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*Diana Castilleja*



ICE CREAM  
IN THE SNOW

# Ice Cream In The Snow

By

Diana Castilleja

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## Prologue

“Look, I know I said I would get help. And I did, but...” The words trailed off as Arthur desperately searched for a plausible excuse. He dragged a damp hand down his pants leg, a nervous gesture that went unnoticed. His mind was running in agitated circles, oblivious to everything but the reason behind the phone call. He ignored the sweat forming over his brow.

The voice on the other end was nearing the point of exasperation. “Arthur, I helped you out once already. You barely came through with the money then. The loan you’re asking for this time is more than twice as much. I just don’t think it’s a good...” The pause only seemed to amplify the surprise in the other man’s voice. “You got help?”

Acute embarrassment made Arthur’s voice sound small, even in his own ears. “Yeah, I did, but I couldn’t hold it together. I’m a weak man, Donnelly.” He inhaled a deep, shaky breath. His thin hand trembled nervously when he raked it through his dark brown hair. This was his only chance. “Please, don’t make me beg. I can make good on it.” With sudden inspiration, he blurted, “I have the parlor! You can take it if I can’t come through.” He mentally catalogued the improvements to the ice cream shop. It was his pride and joy, the one accomplishment he had achieved without too much blemish. The parlor would cover what he was asking for if he couldn’t pay back the loan.

No, he chastised himself. He wouldn’t think like that, not any longer. He would pay it back. He was a changed man. At this point he had no choice, and he knew it.

Arthur turned slowly, looking around the one bedroom apartment, acknowledging with a clarity that scared him just what his addiction had cost him. The walls returned a stark, pallid story. No photos of loved ones, no hanging picture frames of birthday parties or of weddings. Nothing that would tell about the man he once had been. The furniture was just as lonely and tired, with worn vinyl and faded, stained fabrics. He didn't own a TV. He wasn't home enough to watch one. This apartment was a flophouse for one man, a place to shower and maybe eat if there was anything edible to be found. Usually there wasn't.

Arthur was in a real bad spot. If Donnelly couldn't get him out of this jam, he was as good as dead. His Vegas contact was ready and willing to have the bet house slap charges on him if he couldn't come up with the money. He'd been given ten days, and that was almost gone. Arthur could feel the man breathing hard down his neck every waking moment.

Besides that, if Arthur didn't owe Donnelly, then it would just be someone else. He always owed. Donnelly, to his way of thinking, was the least evil of his choices. Donnelly was miles away for starters. And Arthur had managed to repay one loan already, even if he had been shaky paying it back.

But that was before. Arthur swore to God he'd go straight. He owed too many people, and they were out for blood this time.

His stomach made a tumultuous heave at the thought of how much he owed. The worst part was that he couldn't withdraw from the bank account. If Arthur touched it, then *he* would find it, and it would be gone, like so many other things in his life. That account was his last saving grace, his only hope for redemption. He didn't want to take the chance, since he no longer knew how much was in there. He was only certain there was no way he could pay back what he owed with what he had on hand.

"Donnelly, I know you don't owe me a damn thing. Do you think that makes this one bit easier? I'll be the first to admit I'm a screw up." Arthur was instantly tortured by sharp flashes of memory, carried by a cold ache of failure. A beautiful baby boy. The child he had no right to. He slammed them back into the vestiges of his memory with a

cold hand. One more thing he'd screwed up; one more thing to regret. Some things couldn't be corrected.

The dragging silence on the phone became an answer in itself, deafening as he sat waiting. Arthur lifted a casino bar napkin to his face with a hand that still trembled, weak with fear, and wiped away the moisture gathering across his face.

When the chilled answer finally came across the phone, there was a menacing growl that made the warning distinct and in no way ignorable. "I'll send it overnight, Arthur. Same arrangements as last time. I'd better see money within the next thirty days. Do you understand?"

Arthur bit back the deep sob scouring his throat as he sagged in relief. His eyes closed for the briefest moment and thanked anyone he could think of for this moment of deliverance. "Same arrangements, Donnelly. And you'll have the interest in fifteen days." Arthur had scared himself so badly with his latest incompetent attempt; he could walk into a Gambler's Anonymous meeting this minute and claim himself free of the urge to gamble. He knew when he had been beaten. This time he had gotten in with the wrong crowd. He might be weak, but even a dumb animal could learn a new trick, especially if it involved survival.

A sound on the other end of the phone snapped Arthur back to the conversation, reminding him with whom he was speaking. "Very well. And Arthur?"

"Yes."

"This is the last time. Make something of yourself, for God's sake."

"Donnelly, thank you," Arthur answered, but the line had gone dead.

## Chapter One

"Jacob, don't forget your book bag," Jessie called from the kitchen. She shot an anxious look at the clock on the wall to find they were both cutting it close.

"Got it here, Mom." Jacob rushed into the kitchen, grabbed his lunch, and stuffed it into his bag. Watching his total disregard for the poor sack, she knew instinctively his lunch wouldn't resemble food in four hours.

"Did you finish all of your homework?" She screwed the cap onto the juice, and placed it in the refrigerator. She frowned, noticing he hadn't buttoned his shirt all the way again. She wondered if other parents had problems getting their children to dress themselves. Had to be a teenager thing.

"Yeah, all done. Don't worry, Mom. The essay isn't due until the end of the week." He gulped his juice in seconds, and tossed the cup into the sink. She saw him make a final, searching look before he whipped around, rushing to catch the bus.

Jessie planted her hands on her hips and tilted her head. "Hey mister, forgetting something?"

Jacob turned, a bashful hue tinting his cheeks. With a quick kiss to her cheek, he made good on his escape.

"Don't forget to tuck in your shirt!" Jessie yelled after him.

She smiled at his disappearing back, knowing with a mother's intuition her words would be ignored. The slam of the door echoed through to the kitchen. *Going nothing to ninety*, she thought. She envied his constant energy, and not too secretly either.

Jacob was an incredibly smart young man, at least in her eyes, although twelve wasn't considered as young as it might once have been. So much more was expected of

kids today, far more than she could remember. She was glad he had some good smarts to work with. If Jacob kept his classes in order, and kept his grades up, colleges would be looking for him instead of the other way around. It was a prospect for her son's future, which made her very proud of him.

The two of them were a good team. They both had a say in whatever happened in their world, although when necessary, she did take the 'Because I'm the mom' stand. Even then, she took the time to explain the whys if she could. All they had was each other, so their relationship had to be equal, as much as possible.

She turned off the light in the kitchen and made her way through the house. She remembered when she'd bought the three-bedroom house, not long after her divorce from Arthur. It wasn't large, but it was permanent. It exuded that homey feeling she remembered from growing up, a feeling of family. It held a certain appeal she had immediately felt drawn to. There was a warmth in the house, almost a calming quality. It was the right house for her when she needed a home to give a stable life to her and Jacob.

The beaming sunlight in the kitchen was what had sold her on the cozy home from the beginning. The way the light shone through the windows over the sink had seemed so perfect. The bright arcs of yellow warmth fell on the floor, and late into the day would almost reach the counter, giving it an enchanted feeling. She'd fallen in love on the spot.

She'd needed the security the house offered her when Arthur relinquished any rights to her life, the day she caught him in their bed with another woman.

It was a time in her life she didn't usually dwell on, but for some reason, when she awakened that morning, Arthur had been on her mind. Even after more than ten years without a word from her ex-husband, Jessie could recall his face. Maybe it was because Jacob was nearly a mirror image of him. All she knew for certain was that Arthur had chosen his lifestyle over his wife and son.

After she'd discovered his "other life", there wasn't any way she could be married to him anymore. She wouldn't be with a man who held so little regard for the



one person he was supposed to care for implicitly. At the end of the debacle, she wasn't sure what made the whole divorce sadder; the ease with which he just dropped her, or the cold, unfeeling way he gave up his son. To care so little for Jacob; it was more than she could tolerate.

Jessie had never tried to find him, nor had she tried to get money from him. He was supposed to pay child support, but she knew the way he did things. If he had money to buy peanut butter and bread he was having a good week. Trying to get what was due to her would have caused more stress for both her and Jacob than the money was worth.

She never lied to Jacob about his father. Some days she wondered if she was doing the right thing by not holding back, by letting Jacob know exactly what kind of man his father was. Was it harmful to know your father had an addiction? That he couldn't stop gambling, and that because of his addiction he'd given up everything he'd once known? She had no idea what a psychologist would say on the matter; she only had her own instincts to guide her.

When Jacob did ask about his father, she was as honest as she could be, even when he'd asked if she had ever loved Arthur. It hadn't been difficult to answer. She had loved him, very much, but you can't make a person love you in return if the other person isn't capable of loving you.

Jessica didn't know if Arthur had really loved her, either. He might have, in the beginning, when it was all so new to them both. But it had been so long ago she couldn't even remember what it felt like to be held by a man. Since her divorce, she had remained alone on purpose, resolved to avoid relationships that might only confuse or hurt her son further.

She took a deep breath as the morning sunlight warmed her back when she stepped outside. After locking the door, she stepped off the porch, then took the graveled path to reach her car. She loved the smell of the grass in her yard, especially right after the neighbor's kid came to do his bi-weekly trim. She had no interest in gardening, and she didn't even know if she had a green thumb.

The light breezes in the morning brought the delicious scents of roses and jasmine from a few yards down. It was just one of those everyday perks that would put a smile on her lips.

It was a beautiful day, even if it was just another day to go to work. She had never been the type to complain, and by her standards, today wasn't going all that badly. She inhaled a deep breath and found the scent of the roses, letting the sun's warmth and those scents lift her mood even more.

She closed the driver's door, and started the car with a sure twist of the key. Backing down the length of her driveway, she felt a dragging pull. Irritated, but knowing what the problem was without really having to investigate, she got out anyway and walked to the passenger side of her car. Yep, there it was, mocking her and her time constraints. A flat. And not just a little flat --pancake flat. She kicked it with the toe of her pump. Still flat.

She lifted her sleeve cuff and looked at her watch, her lips puckering in dismay. There was no way she'd be on time now. She marched back to the driver's side and fumbled through her purse for her phone. After informing the office she would be late and why, she flipped the phone back into the car with a disgusted sigh.

Forty-five minutes and one really rusty, stubborn lug nut later, she had the tire changed. She slipped inside the house to wash her hands and to check her make-up. With a final glance in the mirror, she headed off to work, again.

She wouldn't let a little thing like a flat tire keep her down. Most of her buoyed mood returned on the drive to the office. She heard three of her favorite songs on the way, and the upbeat tempos had her tapping her fingers within a few minutes of leaving her house.

"Morning, Eloise," Jessie greeted the nurse standing at the desk as she swept into the doctor's office. She dropped her purse into a bottom desk drawer and turned on her computer.

"Flat tire, huh?" Eloise glanced up, but went right back to reading the medical file she held in her hands. She was a petite woman in her forties, kindhearted and quick to smile.

"Yeah, wouldn't you just know it?" Jessie griped in a good-natured way. "It isn't like it's Monday, or anything."

"I wouldn't worry about it, Jessie. There were only two this morning. No rushes, thank goodness." Eloise smiled in sympathy over Jessie's morning trials.

Jessie did a prompt check of her schedule and noted the first appointments had already been shown to exam rooms. There was only Mr. Luftin, waiting for his monthly check-up. She returned his smile as he called a kind greeting to her. *Sweet old man, but he could talk you into a stupor if you let him.*

"Okay. Thanks for holding down the fort for me. Did the Doc need anything?"

"Nope. He's doing great today. I guess he and the Mrs. have finally agreed on the cruise they're taking. He came in smiling." She winked, making Jessie laugh. Yes sir, things were looking just fine.

Jessie settled into the rest of her morning, answering calls, talking with patients and setting appointments. It wasn't a glamorous job but it paid the bills, and she enjoyed the patients. It made her day when a concerned or overwrought patient came in, and with her wit and smile, she could make them overlook the reason they were there in the first place. Once or twice, someone had asked her out on a date, but she always turned them down with a kind refusal. She didn't want to meet someone through her job--not that it was a bad way to meet people. She could meet a couple dozen men, doctors and patients, during a busy week, but to her, it wasn't an appropriate place to find a personal attachment. She needed the job more than she needed adult companionship.

She was taking a detailed appointment when the phone rang. Unable to interrupt the lengthy explanation from the patient, she gestured for Eloise to grab the second line.

When Jessie ended her call, Eloise was still on the phone. "No, this isn't Jacob's mother, but she does work here. Can you wait a minute? Let me see if she's done."

Confusion marked Jessie's brow as Eloise placed the call on hold. "It's Jacob's school. They said it's very important they talk with you."

Suddenly an assortment of troubled thoughts flew through her mind. *Was Jacob hurt? Had he been in a fight? He hadn't been in one yet, but it could still happen. What if he had been playing and had been injured somehow? Were they taking him to the hospital?* Shaking her head to clear the worries that overtook her, she lifted the phone and depressed the blinking button.

She took a steadying breath. "Hello? This is Jessica Harden. Has something happened to Jacob?"

"Well, no not really," came the brisk reply of a male voice. "This is Mr. Settlemeir, Jacob's English teacher." She felt a wave of relief when she recognized who it was. Mr. Settlemeir was one of her son's favorite teachers. The relief was short-lived, unfortunately, because before she could offer a greeting, he continued. "Ms. Harden, the reason I'm calling is to tell you your son will be spending time in detention this week."

"In detention? For what? What could Jacob have possibly done to need detention?" she asked with dismay.

The teacher on the other end sniffed, sounding offended. "I am requiring it because of his belligerent attitude in class today," he explained, in his best teacher's voice.

"Mr. Settlemeir, can you tell me what happened? I doubt Jacob meant--"

"Oh, yes, he did, Ms. Harden. He was very succinct in his explanation." His voice dropped to a condescending tone. "Ms. Harden, your boy had the audacity to call me a liar in front of his classmates. That is reprehensible behavior."

