

He nodded and actually produced a fleeting smile.

"Sure. I'll be here."

"Good. Tell the receptionist to book an appointment for you on your way out. Take care, Dan, and try not to worry."

She watched as he closed the office door behind him. Taking a deep breath, she turned to her computer and started a new file, *Turner, Dan*. He had been sent to her by Dr. Feldman, the physician in charge of the case. Having spent time with Mr. Turner, he felt the man needed to talk to someone who could empathize with him. Someone who could help him through the pain of separation...just in case. His daughter was in bad shape. It might be a long time before she regained consciousness...if she ever did. Her little body had shut down into the coma to heal itself. Only God knew whether or not she would survive her injuries. And there were still so many unknowns if she did come out of it, the least of which would be whether or not she'd have brain damage from the head injury.



With Dan being a recent widower, it was vital that he get help now. He needed Tara more than he realized. Having dealt with the loss of his beloved wife less than six months ago, he was in a very delicate emotional state. Tara knew it was critical for him to shore up his strength to be able to handle what was yet to come.

Her secretary, Jeanine, buzzed her on the intercom and announced her next appointment.

"I'll be ready in a moment."

Tara needed time to clear her mind of the lingering effects of Dan's story in order to be fresh for Mr. Bartlett. She found that by taking a few minutes to shut down her sensitivity to one patient, she was better prepared to receive impressions from another. She closed her eyes and let her mind drift back to a breathtaking waterfall she discovered on her vacation in Hawaii last year. White water tumbled two hundred feet from a cliff high above into a clear lake below. A delicate rainbow formed in the mist rising from the lake. All around in the lush greenery surrounding the lake she heard beautiful bird songs. The heavy scent of gardenias filled the air. The place gave her such a wonderful sense of peace and serenity that she often visualized it whenever she needed to relax or shake off stress. She opened her eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath.

"Jeanine, please send Mr. Bartlett in now," she said, releasing the intercom button.

Henry Bartlett hobbled into Tara's office with his cane tapping against the wooden floor.

"Good afternoon, Miss Singer."

Tara walked around her desk to pull out the chair for the eighty-two-year-old man. He arranged himself in front of it and plopped down, swinging his cane over her desk. His bad leg, unable to bend since the surgery two years ago, stretched out to the side.

"Hello, Henry. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Oh, that would be great. Thank you, dear." He smiled, showing off an almost toothless smile.

Tara walked to the counter by the window where a coffee maker had been set up for her use. She poured him the usual, black coffee with a packet of regular sugar.

"Here you go, Henry. Be careful, it might be a little hot."

He took the cup of steaming coffee from her and placed it on the desk.

"You know, I never can get over your resemblance to my daughter."

Tara smiled warmly at him. From the moment they met four months ago, she felt a special connection with the sweet old man. He had patted her hand with his deeply veined one and exclaimed what a beautiful girl she was. He told her how his daughter, Susan, had the same strawberry blonde hair and bluish-green eyes as Tara and that she was about the same age. They immediately struck up a congenial relationship and Tara always looked forward to her meetings with Henry.

She flipped open his chart and looked through the papers. Henry had been making slow progress over the past four months. She had arranged for hot meal deliveries to be made directly to his home and helped him sign up for prescription coverage under the new Medicare Connections plan. He recently complained of strange dreams that kept him awake at night.

"So have you had any more bad dreams, Henry?"

Henry scooted his chair in a little closer so he could prop an elbow on her desk and lean in to her. His eyes shifted to the right and left before he said anything. His voice was low.

"As a matter of fact, I did. Last night, I couldn't sleep for the longest time. I just lay in bed staring up at the moonlight on the ceiling, thinking about my life and how I've been around a long time."

She laughed. Henry always complained about how old he was. She had told him that getting older was better than the alternative and he replied that she should wait until she gets to his age. He wasn't too sure about anything getting better.

"Oh Henry! So what time did your dream occur?"

He scratched his mostly balding head, stirring up the scant white hairs.

"Let's see. The last time I remember looking at the clock it was three thirty a.m., so it must have been right after that."

"And what happened, Henry?"

He paused and smiled, crinkling deep grooves into his face.

"I saw my Gertrude. She was young and pretty again and running through a field of sunflowers. She turned to offer me her hand and I grabbed it. The next thing I know, we're in the clouds, bouncing from one to another. Now if that wasn't the damndest thing! We were walking along on the clouds, with me not needing my cane or anythin'. It was pretty amazing."

"Well, that sounds like a really nice dream, Henry. You got to spend time with Gertrude."

Henry grew quiet and looked around the room again as though he thought they had company. He leaned in even closer to her so he could whisper. She met him midway.

"Yeah, only we weren't alone. There was someone else in that dream, Miss Singer. It scared me. He looked like a ghost. His mouth didn't move, but I could hear his words in my mind."

"What did he say?"

"He said 'soon'. Then he disappeared. I think it was the Angel of Death, Miss Singer. It was a message."

Tara had learned long ago that dreams were different from reality and she couldn't actually enter them for clarity. She had to rely on the client's interpretation as fact. Only

Henry was quite a tease, and sometimes she wondered whether he was just making up tall tales or whether he really had the dreams he told her about.

"Are you sure about that, Henry? Did Gertie tell you that she saw this ghost?"

The older man seemed to think hard about her question. Then he shook his head.

"Don't think so. She was all smiles, like she had a big secret that she didn't want to share. But it was the real thing, Miss Singer. I'd swear on a stack of bibles. Scared the bejesus out of me. But after the dream was over, I got to thinking about it, and it wasn't so bad after all."

Tears glistened in his eyes and his face relaxed. He appeared to glow.

"You see, I'm gonna see my Gertie real soon. I won't have to be alone anymore."

Tara patted his hand. In all of the counseling sessions she had with Henry, they had focused on his sadness over losing his companion of fifty-six years and the lonely hours he spent in the big house they had shared. Gertrude's sudden death had hit him hard and he had tried to join her by starving himself. Luckily, his daughter Susan discovered his secret and called the doctor. He was put into the hospital for a few days and fed intravenously as he had become severely dehydrated.

After that scare, Susan pleaded with him to move in with her and her husband Seth. But Henry had stubbornly refused to leave the home where he and Gertie had spent their entire life. There were too many memories. Anyway, he told them, he didn't want to interfere with their busy careers. She was an attorney and her husband a politician.

Once Henry was discharged from the hospital, his doctor recommended he talk to Tara. She had convinced him that he had to wait for his time to join Gertie and to eat again or he'd be put into a nursing home. He suddenly regained his appetite.

"When was the last time you had a physical?" Despite the normal symptoms of aging, such as hearing loss and his sight going, Henry hadn't complained of any major symptoms that would be a harbinger of impending death.

"The last time I saw my doctor was for my leg three months ago. He did a physical then. You set it up."

"I remember. You got a clean bill of health, Henry. Are you feeling ill? Should we make another appointment?"

"No, I've been feeling all right. Just tired."

"Well, do you think that perhaps that dream has another meaning?"

He shook his head and his eyes glazed over.

"No, I don't think so, dear. Do you remember the other dream I told you about last week? The one where Gertie told me she couldn't wait to see me again? I think they're connected. I don't think I have much more time here." He smiled again.

"So how do you feel about that, Henry?"

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Miss Singer, this body of mine is old and tired. Life has no meaning for me without her. If I could be with Gertie, I would be happy finally. My days are empty now. I spend my time thinking about things we did and the things I wished we did. I've made my peace with my family and I'm ready."

Tara searched his feelings. He sincerely believed he had received a message that his time had come and he was truly looking forward to crossing over. His belief in the afterlife was strong. Gertrude had been the one constant in his life. She was there in the morning to have breakfast with him, to watch the soap operas with him during the day and, when they retired at night, to hold his hand in his sleep. With her gone, he felt like only half a person.

This was not the first time she had spoken with someone on the brink of death. They seemed to know better than her when the final sands of time were slipping through their own personal hourglass.

"I'm going to miss our meetings, Miss Singer. You've been real good for me. I needed someone to talk to about my feelings and you've been understanding about what I've been going through. I'll put in a good word for you when I get up there." He winked at her while pointing his thumb to the ceiling, indicating that he had friends in high places.

She patted his hand.

"Well thank you, Henry. That's very sweet of you. It's been a pleasure working with you. But do me a favor. Just in case you're still around, why don't you schedule next week's appointment as you leave?"

Henry stood and adjusted his leg under him before grabbing his cane from her desk.

"I will, Miss Singer. Just don't be surprised if I don't show up."

"Okay, Henry."

Tara stood to walk him to the door. Henry turned to study her.

"Did I ever tell you how much you remind me of my daughter Susan? She's a little shorter and heavier than you, but you could pass for sisters. Guess that's why I took a likin' to you the moment we met."

"Yes, Henry. And I'm very fond of you too." She wrapped her arm around his stooped shoulder and kissed him on the cheek.

"You know, she wanted me to move to Philadelphia with her. But I can't do that. It's too damn cold up there for me. I prefer the weather down here in Florida."

"Well, I have to agree with you there, Henry. I like it here too. Take care."

Henry reached over and gave her a big hug. He never left her office without hugging her. He told her that one of the things he and his wife did every day was to give each other a hug before they would be apart. It was their way of saying "I love you and will miss you until we're together once again".

She turned and closed the door. Tears came unbidden to her eyes. The old man had become as familiar to her as her own father. She'd miss him terribly if he didn't come back. But then she'd know he was finally at peace. She walked over to her desk and made a notation in his file, wondering if it was the last.

The rest of the day flew by, or so it seemed. One patient never showed, another had to leave early for a doctor's appointment and the rest of the time was spent on the phone with home health care nurses and a local nursing home.

She also spoke to a psychiatrist regarding one of her prior patients. She had referred the twenty-one-year-old addict to Dr. Simmons a month ago because the young man was very depressed and needed prescription drugs, which she couldn't prescribe. He had cut shallow grooves into his arm and burned his stomach with cigarette butts in an effort to feel anything. He was convinced that life wasn't real and that was why he couldn't feel any emotion...love, hate or sadness. Every relationship he had crashed and burned. His parents had divorced when he was very young and he never saw his father after that. He hadn't finished high school, had a DUI on his record and had quit hanging out with his friends. Whenever he was hired for a job, he quit within a couple months. He always had an excuse for why it didn't work out. So he spent most of his days lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. Tara's heart went out to the poor, misguided soul. She was pleased to hear that he was in rehab.

She finished her paperwork around seven p.m. and was going to head home to feed her cat Symphony, but lingering in the back of her mind was Dan Turner. She couldn't shake the feeling that she could help him even further. Before heading home, she decided to pay a visit to the hospital.

The Intensive Care Unit was located on the third floor. She had a special pass that allowed her access any time of the day or night. Due to the many times she had patients in this ward, she was quite familiar with the building's layout. She stopped at the nurse's station to ask for Amy Turner's room number.

She found Dan sitting in a small chair next to the bed, flipping through the television channels. His daughter lay deathly still in the bed, an IV hooked to her left arm and a breathing tube down her throat. Machinery stood sentinel next to her bed, the lights blinking on and off, numbers and line graphs charting her progress. She heard the steady drone of the heartbeat monitor beeping and air pumping in and out of another machine.

Dan had purchased dinner but hadn't eaten it. The paper plate of food sat untouched on a table next to him. He turned and saw her standing in the doorway.

"Oh hi! I wasn't expecting to see you here tonight. Come on in."

"Thanks." She walked slowly into the room and stood at the base of the bed, regarding the child. The bed seemed much too big for her little body. She wore a yellow flowered hospital gown, which matched the light blonde streaks in her hair. On the nightstand, Dan had placed a picture of Amy and a dark-haired woman about thirty,

who Tara assumed was her mother. They were holding hands, standing in front of the elaborately etched wooden double doors of a house. Amy was smiling and hugging her teddy bear.

"She's beautiful."

Dan reached over and held onto his daughter's hand. "Thanks."

Tara nodded to the picture by the bed.

"Is that your wife?"

Dan reached over and picked up the picture. With the tip of his finger, he stroked his wife's hair lovingly.

"Yes. This was the last good picture I took of the two of them before she became too ill. She looks healthy here, doesn't she?"

Tara came closer to look at the picture over his shoulder. His wife seemed a little thin, but otherwise looked quite normal.

"Yes, she does. And your daughter looks very happy."

"She was. It was her fifth birthday and we were going out to dinner. I suggested we take a picture of them in front of the house before we left."

"It's a wonderful picture. You'll be able to cherish this memory forever."

He nodded and sighed, then placed the picture back on the nightstand.

"So what brings you to this neighborhood?"

"Oh, I had a patient to visit, so I thought while I was here, I'd stop by and see how you're doing." She hoped her lie was convincing.

"Thanks. That's very considerate of you." He looked at his daughter and back at Tara. "The doctor was by earlier to check on her."

"And what did he say?"

Dan sighed. "Nothing I haven't heard before. She's status quo."

"Well, that's good for now."

Tara looked at the television. He had turned on the news. At least he was trying to keep up with what was going on in the outside world. That was a good sign.

"So is there anything exciting on the news?"

"Oh I have no idea. I just turn it on to have noise in here to keep me awake. Staring at the monitors day and night can get boring real quick."

Tara looked around the stark, white room. He was right. Even the food looked boring and unappetizing.

"I see you haven't eaten yet. Perhaps I should go so you can have your dinner."

She turned to leave and he grabbed her arm. A distressed look crossed his features.

"No, please don't go. I'm not hungry and I could use a little company." He motioned to another chair sitting in the corner. "Pull up a chair and stay a while."

She smiled warmly at him. He seemed to have perked up a little since she walked into the room. But the circles under his eyes looked darker tonight.

"I'd be happy to stay with you, Dan."

He yawned loudly and looked away. "Sorry 'bout that. I've been doing that a lot lately. Can't help it."

"Dan, are you sure you don't want to accept my offer to stay with Amy for a while so you can go home and take a shower and possibly grab a small nap? We're only talking about five or six hours, tops. You'd be back before morning comes."

He regarded his sleeping child. Tara sensed he debated whether or not he could leave her side for more than thirty minutes at a time. He had to realize that his lack of personal hygiene, sleep and limited clothing had been stretched beyond reasonable limits. Though his fear of Amy waking without him close by was palpable, Tara felt common sense would be the victor of this round.

"Dan, how long does it take you to get to the hospital from your home? Ten? Maybe fifteen minutes? That's not long at all and, I promise you, I'll be here. I'll tell her you're on the way. I can keep her calm until you get back."

He took a moment to assimilate what she told him. She worried that he would say no, that his concern for his daughter's welfare would override his better judgment.

"You want to be able to take care of her once she recovers and goes home, don't you? If you don't do something for yourself soon, you're not going to be any good to anyone."

"Okay, I guess you're right. Your idea sounds reasonable." He seemed visibly relieved to have another person share the burden of responsibility. "My best friend lives next door and they're due back from vacation momentarily. I'm sure they'll be able to cover for me after they return."

"Perfect. Look, I know it's a lot to trust a stranger. But before this is over, we're going to become very good friends." She smiled reassuringly and squeezed his hand.

He held onto her hand tightly. "I feel like we're friends already."

She felt warmth course through her body. Yes, friends. It was a good feeling.

"Good. Then go home, take a nice, long shower, get a quick nap and something hearty in your stomach. I'll be Amy's guardian angel tonight until you come back."

"Thank you. I can't tell you how much this means to me."

She opened her satchel and took out a calendar notebook. Tearing off a piece of paper, she handed the paper and a pencil to him.

"Here, write down the number where you can be reached, and your neighbor's name and number too."

He took the pencil and paper from her and pulled the rolling table to him. Pushing aside the food, he used the table as a desk and wrote the numbers down. Then he stood, hovering above her. He was almost a good foot taller than her five-foot-four-inch frame. And solidly built too.

"This is my home number and cell, and this number is for Dick and Lisa, my friends next door. I'll probably be back here before they get home later tonight, but just in case, I gave you all the numbers."

"Okay, thanks. Now get going. I'll be right here."

He leaned over and planted a kiss on his daughter's brow. When he pulled back, Tara noted his eyes were glassy, a mixture of lack of sleep and emotion. Taking a deep breath, he turned away from his daughter.

"I'll make it as fast as I can. Please call me for any reason."

"Yes, I will. Now go!"

Tara sighed a breath of relief when Dan Turner left the room. Tough love. That's what that man needed. And she was just the one to give it to him. All of a sudden, she remembered what her cat needed.

"Symphony! Oh dear...not again."

She called her secretary Jeanine. The woman was a saint and she'd owe her one for this favor. Jeanine answered on the first ring.

"Whenever I get a call this late at night from you, I already know what's happening."

"Hi, Jeanine. Wow! That was a quick answer."

"Yeah, yeah. Skip the pleasantries. I guess you want me to go to your house and feed your poor cat. How long has she been alone today? Fifteen hours? That borders on animal cruelty, you know."

"No, I always leave her dry food and water. She's got her kitty pan. She's just been lacking company."

"You know, you really should consider getting fish. You do this kind of thing way too often. Fish don't need so much attention."

"Thanks, Jeanine. I'll consider your suggestion. But in the meantime, I really appreciate you feeding Symphony. You're a pal. I wouldn't ask it, but this is really a special case."

"Sure. That's what you always say, Tara. Remember, this is *me* you're talking to. I know you too well. I've lost count of how many times you've called me to cover for you during the past three years."

"That's why you always get a nice Christmas bonus."

"Bribery. That's what I call it. Of course I'll feed Symphony. She thinks I'm her mommy anyway!"

"You're a doll. Love you! Bye."

"Bye."

Tara hung up the phone and sagged against the cushioned back of the visitor's chair in front of the child. Now for the hard part...trying to make contact with the little girl she saw in Dan's session earlier. Amy might not be aware of Tara's presence on a



conscious level, but nevertheless, she was present on some level. Tara would try to make a connection, perhaps draw the little one out.

Putting herself in Amy's predicament was quite different from stepping into Dan's recollection. This would be tricky, for navigating in a coma was nothing like going into an active scene. And not having physically met the child and been introduced to her prior to her accident was also a detriment. If Amy had been taught "stranger danger", it might be difficult to approach her. There was only one way to find out...jump right in. Tara closed her eyes and focused intently on becoming one with her subject.

*Gray mist surrounded her. Unaware of her footing and unsure of the right path, Tara searched for anything that might lead her in Amy's direction. Unable to use any of her other senses, she reached out with her thoughts. Similar to a bat using sonar to locate things in its path, her mind sent out electric waves, which struck something solid to her right and bounced back to her. Excited, she walked slowly and cautiously in that direction, blinded by the fog. Then she heard a song, faint at first, but as she grew closer, the sound became louder. It was definitely a child singing. Tara got excited.*

*"London bridges falling down, falling down, falling down, London bridges falling down, my fair lady." Giggling accompanied the sweet sound of a little girl's voice. The fog seemed to grow lighter as Tara approached. Finally, the mist became finer, and through the delicate wisps of grayish-white, she saw a blonde-haired child twirling around in circles holding hands with a beautiful, dark-haired lady in her early thirties. They were in a playground at a local park. Up above, the sun shone brightly and a few clouds dotted a bright blue sky. Tall pine trees encircled the grassy area where Amy and her mother played, with a swing set and monkey bars behind them.*

*"I'm getting dizzy, Mommy! I'm going to fall down like the bridges!"*

*"Oops, I caught you!" As the child tumbled, her mother's arms grabbed her and hugged her close. They both landed softly on the grass.*

*Tara recognized Dan's wife from the picture on the nightstand. No wonder Amy was so happy. She was spending time with her deceased mother and having a great time. Amy would not willingly want to leave this scene.*

*Tara watched in stunned silence as the two interacted. They walked hand in hand to the swing set and Amy enthusiastically jumped on a swing.*

*"Push me, Mommy," Amy begged. Her mother smiled and pulled the swing back then released it.*

*"Higher, I wanna go higher!"*

*"Okay, sweetie. Hang on tight!"*

*"I will."*

*Amy smiled widely every time her mother pushed against her back, causing the swing to rise higher and Amy's hair to rush forward, then back, with each movement.*

*"I'm going to touch the clouds with my feet!"*

*"Yes, you are. Oh my! Look how high you're going."*

*Tara felt the love the two shared. Their bond was very strong. No wonder Amy chose this spot to visit while in her coma. It gave her comfort in a scary world. Tears came to Tara's eyes, knowing how hard it must be for Amy to be separated from her mother on a conscious level. Here, all time stood still, and she could spend precious moments with her mother in replayed memories of happier days. There was no pain or suffering here, only joy and laughter.*

*Tara shook her head sadly. It was going to be a monumental task to convince the child to let go and come back to her father's reality. In her unconscious state, Amy wouldn't be able to recognize the difference between what was real and what was not real. And she apparently loved her mother very much. Tara had her work cut out for her. She backed into the mist once more, shrouded in fog, allowing herself to pull out of the child's world, back into the cold, harsh light of the hospital room.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan Turner clicked on the lights in the empty house and threw the newspapers from the front porch in a pile by the door. He hadn't been home in almost two weeks and walking down the hallway toward his bedroom seemed surreal. He dropped his car keys on the table in the foyer and trudged down the hall. As he passed Amy's bedroom, he stopped to look in, half expecting to see her sitting up in bed talking to her teddy bear. No matter how many times he had tucked her under the covers and said good night, he could pop his head in later to find her having a long conversation with her stuffed best friend, Teddy. And they were serious talks too, mostly about Mommy.

"Oh God!" The weight of his grief fell upon his shoulders like bags of sand being dropped on him. He leaned against the wall to support himself. His eyes felt sore and gritty from lack of sleep and two weeks' worth of crying. "Sheryl, I miss you so much. I wish you were here. You'd know what to do. Our little girl needs help."

He recalled all the times Sheryl spent reading a bedtime story to Amy. Every night, after she tucked Amy under her covers and placed a big kiss on her forehead, she'd pull up one of Amy's little wooden chairs to the bed and read her a story. Amy's favorite book was *The Littlest Angel*. His eyes misted over thinking about the story of a little boy who died early and went to heaven. He prayed Amy wouldn't end up the same way, for he feared she would be just as unhappy as that little boy in the story. Dan turned away with the vision of Sheryl seated next to Amy's bed still fresh in his mind.

He shook off the exhaustion and moved one foot in front of the other to the master bedroom. Though he desperately desired a shower, he needed a quick nap even more. He stripped off his shirt and pants, dropping them in a heap on the floor, and collapsed atop the down comforter on his king-size bed. Within moments, he was sound asleep.

A noisy blackbird perched on the tree outside his bedroom window woke Dan early the next morning. He leaned over and looked at the clock.

"Oh shit!" Realizing that he had spent a lot more time than he hoped to in bed, he jumped up. He opened a drawer and grabbed clean clothes, then headed for the shower.

He had forgotten just how good a hot shower felt. Allowing himself only three minutes to shower, he kept thinking about getting back to his baby. By the time he wrapped the towel around his waist, he was beginning to feel human again...until he wiped the steam off the mirror and regarded his haggard appearance. Wow! That was a scary sight. If for no other reason than he didn't want to frighten his daughter, he made a mental note to shave every day. She deserved the daddy she recognized. After applying a new bandage, he donned a clean pair of dark blue jeans and a light blue polo shirt, which completed the new, improved Dan look. He combed his damp hair into his favorite slicked-back style.

"Coffee. Strong coffee. That's what I need to wake me." He decided to get some coffee at a local donut shop on his way back to the hospital. Rushing past the kitchen, he noticed a new stack of mail on the counter and the laundry stacked in neat piles on top of the dryer. That meant only one thing...Dick and Lisa were back from their vacation and had taken care of things for him. Thank God for good friends! Not wanting to take time to look through the mail carefully, he noted a few cards in the pile and pulled out those addressed to Amy so he could read them to her. Most bills were on automatic payment and didn't need attention anyway.

Dan noticed the red light flashing on his voice recorder. He pushed the button to listen to the messages from the past two weeks. It was maxed out. *Too bad*, he thought.

"Dan, it's your mother. Call me." Beep.

"Dan, don't forget to bring Amy's backpack. I've enrolled her in kindergarten here and they gave me a list of things she'll need. That's one of them," Betty Rogers, his former mother-in-law, said. Beep.

She had left that message before the accident. He grimaced at the thought that Amy might not need her backpack for a long time. He was taking Amy to her grandma's for a while so he could have some time to go back to work and get life onto a regular schedule when the accident occurred. They never made it.

"Dan, buddy, give me a call. I've got to tell you about this new stock." Beep. Hal, one of the brokers in his office, kept in touch with him about news of the stock market. Though Dan hadn't been in the office for six months and had lost interest when depression set in after Sheryl's death, Hal continued to relay information. Though he knew Dan had made wise investments while he was working and was now living off the dividends from those investments plus a tidy sum that he had saved, Hal told him he was confident that one day Dan would eventually come back to work.

"Bad timing, pal."

He hit the stop button. There was only so much he could handle right now. If they wanted him badly enough, he thought, they knew to leave a message on his cell phone and he would see that they called and return the important ones.

He locked the front door and rushed to the car. As he pushed the button on his remote to unlock the car door, he noticed Dick waving to him. They had been high school pals who played football together, married best friends and bought houses next to each other. Dick crossed the lawn to meet him, his rotund belly swaying back and forth as he walked over. His once amazing physique had suffered due to too many nights sitting on the couch watching football on television and drinking beer.

"So how's it going?" He gave Dan a manly hug. Though Dick had been on vacation, Dan had been able to get in touch with him after the accident to let him know where he was.

"Still the same. The social worker stayed with her last night so I could get some rest, but I hadn't meant to be gone so long. I'm heading back there right now."

"Good. Glad to hear it. You're looking a little ragged around the edges there, buddy. Did you give her our number?"

"Yeah. Her name is Tara. I told her if she couldn't reach me to call you. I hope that's all right."

"Of course it is. Look, don't worry about a thing. We'll take care of everything here. We'll come to the hospital either later today or tomorrow to see you and Amy. Give me a call if you need anything."

"Thanks, I will. I really appreciate everything you've done. I don't have time to worry about any of that stuff."

"Hey, what are good buddies for? Okay, I don't want to hold you up any longer, so we'll see you later." Dick trotted back to his yard.

"Bye."

Dan smiled. Dick and Lisa were always there for him; he could count on them. He looked at his watch. Seven a.m. Time to get going. He threw the cards on the front seat and put on a pair of sunglasses to hide the shadows still lingering under his eyes.

He made a quick stop at the coffee shop and was back at the hospital in record time. Anxious to get back to his baby, he jumped on the elevator and pressed the button for the third floor. Precious minutes dragged by as people got on and off the elevator. A nervous tick worked his jaw.

His forward movement was stopped at the door to Amy's room. The social worker sat next to his daughter's bed, holding her hand and reading a children's book to her. It reminded him so much of Sheryl that tears came unbidden to his eyes once again. Though Amy was still unconscious, he was touched by the fact that she heard someone's voice letting her know that she was not alone. He walked softly into the room and leaned against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest, watching silently. The social worker looked up at him after she finished the story.

"Hi." He walked up to the bed and looked down upon his sleeping princess.

"Hi yourself." He watched her lift her hand from Amy and stand. "You're looking quite a bit better today. More relaxed, and if I must say so, with that beard gone, quite handsome too."

He felt the heat of a blush creep into his cheeks. It had been a long time since a woman paid him a compliment like that. He never gave his looks a second thought. Sheryl had been his high school sweetheart and they had been inseparable. He never even looked at another woman during their fourteen-year marriage.

"Thanks. I have to admit you were right. Getting rest and a shower has improved my whole outlook. I didn't mean to stay away so long. I overslept. I didn't realize how much I needed that. You're a lifesaver."

"My pleasure." He saw her glance at her watch. "Your timing is great. I have two appointments this afternoon, one in four hours and then yours, so I have time to take a quick nap, eat and get cleaned up myself. I'll see you later."

Dan shook her hand. He saw her turn and wave goodbye at the door and he waved back.

He pulled up the chair and sat down next to the bed. Stroking his daughter's forehead, he noted the pallor in her coloring. He recalled days when her cheeks had been rosy from spending time chasing her friends around the back yard in the bright sunshine. She was such a sweet, enchanting child. He wanted her back the way she used to be. Leaning over, he planted a kiss on her cheek.

"It's going to be all right, baby, Daddy's here."

## Chapter Two

Tara smiled as Dan walked into her office later that day. His whole demeanor was different. It's amazing what a good night's sleep and a shower can do for a body, she thought. Cleaned up, the man was a knock-out. His hair now fell in soft waves and had body and shine; with the grungy beard replaced by a five o'clock shadow, she could now see the contour of his square jaw. Yes, he was definitely much younger than her previous prediction. Now he looked like the thirty-five-year-old man that he was.

"Hi. Come on in, I've been waiting for you."

He pulled up a chair in front of her desk.

"I want to thank you again for what you did last night. That was very considerate of you."

She studied the serious look on his face. He was a man of great depth and compassion...one who truly appreciated kindness. She was happy she had made him the offer.

"You're quite welcome. I'm glad I had time to spend with Amy. I think we made a connection." Though she wasn't ready to share her experiences with him quite yet, she hinted at her secret. She wanted to know more about him. There was still time to learn about Amy.

"I was reading through your file again. You've been through quite a bit in the past year."

He took a deep breath and furrowed his brow.

"That's one way to put it."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

He didn't answer her question right away; instead, he looked around her office, taking in the sparse decor. She didn't like clutter, so her office held only a few special things that reminded her of her beliefs and her roots. He seemed to focus on her picture called "Footprints". It was an ocean scene of the beach with footprints in the sand. He was familiar with the story imprinted on the glass about a man who wondered why there were only one set of footprints in the sand during the hardest time of his life, only to discover that it was during that time that God carried him. He turned back to her and captured her with those beautiful, sad eyes.

"Do you believe in God?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm not sure I do anymore. I mean, why would a merciful God take away my wife just a short while ago and now want to take away my only child? I'm not a bad person and I don't feel I deserve to be punished this way."

*His question was a cue to switch into her empathic mode. Yes, she could see how he would not understand why God wanted to punish him. He worked so hard to make a good life for them, providing a nice house in an upscale neighborhood and many creature comforts. He made a handsome salary as a partner in an investment firm. They had been talking about having another child and moving into a larger home when Sheryl was diagnosed with cancer. The realization that she was going to die was like a knife turning in his heart. Though his partner was supportive of his need to take an extended leave of absence to take care of family matters, he wished circumstances had been different. He became depressed after that, but never let her know.*

"I believe that there is a reason for everything that happens in our life, Dan. Not everything makes sense, but it has a purpose. Life is a precious gift that comes with surprises and disappointments. We must be willing to accept the good with the bad."

His eyes drifted to her left hand, and she knew he was checking on her marital status.

"Have you ever been married or had a child, Miss Singer?"

She shifted unconsciously in her chair. At the ripe age of twenty-nine, she still hadn't tied the knot, but really wasn't concerned about it. She put her faith in God and the Universe that when the time came, the right man would present himself to her.

"No, not yet."

"Look, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but it's easy for you to say 'accept the good with the bad' when you've never been in my position. Let me tell you, it's very hard to lose a life companion, but a child...it's unbearable to even consider the possibility."

"Dan, I definitely agree with you. Though I have not had a child myself, I know the loss would be devastating."

He closed his eyes and tossed his head backward.

"Oh God!"

"Dan, let's not focus on the negative, but rather be positive. Amy's with us now and we're going to get her out of that coma."

"This is my fault. I was thinking that life would be easier if I didn't have to worry about taking care of Amy. That's why I was taking her to her grandmother's house, so she could care for her while I got my life back in order. I had to find my purpose again and get back to work. If only I hadn't gotten on that train with her..."

He jumped up from his seat and paced the confines of her small office. She stood and grabbed him by the arms when he turned to make another pass by her desk.

"Stop! This isn't helping. Blaming yourself won't make the situation any better. Life isn't pretty, Dan. It's actually quite messy. And the ones who survive are those who pick themselves up, brush themselves off and begin again."

He looked down at her with those big, sad eyes then abruptly plopped down onto the leather couch across from her desk.

"I don't know what to do."

"That's where I come in." She sat down next to him. "I want you to trust me, Dan. It may not all make sense right now, but it will...eventually. Can you do that for me, Dan?" She reached over and held his hands in hers.

He looked down at their intertwined fingers. She saw tears trickle down his cheeks. He nodded his head. When he looked back up at her, she noted that the tension seemed to seep right out of his pores. His face relaxed and once again she saw the handsome man who walked into her office. She determined right then and there to chase away his ghosts and make him whole again, for she knew his statement was the truth. He *was* a good man and he deserved better than this.

"Yes, I will. If you can help me get through this time with her, I'll be eternally grateful."

"Eternity is a long time."

"Well, that's the truth. I would forever be in your debt," he said, sincerity tingeing his words. "You have a gift of calming me down and seeing the truth in things. I've never experienced that before."

A nervous chuckle escaped her lips. It had always been hard for her to accept compliments.

"Well then, that's good. At least we have agreement on that point. Now can we go back to sitting by the desk so I can continue to take notes?"

"Oh sure. Sorry."

They got up in unison and walked back to the desk. She flipped through the papers in his file for a moment then continued with her questioning.

"I'd like to know a little about your life with your wife and Amy." She wanted to understand the relationship between Dan and his wife, his wife and daughter and how Dan and Amy interacted. That way, she could possibly find a clue on how she could break Amy's bond with her mother so she could spend time with the living in Dan's world instead of her make-believe existence on the subconscious plane in her coma.

Dan sighed and began. The tension in his body was palpable. His eyes glazed over as he seemed to search his memories for the significant stories he wanted to share.

"Sheryl and I met in high school. I was a jock who played football and she was a cheerleader. Everything we did complemented one another. We were inseparable all through high school. When I asked her to marry me on her graduation day, everyone said they expected it. We were the first ones of our class to get married. She was only nineteen and I was twenty."

"It sounds like you two were soulmates who met early on."

He nodded his agreement.

"I think so. I fell in love with her the moment I met her. I know it sounds impossible, but I never looked at or desired another woman in all of the fourteen years that we were married. I never even got that seven-year itch people talk about. She was



everything to me. I couldn't imagine not having her in my life. I was looking forward to growing old with her."

He grew pensive at that point and Tara felt him shutting down the conversation. She knew it was not easy for him to talk about his wife when she had just passed so recently. It was still an open wound that only time would heal.

"Dan, come on, you're doing fine. You can take your time. Tell me more, please."

He drew in a ragged breath and she allowed him time to compose himself again.

"We went to the Pocono mountains for our honeymoon. She loved the outdoors. When we were planning our wedding, she showed me a brochure about one of the resorts that had a honeymoon suite with a heart-shaped tub and told me she dreamed of taking a bubble bath with me in one of those tubs. How could I say no? I really preferred Hawaii, but gave in to the Poconos for her. I still have the pictures of us sitting in a tub with bubbles up to our neck. That's a priceless memory. She was fun like that. Always thinking up crazy things to do to keep our life interesting."

"You must have loved every day with her."

"Yep. Oh, I'm not saying that we didn't have our moments, like every couple does, where we did stupid things that we regretted later. But I swear she did things to provoke me just so we could have 'makeup sex'."

"Was Amy a surprise or did you plan her?"

A frown wrinkled his forehead. He clenched his hands in his lap.

"Sheryl and I agreed on almost everything. The number of children we wanted was one of those points of contention. I came from a large family of five boys and, naturally, I wanted to continue the tradition. Sheryl, on the other hand, wanted to have a career, so she wanted only one child. She was an interior designer, a really good one too. She never advertised. Her clients were from word of mouth. She even got jobs in other states and would fly out to meet with her clients. As to your question, Amy was planned. Of course, I never gave up hope that we could have at least one more, so I convinced her to have a boy for me. She agreed and would have had another child too, had she not been diagnosed with cancer. It's ironic. She had gone to the doctor to find out why she hadn't gotten pregnant when the doctor discovered her condition. I often wonder if I had prodded her a little harder whether she would have seen the doctor sooner and possibly survived. Now I'll never know and Amy is all I have."

Tara felt the turmoil raging inside him. And the hurt and the frustration. Guilt bubbled under the surface. He was blaming himself for not getting Sheryl to the doctor sooner. It wasn't his fault, but he wouldn't accept it. The man certainly carried around a great deal of guilt. First his wife's illness, then his daughter's accident. She wondered what other things she would uncover once they went deeper into his life.

"Dan, have you read any self-help books?"

"No. Why?"

"I'd like to recommend a few to you. They may help you understand why you are faced with the problems you now have. They may also help you appreciate that everything is not your fault."

"I'm not really into that kind of stuff. I've been a devout Catholic all my life."

"Dan, I'm not asking you to give up your beliefs. However, I too was raised Catholic and remember that nothing was ever explained. The books I'm recommending to you are more of a supplement to your religious teaching. You might find an explanation for the things you were just supposed to take for granted, without question. If anything, I think they will help you understand what is happening to you."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know. With all that's been going on, it's hard to believe in anything."

"I know. But maybe if you read about other people's experiences, it will help you understand that you're not alone."

He studied his clenched hands for a few minutes. The silence seemed to stretch on and on with only the ticking of the clock and Tara's heartbeat thudding in her ears. Tara felt his indecision. His faith was shaky, at best, at the moment. Finally, he replied in a dejected tone.

"Sure, I have a ton of time on my hands. Might as well make use of it."

"Good. I have a few books at home that you can start with. I'll bring them to you."

"All right."

She looked at her watch. Time seemed to pass so quickly when she was with Dan. She regretted having to end the session, but her next patient would be arriving any minute.

"At our next appointment, if you've had time to read any of the material, we can discuss any questions you might have and then perhaps we could get back to talking a little more about your wife and Amy. Sound good to you?"

"Yes, that's fine." He stood and shook her hand. "When do you want me back again?"

"Why don't you make it for this coming Friday? That will give you time to read a book that I'll drop off to you tomorrow. But if you need to see me sooner, just call and change your appointment."

"Okay. Thanks."

She nodded and watched Dan leave the office, then went into her cleansing meditation.

## Chapter Three

Home. Finally. Tara walked into the darkened townhouse and flipped on the lights. Immediately, Symphony greeted her at the door, wrapping herself around Tara's legs as she walked to the kitchen. Dropping the bags of groceries onto the counter, Tara leaned down and picked up the furball she loved.

"Hi, baby. Yes, Mommy's home." She scratched the cat's neck and it purred. "Oh, look what I picked up at the store for you. Your favorite kitty food." She dug into one of the store's bags and produced a can of salmon and whitefish to show to Symphony. The cat rubbed her face against the can. She laughed. "I see you're hungry. Let me get a plate and feed you."

She lowered the cat to the floor and opened the can while the cat wound herself around Tara's legs and meowed loudly. This was her "feed me" cry. Tara knew the difference between all the various sounds her pet made. Besides the "feed me" cry, there was the "I want to go out on the porch" cry, and the "let me in the room with you" cry. Tara named her Symphony because of all the sounds the cat made on a consistent basis.

Symphony had been a victim of Hurricane Wilma, which hit South Florida in October 2005, and when Tara found the little kitten at the animal shelter, she was won over by the cat's pleading meows and affectionate finger licking. Tara was a sucker for the helpless, whether it was a person or an animal. She just couldn't help herself.

Symphony was no longer a baby, however, but an eight-pound full-grown female Ragdoll cat. She had the light blue eyes and markings of a Siamese, but her fur was long like a Persian's. Everyone who saw Symphony thought she was a purebred cat. The cat's lineage didn't matter to Tara one way or the other. To her, Symphony was simply family and that was good enough for her.

After putting away the groceries, Tara microwaved a spaghetti and meatballs frozen dinner and took it into the living room. This was her favorite room in the house, with its vaulted ceiling, wraparound glass windows covered in sheer, white drapery, a mirrored wall with a natural stone and glass étagère filled with knick-knacks and white tile floor. White couches with Wedgwood blue throw pillows and a white rug trimmed in matching blue completed the look. A blue vase with white roses adorned the coffee table. Standing in one corner of the room was a four-foot-tall fountain whose waterfall trickled down a sheet of silver into a small pool of water. A blue light at the bottom highlighted the gently cascading water. Tara thought the room reminded her of Heaven when daylight streamed through the windows...or at least the closest Tara was getting to that place at the moment.

She sat on the couch and put her meal on the glass coffee table in front of it. Symphony jumped up next to her on the couch and curled into a comfy position in the corner, blinking sleepy eyes at her owner. Tara picked up the remote and turned on the new surround-sound speaker system she had just installed. She flipped through a few songs on the CD player until she heard one of her favorite ballads.

Just as she was about to put the first forkful of food into her mouth, the phone rang. Tara glanced at her crystal clock on the étagère. Eight o'clock. As she reached for the phone, she hoped it wasn't bad news.

"Hi, Tara."

"Oh Mom. Hi. I wasn't expecting to hear from you tonight. We always talk on the weekends."

"Well, I didn't want to forget to wish you a happy birthday. I know it's not for another week yet, but your father and I are leaving on our ten day cruise to Turkey, Italy and France tomorrow morning and we won't be back until Saturday the 17<sup>th</sup>. Since I don't know whether I can get a ship-to-shore call through on your actual special day, I'm calling now to wish you a very happy birthday. This is a big one coming up."

Tara winced. She had lost track of the days and didn't recall that they were leaving tomorrow. She had meant to call them to wish them a bon voyage.

"Thanks, Mom. That's very sweet of you. Gee, I didn't realize your trip was coming up so soon. I hope you and Daddy have a wonderful time celebrating your fortieth wedding anniversary."

"Thank you, dear. We will. So, by the way, do you have anyone special to celebrate the day with?" She loved the happy lilt in her mother's voice.

"No, Mom. Symphony and I are going to share a piece of cake from the bakery."

She was turning thirty on Valentine's Day without a sweetheart to share either the occasion for lovers or her big three-oh day. But she convinced herself it was no biggie. She would just pretend it was like any other day.

"Oh! What a shame, dear. I was hoping that maybe Mr. Right had walked into your life. I'll keep my fingers crossed for you. I want to be a grandma, you know."

"I know. It hasn't happened yet, Mom, but it will, some day. You know I'm waiting for a man as wonderful as Dad to marry."

Tara hadn't been concerned about having a man in her life. Right after graduating from college, she plunged into her work and never looked back. Being involved in everyone else's problems gave her little time to socialize with the opposite sex. She had a few boyfriends when younger, but nothing serious. From early on, she made use of her talent and was naturally drawn to her line of work. It seemed like the perfect outlet for her ability. She didn't regret her single status; she loved helping people and felt satisfied with her life's work. There were times recently, though, when she wished she had someone special and a child of her own. But she was willing to wait.

"Oh honey. I think they broke the mold when they made your father. You may have to settle for someone a little less perfect."

Her mother's giggle at the other end of the phone made Tara smile. She adored her parents and admired the amazing relationship they had. Their love for each other, even after all these years, was real and beautiful.

"Well, perhaps, but I can hope, can't I?"

She knew that thirty was considered a milestone number by most people and the one when many women felt their biological clocks ticking. But Tara wasn't worried. She had already sent her wishes out to the Universe, and if it took its time getting back to her with a response, so be it. She wasn't going to be coerced into marriage just because someone thought she had two options, either accept anyone who comes along or become an old maid. She believed in the old adage "first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the couple with a baby carriage".

"Let me put your father on the phone before I hang up. He's got some news he wants to share with you."

"Tara, honey, is that you?"

Dad was a little hard of hearing and always talked louder to compensate for his inability to hear himself speak. Tara could hold the phone three inches from her ear and still hear him clearly.

"Yes, Dad, it's me," she spoke loudly into the mouthpiece for his sake.

"Your mom and I wanted you to know that while we're on this cruise, we're going to reaffirm our vows to one another on our fortieth wedding anniversary."

It took a moment for Tara to register what he just told her.

"What? Oh my God! That's wonderful news. But, Daddy, why didn't you tell me before this? I'd have taken time off to come with you. This is a big deal. I could have planned a party for you!"

"No, we know how busy you are and we didn't want you to make a big fuss over this. We just actually decided it last night. After all, it's not like we take a cruise every year and who knows if we'll both make it to fifty years of marriage. And even if we do, we might have Alzheimer's and not remember that we got married in the first place. Anyway, we're good with this, but wanted to let you know."

"Well, gee...congratulations. Forty years is a long time to put up with one another."

"Yes, and imagine agreeing to another forty! That's a lifetime to most people. But we really love one another and that's the best part."

Tara smiled. Yes, her parents were the lucky ones. They had gotten married and stayed that way, through thick and thin, through ups and downs in their finances, their health and who knows what else. Tara never wanted to delve into their fidelity issues, for that was private between them. She could have easily slipped into her telepathic mode to discern any indiscretion on their part, but she drew the line on spying. She knew when to pry and when not to pry.

"Well, my girl. I've got to continue packing here. Your mother thinks I need more sweaters and a few suit jackets for the dinners on the cruise. I don't know. This is my first time. How am I supposed to know anything? I just do what she says. Here, I'll give the phone back to her."

Tara heard some scraping while the phone switched hands one more time.

"Hi, honey. I didn't tell you the news because Dad wanted it to come from him."

"That's okay, Mom. I think it's sweet that the two of you want to do that. I'm so proud to be your daughter. I love you guys."

"Aw, dearest, that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me. I love you too. We'll call you when we get back home."

"Sounds good. Good night and have a safe trip. Love you!"

Tara set down the phone and took a bite of her food. A big smile came across her face. Her parents were the perfect example to her that the kind of love she was looking for did exist and she was sure that waiting patiently would produce Mr. Right someday.

Thinking of how romantic it was going to be for her parents to renew their vows of love to one another got Tara wondering when Mr. Right might come into her life. After dinner, she decided that she would like to get a psychic reading as a birthday present to herself.

Scooping the cat into her arms, she walked into her master bedroom. This room was on the other side of the living room and the vaulted ceiling continued in here too. She had purposely carried the Wedgwood blue theme into this room, mixing it with cream and gold. As in the living room, this room let in a lot of light through the slider covered with the same sheer white drapery. Her blue satin bedspread hosted a dozen throw pillows of every size and shape arranged neatly. She dropped Symphony onto the bed and the cat burrowed into the pillows. Tara smiled and stroked the soft fur. The cat was her constant companion, never leaving her side, no matter which room she chose to be in. Being a neat freak, Tara always left her house in immaculate condition, just in case she might have company join her after hours. She never wanted to be embarrassed about an unmade bed or clothing thrown all around. Besides, a clean and tidy household made things a lot easier to find.

She opened a set of French doors into her adjoining office. The glass desk held her home computer, a gold banker's lamp and a crystal clock. Pictures of fairies and angels decorated the walls. One wall had built-in bookshelves, stocked to the brim with mostly paperback books. She walked along her home library, running a fingertip across the bindings until she found the book she wanted Dan to read and snatched it up on the way to the computer.

The Lotus Circle website appeared as her main page. She had stumbled across the intriguing lavender front page one day while doing research about a client's obsession with psychic readings. Tara was delighted when she discovered that not only did the

website offer a chat room where she could talk with others who had unique talents like her, but The Lotus Circle also had a web store where she could purchase both metaphysical fiction and non-fiction books, as well as various New Age tools like crystals and Tarot cards. It was the first place she looked for such things now. A thought popped into her head that one of the approved psychics on the site might be able to help with Amy's situation.

She went into the extrasensory service provider directory and was amazed at the extensive listing. The one reading she had over a year ago had been very accurate and she felt confident that she would receive the same level of satisfaction once again with whomever she chose. The ad for Lucretia caught her eye. She read the brief description of the woman's abilities and felt drawn to her, so she wrote down the phone number. Realizing that it was too late to call to set an appointment, she tucked the information into her pocket calendar, making a mental note to contact her in the next few days. She yawned and looked at the clock. Ugh! It was late and she had an early day the next morning. Though she really wanted to stay and browse through the website's new book offerings, she had pushed her limits by staying up overnight with Amy. Her eyes were beginning to burn, a good sign that she needed to rest them. She promised herself to take another look real soon.

Symphony gave her an annoyed glance as she pulled back the covers on the bed. The cat quickly rearranged herself into the crook of Tara's arm once she had settled in and pulled the covers to her neck. Her eyes drifted close to the cat's melodic purring.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dick and Lisa showed up at Amy's hospital room bearing gifts at eight p.m., more than twelve hours after Dan had seen Dick that morning. He thought that perhaps they had decided to come tomorrow instead of tonight. He nodded at Dick, who smiled. Lisa showed off a beautiful yellow mum plant wrapped in pink and yellow foil and a red-headed porcelain doll dressed in a green velvet and satin full-length dress.

"Oh God, am I glad to see you!" He walked over and hugged each one in turn. When he pulled back, tears trickled down his cheeks and he swiped them away with the back of his hand. "Sorry, I get emotional these days."

"Hey, man, it's understandable."

Dan cleared his throat after that statement. Dick was always so considerate of his feelings. Lisa smiled and nodded her head in concurrence.

"I'm sorry. Come on in and pull up a chair. You don't need to stand in the doorway."

Lisa handed Dan the porcelain doll and took the mums to the windowsill. "I bought a plant instead of a vase of flowers, since I want them to be blooming when she wakes up."

"That's very thoughtful of you, Lisa." He set the doll on the nightstand next to Amy's bed and stood looking down at his daughter.

Lisa walked over and joined her husband standing next to him. "Just try to remember to water them every third or fourth day. Otherwise, they might wilt."

"You got it."

Dick looked at all the equipment surrounding the little girl. He shook his head.

"Wow, they've really got her monitored, don't they?"

"Yeah."

Dan felt Lisa's hand wrap around his and felt her warmth and strength as she squeezed. She stared at the blonde-haired child struggling for life and shook her head.

"Poor baby. We couldn't believe this happened. We were in a state of shock after your call. If we hadn't been in Alaska's frozen tundra, we certainly would have cut our vacation short to be with you. We're sorry we couldn't be there with you."

"Hey, don't apologize. I understand. You were there with me constantly during Sheryl's last few days and then after. Who would have thought another tragedy would strike so soon? I knew you had us in your prayers every day and that's what mattered."

Lisa patted his hand and smiled warmly at him.

"Oh Dan. You're like family. When you hurt, we hurt."

Dan's eyes misted over again. He was so grateful to have friends like them.

"I got your mail and did your laundry and Dick put the garbage out for the trash pickup tomorrow. So you don't have to worry about anything at home."

Dan shook his head. "Thanks, you guys. I don't know what I'd do without you two."

"You'd have stinky clothes and stinky garage, that's what!" Dick said, smiling broadly.

"Now that's something I couldn't wait to go home to."

They laughed briefly in unison, the levity cutting the tension for a moment.

Dick looked at the TV set. It was turned off.

"Hey, did you hear the Colts won the Super Bowl?"

"Yes, I watched it. They beat our Chicago Bears twenty-nine to seventeen. Too bad you were out of town and didn't get to see it."

Dick shook his head sadly. "Yeah, talk about bad timing. We had a tour of a glacier that day. I really would have preferred to stay in the hotel room and watch the game, but Lisa wouldn't let me." He reached over and smacked her butt playfully.

Lisa jumped in surprise. "Ow! Dick, it was a football game! You see a million of them. I figured you could miss one. It's not every day that you get to see a glacier."

"It wasn't *just* another football game. It was the Super Bowl."

Dan recognized the exasperated look on Dick's face. He knew it was nothing more than a mask to hide Dick's teasing.



"I'm sorry, honey. I should have realized how much it meant to you. I apologize. Next year, we'll stay home so you can watch the game. I promise not to make any vacation plans during February. Do you forgive me?"

Dick cast a sideways glance at his wife then looked at Dan. "What do you think? Should I forgive her?"

Lisa pouted and batted her eyelashes at them. "Please?"

Dan regarded the petite brunette with the turned-up nose. She was as Irish as they get and Dick's perfect companion. He needed someone to keep him in line, and though she was half his size, Lisa was just the gal to do it. They loved to have fun.

"Yeah, I think she looks repentant enough."

"Okay, you're forgiven. Just don't let it happen again."

Dan gave Dick a nod. He knew that Lisa never got the importance of "the game" like Sheryl had. It must have had something to do with the cheerleading aspect of Sheryl's past, for she would be there rooting for her team as much as they would have been. But this year, Sheryl wasn't around to join them. This year was different in many ways from the past.

"So when would you like us to relieve you? This could take a while and you need a break every so often to go home, if for no other reason than to get away from the monotony of these four walls. We can set up a schedule for the weekends," Lisa offered.

Dan felt comfortable leaving Amy in their very capable hands. Lisa had been Sheryl's closest friend and was over at the house daily from the moment Sheryl told her that she was ill. She often spent time with Amy when Sheryl seemed to be running out of steam. He remembered the day she suggested that she and Amy bake chocolate chip cookies and surprise Sheryl, because those were her favorite kind. She also knew they were Amy's favorite cookie. Amy and Lisa shared a close bond.

"Well, I'd really appreciate that. What day is it? I've kinda lost track of days."

"It's Wednesday," Dick chimed in. "One of us can relieve you this Friday or Saturday night. Whatever day and time is convenient for you is good for us."

"Friday would be fine."

"You got it. We'll be here at seven Friday night."

"Thanks."

Lisa looked at Amy and then back at Dan. "Okay, it's set then. We'll cover you this weekend. And if you need anything before then, you can give us a holler."

"Right."

"So before we leave, did you want to go out and get yourself something different to eat? I'm sure you're getting tired of hospital food. We can stick around for an hour or so," Lisa offered.

Dan looked over at Amy. Status quo. It wouldn't hurt to step out for a while.

"I'd really like that."

"Then get going, buddy. The clock starts ticking now." Dick held up his watch and pointed to it.

Dan jumped up and headed for the door.

"I'll be back soon."

He headed for the local burger joint. Though it wasn't the greatest nutrition he could have selected, it was a break from the institutional food he had been consuming for the past two weeks, and that in itself was a relief. He ordered a double stacked cheeseburger with fries and a soda. Man, did that taste good. Despite his conviction to avoid sweets, he couldn't pass up a hot fudge sundae. He bought a small one to go. By the time he finished it, he was almost back to the hospital.

Dick and Lisa were watching the news channel when he got back. They smiled warmly at him and stood to leave. He hugged them goodbye.

It was getting late. He looked at his daughter. Amy lay very still upon the crisp, white linens of her bed. The nurse had given her a sponge bath today and changed her gown, as they did every other day. Though she didn't appear to be in any discomfort, Dan imagined that her throat was sore from the breathing tube. He wondered how much longer she would have to suffer with that in her. He made a mental note to ask the doctor tomorrow when Amy might be able to come off life support.

His eyelids felt very heavy. He pulled up a chair and leaned over on her bed, laying his head on his arm as he had been doing for the past two weeks. Sleep overcame him within a few minutes and he drifted into a dream.

*Dan was with a group of people combing the woods for a lost cocker spaniel. The dog had run away from its owner earlier that day and hadn't come home. The man who owned the dog was very upset about his loss and begged everyone to help him get his dog back.*

*Dan walked through the thick woods in the dark, a flashlight beam his only means of illuminating the area around him. Though he could hear the others in the distance calling out the dog's name, he couldn't see them. It seemed to be an impossible task. How could one find a dog when they didn't know where it was? And once they did find it, how would they be able to retrieve it and bring it back to its owner? Chances are, if the dog's a runner, it would keep running.*

*Dan thought of giving up several times during the night. The temperature dropped 'til his skin felt chilled and he shivered. He heard things moving around in the underbrush and, out of his peripheral vision, thought he saw flashes of something watching him. His breath came out in puffs of smoke. He wondered why he was helping a stranger. After all, it was just a dog. And he had something more important to do...*

## Chapter Four

Tara stopped at the hospital on her way to work to give Dan the book she promised him. She brought along a cup of cappuccino, a regular coffee and two bagels.

Appearing at the door of Amy Turner's room, she found Dan sleeping in a very uncomfortable position. If he didn't have back problems soon, it would be a miracle, she thought. He was in a very precarious position, slouched over Amy's bed, his arms flung open and his head propped against his daughter's knee. His backside had slid to the very edge of the visitor's chair. She cleared her throat and he came to attention, rearing his head up and losing his tenuous connection with the seat. It flew backward and he landed hard on the floor, hitting his head on the chair. She grimaced. Ouch, that had to hurt.

"Oops, sorry."

"Son of a b..." Dan didn't finish the expletive when he saw who had interrupted his sleep. Standing gingerly and rubbing his head, he smiled awkwardly. "Don't apologize. It's not your fault. I probably would have done that even if you hadn't said anything."

"I brought breakfast and a book." She held out the bag of goodies and coffees. "Which do you prefer, cappuccino or regular coffee?"

"Regular."

She spilled the contents of one of the bags onto the small rolling table so he could help himself to the sugar and creamer.

"Do you take it black or with these?"

"Some sugar. Thanks."

He walked over to her and accepted a cup. She noted that the left side of his face was wrinkled from lying on the folded covers. Poor guy. He was having a rough start this morning.

"Thanks. I needed a pick-me-up." Then he chuckled and looked at the downed chair. "Literally."

"You're quite welcome." She set down her coffee to open the bag. "I hope you like bagels. I've got plain and raisin."

His eyes grew wide when she offered him one. "Are you kidding? I love them. I'll take the plain one with some cream cheese." He smeared the cream cheese on the freshly baked bagel and bit into the moist bread, moaning with pleasure.

"Wow, I didn't know it took so little to make you happy, or I would have done this sooner." She bit into her bagel and experienced the same emotion. Oh yes. That was yummy.

She noticed the new pot of mums on the windowsill.

"Oh, what pretty flowers."

"Thanks. My friends stopped by last night and brought the flowers and the doll over there." He pointed to the nightstand.

"Oh. That was so sweet of them."

"Yes, that's what I said. So are you here on another mission?"

She took a moment to wash down the bagel with a swig of cappuccino.

"Yes, actually, this time, *you're* my mission. I brought you this book, which I think you'll find very interesting."

She handed him the book and waited while he read both covers and nodded.

"Okay. I can see why you picked this one. So you want me to do some 'soul searching'. I guess I can do that."

"It's a start. You may find some of your answers there."

He looked up and smiled at her. Placing the book on the table, he picked up his coffee cup and took a swig.

"I was thinking about Amy last night and how we might be able to make contact with her."

That got his attention. He nearly choked swallowing his coffee.

"Really? How?"

"Well, as I mentioned when we first met, I am a telepath. That means I can communicate with other people's minds. I want to try that with Amy, but because she doesn't know me, I can't just ask her to come out of the coma. If you could introduce us, it might make it easier for me."

"Huh?" A look of confusion crossed his features.

"Since Amy is in a coma, it will be different because I don't know whether I can actually make contact with her. But I need to enter her mind and see what's going on there. Since she won't listen to a stranger, especially at her young age, I need an introduction."

"You're going to enter her mind? That sounds like privacy invasion to me. Do you do this to people often?"

She reached over to touch his hand, but he pulled back. This wasn't going to be as simple as she thought. She decided not to tell him about her first venture into Amy's mind and stretched the truth a little.

"No, and I don't do it without permission. You're right. People's thoughts are private. But I really do care about reaching out to Amy. And conventional methods won't work here. So I would like to try telepathy. I will concentrate on her and reach out to her with my thoughts until I feel a connection and take it from there."

"And how am I supposed to do this introduction thing? Are you going to enter my mind too?"

Ah, so that was the problem. He was concerned she might find out something he didn't want her to know. Interesting. Perhaps she could pursue that with him at a later date.

"No. Not at all. I don't care to know what's going on in that gray matter between your ears. We'll just sit next to Amy and you'll talk to her and tell her about me. If you wish, you can stay while I'm in her mind to prove that she's fine."

Dan stared at her hard with those blue eyes. No matter how many times she looked at him, she couldn't get over the light blue color. Very unusual. She knew this would be a leap of faith for him and it required a good deal of trust. Though they had only known each other for a short while, Tara hoped that would not be a reason to refuse her request.

"You're sure that nothing can go wrong?"

"The most that could happen is that she wouldn't communicate with me, and we'd have to find another means of bringing her out."

"How will we know if it works?"

"Well, hopefully, Amy will be able to recognize that she's in a dream state and will wake up. It may not happen at that moment, so I don't want to give you any false hopes."

"Have you done this kind of thing before?"

"Actually, no. It's just a theory I have."

"A theory, huh? I see." He paused for a moment and Tara could tell he was thinking about her suggestion. "Well, I guess it's worth a try. Like you said, nothing else seems to be working. When do you propose to do this?"

Tara looked at her watch. She had an appointment in a half hour so there was no time to do it at that moment. Since she had no way to tell how long the entire process would take and wanted to take her time, she offered another time.

"Perhaps later today or tomorrow, if that's okay with you."

Dan picked up his daughter's small hand and held it in his.

"I want my baby back. I'm game whenever you are."

She stood and picked up her coffee and bagel. Taking one last bite, she wrapped the other half in a napkin and tucked it back into the bag.

"Well, I have to run now. Just wanted to drop in and chat for a moment."

As she was turning to leave, he grabbed her hand and held it tightly.

"You really do care, don't you? I mean, I know it's your job and all, but you really, really care what happens to me and Amy. You're amazing. I know I keep saying it, but thank you."

He caught her off-guard with that statement. If she had any doubts before about her ability to bring Amy back to her daddy, they vanished now. She couldn't let him down. He was placing all his trust and hope in her.

"Yes, I do, Dan. And you're welcome. Okay, gotta run. See you later!"

He let go of her hand reluctantly. "Bye, and um, thanks for breakfast." He lifted his coffee cup to her in a toast.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara dropped a bouquet of multi-colored carnations and roses and a box of chocolates on Jeanine's desk in the reception area. She smiled when Jeanine came out of the copy room and noticed her gifts.

"Bribery. Pure and simple."

"Sheesh, you are *so* hard to please. This is a 'thank you' gift. Nothing more. Have I asked you to feed Symphony again?"

The big-busted black lady dropped the pile of papers she was carrying on her desk and placed her hands on her hips as she gave Tara the evil eye.

"You 'spect me to believe that request two days ago was the last time I'll cover for you? You must think I've got mush for brains."

"Oh Jeanine. That was a special case. I told you that."

"Hmph! Everbody's a special case to you." Jeanine swished her plump rear end around the desk and took a seat by her computer.

Tara reached over to grab the chocolates and flowers.

"Well, I guess if you don't want these, I'll just enjoy them myself."

Jeanine put her hand down on top of Tara's and held it firmly to the desktop. Tara winced as her fingers were pressed into the edges of the box.

"Oh *hell* no! Where do you think you're going with *my* chocolates? I earned them and I plan to eat every one and I don't plan to share them with you."

"Okay, you can have them."

Jeanine lifted her hand and Tara let go of the candy and pulled her hand back. Before Tara could blink, Jeanine snatched the box and hid it under her desk.

"Enjoy the candy and flowers. I really appreciate your help."

"You're welcome," Jeanine said under her breath.

Tara smiled widely as she went to her office.

Felicity Adams walked into Tara's office at ten a.m., a timid, frightened black woman in her early twenties. Thin and petite, her dress looked much too big for her tiny frame. She held her hand over one eye and looked around the room briefly, then dropped her gaze.

"Won't you come in and have a seat?" Tara offered, watching every move the woman made.

"Okay." Her voice was as timid as she. As if wanting to be sure that she looked her best, Felicity fussed with her skirt, tucking it under her and smoothing the wrinkles before folding her hands in her lap. It wasn't until Tara addressed her once more that she actually raised her head to meet her gaze. One eye was swollen shut.

"So what brings you to see me?" Tara asked. She already knew from the police report that she had received earlier. Battered wife syndrome.

Felicity mumbled a reply and Tara strained to hear her answer.

"Sweetheart, no one is going to punish you here. I'm here to help you, but I need to know what's been going on. Please, don't be frightened. I promise you, everything you say will be held in complete confidence. I'm your advocate and I hope you'll consider me your friend. Please speak clearly so I can hear you."

Tears streamed down the woman's cheeks. Tara handed her a tissue. It was hard for Tara to think of her as a woman. She seemed more like a young girl, due not only to her delicate physique, but her mannerisms and her speech.

"He beat me." Felicity lifted her skirt to show big welts on her thigh.

"He? Who is he?"

"My husband. His name is Jamal."

"Did you get medical treatment?"

"Uh-huh. The police woman taking the report took me to the hospital to check on my wounds. I'm okay. They did a pregnancy test also."

"And are you pregnant?"

"Uh-huh. Four months."

"Do you know why he beat you?"

Felicity nodded her head and started to cry even harder. She put her hands over her face to hide her shame. Tara knew the only way to truly know what happened was to once more place herself into her client's experiences.

*He was a heavy-set black man in his thirties standing before her wearing a pair of baggy, torn jeans and a dirty white tank top. He smelled of cigarettes and bad body odor. A beer was in his left hand, and scattered across the living room floor lay six empty beer bottles. Crushed cigarette stubs overflowed the ash tray on the plastic tray table. A football game played on the twenty-inch television set in the background. The man was screaming at her, drunk and visibly upset. She ducked the first blow and ran to hide behind the shabby rocker for protection. Unfortunately, he was faster than her and he grabbed her by the hair and dragged her out. This time the punch landed squarely on her face and stars exploded as his fist met her left eye. She screamed and wriggled free, only to fall at his feet.*

*"You whore!" His foot connected with her thigh and she instinctively rolled into the fetal position to protect her stomach.*

*"No, no!" she cried. "Please don't hurt me!"*

*"I'll kill that illegitimate brat you're carrying and then kill the son of a bitch who fucked you!" He kicked her again in the thigh and she screamed in pain.*

*"You're wrong. There is no one else." Her tears fell hard and hot against her hands, which she used to cover her face from any further attack.*

*He swigged down the rest of the beer and threw the bottle against the wall. It shattered into a hundred pieces. The sound scared her and she curled further into her balled-up position on the floor, too frightened to move.*

*"Yeah? We'll see about that."*

*He walked over to the couch and pulled out a gun from in between the cushions. Flipping it open, he checked to see that it was loaded. Then he grabbed her by the arm and yanked her close to him. His fingers dug deep into her skin until he was practically crushing bone. She could smell the stench of beer on his breath. The cold metal of the gun pressed into her temple. She heard him cock the trigger and her heart skipped a beat.*

*"I'm going to go pay my fuckin' brother a visit. First, I'll kill him, then I'll be back for you! I'll show you two who's the man around here!" He dropped her back to the floor and she hit it with a thud. Once again, she assumed the fetal position. She heard his footsteps as he headed to the front door.*

*"No! Oh God!" she rocked back and forth, crying hysterically.*

*He slammed the door as he left the house. The sound reverberated in the walls. She heard the screech of tires driving down the street.*

*Fear tied her to that spot on the worn carpet. Scared out of her wits, she remained huddled in the ball, sobbing hysterically. Finally, she gathered her strength to crawl to the phone and dial the police.*

Tara drifted back to the present. No wonder the young woman was so terrified. She would feel the same way if someone threatened to kill her.

"You did the right thing calling the police on him."

Felicity shook her head in acknowledgment. She lowered her hands to her lap and wrung them.

"Did the police arrest Jamal in time?"

"No, he got to his brother's house before they got there. His brother is in the hospital with a gunshot wound to his shoulder."

"Thank God he didn't kill him. Is he going to press charges?"

"I dunno. I haven't talked to him. They got me out of the house right away and brung me to the hospital. I axed about his brother, Tyrone, but that's all they told me."

"Okay, let's talk about you. Do you have any relatives or friends where you would like to stay or would you like me to get you a room at a shelter?"

She looked up with her good eye and Tara saw the depth of her fear.

"No friends or family. But I...can't. He's gonna get out on bail and he'll come for me."



"No, don't worry about that. We'll get a restraining order so he can't come near you. I'll get you set up in a shelter and the police will go back to your place with you to get your belongings. I recommend you take everything you want out of there, because you're never going back. Then we're going to get you legal aid so you can file for a divorce from Jamal."

"No, I can't go to a shelter. I have to go home and wait for him. It's his baby."

Tara looked up from flipping through her reference manual for numbers to call.

"Excuse me?"

"The baby. It's Jamal's. He's been jealous of his brother ever since I met them. But I never done what he said I done. I am not a whore. I really do love Jamal. I want to make it work."

Tara had seen this dozens of times before. Despite the fact that the woman had been brutalized by her husband, she still felt compelled to be with him. She would probably not even press charges and he would go free, unless his brother put a stop to it.

"Felicity, this isn't the first time he's hurt you, is it?"

The young woman fidgeted in her seat. She couldn't meet Tara's gaze. Again, she mumbled under her breath.

"What was that you said?"

"Well, he has good reason for getting mad at me. I don't do what he says. But I'm gonna change."

"I can't let you do that. If you won't protect yourself, you need to do it for your baby. He said he'd kill you and the baby. Doesn't that tell you he doesn't love you?"

"It was the beer talkin', that's all. He gets drunk a lot. He hasn't been able to find a steady job and money's real tight. I've wanted a baby, but he says we can't afford one. I should have had an abortion when I found I was pregnant instead of telling him. Then none of this would have happened."

"Felicity, you can't blame yourself for this. Jamal's temper got him into this. And if you think he had a problem getting a job before, it's going to be doubly hard for him now that he has a record of battery and attempted murder. He's going to have to stand trial too."

Felicity's body slumped forward and she held her stomach as she cried.

"Oh Lord, I've made such a mess of things! It's my fault. I've ruined our life just because I wanted this baby."

Tara came around the desk and pulled Felicity into her arms. The fragile woman wrapped her arms around Tara's waist and put her head against her chest, sobbing hysterically. Tara felt the deep hurt and frustration that her client suffered. Time would heal all, but Tara worried that every time Felicity looked upon her child, it would remind her of what she did to Jamal. Their life would not be pleasant unless Tara could convince Felicity otherwise. She put her hand under Felicity's chin and made her look at her.

"You are a strong woman, understand me? You are important, and so is this baby. You're going to make it without Jamal. You can turn it around and have a good life. But you need to believe that. Do you have a job?"

Felicity nodded. "I'm a cook at a fancy restaurant downtown. But I haven't been there since last Sunday. I only work Thursday through Sunday, and if I don't show up tonight, I may lose my job."

"Give me the name of the place and I'll take care of it for you. I'll get you a leave of absence while you get this straightened out. Then I'll get you some federal aid. You're going to go to a shelter and have your baby, free of fear of retribution from Jamal. He's no good for you, Felicity. Once you step away from the situation, you're going to realize that."

Felicity bit her nail while tears trickled down her cheeks.

"I guess I can give it a try."

Tara smiled at her.

"That's my girl. Here, write the restaurant information on this paper while I make a call." She went back to her desk and called a taxi. "Here is the name and address of the shelter. The taxi will be here in fifteen minutes. Do you have any money to pay for it?"

Felicity shook her head no. Tara reached into her purse and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill. "The shelter is not very far. This should get you there. Don't go back to the house to collect your belongings unless you have a police escort with you. Just in case." She put the money in Felicity's hand and clasped her hand over hers.

"I...I don't know what to say. You're so kind." The tears continued to fall. Tara handed her a tissue.

"All I want you to say is that you're going to the shelter and not back to Jamal. I want you to make another appointment to see me after you're settled. Promise me that?"

"Yes, I will." Felicity blew her nose and managed to give her a weak smile.

"Good." She wrapped her arm around Felicity's shoulder and gave her a hug, closing her eyes and sighing.

"I'll see you soon. Bye for now, Felicity."

The door closed softly behind Felicity and Tara walked back to her desk. Twisting her seat to face her computer, she sat there a moment just staring at the monitor. Her heart hurt for the young woman. Some sessions were harder to take than others, and ones dealing with abuse cases were high on her list. The lingering effects of the beating that Felicity had suffered remained on her mind. How anyone could tolerate another person raising their hand to them or threatening to kill them and then still want to live in the same household baffled her. She wondered if Felicity had come from an abusive childhood. Then it would make sense. The poor woman wouldn't know any better. It would have been a way of life for her. Tara started a new file and made a note to ask Felicity about her family life during the next session.

Cleansing her aura took longer this time. It seemed as though a heaviness had settled upon her during the session and not only did she have to imagine that she was at her favorite resting place, but she visualized lifting a boulder off her shoulders and tossing it into the lake. Afterward, she rolled her shoulders and moved her head in circles to release the tenseness that had overcome her muscles. The deep breathing ritual she regularly did after her visualization process helped her to harmonize her entire body. She was once again ready to face the world.

Tara walked out to the reception area and sat in one of the brown microfiber couches across from Jeanine's desk. She rearranged the magazines on the wooden coffee table. Her assistant looked up at her and shook her head.

"You look like something the cat dragged in."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"It wasn't a compliment. I was tryin' to tell you that you look like hell."

"That was a pretty rough session I just finished."

"I know. I saw that girl come in here and sit on that couch in the very spot you're sittin'. She was a wreck when she first got here. But she left your office in a much better mood."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

Tara smiled.

"Thanks, Jeanine. You always know what to say."

"Boss, you got a tough job. Sometimes I don't know how you do it, but you do. Day after day. You help lots of people. I just have to remind you occasionally that it's working."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." She looked at her watch. Ten fifty-five a.m. Her next appointment would be there in five minutes. "Well, onward!" She stood and stretched.

Jeanine flashed slips of yellow paper at her as she passed her desk. "Here's your phone messages, just in case you have time to call them back. Especially Mr. Johnson."

Tara took the slips of paper from her assistant and flipped through them on her way back into the office. None of them could be handled with a quick call. Especially Mr. Johnson, Tara's boss. She would have to wait until after the next session before making the ten callbacks.

\* \* \* \* \*

How long did it take to sign a piece of paper? Tara watched Mary McLaughlin's hand hover over the consent form until she couldn't take it any longer. Mary had come to see Tara two weeks ago to get assistance putting her eighty-three-year-old mother into a nursing home. It had been a hard decision, but Mary finally accepted the fact that

she couldn't do it all. She had a career, a boyfriend and a mother who needed her to do all the basic things for her. Her schedule was taking a toll on Mary's health and her relationship with Tom, her boyfriend of five years. Something had to give.

"Mary, you're doing the right thing."

"I know. It's just that I promised her years ago that I would always be there for her. Now I feel like I'm abandoning her."

Mary's green eyes became glassy. Tara looked at her and felt sympathy for the woman. It was always a difficult, emotional decision to have to come to grips with the fact that a loved one could no longer be cared for by family. Mary had put her life on hold for her mother. She was an attractive redhead with a sprinkling of freckles across her nose and cheeks that no makeup could cover. Her clothing was impeccable, a tailored brown suit, crisp beige blouse and matching brown velvet heels. Gold earrings, necklace and a beautiful diamond ring on her left hand completed the ensemble.

"Her Alzheimer's is getting worse every day. Pretty soon, she won't even remember who you are. You can't be her caretaker any longer. This is the best thing for your mother. Trust me."

Mary broke down and Tara handed her a tissue. Tara had put herself into Mary's viewpoint when they first met and realized that there was a very strong maternal connection between the two women. Mary was an only child. Her mother divorced when Mary was very young and never remarried. All through Mary's childhood years, her mother struggled to make a home for the two of them, sacrificing her own desires to make sure that her daughter had a decent life. Four and a half years ago, she acknowledged to Mary that she couldn't live on her own anymore. Mary insisted that she move in with her. Torn between her love for her mother and the blossoming love for her boyfriend, Mary tried to juggle all things, including a hectic career as an advertising executive.