Jessica hated it when people were rude enough to interrupt. It didn't help her at that moment though, when she knew she was guilty of doing so when upset. "Can you give me a little better explanation of what happened, Mr. Settlemeir? I'm afraid I don't have much to go on, if all he's done is call you a name," she responded crisply. She felt

her temper starting to rise at the man's attitude, wanting to defend her son. Both sides deserved a chance to explain, but Jacob's defense would have to wait.

"Why don't you ask Jacob? I'm sure he could give a very colorful picture of what he did. He'll be attending detention for the rest of the week. You might want to make sure he has all of his class work for those days." And with a final "Good day", he ended the call.

She held the receiver for several minutes in quiet shock. Mr. Settlemeir was a good, unbiased teacher. She'd had conferences with him, and they had always discussed her son with ease. His attitude and explanation of what had happened were just not like him at all. He'd sounded completely flustered, using a tone of voice she just couldn't easily imagine coming from Jacob's English teacher.

Then there was Jacob. What on earth had he done? Looking at the clock, she realized she still had two whole hours before she could find out.

She stared blankly at the patient insurance forms on her desk for several long, distracted moments. Running late, a flat tire, and now Jacob was in detention. Her day was just getting better and better. The good mood she'd nurtured all day suddenly felt very flat. And it was only Monday.

After waiting an hour at the garage to get her tire fixed, she finally managed to get home. The lights were on, and she could see the flickering TV through the curtains. *Good*, she thought. Now she could find out from Jacob just what had happened to put Mr. Settlemeir on the warpath. She slid in through the side door, aware that with the TV on; Jacob probably hadn't heard her come in.

Jessica dropped her purse and keys on the kitchen table, ignoring the pile of mail on the polished wood. First things first. "Jacob?" Her voice echoed a little off the walls.

"You don't have to shout. I'm right here." He stood behind her shoulder, looking a little uncomfortable, but not ashamed.

She sat down at the kitchen table silently telling him with a sharp look it was in his best interest to do the same. "All right. Tell me why Mr. Settlemeir put you in

detention." She raised a hand to cut in as he drew a breath. "And don't sugar-coat it. I want all the details."

His shoulders drooped with her order to talk. "I didn't mean to make it sound like it did when it came out, Mom, but when he started rattling off dates and writers...well...I kind of told him off." His gaze fell to his lap where his hands were clasped in a death strangle. "Especially when he tried to use Charles Dickens as an example," he added.

"What do you mean? Charles Dickens is a classic author." Her brow shot up in confusion as she tried to follow the details of what had happened between the two.

Relief was evident in his look. "I know! Well, he was talking about nineteenth century England and some of the writers of that time."

"Comparing them?" she guessed.

"Yeah, versus how things are done today." He shrugged his shoulders. "I know he was only using Dickens because he's so well known. What made it worse is we were both right, but because I made him look like he wasn't telling the truth, I got detention for it." His expression spoke volumes. He didn't understand how he could be punished for being right.

"What were you both right about?" Jessie asked, her curiosity piqued.

Jacob's gaze fell to rest on his toes. "One of the other authors was Oscar Wilde."

"I see," she murmured. "And?"

Jacob swallowed. "Well, to compare their writing styles, I pointed out Dickens led a normal life and Wilde was...well...a bit unusual," he told her. "Mr. Settlemeir didn't believe I knew what I was talking about. He told the class some bunk story about Wilde I knew wasn't true." He let out a sigh. "And that was when I told him he was doing it to avoid saying Wilde had homosexual tendencies. He had even been on trial and convicted for being with young men in the 1890's. They were both good writers of their eras, as Mr. Settlemeir said, but he wasn't being fair in his lecture. He was right about Dickens and I was right about Wilde, but that wasn't the point he wanted to make. And then came detention." He ended with a chagrined look in his eye.

Jessica stared back at her son. "You understand it wasn't about who was right or who was wrong that you got detention? You shouldn't have spoken back to your teacher. I taught you better than that." Her frown deepened.

"I know, Mom. But he just kept going on and on, and I knew he was wrong. When I tried to tell him, he didn't want to hear it." He looked up at her with baleful eyes as he continued with the story. "It was like he just didn't care he was telling us the wrong stuff. Or at least not the whole truth." He sat in somber, dejected silence as she considered what he had been saying.

She studied her son for several seconds. "Why do you know so much about English history?"

He ducked his head avoiding her penetrating gaze. His words were subdued in the silence of the kitchen. "I've been doing a family tree. I thought I found a connection to Oscar Wilde and read about him."

"Sweetheart, that's wonderful. But why on England at all? We're not related to anyone from English lines." She heard her own confusion in her ears when she asked him.

He didn't look up. His hands had moved to the tabletop where he started making random patterns with his fingers. "Dad was, so I thought I should include him."

Jessica's heart thudded with a deep, hollow beat for a hard moment. Jacob's words, though innocent, had sliced her to the bone. He didn't make comments like that often. She was equally astounded and disturbed that he had taken such an interest in the man who had effectively kissed them off.

She lifted his face to meet her gaze, her hand a calm, motherly hold on his face. "Jacob, if it helps you to find something about him you can relate to don't ever feel ashamed of it. But don't look for him either. He isn't there."

A fleeting look of disappointed dejection clouded his expression. "I know." He sighed and went on. "I guess I really got into the history part of it and when Mr.

Settlemeir started saying those things about Wilde, England and Dickens, I knew he wasn't telling everybody everything. I think it amazed him that I knew about them."

"So, what do you think you should do about it?" She waited patiently, giving him the opportunity to come up with the answer himself.

His shoulders were still a little stooped. "You aren't mad at me?"

Her lips tilted up at the corners in a sincere smile as she watched him wait for the grounding of a lifetime. This was going to be his first detention, his first week of hard time at school. "I am upset that you spoke back to a teacher and got yourself into trouble. Don't doubt that. But why would I be angry with you for knowing more than your teacher? You probably know more than I do."

His smile reappeared at her jest, only she wasn't joking about him knowing more than she did. He probably did. If he already understood tenth grade literature...oh, boy. She patted his knee affectionately. "So, what do you think you should do?"

He thought for a moment. "I guess I could write an apology. I could explain why I said what I did, and that I wasn't to try to make him sound like a liar. I guess if he asks how I know, I could tell him, but I don't guess it's really important. Is it?" he asked her.

"No, probably not. But if he asks, share what you learned with him. Who knows? You may really know something he hasn't seen or read before."

As he stood, he told her, "By the way, detention is until Friday. At least I can get my essay done for English." His grin was lopsided, since it was his English teacher to begin with who had given him the detention.

"All right, go do whatever homework you have, and turn off the TV until it's done. I saw it was on when I got home," she said, reminding him homework came first as he left the kitchen again. She hadn't known anyone in honors classes when she had been in school, and she knew she didn't have the smarts to have been in any. Yet her son was an ace in practically every class, and knew enough to tell off a teacher. She laughed a little at the thought that maybe someone had switched babies at the hospital. Nah... He was way too stubborn to not be hers.



She was still smiling over their conversation as she sifted through the mail. As she divided the bills from the junk, a professionally printed envelope fell from behind the local store ads. She stared at it a moment before picking it up, trying to place the name. Mr. Sandy Coppers, on Barron Street. She tapped her chin with a bill envelope. The name didn't ring any bells, so it could wait until after dinner.

*Dinner!* She looked up at the clock and realized with a start it was already after seven, and she hadn't even thought of what to cook. She tossed the stack of mail on to the counter and moved to the fridge, grateful she'd remembered to thaw some chicken.

When they were done eating, Jacob carried his plate to the sink, and gave it a good rinse. "I finished my homework for tonight, Mom. Can I watch that movie, the one with Arnold Schwarzenegger?"

She glanced at the clock. "Only until ten. Then to bed. If it isn't over, you can finish it tomorrow night."

With a nod, he took off for the living room. Dinner usually wasn't a boisterous affair with just the two of them, so it didn't take too long to get the kitchen back into shape. Turning to put the milk back in the refrigerator, she caught sight of the large envelope. She shivered as a sense of disquiet rippled over her. She shrugged it off without placing much weight on the feeling. It had simply been a bad Monday.

Might as well see who thought she was important enough to send her a business letter. She pulled out the pages and sat down at the table with them in her hands. She started to read the top letter, slowly sipping her iced tea.

At first, the words didn't sink in. But as she read it again, her eyes grew wide, and she was forced to set her tea down with a numb, shaking hand. She fought for breath as her heart pounded, against her ribs.

"Oh God! Arthur died," she said softly, her shocked words ringing in her ears.

## Chapter Two

The letter trembled in her hand like a leaf in a strong wind, and she shook from head to toe. Overwhelmed, emotions swamped her without warning. Jessica felt a burning anger at her ex's parental neglect, and a searing outrage at his disinterest in her, followed by immense self-disgust. Secretly, she'd hoped Arthur might have admitted to his addictions and vices. Even if he hadn't come clean for her, he could have at least tried for Jacob. There had been a small surviving hope only because she had once loved him, the only man she had ever known on that emotional level. It was with a weary sigh she even acknowledged the hope. The man she hadn't seen or heard from in over ten years was gone. The man who had done nothing to see Jacob, his only son, was dead.

The short letter described in brief detail the funeral arrangements that had been made. There was also mention of a deed with a property description. Reading the words, she felt the finality settle around her like a chilling cloud. Arthur had died of an accidental overdose, a combination of drugs and alcohol. The letter informed her that an autopsy could be performed but due to the cost, it would require a request from the family.

She read the letter again and again, feeling a numbing sense of unreality as her eyes focused and unfocused on the words, blurring the page. Until this morning, she hadn't given much thought to Arthur in years. She hadn't even known for sure if he had still been in New Mexico. Well, now she knew. He was to be buried there.

Her head sank to rest on folded arms. She may not have thought much about him, but after that evening, she understood Jacob did. Arthur was a part of his son's life, regardless of his lack of interest in being a father. How was she going to explain this to her son, who so desperately wanted a father in his life that he was searching in the past to find him?

"Mom, are you okay?" Jacob stood beside her where she slouched over the table.

"Yeah, I'm fine." She glanced at the page in her hand as she straightened in her chair. She pushed her thick hair away from her eyes with a hand that still trembled. "Jacob, you had better sit down. You need to know what this is about." Her voice sounded hollow after the shock of the letter.

"I was just going to get a soda. I didn't do anything, I swear."

"I know, but this concerns you. And me." She felt the numbness work its way over her, her gaze unseeing for several moments.

Jacob's movements were slow, bordering on cautious as he sat next to her. He fidgeted uncomfortably as he waited.

She didn't reach out to him, unsure of his reaction. Instead, she watched him with an open understanding, prepared for whatever his response would be to the news she was about to break to him. "Honey, this letter is from Arthur's attorney." He sat silently, waiting with a blank expression. She didn't need to elaborate on which Arthur she meant. She took one more steadying breath. "Jacob, your father died. Three days ago, in his apartment." She left out the cause. Censorship did have its place.

At first, there was no sign of recognition, no reaction. A man she knew Jacob only vaguely remembered, with whom he had never held a conversation, one who had never made a single attempt to find them, was gone.

She didn't know if she should expect tears or outrage, indifference or relief. For the moment Jacob sat in frozen silence as he absorbed her announcement.

"So, I guess I am the official man of the family now. He's never coming back." His voice was strong but flat, desolate in the knowledge that he would never get to know his father.

She realized his words were enervated, lackluster and without vitality. He was serious. "Honey, this doesn't change anything. A man neither one of us has any real connection to has passed on." She paused, and shook her head slightly. "No, that isn't true. That's too blunt. He had a lot of connection to us. Especially to you."

Before her eyes, her little boy started to mature into the man he would become. "Mom, I do understand what this means. I know nothing has really changed, not between us. But now I have to make sure I become the man Dad never was." His eyes were shiny with tears, a sign of the years of neglect and unfulfilled need his missing father had left as his legacy.

Her hands were swift as she grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him into her embrace, wanting to protect him from the pain. "Don't you dare grow up on me yet. I knew you needed a father in your life, and I'm sorry I couldn't be both to you. But please, you have years to worry about growing up. Don't do it just yet." She leaned back and stroked away the tears that fell from his eyes. Arthur's coffee-and-cream colored eyes.

His words were quiet, yet filled with meaning. "I know, Mom, but I mean it. I didn't have a dad, but I do know how to be a man. You will be proud of the son you have." He hugged her tightly for a few heartbeats before he pulled himself free. What she saw made her proud and sad at the same time. Jacob was growing up before her eyes and she couldn't do anything to stop it. Somehow she knew he would never call Arthur "Dad" again.

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The next morning, she made her appointment with the lawyer to finalize the funeral scheduled for Friday. She made sure she had the time off from work, and that Jacob could miss school to attend. She discovered there were weird rules when it came to detention. She wasn't sure he would even want to go to the funeral, but she knew she couldn't deny him if he wanted to.

Two days later, Jessie met with Mr. Coppers, who had been Arthur's attorney. He was a kind gentleman, straight and thin as a pole with silvery hair in a fashionable style, but with a smile that glowed with gentle empathy. He asked her if she had looked over all the paperwork he'd sent, and she admitted she hadn't.

"That's quite all right. It's very understandable, with news like that," he offered.

"Yes, well... it's been a difficult week. You know that saying about bad things happening in threes? That was it, in a nutshell." Jessica waved her hand in a dismissive sweep.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. No one likes that kind of day," he told her with an understanding nod. "Well, basically, the remainder of the packet was a deed to a piece of property," he informed her, getting back to the business at hand.

"I saw it mentioned in the letter, but a deed to what?" She straightened the hem of her shirt in an attempt to keep her hands busy and hide their nervous trembling.