"Didn't you tell me that Tom wants to set a wedding date?"

Mary shook her head and sniffed.

"You do plan to do it, don't you?"

Mary cried harder and shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know," she said through her sobs. "I feel like I'm putting Mom in a nursing home for my own selfish reasons. She didn't give me up for adoption when things got tough for her."

"This is hardly the same thing."

Tara came around the desk and twirled Mary's chair to face her. She put her hands on Mary's shoulders.

"Look at me."

Mary raised teary eyes to her.

"Haven't you been taking care of her for the past four and a half years? Feeding her, changing her diapers, taking her to the doctor, being her sole entertainment? Didn't she fall out of her wheelchair and break her hip just recently while you were at work?"

"Yes but..."

"No buts. Trust me. You can't handle this anymore. Didn't you say you have arthritis in your shoulders and that every time you pick her up and put her down, the pain shoots through you? How much longer will you last until you need surgery to get new ball joints in your shoulders? How much pain medication will you need?"

Mary shrugged.

"Mary, you can still visit her in the nursing home. She'll have round-the-clock care. You can sleep at night not worrying whether Mom is going to call you to help her go to the bathroom or for a drink of water."

"What if she gets so mad at me for doing this that she won't ever talk to me again?"

"Mary, you two will work through the difficulties of the situation. It will be an adjustment for both of you, but in the long run it's the best thing that can happen for you and her. She needs professional care now."

"Tom wants to go to Puerto Rico for a two-week honeymoon. How can I leave her that long? What if she calls for me and I'm not there?"

"You're making excuses. I'm quite sure there are phones in Puerto Rico. You can call her every day to keep in touch if you want to."

"Well, I guess so."

"That's right. And besides, you and Tom need time alone. Let him take you to paradise. He must love you very much to have stuck it out for the past five years."

Mary shook her head and smiled. "Yes, he does. In fact, I'm still amazed over the fact that he never complained that I was spending too much time with Mother and not enough with him. He's a sweetheart."

"So why would you not want to marry that man? He sounds too good to be true."

"I *do* want to marry him."

"Okay, then do it. Your mother will be in good hands." Tara pushed the paperwork close to Mary.

Mary sighed and picked up the pen, signing on the line marked with a little sticker saying "sign here". She dabbed a tear that had fallen on the paperwork. The ink smeared a little, but it was still readable. Tara took it from her before she changed her mind.

"When will I have to take her there?"

"As soon as you're ready. You let them know when you're coming. The room is waiting for her right now."

"Oh. I see."

"Then you can plan your wedding and honeymoon. Take time to enjoy your life. It's precious and you never know how much time you have. You're so lucky to have a man who cares about you in your life to go through this troubling time. Lean on him for support if you need it. But love him for all that he is. He deserves that. And for God sake, set a date!"

Mary laughed through her sobs.

"Yes, you're right. I'm fifty-two years old and I'm going to be a bride for the first time in my life."

"Your mother would want you to be happy. She'll be fine. Don't worry."

"If you say so."

She stood and shook Tara's hand. Tara was taken off guard when she wrapped her arms around her neck and gave her a big hug. Tara patted her back.

"Thank you so much for all that you have done. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome. I'm glad I was here for you."

"I'm going to send you an invitation to the wedding."

"I'd love to come."

Mary closed the door behind her as she left and Tara made notes in her file and closed it. She put the file folder into her "Completed" drawer. She leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes and sighed.

By the time Tara got back to the hospital, it was six p.m. She was surprised to see that Amy had been relocated. She asked the nurse at the Intensive Care Unit desk which room Amy had been moved to.

"She's off this floor. You can find her in room 125 in the Children's Ward."

Tara smiled widely hearing the news. That meant Amy was off life support and out of the woods. She could hardly contain her excitement when she knocked on the door of Amy's new room.

Dan jumped up from his seat and greeted Tara with a big hug.

"Come in. We have great news."

"Yes, I know. Congratulations. I went to her room in the ICU and they told me she had been moved here." She looked over at the bed where Amy still looked small and fragile, but without so many gadgets attached to her. Her coloring looked less pasty today.

"Yes, and hey, we have a great view of the parking lot." He nodded to the window, which had a view of a large, tree-lined lot filled with cars and trucks.

"I'm glad you find some humor in this situation. After staring at four stark walls during the last two weeks, I imagine that is a special treat for you," she said, glancing out the window briefly.

"So have you come for your introduction to Amy?"

"Yes."

He walked over and stroked his daughter's cheek. Tara went to the other side of the bed and looked at Amy, and then at Dan.

"This is probably as good a time as any. But we need no interruptions. Is anyone going to be coming in to check on her?"

"No. She was just visited by a nurse, so we have a good couple of hours. I'm not expecting any visitors and my friends are coming back to stay with her overnight on Friday, so right now is perfect."

Tara pulled up a chair next to the bed and held the little girl's hand.

"Then I guess we should get started." Dan sat facing Tara across the bed. He held Amy's hand gently as the IV tube was stuck into it.

"Dan, tell Amy about your new friend."

Dan cleared his throat and leaned down close to Amy. "Hi, baby, it's Daddy. I want you to meet my new friend Tara. She's a real sweet lady."

Tara whispered, "Describe me."

"She's got shoulder-length blonde hair and green eyes and the prettiest smile I've ever seen. She's about the same height as Mommy and wears a dress most of the time. But today she has on a pair of navy slacks and a white top trimmed with a red scarf and red shoes."

"That's good. Now tell her I'd like to meet her in person and that if she sees me, she should talk to me."

*Dan repeated the words while Tara closed her eyes and imagined herself walking through the fog inside Amy's coma. Once again, she focused on sending out thoughts to bounce off objects and located Amy straight ahead. The sensation of walking blindly through the mist was easier this time, for she knew what to expect. When the fog turned brighter white, she knew she was nearing the child. This time, when the fog cleared, she saw Amy alone in her bedroom sitting in the middle of her bed, talking to her teddy bear, Teddy.*

*"Hi, Amy, I'm Tara."*

*The little blonde head swiveled to see her. She immediately clutched the stuffed toy to her chest and backed against the wall near the bed.*

*"Did you hear your daddy tell you about me?"*

*Tara walked slowly toward the little girl, extending her hand for a handshake. The child looked up at her with the same beautiful blue eyes as her daddy. Timidly, she looked from Tara's face to her hand and back again, but didn't reach out to shake Tara's hand. She nodded yes to Tara's question. Tara pulled her hand back.*

*"I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to talk. I know you're scared right now, so I thought you could use a friend."*

*"Where's my daddy?" Hers was a sweet, lilting voice – music to the ears.*

*"He's waiting for you to come to him. He loves you very much."*

*"But why didn't he come with you?" Tara sensed Amy's trepidation, so she didn't try to get any closer than a foot from the edge of the bed.*

*"He couldn't come here, that's why he sent me."*

*"How did you get here?"*

*"I have a special way of coming in, sweetie, but your daddy can't get in that way."*

*"Oh."*

*"Do you know where you are, Amy?"*

*She nodded her head and her curls bobbed up and down.*

*"In my bedroom."*

*Amy glanced around her room at the toy box on the far wall brimming with stuffed animals and assorted toys, to the big poster of cartoon characters above the toy box and to her child-sized table and chairs set with tiny white and pink porcelain dishes. Two blonde-haired dolls were having tea. Her closet door was ajar, displaying a wide assortment of colorful dresses hung in a row and the mommy-sized play shoes and purses she had collected. Tara knew why Amy chose to stay in this place...familiarity and comfort from Teddy. Beyond the open bedroom door was the fog shrouding the hallway and anything beyond her bedroom. It must have been very scary indeed to be confined to one room of her house.*

*"It's a very pretty room. You have a lot of toys to play with. But this bedroom isn't really your bedroom, is it? It doesn't seem the same. Am I right?" Amy shook her head no and once again pulled Teddy closer to her.*

*"That's because it's just a dream and this room is in your memory. Would you like to go back home to your real bedroom and see your daddy again?"*

*"Uh-huh. But I don't know how."*

*"It's not that hard, Amy. You just have to wake up."*

*"But there's all that fog outside. I'm afraid I'll get lost. I want it to go away."*

*Tara knew the fear of walking through the mist without knowing what lay inside it. For a child of five, the fog must hold all sorts of imaginary scary things, such as "The Boogy Man".*

*"It's not going to go away. You have to be a brave little girl and walk toward your Daddy's voice and that's how you'll get out of here."*

*"I'm scared."*

*"Sure you are, baby. But I've walked through the fog. There's nothing out there to hurt you, trust me."*

*Amy broke down crying, sobbing into her bear. Tara sat on the bed and pulled Amy to her, cuddling her in her arms and stroking the top of her head. Amy nuzzled against Tara's shoulder, as if that act could protect her from the Big, Bad World outside her door. Tara sensed the child's pulse rising.*

*"Shhh, shhh, it's all right."*

*"I want my daddy. I got lost and I couldn't find him. Sometimes I hear his voice and I think he's coming for me, but he never does."*

*"I know. I know. That's because he can't get to you. You've got to go to him."*



*"I can't. I'm afraid," she said between sobs.*

*Amy was becoming almost hysterical. Tara knew that in her frame of mind, the last thing she would do is break out of the coma. She needed to stay put for the time being, until Tara could come up with a solution.*

*"There, there. Take it easy, sweetie. If you feel safe here, then you should stay here for now."*

*Amy looked up at Tara and wiped her eyes.*

*"Yes, I want to stay here."*

*"I've got to leave, but I'd like to come back and visit you again. Would that be all right?"*

*All Amy could do was nod her head. He curls bobbed up and down.*

*"Good. Why don't you rest now?"*

*Tara pulled down the covers on the bed and Amy crawled under them, holding Teddy next to her. Then Tara tucked her in and placed a kiss on her forehead. She looked up at Tara with blobs of tears glistening on her eyelashes.*

*"You know, Valentine's Day is coming up next week. There's going to be a big red heart filled with candy waiting for you. Would you like to be home for that?"*

*Amy smiled hesitantly and nodded yes.*

*"Good. That's what we'll work on. You take it easy now and I'll be back. Okay?"*

*"Uh huh." Amy closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep as Tara watched.*

*Tara sighed. She regretted having to tell Dan that her trip was not successful. She walked back into the fog and imagined the room where she was sitting across from Dan by Amy's hospital bed. When she opened her eyes next, she was back with him.*

Dan realized that she was back and had a look of great expectation on his face.

"Well, did you talk to her?"

"Yes."

"And... Please don't keep me waiting. Is she going to come back?" He rubbed his upper right arm as though the bandage annoyed him.

Tara stood and walked to the window, looking out at the parking lot. She motioned to Dan to join her. He came to her side and looked out the window with her.

"I don't want her hearing our discussion," Tara talked softly.

"What do you mean?" he whispered.

"Dan, Amy's scared of the fog in her mind. It's like she's in limbo. She is trapped in her bedroom in her memory. She wants to see you, but she doesn't know how to get out. I tried to explain it to her, but she started crying and I didn't want to upset her any further. It's going to take some time. I told her I'd come back, and she seemed receptive to that idea."

"Oh God! I feel so helpless." Dan balled his fists at his side and cursed under his breath. Tara put her arm around his waist and he leaned into her, using her for support.

"I know it's hard to accept, but don't give up hope."

He pulled back to look at her, lines of worry etched deeply into his forehead.

"So what do I do?"

"Right now, the best thing you can do is talk to her. Often. Even though you think she can't hear you, she can. Encourage her to get better and to find her way back out of the fog. Tell her you're waiting for her. She knows your voice. One of these days, she'll follow your voice until she works her way out of that maze she's in. Tell her how much you love her and want to hold her in your arms again."

"Yes, I'll definitely do that. I really appreciate your help. Thank you."

"We have an appointment for tomorrow. We can talk further then."

## Chapter Five

Tara tossed her briefcase on the kitchen table and reached down for Symphony. After a hard day at work, there was simply nothing better than snuggling into the soft fur and getting a rough tongue lick upon her cheek. After a little coaxing from her very noisy companion, she set the cat on the floor and fed her a bowl of food.

She felt the need to eat healthy, so she scrounged through her refrigerator to find the salmon filet she was defrosting since yesterday. In addition, she found six stalks of asparagus, some cherry tomatoes, a cucumber, a sweet potato and some Italian dressing. She popped the salmon into the oven, placed the asparagus into a pot on the stove and set the timer on the microwave to cook her potato.

Dinner would take twenty minutes to cook, giving her time to change into her favorite pair of gray sweatpants and a baggy T-shirt. She turned on her computer while dinner was cooking and got into the chat room of the Lotus Circle website, signing in as "Mpath".

"Hey, girl, where've you been? Haven't seen you in a couple of weeks." It was Tina, another empath, whom Tara had met three months ago on the site.

"Busy, busy, busy as usual. And you?"

"I got married last month! We moved to Austin, Texas, and he got a job on an oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. We don't get to see each other much, but we talk every day."

"Congratulations. Is that the same guy you've been dating for over a year?"

"Yep. We couldn't live without each other and decided to make it permanent. Now we've set up housekeeping and are looking forward to starting a family very soon. How about you?"

"Nothing much happening in the romance department, but I'm involved with some serious stuff. Hey, maybe you can help."

"Sure. I'll be glad to try. What's up?"

"I've got a youngster in a coma. She was in a terrible train accident. Her injuries continue to improve, but I need to convince her to wake up. I am able to enter her imaginary bedroom to talk to her, but she's scared of the fog in her mind. Got any suggestions?"

"Hmmm. Let me think. Perhaps you could walk through the fog with her so she can see it's nothing to be afraid of."

"Yes, I was thinking of that, but I don't know how she'll react when I disappear on her."

"Tell her you're playing 'Hide and Seek' and that she needs to find you. Then when you disappear, she'll just assume you've started the game."

"Hey, that's a good idea. I'll definitely consider doing that. Oh my! I forgot my dinner. I can smell it. I think it's done. Gotta run. Thanks for your help."

"Bye."

The smell of fish grew stronger as she ran toward the kitchen. She almost tripped over Symphony as she rushed to grab an oven mitt, then threw open the oven door. A blast of heat forced her backward. She blinked her eyes quickly and reached in to pull out a burnt piece of fish with blackened Italian sauce bubbling on the outer edges. Touching it gingerly with her fingertip, she discovered that the meat in the middle was salvageable. She placed the fish on the plate she had set out, added the sweet potato from the microwave and the asparagus from the pan filled with water on top of the stove.

Symphony joined her in the den where she decided to eat her dinner. Though she didn't spend much time in this room, she enjoyed the ambiance here almost as much as the living room. The centerpiece of the room was the large, faux white coral stone entertainment center with a forty-eight-inch-wide thin-screen television. Three years back, she had a wood floor installed and found a large Persian rug to place between the royal blue velour couch and the entertainment center. A five-foot-tall copper sculpture of a merman and mermaid graced one corner. On the wall directly to the left of the couch, she had hung a four-foot-wide mirror with gold, silver and copper spokes radiating from the small mirror in the middle.

She sat on one end of the couch and pulled the handle on the side that turned that portion into a recliner, then flipped through the TV channels with the remote until she found a comedy channel to watch. Symphony jumped up next to her and stepped onto her leg so she could reach over to smell the fish on Tara's plate.

"Oh, aren't you a little pig! I already fed you. Go away. This is my food." Symphony gave her a sad look and backed into the other end of the couch, kneading the material with her paws before settling into a curled-up position. "That's a good girl."

She was munching and laughing at the comedian when she noticed a bulletin flash across the bottom of the screen, "Man shoots three in restaurant brawl. Jamal Adams arrested in connection with shooting. More on the *News at Eleven*."

Tara dropped her fork onto her plate. That was Felicity's husband! He must have gotten out on bail. Where in the world did he get another gun? She assumed the police had confiscated the gun that he shot his brother with. His going into a restaurant in West Palm meant only one thing—he thought he'd find Felicity there. Thank God Felicity had gone to the shelter. God knows what might have happened if she had been at work when he showed up. Despite the fact that she had thought it was a good idea for Felicity to keep her job, that place of employment was no longer a viable option. She did not want to place her patient in any potentially harmful situation. Tomorrow she would locate a better job for the young woman.

\* \* \* \* \*

Friday morning started off on the wrong foot. As Tara walked into the office at eleven thirty a.m., Jeanine lifted her head, nodded and went back to taking notes from her telephone call. Tara was almost past her desk when Jeanine reached out and snatched her hand, indicating that she should wait a minute until she finished writing a note. When she hung up, she turned an exasperated look upon her boss.

"Good morning," Tara said, trying to be as cheerful as possible.

"You mean almost afternoon, don't you? You're late and the phone's been ringing off the hook with people looking for you."

"Sorry. I overslept. Do I have any messages?"

"Course you got messages. You always got messages. Here's one from your boss. You remember him, don't you? The one who signs your paycheck. The same one that you keep avoidin'. I swear, one of these days, he's gonna show up here unannounced and you're gonna have to explain to him why you don't follow his rules 'bout interacting with the patients. And I can't wait to say 'I told you so'. Are you gonna call him back this time, or are you gonna pretend I forgot to tell you like you did last time?"

Tara giggled and rolled her eyes. Oops, she found out about the little lie. Well, the timing wasn't right. She had things to do and he called at the most inconvenient time. She meant to get back to him; it just slipped her mind.

"I promise I won't tell him you lost the message. I'll call him back. Later."

"Don't forget you got a twelve thirty p.m. appointment in Riviera Beach with that Castalone boy. You're gonna have to leave here in about a half hour."

"Yep, I'm on it!"

She picked up the messages and flipped through them as she walked back to her office. She loved bantering with Jeanine. God love her, she always came through in a jam. When she first interviewed Jeanine, she wasn't sure she would be right for the job. Jeanine had never worked in an office environment before, she had been a waitress. But she told Tara she wanted to work days so she could spend time with her kids, and the only hours she could get at her other job were nighttime hours. Jeanine promised Tara that she was a fast learner and would do whatever Tara wanted. Tara just couldn't say no. She felt sorry for her. She gave Jeanine a chance and found that hiring her had been one of the best decisions of her life.

She turned on the overhead lights in her office and threw the messages on her desk. Coffee was always first priority, no matter what time of the day it was, then she'd think about all those important things she needed to do. Just as she was about to pour a cup of the steaming hot brew, her intercom rang. She put down the cup and answered Jeanine's beep.

"Yes?"

"Got a call here you ain't gonna want to take, but I think it's important that you do." The seriousness in Jeanine's voice concerned Tara.

"Of course, put it through."

"Miss Singer? This is Detective Bradley Gainer from the Sheriff's Department. Do you have a moment?"

She slid into her desk chair. From the tone of Gainer's voice, this wasn't a social call. She figured it had to do with Jamal Adams.

"Sure. What can I do for you, Detective?"

"Do you know Mr. Henry Bartlett?"

"Yes, he's one of my patients."

"Well, ma'am, Mr. Bartlett passed away this morning and we need to contact the family to make arrangements for the body. No one here seems to know if he has any relatives. I was hoping you could shed some light on this. We found your card in his pocket."

Tara sat in stunned silence, trying to register the fact that Henry had really passed away. When she raised her hand to her mouth, it was shaking like a leaf in the wind. Dear Henry. He knew what he was talking about the other day.

"Miss Singer? Are you there?"

She shook off the out-of-body feeling and took a deep breath.

"Sorry, yes, I...I'm here. Um, Henry's got a daughter in California. No, I'm sorry, she's in Philadelphia. Her name is Susan Stevens. She's a lawyer and is married to a politician who is running for office. He didn't mention any other children."

"Would you happen to have her number?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't. He never gave it to me, just mentioned her in passing conversation. But perhaps Dr. Kramer has her number. He's the one who referred Henry to me."

"Thanks for the lead. Perhaps we'll be able to track her down with that information. I'd like to give you my number, in case you think of anything else."

"Oh sure. Let me get a pen and paper." She fumbled in her drawer to find a writing implement. "I'm ready."

"561-555-5550."

"Got it. Oh, by the way, what did he die of?"

"It appears to have been a massive heart attack. He died in his sleep sometime during the night. Craziest thing, though. He's got a big smile on his face."

"That makes sense."

"Pardon?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Just something he told me last week about his departed wife waiting for him."

"Yeah, well, guess he's with her now."

"Officer?"

"Yes?"

"Would you tell his family that I'd like to know about the funeral arrangements?"

"Sure, will do. Well, thanks again. Enjoy your day."

Leaning back in her chair, she stared at the ceiling, watching the rattan ceiling fan swirl round and round. She shook her head as the realization that Henry had really passed away sank in. Her eyes misted over, but she fought back the tears. Henry would have wanted her to be happy for him. She believed that the spirit lived on long after the body perished.

"Goodbye, Henry," she whispered. "Don't forget your promise to put in a good word for me."

Though she had paperwork to complete, she could not stop thinking about Henry's passing. Her mind drifted, and it wasn't until Jeanine buzzed her on the intercom that she realized she was running late for her appointment. She grabbed her purse and asked Jeanine to let them know she was on her way. There was only one thing she forgot to do. Call her boss...again.

Tara had been given the assignment to intervene in the case of Jimmy Castalone by his school counselor. Jimmy was a recent transferee from another middle school and had a troubling record that followed him. School officials hoped she could figure out what was bothering him. A brooding youngster, he wouldn't open up to them. For months, he was involved in daily fights in the school courtyard or reprimanded for disrupting a class. He had been suspended from classes to "think" about his bad behavior. When that occurred, he became disinterested in his studies and his grades plummeted. He was about to fail sixth grade. Lately, he had missed more days than allowable, and if he didn't straighten out, a truancy officer would visit his home.

Tara found the tall, scrawny twelve-year-old boy throwing a basketball at a hoop in his community park. She watched for a few minutes as he attempted, but failed, to get the ball centered properly. It ringed the hoop and fell off sideways.

"Mind if I give it a try?" she asked, walking up to him.

He looked at her from head to foot, then scowled.

"I don't let girls use my ball."

"All right. I was going to give you some pointers, but I can see you think you know better."

He bounced the ball on the pavement and looked at her askance.

"Why do you think you can teach me how to throw?"

"Well, when I was growing up, my cousin lived with us awhile. He wanted to try out for the Miami Heat basketball team, so he practiced every day. I got to throw balls with him and learned a lot of tricks."

That got his attention. Jimmy caught the ball in his hand and walked toward her. She smiled when he handed her the ball.

"Okay, show me your stuff."

She nodded and dodged around the basketball court, bouncing the ball as she went. Then she stopped and tossed the ball to score on her first attempt.

"Wow, that was really good. Can you teach me how to do that?"

"Sure. It's easy. Once you learn how to concentrate on the net and position your hands just so in order for the ball to hit just right."

He hiked up his baggy pants that had slipped down his rear end as he walked on the court to join her. She showed him how to stand and toss the ball and within a half hour, he was doing as well as she was. They stopped and walked to his towel and bottled water, taking a seat near each other on the pavement. He propped the ball between his knees and handed her the bottle of water. While she drank, he wiped the sweat from his forehead back across his crew cut dark hair.

"Thanks. I really appreciate your help."

Tara smiled.

"You're welcome. Oh, by the way, my name is Tara. What's yours?"

She took another swig of water and handed him the bottle.

"Jimmy. I live over there." He pointed to a beige stucco home with a burnt orange tile roof.

"Nice house."

She looked at her watch.

"Hey, isn't it a school day? Why aren't you in class?"

"Geez. Now you sound like my mother."

"Well, Jimmy, that's what mothers do. They send their children to school to learn skills so they don't grow up and have trouble getting a job. Speaking of your mother, where is she?"

"Working."

"Does she know you aren't in class?"

He lowered his head and looked away while mumbling an answer.

"Jimmy, I couldn't understand what you said. Please look at me."

He raised his head and his brown eyes met hers dead-on.

"I said, no, she doesn't know."

"I see. Have you been doing this a lot lately?"

"Yeah, so what?" The disdain in his voice was evident.

"The school can send someone to your house to take you to school. Why aren't you going?"

Just as she predicted, Jimmy clammed up. He bit his top lip with his teeth and shrugged.



"Jimmy, I'm a social worker. It's my job to help people. Why don't you tell me what's going on? Perhaps I can help you."

"No one can help me."

"You don't know if you don't try. Come on, give me a hint and maybe I can figure out the rest by myself."

"I don't like school. The kids are mean."

Tara switched into her empathic mode to see what Jimmy had been going through.

*He was standing in the courtyard, waiting for the school bell to ring to signal the beginning of classes. Suddenly, out of the crowd of kids, an older boy approached with three other boys flanking him. Though Jimmy had only been there a couple of weeks, he knew the class bully by reputation. Jimmy tried to blend in with other groups of kids, but the moment they saw who was coming after him, they all moved away, leaving him exposed.*

*"So I hear you're new around here. Well, that doesn't give you the right to talk to my girl. You're just a sixth grader. She's a seventh grader. Leave her alone."*

*"She didn't mention anything about being your girl. Maybe it's her you should talk to."*

*The larger boy grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him close to his face. He could smell that the kid had eaten something with garlic on it for breakfast.*

*"I'm tellin' you, stay away from her or you'll be sorry."*

*"I don't like threats."*

*"Oh yeah? Maybe you'd like a beating instead."*

*The big kid swung his other arm to hit Jimmy in the face, but Jimmy was faster. He pulled out of the kid's grasp and ducked. He butted his head into the bully's stomach, throwing him off balance, and the kid fell onto the ground. Jimmy balled his fists and hovered over his opponent, ready for a fight. The other boys had started to jump on him when the school bell rang and the entire yard mobilized, everyone rushing to their classes. The bully stood and brushed off his pants.*

*"This isn't over yet."*

*"I guess it isn't."*

Tara pulled out of the scene and shook her head.

"So do you get into a lot of fights at school?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"Oh, it was just a good guess. Middle school is a tough time. Why do you fight so much?"

"Guess I picked it up from my folks. It just comes naturally."

*Once again, Tara went into her telepathic mode and searched Jimmy's past for clues to his present behavior. She discovered that Jimmy Castalone had led a very rough life, growing up in a*

*household with parents whose hatred of each other spilled over into bitter fights daily. Then, when they finally couldn't take it anymore, they went through a protracted divorce, where Jimmy felt like a prize in a tug-of-war custody battle. The home he grew up in was lost to foreclosure and he and his mother had moved several times from one apartment to another, one town to another. He had lost touch with all of his childhood friends from his old neighborhood and had a hard time making new friends because they moved so often.*

*Now, three years after the divorce, he felt that his situation had deteriorated. Though his mother was happily wed to another man, Jimmy despised his stepfather Richard. The man had been very nice to him while dating his mother, but the moment they got married, he continually found fault with Jimmy. Nothing Jimmy did was good enough for him. When Jimmy told his mother about altercations between him and Richard, she almost always took her new husband's side. It also bothered Jimmy that his mother spent more time with her new husband than with Jimmy, and he felt rejected when they took weekend trips during the time Jimmy had visitation with his father.*

*He was also upset by the fact that his own father now lived a meager existence in a trailer home while paying child support to his ex-wife. They now lived in a nice house in a middle-class neighborhood that his stepfather owned.*

*Jimmy found it harder and harder to concentrate on his studies because of the situation at home. While in class, he often spent time thinking about his future and how he would move out when he was old enough. He had asked his father if it would be okay to move in with him, but his father didn't seem to think that was a good idea. He was dating a lady fifteen years younger than him and said he wouldn't be a good role model for Jimmy. When his mother announced that she was having Richard's baby, Jimmy felt that he didn't fit in anywhere. He believed they were making their own family. He recently had been having thoughts of suicide, so he would no longer be a burden on anyone. He figured no one would miss him, anyway.*

Tara felt the loneliness and confusion that the boy lived with. Her heart hurt for him. Instead of growing up in a loving, nurturing home, he had been subjected to constant unpleasantness, both with his biological family and with his newly formed family. She now understood his need to fight and his lack of desire to study. Armed with this information, she would talk to his counselor at school and his mother.

"Jimmy, I think I can help you. I'm going to need to talk to your mother. What time does she come home from work?"

"She gets off at five and is usually home to make dinner by six."

"Okay, do me a favor. Give her my phone number and ask her to call my office and make an appointment to meet with me."

She took out a business card and handed it to him, pointing to the number in the bottom right-hand corner.

He looked at the card.

"I'll do it, but I don't see how it will help."

“Trust me, things will get better. Just give it a chance. Well, I have to get back to work myself. It was nice meeting you, Jimmy. And, by the way, good luck with your hoop shots. Hope I helped.”

## Chapter Six

When Dan Turner walked into her office at three p.m., she was staring into space. She heard him clear his voice and twisted around in her chair to face him. He was dressed in a pair of black jeans and a v-necked white knit top. The shirt molded to his body and she could see the trim lines of his chest and stomach. He had taken off the bandage and she saw a raised pink jagged line running four inches down his bicep.

"Oh sorry. I was daydreaming. Come in."

"I thought I was the only one who had moments like that. Glad to know I'm not weird."

She shook her head. "No, if there's one thing you're not, it's weird. Have a seat, please."

He glanced at the couch as he was about to sit on the hard wood chair in front of her desk.

"Is there any chance I could sit over there? My back has been killing me the past few days." He put his hand on his back and stretched to the right and left.

She laughed. "I was wondering how long it would take you to feel the strain of leaning against Amy's bed to sleep every night. Of course you can sit on the couch. You can lie on it, if you'd like." She rose from her chair and walked toward the couch with him.

He smiled. "Oh, don't tempt me. It wouldn't take much to pass out right about now. Then you'd hear my snoring all afternoon long." He sat on the soft beige leather and stretched his arms and legs out. Leaning his head against the plush back, he let out a sigh of relief. She sat in the matching round swivel rocker chair near him, crossing her legs and propping her notepad on her lap.

"Well, if you're that tired, I'd surely not mind the snoring. Speaking of sleep, are you getting relief any time soon or would you like my help again?"

"Oh no, I'm fine. In fact, my friend Lisa is coming to relieve me tonight. I'll get to sleep in my own bed again."

Tara regarded the handsome man before her. Though the dark circles remained under his eyes, she noted an improvement in his overall appearance. The worry lines weren't as deep as they were last week. The strain of seeing Amy connected to all the equipment had sorely tested his resolve, but she noted a more relaxed demeanor in the man lounging on the couch before her. She was pleased with the results.

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Me too. So you said you'd tell me what we're going to do about Amy. Where do we go from here?"

"Right now, I'd like to continue talking about your wife, if it's all right. I want to know about her relationship with Amy and then we'll talk about you and Amy."

He looked down at the couch and ran his hand over the smooth leather, following the wrinkle lines with his forefinger. His mood altered when the topic of his wife was brought up. Tara felt sorry that she had to make him bring up old memories, but she hoped to find a way to encourage Amy to wake up, and the more information she had, the better.

"Well, if you really think it will help..." He took a deep breath before beginning. "Amy was very close to her mother. During the first year after she was born, Sheryl barely worked at all. Then, when Amy was a year old, we put her in daycare and Sheryl pursued her career again, picking up where she left off. It's amazing, people held off projects until she came back because they wanted her as their designer. Anyway, Sheryl's job was flexible, so she spent a lot more time with Amy than I did. When Sheryl was diagnosed with cancer, she became obsessed with spending as much time as possible with Amy. She quit working totally and devoted her time to teaching and playing with Amy."

"And what were you doing at the time?"

"I wanted to provide the best life for them. I thought I was doing the right thing. I didn't know any better." His eyes shifted to the "Footprints" picture and he blinked hard.

"Dan, I see you're upset. Tell me why." Tara could have slipped into her empathic mode once again but felt he needed to talk. The man seemed to have a lot of layers to work through, and she had stumbled upon another.

He shook his head and looked down at his hands, studying his palm for several seconds and tracing the life line with his thumb.

"I rarely got to spend any time with Amy until the end, if you want to know the truth. During the first three years of Amy's life, I worked a lot—an average of sixty hours a week. I had a very important position in my firm and was paid very well for it. But it meant working long hours. Because of all the stress I was under during the day, I also took an hour after work to go to the gym. Playing college football, I was used to a physical routine. I never stopped it. But it meant I wasn't home until late at night. Amy was in bed quite often by the time I got home."

"Did Sheryl complain about your long hours?"

"No, she understood my reason for doing it and she was very supportive. I was proud of the fact that I was able to buy us a big house in an upscale neighborhood when Sheryl became pregnant. You should have seen how her face lit up when I told her to buy designer furniture for it. She made it look amazing. And Amy's room, oh, it blew me away! We had a Mercedes, a pick-up truck and a boat for family outings. We were riding high on the wave of my success and living the American Dream. But when Sheryl became ill, all that changed."

He started to tear up again and Tara sat by quietly until he composed himself.

"So that was about two years ago?"

"Yes. Sheryl went to her gynecologist to find out what was taking so long to get pregnant. She had gone off the pill six months prior and we were actively trying to have another child. The doctor did a complete physical and ordered a bunch of tests. When the results came back, we were devastated. I remember holding her in my arms that night in bed and the two of us just cried and cried."

"How did you break the news to Amy?"

"Well, remember, she was still a little girl, just barely three. We didn't know how to handle it, so Sheryl said she was going to try to live life as normally as possible. She decided to stop working, which was fine with me. We didn't need the money; the only reason she worked was to satisfy her own desires. I cut back my hours then to around forty hours a week and picked up all the household chores. I should have gotten a maid. I don't know why I didn't. That was so stupid of me. I got to spend a few hours a week with Amy, but certainly nothing like the hours Sheryl devoted to her."

"Amy must have been in heaven having her mommy there full-time during the week and her daddy home more often then."

He managed a faint smile.

"Yes, Amy was spoiled. As she got older, she wanted to do more things with Sheryl. Like go to the park and play hide and seek in the backyard. Sheryl tried to keep up with her, but she got increasingly more tired. She was taking chemo and that made her very sick. I remember her spending many nights in the bathroom puking. But Sheryl was a trooper. She was going to go down with a fight. Finally, she admitted to me that she couldn't do it anymore. I took a leave of absence so I could spend all my time with them. During the last month, we had hospice at the house as Sheryl was too weak to get out of bed. Amy couldn't understand why Mommy couldn't do things with her like she used to. I told Amy that Mommy was very ill and tried my best to entertain her."

"So Amy was confused?"

"Yes. She grew sullen and inconsolable. When I'd go into her bedroom to try to play with her, she'd say she wanted her mommy to play."

"I see. So Amy's bond with Sheryl was much stronger because she was there with her more. Makes sense."

"Sheryl died a month after I went on my leave. Had I known it was going to happen so quickly, I would have quit a long time before that. I just didn't know..."

He broke down again.

"Dan..."

"You know what I realized? Who gives a damn about all that money and that big house and those expensive vehicles?" His tone turned angry and despondent. "Spending time together is what is important. Now I have all the material things I want,

but I've lost my reason for living. That's why I can't lose Amy. I have to make it up to her. To give her the time I owe her."

Tara sat in silence, allowing Dan's words to sink in. The guilt just didn't stop coming. He thought he was doing all the right things and found out that the price to pay was much too steep.

"Dan, don't you think we'd all live our lives differently if we knew what was coming? If there was a way we could be born into this world with all the information about the consequences of our actions ahead of time, it would make everything a lot easier. But we don't. We make the best choice possible based upon the information we have at that time. You certainly didn't know Sheryl was going to become terminally ill. You surely wouldn't have gotten on that train with Amy had you known it was going to crash. Things happen that are beyond our control."

"If only..."

"Yes, if only. We all say that. But we can't look backward. We can't blame ourselves. I have heard the saying that life is ten percent what happens to us and ninety percent how we react to it. I believe it's true."

"Yeah, and I guess I reacted all wrong." She put her hand on top of his.

"No, not at all. When you realized Sheryl was ill, you cut back on your hours and took over the household responsibilities. When she couldn't do it anymore, you took a leave of absence. What more do you think you could have done? You're only one person. And you're human. Give yourself some slack."

"I just wish I could turn back time. I want a chance to do it over again, the right way."

"I understand. Unfortunately, we can't do any more for Sheryl. But there's still time for Amy. Can you tell me about your relationship with her since your wife's death?"

He took a deep breath and looked out the window. It was a sunny day and the sunlight streamed through the tall window, creating an elongated rectangle of light upon the floor. His eyes followed the trail until it ended at Tara's chair. He turned to look at her.

"At first, it was all a blur. I was in shock when the hospice nurse told me the news that Sheryl wanted to talk to me. I could tell by her tone that the end was very near. I remember walking into the master bedroom and not feeling my feet touching the floor. I rushed to Sheryl's side and held her hand. She could barely turn her head to look at me. Her color was pasty gray and her eyes looked washed out. Her lips were dry and I rubbed some ice across them. She was having trouble breathing, but insisted she needed to say something. She told me she loved me and thanked me for everything I did for her. Then she told me to take care of Amy. The next moment, she exhaled for the last time."

"Oh Dan, that must have been so difficult for you."

He nodded his head and the tears flowed down his cheeks.

"I knew it was coming, but I still wasn't prepared for it." His voice was choked with emotion, and Tara had to listen carefully between the sobs to understand what he was saying. "I didn't get to tell her anything, and I had so much to say. I wanted her to know how much I loved her. I wanted to tell her how much I was going to miss her and I didn't know how I would live without her. But I couldn't. She...she was just gone and it was too late. The nurse heard me crying and came in to console me. She checked Sheryl's pulse and pulled the covers over her head. I walked out of the room and called Dick and Lisa, and they came over right away. I remember Lisa saying she would take Amy back to her house so we could make the appropriate arrangements. She didn't want Amy seeing her mother that way and she thought I'd only frighten her in my condition. Dick stayed with me and helped me through the process. There was just so much to do. I was pretty much out of it."