Mr. Coppers pulled a file from under two others sitting on his large desk, searching with nimble fingers through sheets of paper. "It would seem Mr. Harden had a business that did a fair profit, and during the tourist season, it managed to do quite well. It has been unoccupied and locked for a few months, however."

She sat a little straighter. *Arthur and responsibility?* The two were not synonymous in any way. "What kind of business and what does it have to do with me?"

"Well, according to the will Mr. Harden had drawn, it has been deeded to both you and your son." She saw his eyes continue to move, scanning the page in front of him. "Actually, according to the documents I have, he transferred ownership of the shop to you two months ago, but according to the will, it was to be deeded to you regardless. The transfer simply legalizes the state's tax interest in the business. Legally, it is yours."

It felt like a boulder slammed into her. "Ex...cuse me?" She tried to focus on the array of papers on his desk, even though she couldn't read a word of it upside down.

“Well, it is legal to transfer businesses from one owner to another. All he would need is your social security number. The will had been done a year ago, and I know he had intended for you to have it regardless.”

She sat in blindsided silence as he continued with the edicts of the will. “Even though your son is a minor, there was a direct request he have half the ownership. The property value equity can be held in trust until he’s of legal age. As for what the business is, it’s an ice cream shop. An ice cream parlor is how it is described in the documents.” His sharp eyes dropped as he scanned the document for the proper description, nodding to see that he’d remembered it correctly.

“An ice cream shop? Are you serious?” Her eyes grew wide in disbelief.

“Yes, actually. I have a copy of the latest financial statements for it if you would like to see them.”

“He had a business? A real business, and he actually made money from it?” She sank deeper into the chair. *They couldn’t be talking about the same man, could they?*

“It was very legitimate. And I know he spent the last three years renovating the interior in stages.” He added after a short pause, “I don’t believe he physically ran the store, but he’d overseen it for several years.”

“Not to sound rude, but this is Arthur M. Harden you are talking about?” She just couldn’t get past the dichotomy of Arthur the ex-husband louse and Arthur Harden, the businessman. They weren’t--couldn’t be--the same man.

He smiled at her shocked expression. “Yes. I understand your disbelief at this news, considering your relationship to the deceased, but I can confirm what I have told you.”

Jessica was quiet for several minutes. Remembering where she was, she pulled herself together. Arthur had an ice cream parlor right in town, and she had never known. Why hadn’t he ever told her? Why hadn’t he ever contacted her? Picturing it as a profitable business was easy, but as Artie’s? It was a stretch.

“Does it have a name?” she asked, finally recovering from the inheritance of her own business.

He scanned the sheet before him. "I believe it's called *Ice Cream in the Snow*."

Her sharp gasp broke the stillness of the office. Concern flashed across his thin features as she felt the blood drain away from her face. "I'm sorry. Are you going to be all right, Ms. Harden?" He began to rise from his seat when she didn't answer right away.

She took a deep breath, then another. She waved for him sit back down, embarrassed that she was making such a spectacle of herself. "Yes. I'll be fine in just a moment. It was just a shock." He nodded as he retook his chair. She was thankful that he took a few minutes to unobtrusively replace the documents in a plain folder on his desk while she sorted through this new information.

Her gaze unfocused as a long-ago memory returned with amazing clarity, a wintry afternoon when Arthur had been courting her. He had written a poem for her, and described her eyes as the palest of blue, her hair likened to a dark copper penny. He described her skin, pearly white with dark freckles on her shoulders and a few lighter ones on her cheeks. He'd told her she reminded him of cinnamon ice cream, with her skin the color of cream and her freckles the flavor. The poem had been called *Ice Cream in the Snow*. It was a fierce shock to realize he'd never forgotten her.

"Thank you, Mr. Coppers, but I had better get home. Jacob will be home soon," she said, too distracted to know if they were done or not. Her thoughts were far away as she rose to leave. Mr. Coppers stood at her hasty departure.

Had Arthur harbored feelings for her, after all this time? Could she still care for him, after everything he had done to her? And why had he left them everything he had? The questions swirled through her mind as she made her way out of the office. The sadness of knowing that it was too late for either of them was her shadow for the rest of the day.

\* \* \*

The burial site was pristine but barren. The deep hole in the earth gaped beneath their feet like an ugly, toothless yawn. There were no sorrowful sympathizers to line the

site, nor any flowers to mark this passing of a soul. There was no sweet, poignant organ music to be heard. Only the sound of the birds and their passing chatter broke the morning silence.

Jessie and Jacob stood as solitary witnesses to Arthur's death. Jacob's arm was around her waist, and Jessie's wrapped over his shoulders, their heads bowed in shared grief for the man who was to be lowered into a cold and unforgiving ground. As there were no other mourners, there wasn't a need for a wake, allowing the whole ceremony to be held at graveside. A short passage from the Bible was all that was spoken in eulogy. Jessica no longer knew if it was adequate or correct.

Her thoughts had been in turmoil ever since the meeting with Mr. Coppers. The idea that Arthur had kept them in his thoughts was remarkable enough, but to know he had left them all he had, well, it was unimaginable. She hadn't mentioned much about it to Jacob. She didn't really know how to explain it to the boy who felt he needed to be a man to help her through this. All she wanted was for her son to understand that the man he had thought of as a father had clearly felt something for the both of them. Regardless of how large or how small the effort had been, it had been an honest effort from a man who had forgotten how to communicate feelings to another person.

Neither spoke as they trudged in silence from the gravesite back to her car. When she should have turned left to return home, she drove straight into the heart of town, making a sharp right into a shopping center. Jacob looked at her in confusion, but she kept driving to the far corner. There were large, leaf-filled trees and two outdoor wooden tables with tied-down umbrellas. She parked in front of the glass doors of the ice cream shop, and cut off the engine with trepidation.

"Jacob, I want you to know, we will get through this together." She couldn't look directly at him. Her body felt numb as she became mesmerized by the curved neon sign in the storefront window. Even in dull red and turned off, the sign brought back those forgotten memories. The memory of the poem, the cold winter weather of that day, the sounds of people walking passed them in the park, dogs barking. She shook her head and dislodged the faded memories.



Had she been wrong about Arthur? She shook herself mentally. No, she knew who he had been, what he had done. She'd caught him with another woman in their bed. And that had only been the nasty beginning of her wake-up call.

"What are you talking about, Mom?" Jacob was looking around, staring at the business fronts with a withdrawn expression. Except for the ice cream shop that was locked up tight, she noted there wasn't a single store on their end of the strip mall that would appeal to him.

Jessie turned in her seat to face him. "It looks like you and I are business owners."

Her statement went right over his head as he started to fidget. His fingers tugged at the knot of his tie in exasperation at the confinement. "Mom, when can I change?"

She looked at his face, seeing discomfort in his eyes along with a lingering sadness only time could heal. "I guess once we get done with the first walkthrough, we can go home and change."

"Mom!" He sighed with impatience.

Jessie inhaled a slow steadying breath. "Arthur left us, both of us, this ice cream parlor." She gestured to the glass storefront.

He turned to look at his mother with a puzzled expression. "What do you mean?"

"Like I said. You and I are business owners."

His mouth fell open as excitement began to glow within his eyes. "Really? Our own ice cream shop? Wow! Wait until I tell the guys at school." He reached for the car door, but her next words froze him.

"I don't know if we're keeping it yet, Jacob. If we sell, it could pay for your college tuition. Plus, I don't know how we could run it. I'm only one person, who already has a job, and you're only twelve. I know there are child labor laws, so don't give me that look, mister. But I promised myself I'd at least come and look at it." She admitted she was also a little curious about the kind of man Arthur had to have become to own a business. She wondered if the parlor would give her any of his secrets.

"I'm almost thirteen," he stated imperiously, in the voice of a child weary of being thought of as anything less than an adult. With that, he bounded from the car, and ran to look through the windows.

He gaped and peeked and oohed and ahhed, trying to see through the glass, his hands curved in childish fascination around his face to block the glare so he could see through the glass to the dim interior. He was so excited. Jessie sighed, and decided she could at least let him know she had the key. Her smile was lighter, for the first time that day, as she watched him. She soaked in his delight over the new discovery as she stepped up to the entrance, slid the key into the lock, and opened the door for her son.

## Chapter Three

The stark chrome and black interior of Brick's office encompassed him with a cold edge. Today, it suited his mood more than ever. Brick glared at his paperwork one more time, well aware he was accomplishing nothing.

Arthur had disappeared, and so had Brick's money. He doggedly tried the home number with fading optimism. He took a deep breath, waiting, but this time, it didn't ring. For the first time, he heard the phone company's recording that the number had been disconnected. He slammed the phone down with a deafening crunch and bellowed for his assistant.

He'd known making a loan of that size to Arthur was a mistake. The last loan hadn't been half that, and it had taken Arthur three times the agreed timetable to pay it back. Brick got it all, along with the interest, but he didn't have the assets to loan idiots money on a daily basis. And now, he had been the idiot for doing it twice for the same low life, who supposedly was setting himself straight.

"Yeah, right!" He snarled at his own stupidity. "Silvia, get me a flight to Las Cruces!" he roared when her dulcet, unfazed response was heard over the intercom. "And make damn sure it's first class this time. I don't care if they have to kick off the pilot; I am not riding in coach again!" He yanked viciously at his tie. God, he hated flying, and now he was not only going to have to fly to New Mexico, two-thirds of the way across the country, but he was going to have to find Arthur and beat him to a pulp for making him fly to begin with.

His fingers worked on the knot at his throat with quick movements, finally releasing the strangling hold of the tie. He began pacing, considering all the body damage that could be done without leaving physical evidence. The knowledge he had wasn't the kind you learned from a book. You learned it during warfare. You learned how to defend, how to move with the wind, how to attack with the darkness. How to be completely silent and lethal. And you definitely learned how to survive. For some reason, he'd gone against his better judgment with Arthur, and now all his instincts were ready for the hunt.

"Mr. Donnelly," Sylvia's quick, crisp voice announced over the intercom. "You are booked for tomorrow morning, 8:50 a.m. The ticket will be at the counter, sir, and a car will be waiting. Anything else?"

"No," he responded curtly, then sighed. He hadn't meant to growl at her. He grabbed the stress ball off his desk, unconsciously tightening his hold around the foam rubber martyr. Sylvia was good help, and thankfully she'd been with him long enough to know about his mercurial moods. He'd worked his ass off to get to where he was after the Army advised him to "quietly get lost" because he had gotten too thorough in his line of work. He had only done what they had taught him to do. It wasn't his fault he had been able to improve the techniques. Sitting back in his chair, he began to toss the ball against the hardwood wall behind his desk.

He wasn't a loan shark, not even close to being one. However, he had garnered lucrative assets from his stint in the military, not to mention contacts that would make the FBI and Secret Service green with envy. He'd learned the best ways to make his money work for him. His private business was self-sufficient, just another notch in his belt of success.

He snapped his fingers, and caught the ball in his palm a split second later with a satisfying slap as snatches of his conversation with Artie came back to him. Artie had said something about owning a business. If the idiot thought he could screw with Brick Donnelly, then there was certainly a lesson to be learned. It was a shame Artie would

have to lose his business over it. Brick's lips curved into a mockery of a smile when he threw the ball once more.

\* \* \*

Jacob smiled as he wiped down tables in the parlor. He had fallen in love with the shop. He knew it sounded corny, but he didn't care. It was his silent belief that in some obscure way only a twelve-year-old boy could hope for, his father was trying to apologize. Jacob couldn't remember the physical presence of the man he had thought of as Dad, and yet, Arthur had left them the only thing that had clearly meant something to him before his death.

Whatever Arthur's reason, Jacob loved the place. Every free minute he had, he was there, and it wasn't just to eat ice cream. He had posted flyers at school to advertise the reopening under new management. Realistically, he understood his mother's point of view and whether they kept it or not, it should be shown to be a thriving business. He knew it would be easier to sell that way, but he was hoping if the shop did a booming business, his mother would reconsider. He didn't want to sell it at all.

He polished the heavy wood bar that lined the entire back wall. His mom said it was probably oak, but it didn't really matter. He loved the way it reflected the lights. There was a mirror behind it, with an elegant etched scroll around the edges and huge, padded stools that seemed to make the place shine with their shiny chrome reflecting light in all directions. He imagined it might have looked like the ice cream parlors of the early 20's and 30's. Back when ice cream socials were all the rage, and prohibition had put a stop to the real fun. He chuckled to himself. Sometimes history made the littlest things interesting.

"Mom, why don't we try expanding?" Jacob asked, trying for an air of nonchalance. While he carefully polished the wood trim winding its way around the room, he envisioned people enjoying their little piece of paradise year round. "Mom, did you hear me?" His strokes were strong as he rubbed and wiped away the dust that had collected in the weeks the shop had been closed.

Jessica poked her head out from beneath the cooler, where she'd been checking the thermostat again. She'd done some intense reading on proprietorship, on cooling systems, financing and probably about a thousand other details, mentally trying to get into gear to run the store. She couldn't believe it herself. She was loving it!

"Um, yeah, but expand how?" She looked around the suite they occupied, and couldn't see room for expansion in square footage.

With unrestrained enthusiasm he began gushing ideas, rattling off a list of all the things the kids at school had suggested, throwing out anything and everything that came to mind. "Well, we could add coffee for during the winter, and hot chocolate, with flavors. We could talk to Mr. Tipple about bakery stuff."

She held up a hand, catching him in mid-rush. "Who is Mr. Tipple?"

Not losing a beat, he said, "He owns the bakery at the other end of the shopping center. And he said he'd be happy to help us, to get us started by underselling, I think that was what he called it, so we could make money off of his stuff."

She laughed easily. "My son, the networker." She waved it off when she got only a blank look for her joke.