"You're very lucky to have such good friends."

"Yeah. They're the best. The first night after the coroner came and they took the body away, I went over to Dick and Lisa's house. I needed to get out of the house for a while. Amy didn't understand what was going on, even though we tried to explain that Mommy went to Heaven. She wanted to go home and see her mommy, and when I told her we couldn't do that, she got mad at me and wouldn't talk to me. Dick and Lisa invited us to stay with them. I agreed that was a good idea. During the first few days, Amy slept in Lisa's bed, huddled against her with Teddy. After Amy fell asleep, Lisa, Dick and I discussed what we should do. We realized that the only way Amy would accept that Mommy was gone was to show her the body at the funeral home. I was really nervous about that. She had just turned five."

"Oh Dan!"

"It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do."

Tara reached over and squeezed his hand. She pictured the scene in the funeral home with Amy and felt his hurt and upset. It was hard enough to have to endure the sight of his wife lying in the casket, but even more difficult showing it to a small child and dealing with her pain.

"After the burial, we went to the reception. Amy sat next to me at the head table. My family had all come in from out of town and for some of them, this was the first time they had met my daughter. They were doting over her and telling her how beautiful she was. She was pretty well traumatized by the time we got home that night. I didn't know what to do. She didn't want to sleep alone, and because I needed to get a new mattress, I slept in her room. That was the first time we really got to bond. She cried a lot in her sleep that night, so I wrapped my arms around her and held her tight. All I kept thinking was that it took her mommy to die for me and my daughter to get close to each other."

Tara shook her head. She understood how a child could feel lost and alone after losing her mother. Naturally, she would turn to her father for consolation. She was happy to hear that Amy finally accepted Dan's affection.



"Then what happened?"

"I became severely depressed. It was difficult having to go through Sheryl's belongings, throwing away her cosmetics and giving away her jewelry and clothes. Even after all those things were cleared away, I still had to look at the furniture and knick-knacks she bought. Everywhere I looked, I was reminded of Sheryl. My friends would invite us over for dinner so we didn't have to eat alone and I felt uncomfortable around them. It was awkward for a long time. They were afraid to say anything for fear it would bring back memories. Amy clammed up and wouldn't talk for a while. But I would pass by Amy's door and hear her talking to her bear about her mommy. It would make me so sad because I didn't know what to say to her. We had gotten into a rut and I knew we had to do something."

"Was that when you decided to go back to work?"

"Yeah, pretty much. I was going crazy. Our perfect world wasn't perfect anymore and I needed to get my head screwed on straight again. I figured if I could just bury myself in my work that things would somehow get better. I felt my relationship with Amy would improve too if I felt better about myself. So I called her grandmother and she said she'd be happy to take Amy for a while. I figured four months, tops."

Tears glistened in his eyes and he worried his bottom lip.

"And the rest is history." Tara stopped writing and looked at Dan. He had suffered through a great deal in a short time. She admired the way he analyzed his problem and tried to come up with a solution. "Okay, well, that gives me a lot to work with. Thank you. I know it's not easy to talk about these things."

Dan shook his head and looked away again, staring out through the window at the big oak tree, whose leaves were swaying in the breeze. Tara thought how his life resembled those leaves, buffeted by the wind. Just when things seemed to calm down, another gust grabbed him and tossed him around. He appeared to be trying to settle his emotions. He had spilled his story. Good, bad or ugly, it was the way it was. Now all he needed to do was to let go of the guilt. She patted his hand and stood. Slowly pushing the chair away from him, she moved to the desk and put the notepad down. She gave him space and time to think about everything.

Five minutes later, he stood and walked over to her. She looked up at a man raw with emotion. He hugged her tightly, then left the room without saying a word.

She watched him leave, thinking of how ironic life can be. People can seem to have it all, yet when you scratch the surface, you find all sorts of things that aren't so wonderful. Dan was living proof of that.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lisa, Dick's wife, showed up promptly at seven Friday night, carrying a box of books from Amy's bedroom. Dan greeted her with a warm hug and smiled when she showed him the contents of the box.

"You brought her favorite books. She'll love having you read those to her."

"I thought the same thing. So what big plans do you have for tonight?" Lisa dropped the books in the corner and wiped her hands on her pants.

"Actually, sleeping is a priority, as is another shower."

He combed his hair with his hands and smiled shyly.

"I think that's a great idea. Dick wanted me to tell you that if you're feeling up to some company, he'll be home tonight and you can stop over if you want."

"Yeah, I might do that."

"Did you eat yet? We ordered a large pepperoni pizza and wings for delivery. There's a whole bunch left and you're welcome to it."

"That sounds great. Okay, is there anything you need before I leave?"

Lisa looked around the room.

"All I need is the remote and you're good to go."

He dug under the newspaper he had been reading on the small table and handed her the television remote control. She laughed.

"Glad I asked. I never would have thought to look under there. Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow. No rush. I have nowhere to go, so if you want to sleep in late, it's no problem."

Dan hugged her. "I really appreciate this."

"You're welcome." She looked at Amy and ran her fingers through the child's silky blonde hair. "I love this little girl. She and I are going to have a great time, so don't you worry about a thing. I'll call you immediately if anything happens."

"All right. I'm off then. See you sometime tomorrow."

Dan took one last look at his daughter before leaving the hospital room. He waved goodbye to Lisa.

The ride home took Dan past places that held lots of bittersweet memories...the park where Amy played, the school where she went to kindergarten, the donut shop that she always begged to stop at. He thought of the last time they visited the shop. He bought her a glazed donut and she smiled at him with sugary lips, then kissed him so he could taste how sweet she was. For some reason, he was beginning to feel better about her prognosis. He was no longer gloomy about her condition and actually believed that she was going to come out of the coma. Perhaps it was the change of room and scenery, or perhaps it was the constant optimism provided by the social worker. Whatever it was, he couldn't help thinking that things were going to turn around. And he was determined to make things better...for both of them.

The meeting that afternoon had dragged up a lot of memories that had plagued him for months after Sheryl died. He kept reliving the scene where she told him goodbye. He had suffered through too many restless and sleepless nights, ones where he'd run

into Amy's room and console her tears from a bad dream. They both had been through a nightmare and he felt especially bad for Amy because she was so young to lose her mommy. Life wasn't fair.

He turned into the driveway and noted that Dick's front porch light was lit. He smiled. That was the welcome sign for him. But a shower and change of clothing was the first priority, then he'd visit his friend and share some pizza with him.

The pile of old newspapers at the front door was gone and the garbage cans were set at the edge of the street waiting for tomorrow's pick up. He knew he had Dick to thank for that. He peeked into the refrigerator and saw a sparkling interior devoid of food. That alone made his night. Not having to deal with mushy, moldy, stinky food, what a treat! He'd thank Lisa for that, as he was sure it was most likely her handiwork. He couldn't picture Dick handling anything that had more hair on it than he had on his head.

The shower stall had a freshly laundered towel slung over the rack, a brand new bar of soap, a razor and his favorite gel, plus his toothbrush and toothpaste sitting on the counter. Once again, Lisa had thought of everything. He stripped off his clothes and jumped into the warm, pulsating water. The room quickly filled with steam and he breathed in the moist air. This time he decided to take a leisurely shower. He leaned against the wall with his hands and dropped his head so the water could beat against his shoulders and down his back. The tension seemed to melt from his muscles. He rolled his head from side to side, savoring the delicious rhythm of the spray on him. He looked forward to being able to do this on a daily basis again. There was something comforting in ritual, he realized. No matter how boring or tedious it was, just doing everyday things made life feel normal. He needed normalcy once again.

A half hour later, he knocked on Dick's door and let himself in. Dick was in the great room at the back of the house, watching his big-screen TV. He had his feet propped on the large square wooden table centered before his wrap-around couch.

"Hey, there you are!" Dick said as Dan entered the room. He pointed to the box on the kitchen counter. "Help yourself to some pizza. You'll probably have to warm it in the microwave, then grab a beer in the fridge. I'm watching one of those survival shows. Wait 'til you see what these people are eating. Yuck!"

Dan opened a cabinet and found a paper plate, then placed two slices of pizza into the microwave. Taking a light beer from the refrigerator, Dan joined his friend.

"Hey. I can't stay long. Just wanted to come over for a few minutes to visit with you before I go to bed. It's been a long day." He watched as the four young people competing on the reality show bit into plump, squirming grubs. The faces they made as they chewed and swallowed left nothing to the imagination. The bugs tasted horrible. One girl vomited. Another guy turned yellow but managed to get it down. "Wow, yeah, this is entertainment." Dan looked at his pizza. "I'll take this any day over that."

"No kidding."

"So I noticed everything you did at the house. It looks great. Thanks."

"Not a problem. I sent Lisa over first. She's Miss Organization. She let me know when it was time for me to do my jobs. I cut your grass today and put out the garbage. She got the mail and cleaned out the refrigerator. So the place is in pretty good shape until you guys come home. Any word on when that will be?"

"No. Not yet. But the doctors are pleased with her progress. She seems to be healing nicely, that's why they took her off life support."

"That's great, man. I sure hope to see her running around here acting like a little airplane again real soon."

"Yeah, me too."

"So has that social worker been helpful?"

"Yes, she's been great. I've never met anyone who is so compassionate and attentive. She's been helping me take a look at my beliefs and at my life and see where I might want to make changes. I've noticed I'm becoming more positive in my thinking."

"Hmm, interesting. Positive is a good thing."

"And she contacted Amy in her coma."

"What?" Dick sat up and muted the sound from the TV. "And what was the result?"

"She said Amy's caught in her bedroom in a dream and that she's afraid to come out because of the fog in her mind. Right now she's scared, so we're taking it slow."

"Do you think she can talk her out of it?"

"Well, I don't know for sure, but if anyone can, I think she can."

"Wow! That would be amazing. So you really like this woman?"

"Yes, she's good. I'm glad she's on the case." He couldn't help smiling when he thought about her.

"Me too. When do I get to meet her?"

"Well, once Amy comes out of the coma, there will be some rehab to be done, so I imagine you'll get to meet her when she starts coming to our house. I have no idea at this point when that will be."

"Hmmm," Dan said, studying his beer. "Is she single?"

Dick turned to face his friend. That seemed a very strange question for him to be asking.

"Yeah, why?"

"Oh nothing. Just wondering."

"Come on, Dick. I've known you practically all your life. You don't just wonder about anything. What's your point?"

Dick raised a brow in an assessing manner.

"I just think it's interesting that she's single. I mean, how does she get along with children?"

"I imagine she does a wonderful job, if what I've seen so far is any indication. I don't think the fact that she's single has any bearing on the case. She's very good at what she does and that's the important thing. Look, we've shared a lot in the past few days, but I can assure you my interest in her is strictly professional. Anyway, I couldn't imagine her being interested in a widower and a child in a coma."

"Okay, wow, I was only asking a question. I didn't mean to put you on the defensive."

"I'm not on the defense. I'm just saying that she seems to have a good handle on relationships, despite the fact that she's single and has never had a child."

"Well, that's important."

Dick turned to see what was happening on the television and took it off mute.

"Oh look. Let's get back to this exciting show, shall we?"

Dick had effectively changed the subject, Dan noted. By turning on the volume, their attention was drawn back to the castaways who were cooking rats over an open fire and congratulating themselves on a task well done. They both became engrossed immediately and nothing further was said about the social worker, even during commercials. But she lingered in the back of Dan's mind all evening long.

## Chapter Seven

Weekends were Tara's official days off, but she rarely observed any break in her routine. Though she didn't have any scheduled appointments on her calendar, she always stayed in touch with her clients. This Saturday was no different from the rest.

A phone call woke her from a very sensuous dream with a mystery man early in the morning. It was Susan Stevens, Henry's daughter.

"Hi. I'm sorry if I woke you, Miss Singer."

Tara yawned and sat up in bed. "No, it's all right. I was going to get up soon, anyway," she lied.

"I heard you wanted to know about Daddy's funeral arrangements. We're having a wake tonight and tomorrow night at the Thompson Funeral Home in Wellington. It will be from six to nine. Do you need directions on how to get there or would you just prefer to attend the funeral on Monday?"

"I'd like to come to the wake tonight, if you don't mind. I can find directions to the place online. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No. Thanks for the offer, but we've got it pretty much under control. Daddy was very considerate. He had everything planned out. We found a file in his drawer with all his final requests. It was almost like he knew this was going to happen. He mentioned you too, so he must have updated it recently. I'm looking forward to meeting you in person. I understand we're a lot alike."

"Yes, your father talked about our similarities quite often. I'm so sorry we have to meet under these circumstances."

She heard sobbing at the other end of the phone.

"I'm sorry. Yes, me too. We're going to miss him terribly. Well, I hate to cut this short, but I have a list of people I have to contact regarding the wake. I'm sure we'll speak later."

"Yes, I'll see you at the wake."

Tara looked at the clock after she hung up. Seven a.m. What an ungodly hour to be getting up on a Saturday morning! She yawned and was surprised by the cat jumping on her stomach. Symphony had leapt off the bed when the phone rang, but now that Tara was finished with the call, she came back. Symphony walked across her stomach and lay upon her chest, purring loudly.

"Okay, so now I suppose you think I'm awake and should feed you, right?"

The cat bumped the top of her head against Tara's chin. Tara reached up and stroked the cat's head with both hands, then worked her way down the cat's flanks.

Symphony purred even louder. Tara took that as a yes. She held the cat's face with both hands and looked into her amazing blue cat eyes.

"Well, let me get up and feed you." The cat jumped off the bed and ran toward the kitchen. Tara followed, walking sluggishly and yawning loudly.

While opening a can of tuna, she remembered she hadn't made an appointment for the psychic reading with Lucretia. She shook her head and smiled. She couldn't help putting everyone else's needs first. She made a mental note to call at a respectable hour later today to make an appointment.

With the cat fed, she crawled back under her covers and checked the alarm clock to ensure it was set for nine a.m. Within minutes, she drifted back to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara always felt uncomfortable entering the funeral parlor where the body was laid out. Perhaps it was the aura of sadness that permeated the room or perhaps it was the depressing organ music piped in. Tara knew the dearly departed had no need for any staged presentation, as they were already on a new journey, but the ritual was more for family and friends to pay their last respects to someone they cherished and to show support for the family members. She acknowledged that fact as she entered the Thompson Funeral Home. A very stiff, formal man in a tuxedo greeted her at the door and asked her the name of the party she was visiting. When she answered, he directed her to Henry's parlor. Another prim and proper lady offered her coffee as she walked by, which she turned down.

Both sides of the small room were filled with two medium-sized floral displays of gladiolas and roses. In the center, thirty chairs were set in theater style. Spotlights highlighted Henry's copper and silver coffin at the head of the room, flanked by two larger floral displays of lilies. One had a white sash reading "Beloved Father" and the other had a sash which read "Beloved Husband". The room was dimly lit and smelled a bit like lilies. On a table at the entrance of the room, Tara saw a sign-in book, so she stopped and wrote down her name and address. People were mingling around the room, talking in hushed tones. A young woman in her mid-thirties who resembled Tara stood near the coffin. She was dressed in all black and dabbed her eyes as she spoke to a gray-haired, stoop-shouldered lady. When she noticed Tara, she appeared to excuse herself and came directly toward her, with a tall, good-looking dark-haired man in an expensive tailored suit in tow.

"You must be Tara. I'm Susan and this is my husband Seth."

"Nice to meet you." Tara shook their hands, looking from one to the other.

"It was so sweet of you to come. Daddy talked about you often. I feel like I know you."

Tara smiled and nodded. She felt the same, although all she really knew about Susan was that she was married to a politician.

"Yes, he spoke of you often also. I'm really going to miss him."

Susan's eyes misted over and she took a deep breath to compose herself. She looked toward the coffin. "I can't say it was unexpected. Daddy really hasn't been happy for some time now. I guess I just wanted him to stay around for my own personal reasons. But he missed my mother too much. I'm going to miss him terribly too. Did you want to see him?"

"Yes, I would."

Tara walked slowly to the coffin with Susan. Her husband stayed behind, delayed by a question from a young blonde woman, who Tara understood was a distant relative.

They stopped in front of the coffin. She noted a picture of Henry and his wife propped against the cream-colored satin of the inside of the coffin top. Tara recognized the petite, gray-haired woman in the picture from the wallet-sized photo he carried around with him. The first time he met Tara, he proudly displayed the photograph, telling her that he never went anywhere without a picture of his sweetheart. Even in death, he had her near. There was a big smile on his face in the picture.

Tara looked down at his corpse and saw a stranger. Although the man resembled Henry, it was only the shell of the person she knew. The funeral director had done an admirable job dressing him and fixing his hair just so, but the expression on his face looked unnatural. Henry had always been so animated, and that special quality just couldn't be captured in death.

"It's hard to see him like this, but I know he's with Mom and that's what helps me get through this." Susan's smile wavered as her bottom lip quivered. Tears glistened in her eyes.

"I know exactly what you mean." Tara envisioned him holding Gertie's hand and walking among the clouds with her.

"You know, Daddy really loved coming to visit with you. He said you had the patience of a saint and a heart of an angel. You listened to all of his stories and sympathized with him. He didn't think anyone could understand what he was going through, but he found you to be most compassionate."

"Well, thank you. I was fascinated by your father's stories and always looked forward to his visits. He was such a sweet man. I just tried to help him get through a tough time."

"I know. He missed Mom so much. I imagine it's hard to be up there in years and to have outlived most of your friends and family." She looked around the room. "We have a few distant relatives here, but most of the people are either neighbors or people he met in the hospital."

"Well, nevertheless, it's a nice turn-out of people who wish to pay their last respects."

Susan sighed.



"We're going to bury him next to Mom here in Florida, just as he requested, but that means I won't be able to visit the grave more than once a year. I'll come back on the anniversary of his death, but that's the best I can do. Our lives are hectic, to say the least."

"Yes, he told me about how busy you are at your jobs. But don't worry. He'll hear you speaking to him, even if you're not at the gravesite. Henry knows how much you loved him. If you'd like, I'll place flowers on his grave every so often for you."

"Oh, that would mean so much to me. I can't thank you enough. I'll send you money so you can buy fresh flowers."

"It would be my pleasure."

Several ladies approached and drew Susan's attention from Tara. She looked back at the body lying in the coffin and placed a kiss upon her fingers and touched his cheek.

"Goodbye, Henry." She took one last look at the picture of him and Gertie. Their faces glowed with happiness that exuded from within. She wondered what they looked like when they were younger. Gertie was still an attractive woman, even in her later years. They must have had a good life together. She sighed. Henry and Gertie were yet another example of how true love withstands the test of time. She couldn't wait to find someone who cared for her as much as he did Gertie.

Tara looked at her watch. It was getting late and she wanted to get home to make that appointment with Lucretia. Besides, she didn't want to take up all of Susan's time, as she had other guests to visit with. When Susan turned to her after breaking off a conversation with a neighbor of her father's, she took advantage of that moment to say her farewell.

"I really have to get running here. It was so nice to finally meet you in person. I look forward to keeping in touch with you."

Susan gave her a warm hug, which lasted a long time. When she pulled back to look at Tara, she had a peaceful expression on her face.

"The pleasure is all mine. Thank you so much for being with Daddy in his last days. It meant a great deal to him and it means a lot to me. And yes, I will be in touch. I'll send you the information about the burial site. I think the cemetery is close to your home."

"That's fine. I'll make sure he has flowers on his grave."

As Tara left the funeral home, she stopped at her car and looked back at the building. Her thoughts drifted to Henry's face, not in death, but in life. Unbidden tears came to her eyes and she swiped them with the back of her hand. Suddenly, she sensed someone hugging her, even though no one was near her. She smiled and the tears came even harder. Henry never left without giving her a big hug first.

It was nine p.m. by the time Tara got around to calling Lucretia. She worried that she might not be able to reach her because it was a Saturday night, when most people

go out. She was delighted when Lucretia answered the phone and set an appointment for the next day at two p.m. at Lucretia's house, which was only ten miles from where Tara lived.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lucretia's home was easy to find. She had given Tara easy-to-follow instructions and was identifiable by the fact that the home was the only one in the upscale neighborhood with turquoise trim. Tara knocked on the front door and a light-skinned older black man smiled warmly at her and welcomed her into the immaculate house.

"You must be Tara. It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Lucretia's husband, Manny. She's with a client right now. Come on in." He shook Tara's hand and she felt immediately comfortable.

"Thank you."

"Please have a seat in the living room. Lucretia will be with you shortly." He motioned to the back of the house, where a piano occupied most of the right-hand side of the room. Two couches set in an "L" shape, a floor lamp and a coffee table full of magazines set in neat rows shared the piano's space.

"Thank you."

He disappeared into the kitchen and Tara moved into the living room and sat upon the soft turquoise leather couch. She heard a bong behind her and turned to look at a white wood and glass grandmother's clock standing in a corner of the dining room, its golden chains and dangling golden pinecones moving slightly. A second later, a coo-coo clock chimed to the right of her, then another wooden musical clock by the piano opened its doors to display a Dutch girl carrying a basket of flowers across the front of the clock. Curious, she noted the entire room was filled with clocks of every shape and size. The psychic definitely had a fascination with clocks.

Manny cleared his throat behind her. She turned around, startled.

"Oh I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Can I offer you something to drink or to eat?"

"Oh that would be nice. I'd just like a glass of ice water, if you don't mind."

"Are you sure? We have other things...iced tea, soda, coffee."

"No thanks. Water will be fine."

"And how about a little snack? I've got cookies, fruit, cheese and crackers, anything sound of interest to you?"

"Just the water, please."

He disappeared and reappeared within a minute, handing her a tall glass of ice cold water.

"The other client arrived a few minutes late and my wife likes to give each person their full half hour."

"Oh that's okay. I understand. I'm not in any rush. I don't have any appointments today. I'm happy sitting here admiring all of these clocks."

He laughed and looked around the room. "Yes, my wife is a real collector. You could say it's her obsession. She started this hobby years ago. Thank goodness we have a high tolerance for noise, because at certain times of the day, they all go off simultaneously and it's enough to make you deaf."

"I imagine so."

"Yes, we are very aware of time passing in this house. The one good thing about these clocks is that they remind us of how important it is not to waste time. Clocks surround us and mark the passage of seconds, minutes and hours. We realize how precious time is when we're reminded by these timepieces of how easily it slips by. Well, better not get me started on this topic, because I have a whole repertoire about these clocks that could put you right to sleep if you're not interested. Anyway, if you need anything else, I'm just around the corner in the kitchen. Please don't hesitate to come in and ask for whatever you need."

Tara nodded. "Thanks. I appreciate that."

She thought how fortunate Lucretia was to have found such a sweet man with a high tolerance for her love of clocks. The fact that he was also gracious and cordial to all the strangers who entered their home was just as amazing.

The double doors to an adjoining room opened a few minutes later and an auburn-haired young woman walked out with a tall black woman. She shook Lucretia's hand and left. Lucretia closed the front door behind the woman and walked toward Tara, smiling.

Though they had never met, Tara felt as though she had known Lucretia a lifetime. Her smile showed off perfect white teeth, and her honey-brown eyes sparkled. She was several inches taller than Tara, even in flat-soled shoes.

"I'm ready for you now."

Tara picked up her drink and followed Lucretia into her sanctuary. The room was small, yet seemed quite open and airy with lots of sunlight streaming in through the tall windows, just like the ones at her house, Tara thought. Lucretia had painted the walls in marbled lavender and baby blue and her leather couch was a pale pink. All around the room there were statues of fairies and angels and, of course, more clocks. The quiet kind. Tara was relieved about that.

Lucretia indicated that Tara should sit on the couch and Lucretia settled into an easy chair across from her, crossing her hands over her stomach.

"So, since this is your first time here, let me tell you how I work. I don't do cards or use a crystal ball. I am in contact with the spirits. I get visions and I interpret those visions to you. I will cover all aspects of your life, but if I miss something or you need more specific information, you can ask afterward. But please, I would appreciate it if you would hold your questions until afterward, as I may answer them in the vision. Does that sound okay with you?"

Tara had never been to a psychic who did not use some sort of divination tool, such as runes or tarot cards or a crystal ball, but she was game for a new experience.

"Sure, that's fine with me."

Lucretia smiled at her. She arranged her slender frame comfortably into the chair and focused at a spot above Tara's head.

"So let's see what's going on in your life. Hmm. Well, first thing I want to tell you is that I see you work with people, talking to them, helping them with their problems."

"Yes," Tara answered, not sure whether she was to confirm Lucretia's comments, but thinking it couldn't hurt.

"You like what you do. You get very involved with them. In fact, you have a hard time separating your job from your own life."

"Well..."

"No, no. Don't say anything now. Just let me continue, then we can talk about it later."

"Oh, okay," Tara said, rearranging herself in her seat.

"You work alone, but you have a superior that you report to. It's a male. He's quite concerned about you at the moment. You can expect him to pay you a visit soon."

Tara recalled that she forgot to return her boss's calls. She made a mental note to do that the first thing Monday morning so she didn't get that visit that Lucretia was telling her about.

"You're single, you've never been married and you have no children. But I see a man very near you. He's good-looking and has light-colored hair. You either already know him or will meet him soon."

"Oh! I like that."

"Yes, but there may be difficulties in this relationship. You will need to work on it if you wish it to succeed."

"Okay."

"Your parents are alive, but they are not close right now. I see them moving."

Tara smiled. *Well, she thought, I guess being on a ship constitutes moving.*

"You are living in a place you own. You are happy there. But I see you moving by the end of this year."

*No way*, Tara thought. She definitely would not want to give up her residence. She loved where she lived.

"Your health is good, but you could devote more time to exercise."

Tara smiled. She realized that her busy schedule interfered with the time she wanted to go to the gym and, in fact, had made a New Year's resolution to get back into a regular routine soon. Though it was February, there was still time to abide by that resolution.

"Money is not a problem for you. You make a decent living and do not need much. You are young and not concerned about your future, yet, as you know, you will not be alone."

Tara realized she was right on that point. She was not money motivated, and as long as she covered her day-to-day expenses, she was happy.

"As far as travel, I don't see you taking any trips soon, but I would recommend it. Vacation is time for relaxation and is a great stress reliever."

"Oh, I don't really have time for that."

"I see."

Lucretia raised a brow and shook her head. She looked around her room at her clocks. Tara was reminded about her husband's comments about time.

"So, do you have any questions you'd like to ask me?"

"Well, actually, I do. You mentioned a man coming into my life. What kind of problem will we have?"

"I'm not being shown anything specific, except to say that it has something to do with the way you do things. Maybe it will be the way you make the bed or cook the food. I'm not sure. It's still hazy right now. Once you meet him and get into the relationship, I may be able to pinpoint it for you better. You know, I sense that you have the gift of seeing also. Perhaps if you look into yourself, you'll find the answer."

Tara shook her head.

"No, my gift is being able to envision what others go through and putting myself in their position. It doesn't work on me."

"Oh, that's a shame. I still feel you will know what the answer is and how to solve it. So just be aware that you are the key."

"I'm the key. Okay. If you say so."

"Do you have any other questions?"

"Yes, about my moving. I can't imagine that happening. I am very happy where I am."

"I know you are happy, but be open to the possibility that you might be just as happy somewhere else if the right situation arises."

"Well, we'll see."

"Anything else?"

"There is one more thing. I am trying to help this little girl come out of a coma. Will I succeed?"

"I believe you will be successful, though it may take time. Any other questions?"

"Not that I can think of."

"All right. You have three days to call back if you think of anything else you wish to ask me. Beyond that, you'd have to make another appointment."

"I understand. Well, thank you. It was a pleasure meeting you."

Lucretia stood and stretched. Tara stood also, taking cash out of her pocket and handing it to Lucretia. "That's the amount you mentioned, correct?"

Lucretia counted the bills. "Yes, perfect." They walked together to the front door.

"Good luck, Tara."

"Thanks." She waved goodbye and went home.

## Chapter Eight

Felicity Adams paid a surprise visit to Tara Monday morning. Her appointment had been set for the following day, but she had gotten the days mixed up. She looked a lot better than she did four days prior. She wasn't as timid as she had been on her first visit. In fact, Tara was delighted when Felicity walked right into the office and gave Tara a big hug, then sat down in front of her. Felicity's bruised face still needed to heal, but her eye was open and looked less painful than the last time she had seen her. Tara worried more about her bruised emotions. Those would take a lot longer to heal and she would help her through this turbulent time.

"It's good to see you again, Felicity."

"I'm glad to see you too. I did as you told me. I'm in that shelter you recommended, and the people there are real nice to me."

"Oh I'm so glad you took my advice. What about your belongings? Did you go back to the house and get your stuff?"

"Sure did. The police picked me up and stood guard while I went in and got my stuff packed up. Thank the Lord he was nowhere's around! That was good, 'cause I didn't know what I was gonna say to him. I was really scared to go back there. I rushed packin' up my stuff. There wasn't much that I cared to take with me. Mostly my clothes. It was hard to leave there, seein' as that's the only home I've had since I got married three years ago. But now that I'm gone for a while, I keep wonderin' if that was the best decision."

"Yes, it was. Think about it, Felicity. The good news is you don't have to worry about being beat up anymore or fearing for your or your baby's life."

Felicity kicked at the floor.

"Something wrong?"

"Well, Miss Singer, I'm afraid to go back to my job because I just know he's gonna come for me there. That's the only place he'll know where to find me. And the police can't protect me all the time. I was wondering..."

Tara realized that Felicity hadn't seen the news the other night. Perhaps it was best that she didn't know he had come after her with his gun and that three of her co-workers had been shot. She knew the employer wouldn't want Felicity back now, considering the danger her soon-to-be-ex-husband had put them in. All of the other employees were undergoing psychiatric consultation as a result of the assault on their place of work and their business had taken a nose dive since patrons were afraid to come back so soon after the upsetting incident the other night.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Well, could you help me find another job?"

Tara looked at the young, pregnant woman. She had been trying to find another job for her, but so far, no luck. It was going to be hard, but not necessarily impossible. She had assigned the task to Jeanine because she had some contacts Tara didn't. Tara had faith that, together, they were going to find a match for Felicity. It would just take time. Not wanting to let Felicity know that they had come up empty handed at this point, she didn't reveal their unsuccessful efforts.

"Of course, Felicity. I'll see what I can do. Jeanine can help you write a resume and then I'll go to work on my contacts to see what I can find for you."

Felicity came over and gave Tara a big hug.

"You're a lifesaver, Miss Singer! I can't tell you how much this means to me."

Tara pulled back from her. "We'll do our best, Felicity. But it may take some time, so I don't want you getting discouraged. In the meantime, stay at the shelter and keep a low profile. I will call you when I have some news and then you can venture out, but nothing before that. Promise me?"

"Oh yes. Thank you!"

"Good. And let's get together next week to discuss your progress. I know it's hard to go through what you did, and I want to talk with you about it."

A shadow crossed Felicity's features. Tara realized she had struck a chord, and though Felicity was putting on quite a show of optimism, Tara knew that not too far beneath the surface lived an insecure woman. Tara was concerned about her emotional wellbeing. She needed to talk to someone, and Tara would be there for her. Together, they would sort through her emotions and Felicity would come out of it a more confident person.

"Yes, I'd like that. I don't have any friends right now who I can talk to and the family is mad at me."

"Oh Felicity, I'm sorry. Was your family supportive of your marriage to Jamal?"

Felicity turned away and bit her nail.

"My mama was happy that I got out of the house, but Daddy didn't approve of Jamal. He didn't approve of any of my boyfriends."

"Why do you think he felt that way?"

Felicity's eyes glazed over with tears. She nervously tugged at her clothing and Tara could tell she had hit upon a sore spot. Her happy demeanor was shattered and she became quiet and despondent.

"Felicity, I can tell you're upset about something. Do you want to talk about it?"

The young woman shook her head.

Tara felt it important to delve into her past so she could understand Felicity's present behavior. She went into her telepathic mode.



*She was only ten, but had been an early bloomer. Her father and mother argued every night at bedtime. She'd lie in bed, unable to sleep because of all the shouting, frozen in her position under the covers, shivering with fear. She knew the routine. Daddy would be in soon to get comfort from her because he wouldn't get it from her mother. Tears of shame slipped down her cheeks.*

*The door opened and light from the hallway fell across her bed. He locked the door behind him and she knew what he was doing as he walked to her bed. She heard his footsteps coming closer, heard the slide of his zipper and his pants down his legs, then the belt buckle hit the floor with a thud. She had the covers pulled up to her neck, yet that didn't deter him. His big hand grasped the covers and easily tossed them aside. The bed squeaked as he mounted her, pushing the flimsy material of her nightgown up her thighs until she was exposed. Hot, angry tears trickled down her cheeks as he spent himself on her, then as he got off her, reminded, "Not a word of this to your mother or I'll beat you 'til you're almost dead."*

Tara pulled out of the vision, having seen and heard much more than she needed.

"Felicity, you don't have to continue in abusive relationships. I know you're having a hard time now. Jamal isn't the first man who's hurt you. I know. Trust me, things will only get better." She reached over and placed her hand upon Felicity's.

Felicity nodded. Her words were choked with emotion. "I know, Miss Singer. I heard the sayin' 'when you're on the bottom, there ain't nowhere's to go but up'. I keep that in mind, and it helps me through the day."

"That's right. It's a good thing to remember. Keep believing it and it will come true."

Felicity wiped the tears from her eyes and looked down at her stomach. She rubbed her hand across it gently.

"I felt a flutter for the first time today. It's amazing!"

Tara smiled. Though the bump was still very small, the pregnancy was noticeable. She felt a warm sensation on her abdomen as she sensed the love Felicity felt for her baby.

"Yes, and that baby knows how much you love it. You are going to make a wonderful mother and will experience much joy and happiness. Just wait and see."

"I think you're right. I want this baby to grow up in a happy home, knowing that her momma loves her."

"You're on the right track, Felicity. Now take a deep breath and say to yourself, 'I am going to survive this. And I'll be stronger for having gone through it.' I'm going to help you."

Felicity managed a smile and nodded to Tara.

"Thank you, Miss Singer. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Be well, Felicity."

Felicity stood and gave Tara a big hug.

"I'll see you at my next appointment."

"Bye, Felicity."

Felicity left her office. Tara was pleased with Felicity's progress. She felt good about her future.

Mr. Johnson's arrival startled her. A tall, large man, he filled her doorway, blocking the light from the reception area. Tara felt the heat of his stare on her back as she typed on her computer. She swung around to see a scowl on her superior's face. *Damn*, she thought. *I meant to call him, but I didn't get time this morning.*

She attempted to sound cheerful. "Oh hi, Mr. Johnson, won't you come in?"

"Yes. I will." The monotone in his deep timbred voice sent a shiver up her back.

He strode into the room like he owned it and walked directly to the coffee pot to pour a steaming cup of black coffee. Tara shuffled papers on her desk, tidying up before he came to sit before her.

"So why don't you return my phone calls? Are you ignoring me?"

Tara stared at the man before her. His commanding appearance, with his perfectly groomed salt-and-pepper hair, the tailored suit and his manicured nails always made her feel self-conscious about her relaxed attire. Though crow's feet crinkled the corners of his dark brown eyes, he was still a very attractive man for fifty. Perhaps she felt a little intimidated by him, but there really was no excuse for her not to call him. He had given her a lot of leeway in her job, allowing her to do what she needed without him breathing down her back. All he required was a summary every so often to keep him abreast of her progress. The problem, she discovered when she gave her first report, was that he was a man of little patience. He wanted quick results, then to have her move on to the next patient. Tara didn't work like that and he had become annoyed.

"Oh no. That's not the case at all. In fact, I was going to call you this morning, but I had an unexpected visit from a client."

"I see." He tapped his fingers against the wooden desk.

"Mr. Johnson, I've just been putting in a lot of hours lately."

His brows raised and she knew she had hit a nerve.

"That's exactly what I've been meaning to talk to you about, Tara. I understand that you have been working a great deal with a Mr. Dan Turner. What's taking so long on that assignment? All you had to do was talk to him about the possibility of losing his daughter."

"Well, sir, it's not all that simple. I believe his daughter will survive, and I've been helping him deal with a lot of emotional issues from his wife's recent death."

"Have you discussed the girl's health with the doctor to see what her prognosis is?"

"No, not yet."

"Then don't you think it's quite presumptuous of you to assume that she will recover?"

Tara shifted in her chair, uncomfortable with the way the conversation was heading.

"Actually, I connected with the child, and though she's not ready yet to emerge from the coma she's in, I have faith that she will survive."

He crossed his arms over his chest.

"You *connected* with a child in a coma. Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know, Tara, we have many patients who need our help. You spend more time with your clients than any of the other social workers. I am concerned that you are becoming much too involved with them. You need to do your work then step back."

"Sir, if you need me to take on more clients, then just let me know. I'll do my best to fit them into my schedule."

"You're not getting my point. I want you to spend less time with your patients."

Tara felt like she was sinking into a pool of quicksand. No matter what reasoning she used, it simply wouldn't fly with him.

"But if you could just give me a little more time with Mr. Turner, I'm sure you'll see positive results."

His gaze narrowed upon her. Since he didn't answer immediately, she hoped he was contemplating giving in to her request. Finally, after a few anxious moments of holding her breath awaiting an answer, he replied.

"All right. You have two weeks. And that's it. Wrap up that case. I have quite a few more patients that need your specialized attention. You know, no one else has your gifts and you are better qualified than most to handle certain clients. I need you to be available very soon."

Tara breathed a sigh of relief. *Yes, a reprieve!* She would do her best to work under the time constraints he had given her.

"Thank you, sir. I'm so grateful."

He rose from his seat, downing the last of his coffee before setting the empty cup on her desk.

"Good day, then. And the next time I call you, you had better return my message."

Once he left her office, Tara leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Talk about needing a moment to regroup! She focused on her mental relaxation technique and calmed her frazzled nerves. Mr. Johnson truly knew how to get under her skin.

Tara walked out to the reception room, crossing slowly to the couch. Jeanine was on the phone, but she could tell by the look she was getting that her assistant was ready to

burst with one of her lectures. She took a seat, fortifying her strength for the barrage she knew was coming. Jeanine hung up the phone and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I hate to say it, but I told you so. How long did you think you could get away with not calling him back? I kept count of how many calls he made to you. Ten. Ten calls in five days, and you got every message. But no, you know better. Well, from the look on your face, I think he gave you a stern warning."

"Thanks, Jeanine. I needed that."

Jeanine walked over, sat on the couch and gave her a hug.

"You know I love you and will do whatever I can to help you. But sometimes you get so wrapped up in things that you can't see it from an outsider's perspective."

Tara nodded her head.

"You're right. I do get emotionally attached to my clients. But that's the way I am. Being an empath, it comes naturally to me. I *feel* what they feel, and it's hard to stay aloof when your heart hurts for someone."

"I know, baby. If anyone understands you, it's me. I wish there was something I could do for you."

Tara smiled weakly.

"I appreciate the offer. I guess you're doing what you can by nagging me. Please just keep it up."

Jeanine patted her back. "You can count on that, boss."

## Chapter Nine

Tara caught Dan reading the book she loaned him when she arrived at the hospital the following night. She hadn't told him she was coming, but given the short time frame she had to work in, she felt compelled to take as much opportunity as possible to be with Amy.

"Hey," she said, interrupting his reading.

"Hey yourself." He put the book down and smiled at her.

"We didn't get a chance to confirm your next appointment, so I thought I'd drop by and discuss it with you. I also hoped to be able to connect with Amy again."

He pulled up a chair next to him and patted the seat.

"Come on in."

She walked in and sat beside him. He looked much more relaxed and in a better frame of mind than he did the other day.

"So, any word on her progress?" She nodded to the sleeping child.

"Yeah, Doc was here earlier and said she's healing faster than they thought. He thinks she has a strong will to survive."

"That's wonderful news! Oh Dan, I just know it will be all right."

He reached over to grasp his daughter's hand. Tara noted that her coloring seemed much more natural, not the pasty pallor that she first had.

"Well, your optimism is rubbing off on me. I can't help looking forward to the day I can take her home."

Tara reached into the plastic bag she was carrying and produced a seven-inch red satin heart filled with chocolates.

"Oh wow. Thanks, I didn't know you cared."

Tara laughed.

"No, silly. It's for Amy. I told her she would have a big, red heart filled with candy waiting for her for Valentine's Day, and that's tomorrow."

"It is? Gosh, I didn't even realize it. I've lost track of the days."

"Well, luckily I didn't. So here you go." She handed him the heart.

"You're really very considerate. Did I tell you that?"

"I'm sure you did."

The dark circles under his eyes had faded to a faint gray and, even this late in the day, he had no shadow of a beard. His blue jeans and cream-colored pull-over looked fresh.

"It looks like you had time to catch up on your sleep."

He smiled and she noticed for the first time that he had dimples.

"Yes, Lisa babysat Friday night and I got a good night's sleep. I don't know what I'd do without them. They've helped me in so many ways over the past six months. I can't even begin to tell you."

Tara patted his hand.

"You don't have to. I already know."

"Oh yeah. Empathic telepath. Guess you know almost as much about my life as they do at this point."

Tara nodded.

"So is this a good time to contact Amy again?"

"Yeah, no one's coming around tonight. She's all yours. Oh, and can you tell her how much I love her and can't wait to be with her again?"

"Of course."

*The fog surrounded Tara once more. This time, she felt more confident about her ability to locate the child. She knew how to reach out with her thoughts and to find the direction in which to head.*

*Amy was seated in her little chair across from Teddy. They were enjoying a cup of pretend tea. When Tara arrived, she heard Amy reprimanding Teddy, who had a teacup stuffed onto one arm. The teacup wouldn't stay upright.*

*"No, no, you have to hold the cup like this."*

*Amy's little pinkie stuck up in the air as she held the cup to her mouth. Her little lips pursed into a sweet little pout. She shook her head and her riotous curls bobbed around.*

*"Teddy! You're doing it all wrong."*

*"Excuse me," Tara said, and Amy twisted in her chair to see her.*

*"Yes?" Tara loved the sound of Amy's little girl voice.*

*"Hi. Remember me?"*

*The child patted her index finger against her lips and rolled her eyes to the ceiling. Tara could tell she was thinking.*

*"Oh yes. You're Tara."*

*"That's right. I was hoping we could spend some time together."*

*Amy looked over at Teddy and put her hands on her hips.*

*"Well, I guess we can, 'cause Teddy just doesn't know how to have tea. He keeps spilling it all over himself when I pour him a cup."*

*Tara looked at the teddy bear leaning to one side, the cup awkwardly dangling from his arm.*

*"Oh dear. It does look like he's having a problem. Maybe tea isn't his thing."*

*"I guess not. We always have a good time, but not today."*

Tara's heart went out to the little one. It must be very hard to be all alone with no one to talk to but a stuffed animal. She sat on Amy's disheveled bed and looked around the room. Amy had apparently been playing since she was gone. Her closet door was ajar and clothes were scattered all over the floor. Mommy-sized shoes and hats were tossed in disarray. The toy box was open and several dolls were lying on the carpet near it, half dressed. Even the books that had been neatly stacked during Tara's last visit were now lying on top of the bookshelf.

"I see you've been busy."

"Yes, the weather is bad outside, so we can't go out. We've been playing in my room a lot. I hope Mommy doesn't get mad because we made such a mess."

"Oh, I'm sure she'll forgive you."

Amy suddenly got very sad. Her little face got as cloudy as the weather outside.

"Mommy had to go away. She said she couldn't be with me anymore. I don't know what I did to make her mad at me."

Tara opened her arms and Amy ran right into them, placing her head against Tara's chest. She patted the child's back.

"Oh sweetie, you didn't do anything wrong. It was just time for Mommy to leave. But you still have your daddy."

"I haven't seen my daddy in a long time. I miss him. Sometimes I think I hear his voice, but he doesn't come to my room."

Tara lifted the little girl's chin and looked into her eyes.

"Would you like to play a game? Your daddy can play with us."

A big smile came across Amy's face and she clapped her hands.

"Oh yes! What is it?"

"It's called 'Hide and Seek the Big Red Heart'."

Amy pulled back to look at her and shook her head.

"I never heard of that game."

"Well, it's 'Hide and Seek' with a twist. If you win, you get a big, red heart filled with chocolate candy."

Amy's eyes grew wide.

"I love candy!"

"Me too. That's why I thought you'd like this game."

"I don't understand. How can my daddy play when he's not here?"

"That's the trick. You see, your daddy is hiding outside in the fog with the red heart. We have to try to find him."

Amy looked toward her bedroom door.

"I'm afraid to go out there."

"I know. But it's not scary like you think. I've been there. You just put your hands out in front of you like this," Tara demonstrated, "and then walk slowly forward. If you find someone, you'd bump into them with your hands first."

*"I don't know..."*

*"Hmm. Well, there is another way to play. You can be 'it' and stay in your room, with your hands covering your eyes. You'll count to twenty and we'll hide. Instead of you going into the fog, you just have to wake up and you'll see us. Is that easier?"*

*"But how do I wake up?"*

*"Just tell yourself, 'I'm awake.' Keep repeating it and you will wake up."*

*"Okay, I can do that."*

*Tara smiled.*

*"That's great. All right. You start counting, with your hands over your eyes. And no peeking, young lady. I'm going to run outside and hide. Ready?"*

*Amy smiled and bobbed her head up and down.*

*"Yes, ready!"*

*"Good. Okay, start counting."*

*Amy put her hands over her eyes.*

*"One, two, three..."*

*Tara backed out of the room into the fog and, in the next instant, was seated next to Dan.*

*"Well, this is it."*

*"Pardon? Oh you're back. What do you mean?"*

*"I've got Amy playing a game of 'Hide and Seek the Big Red Heart'. I told her you're holding it for her and she has to find you, but in order to do it she has to tell herself to wake up."*

*Dan's eyes grew large.*

*"Do you think it will work?"*

*"Well, we'll find out soon enough. She's counting to twenty."*

*"Oh." There was a pregnant pause and Tara wondered why he had such a stricken look on his face. "Not good."*

*"Why not?"*

*"She can only count to ten."*

*They both looked into each others' eyes. An unspoken "Oh shit!" passed between them. After fifteen minutes had passed and nothing happened, Tara dropped her head, disappointed by her failure to bring Amy out of her coma. Dan said nothing, sitting quietly by her, his full attention on his daughter.*

*"I'm sorry. I guess we'll have to try it again another time."*

*"Why not now?"*

*"I'm drained. For some reason, when I go into the coma, I don't have as much energy when I emerge from it. I think it has something to do with the increased mental activity I use to make contact."*



"I see. Well, you tried, and that's what counts."

Dan made the statement to make her feel better, she knew, but Tara could tell how disappointed he was by the look of despair on his face. She really didn't know what else to do at the moment, so she figured she should leave him alone with his daughter.

"Okay, well, I'm going home. Why don't you call tomorrow morning and see if you can make an appointment with Jeanine to see me?"

"Sure."

With a heavy heart, she left the room, feeling as though she had let him down.

## Chapter Ten

The six helium-filled balloons were garish enough, but the foot-tall black number thirty made out of Styrofoam on her desk was just too much. Tara took one look at her office and turned to face her assistant, who had snuck up behind her and tossed confetti on her.

"Happy thirtieth birthday!" Jeanine screamed, then blew a shrill tone on a paper horn.

"You're lucky no one is around to hear you, or you'd be in big trouble now."

"Oh come on. Celebrate the days of your life. Remember, you'll never be this young again."

"Yeah, and I've never been this old before either!"

"I baked you a cake too. Of course, it doesn't look as good as the professional ones from the bakery, but you did say you liked home baking." She pointed to Tara's desk where she had placed a chocolate frosted cake with the number thirty printed in bold below the words "Happy Birthday Tara".

"Oh Jeanine. You didn't have to go through so much trouble. I really wanted to let this birthday slip by unnoticed."

Jeanine put her hands on her hips.

"Oh *hell* no. There ain't no slipping goin' on here. Girl, this is your birthday and we are gonna celebrate, whether you like it or not. I'm takin' you to lunch, so you better not have made any plans." She poked her index finger into Tara's chest.

"Ow. That hurt. Okay, you win. We're having lunch together. Does that mean I get to pick the place?"

"Sure, as long as it is local and reasonably priced. I'm game."

Tara hugged Jeanine.

"You're too much. I love you."

"Well, I love you too. But before we get to that lunch, you have an appointment this morning with Jimmy's mother. She'll be here in..." She looked at her watch. "Exactly ten minutes. So if you want to go brush the confetti out of your hair in the restroom, you better get going."

Tara reached up and felt little pieces of paper all through her long hair. She grimaced. She held one between her fingers up to Jeanine's face.

"Thanks. I'll remember that little trick for your birthday."

A very pretty brunette in her late thirties was sitting in the reception area when Tara returned from the restroom. She walked up to her and smiled.

"You must be Jimmy Castalone's mother."

The woman looked up from the magazine she was perusing and smiled.

"Why, yes, I am. Are you Tara Singer?"

"Yes, won't you please come into my office?"

They walked side by side to Tara's office. Tara entered first and walked directly to the coffee machine.

"Can I offer you something to drink? I have coffee, hot water, juice."

"Sure, that would be nice. I'd love a decaf herbal tea if you have any. Oh, by the way, my new married name is Melanie Davis."

Tara poured herself a cup of coffee and made Melanie's herbal tea and brought them to the desk on a small, silver tray laden with spoons, sugar and creamer.

"I didn't know how you take yours, so I brought you sugar and creamer."

"Thank you."

"So, Jimmy tells me you wanted to speak with me. Is there a problem?"

Tara sat down and looked at the woman. She seemed quite polished, a nice dresser, someone who took care of herself. She appeared to be about six months pregnant.

"Mrs. Davis, I was asked to investigate your son's truancy problem and to find out what seems to be causing him to fight so much at school."

"Yes, the school told me someone would be speaking with Jimmy." Melanie took a sip of tea and set the cup down on the desk.

"When Jimmy didn't show up at school last Friday, I visited your home and found him at the basketball court. He had skipped school and said you were at work and didn't know that he was home again."

"I know. I got a call from the school that night telling me he hadn't attended classes. He mentioned that he had met you and gave me your card, saying you wanted to speak with me."

"Yes. We had a long talk and I think I understand what his problem is."

"If you do, I wish you'd tell me. He's become so withdrawn at home. He won't talk to me, and he never really got along with Richard."

"I know you had a really bad relationship with your first husband and you are very happy now."

She smiled and patted her rotund stomach.

"Yes, and I'm having Richard's baby in another three months."

"Congratulations. You must be thrilled. Do you know how Jimmy feels about having a sibling?"

"It's a little girl. Well, actually, no, I have no idea. Ever since he found out I'm pregnant, Jimmy's refused to talk to me. I don't know what to do."

"Well, Jimmy feels that you always take Richard's side, and you don't care about him. He hasn't made friends because you keep moving and his father told him he wouldn't want to take him in when he turns fourteen because he's living with a younger woman. He's worried that when you have this baby, he won't be part of the family anymore because you and Richard are making your own family. Are you aware that Jimmy has been having thoughts of suicide because he feels like an outcast?"

His mother gasped and grabbed her throat.

"Oh dear God! No!"

"Yes, and he's very depressed. He's getting into fights at school and he's lost all interest in studying. I think you need to take him to a psychologist who can give him some medication, but even before you do that, you need to have a serious one-on-one talk with him when Richard is not around."

"What am I to do?"

"Jimmy needs to know you still love him. He's been deprived of love most of his life. I get the feeling that you were so involved in fighting with his father that you really didn't have time to make Jimmy feel wanted. Then, when you married Richard, you were so intent on making that relationship work that you ignored Jimmy again. He's not happy when he goes to see his father either. I'm afraid it's serious and you need to take immediate action."

"Oh, thank you for telling me. I definitely will."

"Mrs. Davis, I spent time with your son. He's really a good kid, just misguided. I wouldn't want to see him sent to a juvenile detention home because he lashed out against society. Or worse still, found dead in a gutter. Please spend time with him and show him you care. And if you can possibly talk to Richard about the way he interacts with Jimmy, it would help so much. Jimmy has no real father figure in his life. He needs one, and Richard may not be his biological father, but he's the closest thing he has to one living in his house."

"Yes, I've spoken with Sam, his real father. Sam lives quite a distance away from us and only gets to see Jimmy once a month. He really has little to do with our son anymore. He's no role model and certainly does not want to administer any punishment for bad behavior. It all falls on us and then we're considered mean."

Tara shook her head.

"I know it's a hard place to be. But someone needs to take responsibility for Jimmy."

Melanie played with her coffee cup, swirling the spoon around and around.

"I guess you think I'm a pretty bad mother."

"No, that's not what I meant. Sometimes we get so involved in our day-to-day activities that we really don't notice how bad things have become. I think you just need

to take a more involved role in his life and he'll turn around in no time. He's at a critical time in his life, on the brink of becoming a teenager. And you know what hormones do to a kid during that phase of life."

"Yeah, I was wild."

"Well, let Jimmy know you understand and want to help him. Maybe involve him with some of the preparations for the baby and get involved in things he likes to do."

"Okay. I can do that. I don't know how to thank you. You've been so helpful."

"It's my job. I hope you'll report back to me and keep me informed of Jimmy's progress."

Melanie stood and shook Tara's hand.

"I'd love to give you good news. I'll do my best."

"That's all anyone can ask. Thank you for coming in."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan burst into her office after lunchtime like a whirlwind. She barely caught her breath before he picked her up and spun her around. She laughed at his enthusiasm.

"She's awake! She's awake. You did it. I can't thank you enough."

Tara put her arms on his shoulders and looked into Dan's smiling face.

"Oh my God! You mean, it worked? That's amazing."

"No, *you're* amazing. I fell asleep after you left last night and around seven this morning I felt her hand running through my hair. I looked up and she was staring at me. She barely managed a squeak, but she mouthed 'Daddy' to me. I cried and hugged her and kissed her and showed her the big, red heart. She gave me the most beautiful smile I ever saw."

"That's so great."

He twirled her around again then noticed all the balloons and flowers in her office.

"Hey, what's all this?"

He set her down and walked over to the cake and the "three-oh" sign, which she had set on the counter near the coffee pot.

"Oh Dan, it's nothing."

"Don't give me that. It's your birthday and it's Valentine's Day. Wow, this is a special day! There's so much to celebrate."

"Dan, I can't tell you how happy I am for you. What did the doctors say?"

He took a swipe of frosting on the tip of his finger and savored it against his tongue.

"Mmmm. That's good." He walked toward her grinning from ear to ear. "They said it's a miracle."

Tara felt tears welling up in her eyes. She wished Mr. Johnson was here right now to hear the good news.

He stopped in front of her once again...very close. Looking up at him, she noticed there was a new aura about him. One of confidence. She wasn't sure why, but it made her nervous. She took a step back.

"So when will she be able to go home?"

"They don't know yet. She's got to gain her strength back and start eating solid food again. We'll know more in a few days. The important thing is that she came back to me. And I owe it all to you."

"Dan, it's wonderful. You've been blessed with that second chance you wished for."

"Yes, I know."

Tara regarded the man standing before her. He radiated happiness. She could see it in his glowing face. The love and excitement he felt was palpable. Dan had crossed the threshold of despair and now greeted his future with great hope. This was the transformation she had hoped for.

"As soon as she is well enough to go home, we can begin her recovery. This is so exciting, Dan."

"I know. I couldn't wait to tell you, but I didn't want to leave her alone. When Dick and Lisa arrived, I asked if they would stay with her a few minutes while I came here. They agreed that you should be one of the first people to know about her recovery. They are with Amy right now. My parents are flying in from California Friday and my brother Jim is coming in from Texas in a few days. I'm putting them all up at the house. There's plenty of room."

"Do you mind if I stop by after work tonight to see Amy?"

"Are you kidding? I insist! After all, she's out of her coma thanks to you."

"I can't wait to see her."

He looked around the room at all the festive balloons.

"So what are you doing to celebrate your birthday tonight?"

"Oh, nothing, really. I celebrated at lunch today with Jeanine. That's good enough."

"No, it's not. This is a big day for you. You've done so much for me that I want to do something special for you. What time do you get out?"

She shrugged.

"I don't know. It's my birthday, so I could leave early today, say around four p.m."

"Good. Be ready. I'll see you then."

He kissed her on the cheek and left her office with a bounce in his step.

Tara could not believe the huge bouquet of roses, daisies, carnations and lilies Dan handed her when he arrived at her office at four o'clock to pick her up.

"Oh they're beautiful. Thank you." She smelled one of the pink roses. "What's this for?"

"Let's see...giving my daughter back to me, saving me from myself and having a special birthday. Did I miss anything?"

She laughed. "No, I think you've covered everything."

"Shall we go?" She accepted his proffered his arm.

"Yes, just let me gather some of the balloons to take to Amy. Do you think she can eat cake?"

"Probably not." He smiled and she felt a warmth flow through her. "Here, let me help you."

As they approached a black Ford Taurus, he pressed the button on his key pad and the car's lights flashed and a high-pitched chirp sounded.

"I thought you had a Mercedes."

"Yeah, well, I traded it in for this about a month ago. I just can't do fancy cars any more. I realize I'm more of a down-to-Earth guy who enjoys the simpler things in life."

"Oh."

"Anyway, I thought it was time for a change. The Mercedes held too many painful memories."

"I understand."

They were at Amy's room fifteen minutes later. Dick, Lisa and Amy all smiled as they walked through the door wearing a halo of helium balloons.

Lisa rushed over to them and gave Tara a hearty hug. Dick followed suit.

"It's so good to finally meet you. We've heard so much about you from Dan."

"I've heard a lot about you too." Tara smiled and looked at Dan. He shrugged.

"I can't help raving about how wonderful you are. Come, I want you to meet Amy."

Tara felt Dan's hand slip into hers as he led her to Amy's bedside.

"Amy, I want you to meet Tara."

The little girl's blue eyes studied Tara for a moment.

"Do I know you?"

Tara smiled.

"Perhaps we met in your dreams."

"Well, yes, I was dreaming for a long time."

"I know. I visited you and your daddy while you were dreaming."

"Oh. Daddy said I just woke up today."

"Yes, you did. And we're all so happy to see you awake. I brought these balloons to cheer you up. See?" Tara displayed the four balloons she brought. One had a heart for Valentine's Day, one bore a big yellow flower in the middle, another announced "It's Your BIG Day", and the fourth had a beige teddy bear seated in the middle. When Amy looked at the last one, her smile fell upside down.

"They're pretty, but they don't make me happy." Amy's eyes started to gloss over. Dan knelt beside her bed and grasped Amy's small hands in his.

"What is it, baby? Aren't you happy to be awake?"

"I can't find Teddy. I thought he would be in bed with me, but when I woke up, he was gone. Where is he, Daddy?"

Dan turned stricken eyes to Tara. She realized what happened. Teddy didn't make it through the crash.

"Amy, sweetie, do you remember being on the train with your daddy?"

She nodded slowly.

"Yes."

"There was an accident. The train fell off the tracks."

"I remember."

"Well, Teddy was a very brave bear. He knew you were in danger and he jumped up to save you from the flying glass."

Amy's eyes welled with tears.

"But he's okay, isn't he?" Her tiny voice was torn with emotion.

"Oh baby, he got hurt too bad and the doctors couldn't fix him." Dan rubbed her head to soothe her.

"But, but...Teddy was my best friend. What am I going to do without him? I miss him!" Big tears slipped down her cheeks.

"There, there, baby. Please don't cry. Don't you like the pretty dolly that Dick and Lisa brought you?" He picked up the doll in the green dress from the nightstand and showed it to her.

"No, I like my Teddy."

"All right. I'll get you another bear."

"No, I don't want another bear. I want my Teddy!"

Tara grabbed Dan's hand and pulled him aside so Amy couldn't hear what she was saying. Dan looked over at his daughter lying in bed, rubbing her reddened eyes. Tara knew that bear meant everything to her.

"I've got an idea."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Come with me."

"Okay, give me a second."

He walked back to his daughter and kissed her forehead, smoothing back the blonde hair.

"We're going to go somewhere for a while, but we'll be back. Dick and Lisa will be here with you. Okay, sweetheart?"

Amy lifted soggy lashes to look at her father with sad, blue eyes.



"Okay, Daddy."

"Love you, baby."

Tara walked quickly down the hospital corridor with Dan at her side.

"We'll get her another bear and make it look like Teddy."

Dan stopped and looked at her with a pained expression.

"What's the matter?"

"That's not possible. You see, I got that bear at a football game from a street vendor. I've been back to the games and have never seen that vendor again. The bear wears a team jersey with his name on the back. There's nothing in the stores that resembles that bear. It was a one of a kind."

"I see. Well then, there's only one thing we can do."

She continued her fast pace, making him take larger strides to keep up with her.

"What's that?"

"We need to take a trip to a train wreck site."

She felt his hand on her arm and she stopped to turn and look at him.

"What?"

"Come on. You're not serious."

She read the concern in his wrinkled brow. Tara put her hands on her hips.

"Of course I am."

"No, it's too dangerous."

"Dan, it's the only option we have."

"And I say no. I really appreciate everything you have done for us, but I won't ask you to risk your life to rescue a lost teddy bear."

"We'll be careful. I know it's a long shot and probably a miracle if we can find Teddy in the wreckage, but it's worth a try."

She could tell he was going through one of his moods where he was weighing the pros and cons of the situation.

"There's got to be another solution."

"There isn't and you know it. The longer we wait, the darker it's going to get, which will make it more dangerous, so come on, let's go."

"All right." From the dejected tone in his voice, Tara knew he was against the idea, but she wasn't going to let him change her mind. She felt that Amy would recover faster if she knew her best friend wanted to play with her again.

They parked several blocks away and walked to the train wreck site because Dan said his car would attract too much attention to their presence. The wreck was still quite gruesome. Though the accident reconstructors had already removed some of the

wreckage in the weeks since the accident, there was still a good amount of twisted metal debris at the site. Tara and Dan slipped in the space between the open edges in the temporary fencing erected around the crash, keeping a close watch for a security guard who drove by, flashing his spotlight upon the wreck.

"Wow, I bet it looks even worse in bright daylight."

Tara looked back at him as she stepped cautiously over pieces of metal and glass. A few piled-up passenger cars loomed ominously before them. She noted how he rubbed unconsciously at the scar on his arm.

"Is this the first time you've seen it since that night?"

"Uh-huh."

"From the looks of it, I'm amazed anyone made it out alive. You were very lucky."

"Yeah."

Tara recalled hearing on the news that a passenger train had collided with a cement truck on the tracks that night.

"You realize we're not supposed to be in here. If that security guard finds us, he'll throw us out."

"I know. That's why we're going to keep a watchful eye and work quickly. I don't want to disappoint your daughter, so I'm willing to take the chance."

He sidestepped a large, jagged piece of metal sticking straight up.

"This is going to be like looking for that proverbial needle in a haystack. Chances are it may have already been cleared away with the debris."

"Yes, I agree, but it's here and I just know we're going to find it."

She bent over and lifted a seat cushion, then dropped it when she didn't find what she was searching for.

"I love your optimism. Can you give me a dose of it?"

Tara laughed.

"Just believe and somehow that makes anything you wish for happen."

Glass crunched under foot as Tara worked her way closer to the pileup. Dan headed in the opposite direction to cover more ground.

"Give a holler if you see something."

"Okay. I will."

A half hour later, in the deepening dusk, Tara stumbled over a large piece of wood and got her pant leg caught on a sharp metal object sticking out from the wood. When she bent over to free her pant leg, she saw a piece of cloth under the wood. She tried to lift it, but it was too heavy.

"Dan, come over here! I might have found something. I need your help."

Dan came running as carefully as he could, leaping over broken seats and car doors.

"What did you find?"

She displayed the piece of material sticking out under the wood.

"Hmm. That could be it. Here, get back and let me lift this."

Tara watched the muscles in Dan's arms become more defined as he struggled to lift the long, thick piece of wood. She heard him groan at the same time she heard the sharp sound of wood and metal moving. Suddenly, a frayed bear with a white and red jersey appeared, and she leaned down to grab it.

"Okay, I got it. You can put it down."

Again, she heard the loud sound of grinding metal slipping against itself and the thick thud of wood hitting the ground. Dan brushed the dirt off his hands as he regarded the bear in her hands.

"Good Lord! You found him. That's amazing."

She smiled. "See, I told you believing *is* seeing."

"With you, it definitely is."

He jumped cautiously down from the precarious position he had gotten in to lift the wood and metal. She handed him the bear.

"Oh God. Teddy's pretty messed up. How am I going to give my daughter this dirty, torn bear?"

"Never fear. Tara's here. It just so happens that I have a friend who works at a teddy bear-making factory in town. If anyone can fix Teddy, it's her."

"Okay, lead the way."

Tara told Dan about Kaya Yamage on their drive to her house. Tara had visited Kaya many times long after she had been Tara's patient and loved the relaxed atmosphere that the young Japanese woman had created in her living space. The house was reminiscent of a Japanese tea house with paper lanterns, floral painted rattan pictures, miniature potted trees and sliding paper doors. Tara loved all the Japanese dolls, fans, tea sets and orchids that Kaya had decorated her house with.

She and Dan walked past the Zen rock garden up the three stairs to the porch and politely knocked on the screen door. She let herself in the house, coaxing Dan to follow her.

"It's okay. Kaya loves unexpected company. She has an open-door policy."

"I can't believe you just walk into this woman's house without warning. Most people would shoot first and ask questions later," Dan whispered, not knowing who might be listening.

"I knocked first. Hey, Kaya! It's Tara. Are you home?"

"In here." The voice came from the back of the house.

They walked toward the kitchen area. Kaya was sitting on a rattan mat with her legs tucked neatly under her, working metal ties on a bonsai tree. She smiled when she saw Tara and stood to greet them.

"Welcome, my friend. It good to see you again." They hugged warmly.

Tara turned to Dan and held his arm when she introduced him.

"This is Dan, a very good friend of mine. I told him where you work, and we were wondering if you might be able to help us."

"You mean teddy bear factory?"

"Yes," Tara said, displaying Teddy.

Kaya took the bear and turned it over to examine the tears and missing parts.

"Yes, I can fix. How soon you need?"

Tara looked at Dan.

"The sooner, the better. We have a little girl in the hospital who is broken-hearted because her teddy bear is missing."

Kaya nodded her head. Her silky black hair was tied back into a knot and held in place with what appeared to be miniature chop sticks.

"I take to work tomorrow. You pick up tomorrow after I get home from work."

"Oh, that would be wonderful."

Kaya smiled and bowed her head.

"You like stay for dinner? I have Sushi." She pointed to the food set out on the counter.

"Sure. I'm game. What about you, Dan?"

"Well, actually, my stomach doesn't do well with raw fish. I'm sorry. Anyway, I was hoping to take Tara out to celebrate her birthday today."

Kaya turned to Tara and smiled warmly.

"I forgot is your birthday. Oh, happy birthday!"

Tara nodded. "Thank you. It's really not a big deal."

"All birthdays are big deal. You go. Enjoy."

Dan shook Kaya's hand.

"Thank you so much for helping us with the bear."

"You welcome. Now go. Take friend to dinner."

"Yes, I will."

Tara kissed her friend on the cheek and hugged her.

"It's good to see you again. I'll be back tomorrow to get the bear. Thank you again."

"You welcome. Any time. Don't be stranger. I want see you more often."

Tara smiled.

"You're right. I haven't been around in a while. I promise to be back soon."

"Bye."

In the car, Tara turned to Dan.

"I really appreciate the fact that you want to take me to dinner to thank me for everything, but don't you think we should be getting back to the hospital? Amy might be missing you."

"Don't worry. Dick and Lisa are there. She thinks of them as family. They're okay with this and they'll keep her company."

"We can do this another time."

"Yes, we'll do this again, but we're celebrating your birthday tonight. No ands, ifs or buts."

Dan drove through Palm Beach, heading east on the main boulevard. He pulled into the city's hot spot for shopping, dining and entertainment and searched for a parking place near a well-known, high-class steakhouse.

"Oh Dan, no. It's much too expensive."

"It's my treat. So be quiet and enjoy."

He opened her car door and led her into the restaurant by the arm. The place was packed. He excused himself for a moment and gave his name to the hostess, requesting something special for his friend's birthday. The hostess told him there was a wait list and that they could not possibly seat them that night because of the holiday. He pressed a hundred-dollar bill into her palm and pleaded with her for special consideration. She looked furtively over her shoulder at her manager, who had his back to her, and told Dan that she would do it just this once. However, they would have a long wait. Though that wouldn't have been acceptable in the past month, he said it was fine. Dick and Lisa told him to take his time when he had explained that it was Tara's birthday and he wanted to take her to dinner.

"Let's take a little walk, shall we? We have some time to kill."

Once again, he took Tara's hand in his. It felt warm and comfortable. During the past week that he had been seeing her on a professional basis, he hadn't paid much attention to what a beautiful woman she was because he was so concerned about his daughter. Now that Amy was awake, Dan acknowledged to himself that he found her very attractive. He knew it was more than her kindheartedness, but that was certainly a part of the attraction. He knew it was more than her dedication to her patients, but he knew that, also, was part of the attraction.

"What a great night. Look at the stars." She drew his attention from his thoughts to the sky.

He glanced upward to the ink-black sky sprinkled with hundreds of pinpoints of starlight.

"Wow, it's beautiful. I usually don't see so many stars because of the city lights and the normal cloud cover, but there are no clouds tonight."

"Me neither. Actually, I rarely gaze at the stars. No time."

Dan turned to look at Tara's profile. She had the most adorable turned-up nose and lush lips. When she glanced his way, her eyes captivated him. They reflected the colored lights from the storefronts they passed.

"You need to take time to smell the roses and gaze at the stars. Otherwise, you're missing out on life."

She laughed and he loved the melodious sound of it. In fact, he realized that her positive attitude was another aspect he really liked about her.

"You're acting a little strange tonight. Do you feel all right, Dan?"

He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss on her palm, holding it there for a long moment. She drew back in surprise.

"I haven't felt this good in a long time."

Her smile in response gave him a warm, tingly feeling. They stopped at several windows along the way to look at the displays. Though he pretended to have an interest in the things she pointed to, he couldn't help watching her every movement. He noted how her lips pursed when she was thinking about something. He watched how she talked with her hands. He smiled when she got excited about something that she wanted to buy on her next shopping trip.

"Okay. We have to go back to the restaurant. I just felt the vibrator go off." He displayed the hand-held device he pulled from his pocket. Little red and green lights raced around the outer edge of the square plastic box.

They were seated in a secluded corner of the restaurant. The waiter introduced himself and handed them the menus, explaining the night's specials. When he left, Dan looked at Tara.

"Feel free to order anything you like from the menu. Price is no object."

"All right."

While she regarded the menu, Dan let his gaze linger on her face. The candlelight framed the delicate oval, illuminating the length of her lashes, which swept up and down as she read. He noticed the way she pushed her hair behind her ears to keep it out of her face. When she hit upon the item she wanted, her entire expression blossomed.

"I found something. The 'Steak a La Georgio'. It's got mushrooms and wine on top, which I love."

"Sounds delicious. I think I'll have that too."

He motioned to the waiter to take their order. When the waiter left, he reached over and held her hand in his.

"I want you to have a great time tonight and don't worry about a thing."

That seemed to remind her of something, for she grabbed her cell phone and dialed frantically.

"Jeanine! Oh I'm so glad I reached you. I know I said I wouldn't do this again, but I'm out to dinner celebrating my birthday and I won't be going home for a while. Do you think you could go over and feed Symphony? Yes, I know. Fish. Thanks so much."

She flipped the cell phone closed.

"I'm sorry. I get wrapped up in things and forget to feed my cat. Luckily, my assistant is willing to back me up, so I gave her a key and she's going over there now."

Dan nodded.

The waiter returned with two glasses of wine.

"A toast...to your birthday and to Amy returning to me."

"I'll drink to that."

He clicked his glass against hers, gazing deeply into her eyes.

After the dinner dishes were cleared away, the staff arrived with a piece of decadent chocolate cake topped with whipped cream and a sparkler, as Dan requested. He smiled watching Tara's face light up as the group of ten waiters sang a version of "Happy Birthday" to her that incorporated their store name in the song. It brought tears to her eyes and she dabbed them away with the cloth napkin.

"I hope those are tears of joy."

She nodded.

"Yes. I didn't expect anything like this. My family is away on a cruise, and I was just going to go home and have a piece of cake with my cat."

"You deserve to have a special party for every birthday you have."

"Thank you."

He reached over and grasped her hand, rubbing his thumb across the soft skin.

"Oh, and if you were wondering, thirty looks beautiful on you. You look radiant tonight."

He saw the rosy hue of a blush coloring her cheeks. She really had a hard time accepting compliments. Well, he didn't care. He was going to compliment her every chance he got.

"Here, you're going to share this with me, because I don't have time to get to the gym." She pushed the cake in between them and handed him one of the two forks that were left by the waiter.

"I'm not a big sweet eater, but because it is a special occasion, I'll give in to a little temptation."

He watched her quirk a brow then give him a brilliant smile.

The drive back to her office only took Dan twenty minutes. He opened the door for her and offered her his hand to get out of the car.

"Wow. A real gentleman. I've never been treated so well in my life."

He backed her against the car and placed his hands on both sides of her face, looking deeply into her eyes.

"You deserve a man who treats you well all the time, for you are an amazing woman, Tara."

"Thank you." Her eyes misted over with emotion and she licked her lips.

"You're welcome."

He looked down at her lips parted so invitingly and was tempted to bend forward to kiss her. He imagined that she would taste like red wine and chocolate cake. Though the thought was intoxicating, he realized that he wasn't ready to get emotionally involved with anyone yet.

"Come on, I'll walk you to your car."

He took her hand in his and walked slowly across the parking lot with her. When he reached her car, he waited until she unlocked the door and got in. He closed it behind her.

She rolled down her window to talk with him.

"Thank you again for making my birthday so special. It means more to me than you can imagine."

He reached over and lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss upon the back of her hand while gazing into her eyes.

"My pleasure. Have a good night, Tara."

As he walked away, a gust of wind blew through the trees and the fluttering leaves sounded like a thousand hands applauding a fine performance.



## Chapter Eleven

Tara had no idea how she got home that night, for every thought she had focused on Dan. He surprised her by how much he cared that she celebrated her birthday. He had given her a day to remember. She smiled, thinking about how handsome he looked when reaching across the table to hold her hand and tell her how beautiful thirty looked on her. It had meant a lot to her to have him say that.

Symphony jumped off the table and came running to her when she opened the door. Though she had tried to train the cat not to go on her table, tonight she could care less about scolding her pet for misbehaving. She picked up the big ball of fluff and buried her face in the fur.

"Hello, baby girl. See, I didn't forget about you."

She carried the cat to the kitchen so she could get a glass of water. Glancing over to the cat's dishes, she noticed the plate of crumbs from her dinner was missing. Symphony always left a little bit after she ate. Tara eased the cat down to the floor and it immediately wrapped around her legs, meowing loudly. That was definitely her hungry cry.

"Wasn't Jeanine here? That's doesn't make sense. She said she would feed you. This isn't like her."