"One of the girls at school even suggested we do birthday cakes and birthday parties. She said she loves ice cream cakes." He stopped to take a deep, excited breath. "What do you think? Could we do it?" His face glowed with eager anticipation.

She had already crunched the numbers with Mr. Coppers. He had advised her he had the financial statements and was willing to help her make sense of them. His years of experience had helped to alleviate her doubts of this surprising opportunity. The little shop did make a comfortable profit. With a little saving for the slow times, she wouldn't be making any less than if she continued to work at the doctor's office. Even with overhead and an extra employee during the summer, they could make it.

"I had no idea you were so into all of this," she told him evenly. He'd never know that was the biggest bald-faced lie she'd ever told him. She had watched her child's *joie de vivre* grow by leaps and bounds over the idea of owning an ice cream shop.

"No, Mom. I love it!" When he looked up and caught her thoughtful stare, she could see the first twinges of panic in his expression. "Mom, you aren't going to sell, are you? You said we would talk about it. The shop's half mine too!"

Jessie prayed she'd made the right choice. She had spent many sleepless hours in the last week trying to come to a solid decision. She walked around the cooler as Jacob sank into a chair, the fear of hearing the worst on his face. She knew it was risky, but their bills were minimal and it looked like a good location. Besides, what was life but a chance to improve?

"Jacob, I know we said we would talk about it, but I figured since the majority of the responsibility was going to fall onto my shoulders, I needed to make the responsible decision. So, I did." Abject horror clouded his face. It broke her heart to watch all his hopes crash to the floor at his feet.

She made sure she had his undivided attention before she tried to speak again, a gentle hand holding up his chin. Her lips curved up at the corners, unable to completely resist the grin lurking within. She hooked a thumb over her shoulder behind her, pointing to the immense counter space backing the wall. "I gave my notice yesterday. Where do you want to put the coffee and hot chocolate?"

Disbelief washed over his youthful features. "Do you mean it?" When she nodded her head, he threw his arms around her, nearly bowling over the both of them in his excitement. "I love you, Mom. You won't regret it. I'll work hard. I won't pick any more fights with Mr. Settlemeir either. I--"

"Slow down." She cut him off as his face lit up. "We have a little in savings to get us through the start up, and I think your ideas are going to be a hit with winter coming. And we will definitely go talk with Mr. Tipple. We're a team remember? We will both work hard, and neither of us will pick fights with anyone. Deal?"

"Deal," he replied, his face beaming.

It turned out Mr. Tipple was more than willing to come to their aid. He felt it would benefit everyone's traffic flow if they bolstered each other. Somerset wasn't a

sprawling metropolis by any means, but if the ice cream shop brought people in their direction, he wasn't going to argue about competition.

Mr. Tipple was a married man in his late forties, with one grown daughter in college. The bakery was his first love, and he understood how hard it was to keep a small business open with larger stores cutting prices and marketing convenience.

He told them as soon as they were ready, he could supply them with rolls and muffins to go with their coffee and hot chocolate, which he thought was a fantastic addition. When she asked him about the parlor itself, he didn't have much to say except he had watched as they made the improvements. He was sympathetic when he heard it had belonged to her ex-husband, whose obituary had been printed in a weekend paper.

"Mr. Tipple," she said, almost done with the list of questions she had come to discuss. "How are your cakes?"

The smile that broke out made his whole face glow. "They've won two local awards. I can make anything you want, butter cream, low fat, filled. You name it; I can do it or find a way to make it happen."

She laughed at his enthusiasm. "That's wonderful. The reason I'm asking is because I'm thinking about an idea Jacob gave me." She paused for effect. "I want to add birthday specialty to the line-up, private parties with cakes and the works. Some will be regular cakes or ice cream cakes or combinations. Could I interest you in the deal?"

"That's a great idea, and you have a great location for it. All that extra space outdoors. Of course, I would love to do it. Why don't I give you a list of prices, from a standard one and two layer cake to full pan size? And even if you get someone asking for something bigger, I can always work with it. Oh, and I do custom cakes too. The youngsters just eat those up."

"That's great, Mr. Tipple. I know Jacob will be thrilled when I tell him. He's really throwing himself into the shop. I was even thinking about hooking up with the pizza joint down the street."

"Why don't you offer your own?"



"I'm sorry?" Jessica's brow lifted at the suggestion.

"Pizza isn't hard to store, and kids aren't picky about pizza."

"What about vegetables?" she asked, surprised by the idea but at the same time thinking about the storeroom space. His suggestion made her wonder if they had the room for another small freezer.

He shook his head, laughing at her expression. "Kids don't eat vegetables, remember? Keep pepperoni and sausage and lots of cheese. And find a good sauce. It isn't as hard as you think."

"Is there something you aren't telling me?"

Mr. Tipple laughed in his jolly way. "Just a lot of wisdom earned the old-fashioned way. If you need any other help, come by. I think what you're doing with the ice cream shop is great. I don't know what your ex-husband's plans were for the place, but he sure did make an effort for it to look nice."

"Thank you, Mr. Tipple. I appreciate all your help and the advice. I'll look into the pizza thing, too," she told him warmly as she left, thankful she had found such a wealth of information in an equally giving person.

She made her way back down the sidewalk, thinking about everything they'd discussed. It did make sense to offer her own pizza instead of purchasing from outside. She let herself into the parlor, and dropped the price lists on the counter before wandering back to the storage room.

There were sizeable racks for supplies, as well as two stainless steel coolers for ice cream and freezable stock in the back room. She looked through both and decided if she rearranged, they could easily free up space for other storage. Plus, if she put in a large refrigerator instead of the half-sized one that she had on hand, they could add to the pizza toppings and store a few vegetables for the older crowd. But she would take his advice, starting slowly. Kids weren't going to be interested in anything healthy on a pizza. She could see the possibility of expansion, and she liked the idea. She was looking around trying to find a place for a small oven when she thought she heard the front door open.

When she didn't hear Jacob's voice for several minutes, she closed the storage room and headed to the front of the parlor.

\* \* \*

Brick wasn't in a good mood. He'd just flown for nearly six hours, with a layover, and he was mad as hell at Arthur. He'd already checked Arthur's apartment, which only left the parlor before he had to do some real searching to find the man. With each passing moment, his mood turned blacker. There wasn't a sign of Arthur anywhere.

He found the shop easily enough. There were only two ice cream parlors in Somerset. The minute he walked into the shop, he began taking stock of the property. He pulled a pad and pen from his pocket and began to make notes, categorizing everything with a critical eye. He paced off the approximate square footage, and marked it on his pad, then counted the tables and chairs. The bar was in excellent condition, and if he included the mirror in his estimation, he figured he could make up nearly half of his money if he stripped the shop and sold off the fixtures.

He was lost in calculations, trying to decide if he should just sell it in the shape it was in, when a woman stepped forward on silent feet. Brick's head snapped up at her startled gasp.

"Oh! I'm sorry. We aren't open yet. The grand opening is this weekend."

He didn't say anything for a span of a few seconds as he looked around, avoiding her gaze or any other part of her curvy body. He wondered if she'd been in the cold storage, because her nipples were pushing against her T-shirt. The observation was just one more point to annoy him.

Unable to stem his impatience, he fixed her with a cold, commanding stare. "I'm looking for Mr. Harden." His deep voice filled the space between the walls of the shop.

"I'm right here," came a young man's authoritative voice from the doorway.

Brick spun around, taken by surprise at the voice. He tried to conceal his anger at the youth's pugnacious behavior. "No, I am looking for Arthur Harden. I need to talk to him immediately." His tone brooked no argument.

The woman's pale eyes widened, then narrowed quickly. "I'm sorry. He's no longer with us." Her words were crisp.

Brick scowled at her, his tenuous hold on his patience slipping further. "Maybe you could tell me where I might find him, then." He watched as her eyes took on a challenging glint. Obviously, she was a redhead in every sense of the word--her hair, her eyes and her attitude. He maintained a cold and aloof stare to meet her gaze.

"I would be happy to, Mr....?" she offered in an unreceptive tone.

"Donnelly. Brick Donnelly." His lips thinned. This woman with her pert breasts and stiff manner was an aggravation he just didn't need. No matter how lovely she may be, she was in his way of finding Arthur. With that, he pushed the thought of her out of his mind.

She nodded her head, as if to commit the name to memory. "You can find him at the Somerset Memorial Grounds."

He felt his eyes widen marginally in shock. His own anger was making it hard to control his reactions today. "What the hell is he doing down there?" he exploded.

"He's six feet under," was her succinct reply, her words colder than the ice-rimmed cooler behind her. Her chin lifted a fraction as she returned his demanding stare. The woman's gaze was icy-blue, clearly not welcoming, and surprisingly, showed no fear.

That stopped Brick. Okay. Take a deep breath. *You have spent so much time dealing with business you have forgotten how to treat a lady*, he reprimanded himself. He was tired and irritated. He rubbed his eyes, searching deep for a thread of tranquility.

The boy had moved with cautious steps to stand beside his mother. The relationship was obvious. It wasn't in the hair or the eyes. The resemblance was in the firm tilt of the chin, the show of defiance, and the intent to protect each other. He took another breath, and tried to project a less-challenging demeanor. He almost succeeded.

"I'm sorry. I'm a business associate of Mr. Harden's," he offered with a grim smile, and a softened voice. Neither caused her expression to change. "Since I haven't been able to reach him by phone, I flew down here to find him."

"Can I ask what your business was with him, since you stormed in here making demands of people you don't even know?"

"He owes me money," Brick snarled, his attempt at patience vanishing when she didn't answer the way he'd anticipated.

Her reaction was unexpected, surprising him like a shower of ice water. She threw up her hands as if to dismiss the uncomfortable feeling in the room. "Is that all? Come on, Jacob. Let's get you settled to do your homework."

Jacob slid his book bag off of his shoulder and went to a corner table. Brick noticed the boy kept a watchful eye on him, even under the pretense of doing his homework. With a sharp look in Brick's direction, she walked to the counter at the rear of the shop. All Brick could do was wait.

She picked up a pen and a piece of paper, and wrote with sharp agitated movements. "I guess you are going to want to confirm what I told you." Judging by her pinched expression, he was sure she wanted him gone, and quickly. He didn't want to give her that satisfaction.

Brick watched as she leaned over to write. He couldn't resist. Her legs were creamy white, with a splash of freckles along one thigh. The shorts she wore weren't indecent, but he'd never turned away from a nice set of legs in his life.

"Look, I'm sorry Arthur bailed on you," she said. Her words snapped his attention back to her face. Her lips were raised in a smirk. "You weren't the only one. He had a long history of it." Her voice held the rancor of experience. She handed him the slip of paper. "But there isn't anything I can do about the money he owed you."

Brick searched her expression, seeing a shade of sincerity in her eyes. They were a color unlike any he had ever seen, very pale, with shades of blue and green flecked throughout. He couldn't decide if they were more aquamarine, or a soft, powdered turquoise. He also noticed she had light freckles across her forehead, and after seeing

the smattering on her thigh; he discovered he wanted to know if she had them everywhere.

He shook off the thought, aware that this distraction from his search was not getting him what he wanted. His scowl deepened as he pulled himself back together. "You don't know anything about the fifty thousand he borrowed?"

Her eyes widened in shocked disbelief. "You loaned him fifty thousand dollars?" She barked a short, derisive sound.

"What's so funny?" he growled. Her behavior was beginning to rankle.

Shaking her head furiously, she replied, "Nothing."

But the answer was written on her face. She thought he was an idiot for trusting Arthur Harden with money. His anger rose to the surface again.

He turned on his heel, and faced the door. "After I check this out, you have twenty-four hours to vacate the shop," he told her coolly over his shoulder.

She stared at him in stunned silence. "What are you talking about?" she demanded as she reached blindly to grip the counter.

"Arthur used the shop as collateral for the loan. Since he didn't pay, it's mine." And with that parting shot, he left the shop.

## Chapter Four

When their eyes met, Jessie shuffled to the table Jacob had taken over, and sat down wearily. She looked at her son; sure his expression was no less distraught than hers was. He had heard every word. Seeing the absolute fear in his eyes, she reached for one of his hands. Her own hopes were slowly beginning to unravel. The plans she had been making, Mr. Tipple, the birthday parties...all gone. She didn't have a job to fall back on anymore, either.

Jacob stared at her in disbelief. "Mom?"

She shook her head, unsure of her immediate future for the first time.

His soft pleading words forced her to refocus. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

"I don't know, Jacob. I just don't know."

"What if we found the money? Would he leave us alone?"

Jessie knew Jacob was grasping at straws. He didn't want to lose the only thing his father had left him any more than she wanted to see it taken away from him.

"I don't even know where to look." She let her gaze wander around the shop. The newly polished wood shone brightly, the shop-front glass making hazy reflections of the room. "I guess we could sell. I'm sure we could get at least fifty thousand for this place. Maybe more. Then we'd have enough for you to go to college."

"No!" His hopeless cry fell hard on her ears. "Mom, he can't do this to us. I won't let him!"

Jessie felt her eyes grew huge at Jacob's defiant cry. "Don't start talking like that." She clasped his hand tighter. "We will make it through this, somehow. There has to be a way," she assured him. She focused over his shoulder to stare at the huge glimmering mirror, and began to turn over in her mind possibilities of how to keep the parlor.

\* \* \*

After viewing Arthur's grave for himself, Brick slowly walked back to his car. So, she hadn't been telling him a story. The man really was dead, but that knowledge didn't make his money mysteriously reappear. Did the woman know anything? Why had Arthur needed the money? He frowned with disgust; sure he already knew the answer to that one. Arthur was known for high-stakes gambling. At least to Brick's knowledge, Arthur wasn't into drugs or other fast paced addictions which siphoned off hard-earned--or borrowed--money.