She opened the refrigerator and saw the half can of food that she had left this morning. Strange, she had called Jeanine over an hour and a half ago. It only took Jeanine a few minutes to get to Tara's house. She emptied the contents of the can onto a plate and gave it to the cat before she called Jeanine.

Waiting for Jeanine to answer her cell phone, Tara became increasingly worried. Jeanine always picked up after two to three rings, the same as she did in the office. But there was no answer and the call went to voice mail each time she rang. She tried the home phone and got the same response. Why wasn't Jeanine answering? Where was everyone at her house? Fear knotted Tara's stomach. She grabbed her keys and rushed out of the house.

"Oh no!" Tara gasped, seeing the red flashing lights atop a police car as she approached Jeanine's house. An officer was leaning against his car while making out a report. She looked past him at Jeanine's car, which was being loaded onto a tow truck. From where Tara was standing, she saw the entire back end of the car crushed inward. There were no emergency vehicles at the scene, and Tara prayed that Jeanine was not hurt badly, though from the looks of the car, she would have sustained some injuries. Tara parked and ran up to the police man.

"Officer, what happened here?"

The policeman looked at her over the rim of his glasses, annoyed, and nodded to the tow truck and car.

"Accident."

"Yes, I know that. But what about the woman who was driving the car?"

"And you are..."

"Oh, I'm Jeanine's boss. The lady who owns that car. Is she all right?"

"Talk to the officer over there." He pointed with his pen to a policeman standing at the front door, speaking to Jeanine's mother.

"Thank you."

She walked briskly to the house and slowed as she got closer. Waiting for the officer to get an answer to his question, she stopped patiently nearby. Jeanine's mother looked over at her but didn't acknowledge her presence and continued talking to the policeman.

"Okay, ma'am. If I have any more questions, I'll be in touch." The policeman pulled off a copy of his report and handed it to the frail, older woman.

"Thank you." She folded the report, tucked it into her pocket and turned to go back into the house as the officer left.

"Wait, please!" Tara rushed past the officer and caught the door in her hand just before Jeanine's mother closed it. The stooped, old lady turned to stare at her. From the look on her face, she knew who Tara was and that made her very unhappy at the moment.

"You did this to her. She was going to feed your cat, like she always does. But this time, she didn't make it. She only got to the end of the driveway when someone hit her car."

"Is she all right?"

"Don't know. She's at the hospital right now with Reginald. They called me to take care of the kids. She was taken away on a stretcher in an ambulance."

"Which hospital?"

"St. Mary's, of course. It's the closest."

"Thank you. I'm going there right now. I'm so sorry."

"Yes, well, I hopes her insurance is gonna cover all this, 'cause we surely don't have money to pay for another car and hospital bills too."

"I'll take care of her."

"You better. After all, I hear she's always coverin' your ass." The words echoed in Tara's mind as she ran to her car. She nodded sadly. She deserved that.

She realized as she drove to the hospital that she had been relying on Jeanine an awful lot lately. But there was a very good reason why she needed backup every time

she called on Jeanine. And now poor Jeanine was in the hospital. She floored the gas, wanting to get there and find out how her friend had fared.

The emergency room was packed with all sorts of people of every age and race sitting around waiting for their turn. Tara scanned the crowd and found Reginald sitting in the corner, bent over at the waist with his head in his hands. She had only met him once a couple years ago, so she did not recognize him at first. He had shaved his head and grown a goatee. She walked over to him slowly and stood before him. He didn't raise his head, so she bent down to look up at him.

"Hi."

He raised his head and she could see he had been crying. Knowing that men don't like women to know they cry, she did not acknowledge his tears. He folded his hands between his knees,

"Why?" The one word sent a shooting pain through her heart.

"Accidents happen." She knew that did not console him, but it was all she could offer at the moment.

"No. Why didn't you come home tonight instead of calling her to feed your cat? Didn't you think we'd be doing something special for Valentine's Day? I had made her a special dinner and we had put the kids to bed early so we could spend some quality time together. Do you know how much she normally does at night? She makes dinner, does the dishes, the laundry, gives the kids their baths, helps them with their homework and puts them to bed. She never sits down at night until around eleven p.m., when we watch the news together, then go to bed. But she never says no to you. Never. Why?"

Tara put her hand on top of his.

"Reggie, I'm so sorry. I had no idea. She never told me that she was so busy at night."

He stared at her hard with his deep, brown eyes.

"Yeah, well, maybe you should take some responsibility for yourself instead of being so damn involved with everybody else."

The words hurt, but Tara knew he was right. She always put everybody else first, yet she hadn't realized that she was taking advantage of one of the most important people in her life.

"Do you know how she is?"

"No, they're taking X-rays of her back right now. The doctor was called and should be here in an hour."

"I'll stay here with you. I want to know how she's doing. Can I get you anything?"

"No, I'm okay. I just don't feel like talking at the moment."

"I understand."

Tara moved to a seat nearby, leaving him to his distress. She sat in the small, uncomfortable plastic and metal chair going over the details of her life. She didn't know where to draw the line, how not to get involved. Everyone needed help and that was her job. Wasn't it?

An hour passed, and yet no word. She started to doze off when she finally heard Reginald's name called. She jumped up to go with him to meet with the doctor.

"Are you family?" the tall, slender man in the white coat asked.

"No, but I'm her boss."

"I'm sorry. You'll have to wait out here. Only family is allowed inside."

Reginald turned to her and shrugged, then followed the doctor through the double doors.

She sat back down on one of the small chairs. The room had noticeably cleared out while she dozed. Only a young couple waited to be called. The man, who appeared to be around twenty-something, held his tattooed arm and grimaced in pain.

It was another hour before Reginald emerged from the back room. She sat up immediately when the doors swished open, anxiously awaiting his report. He walked slowly to her.

"She has broken the C-1 bone in her neck. Doc said she was very lucky. It is something that a lot of athletes get, and it heals pretty well. If she had broken some other bone, she might have been paralyzed now."

Tara sighed in relief. Not that this was good news, but it could have been a lot worse.

"What happens now?"

"She was in a lot of pain, so they gave her morphine. She's pretty well out of it. They're putting her in a neck brace and will keep her in the hospital for a day or two to monitor her. I suppose she'll go home in a couple of days."

"I understand. All right, well, keep me posted. If there is anything I can do..."

"I think all we can do right now is to get some sleep. It's about midnight, isn't it? They're going to assign her a room. She'll sleep through the night and I'll come back to see her tomorrow."

"Okay. I'll get over to see her in the next day or two. I think I have a pretty full calendar to deal with tomorrow and it looks like I'm flying solo for a while. Good night."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tara entered her office the next morning and looked at the empty seat where Jeanine would normally be smiling at her. Sighing, she walked into her office but left the door ajar because she was somehow going to have to answer Jeanine's phones and do her job until she could hire a temp to help with the workload.

Before the day got hectic, she called Jeanine's favorite family restaurant and ordered dinner to be sent to the house. She felt it was the least she could do. Then she called a temporary personnel agency and made an appointment to interview a candidate the next afternoon.

Jeanine had left a note on her desk after Tara left last night. It was the number to a family who lived on the ocean in West Palm Beach. They were looking for a live-in companion and had a separate housing unit on their property for the person to stay at...perfect for Felicity. She dialed the number anxiously, praying that they would be willing to interview the young, pregnant woman.

"Hello, Mrs. Weinstein?"

"No, this is her daughter, Stephanie."

"Oh. Hi, Stephanie. My name is Tara Singer. I'm a social worker in the area. I understand your mother has an opening for a maid and I have a gal I would like you to meet. She cooks and cleans and is a real sweetheart. May I send her over for an interview?"

"It depends. We're looking for someone reliable, who plans to stay for a while. We're tired of all the transients who apply for the job."

"Then I think you'll love Felicity. She has lived in this area all her life and plans to stay here. The only drawback is that she is going to have a baby in five months. Would that be a problem for your mother?"

"Actually, no. I think Mom would like to have a young one in the house to liven it up. It's really very quiet and boring here for her. Is she single?"

"Yes. Well, let's put it this way, she will be single very shortly. And she needs a place to live to raise her baby. This may be the perfect solution for both of you."

"I'm willing to talk to the young lady. Can you send her over around three p.m.?"

"I'll give her a call. If the time is no good for her, I'll get back to you, otherwise, consider it an appointment."

"Thank you."

Tara hung up the phone and immediately called Felicity.

"So does this sound like something you'd be interested in?"

"Oh my yes! I'll take a cab there this afternoon."

"All right. Be prompt and respectful. I don't know about this older woman, but sometimes they can be a little crotchety."

"Don't worry. I'm very close with my grandmother and she's mean to everyone else but loves hanging with me. I'm sure it will be fine."

"Okay. Call me when you get out of the interview and tell me how it went."

The day flew by. Tara found herself running from one desk to the other, answering phones, making appointments and talking with patients. By the time three p.m. rolled

around, things quieted down and she took a break with a cup of coffee at her desk. The phone rang and she heard Felicity's excited voice on the other end.

"Tara! Oh my God! I got the job. You wouldn't believe this house. It's enormous and it's beautiful...and it's right on the ocean. And the lady, she is the sweetest thing. She wants a companion more than a maid. We talked for the entire hour. We got along so good that her daughter asked me how soon I can move in. She showed me where I will be living. I ain't never lived in anything so fancy in my entire life. I feel like my whole life is gonna get better and it's all because of you. How can I ever thank you?"

Tara grinned from ear to ear. She was so happy for Felicity. She had hoped with all her heart that the interview would go well and it did.

"You can thank me by taking the job and doing well so you can make your dreams come true with your baby."

"Oh, I will. I will!"

"I'm so happy for you. Good luck on your new job, Felicity. I'd like to meet with you again in about a week to check on your progress."

Tara left the office after Felicity's call and drove to Kaya's house. Kaya worked the early shift and was always home by three thirty p.m. Tara pulled into the driveway at the same time Kaya arrived home.

"Come in," Kaya called as she opened the front door. "I have bear."

Tara walked into the house, smiling at her friend. Kaya handed her Teddy who looked like he had a new lease on life. Tara would have thought it was a new bear if she hadn't known that one day before the bear was a tattered mess.

"You're a miracle worker, Kaya. This bear looks amazing. You do fantastic work."

"Is special for you, Tara. Make like new."

Tara reached down and hugged her friend.

"Thank you so very much. How much do I owe you?"

Kaya laid her hand upon Tara's shoulder and shook her head.

"No charge for you. Is gift for all you did for me."

Tara smiled at her friend. Kaya had been through a difficult time and had come through stronger than before. She always told Tara that it was because of her faith in her that she survived breast cancer and was living proof of the philosophy that if you only believe, anything is possible.

"Trust me when I say you have made a little girl very happy. I love you."

"That makes me happy, too. Here, I have box for bear, also."

"You've thought of everything. Thank you so much."

A half hour later, Tara was back on the road heading toward the hospital, with a boxed teddy bear laying on the seat next to her. She smiled as she thought of how wonderful it was to have a friend like Kaya.

## Chapter Twelve

Jeanine's hospital room was on the fourth floor. Tara paused at the door and waited for Reginald to acknowledge her presence. He was seated next to his wife, holding her hand. Jeanine's eyes were closed.

"Jeanine, Tara's here," Reginald leaned over and placed his hand on his wife's shoulder. She opened her eyes, looked at Tara and said something in a low voice to her husband that Tara could not understand.

Tara stepped into the antiseptic-smelling room and glanced around, carrying a vase of flowers she picked up in the hospital's gift shop. A half-dozen cards and other floral arrangements were sitting on the windowsill.

Reginald stood and walked to Tara. He crossed his arms over his chest.

"She's not feeling well today and doesn't want company. She told me to thank you for the flowers."

"Oh," Tara looked over to see her friend close her eyes. "Well, I just wanted to..." She felt a pang of distress. Tara sensed there was something Reginald wasn't telling her, she could see it in his eyes. "Oh sure, she must be in a lot of pain. That collar looks very uncomfortable."

"Yes, so you can understand why she doesn't feel like talking to you."

"Yes, of course. Well, I brought her these flowers. Please tell her that I hope she feels better and if she needs anything, she shouldn't hesitate to call me."

Reggie accepted the flowers and nodded.

She left the room hurt and confused. Was Reginald trying to protect his wife or was Jeanine really not in the mood to talk to her? Tara could tell by the expression on his face that he was not happy to see her. She decided she would give Jeanine a day or two to recuperate, then call her.

Dan was playing patty-cake with Amy when Tara arrived carrying a package with pink and white wrapping and a frilly pink bow. The sound of the child's giggling was music to her ears. The room had become a place of happiness instead of sadness. Dan laughed at the end of the rhyme because he couldn't remember the last few sentences. She felt a warm stirring inside at the sight of the father and child bonding again.

"Oh Daddy, you're so silly. That's not how it goes."

"I'm sorry, baby. I'm a little rusty. Will you teach me how to do it?"

"Sure. Oh lookie! Tara's here."

Dan swung around to face her and when their eyes met, she felt the most amazing rush go to her head. He stood to greet her.

"Hi."

"Hi yourself."

He looked at the box in her hand.

"What have you got there?"

"Oh, it's a gift for Amy." She smiled and handed the present to the little girl.

Dan propped the pillows higher and helped Amy scoot up against them so she could hold the box in her lap. In her excitement to get into the box, she was having a hard time removing the ribbon.

"Help me, Daddy."

"Sure, baby." Dan snapped the ribbon and Amy tore through the wrapping paper. When she pulled off the top of the box, her face lit up.

"Teddy! You found my teddy bear!"

She kissed the bear on the nose then hugged it tightly to her breast.

When Dan mouthed "thank you" to Tara, she smiled and nodded. Nothing gave her more pleasure than watching Amy reunite with her beloved bear.

"What do you say to Tara?"

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, sweetie."

Dan kissed his daughter on her forehead.

"Play with your bear for a few moments. I want to talk to Tara outside."

"Okay, Daddy."

Tara followed Dan out of the room and walked a few feet down the hall from Amy's doorway. They stopped next to an empty hospital bed sitting in the hall.

"I hope you know that she'll never forget you for this."

"That's wonderful. I'm so glad I could do that for her."

"So what do I owe you?" He reached into his pocket to pull out his wallet.

"Nothing."

"What do you mean? Didn't Kaya charge you for repairing the bear?"

"Nope. She said it was her pleasure to do this for all the things I did for her." He shoved his wallet back into his pocket.

"That's incredible. But I can certainly understand it. If you did for her just half of what you've done for me, she'd be in your debt eternally. Like I am."

"Oh, don't be silly."

Tara laughed and put her hand on his shoulder. He grasped it and held it over his heart.



"I mean it. You never stop giving of yourself and your time. You're a unique, wonderful woman."

Tara giggled nervously and looked anxiously around the hallway. Nurses were walking in and out of the patients' rooms, but no one was paying any attention to them.

His head dipped down to hers and she felt his warm breath against her cheek. His soft lips brushed her skin with kiss.

"Mmm, you smell good, like sweet cream and vanilla," he whispered in her ear.

She breathed in his wonderful scent also, thinking he smelled like the fresh sea breeze and musk.

"Thank you. It's a new perfume. I'm glad you like it."

She felt him nudge her ear with his nose. Shivers went down her spine. She needed to maintain professionalism with him and the intimate touch was too much to bear.

"Dan, please don't."

He leaned back to look at her, sighed heavily and closed his eyes. She felt the disappointment he felt.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I don't know what came over me."

He took a step back. An awkward moment passed between them. She sensed the break in the connection they had and felt a deep sense of loss.

"I have to get going. I just wanted to drop off the bear. Can you see me tomorrow?"

"Sure. What time?"

"Let's say ten. My assistant is going to be out for a while, so I'm all alone."

That came out differently than she meant, and he smiled.

"Definitely. I'll be there."

## Chapter Thirteen

By ten fifteen, Dan still hadn't arrived for his appointment. Thoughts of "what if" raced through her mind. Dan had never stood her up before; there was no reason to think he would do it now. She prayed nothing bad had happened to him as she absentmindedly flipped the calendar page back and forth from Friday the sixteenth to Saturday the seventeenth.

She jumped when the phone rang at ten thirty. It was Dan. She put the calendar page back to Friday.

"I'm sorry. I'm running late. My parents just arrived in town and they had to stop by and see Amy before going to my place. I've been trying to get away, but they keep asking questions. I'll be there as soon as I can, unless you want to reschedule."

"No, that's fine. Don't worry. Just take your time. I'll see you when you get here."

She had purposely not booked any other appointments close to Dan's to allow plenty of time to spend with him.

When he finally showed, she thought he looked sexier than she had ever seen him. Perhaps it was the way his fitted black jeans hugged his rear. Or perhaps it was the v-neck light blue shirt that dipped low on his chest, exposing a teasing glimpse of skin. Whatever it was, she had a hard time concentrating on what he said to her. He sat across from her and leaned an elbow on the desk. She just stared into his expressive eyes.

"My parents will be going home a week from Monday. Tara, have you heard a word I just said to you?"

She flinched and blinked her eyes. Had she zoned out and he noticed it? She shook her head.

"Oh yes, sure. Um, you said Amy is going home a week from Monday."

He looked at her strangely, as though *he* could read *her* thoughts.

"No, actually, I said my *parents* were going home that day. But there is a possibility that if Amy continues to recover at her current rate, the doctor would release her next Friday."

"That's wonderful. That means the hospital staff will contact the rehab facility to get her a spot in their program. She'll need to work up to using her muscles again."

"Yes, she will. We'll still see *you*, won't we?" Concern was written in his wrinkled brow.

Tara smiled at him and thought of Mr. Johnson's demand that she cut back on the amount of time she spent with patients. Yet she didn't have the heart to tell Dan that she would not help him with Amy's recovery, or his, for that matter.

"Of course you will. I'll be available for however long you two need me."

He visibly relaxed.

"I think we'll need you for a long time yet."

He reached across the desk to grasp her hand and rubbed his thumb over her fingers. It was a simple gesture, but one that spoke volumes. He studied her for a moment and she felt very self-conscious. Something had changed between them in the past few days—something she wasn't sure she was ready to deal with. She felt it when he looked at her, in the inflection in his voice and in the way he touched her. It had been a subtle shift, as day slips into night, almost imperceptible, but nevertheless real.

"Yes, well, um..."

He rose and came to her side of the desk, standing over her so close that she could feel his body heat. He was too near and too utterly masculine. She was afraid to look up, fearing he might read desire in her eyes. He lifted her chin with his fingertips to make her look at him.

"I'm glad there's no one around." His voice had a husky timbre to it and his eyes were heavy lidded.

"Dan, I..."

He swallowed her protest as he dipped down to taste her. She closed her eyes to savor the brush of his soft lips against hers, like the petals on a rose. He lifted her easily from the chair and deepened the kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he pressed his body into hers. The hard surface of her desk reassuringly cushioned her bottom when he leaned heavily into her, causing her to surrender her tenuous stance.

His fingertips skimmed the sides of her blouse—silky, soft touches that evoked a moan. He pushed her hair aside, exposing the slender curve of her neck. When his lips found the sensitive throb and began to suck, reality faded away. The phone rang in the background, but it seemed a million miles away.

Suddenly, he dropped his hands and pulled away from her. She stood before him, stunned and breathless. What had just happened? Had she completely forgotten herself? Tara could tell by the look in his eyes that he too was unprepared for the passion that flared between them. He cleared his throat.

"I, uh, think perhaps I should leave."

She straightened her blouse and nodded. Her head was still swimming from the sensual onslaught.

"Yes, that would probably be best."

"I was going to invite you to dinner with me and my parents tonight."

"Oh, I think I should pass."

"Yes, I understand."

"But I want to stop by and see Amy."

"Of course. I'll see you later."

Tara sat on the couch for an hour after he left, gathering her thoughts and her composure. What she had done was so out of character that she wondered what had come over her. All of her training and instincts had told her that she should never cross the line with patients to become involved with them on a physical level. And until now, she had been able to maintain that distance. She could imagine what Mr. Johnson would say if he discovered what had just transpired.

Yet she could not convince herself that what she did was wrong. In fact, it felt right. She had never experienced the kind of joy that Dan had given her in their momentary lapse. He made her feel like a woman in every sense of the word. And she rejoiced in it.

She looked at the clock and saw it was nearing the time for her appointment with the girl from the temporary agency. Standing, she straightened her skirt then touched up her makeup in the mirror to hide the telltale traces of her inappropriate, yet incredibly romantic, interlude.

A petite, dark-haired girl sat in the waiting room as Tara walked out of her office to greet her at one thirty. She jumped to attention when Tara approached.

"Hi. My name is Tiffany. I've been sent by the temporary agency to fill in for your assistant while she's out."

Tara looked the young woman over. She appeared to be just out of high school. Dressed in a short plaid skirt and a white blouse that tied in the middle over a dark green tank top, she seemed to be around nineteen years old. The piercing in her eyebrow and the green tint at the edges of her dark brown hair caught Tara's attention, but she didn't want to stare.

"Welcome, Tiffany. I'm Tara. Nice to meet you. Come with me into my office and we'll go over a few things and then you can get started."

"Sounds good."

Tara set her briefcase on her desk and pointed to the chair for Tiffany.

"Coffee?" She walked to the machine to turn on the brewer.

"Oh, no thanks. I don't drink coffee."

Tara shrugged.

"I need it to start my morning. In fact, I probably drink about four cups all day long. I find it keeps me going, especially when I have a particularly difficult day."

"That's nice."

Tara watched Tiffany scan her office. When her gaze lingered on the "Footprints" picture, she couldn't help but ask the usual question.

"Have you ever felt that way before?"

Tiffany blushed and dropped her eyes to her lap.

"Yes, lots of times. In high school, I had a problem with my ex-boyfriend."

"Well, if you ever want to talk about it, I'm right here. I'm a social worker, but I kind of stretch my job description. Actually, I do it a lot."

Tiffany gave her a bright smile.

"Thanks. Some days I wish I had someone to confide in. My mom just wouldn't understand. She's very old-fashioned."

"Well, I'm pretty good in the understanding department. So, shall we get to work? You'll be sitting at the desk in the reception area. Basically, you answer phones, make my appointments and do any special tasks that I assign. Some days can be very hectic around here and I will depend on you to make sure no one gets upset and leaves if I'm running over."

"I can do that. I love to talk, so I'll just keep them busy answering questions about their favorite books or movies."

"Great. You can help a lot by buzzing me on the intercom to let me know they're waiting too, because that helps to motivate my clients to wrap up their conversation."

"Okay, got it."

"Oh, please put any calls from Mr. Johnson through. He's my boss and I'm trying to stay on his good side. I haven't been very prompt in returning his calls lately and I'm sort of on probation."

Tiffany nodded.

"You can count on me. Do you know how long this assignment will last?"

Tara shrugged.

"I'm not sure. It could be a couple weeks or a couple months. Right now, I'm waiting to find out when my assistant will return to work. She was involved in a bad car accident. We'll know more when they take her collar off in a few weeks."

"Well, that's fine. I just wanted you to know that if you need me to stay longer than a month, I can do that, but I've already made travel plans for a vacation in April. I'll be gone for a long weekend. And I'm also interested in full-time employment."

Tara studied the young woman. She was sweet and seemed quite intelligent. She would be a nice addition to her office.

"I'm sure we can work around your vacation time and I'll keep your offer to work full time in mind if it comes to that."

Tiffany smiled and Tara liked their easy rapport.

"Okay, well, I guess I'll get started. If I have any questions, I'll be sure to ask."

"I have no more appointments scheduled today, so that will give you time to familiarize yourself with the office setup. I prefer to have about a half hour in between appointments, so I'd appreciate if you'd keep that in mind. You'll find the names and times listed on the calendar on the desk."

"Thanks."

"No, thank you. I appreciate all your help."

Tara stopped by Jeanine's hospital room on the way to see Amy. She was sitting up in bed, talking to her doctor, so Tara lingered at the doorway until the doctor finished. She nodded to the tall, dark-haired man wearing wire-rimmed glasses as he passed her on his way out.

"Hi, mind if I come in?"

Jeanine shifted uncomfortably in the bed.

"All right, I guess so."

"How are you feeling?" Tara held Jeanine's hand as she leaned over the bed's railing.

Jeanine looked at her with sad, brown eyes.

"I'm in a lot of pain, so they've got me on real strong pain killers. I've been sleeping a lot. And I don't like this stupid collar they put on my neck. The doc says I will have to wear it for three or four weeks before he will let me take it off."

"Jeanine, I'm so, so sorry. If I had known..."

"Tara, I understand, believe me and I know it was your birthday and the first time you got to spend time for yourself. I just wish you had a chance to go home first to feed Symphony before going out. Then this never would have happened."

"I know."

"You say you do, but I'm not sure you do. You count on me to back you up too often. You gotta get your priorities straight." Jeanine sounded a little angry, but she couldn't blame her.

"Well, you know I'll do anything for you, especially. I've always been amazed at how much you can do in a day, but after doing your job today, I am so impressed. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you now that you're not there. I checked with Mr. Johnson and he wanted me to assure you that you will get paid for however long you're out. And I checked with your insurance. They will pay almost all of your bills, and whatever they don't pay for, I'm going to pay. I've already given them my credit card information. So all you have to worry about is getting well. Then when you come back, I'm giving you a raise."

"Tara, that's what I wanted to talk to you about." The seriousness in her voice concerned Tara.

"What? The raise? Tell me what you want and you've got it."

"No, I mean, I don't know how long I'm going to be out. It could be months for recovery and rehab, and that's not fair to you to have my position open so long."

Tara felt there was an underlying message in Jeanine's statement, but she didn't press her. She could sense that their friendship had been strained by the accident and she wished there was something she could do to get it back on track. She wouldn't dare breach her friend's trust by reading her mind.

"Don't worry. I've hired a temp until you return."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'll be fine. So when did the doc say you can go home?"

"Tomorrow. He gave me instructions on how to take care of myself and some strong meds for the headaches he said I will continue to experience for a while. I have to leave this collar on for weeks and that's going to be the biggest pain in my you-know-what, but I guess it's a small price to pay for not bein' in worse shape."

"That's the attitude. So where's Reggie?"

"Oh, he went home to feed the kids. Mom's gettin' tired of doing everything herself, so Reggie said he would take over the dinner detail. He's a pretty good cook."

"Well, that's good news for you. It's one less thing you have to worry about when you get home."

"The doc's already given me strict instructions, like no heavy lifting, no bending over, no takin' this collar off unless I'm taking a shower. So someone else is gonna have to carry my two-year-old, Jesse. And they're all gonna learn to help their momma put the groceries away. Yep, this actually may be a good lesson for us all. So how are you doin'?"

"I'm okay. Felicity got that job working as a companion for Mrs. Weinstein that you had found for her. She's happy now, thanks to you."

Jeanine smiled for the first time.

"That's wonderful news. I like when things work out. And how's Amy doin'?"

"Now that she's out of the coma, she's coming along very well. She'll probably go home next Friday."

Jeanine sighed.

"That's good news. Are your folks home from their cruise yet?"

"Not yet. They're due back tomorrow. I can't wait to find out how their renewed vows went."

"Well, keep me posted. I may not be in the office, but I still like to hear good news."

Tara reached over and grabbed Jeanine's hand.

"And you know I want to hear your own good news. I'm so sorry you're here. If only I hadn't..."

Jeanine gave her the evil eye. "Look, Tara, I don't want to talk about it now, okay?"

Tara sighed deeply and nodded.

"If you say so." She looked at her watch. "Oh my, it's getting late. I have to stop by to see Amy before I go home."

"No need to say any more. I know the routine, girl. Get going."

Tara leaned down and kissed Jeanine on the cheek.

"Okay. Get well. Remember to call me if you need anything."

"Yeah, sure."

She left with a sinking feeling that she was not going to see her best friend again for a long time.



## **Chapter Fourteen**

Amy was napping when Tara arrived at her door. Dan sat by the window reading the book she gave him, but the moment he saw Tara, he put it down and walked over to greet her. She thought it might be awkward the first time she saw him after their encounter in the office, yet he seemed to be acting normal again. She was grateful.

"Hi," he said quietly.

"Hi. I see the princess is sleeping."

Dan looked over his shoulder to regard his child.

"Yes. It was a busy day with lots of company. She had visits from her grandparents, her uncle, our neighbors and their daughter Shayna, who plays with Amy, and of course, Dick and Lisa. They left just a short while ago so she could get some rest. It's still a little too much excitement for her. She tires easily."

"I imagine so. This has been quite an ordeal for her. Even though she's young, it will take some time before she's running around the block again."

"Yes, but she's doing better every day. She's been getting out of bed and I've been taking her on walks around the hospital in her wheelchair. She had her first physical therapy appointment today, where they evaluated her condition. They will start her therapy tomorrow and then we'll continue with it after she goes home next Friday."

"That's wonderful news. I bet you'll be so glad to not have to make trips to the hospital every day."

"That's an understatement!"

Tara imagined how proud Dan must have been showing off his daughter to his family. It wasn't every day that she survived a train crash and came out of a coma. She thought how lucky Amy was to have such a devoted, adoring father.

"Did I tell you what a great father you are?"

"Yes, you have, many times in many ways."

Tara looked around the room. Amy had received more toys, flowers, balloons and candy. But she clung tightly to her bear, even in slumber.

"It appears that Amy has a lot of people who love her. I guess they'll all be happy to see her leave this hospital."

Dan nodded.

"She's a very lucky girl. They're already spoiling her. She's got quite an extended family and now they'll be even more protective of her."

He ran his finger along Tara's jawbone.

"And she's got a lady in her life who will do just about anything for her. What more could she ask for?"

Tara smiled hesitantly. Though she didn't say it, she thought that Amy would ask to have her mommy back if it were possible.

"Don't forget she's got a loving, caring daddy."

"Yes. I've made mistakes in the past, but like you said, I've been given a second chance. I'm going to do things smarter this time."

His eyes bore into hers and she felt that his statement included her too. Tara nervously looked at the clock. It was six thirty p.m.

"When are you going out to dinner with your family?"

"Soon. They went home to change. Are you sure you won't come with us? I'd really like to introduce you to my family. After all, you're the heroine here. I wouldn't have my baby back if it weren't for you."

"I'm sorry, I really can't. Perhaps I'll meet them another time. I have to get home."

"Oh, I see."

She recognized the disappointment in his expression. She put her hand to his cheek and stroked him softly.

"Dan, I have other responsibilities. Although I truly appreciate the offer, tonight's not good for me. Please don't be upset with me."

"How could I be upset with you?"

"I get the impression that you think I'm avoiding you. I don't mean to."

"Well, are you?"

"No, of course not."

"Look, if it's about what happened this morning, I'd like to explain."

"No, I understand. Truly, I do."

"I don't think you do."

He took her hands in his and looked deep into her eyes. She regarded his face. He had to be the most handsome man she had ever met. She loved the way his smile lit up his eyes, the dimples in his cheeks and the way his hair fell on his forehead.

"It's been a long time since I've felt anything except sadness. But today, in your arms, I felt something stir inside me that I had almost forgotten. And it felt so damn good that I'd rather suffer in torment than be without it. It scared me at first, but it also made me realize that I'm alive and I'm still young. I can't change what happened. I'll always love my wife, but I need to move on. I think I'm ready to get involved again."

Tara swallowed hard. In his eyes, she saw a man hungry for love. Yes, he needed the physical pleasure they both enjoyed, but more than that, he needed a deep, abiding love like the one he shared with his wife. She realized at that moment that he desired her for more than just her body; he wanted everything she had to offer and, for some reason she didn't quite understand, it scared the hell out of her.

"I really must go. It's getting late."

She stepped away from him and cooled the ardor she could feel building between them. He did not pursue her; she was relieved when he allowed her the luxury of regaining her senses.

"I understand. When will I see you next?"

She looked over at Amy. The child continued to sleep on peacefully.

"I'll make some calls tomorrow to physical therapy offices for you. When I get the information, I'll contact you."

He had a questioning look on his face, and though he didn't ask it, she imagined what it might be. He wanted to know if she felt the same way about him as he felt about her. She was almost sure of it. She could have read his mind to find out if her assumption was accurate, but that would be an invasion of his privacy and she would never take advantage of her abilities that way.

"All right. Well, thanks for stopping by."

He turned and walked back to Amy, for the first time not watching her leave. To Tara's bewilderment, that left her feeling totally bereft.

## Chapter Fifteen

The phone rang early Saturday morning. Tara sat up in bed, brushed the cat aside and ran to the kitchen to answer it.

"Hi, honey. Dad and I are back from our cruise."

Tara smiled. She didn't realize how much she missed talking to her mother until she didn't have a chance to do so.

"Hi, Mom! It's so good to hear your voice again."

"Hello, sweetheart. We just got home today and I'm unpacking as we speak. So how are you? Has anything exciting happened since we've been gone?"

Tara thought about the past week and a half. Exciting...yes, that was one way to describe it.

"It's been a very eventful time and I'll tell you all about it, but first, I want to hear everything about your vacation. Did you have a good trip?"

"Oh my goodness, yes! Neither of us had ever been on a cruise before and it was fabulous! I highly recommend it to you when you find that certain someone to share special memories with. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

"Sounds like you had a great time. And how did the renewing of your vows go?"

Her mother sighed.

"Honey, I wish you could have been there with us. I know you would have cried. Your father is such a romantic. He hired a violinist to play the song we had at our wedding forty years ago. The room had such a delicious fragrance because it overflowed with white roses. The entire ceremony was done by candlelight. There were at least twenty candlesticks of varying heights all around the room. Several of the couples that we met during the cruise came in to witness the ceremony. And your father gave me the most gorgeous eternity ring. I can't wait until you can see it."

"Oh Mom. I'm sorry I wasn't there."

"And I forgot the most important thing. Your father and I both wrote our own vows and read them to each other. I had no idea that your father still loved me deeply, even after all these years, and I cried when I heard him say that. He even had tears in his eyes. It's been like a fairytale romance my whole life. I'm so lucky to have found him."

"Aww. You guys are too much. That's why I love you."

"We love you too, honey. Don't worry. We have lots of pictures to share with you and a short video. I'm sure you'll enjoy seeing it."

"When are you coming to Florida for a visit?"

Her mother laughed.

"Let us catch our breath, sweetie. We just got home from a long trip. We'll try to get down there by Easter."

"I've got plenty of room here. I'm ready for you whenever you arrive."

"Okay. I hear your father honking the car horn. We're supposed to go out to dinner with our neighbors. I have to go. I guess we'll catch up on your life when we talk this weekend. Love you, honey. Bye."

"Love you, Mom."

Tara hung up the phone and sighed dreamily. She knew she'd receive a fabulous report from her mother about their trip. Their love reinforced her desire to spend a lifetime with a man who loved her as much as they loved each other.

Dan's face flashed through her mind at that moment. She pictured herself standing across from him in a room decorated similarly to the one her mother described. He was dressed in a tuxedo and she in a wedding dress. She wondered whether that was a dream she had, a vision she picked up from Dan or a premonition of the future.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sunday morning, Dan walked out of the house with his parents and got into his car. They had been in Florida for two days and visited with Amy every day. Their last day in town would be a week from Monday and they wanted to do something special for her before they left. His mom suggested they make a little "coming home" party at the house for Amy on the Sunday before they left, inviting some of the neighbor kids and a clown. Dan loved the idea. From the doctor's report, Amy would be released from the hospital next Friday, the twenty-third, exactly one month from the date of the accident. The doctor said she could do whatever she felt up to, as long as it was done in moderation.

His mother sat in the front seat next to Dan. Every gray hair on her head was perfectly in place. She had gone to the hairdresser yesterday afternoon, a routine that she didn't break even though she was an out-of-town visitor. Dan loved how she took such great care of herself, down to her polished fingernails. Though she was approaching her sixty-fifth birthday this year, people never guessed her age because she seemed so youthful. And she never let it discourage her. After the boys got old enough to go to school, she went back to work as an accountant and was still sharp as a tack.

"I wish we could extend our trip longer, but it's hard to get away during tax season. I guess I should be grateful they let me have this much time off."

Dan leaned over the car's center console and held his mother's hand.

"I'm so glad you came. It's not how much time you spent with us; it's the fact that you *did* spend time with us. Amy will have some great memories of your visit."

She glanced over at him with a sad look in her eyes.

"I wish we didn't live so far away. Ever since you and your brothers grew up and got married, our entire family has spread all over the U.S. Now the only time we get together is for weddings and funerals. I miss the family get-togethers we used to have when you were growing up. Holidays just aren't the same without my boys. I wish we could make time for each other again."

"Mom, I couldn't agree more. After going through so much these past six months, I have a new appreciation for how precious family is. We can't ever get back the time we missed with our loved ones, so we shouldn't waste any opportunity to be together. Why don't we all have a joint conference call and make a date for a family party in May after tax season is over?"

"Oh, I love that idea. I hope your brothers can make it."

"Me too, Mom. I'm sure if we give them enough advance warning, they will be able to make it. What do you think about the idea, Dad?"

He looked in the rearview mirror at his father who was sitting in the backseat, quietly watching the scenery go by.

"You know I always go along with whatever your mother says, so it's fine with me. She keeps the calendar of our events, anyways."

Dan smiled. Nothing had changed in all the years since he moved out. Mom was the organizer of the household and the events that everyone went to. Dad just tried to keep up with her. They never argued, and Dan figured that his father had learned long ago it was much easier just to go along than try to change her mind. It seemed to have worked, considering they were married for forty-five years.

"Now, for this party we're planning for Amy. Where do I find a party store so I can get some decorations?" His mother's face was animated with excitement over the upcoming event.

"We'll pass it on the way to the hospital, Mom. I'll loan you and Dad the car and you can shop to your heart's content."

"That sounds wonderful, dear."

Amy greeted them with a big smile and open arms when they walked through her hospital room door. Dan was excited to see his little girl getting stronger every day.

"Daddy, Grandma, Grandpa!" she cried with glee.

They all gathered around her bed.

"Aww, there's my little granddaughter. My, don't you look pretty today?" his mother said as she hugged the child.

"Look, they put curls in my hair."

Dan reached over to stroke his daughter's head. Her coloring had come back and her cheeks were the rosy pink he always loved. Her eyes were clear and blue as the sky. She had taken her first bath in a long time yesterday and her hair fell into its natural soft and shiny curls. She smelled like springtime.

"So are you ready to go home soon?" Grandpa asked.

"Oh yes! I can't wait to see my friends and Teddy wants to sleep in our bed again."

"I imagine he does," Dan chimed in. "And Grandma has a big surprise for you too."

"Oh!" Amy's pert little mouth formed a perfect O.

"Yes, but you have to wait until next Sunday to see it."

"Daddy, how many days until then?"

He held up seven fingers. Amy counted them and pouted. She crossed her arms over her chest.

"That's a long time to wait for a surprise. What is it?"

"Oh no you don't, little lady. You're not going to coax us into telling you about it," Grandma scolded. "We know your tricks."

Amy giggled.

"I see you're feeling much better today. I'm glad. Did you eat breakfast yet?"

Amy scrunched up her face.

"Yes, they made me eat yucky oatmeal."

"Sounds like the perfect thing to make you healthy and strong again, so stop complaining, baby."

"Daddy, when I go home, can we stop at the donut shop again? I want one of those sugar donuts."

"Yes, I know. You love to eat those so you can smear the sugar all over my mouth with your kisses. I remember what you did last time."

Amy giggled again.

Dan's mother leaned over the bed railing to get closer to the little girl.

"Well, child, your grandfather and I have some errands to run, so we're going to leave you now. We'll come back later to visit. Have fun with your daddy."

"Okay, Grandma." She gave both her grandmother and grandfather a big hug.

"See you later," Dan said as they walked out the door, then turned to hold Amy's hand.

"Are you ready to go for a ride to the outside patio? You're looking rather pale there, honey, and you could use a little sun."

"Sure, that sounds like fun, Daddy."

He lifted her easily from the bed and sat her in the chair, tucking her flimsy hospital gown around her legs so it didn't fly open when he pushed her down the hallway.

They sat in the sunshine in a small, open grassy area outside the cafeteria. Visitors and hospital workers came and went, carrying trays of meals to the metal table and chair settings that were dotted around the perimeter of the patio. High in a nearby palm tree, a cardinal chirped.

"Would you like something to drink, sweetheart?"

"No, Daddy. Me and Teddy are happy just sitting here."

"Well, we're not going to be out here too long because it's really bright and I don't want you to get burnt."

Amy tented her hand over her eyes and pointed at the sun.

"That looks like the light Mommy went into."

Dan bent down on one knee to look directly at her, surprised by her remark.

"What did you say, honey?"

"I said Mommy went into the light."

He sucked in a breath and heard his heart thudding loudly in his ears.

"And when did you see Mommy?"

"Oh, she was in my dream. We had a lot of fun at the park and then she told me that she had to leave us. She said she loved us very much, but she had somewhere else she had to be. When I cried and told her not to leave me, she said she'd always be near. All we have to do is speak to her and she'll hear us."

Dan took a moment to absorb all that his daughter had just revealed. Had it been just a dream for Amy or was Sheryl really there, helping Amy accept the fact that she had passed on?

"Did she say anything else?"

"Yes, she said she doesn't want us to be sad. She's very happy where she's going and she wants us to be happy too."

Tears welled up in Dan's eyes and he swiped them away with the back of his hand. Fresh memories came rushing back...the last moments with Sheryl as he held her hand, not wanting to believe she was leaving him. Then she exhaled her last breath and he realized she was gone.

"That's good to know, baby."

Amy wrapped her small arms around his neck and gave him a big hug.

"Don't worry, Daddy. I love you."



## Chapter Sixteen

Felicity's call at noon on Monday was not unexpected. Tara knew that although Felicity had put on a façade that spoke outwardly of happiness, deep inside the young woman was still troubled. What was unexpected was the hysterical tone in Felicity's voice.

"I need to see you. When can I come in?" Felicity's tears tore at Tara's heartstrings.

"Felicity. Are you okay?"

"Yes and no. I...I really need to talk."

"Of course, I think I have an opening this afternoon. Hold on a second while I check with the receptionist."

Tara rang through to Tiffany.

"Did you schedule any more appointments for me this afternoon?"

"No. You're free after two p.m."

"Good, please put Felicity Adams' name down for the two p.m. slot and don't book anyone else after her. I've got a feeling this appointment may take a long time."

"Got it."

"Thanks."

She clicked back over to Felicity.

"All right, honey, I've got time at two. Do you need a ride here?"

"No, I can take a taxi if I can borrow some money to pay for it."

"Not a problem. I'll be happy to pay for it. Just let me know when you're there and I'll send my girl downstairs with the money."

"Thank you."

Tara hung up the phone with an uneasy feeling in her stomach. When it growled, she looked at the clock and couldn't believe the morning had passed by so quickly. Deciding to visit the sandwich shop next door and to pick up a newspaper on the way, she closed her office door behind her. When she walked into the reception area, she saw Tiffany copying some articles about depression that she had given to her.

"I'm going to grab a quick lunch. I'll be back in about a half hour. Do you need anything while I'm gone?"

Tiffany popped her head out of the copy room.

"No, I'm good. Thanks for asking."

"All right. See you soon."

The paper's headline story in big, bold print reported that a man had been arrested in the shooting of three people at the restaurant where Felicity had worked. Lower down on the page was a column concerning the shooter's arrest and Jamal's picture. Reading that, Tara froze in her place in the sandwich line. No wonder Felicity needed to see her. The poor girl was probably beside herself. She moved forward hesitantly when nudged from behind by an impatient customer. Though she ordered her lunch, she suddenly didn't feel hungry any more.

Felicity stumbled into her arms, sobbing hysterically against her shoulder the moment she arrived. Tara hugged her closely, letting her release her sadness and stroking her hair.

"Come, let's sit on the couch, shall we?"

She leaned over the coffee table to pick up a box of tissues to hand to Felicity. At the rate she was crying, she'd most likely use the entire box by the time their session was finished.

"He...killed my b-best friend at work!"

"I'm so sorry."

The newspaper said two guys and one girl were shot. The girl had survived the initial shooting, but complications led to her death at the hospital.

"How could he? She...didn't do anything to him."

Tara held her hand and stroked it. Though she knew it was little comfort when confronted with the terrible aspect of losing a close friend, she hoped Felicity would know she cared.

"Sometimes people do crazy things out of anger that make no sense. Jamal is a very disturbed man."

Felicity turned angry, tearful eyes up to her. She shook her head forcefully back and forth.

"No, I did this."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's my fault. I'm the reason he started drinking, I'm the reason he shot his brother, and now I'm the reason he killed three people that I worked with."

"Felicity, you can't blame yourself for what other people do. Jamal is a grown adult and he has to take responsibility for his actions."

Felicity rubbed her stomach, a sad expression crossing her delicate features.

"All I had to do was get an abortion and not tell him. But I wanted this baby so bad that I told him about it, thinking he would be happy. I was such a fool! Now he's in jail."

"Yes, that's where he should be. No matter how upset anyone gets, there's no justification for taking another person's life. He's out of control."

"I can't go to work for that lady. Why would she want to hire someone like me?"

Tara held on to Felicity's shoulders and looked her directly in the eyes.

"Because *you* are a good person, that's why. Because *you* did nothing wrong. If you do this, Jamal wins. He's ruined his life and now he's about to ruin yours. You can't do anything more for him. He's got to live with what he did the rest of his life. But you can rise above it. You have a child to think about now."

Felicity turned her face to the window. In the bright afternoon light, Tara watched a tear streak down her cocoa brown cheek.

"I was thinkin'...maybe this isn't a good time to have a baby. Maybe I was too selfish. Maybe God is punishing me by making all this bad stuff happen."

"No, Felicity. I know what you're thinking. Don't go there."

Felicity looked back at her, a dead stillness in her eyes.

"Why not? It's still early in the pregnancy. I can always have another baby when I've gotten things straightened out. Jamal needs me now. I need to testify for him and get him out of jail. He'll be happy if I tell him there is no more baby."

Tara held onto Felicity's hand.

"You're not thinking clearly now. This is not the right time to make such an important decision...one that you may regret later. Think about this...even if you do testify for Jamal, he's killed several people. Whatever you say won't make a difference. They're not going to let him out of jail with a slap on his hand for bad behavior and tell him to be a good boy. He'll be lucky if he doesn't get a life sentence or the electric chair."

Felicity framed her face with her hands and began to sob again.

"Are you seriously going to waste your whole life just because of him? This baby may be the only part of him that will survive. Take that away and you really will have nothing of him left in your life. Is that what you want?"

Felicity shook her head no.

"I don't want Jamal to die! He's my husband."

"I know this is hard to accept and I'm sorry, sweetie. That's not up to you anymore. The judge and jury will determine his fate and you'll have nothing to say about it."

"I want to go see him. I want to tell him how sorry I am about everything."

"Felicity, you're not the one who owes an apology. He should be saying that to you. Besides, I don't think he'd want to see you now. He's most likely too distressed about his own predicament and you may just add to that."

"Then what can I do?"

"Honestly? Pray for his immortal soul because that's all he's got left."

"But if Jamal dies, my baby will never see its daddy."

"Some day you'll find another man who will truly love both you and the baby. He will become your baby's father. That's what you both need. Not Jamal."

Felicity shook her head sadly. Though her tears had stopped falling in a torrential downpour, they still marred the beauty of her delicate, heart-shaped face.

"Felicity, you know I'll do whatever I can for you. But you've got to be strong and do the right thing. If you want me to, I can call your employer and tell them you need another week before you move in. I'm sure they won't have a problem with that."

"You'd do that for me?"

"Yes, of course I will."

"Do you think they won't get suspicious and hire someone else instead?"

"I'm sure it will be fine. It's only a week."

"Well. Okay, I guess you're right."

"I know it's hard now to turn away from someone who you truly love. But pouring your heart into that relationship would be like filling a bucket with a hole in it. All that you put into it will just drain away and you'll end up giving everything you have and getting nothing in return."

Felicity nodded and stood slowly.

"It's going to be so hard to hear about the trial, and even harder when they pass judgment on him."

"I know. But if you need me, I'm here for you, Felicity. I'll be your strength when you feel weak. Together, we'll make it through this. Just take it one day at a time."

"All right, I'll try."

Tara hugged her.

"That's good. Now dry your tears. Take this next week to get ready for your brand new life. I'm rooting for you, girl!"

Felicity managed to give her a tenuous smile.

"Okay."

"We'll get together again soon. Be well, Felicity."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan stopped by just as Tara was locking the office door. She felt his presence move behind her before slipping his arms around her waist.

"I'm so glad I caught up with you. I took a chance you might still be here."

She turned around and sighed.

"Rough day?"

"Yeah."

He brushed aside a stray hair on her forehead and smiled down at her.

"You look like you could use some TLC."

"What do you have in mind?"

She felt him wrap his hand around hers. He nodded to the elevator.

"Come on, I'll show you."

He pulled the car to a stop in front of one of her favorite ice cream shops. People were sitting outside tasting every concoction imaginable.

"Interested?"

Tara smiled widely.

"You bet. Though my hips might disagree with me."

"Oh, don't worry about that. You're adorable just the way you are."

She ordered fudge, brownie, hazelnut, marshmallow cream and vanilla ice cream all mixed into one decadent scoop heaped into a large waffle cone topped with a chocolate rim. He ordered a small swirl cone.

"My eyes may be bigger than my stomach," she confessed.

"It doesn't matter. As long as you're happy, that's what counts."

"So who's watching Amy?"

"My parents. They want to spend as much time as possible with her. I actually have a purpose for coming to see you tonight."

"Ah, I see."

"Yes. Amy is getting out of the hospital this coming Friday, as you know, and my parents want to host a coming-home party for her on Sunday. We would all be very honored if you would join us for this special occasion."

Tara smiled.

"I'd love to be there."

"Good. It starts at three p.m. and should be over by six. However, you're welcome to stay as long as you wish."

"Thanks. Is there anything I can bring?"

"Nope. Just yourself."

"I'll be there."

Dan smiled and held her hand across the table.

"I'm so glad."

Tara toyed with her dessert. Though she hadn't eaten much of her sandwich at lunch time, she felt full having only consumed half of what was before her. She grew quiet and contemplative.

"Something the matter?"

"Ha? Oh no, it's just been really hard with Jeanine out."

"Is she on vacation?"

"No, I guess I didn't tell you. She had a car accident on my birthday and she's going to be out of work for a while."

"I'm sorry to hear that. No wonder you look so tired."

"Yes, I haven't been sleeping well at night since that happened. She hasn't been acting the same toward me and I don't know what to say to make it good again."

"I have faith in you. You'll find a way. You always do."

"Thanks. It's good to know you believe in me."

"I'm your biggest supporter."

Tara finished what she could of her ice cream concoction, leaning back in her chair with a feeling of total satisfaction.

"Ready to go?"

"Yes. Thank you."

He drove along the ocean with the windows open. The crisp breeze blew Tara's hair around her face.

"I'm sorry. Do you want me to close the window?"

"No, I love it. I hardly ever get a chance to come to the beach."

"Then let's stop and take a walk. Do you have time?"

Tara thought about getting home to Symphony, but realized she easily had another hour before her baby would be complaining.

"Sure. I'd love to."

He parked in a shaded spot in a designated parking lot for the beach. They slipped off their shoes and walked down the faux wood planks to the sand. A brisk southeasterly breeze blew their hair backward as they walked, hand in hand, along the shoreline. Tara smiled at the sandpipers flitting in and out of the waves crashing on shore as they looked for tidbits to eat. A few shell pickers strolled along the beach, dipping low to pick up shells, examine them and toss the unwanted shells back into the water.

"It's a great night to be out here. Not too many people on the beach."

"I know. The others don't know what they're missing."

"I've heard that we're the closest to God at the beach. I wonder if that's true."

"Hmm, I don't know about that, but I've heard God is everywhere and in everything."

"Oh, that reminds me. I almost forgot to tell you what Amy told me yesterday."

"What's that?"

"She saw her mother in the dream and watched her go into the light. She told Amy not to be sad because she was happy where she was going and that Amy could talk to her any time she wanted."

"Wow, how did Amy react to that?"

"She actually was fine with it. Oh, look!"

Dan stopped and turned her to face west, where the coral ball of the sun was slowly setting and wispy clouds spread the color across the horizon. The sight took Tara's breath away.

"It's beautiful."

He pulled her into his arms and gazed deeply into her eyes.

"Just like you are."

He looked down at her lips and she suddenly felt very self-conscious. Though part of her wanted him to kiss her again, another part knew it was too fast; he might think he's ready, but she knew it was still too soon after his wife died and Amy came out of the coma. She didn't want to be his rebound girl. She knew that there were a lot of issues he still had to deal with and he didn't need a relationship with anyone to complicate matters.

"Tara, I want to ask you something."

Though she didn't know what he was referring to, the look on his face was extremely serious. Her heart fluttered against her breast. Whatever he had to say, she knew she didn't want to hear it.

"Please don't."

The cool ocean water lapped against her ankles and she sank a little further into the sand each time the water receded. Just as Dan was about to ask his question, a large wave crashed into them and knocked them sideways. They jumped back, soaked to the knees.

"Oh good Lord!" She shook her soggy pants. "Well, I guess this is a sign that I need to get home to feed my cat."

Dan sighed. She appreciated the distraction.

"Yeah, I guess I should be getting back to the hospital too. Come on, I'll drop you back at your car."

The trip back to her car was filled with strained silence. She felt grateful that the moment had passed and Dan did not pursue asking his question again.

## Chapter Seventeen

Tara arrived at her appointment with Mr. Johnson on Tuesday morning at ten thirty a.m. His secretary had called and made the appointment with her temp and Tara found out about it when she got to work that morning. Though she wished she had been given advance warning of her meeting with him, she didn't say anything to Tiffany. Assuming he wanted an update on her cases, she took her notebook and some files with her.

When she walked into his office, he glanced up briefly from his desk, then back down to his paperwork.

"Come in, Tara, and shut the door."

She did as told, wondering what was so secretive that he didn't want anyone in the outer office to hear.

"Well, I hope you've freed up your schedule, because I have an important case I need you to handle. I feel that with your talents, you should be able to deal with this. I've given this client to several other social workers and they're thrown their hands up in frustration."

"What's so hard about this assignment?"

"His name is Jason Romero. He's the son of a very prominent politician in this town. He's been reckless and out of control and arrested several times. Because of his father's influence, the reports haven't reached the newspapers, but his father is concerned that if his son doesn't get help soon, this could ruin his career."

He picked up a file and tossed it to her.

"Here, study this and make an appointment as soon as possible to meet with him. This afternoon, if you can. I want results...fast. The kid is in juvenile detention hall. I promised his father we'd take care of this for him."

Tara flipped through the chart. The young man's photo was clipped to the inside of the left of the folder. He appeared to be about seventeen, a good-looking kid, with a hint of a mustache and a full head of wavy black hair. The smirk on his face told her more than any words could in the pages of the folder. Trouble.

"I'll do my best, sir."

"I want more than your best. I want this boy to do a complete turn-around. The funding for our function is approved by his father. We can't afford to botch this assignment."

Tara swallowed hard.

"Yes, sir. As you wish."



"Good day."

She nodded as she left his office. Wow, nothing like a dose of pressure to start her day.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jason Romero sat at a long, wooden table waiting for Tara to be cleared through the cell doors later that afternoon. He wore prisoner clothing and an armed guard stood sentinel in the corner of the room, watching over him. She walked over to him and put her briefcase on the table.

"Hello, I'm Tara Singer. I'm the social worker assigned to your case." When he didn't accept her hand to shake, she pulled it back.

"Oh yeah. Another shrink."

He briefly glanced at her and grunted before dropping his gaze to the table. His dark hair hung down over his brow, shading his eyes. She noticed he wore a gold ring through his bottom lip and had a tribal tattoo on his upper right arm.

She opened her briefcase and took out a pad of paper and pen. The sound reverberated in the large, empty room.

"I read your file. You've had quite a few busy years since hitting your teens."

He pursed his lips and looked up at her.

"Yeah? So what?"

"Well, perhaps you could tell me what's been going on with you so I have a better understanding about what we're dealing with here."

He turned his head halfway around to the guard and back to her.

"I don't like to talk when there's company in the room."

"Oh, well, let me see if I can do something about that."

She left the room for ten minutes and when she returned, the guard was called away.

Jason seemed to like the fact that she had some power.

"Better now?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Guess so."

"How long have you been here?"

He didn't answer.

"Has it been so long you can't remember?"

"No. A week. Okay? My dad refused to pay the bail this time."

"Do you know why?"

Jason laughed cynically and didn't answer her question.

"I'm waiting."

"I don't feel like talking."

He crossed his arms over his chest and glared at her. She looked at him. At his very young age, he had developed quite an attitude. Well, being in jail certainly wouldn't make anyone very happy.

"I have ways of finding out, you know."

His sneer told her he didn't believe her.

*She closed her eyes and focused on his mind. Sorting through the sounds of his favorite music and some pretty psychedelic visions, she came upon the answer.*

"Ah. You messed up his Ferrari again. This is his way of punishing you."

"How did you do that?"

"Maybe I don't feel like telling you." She tried to make eye contact, but he looked away distractedly, examining the empty room.

"Okay, look, my father has a lot of money. What's a Ferrari or two?"

*She switched into empathic mode and envisioned him racing along a crowded main highway in rush-hour traffic, weaving in and out in a red Ferrari, police sirens and lights flashing behind him. A double rigged semi changed lanes at the same time he did and he swerved erratically, then crashed into the guard rail.*

"So that's your excuse for crashing his car on I-95 after being chased by the police for speeding?"

He laughed. "You think you're pretty smart, huh? So you did your research before you got here. I'm not impressed."

"If that's what you think, that's fine with me. So why do you do it?"

Again, he did not answer her. She rolled her eyes to the ceiling. Now she knew why others gave up on him.

"I have nowhere to go. I can sit here all day, if that's what it takes, but I will get the answers from you, one way or the other."

"Look, I don't talk to shrinks. I don't care who my dad sends in here."

"I wasn't sent by your father. We'll try it again. Why did you do it?"

He leaned halfway across the table and she leaned in close to him.

"Go fuck yourself."

"Ah, a funny boy. Well, shall I tell you what happened? You were driving at a very high speed, swerving in and out of lanes, when a semi got in front of you and you corrected too fast and hit the railing. Did I get it right?"

He sneered at her and looked around the room before turning back to her. Taking a deep breath, he finally answered after a few minutes' pause.

"Well, I didn't want to end up with a DUI. I definitely could have outrun them if it wasn't for that fuckin' semi."

"Oh, so you do have a tongue. We're making progress. You're lucky to have survived with minor scratches."

"Yeah, well..." he brushed aside the hair on his forehead to display a large bandage. "Apparently I won't forget it."

"I guess you're lucky that you didn't hit another car and kill someone."

"Whatever."

"You seem very bitter. Want to talk about it?"

"No." His sneer told her she would not easily conquer his distaste of authority.

She looked directly into his green eyes, glittering with hate.

"Perhaps I should tell you about your choices here. One is that we get to the root of your problem; the other is that you can stay in jail for a long, long time. But let me tell you about the second choice. It's not a lot of fun in here and I imagine you'd rather be out hanging with your friends. But, hey, I've been wrong before."

He fell back into his chair and crossed his arms again.

"I see," Tara said. "A tough guy."

Silence filled the room like air in a balloon ready to burst.

"Are you going to talk to me or not?"

"I told you no."

She stood and put the papers back into her briefcase and closed it.

"Fine. Have it your way. I'll give you a little time to think about it. You're not going anywhere, so I know where to find you. Just keep this in mind. I may be your last hope to get out of here. So if I were you, I'd think about *that*."

She motioned to the guard to let her out, glancing back at the boy who refused to move a muscle. She shook her head and left. This was going to be one of her toughest assignments.

## Chapter Eighteen

Wednesday arrived with the sound of a loud buzz saw cutting down a neighbor's tree at six thirty a.m. Tara peeked open one eye and looked at the clock. Groaning, she folded the pillow over her head, wanting another half hour before she greeted the day. Unfortunately, all attempts at muffling the noise were futile.

She trudged into the bathroom and flipped on the light. Regarding her face in the mirror, she saw circles under her eyes. She chuckled to herself, thinking about what her grandma used to say, "You can't go burning the candle at both ends, or you'll run out of wick." That's just about how she felt this morning...burned out and running out of wick. But she just didn't know what she could cut out. Everything and everybody was important to her.

The shower did what the buzz saw had failed to do...wake her completely. She flipped on the television while drying her hair to hear the weather prediction for the day. Her local area was due to have rain in the afternoon. So that was why they were cutting the tree so early in the morning.

Tucking an umbrella under her arm, she left the house early and got to the office before the parking lot filled up. She congratulated herself on being lucky to grab an up-front spot, for she knew she would really appreciate it if a downpour struck at the time she was leaving.

Tara kept thinking of Jeanine while eating lunch. She recalled how Jeanine had put her arm around her shoulder and told her what a good job she was doing, especially with Felicity. She missed her best friend and her heart hurt that their relationship had become strained. She wanted to make it better. She picked up the phone and dialed Jeanine's number.

"Hello?" It was Jeanine. In the background, kids were screaming. "Hey, you kids. Keep it down. I'm on the phone here. Sorry, who's calling?"

"It's me, Tara. How are you doing, Jeanine?"

"Well, as you can tell, I'm home and the kids are actin' up. I think they figure they can get away with murder just 'cause I can't chase them around the house to give 'em a good whoopin'."

Tara laughed. Yep, Jeanine was back to her ornery self again.

"You want me to come over there and put them in their place?"

"No, it's okay. I'll just tell their daddy and he can take care of them when he gets home."

All of a sudden, it grew very quiet in the background. *Wow, Jeanine really knows how to put the fear of God into the kids,* Tara thought.

"Well, that worked."

"Yep. Always does." Jeanine sighed. "Now go to your rooms and play quietly. You heard me. And no fighting over the video games."

"So how are you doing?"

"It's really hard bein' an invalid like this. You know me, I'm used to goin' and doin' and now all I can do is sit."

"Do you still have the headaches?"

"Headaches, neck ache and shoulder aches too. Doc says it's gonna be that way until I get this stupid collar off."

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, you got enough stuff of your own to do. I don't mean to complain. I'm happy to be home with the kids. They get on my nerves sometimes, but I love 'em."

"I know. Well, I just wanted to stay in touch."

Jeanine's voice grew serious.

"So what's going on with you? You hangin' in there?"

"Oh sure. I have a temp working for me. She's doing okay. She's not you though, Jeanine. Mom and Dad came home from the cruise and had a wonderful time and Felicity got the job in West Palm, but she's upset because Jamal killed her best friend at work."

"Goodness. Losing a best friend. That's rough."

"Yes, I agree. That's why I don't want to lose you. You're my best friend."

Jeanine sighed.

"Tara, honey. You ain't gonna lose me as a friend. I was a little shook up right after the accident and upset with you, but it wasn't your fault. I realized it could have happened at any time. It was just unfortunate that it happened that night. I hope you'll forgive me for the way I acted."

Tears came to Tara's eyes.

"Forgive you? Don't be silly. There's nothing to forgive. But I realized one very important thing that night. I had been so worried about taking care of everybody else that I was taking advantage of my best friend. I didn't mean to do that. I'm so sorry. I'll never do that again."

"Girlfriend, let's put that night behind us and start fresh. What do you say?"

"I'd really like that, Jeanine."

"Then you got it." A loud crash sounded from the kitchen. "What the heck is going on in there? I'm sorry, honey. I better go. Every time I turn my back, these kids are getting into trouble. We'll talk soon, okay?"

"Sounds good to me. Love you."

Melanie Davis arrived promptly for her one thirty p.m. appointment with Tara carrying a picture album under her arm. Tara welcomed her into her office.

"It's so good to see you again, Tara," Melanie said, taking a seat in front of her desk.

"Can I offer you something to drink?"

"Oh no, thank you. I just ate before I got here."

She handed the picture album to Tara.

"I brought these along because I thought you might be interested in seeing these pictures."

Tara flipped the book open to the first page. She saw Jimmy standing next to a tall, good-looking man, with their arms wrapped around each other's waist. Jimmy held his basketball in one hand and had a big smile on his face. They were under the basketball hoop on the court where Tara and Jimmy had met.

"That's my husband Richard. The picture was taken two days ago. They had just finished playing a game of basketball with some neighbor boys in the park."

Melanie pointed to another picture of her and Jimmy in the baby's room. Jimmy was helping his mother fold baby clothes.

"We spend a lot of time in that room now, talking about his sister. Jimmy is really excited about having a baby in the house. He told me all the things he's going to do, being a big brother."

"We decided to have a family day after the baby is born, so we let Jimmy pick the place he wants to go. Naturally, he chose Orlando. We want Jimmy to know how much we love him. So, we'll be going there this summer when the baby is a few months old."

"Mrs. Davis, it appears that you have done a marvelous job of making Jimmy feel part of your family. How is he doing at school and has he been fighting anymore?"

"Please, call me Melanie. Um, Jimmy is doing quite well. Both Richard and I take an interest in his studies and switch off helping him with his homework. Though it's only been a week and a half, he's already showing improvement. He hasn't been in a fight, either, and Jimmy's counselor has told me he's already seeing a definite turn-around in Jimmy's attitude."

"That's wonderful news. I'm so proud of you. I know how hard it can be when you are dealing with a new family, but it seems to be working."

"Well, it's thanks to you. If you hadn't given me that heads-up, I might not have ever been able to get through to Jimmy. We had a very emotional talk, and I apologized to him and he apologized to me. When Richard saw that the two of us were getting along, he became less defensive of me and more caring of Jimmy's feelings. The house is so much calmer now and I really feel the love between all of us. It's going to be a wonderful place for our baby to grow up."

"I'm happy for all of you, Melanie. Please give Jimmy my best regards."

"I will."

"And if you ever need my help, please give me a call. I'll be more than happy to be of assistance."

Melanie Davis stood and shook Tara's hand.

"Of course. Take care."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan called at eleven a.m. Friday.

"Hi. Well, today's the big day."

She loved the sound of his voice. She hadn't spoken to him in a couple of days and was happy to hear from him again. He sounded hopeful and confident.

"Wow, you're excited."

He chuckled.

"Wouldn't you be? Considering that we've spent so much time here, I figure we've probably paid for this wing of the hospital."

"Yes, I imagine so."

"So what are you up to?"

"I just got assigned to a really important client and it's going to take a lot of time."

"Oh I see. You'll still be able to make the party Sunday, won't you?"

"Oh yes, sure. I won't let it interfere with Amy's special day."

"Good. Because I really miss you. It feels like ages since we've talked."

"I know. I was really busy. Sorry. So how's Amy doing?"

"Are you kidding? She keeps asking when the doctor is coming by to release her. She can't wait to get home. She's been telling Teddy that she's excited about finding out what her surprise is."

"And what's that?"

"The party. She thinks it's some sort of gift. I can't wait to see her face when she sees the decorations her grandma is putting up and the clown who's coming to entertain the kids."

"Wow. That sounds wonderful. But don't you think that might be a little too much excitement for her after what she's been through?"

"I talked to the doctor about that. He said it is okay as long as we keep her calm and don't overwhelm her, so the party will be short. She'll be going to rehab next week and he doesn't want her run down."

"You'll have to take lots of pictures."

"Of course. You're going to be in them too. It's one of those days meant to be memorialized."

Tara smiled. Dan and Amy had become so close they almost felt like family.

"Okay. Tara, the doctor just arrived, so I have to hang up. I'm looking forward to seeing you Sunday."

"Me too."



## Chapter Nineteen

Dan's house was alive with the sound of children running around. Tara knocked on the door and rang the doorbell, but no one heard her, so she opened one of the double wooden doors and peeked in.

"Hello?"

Music blared from the living room where adults were gathered in small groups, munching on cheese and crackers, fruit and chips. Tara didn't recognize anyone there, so she walked through the house until she found the kitchen. A gray-haired woman stood over the counter cutting vegetables. When Tara cleared her throat, she turned around. Her hand paused in mid-air, the sharp edge of a paring knife reflecting the ceiling lights.

"Oh. Hi! Come in. You must be Tara. I'm Grace, Dan's mom. It's so nice to meet you."

She put the knife down and wiped her hands on a kitchen towel, then walked to Tara with an extended hand. Tara shook her hand and smiled.

"Yes, it's nice to meet you too. Dan told me you were visiting."

Just then, Dan walked through the sliding glass door into the house carrying an empty tray. When he saw his mother talking with Tara, he worked his way through the crowd to them. He put the tray on the counter, wrapped his arm around Tara's shoulder and kissed her cheek.

"Hi, I'm glad you finally got here. Mom, I'm sorry, I wanted to make the introduction, but I see you've already met Tara."

"Yes, we have, dear. How are the kids?"

Dan sighed and shook his head.

"You mean the bunch of little Indians in the backyard, don't you? My God, they've got so much energy! When did you say the clown was coming?"

His mother laughed.

"Soon. What's the matter, dear? Did you forget what it's like to have little kids in the house?"

"Well, Amy usually only played with one or two at a time quietly in her room. There are a dozen here today. That's a big difference."

"You'll get used to it, won't he, Tara?"

Tara looked at Dan and smiled at his mother's comment. The party had only started and already he looked like he could use a strong drink.

"Where is the lady of honor?" Tara looked around but didn't see the little blonde-haired girl.

"Oh, she's in the tent outside. They're playing Cowboys and Indians and because she can't run around, she's pretending that she's been captured."

He put his hand in hers.

"Come on, we'll go say hello, and then there are some people I want you to meet. You don't mind, do you, Mom?"

"No, we'll talk later. I've got plenty to do here, keeping up with setting out the food. You go ahead."

Tara was amazed at the size of the house. She knew Dan said he owned a large place, but she had no idea that it would be as sprawling as it was. The decorations were elegant and tasteful, with contemporary furniture and all the latest in high technology. He led her through the glass sliding doors out to the wood decked patio. His lawn was well manicured, with bushes and palm trees aesthetically placed around the backyard. Two tents had been erected in the center of the yard, one that resembled a screened tent with wrought iron patio furniture in it; the other tent was a large camping tent with flaps open to vent. Children were running around, laughing and screaming. He pointed to the camping tent.

"Amy's in there. Let's go see her. Watch your step on these stairs."

When Dan pulled back the zippered flap on the front of the tent, sunlight streamed in and Amy put her hand up to shield her eyes. Dan and Tara stood before the cot she was sitting on. When she put her hand down, she reached out her arms to Tara.

"I'm so glad you could come to my party today."

Tara smiled at the child and gave her a warm hug. She looked healthy and happy, albeit a little weak.

"I'm happy too. I bet you're glad to be home."

"Oh yes! And Daddy put all my new toys in my room."

Tara saw Teddy lying next to her on the cot.

"I see you still have Teddy."

Amy snatched the bear to her chest.

"I love my Teddy. I don't go anywhere without him, do I, Daddy?"

"Nope. That's true. He's her best friend in the whole wide world."

"So I see you have quite a few friends outside."

"Yes, the girls are cowgirls and the boys are Indians. The boys are trying to catch the girls and put them in the tent with me. I have to sit quietly so I'm pretending that I've already been captured by the Indians."

Tara laughed.

"Makes sense. Well, it's so good to see you again, Amy. Remember to take it easy or you'll get exhausted and be back in bed for days."

"I won't. I'm not running around. My friends are."

"That's a good girl."

A dark-haired little girl stuck her head in the screen window and screamed at Amy as she was grabbed by a boy. "Help!" she called as she was dragged away.

Amy squealed in delight.

Tara and Dan laughed.

"Okay, honey, Tara and I will let you get back to playing with your friends. Tara will be around all day, so I'm sure we'll have time to talk later. I want to introduce her to some of my friends and family."

Amy turned to look at them quickly and wave.

"Okay. Bye."

Amy's attention was once again drawn to the screened window. She laughed as she watched her friends chase each other around the yard.

"Shall we go?" Dan took Tara's hand as they exited the tent.

"Where to, mister tour guide?"

"Inside. I want you to meet my father and my brother."

They stepped into the noisy living room and Dan led her to an oversized, beige leather recliner, where an older gentleman was resting with the chair's footrest extended.

"Hi, Dad. I'd like you to meet Tara."

The gray-haired man pulled on the wooden post on the side of the chair and it folded back into the rocker. He extended a brown spotted hand to her.

"Tara! Dan has told me a lot about you. You're the one who brought our granddaughter back to us, aren't you?"

Tara smiled. "I just helped. Dan's faith had a lot to do with it."

"Well, we are all so grateful to you. She's such a precious child and we couldn't imagine life without her."

"Yes, sir. I've known her now for a couple of weeks and I couldn't agree with you more."

"Dad, where is Jimbo?"

"Probably at the bar. He's been following an auburn-haired lady around the house for the past half hour. I saw her head that direction."

"Thanks. Okay, we'll talk to you later. I want to catch up with him while he's still sober so he can meet Tara."

Tara weaved in and out of the crowded room with Dan. She assumed most were the parents of the children in the backyard and the others were relatives. They all seemed to know each other from the conversations she overheard as she passed by them.

"Ah, there you are! This is my oldest brother Jim." Dan put his hand on a tall, slender man who turned to face them. Tara could see the resemblance immediately. His brother had Dan's eyes and mouth, but his coloring was more olive and his hair was dark. He looked Tara over and put out his hand.

"Don't tell me. This must be Tara. Dan can't stop talking about you. I'm so happy to meet you." She shook his hand.

Tara looked at Dan, then at his brother.

"Well, thank you, Jim. It's nice to meet you too. You're from Texas?"

"Yep, everything is bigger and better down there." He glanced at the zipper on his pants.

Dan cleared his throat. His brother smiled nervously.

"I meant in Texas."

"Sure you did," Dan said. "So I see you met my neighbor. Where did she go?"

"Nancy? She went to the restroom."

"Did you find out much about each other yet?"

"No, actually we were just getting acquainted." He held up a glass of wine.

"Then you haven't heard that she's a recent divorcee with three children and no child support."

A distressed look came over his brother's face.

"Three?"

"Yep, and they're all pretty young."

"Oh good grief! Why did you have to tell me that? I can't deal with kids. Well, I'm going to hide from her now. See you later."

Dan laughed as Jim disappeared into the crowd.

"What was that all about?"

"Oh, he's a confirmed bachelor. He's never been able to stand children. I'm surprised he isn't complaining about the group here. Most likely it's because they're outside. I just thought that little tidbit of information might be essential to his pursuit of my neighbor."

"I see. Oh look, here she comes."

The petite, auburn-haired woman walked right toward Dan and gave him a big hug. Her snug-fitting top and slacks showed off her perfectly proportioned body.

"Hi, I'm so glad you invited us here today. My kids were so worried about Amy and now that she's back, they're happy. Thank you for having a party for her."

Dan smiled and shook his head.

"We wanted to make Amy feel loved and to celebrate her recovery. It's going to take her a while yet until she's totally back to being herself, but we thought this little get-together would put her in the right frame of mind to recuperate quicker."

"I think it's a great idea. Hey," she looked around the room, "I was talking to your brother Jim. Do you know where he went?"

"Um, gosh, I...I really don't know. Perhaps you could check upstairs in the entertainment center."

She looked up the stairwell.

"Good idea. See you later."

Tara hit his arm.

"Dan, that wasn't the way he went."