He drove slowly back to the ice cream parlor. From his parking space just outside the storefront, he could see the woman and her son seated at a table, talking. She held the boy's hands as he seemed to say something in a rush of words, and she slowly shook her head. The boy's face fell in answer to her slow movements. Brick found himself in untested emotional territory as he witnessed their defeated behavior. Remorse? Was that what they called this feeling?

Finding her at the parlor instead of Arthur had caught him off guard. He scratched his chin while he reviewed the facts, ignoring the hint of rough stubble that scraped against his fingers. He needed more information about her and the ice cream shop. She'd said something about a grand opening, and he was curious. He would also have to find out if she knew anything about the money, which meant he would have to stay in town for a while.

He rolled his shoulders, welcoming the idea. At least he wouldn't have to jump right back onto a plane. With that plan in mind, he stepped from his car and made his way to the door.

"Mom, he's back!"

The boy's eyes grew wide as Brick opened the door. With a final pat on the boy's hand, the woman rose from her chair. She turned to face him, her expression telling him she was prepared for another battle of wills.

Her pale eyes flashed at him with cool disdain. "Was there something else, Mr. Donnelly?"

He regarded her in return with an intense stare. Battle lines had been drawn. "Could you tell me how you came to be here?"

She crossed her arms over her chest, and her chin took on a defiant tilt he already recognized. "Well, my mother and father met in Chicago."

His lips curved in what could have been amusement if the feisty redhead and her son had not taken him so unawares. "I deserved that. How about if you tell me how you and your son came to own this place?" His hand swept in a small arc to encompass the shop.

"Arthur deeded it to us in his will."

Brick suppressed the immediate urge to snap at her. Okay. He hadn't been expecting that. He was beginning to hate surprises. He stepped a pace or two closer, making the light freckles on her cheeks easier to see. "He deeded it to you?"

She nodded her head once in answer. "He'd made a will about a year ago."

"You're not going to tell me anything unless I ask first, right?" His brow arched to stress his point that she was being annoying, intentionally.

"Nope," she replied, but her lips softened a little, presenting another surprise. She had a fantastic mouth.

"Mom?" Her head snapped around to look at her son, and her red hair swayed with her movements. "Can I go see Mr. Tipple? He says he has a new muffin recipe, and asked if I would try it."

"Sure, honey. Don't be a pest, and be back in half an hour."

"All right." The young man was out the door like a shot, going for a new land speed record.



"I wasn't trying to make it uncomfortable for him," Brick told her truthfully. He'd never hurt a child.

"You already did. You've destroyed the only thing his father left to him."

"He's Arthur's son?" That grabbed him. He swept his eyes over the woman and wondered how he'd missed the connection.

"Yes. We hadn't seen Arthur in more than ten years. Jacob was almost three when we divorced." Brick saw the quick flash of buried pain flash in her eyes. She regarded him silently for a moment, biting on her lower lip. He found himself staring at her mouth again.

"It doesn't matter now," she finally said. "Now, I need to figure out how to fix this mess that Arthur left for us. Namely, you." His eyes were pulled back to hers.

He chuckled. "I don't think I've ever been called a mess before."

"Then I guess you'd better write it down," she quipped. She sat back down at the table, pushing her son's homework aside. "Look, I don't know what kind of an agreement you and Arthur had, but I know this shop is legally ours. However, if you want to make things bad for us, I'm sure you can." She gave him a quick once over, her perusal stressing her point.

Brick knew he wasn't a small man. He'd used his size to intimidate before, but that wasn't his intention this time. He seated himself in the chair across from her, his long legs taking most of the space beneath the table. He was careful not to let his legs brush against hers.

She leaned her elbows on the table. "I can't do anything about the money Arthur owed you. The only other thing I can do is sell this place, but I'm not about to do it *just* because you say Arthur owed you money."

Her eyes lifted focused on him, coolly blank. He decided he didn't want her as an enemy. "Look, I came back because you said the grand opening was this weekend."

"Yes, but if we're supposed to 'vacate the premises,' as you put it, what difference does it make?" Her voice was low, indifferent.

His words sounded much harsher coming from her soft lips, and he winced. "Are you always this difficult?" She almost made him want to smile. Almost.

"Not typically, but I guess you bring out the best in me," she replied with a mocking twist of her lips that resonated in her words.

He laughed lightly, his shoulders shaking a little. He realized with an odd sense of wonder his anger at Arthur had evaporated in her presence. "I was thinking--"

"Really? You big business-types know how to do that?"

"Cheap shot," he admonished her playfully. "What I was thinking about..." His brow rose to cut off any other comments, but she had lapsed into silence. "Was maybe to let you keep the place and find some other way to recover the loan."

She planted her hands on the tabletop and rose from her seat in a fluid motion. "I will not work like a slave to repay a loan you made. Do you think I'm going to let some shark come in and demand a cut of my business because of some stupid agreement he had with my dead ex-husband? You have yet to show me one legal signed page that proves Arthur owed you a dime. Where's the contract?" She glared at him with fire in her eyes as her words fell with a stinging sound in the quiet of the shop. Her mouth curved in triumph when he realized she knew he wasn't going to be able to produce one. "Arthur was a player and an ass. You're the one who made the loan. I may be a woman, but I am not a fool. So chew on that for a while."

Brick's silence was a thoughtful one. His mind started ticking, wondering about her motives, and digesting her defensiveness. "How long have you been working to set up the opening?"

"Not quite a month. Why?" The tilt of her chin shouted her distrust in his sudden interest.

"I'm wondering why you took such an interest in this place, if there wasn't money to be made." He steepled his fingers in front of him and pinned her with his best board-meeting stare.

Her jaw worked from side to side, showing her aggravation. "Look, I told you. I don't know one damn thing about your money. I hadn't spoken to Arthur in ten years,

and now, no one can. I am going to do what I can to make this place succeed. If you think I would quit a job with benefits on a whim to take this over, you don't know me."

He lowered his voice, changing tactics. Honey before vinegar. "You're right, I don't know you. I don't even know your name."

"Jessica Harden," she replied in a soft snarl, informing him in no uncertain terms he was getting too personal.

His brow lifted in curiosity. "You quit your job?"

"After three weeks of consideration and evaluation, yes."

"Why?"

"If you are trying to find out if I had extra cash for start up, I did. It's called a savings account. I repeat, I know nothing about your money." Her hand slapped the table in emphasis.

"And you think you can support yourself on what this place will bring in?" She was shrewd if nothing else, he thought. But he wisely kept his observations out of his expression.

"I feel confident enough that it will. If I save for the short months, and work like a dog during the summer, we'll make it." She crossed her arms over her chest again. "Now, have I passed the test to your satisfaction?"

He leaned back in his chair and considered her. She was feisty, protective, and ambitious. Good qualities most of the time, except right now they were causing him all kinds of problems. His mind was turning over possible solutions when the door opened again behind him.

"Mom, I'm back," Jacob called out as the door closed behind him, the clank of the jamb announcing his return.

"You need a bell on the door," Brick muttered.

Jessica's eyes flickered with warning as they clashed with his. "So, do we have an opening scheduled, or do I lose my shirt because of you?"

Instantly, he wished she had made a better choice of words. He already had a great idea of what lay beneath her shirt, the way it formed so nicely to the curve of her body.

He lifted his eyes and noticed that the flush on her cheeks made her freckles darken. "You do as you originally planned. I'm sure we can come up with a way to resolve this."

He thought he saw a hint of acquiescence in her posture, but her eyes remained wary. Her spunk was as obvious as the striking sunset-red hair that fell past her shoulders. The same sense of awareness he'd experienced earlier began to creep back into his blood, and his reaction was beginning to make him angry all over again.

He heard her sigh, and the sound of her capitulation forced him to regroup. Her rosy lips showed her grim displeasure as she nodded.

Jacob approached the table where Brick sat, and threw back his young shoulders. "I want you to know you may take this place from us, but I won't let you hurt my mother."

"Jacob!" Jessica's mouth dropped open.

Jacob turned to face his mother. "I mean it. I won't let him hurt you." His voice was strong, never wavering as he glared back at Brick.

Brick had to admire the way the boy was trying to be a man. "How old are you?" he asked Jacob.

Jacob stood a little taller. "I'll be thirteen next month."

"Well, that's certainly old enough to keep an eye on your mom." For the first time, a sincere smile broke across Brick's lips. "Jacob. Can I call you that?" The boy nodded. "I want to tell you I am not taking the shop. Your mother and I have agreed to try to find some other way to solve this."

Jacob's questioning stare flew to meet his mother's gaze in a heartbeat. Jessica's smile was weak, but it conveyed the truth of Brick's words. He turned back to Brick. "Really? You aren't going to take it from us?" Brick shook his head, and Jacob smiled.

Jacob thrust his hand forward. "Shake on it, Mr. Donnelly. I want your word."

The child's seriousness took Brick by surprise, but he'd been called out, and he wasn't about to back down from a kid. He closed his larger hand over Jacob's. "Jacob, you have my word. I'm not going to take the shop, and I won't let your mom sell to pay Arthur's debt."

Jessica looked pointedly at Brick. "A man of honor?"

Brick met her gaze and smiled. "Don't tell anyone."

"Mr. Donnelly?"

Jacob's inquisitive voice dragged his attention from Jessica to her son. "Yes."

"I had an idea, about trying to find your money."

Brick's smile died a fast death. Suddenly, he wondered how much they might know, and if he was being played for a fool. "Go on," he said in a level voice.

"Well, I know Arthur's bank accounts have been closed, and we have those records. Couldn't we see if he did anything with the money from those?"

"Jacob, that's private information," Jessie rebuked him.

"How do you know about that sort of thing?" Brick asked Jacob.

Jacob shrugged. "I don't know really. I listen a lot. Mom and I do a bunch of stuff together. I read, I work on the Internet." He dropped his eyes, suddenly bashful. "I like to learn new stuff."

Brick smiled warmly at the boy, remembering he'd once been the same way. "There's nothing wrong with that, Jacob. Actually, your idea is a good one. I can also trace the check from my bank. Maybe see where it was cashed."

Jacob's eyes glowed at his compliment, and Brick felt a surge of warmth in his stomach. Suddenly he needed to get out of there. "Look, I need to find a place to stay until this mystery is solved. When is the grand opening?"

"Are you inviting yourself? Or just wanting to keep an eye on things?" Jessica asked him tongue-in-cheek.

Brick's gaze fell on Jacob. "I need to be able to get to my right hand man here, don't I?"

Jacob returned his question with cautious eyes.

“We open at ten on Saturday morning,” was the last thing Jessie said as he left them for the second time.

\* \* \*

Jessie watched in silence as Brick’s car pulled out of the parking lot. She breathed in deeply, and stretched to relax the knot that had formed between her shoulder blades.

What was she going do? Brick’s appearance had been unexpected. She supposed she should be thankful he wasn’t an ax-murderer--or worse--the way he had stormed into the parlor, making demands. Fortunately, his only weapon had been his spoken word.

She’d felt a tickle of warning slide down her back at his first appearance, yet she hadn’t been able to look away from him. He was a big man, tall, with strong shoulders. His presence had been overwhelming, and without warning, her throat had gone dry as a desert wind and her breathing had become almost painful. With his penetrating eyes, he commanded instant respect. It was those eyes she hadn’t been able to ignore. They were so dark. A deep, cold, unforgiving blue.

His eyes had held her captive unable to move or speak, until he’d practically leered at her. It was the tilt of his lips that had finally freed her.

Jessie sighed softly in disgust when she thought about it.

She didn’t have to believe him, but she did. She had no doubt Arthur had done some kind of business with the man. But how much could she possibly know about a loan Arthur arranged? Absolutely nothing. She hadn’t spoken to her ex-husband in over ten years.

What had truly bothered her was the intense reaction she’d felt when Brick had smiled with genuine warmth at Jacob. It had been a devastating encounter and after feeling the force of his nature, it was intriguing such an expression would come from him. It had turned his overwhelming features completely divine.

Jacob’s voice jerked her from her contemplation. “Mom, what just happened?”

Jessica mentally collected herself. "I think we just got a reprieve from the devil himself," she answered. She had no idea what kind of solution Brick might be thinking of, but she was absolutely certain he meant to find one. She just wasn't sure how much she was going to like her part in it.

## Chapter Five

Jessie took one last look around the shop. It was hers and Jacob's. Theirs. The interior sparkled with renewed life; the tables gleamed in the bright light. The mirror reflected the reborn images without a blemish, and the counter glowed with the warm patina only aged wood could give. They had worked hard as a team to make the little ice cream parlor theirs, and today was opening day.

Jacob's smile had been non-stop all morning, and Jessie was happy he had found something to throw himself into with gusto. He was bouncing off the walls, anxious to get the day started. He wanted to show off the shop to all his school friends, most of whom she was sure would stop by, from the sounds Jacob had made all week. She and Jacob had sent out flyers in the mail, and had posted a few in neighboring stores. Jessica could only hope the customers of opening day grew into a long line of repeat business.

"Mom, I think our first customers are here!" Jacob called excitedly.

"Great! Go open the door. Let's make this official." She couldn't believe it herself. They were business owners. They were going to succeed. She just knew it.

Soon after the first customers came in and requested coffee and muffins, she lost all track of time. They'd been blessed with a nice fall day. Soft breezes, warm sunshine and even with the hint of fall in the air, the ice cream was selling. The line was never-ending, and she noticed how quickly the flyers for the parties were going, too. Need to make more copies, she thought happily.

It was after lunch by the time things slowed down. Jacob was industrious about keeping the glass-topped tables clean, working hard to keep the little shop pristine.



With a heartfelt laugh, she wished he'd put half that much energy into his room at home. "Jacob, don't forget to check the trash. If it needs taken out, let me know."

He nodded in answer, intent on a table in the front.