"Yes, I know." He shrugged. "What can I say? My brother isn't right for her anyway."

The party lasted until six p.m., but by the time the guests all left and the mess was cleared away, it was close to nine o'clock. Tara stayed around to help with the clean-up and sighed as she sat down on the couch when they finished. Dan had gone to tuck Amy in bed and his parents joined her in the living room.

"Well, I'd say that was a very successful party, wouldn't you?" his mother said.

"Definitely. The clown was a big hit and the food was excellent. I think everyone had a great time," Tara said.

"As usual, my dear, you did an outstanding job," Dan's father said.

"I can't believe these past ten days have gone by so quickly. I wish I didn't have to go back to work tomorrow."

Dan's father looked at his wife. "We're coming back in May, remember? You're going to plan a family reunion."

"That's right, dear." She turned to Tara. "I hope you'll join us. Then you'll get to meet Dan's entire family. He's got three other brothers you haven't met yet. And they're all as handsome as he is."

Dan's father threw her a concerned look.

"Tara's not interested in that, Gracie. I'm sure her interest in Dan is much more involved."

His mother yawned and looked at her watch.

"Oh goodness! I've got to pack and take a shower before I go to bed since we have to be up very early tomorrow morning to catch a plane. I'm exhausted from working since early this morning. Well, it's been a real pleasure meeting you, Tara. I hope we'll see you again."

She stood and shook Tara's hand.

"Thank you, Mrs. Turner. It's been a pleasure meeting you too."

She watched Grace walk down the hallway to the bedroom, then turned to Dan's father.

"You mentioned my interest in Dan. I can assure you it's strictly professional."

He raised his brows at her statement. "Really? By the way you two act, it certainly seems like a lot more. But I'm an old man. What do I know?" He laughed.

Tara thought about what he said. No, that couldn't be. Could it? True, Dan held her hand quite a bit during the party, but she was used to him doing that. True, Dan often looked at her and smiled, which gave her a warm, tingly feeling down to her toes. But was there more to it than she acknowledged to herself?

"Dan's a good boy. Did he tell you that he wanted a big family?"

"Yes, he mentioned that."

"Yep. He loves his brothers and wanted to have a bunch of siblings for Amy. Sheryl's diagnosis was a big blow to them in many ways. It was hard on him emotionally. He held a lot of stuff in. One night shortly after she was diagnosed, we talked on the phone. He broke down. He told me he was confused and scared, but he wanted to be strong for her. He tried to do everything for her to make her as comfortable as she could be to the end. He did everything around the house."

"I know. He explained that to me."

"But I'm concerned about him. For the last six months, he's been leading a life with no direction; he's been lost without a companion. He was afraid to leave Amy's side, so he didn't go back to work. But he needs to go back to work. I saw him happy tonight, but I'm afraid that once the party is over and he gets back into a routine with Amy, that he won't know what to do with his life. Please don't give up on him. He still needs you, whether he knows it or not."

"Mr. Turner, I won't give up on them. I promise you that."

"Thank you. Well, I think I'll turn in for the night too. I look forward to seeing you again, Tara."

"Good night, Mr. Turner."

She sat alone on the couch for ten minutes after Mr. Turner left, then decided to see what was taking Dan so long. She walked down the hallway to Amy's bedroom and peeked inside.

Tara watched Dan read the last few pages of a book to Amy, then tuck her under the covers. He placed her Teddy in her arm and kissed her forehead.

"Good night, sweetheart. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Don't close the door all the way, Daddy. I want some light in here."

"Yes, I remember, baby."

He closed the door slowly, watching his daughter until it got to within two inches of the frame. Then he took Tara's hand in his and led her back to the living room.

"Alone at last! Do you want some wine or something?" he said softly as they walked down the hall.

"No, I'm good. I think if I eat or drink anything else, I'll burst."

"Hmm, then maybe we should take a walk. It looks like a nice night for one."

Tara smiled. A walk would be just what she needed to get rid of that feeling of too much partying.

"I'd love to."

He grabbed her hand.

"Come on."

They walked in comfortable silence along the sidewalk, holding hands, passing quiet houses and illuminated street lights.

"This is the best time of the entire day. You know that?"

"Mmm, I agree." Tara said.

"So you know what I was thinking?"

Tara held her breath. She was afraid he was going to bring up the question he never asked her the last time they were together.

"No, what?"

"I really don't know much about you. I feel like I'm at a disadvantage. You know everything about my life. You know my family, my friends, my child, even my wife. But I have very little knowledge about you."

She laughed.

"Maybe it's better that way."

He paused and turned to look at her.

"Does that mean you're not going to tell me?"

"Oh, I don't know. It depends. What do you want to know?"

"Well, when did you discover you had these talents?"

"Oh, that's easy. When I was fifteen, my girlfriend and I were riding our bikes. I crossed the road ahead of her and I heard wheels screech and a thud. I turned around to see her lying on the road. A car had hit her and she was almost unconscious. The man who hit her called the paramedics right away and I called her parents. When they got there, they asked her about what had happened and what hurt. I could hear her in my head, but she wasn't speaking. I told them what she was saying, and they just thought I had witnessed it and talked to her before she drifted in and out of consciousness. After that, I noticed I could pick up on people's emotions and picture exactly what they had gone through. I've been doing it ever since."

"It seems to come so naturally to you."

"Well, I guess so, because it's a part of who I am."

"How long have you been working as a social worker?"

"Seems like forever. But actually, I've been at this job for about three years."

"I'm sure they appreciate you a great deal."

"Well, I don't know about that. My boss is kind of a stickler when it comes to rules and I have a habit of breaking them all the time."

He smiled and nodded.

"I can see that. What about family? Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

She shook her head sadly.

"No, I was the only one. I wish I had a brother or sister to confide in, but no such luck."

"That's sad. I don't know what I would have done without my brothers growing up. We were all close in age, so we did everything together. I guess that feeling of family was what kept us all in line. If one of us did something the others didn't approve of, he was ganged up on and straightened out in no time."

She sighed.

"Yep, I missed that."

"Well, you never know. Maybe some day you'll marry someone who wants to have a big family."

The way he looked at her told her he was wondering if that's what she wanted. She could feel the heat of a blush coloring her cheeks.

"Yes, you just never know."

"Tara, I read that book you gave me and it renewed my faith in God and the Universe. It's really helped me to understand what's important in life. I used to lie in bed at night after Sheryl died, listening to the rain pounding on the roof. It's such a lonely sound when there's no one to share it with. It brought back many memories of our honeymoon. It rained almost every night at the cabin in the Pocono mountains. Each morning, when we went outside, the air would still be heavy with smell of the rain-soaked ground beneath our feet and the fog would look like smoke hanging in the trees. It was all very romantic."

"Oh Dan."

"Yeah. Tara, I'm tired of sleeping alone and listening to the rain on the rooftop. I'm ready to make new memories. Can you understand that?"

"Yes, sure I can."

He pulled her into his arms and pushed back a wisp of hair that had blown into her face. Her breathing became quick and she licked her lips.

"Tara, maybe this is the wrong time or place to do this, but I'm kinda out of practice, so I hope you'll forgive me."

"For what?"

He gazed into her eyes and she saw the depth of his sincerity.

"Would you be my girl? I can't think of anyone else who I'd rather have in my life and Amy has become very attached to you. I know it would make her happy to see us together."



Tara's heart skipped a beat. He truly cared about her. She realized at that moment that he had touched on exactly what was bothering her...she wanted more from him than just a casual affair.

"Oh Dan. I, I don't know what to say. This is so sudden. We barely know each other. It's not that I wouldn't love to be your girl. I'm just not sure it's appropriate, considering the fact you're still a patient of mine."

"I can stop being your patient right now. So is that a yes or a no?"

He looked annoyed that she didn't respond favorably to his request.

"It's a maybe. Can I have a little time to think about it?"

Dan's hopeful expression dropped. He released her and shoved his hands in his back pockets and looked around. All of a sudden, the atmosphere between them became strained again and Tara regretted having caused Dan more distress. She just didn't feel right accepting his offer until she had time to reflect upon the pros and cons. He was still very vulnerable from everything he'd gone through recently and she couldn't help but worry that he would change his mind a few weeks from now.

"Well, I think we've covered enough ground tonight. We should be getting back. You need to get home before it's too late."

"Dan, I..."

He shook his head.

"No, don't say anything. It's better that way."

## Chapter Twenty

Monday morning sunshine sifted through the slats of the vertical blinds onto Tara's bed. A beam landed squarely on Tara's left eye and she held her hand up to shield her vision when she woke. As she sat up in bed, she remembered her conversation with Dan last night. The pit of her stomach hurt. She propped her knees up and held her head between her hands. What was she going to do?

Visions of Dan's sad face popped into her head. She hadn't meant to hurt his feelings. He was such a sweet, sensitive man. He reminded her of her father...caring, devoted and loving. The kind of man she always thought she would end up with. Tears filled her eyes as she realized that he was the one man who could make her happy. It wasn't fair to him or her to keep him waiting for her answer. She picked up the phone and called him.

"Hey," she said hesitantly.

"Hi."

"Listen, I spent most of the night tossing and turning, thinking about you. Can we get together some time today? I'd really like to talk to you in person."

"Well, I guess so. But it will have to be much later. I just took my parents to the West Palm Beach airport and I've got an appointment for Amy at the rehab, I don't know how long that will take. If she's up to it, I want to take her to the park to spend some time alone so we can bond again. I'll see if Lisa can babysit Amy for me for a little while tonight. I won't be able to stay long. But if that's okay with you, I'll try to be there at seven p.m.

"That would be perfect. I can make dinner, if you'd like."

"Oh, I don't want to put you out. I can pick up some to-go food."

"No, really. I'd like to show you what a good cook I am."

"All right. See you at seven. I'll give you a call if that will be a problem."

"Sounds good to me."

Dan arrived bearing a bouquet of red roses and white carnations, plus a bottle of white wine.

"These are for the lady of the house," he said as he entered and gave her a kiss on her cheek. The cat peeked out from under a chair and scampered away. "So that's your cat?"

Tara looked around the corner and saw Symphony hiding under the couch.

"Yes, that's Symphony. We don't get many visitors here, so she's a little afraid of you. But don't worry. She'll warm up soon enough and then we'll have to push her away to have some privacy. Oh, you're not allergic, are you?"

"No, I love cats."

Tara sighed a breath of relief. She wanted Dan to like her cat.

"Good. 'Cause she's as important to me as Teddy is to Amy."

Dan smiled.

"I understand. Mmmm, something smells good. What are you cooking here?"

She led him to the oven. "I've got twice baked potatoes, a broccoli casserole and London Broil for dinner. Sound good?"

He held his hand over his heart.

"Be still my heart. Everything I love."

She smiled.

"Good. Dinner will be served in a few minutes. Could you put the flowers in a vase and open the wine?"

"Sure. Just point me in the direction of the vases and glasses."

She turned him to face the cabinets near the sink.

"The vases are under the sink and the glasses are in the cabinet on the left of the sink."

While he was busy with his chores, she took out the pans of food and placed them on the table. She had already set the two place settings with her nice dinnerware, a folded light blue cloth napkin to match the placemat underneath and candlesticks in the middle of the table. He brought the flowers and wine to the table.

"Wow. Fancy. You didn't have to go to such trouble."

"Yes, I did. You're my special company tonight."

"Thank you."

"Shall we?" She motioned to the dinner. "I don't want it to get cold."

He pulled out her chair for her to be seated.

"Yes, it looks delicious. I haven't had a home-cooked meal in a long time."

After dinner, Tara suggested they retire to the living room. Seated on the couch with a glass of wine, Tara looked at Dan. She knew she would have to broach the topic he brought up last night.

"Dan, I've been doing a lot of thinking since last night."

"Oh?"

"Yes, and I realized that I'm being a little overcautious. Dan, it's been a very long time since I've been in a relationship. I just don't know how things will work."

He took her hand in his. It felt warm and comfortable.

"To tell the truth, I'm just as scared as you are. Dating is something I haven't done in, oh, sixteen years. But I'm willing to give it a try because you're someone who has come to mean so much to me in the past few weeks. I really feel a connection here. Yes, I admit, I'm very attracted to you sexually, but it's much more than that. I'd like to give it a chance."

"Oh Dan, I would too."

He pulled her into his arms and his mouth captured hers in a sweet, sensual kiss. Tara melted into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck. He tasted like wine and beef. She moaned against him and he tightened his embrace.

He leaned back to look at her, running his hand through her hair.

"You're so beautiful. I love looking at you. Come here, let's snuggle awhile."

She sighed. Having Dan snuggling next to her was the perfect way to end a day.

"You know, I'd love to do this every night."

"Uh huh," she said.

"Perhaps you could sell your place and move in with us."

Tara leaned up and looked at him.

"I think that's moving a little too fast. We can discuss that later, once we decide we can put up with each other's idiosyncrasies. I don't even know how you squeeze your toothpaste."

He laughed.

"From the end and I roll it to the top. And I don't know if you hang your nylons on the shower curtain. These are major problems we're going to have to overcome."

"See? We have lots of things to find out about one another."

He rubbed his nose into her hair.

"Mmmm, you smell so good."

"Thanks."

Her eyes became drowsy and she snuggled close against him.

"Hey, you're not falling asleep on me, are you?"

"Ha? I'm sorry. I'm trying to stay awake, but it was a long day yesterday and I didn't sleep well last night, as you know."

"Okay, baby. This has to be a short night anyway. I should go home so you can get some sleep."

"I'm sorry. Do you mind?"

"Nope. Not at all. I told you I wouldn't be able to stay long, anyway."

She leaned up and kissed his cheek.

"Thank you for understanding."

He kissed her forehead.

"Good night, sleepyhead. I'll see you tomorrow." She smiled and nodded her concurrence.

"Good night."

## Chapter Twenty-One

She made another attempt to get through to Jason Tuesday morning. Though he wasn't in any better mood to receive her, he begrudgingly sat at the table to meet with her.

"Hello again."

He looked up at her and grunted.

"I figured maybe you've changed your mind about talking to me since you've spent another week here."

He rolled his eyes.

"I don't get it. What harm does it do to talk to me? We may find a solution to your problem."

"I don't have a problem."

"Well, from the looks of this place, I'd certainly say you do. Why don't you tell me about your home life, going back to the time when you were little."

Jason laughed out loud.

"Is that your answer?"

"Geez! I don't know. I grew up, went to school and then got into the party life with my buddies, just like everybody else."

"I think there's a lot you're not telling me. Perhaps we can just focus on your relationship with your father."

He smirked.

"What relationship? Do you really think he has time to worry about his kid when he's running a political campaign or when he's in a charge of a large area? Guess again."

"So that's your problem."

Jason sneered at her.

"Look, like I told you. I don't have a problem. Now leave me alone. Guard, I'm done here."

Tara slammed her hand onto the table and turned around to the guard rattling his keys at the door.

"No, we're *not* done." The guard dropped his keys and stepped away from the door. She turned back to Jason.

"I'll be the one to judge when we're finished. If you'd get that chip off your shoulder, maybe we'd make some progress here and then we can be done. But I'm the one who calls the shots here, not you!"

He looked at her with renewed distaste.

"Have it your way. I'm not talking."

"Fine. As you know, I have other ways of figuring you out."

Although she would never normally invade someone's mind without their acceptance of her help, she was absolutely certain that it was imperative that she get through to Jason as soon as possible and this was the only way she knew how to do it.

*She focused on his mind again, sifting through his memories to locate ones from his childhood. He was thirteen. It was his birthday party and a lot of his school friends had been invited over to the house. His mother had hired a caterer to serve a three-course meal and cake. A DJ was scheduled to start playing after they sang "Happy Birthday" and all sorts of games were going to be played. Twenty-five boys and girls sat around the table eating when his father came home from work.*

*"What's going on here?"*

*Tara looked around the room at all the balloons and crepe paper signs with the words "Happy Birthday" emblazoned across them.*

*"Oh, hi, honey," Jason's mother said, walking swiftly to her husband as he walked through the door. "It's Jason's birthday."*

*"Birthday? We don't have time to have a party here. I've got a group of political supporters due any minute. We're going to hold a meeting in this room. You need to get rid of all these kids."*

*"Oh sweetheart, couldn't you hold your meeting somewhere else? After all, this is a special day for him."*

*"You should have asked before you planned an event like this. I told you I'm trying to win an election here and I need to strategize."*

*His mother turned sad eyes upon the kids.*

*"I'm sorry. You have to leave."*

*Everyone stood up at the table, took their party hats off and dropped their utensils. Slowly, they filtered out of the room. A few of them mumbled, "Bye, Jason" as they left. Others just shook their heads. The disc jockey packed his equipment and left.*

*"I hate you! I hate you!" Jason cried to his father, running up the winding staircase to the second floor where his bedroom was located. He slammed the door shut and fell face first upon his bed, crying hysterically.*

Tara pulled back out of his mind.

"So your father ruined your thirteenth birthday. That must have been embarrassing."

"I don't know how you know that, but it's none of your fuckin' business." He crossed his arms over his chest and looked away. She could tell he was still upset over the issue.

"Look, I'm sorry. Sometimes parents can be insensitive to their kid's feelings. I'm sure he didn't realize what that did to you. Do you want to talk about it?"

Still, he wouldn't answer her. She flipped through his file.

"I see you dropped out of school. Can you tell me why?"

He gave her a big smirk.

"Daddy has money. I don't need to worry about getting an education to get a job."

"What have you been doing with your time since you don't go to school?"

"Why are you so interested in me? Can't you tell I don't care?"

"Because I do care. I think it's a waste of your life to be spending it in jail when you could be living it on the outside."

"Well, that's your opinion."

"How many times have you been arrested?"

He clammed up again.

"Jason, how many times?" She raised her voice to get his attention and it worked.

"Recently? Twice."

"So you're getting a record."

"Not exactly. That's one of the perks of having a father in the right place."

"Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

He laughed. "Yeah, right!"

"Look, we can't change certain facts, like the family we're born into or our skin color or the country we're born in. But there *are* things we can control, like our destiny. You can go through life letting things happen to you or you can take control and make things happen. It's up to you, Jason. Stop being a victim and become a master of your life. There are a lot of people in this country who have had it a lot harder than you growing up and they've managed to make something of themselves. Why don't you think about that?"

"You finished?"

"Yes. Thank you for your time, Jason."

She slammed her briefcase shut and walked out of the room, leaving him with his thoughts about what she told him.

"Hi, baby. Busy day?" Dan's happy voice on the other end of the phone made her smile.

"Yes, that's an understatement. This new case is really draining me. I've never met anyone so difficult to deal with."



"I have faith in your abilities. You'll figure it out."

"Yes, but at what price? He's so obnoxious. I want to strangle him, but I know that he's messed up for a reason. I just have to find out a way to get through to him."

"So, am I coming over there or are you coming here tonight?"

She sighed.

"Oh, I didn't like the sound of that."

"I'm sorry. I really wish I could. But I have to be up early tomorrow to get to this kid's father's house. The only time I can see him is at seven a.m. That means I need to get up at five-thirty."

"Ouch. That is early," Dan said.

"I know. But we'll definitely get together tomorrow night. I promise."

"Okay, I understand."

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

It was dark when Tara headed out to the main highway along the Intracoastal waterway. Thick clouds hung heavy overhead and she worried that the sky would open up just as she would get to her appointment. She passed by office buildings and fabulous mansions on her way to the house. When she arrived, she waited at the gate to announce her name on the security phone, then entered the driveway through the double wrought iron gate which swung open slowly. When she got out of her van, she smelled the moisture in the air. The wind gusted so that she had to grab her car door to keep it from flying open. She glanced skyward and noted that, although it hadn't started to rain, the clouds were still threatening, so she grabbed her umbrella just in case.

The house resembled a museum with its curved stone stairway going up to the entrance on both sides of the front of the house. A butler opened glass-etched doors as she got to the top of the stairs. She walked across a highly polished marble foyer into the main hall, whose ceiling rose thirty feet above her. The blue-green beauty of the ocean with its white-capped waves was the view out the floor-to-ceiling window panes at the far end of hall. She was both impressed and intimidated at the opulence of the home.

She heard the squeaking of men's shoes coming behind her and she swung around the face the butler once more.

"He'll see you now," the older Hispanic man said, bowing gracefully at the waist.

She followed him down the marbled hallway to closed double wood doors almost fifteen feet tall. The butler knocked once, then opened the door for her to enter.

Mr. Romero sat behind an elaborately carved oak desk, his back to her in a large, overstuffed black leather chair. The only part of him visible was his hand, which lay upon the armrest as he smoked a pipe. She saw grayish smoke curling to the ceiling from the end of the long, thin gold pipe. The aroma filled the room with a sweet scent.

She cleared her throat and he swiveled his chair around to face her.

For a man in his early sixties, he was stunning. She credited his good genes and some excellent plastic surgery for his amazingly youthful-looking skin. His full head of wavy gray and white hair was perfectly coiffed. She could tell he took a great deal of care to make sure that he presented the best picture of himself that he could to the world, from his impeccable clothing down to his polished fingernails.

"So, I understand you wish to speak to me about my son." His voice was deep and commanding.

"Yes, sir. How do you do. My name is Tara Singer."

He did not move to shake her hand, nor did he make any gesture for her to be seated.

"I know who you are. Johnson told me."

"Yes, sir. Um, may I sit down?"

"If you wish. I don't have much time for this interview."

"Sir, I appreciate your busy schedule, but I felt it was important to speak to you if I am to make any progress with your son."

"Yes, Jason. Such a disappointment."

She mentally compared the way his son looked to the father and realized why he thought his son was not up to his standards. But who could be? Though she knew him to be a warm and friendly personality to his constituents when doing a television interview, he apparently could assume quite a façade. The only impression she got from him in person was cold and cruel. She tried to keep her own opinion separate from the conversation.

"Was he always rebellious or is this something that has occurred in the past, say, few years?"

"Let's say he's never been quite right. We disciplined him, but that only made it worse."

"May I ask what kind of discipline you used on him?"

The heated look in his eyes told her she needed to be careful in phrasing her questions.

"Miss Singer, if you're suggesting that we abused our son, you are quite mistaken."

"I'm sorry if that's the way it appeared, but I didn't mean it like that."

"By the time he became a teenager, I was very busy with my political career. Both my wife and I were on the run most of the time, so we hired a nanny to watch over Jason. She did most of the discipline, such as curfews, no telephone time, that sort of thing. As I said, it only made matters worse."

"And is he your only child?"

"Yes, we didn't have time to have any more children, and from the way he turned out, it's best that we didn't."

*Tara felt there was something he wasn't telling her. Something that was the key to breaking this case. She searched his mind to see if there was anything he was hiding and there was. Jason wasn't his child; he was adopted. He and his wife couldn't have children of their own. Almost from the moment Jason arrived, his father found fault with him. The little boy couldn't turn to his mother for consolation, because his father yelled at her. Growing up in the shadow of a father who never gave him an encouraging word, the child became rebellious and angry. That only made his father more upset. It had been a vicious cycle for them. As the boy grew older, the father wanted him out of the way, so he bought him cars. Then got mad at him when he crashed them.*

"I know this may sound like a strange question, sir, but do you love your son?"

His eyebrows met in a thin, straight line.

"What kind of a question is that? Of course I love my son. I've given him more than most other fathers could ever give."

"I understand that you've showered him with material things, such as cars, clothes and jewelry, but have you given him any words of encouragement, any coaching, any praise?"

He shook his head.

"Why would I possibly do that when he's been a terror for so long?"

"Sir, I believe all of the things he has been doing are just because he wants attention; he wants to be loved. Right now, he needs you now more than he ever did. This is a crucial point in his life. He needs to know that you aren't going to push him away as you have all his life."

He sucked in on his pipe then blew a circle of smoke above his head.

"You think so?"

"I can almost guarantee it, sir. You have to give a little to get a little. Love is the glue that binds us together and heals our wounds and gives us hope when things look bleak. Why don't you try it with Jason?"

"Well, I guess it couldn't hurt. But if he doesn't straighten up, I'm going to send him to military school where he'll really learn the word discipline."

"Before you do that, sir, could I just recommend a little family counseling? If you can undo the harm you did to him all those years when he was growing up, he still has a chance of being a good member of society and someone you can be proud of."

"I'll talk it over with my wife. You're right. I probably have been too harsh on him. I'll bail him out and we'll work on it together. Thank you. I appreciate your help."

"You're welcome, sir."

"I'm sorry, Miss Singer. I have another appointment now."

"Yes, sir, I understand. I'll let myself out."

"Good day."

The ride home took much longer than she anticipated. Traffic blocked major arteries and she couldn't find a radio station that played soothing music for her nerves. She was happy with the progress she had made with Jason's father, however.

By the time she got home, her head pounded like it was in a vise and someone was slowly turning the wheel and torturing her. Knowing that she had no other appointments today, she called Tiffany to tell her she was staying home. She popped two pain killers and lay on her bed with a bag of ice on her forehead. Finally, she drifted to sleep as the pain subsided.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan tried calling Tara for the fourth time at eleven p.m. The phone just rang and rang as it did each time before, then went to voicemail. He ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. He hadn't seen her in almost two days. They were supposed to get together that night, but he couldn't reach her. Though she told him she had a big case she was working on, he felt she should have had time to at least pick up the phone and say hello. He had left other messages, but this last one came out sounding upset. He couldn't help it; that was the way he felt.

"Tara, where are you? Call me as soon as you get the message, no matter what the time."

He hung up the phone and leaned back against the pillows on his bed. Outside, rain slanted against the roof and he heard the wind blowing pellets of water hard against the window pane. Lightning brightened the room through a twisted vertical. He got up to straighten it and pulled back the blinds to see the night soaked in a torrential downpour. The trees in the backyard looked like silhouettes until lightning highlighted them momentarily. The deep rumble of thunder shook the window pane and Dan watched droplets of water slide down it and join together to become larger drops. A heaviness surrounded his heart. Without a companion to cuddle with during a storm, the rain emphasized his loneliness. He dropped his head in sadness, straightened the vertical blinds and went to bed.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Tara woke the next morning to find the message light flashing on her phone. When she saw that Dan had called four times and then heard the tone in his voice getting more upset with each successive message, she felt bad. She wondered why she didn't hear the phone, then she noticed the numbers flashing on her clock. Power outage. Damn.

She rang his phone and was relieved when he picked up.

"There you are. I'm so glad I caught you."

"Long night?"

"I had a headache and fell asleep. I'm sorry, I didn't hear the phone. We had a power outage."

"Oh, I see." She thought she heard doubt in his voice.

"What are you doing tonight? I'm free after work."

There was a long pause at the other end of the phone.

"Dick and Lisa invited Amy and me over for dinner."

"Well, perhaps we can get together after that?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Call me after you get home from dinner, okay?"

"All right. I'll talk to you later. Bye."

Jeanine called just as Tara was closing up for the day. Tara could tell by the seriousness in her voice that she had some bad news for her.

"We've made a decision."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"I'm not returning to work. Reggie and I have been talking a lot about our lives today. When we looked at the pictures of the wreck, we realized how lucky I am to be alive. Had my car been hit a few inches further up on the driver's side, I would have been killed."

"Oh my!"

"Yeah, that really hit home. Reggie says maybe I should be at home with the kids more and focusin' on our family. They all depend upon me and he just doesn't know what they'd do without me. That accident made me realize that it's the time you spend with loved ones that is the most important thing in life. Reggie just got a promotion and

raise at work and believes he can support us. We'll just have to be very prudent in our spending, but I think we can do it."

"I see."

"Tara, you know I love working with you. Although most of the time I wanted to strangle you for doin' too much and gettin' too involved in everybody else's life, I also admired you for how much you helped all those folks. But my kids need me; my family has got to come first. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. You're doing what's best for you. And I admire that. And I love you, despite the fact that you made the decision not to be with me every day. This doesn't change our friendship."

"No, not at all."

"I understand and accept your resignation, Jeanine. I hope you'll heal all right from the accident and that you'll be happy with your family."

"Thanks. I just felt you should know as soon as possible so you weren't holdin' my position open. It isn't fair to you to keep you wonderin' about me."

"That's very kind of you. I do have someone who's working for me now from a temporary agency and I think she'd like to work full-time, so it may work out for everyone."

"I hope it does. And we're still going to be friends, right?"

"You bet, girlfriend. Please keep in touch and let me know if you need anything."

"I will. Bye."

"Bye."

Tara leaned back in her seat and toyed with her pencil. It took a few moments to register that she would not see Jeanine sitting in the reception seat anymore. She was going to miss her.

Dan rang her doorbell at eight p.m. When she greeted him, he didn't seem as pleased to see her as he had been before. She kissed him on the cheek, but he didn't return the favor.

"We need to talk."

She dreaded that phrase. Any time someone said that to her, it was always bad news.

"Okay. Come on in and we'll sit in the den. Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, I'm fine."

She led him to the back room and sat on the couch across from him. He didn't appear to want to cuddle, so she kept her distance. There was an aura about him that said he was not in the mood to be romantic.

"Tara, I'm not sure this relationship is going to work."

She swallowed a large lump in her throat. Though she felt like crying, she held back the tears.

"Why?"

"I was thinking about us the past couple of days. You see, you're very involved with your work, and that's wonderful. You're an amazing woman. The problem is that you're so busy with helping other people that you don't have time to spend with us. And right now, Amy and I need someone who can devote her time and energy to developing a solid relationship. I want to move forward with my life. I want a companion and partner again. I want to be in a loving relationship again."

Tara's head spun. This couldn't be happening to her. Not after finally finding the one man who could make her happier than she'd ever been in her life. *This* was exactly what she'd been afraid of all along.

"Dan, I...I don't know what to say. I thought things were going so well with us."

Dan stared at the floor then looked back up at her.

"Me too. I really enjoyed the time we spent together. I had hoped you were the one for me. But if the past two days are any indication of how our life would be together, it's not enough for me. I'm selfish. I admit it. I don't want to share you with everyone else. I want you to be there with me every day. You can't seem to understand that desire, that need. I guess it's because I've suffered loss and near loss that I feel that time is precious and loved ones are too."

She reached over to put her hand on his arm.

"Please don't do this." The words came out strangled with emotion.

He stood up and hovered over her. She dropped her head and let the tears well up in her eyes.

"I'm sorry. I'll let myself out."



## Chapter Twenty-Four

Tara walked along the deserted sidewalk in her neighborhood with only the full moon to keep her company. She had been out for almost an hour after Dan left, walking in a daze, crying, replaying their last conversation over in her mind. She was so sure they were going to have a happy ending. What went wrong?

She thought back to all the things she had accomplished in the past three and a half weeks since she met him. Her greatest achievement had been bringing Amy out of her coma. But she had helped so many others. Why was it that she could do so much for everyone else, but she couldn't help herself?

Suddenly she had an idea, crazy as it seemed. The cemetery where Henry was buried was six blocks away. Perhaps he had an answer. She picked up her pace and arrived there in fifteen minutes.

Tara thought back to all the movies and scary stories that she had seen or read about cemeteries at night as she stood hesitantly at the entrance. Though it was dark outside, the sky was clear and a full moon cast its light upon the headstones, making them appear eerily white. She heard the metallic creak of the gate as she pushed it open and stepped into the land of the departed.

She hoped she remembered exactly where they had buried Henry from the description Susan had given her. Everything seemed different in the dark; the path to his burial site was farther than she thought it would be, but she finally discovered his resting place by the large statue of an angel at a grave nearby.

Kneeling upon one knee, she folded her hands and closed her eyes. Prayer came easily to her as she believed that the spirits and angels were always listening.

"Henry, I need your help. I don't know what to do right now. You were such a wonderful example to me about how devoted two people can be to each other. I love Dan, but I don't know how to show him. What should I do?"

An owl hooted in the distance from the branches of a dead tree. She turned to see where the sound came from and when she looked back at Henry's tombstone, it appeared to be glowing in the moonlight. She leaned over to read the words inscribed upon it.

*Henry Bartlett  
Loving Father, Loving Husband  
1924-2006  
Love Transcends All*

"Oh Henry!"

Invisible arms wrapped around her, filling her with the sense of overwhelming love. Her tears fell hot and heavy like rain upon his grave. She placed her hand upon the cold stone and ran her fingertips across the engraved letters.

"Thank you."

She stood, straightened her shoulders and nodded. Leaves scattered at her feet as a brisk wind picked them up and tossed them around. The answer she was seeking had been with her all the time. The Universe had given her examples over and over in so many ways, but she had not listened. But tonight was different. Tonight she finally understood what she had to do.

The next morning, she called Mr. Johnson's secretary for an appointment. She was told that he had an opening at ten a.m. She accepted.

While the hot water beat on her back in the shower, she practiced her speech. Tara wasn't sure whether this was the bravest or most stupid idea she ever had, but she was going to go for it. Confident that she had the courage to face him, she dressed in a tan skirt and suit jacket with a white silk blouse.

Mr. Johnson's expression was a mixture of caution and high expectation as she walked through his door. She knew he wanted her to give him a thumbs-up on her recent assignment. She tossed the file on his desk as she sat at the chair across from him.

"So I guess you've come to make a report on your progress with Jason. Will I be pleased?"

"Actually, that's not my main reason for being here, but I will be happy to report on that case. Jason is not a bad kid. He's a kid who's been pushed aside for his father's own personal political gain. Everything he has done has been to make his father take notice of him. I recommended that his father and mother attend a counseling session with him so they can hear each other's side. I think, with the right encouragement, the young man has an opportunity to be an upstanding citizen. His father and mother agreed to work with him and he's going to get him out of jail and back in their home."

Mr. Johnson's face lit up. "You're amazing, you know."

"Yes, sir. Thank you. But that isn't the only reason I asked to meet with you today." She took a deep breath and went for it. "I want to cut back on the number of clients I have and work part-time."

Her superior jumped up from his seat.

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. Johnson, you've been telling me I spend way too much time with my clients, and I wholeheartedly agree. So I'm going to free my time for the things I want to do in my life."

"And what might that be?"

"Perhaps I'll take a cruise. I think that would be fun. After that, I don't know...maybe I'll just wing it."

"But you're the best I have. Your talents are so specialized that no one else can do it as well as you. You just proved it by solving my toughest case."

Tara shrugged.

"Well then, we'll have to work on a compromise. Time is too precious for me to spend all of it wrapped up in other people's lives. I need to have a life of my own."

"You know I'll do anything to keep you, Tara. What do you have in mind?"

"I work out of my home. Set my own hours. Only handle a case or two at a time."

Mr. Johnson sighed and shook his head. "All right, I'm not happy about it, but it's better than losing you completely. So are you working on any cases that I need to reassign?"

"Actually, no. I've got them all wrapped up. That's why I thought this would be a good time to do this."

"So from now on, I'll just send you one case at a time and you let me know if you can take on any more. I suppose I can live with that."

"Me too. Thank you, sir."

Mr. Johnson shook her hand.

"No, thank you, Tara."

Tara walked out of his office with a lightness in her step. She let out a sigh of relief. She wouldn't have believed it would be so easy to convince him to go along with her offer. But it did.

As she always said, have faith, believe anything is possible and you can get exactly what you want.

Dan was washing his car when she pulled to the curb in front of his house. He looked so sexy in his shorts and tank top with the sun glinting off the moisture on his shoulders that her eyes filled with tears. She saw Amy and her Teddy sitting on the porch watching him. Amy waved when she saw Tara and walked slowly to her.

Dan turned when he saw his daughter going down the sidewalk to Tara. Amy greeted her with open arms and gave her a big hug and kiss.

"Tara! I missed you!"

She squeezed the little girl tightly and kissed her cheek.

"Me too."

She looked up to see Dan turning off the water and wiping the soap from his hands. When he walked toward them, she felt butterflies in her stomach.

"Hi."

"Hi. I wasn't expecting to see you today."

"I know." She turned to the child, kneeling down to be on her level.

"Amy, I need to speak in private to your daddy for a moment. Could you and Teddy go back to the porch?"

Amy gave her a bright smile.

"Okay. When you're done, I want you to come and have tea with me and Teddy."

Tara nodded her head, remembering the tea party in Amy's coma. Running her hand through Amy's riotous blonde curls, she smiled at her offer.

"All right, sweetheart. Give me a few moments."

Amy sauntered off, talking excitedly to Teddy about their tea party as she went. Tara turned to Dan.

"I did a lot of thinking last night after you left. I realized that you were absolutely right. I can't be so involved in other people's affairs that I don't have time for what's really important. And being with the man I love and the little girl I love are worth more than anything else in the world. I talked to my boss today and he's allowing me to cut back my hours, Dan. I can choose when to work and how much time I want to put in. That's how important you are to me. I can make you and Amy my number one priority. I'll even sell my house and move in with you...if you'll still have me."

Dan's features softened.

"You did all that just to be with us? You'd sell your place?"

She smiled and nodded.

"Yes. I always tell everyone else to believe and have faith, but I haven't been listening to my own intuition. It doesn't matter how long we've known each other. I know I love you, Dan, and I want to be with you."

His lips grazed hers ever so lightly as he closed his eyes and pulled her into him. She knew this moment was the beginning of something brand new for them and she gave of herself willingly. When her heart burst with love for him, she was filled with complete certainty that he was the one Lucretia had told her about and she felt more joy than she had ever known.

"I love you too. I was going to call you and tell you how sorry I was. I didn't mean what I said last night."

"You were? You do? Oh Dan!"

"Come on, let's tell Amy the good news."

He took her hand in his and walked toward the house. Amy stood as they approached.

"Tara would like to move in with us. What do you think about that?"

"Oh yes! Then we can play every day and you can read me books," she said to Tara.

Amy stood in between both of them and took their hands in hers. "I love our new family!"

Tara looked down at Amy's smiling face and back up at Dan's smiling face and she realized Henry was absolutely right.

Love does transcend all.



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