While she wiped the counter top, her mind drifted back to Brick Donnelly. It had been four days since his abrupt arrival, and at the oddest moments he would invade her thoughts. She still wasn't sure what to make of the man. He was arrogant and brusque, but he'd been respectful toward her son, and had even shown a softer side when she'd teased him about his honor.

She still didn't know what she could do to help him find his missing money. She certainly didn't have that kind of cash lying around, and she wouldn't have just handed it over to Brick if she did.

What had bothered Jessica more than his demand for the money, or his threats, was her reaction to him. Just him, the man. She had felt something while they had argued, a pull she couldn't place. It was a feeling she didn't recognize, and because of it, she didn't know if she should be wary of him or not. There was just something about the way his mouth moved; the way his face showed displeasure, then expressed his enjoyment of the moment. She was naturally wary of men, but that was her well-honed self-preservation speaking. She had her son to protect, and she wasn't about to let some shark, as she had called him, bully her into submission. Being Irish and a redhead counted for something. *Oh no, you don't, Mr. Donnelly. I will fight you all the way.* She caught her determined reflection in the mirror and laughed.

A while later, she was filling a coffee decanter when the small cowbell on the door rang. "I'll be right with you," she called over her shoulder.

"No rush."

When she heard his voice, there was that feeling again, skittering along her skin like gossamer threads. Goose bumps trailed in its wake.

She peeked in the mirror above her head and saw Brick contemplating the ice cream flavors. What was he doing here? She hadn't thought he would really show up, not on such a busy day.

While the coffee pot filled, she discreetly continued watching him. He shifted his weight and rolled his shoulders, muscles flexing underneath his shirt as he surveyed his choices. When he turned his head, she saw a scar that flared at his temple and faded just above his cheekbone. She had been so absorbed in what a problem he was, she hadn't noticed it before.

She saw herself flush a guilty red in the mirror's reflection when his head popped up, and he caught her staring in the mirror. His lips curved into a smile, and she felt a sudden, intense longing to know what it would feel like to be kissed with that mouth, to feel the firmness of it against her lips, to feel the heat. She gave herself a little shake to dispel the thought. How could she want to kiss him? She wasn't even sure she liked him.

She wiped her hands on a towel as she turned to face him, fighting to appear nonchalant. "Can I get you something?"

His eyes were dark. Dark indigo blue, and they were staring right back at her. He looked around. There was no one in the shop. He smiled. "How about a cup of coffee and a few minutes of your time?"

Jessie shrugged. "Sure, it's quiet right now." She poured two cups, carried them around the counter, and made her way to the large corner table where Jacob usually did his homework.

Brick followed to sit with her. "I wanted to let you know the bank says the check was cashed, but they couldn't trace anything else on it."

Jessie sat down at the table and handed him his cup. "Oh. I wish I had a suggestion for you." She sipped at her coffee, watching his expression.

Jacob approached the table. "Mr. Donnelly?"

"Mr. Harden?" Brick answered playfully, making Jacob laugh.

"I was wondering, if it's all right to ask, where did your name come from?"

Brick took a sip of his coffee, offering a smile of approval to Jessie. He looked back to Jacob. "That isn't a big family secret. I was named for my grandfather. His name

was Bryce, but since he was still living when I was born, I got a different version of his name. It's Celtic, the same as Donnelly."

The boy's eyes rounded. "Wow! That's so cool. We're Irish too."

"Really? I never would have guessed." Brick's eyes glinted as Jessica fought back a grin.

Jacob glanced from Brick to Jessica and back. "You're playing, aren't you?"

Brick grinned. "Guilty. I could easily believe you're Irish, especially with hair like that," he said, looking directly at Jessie before he turned his attention back to her son.

She felt warmth envelop her at Brick's brief glance and tried to ignore it. She looked at her son instead. "Jacob, did you finish the front room?" He nodded. "Okay, why don't you finish any homework you have? When you're done, I think we'll lock up for the day. It's already after five. I doubt we'll see anyone else today." Jacob nodded again and left to grab his bag from the office.

When they were alone, Brick turned to Jessica, his gaze meeting hers. "Do you need any help?"

"No, I just need to straighten the back room, but thanks for asking."

She reached for her empty cup, but he laid his hand across her fingers. "Why don't I take the two of you out to dinner? I'm betting after a busy first day open, you don't really want to go home and cook."

Jessica laughed, and a sudden nervous flutter landed in her stomach. "Mr. Donnelly--"

"You can call me Brick." The corners of his mouth lifted into a sinful invitation to use his name.

She swallowed, suddenly wanting to put space--a lot of it--between them, but he still held her hand. She could feel the heat of his skin all the way up her arm. "Brick, I don't know if that's a good idea to go to dinner. I don't want to put you in a worse situation until we know what happened to your money, if it can even be found."

"It won't. Let's call it a show of good faith. I don't think you or Jacob know anything about the money, and my instincts are usually pretty good. What do you say?"

Her hand trembled slightly, still caged within his larger one. She hoped he didn't notice. His tone was light-hearted, and she could see the sincerity in his eyes. It made his invitation hard to turn down.

She smiled in acceptance. She needed her hand back anyway. "Yeah, sure. But nothing too fancy, if that's all right. I am tired," she allowed.

"How about Chinese?"

Jacob's voice came from the office doorway. "I love Chinese. Do you use chopsticks?"

At the sound of Jacob's voice, Brick dropped Jessie's hand. "Like a pro," he answered quickly.

Jacob chuckled. "Mom can't. She just can't figure them out."

Jessica lifted a brow at her son like he was the one telling a family secret, and Brick laughed again.

\* \* \*

At the restaurant, Jessie relaxed a little. She was beginning to see Brick in a new light. He could be charming when he wanted to be. She had seen for herself how easily he responded to Jacob, but she guessed his lighter side wasn't something he showed too often. The reality of the infrequency was found now in the ease of his smiles as he talked with Jacob. The edged harshness she had first seen was gone. But the memory of his arrogance was hard to ignore. He was used to giving orders and having them followed.

But that wasn't what fascinated her so about that mouth. Instead, she found herself wondering what that mouth would feel like against her own. Would it be soft, the way it looked when he smiled at Jacob, or hard, demanding her submission? *Okay.*

*Now you're just being silly. You haven't kissed anyone in ten years, and suddenly you start fantasizing about the first gorgeous guy that shows up. Does desperate ring any bells?*

Jacob's impatient voice dragged her from her contemplation. "Mom, you aren't listening!"

She blinked. "Sorry. I guess I was just thinking about today. And we get to do it all over again tomorrow, and Monday, and Tuesday," she drawled with a light laugh.

"Think you bit off more than you can chew?" Brick asked before he attacked his noodles with relish, which made her wonder where he put it all. Male appetites, she mused, and deliberately forced herself not to wonder what else that appetite of his applied to.

"Maybe, but then again, I've never done this, so who knows? Jacob goes back to school on Monday, so that leaves just me to keep it going smoothly."

"You could hire help."

She shook her head. "No, not this soon. I need to see the numbers over at least a quarter before I can budget for more employees."

"Shrewd woman," Brick said.

Jessie smiled at his assessment. "I've been accused of far worse in my life." Brick smiled at her, and she shook off the little flutter that grew in her stomach. "So, what was I rudely ignoring?"

Jacob swallowed the last of his rice. "I was thinking about doing a money trace, on the Internet. If someone did something with fifty thousand dollars locally, it could be traceable, especially through Western Union." Jessie didn't miss the wary expression Jacob tried to hide from Brick as he made the suggestion.

Her eyebrows rose. "Jacob, I will not have you hacking into systems to try to find the money." She directed a pointed stare at Brick. "Knowing Arthur, I'm sure the money is long gone, anyway." Brick only shrugged in response.

"It won't be hacking, Mom," Jacob told her, sounding insulted that she would suggest breaking into a computer was what he wanted to do. "Okay, maybe I'd have to lie a little," he said in a small voice, but added quickly, "They won't know the

difference, because I won't use any names, just the amount. Sammy's dad works for them. It was her idea. I know her dad won't mind checking to see if there was a dollar transfer that large sent around the time we got the funeral information."

"Sammy?" Jessie inquired. "A friend from school?"

"Yeah, but she's cool. I'll just have her ask her dad on Monday. If it can even be done, that'll be one place to look. If it's found, then Mr. Donnelly can leave. I'm sure his family wants him home."

Jessica cast Jacob a surprised glance, curious at his petulant tone. *What just happened here?*

Brick's expression gave away nothing of his thoughts on Jacob's behavior. "I doubt it. My mother is usually glad to see my backside after about three days. Dad passed away five years ago, and according to her, I'm more trouble than two of him ever could have been." His eyes twinkled a little bit. "The only people who can tolerate me for any length of time are my sisters."

"You have sisters?" Somehow the thought of Brick with sisters, or a mother, seemed unnatural. He seemed too calculating and difficult to allow for the love of family, but seeing this new side of him, it was possible she had been too hasty in judging him.

"Oh, yeah. Didn't I mention that? The Twin Witches."

"Your sisters are witches?" Jacob asked with a blatant snort of disbelief. Jessica's lips thinned marginally at his deteriorating behavior. She was going to have to have a talk with her son about his disrespectful behavior.

But Brick laughed at Jacob's question. Apparently he was willing to ignore her son's crass tone. "Not the real or even fictional kind, I'm afraid. They're three years older than me, and a pain in my butt."

Brick's hard-nosed attitude softened at the mention of his sisters. He did have a soft spot for his family after all. She never would have thought it likely, the way he'd invaded her little shop on that first day.

"Well, just the same, I'm sure they miss you," she said.

"They might. They don't know I'm here," Brick replied.

Jessie's brow formed a concerned frown as she observed her son, sending him a warning glance. "Either way, I don't know if it's a good idea to involve other people in this."

"I hope the money will turn up. Give it a shot. Maybe you are right," Brick told Jacob, receiving only a cool, blank stare in return.

\* \* \*

Brick leaned back after they'd finished their meal, wondering what he'd done to be on the receiving end of Jacob's cold shoulder. He had agreed to not kick them out of the parlor. Under the circumstances, that wasn't an option. He'd had the impression Jacob might have been warming up to him, but that seemed to have changed rather suddenly. He was finding himself mystified as to why Jacob's acceptance mattered at all. He had no interest in children as a rule, least of all moody almost-teens who had a protective streak as large as the St. Louis arch.

Brick had observed Jessica through the evening while they ate and talked, and for the first time in more years than he could count, he'd felt perfectly relaxed. He'd never had a problem with women, sexually or intellectually, but he was finding himself wondering more and more about the spunky redhead who had graciously given him her company for the evening.

He remembered the way she had sipped her coffee while they'd talked about the cashed check at the parlor. The way her lips caressed the rim of her cup, the soft edges of her mouth lifting with her smiles. He found himself wondering what they would taste like, the mocha and cream of her coffee or the luscious strawberry at which their color hinted. And his thoughts didn't stop there. He easily pictured running his hands through the vibrant length of her hair, the silky strands slipping between his fingers. He liked red hair, and he had to admit it, she was blessed with a lot of it.

He shook himself mentally, and reined in his thoughts. There was no reason to even consider such nonsense. He had reasons for being in Somerset, fifty thousand of them. If getting to know Jessica and Jacob was a way to find his money--if it could be found--then he would do that. He didn't have to become involved with either of them to do the job. And technically, that's what this was, a hunt for his missing loan. He decided any issues Jacob might or might not have with that were not his problem.

\* \* \*

Later, as Jacob followed Jessie into the house, she stopped her son in the living room. "Do you want to tell me what that was all about?"

Jacob's expression was innocently blank. "What do you mean?"

She put a fist to her hip. "You know perfectly well what I mean. Suddenly behaving like a spoiled little boy, when all we did was go to dinner. You were very rude."

His eyes began to darken with pain as his mouth formed a hard line. "But I saw him holding your hand!"

With a flash of understanding, she pulled him down to the sofa next to her, holding his hands in hers. "Like I'm holding yours now?" He yanked them free with a fierce frown. "Jacob, he was trying to convince me to go to dinner with him. People use physical contact like exclamation points. I didn't really want to go, because I was tired, but he understood that, and wanted me to see it was all right to go to dinner for exactly that reason."

Jacob rubbed his nose on his sleeve. "So he wasn't doing anything else?" He looked her in the eye. "I don't need a father, Mom. I know how to be a man, by being everything Arthur wasn't!" His eyes glowed with fierce determination.

She leaned back, stunned at his vehemence. "Jacob, that's harsh. Arthur did have some good qualities, or I wouldn't have loved him at all. He had a problem with



gambling, and as it got worse, he let it override his common sense. He let it destroy his better judgment."

"Mom, you aren't going to get married again, are you?" It was a whispered desperate plea.

"I don't know, Jacob. I hadn't really thought about it." She sought his watery gaze. "But let me ask you this: Do I deserve to be happy when you have grown and left to live your own life? When you've left and maybe found someone to love for yourself, do I have that right?"

"But you have me!"

"And I will always love you, and I will always, to my last day, be your mother. But that's just it. I will always be your mother, and you will always be my son. What happens when you become a man, and I just become your mom on the other end of the phone?" Her voice and touch were thoughtfully tender as he tried to cope with what she was asking of him, that she was a breathing, feeling human being. He wasn't as mature as he tried to be, and she knew he was trying to keep the security of their little family intact. His face was expressive as he listened to her question, but he seemed unsure and scared of the answers. The possibility that she'd find someone to love was one he hadn't thought of, she was sure of it.

He sat quietly for a few moments, but didn't answer. Finally, he rose, and with a mumbled good night, wandered out of the living room.

Jessie watched him go with a bittersweet ache in her chest.

How had he gotten the idea of her getting married simply from seeing her holding hands with Brick? It wasn't as though the touch had even been affectionate. She hadn't thought about men or anything romantic in years, but suddenly, she found herself thinking about Brick and his kisses, and she didn't even know if the man had any desire to kiss her. She shook her head, giving up with a weary sigh.

Brick was a different kind of man.

Strong, decisive, and authoritative, certainly, but he had a compassionate streak. She'd seen it in the way he dealt with her son, and talked about his family. She hadn't

failed to notice the way her stomach fluttered when he smiled at her, either. As her thoughts began to circle back to what it would feel like to touch him, she stopped herself abruptly. She didn't necessarily like him, and she was almost positive it was a mutual feeling, even if he had taken them to dinner.

He was probably just keeping an eye on them because of his stupid money. Well, she didn't know anything, and if he was waiting for her to come up with it, he could hold his breath for all she cared.

\* \* \*

She opened at noon on Sunday, hoping to draw the church crowd. She was blessed, as it were, over-run until well after two in the afternoon. Mr. Tipple stopped by a little later in the afternoon to check on her, and had been ecstatic she'd had such a good opening. Her steady flow of business had brought more people to his own doors, and a profit was a profit.

The person she hadn't expected to see was Marc Settlemeir, Jacob's English teacher. He requested a cup of Rocky Road, and waited until she was available to talk to deliver his message. "Ms. Harden, I wanted to let you know I was very impressed with the maturity of your son's apology." He shrugged his shoulders as he munched his ice cream. "Jacob was right. The details had been there all along, but I had overlooked them. Oscar Wilde isn't usually a part of my curriculum."

"I'm glad you can see both of you were right, but why don't you tell Jacob yourself?" she asked as she wiped down the counter.

"I have. And I nominated him for the Annual Fellowship Award at Somerset Hills." His response surprised her, and she dropped the rag onto the counter to stare at him. Mr. Settlemeir smiled. "If he's accepted, he'll be offered a plaque, plus an honorable mention in the school yearbook. Not that he should rest on his laurels, but if he's getting mention at this grade level, class president will be a snap in high school."

He's well liked by the students and his teachers. He's smart enough to know how to get the class votes."

Jessie stood straight, and smiled with relief. "Well, that's wonderful. I'm sure he will be thrilled to know you think enough of him to nominate him for such an award. I know he respects you, even if you do butt heads on occasion."

He appeared a bit flustered at her compliment and glanced down. "Yes, I'm sure. I am sorry about the detention, but I have to be able to keep the class in line. If one student acts up, it dominoes for years to come. This kind of story pops up for years after the fact, if it's strong enough."

She nodded, remembering a particular fight a friend of hers had been in during high school, in his English class, right as the teacher walked in. The story had still been circulating three years after her friend's graduation. "I understand. He shouldn't have spoken the way he did, regardless of who was right. He needs to respect those who teach. Lord knows, I can't do it all." He laughed as she lifted her shoulders in supplication.

"So where is the wonder-boy today?" he asked, looking around the empty parlor.

Jessie leaned over to wipe the counter beside the freezer. "He's at a friend's house doing some research on the Internet."

Marc only shook his head, saying in an awed complimentary tone, "I swear that boy will have a degree without ever stepping foot in college at the rate he is going." He fell silent for a few minutes while he ate his ice cream. Then, out of nowhere, in a tender voice, he asked her, "Jessica, would you go out with me?"

She snapped erect, the rag clutched in her hand. He looked a little embarrassed, a wobbly grin hovering over his lips.

"I'm sorry?"

"I know it's probably not a good time," he gushed. "With the opening and everything, but I have wanted to ask you out for some time." His dark brown eyes caught hers with a questioning look. His hair was a bit shaggy with barely a gray strand

anywhere to interfere with the rich, sable color. She estimated him to be nearing forty, but she couldn't be sure without actually asking.

He placed the nearly empty cup on the counter and reached across it to clasp her hands in his. "I think you're a very beautiful woman. I've watched you ever since you stepped into Somerset Hills with Jacob, so many years ago."

She had been stunned into silence. Marc wasn't an unattractive man, and she knew he could be sweet. She looked around the shop, as if searching for an answer. "I don't know," she stammered finally. "I don't really date."

"I thought as much." He released her hands slowly, disappointment evident in the darkness of his eyes. "If you ever decide you'd like to catch a movie or something, would you let me know?"

Jessie's smile felt weak, but she nodded. "Sure, I can do that. You just caught me off-guard." Marc picked up his cup and tossed it into the trash, then made his way out of the shop, leaving her unsure of how to take his interest in her.

Should she start dating again? Jacob would be out of Marc Settlemeir's classes by the end of the spring, and he was getting old enough to understand she was a woman, especially if last night had been any indication. It was flattering as well, to know that he was interested.

She hadn't allowed herself to think of a man as anything more than a conversation partner in years. But even as she considered it, she knew if she did start dating again, she didn't want to go out with Marc. No, unfortunately, a rather overwhelming Celt with indigo eyes had invaded her thoughts, and there just wasn't any comparison between the two men.

## Chapter Six

The next day, Jessie took advantage of the slower morning hours to balance the receipts for the weekend, and was extremely pleased to see they had made up the expenses of the opening with a little cash to spare. When she heard the sound of the bell on the door, she rose from her chair in the office and walked to the front, surprised to see Mr. Coppers.

His smile was kind when he saw her in the office doorway. "Ms. Harden. It's lovely to see you."

"Thank you, Mr. Coppers. This is a nice surprise. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Well, when you were in the office last time, I'd meant to see you received this." He held up a plastic storage box. "It's from Arthur's apartment. His personal effects, I believe."

"Oh." Jessie eyed the box in his hands. "Please put it in the office. On the floor should be fine. It's right through here." She motioned to her office doorway with her hand and her brow furrowed in curiosity as Mr. Coppers carried the lone box past her. Was that one small box all that Arthur had?

He disappeared briefly, then returned to the front of the parlor. "Thank you. Could I offer you something for your trouble? Coffee, maybe?"

He shook his head. "No, thank you."

Jessie nodded. "Well, I appreciate you bringing it by. You could have just called, and I would have picked it up."

"There was no need. I was curious to see how things were going for you and that was as good an excuse as any." He looked around the shop, his admiration showing on his face. "It looks like you've done a wonderful job with the place."

She felt definite pride in their accomplishments, but knew Jacob deserved it more. "I can't take that much credit. Jacob did a lot to make sure we were ready for the opening. He's really fallen in love with the place."

"Seeing your smile, I would have to say you have too."

"You would be right." She followed him as he walked to the door, her stride relaxed. "Thank you, Mr. Coppers, for everything. If it's all right with you, I would like for you to recommend someone who could continue with the books for me."

"Consider it done. I know exactly the man. He doesn't charge a lot like some can. Just call when you're ready, or if you have any questions. As long as you keep a good paper trail and your receipts, it shouldn't be hard."

"Wonderful. I'll be in touch." She watched as he got into his car, and waved again as he drove from the parking lot.

\* \* \*

Brick was having a hectic Monday. Two conference calls and a missing deposit had thrown him into a foul mood, and he still wondered about the loan. Hell, how could he not? The money had disappeared, spent or vanished, and the only man who knew where it was had died.

He pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes, aggravation at the situation burning through him. His own bank confirmed that the check had been cashed, but couldn't tell him anything else. Even his snoops hadn't come up with any usable information. He doubted even Jacob's well-intentioned efforts would come up with anything. The kid was only twelve, after all.

He flopped down on the mattress. Hotel beds were all the same, no matter where he stayed. Hard. Which figured, because it suited his mood. He couldn't believe he'd let

Arthur talk him out of the money. With an exasperated sigh, he closed his eyes, trying to think of some new avenue of pursuit, when a wave of red hair overtook his thoughts.

Seductively, his mind slowly focused on an image of Jessica. Jessica with her fiery red hair, her will of iron. After she'd stood up to him as bold as a warrior princess, he'd known he wasn't going to take the shop from her. Jacob's echo of her sentiments had only reinforced the idea.

For some reason, watching her work behind the wooden counter had made the picture too real for him, and seeing Jacob's genuine enthusiasm for the little place...well, even he wasn't that much of a monster. Not anymore. Jacob had struck a chord inside him. A memory maybe, of someone he'd once been. When he'd sat with Jacob, discussing the fate of the ice cream shop, he'd noticed the boy was taking advanced classes, learning algebra that Brick was certain he hadn't seen until high school.

Certain things the boy had done and said rang of maturity and intelligence. He was thriving on the challenge of the little parlor. How many twelve-year olds did that? That boy was going to become something, someone important.

Brick rolled over, rested his head on the crook of his arm and let his gaze wander around the room. Except it wasn't the king suite he saw surrounding him, with its lush emerald and sapphire colors. Even the picturesque view of the mountains outside his window didn't draw his attention. His mind had circled back to Jessica.

How many times had he looked at a woman and desired, needed like he did when he was around her? When had he craved just the touch of satin skin, or longed to pleasure a woman only to hear her enjoyment? He sighed. Jessica was feisty, but cautious. And ambitious. How many people--women, he corrected himself, somehow knowing she would have set him straight in a hurry--would have taken something as seasonal as an ice cream parlor and tried to make it profitable? He pushed himself up to sit and decided he had waited long enough to see her again.

Somehow, the arguments he'd wrestled with the night before as he ate alone in the quiet hotel restaurant failed to reappear as he strode through the hotel, his destination set.

He pulled his car into a parking space in front of the shop and cut the engine. He could see Jessica and Jacob through the glass, talking in the middle of the empty shop. Jacob was very adamant, his expression intense. The boy made wide gesturing motions with his hands while his mother held on to his shoulders.

When Brick walked through the door, Jessica pushed Jacob behind her back and faced him with a still, cold stare. "Why didn't you tell us who you were?" she demanded.

Her chilly reception stopped him in his tracks, just inside the entrance. The bell on the door chimed, the sound seeming to hang on the tension in the air. "I did. You know who I am."

"I know your name, but I didn't know who you are. Now I do. I think it's best that you leave. Just leave us alone." Jacob was staring at him from behind her with wide-eyed wonder and a touch of fear.

Brick watched them both closely as he locked his stance, ready for the verbal attack he could see brewing. "I don't think I'm ready to leave yet. A few things may need to be explained."

"You ought to know. You're the only one with secrets," she threw at him. "I will not have you jeopardize my son's life or mine over this money you *claim* Arthur owed you." Her pale eyes flashed at him, daring him to deny her.

He controlled his anger, barely keeping it in check. He would never, in a million years, willingly put someone's life on the line for the sake of cold, hard cash. That had never been his way. Without turning away from her damning stare, he said, "Jacob, why don't you go say hello to Mr. Tipple? Your mother and I have a few things to discuss."



"No way." Jacob slipped from behind her stiff body to stand directly in front of her, his hands clenched at his sides, as if prepared to protect her. His voice quivered only a little. "I won't let you hurt her."

Brick met Jacob's distrusting glare, and softened his tone. "I have never, nor would I ever hurt a woman. I have a history, but I promise I won't hurt your mother." When Jacob didn't appear to be swayed, he added, "I give you my word."

Jacob turned to Jessica. Her expression was wary, but not fearful. "Go ahead, Jacob. Go to Mr. Tipple's for a few minutes. This won't take long." The tone of her voice said as much as her words. Jacob gave Brick one last, long look before going out the door. When he was out of sight, Brick turned and locked the door behind her son, watching Jessica over his shoulder. Her eyes widened with fright as she watched him turn the lock, but what he had to say was important, and he didn't want any interruptions.

"What did he tell you?" he asked, deliberately softening his tone.

She swallowed, and wrapped her arms around herself. "He found a report. Seven years ago. You and..." She licked her lips, visibly shaken. "You were listed. Charged with murder." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Who are you?"

He stepped closer to her. "I don't know how he found out. It isn't really important. What is important is you listen very carefully to what I am about to tell you." He waited for a response, standing perfectly motionless. She nodded her head, a cautious agreement to listen. "I was in Special Ops for two and half years. My specialty was interrogation. The reports--I'm guessing at what he found, I don't know--those are classified files. I was able to outthink the machine, and improve on their by-the-book rules." His voice was a low rumble from somewhere deep in his chest, but he meant every word.

"Jacob found information on a court martial issued through Ramstein Air Base in Germany. There were details about an attack in the Persian Gulf that you were a part of, linking you to a Captain's death. His questionable death. And that was on the Internet, not classified," she told him, her tone chilled.

He never blinked. Unfortunately, the accusation was true. "I want you to know I was doing what I had been trained to do. Nothing more, nothing less. And I wasn't the one court-martialed." Actually, as he recalled, that mission hadn't been as bad as some. There had only been one target. His Captain had paid the ultimate price when they were attacked. The charges against Brick had been dropped when the investigation proved his innocence.

Jessie's voice was a murmured whisper. "What do you do now?" Her lips twitched with the slightest flair of fear.

He raked a hand over his hair. "I run an investigative company that subcontracts to the political community, as far up as the White House. When they want an investigation done quietly, they call me." Jessica stared blankly at him. "I have the ability to think outside of the box. If there's information I need, I find a way to get it." He tried to make it sound simple and non-threatening. He didn't think it would be wise to elaborate on the ways he could get into the darkest recesses of the community, or of a person's mind, for what he needed to know. He didn't move a muscle when she visibly shuddered, when what he wanted to do was hold her and tell her that she would always be safe with him.

"Is that what you were going to do to Arthur?" She flipped her hair over her shoulder in an attempt to hide the chills that made her shiver, but were not missed by him, either.

"It crossed my mind." His voice was purposely low, unrepentant.

"What about us? Are we in danger because of your money?" Her expressive eyes flashed in anger, even as her lips trembled.

Brick leaned forward, threaded his fingers through her hair, and watched her glistening eyes widen at the gesture. "No," he assured her as he stepped directly in front of her, their bodies hardly a breath apart. "In fact, right now I'm going to kiss you. You can't talk if I'm kissing you." And before she could draw a breath to protest, his lips were on hers.

Her lips were soft and supple beneath his. With an intensity that shocked him to the core, she kissed him back. Her hands clutched the fabric of his shirt at his waist. She leaned into him, her softness forming against his body with exquisite wonder. Heat and desire ripped through him, and left him swimming in a pool of passionate hunger.

When he trailed his tongue over the curve of her mouth, she moaned deep in her throat. He gripped her hip with one hand and pulled her closer, the undeniable form of his arousal between them, and she quivered under his palms. She ran her hands up and across his chest, and his muscles tightened beneath her touch. His hand gentled in her hair, but his mouth still sought to conquer, demanding her complete submission.

The pleasurable pressure of her breast in his palm almost made him boil over with desire. With a whimper, Jessica suddenly pulled back. "Don't. Please."

He released her immediately, dropping his wandering hand, but the hand he'd entangled in that glorious mass of red hair continued to caress her back of her neck.

He became immersed in the roiling emotions in her eyes. Her wet lips trembled, but he hoped it was with unfulfilled need and not fear. His eyes narrowed as he fought to regain a steadier stance.

"You felt that," he said softly, his voice hoarse with need. "I know you did." He pressed his forehead against her for a scant moment, trying to find his equilibrium. What the hell had happened? One minute he was explaining himself to her, and the next he'd been so completely overwhelmed with the desire to kiss her there had been no other choice. He had expected her to shove him away, to slap him, to at least offer a token protest, but instead, she'd kissed *him* senseless. That, he had not expected. This feisty little redhead had given him the most electrifying kiss of his life.

Her panting was shallow and quick as her eyes drifted closed. He lifted her chin with his thumb, his gaze seeking hers. Every molecule of his blood was still hot, still boiling with need.

Jessica shook her head. "I can't do this," she told him, backing up slightly. "I can't. I have Jacob to think about." Her mask of self-control slipped back into place and she moved away from him.

The cool air between them left him feeling empty, something else new and unknown. Before he could speak, a tap on the storefront window startled them both. Jessica gave him a wide berth as she walked toward the door.

Brick's gaze followed her every movement, and she jumped when his hand shot out to grab her arm. "If he asks, I'll tell him, but I won't be graphic. I give you my word."

"Thank you for that." She straightened her shoulders, and unlocked the door for Jacob.

Jacob stepped inside and looked at them both. Jessica was still slightly flushed, but he doubted the boy would notice.

"Mr. Donnelly, I wanted to let you know what I found out about the money," Jacob told him as he approached with his mother.

Brick sat in a chair, and motioned for Jacob to sit across from him. "Go on. What did you find out?"

"I researched an online transfer done with Arthur's bank two days before he died. It was for fifty thousand dollars." He fell silent for a few heartbeats. "I guess you're going to want to go back home to try to trace that."

"Actually, that's something I can do from here. I can set one of my guys on it, if you have the information." Brick wasn't going to call him on it, but he knew the boy wasn't telling the truth. When Brick declared his intent to stay in town, Jacob's face fell, confirming his suspicion.

"That's great news," Jessie said from behind her son. Brick could see she had completely missed her son's reaction. Her cool, efficient demeanor was back; leaving no sign of the earth-shattering kiss they had just shared. Brick was surprised at how much he suddenly missed the passionate woman she kept buried beneath the surface. He was even more surprised to discover how much he wanted more kisses, more of her.

When she placed her palms on her son's shoulders, Jacob wrenched himself from her grasp and leaped from his chair. He stormed through the parlor to the office, and closed the door behind him.

Jessica turned to Brick with a dismayed expression. "What was all of that about?"

"Just a guess, but I'd say he saw me kissing you." Jessica groaned guiltily. "And not to get him into trouble, but he's lying about the money. I've already done a trace on everything within seven days to either side of Arthur's death. The bank can only tell me it was cashed, and nothing more."

"Are you sure?"

His smile was thin. "Let's just say if there was any other information to find, I'd have the means to do it."

Jessica cast a glance at the office door, then turned back to Brick. Her pale features showed her confusion. "I'm sorry. I don't know why he would lie."

"I do."

Her expression closed up again. "You're just a man of answers, aren't you?" she said flatly.

"Look..." Brick leaned forward in his chair. "I just know how people think. I've watched him with you. He takes being the man of your little family very seriously. He feels I'm a threat."

"But why? It isn't like I throw men at him on a regular basis. I haven't had a date in eons."

Brick nodded. "Exactly. And now here I am, ravaging his mother in broad daylight."

She blushed a deep red at his mention of the kiss. She sat down weakly in the chair Jacob had vacated. "Why didn't I see this coming?" Her head fell into her hands. "I knew he needed a balanced home, a father figure, but I wasn't going to be with someone just so he could have a male influence."

She dropped her hands to the table, and he laid a gentle hand on her arm. "You have done an excellent job raising him. If he were my son, I would be proud of the man he's becoming. But he can't help the way he feels." His thumb lightly caressed the soft

skin along the inside of her wrist. "He can't help it any more than I can help what I feel for you."

"Lust," she nearly snarled, jerking her arm from beneath his hand. She moved quickly out of her chair. "I told you, I can't become involved."

He rose to his feet and frowned at her, then deliberately shifted his expression to one of cool disdain. "Can't or won't?" was his sneered taunt. "You're right. I'm only here for the money." How could he have forgotten that, even for the brief moment of their kiss? His eyes bored into hers. "Who said anything about getting involved?" he interjected dryly. "Don't worry, Ms. Morality. I won't touch you again." He turned and stalked from the parlor.

Jessica sank again into the nearest chair, watching the door fall shut behind him. What was she going to do? That kiss had melted every bone in her body. She had completely forgotten everything when his lips had taken hers, lost herself in that one moment of insanity.

Was it more than lust? He certainly was attractive, but he was so damn arrogant! Even though he had frightened her, she'd wanted his kiss. Knowing who and what he was hadn't deterred her desire at all. She groaned softly at the realization of what had just happened, and knew without a doubt that she was attracted to him.

She had never experienced such an all-consuming kiss. He had obliterated the tendrils of fear that had wrapped around her heart. When he'd touched her, kissed her, she'd felt the blood rushing hot through her veins in a way she hadn't felt since...well, ever.

She needed to move. Rising to her feet, she determined that she was not going to let that man get to her again. She refused to even consider it, no matter how engaging his dark, mysterious blue eyes may be. She wouldn't think about the way his lips curved charmingly when he smiled, or the way he'd felt so solid against her...or...or... anything! She moved behind the counter, grabbed a towel and started wiping anything within reach with vigorous strokes, refusing to dwell on thoughts of him any longer.

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Brick revved the engine, then heard the satisfying squeal of rubber on pavement as he pulled out of the parking lot. Where the hell did he come up with the idea to kiss her anyway? He bit his lip, furious with himself, and still tasted the sweetness of her on his mouth. It only enraged him further.

Never in his thirty-eight years of life had he come so close to completely abandoned desire. It had torn through him like a freight train, barreling at unstoppable speeds to finally crash in a blaze of glory in his pants.

His senses had been on high alert when she'd begun demanding answers about his military past. He honestly hadn't thought about any of it in some time. And he'd told her the truth. He'd only been doing his job.

He knew he needed to find the money, but he'd let his better sense be overruled by lust, entranced by her lush mouth and the strength of her will. He knew he'd wanted to kiss her, but he had gone in under an incredible disadvantage. Those rosy lips of hers had electrified him. And when she kissed him back, the contact had sent a jolt from her lips all the way to his toes and back up, to finally collide with an agonizing impact with his own need. Before he could completely comprehend what was happening, his body was on autopilot.

He could still feel the warm weight of her luscious breast in his palm, and his grip on the steering wheel tightened. Never before had he been so enthralled with the shape of womanly flesh.

He slowed to a stop at an intersection. Maybe she was right. Maybe it was just lust. He cursed softly. Lust was curable. Even as he decided on the best action to take for relief, he realized with a groan that Becca, with her luscious body and sultry green eyes, was now nothing more than a fuzzy picture in the recesses of his mind. Jessie's kiss, her lips, her soft moans of need, had wiped out his sexual memory of any other woman.

Well, then he would just picture himself in bed with the woman of his dreams, watching with heated eyes as she rose up on the bed to kiss him. God, but it was a sweet picture. All that beautiful red hair draped over his abdomen like a sheet of

molten copper as her mouth blazed languid circles over his thigh, inching with intoxicatingly sweet, slow strokes toward their mutual goal.

The blare of a horn behind him jerked him out of his daydream. He groaned, and ground his foot onto the accelerator. *Great.* He'd been caught daydreaming in broad daylight, like a horny teenager. All because of her kiss.

He whipped his car into a spot on the right, opened his door with a frantic shove, stepped out of the car and gulped a few breaths of fresh air. With his arms braced on the frame of the door, he let his head fell forward in sexual frustration and disbelief. If just her kiss could do that to him, what would happen if she actually *tried*? He shuddered with erotic anticipation. He just didn't know. He shook his head.

After several minutes, he decided it had to be lust. Lust was controllable and curable, he repeated to himself, a mantra to regain his equilibrium. He'd just have to make a better effort at controlling it. There wasn't one good reason to become involved with the beautiful redhead just because he was attracted to her. The sooner he found out what had happened to his money, the better.

\* \* \*

"Jacob," Jessie called from the kitchen.

"Coming."

She heard a study book being closed, then the drag of feet. She was washing their dinner dishes, and didn't turn to look at him as he entered the kitchen. "Is there something wrong?" His silence was damning. "I'm only guessing, but I think you saw something today that bothered you." He continued to ignore her.

"Jacob." She turned to face him and fought to keep her tone neutral, but she was bordering on exasperation. It wasn't like him not to talk to her, and he'd been avoiding her all evening. "Tell me what's bothering you."

Jacob didn't look at her. "Nothin'."

"Baloney. Spill it."



His voice cracked. "Why did you kiss him? You said you weren't going to get married."

She had guessed right. He had seen them and it was causing him problems. "First of all, I said I hadn't *thought* about getting remarried. As for the kiss, he kissed me." She knew there was something more underneath all of his childish worries, and patience was the only way for him to say everything that was on his mind.

He dug a toe into the linoleum. "It's weird, Mom, seeing you like that."

"Do you like him?" She finished the pan and sat it on the rack to dry.

Jacob shrugged. "I respect him. He's a man of his word. I can tell." He clenched and unclenched his free hand. The other hand was jammed into the pocket of his jeans. "I don't know if I like him."

"Why?"

"Because he wanted to take everything away." He spoke softly, his voice trembling.

"And you think he still might?" Her gaze drifted out the window while she listened to what he said, and what wasn't put into words at all.

"Yes."

She ached for him, for the fear that one word revealed. She dried her hands quickly and turned to grab him firmly by the shoulders. "Jacob, I'm confident he isn't going to take anything away from us. I don't think that's the kind of man he is." She ran a hand lovingly over his hair. "I want to find someone you like and that you can respect. Someone you can talk to."

"Like Mr. Donnelly?" he offered.

His statement made her tongue grip the roof of her mouth. How was she supposed to answer that? "A kiss does not make a relationship, understand?" she pointed out firmly instead.

"I think I do."

"Just keep an open mind. There's more to a relationship than a kiss. It's a lot of work and trust. Believe me on that."

"All right. And Mom?"

"Yeah," she said, turning back to the dishes.

"I lied to him about the money, I'm sorry." His head was bowed in penance.

"I know."

"You knew?" he exclaimed, his head snapping back up, his brown eyes wide.

"I am 'The Mom,' the all-powerful, remember?" She winked at him. "But I trusted you to come clean with it."

He stood and stared at her for several minutes, unblinking. Finally, he hugged her. "Thanks, Mom."

"Hey, anytime," she assured him, trying to not choke on the emotions swirling through her as he walked out of the kitchen without another word.

## Chapter Seven

*The sun was shining brightly as Jessica walked from the car to the apartment. When she'd left that morning, she'd stressed to Arthur that she wanted him to spend some time with her and Jacob. He'd been busy, away from the apartment a lot that week, and she felt lonely. She knew Jacob missed him, too. He would walk around the apartment for hours, looking for his dad.*

*She usually didn't think about why Arthur spent so much of his time out of the house. He almost always had a good reason, like long hours on whatever project he was currently overseeing. She had never doubted him before, but lately he had been behaving oddly.*

*It was quiet in the apartment as she set her purse on the table beside the door. His jacket was thrown over the back of the lounge, just like usual. Then she heard a lusty groan come from the bedroom, and felt her blood turn to ice.*

*With her heart in her throat, she walked the few feet to their bedroom door. It was open a crack, and with a push of her toe, it swung wide. What she saw made her want to scream, but the most she could deliver was a whimper of horror and disgust. There was Artie, her husband, going to town for all he was worth on some bitch of a blonde. Clearly neither of them had heard a thing as she had entered the bedroom.*

*She wanted to run, but her feet refused to take her from that awful sight. "Arthur!"*

*He flew from the bed with a strangled oath. He grabbed the sheets to wrap around his body, leaving the blonde completely naked. The woman screamed and tried to cover herself, but Jessie barely noticed. Her eyes were riveted on her husband. Then her gaze fell on the used condoms piled beside the bed. She cringed with disgust.*

*A flare of fury raged within her when she spotted a bottle of bourbon on the floor, with less than an inch at the bottom. Jessica never drank hard liquor. She didn't even keep it in the apartment.*

*Scattered across the nightstand and floor were several gaming chips from Arthur's favorite casinos, a testament to where he had spent his day. That certainly explained his unconcerned attitude toward his job that morning. He'd lost yet another one.*

*She whipped back around to face him, but could find no words. She wanted to be angry. She should be furious, but all she felt was an overwhelming numbness. She searched desperately inside herself for the disgust she knew should be aimed at him, but found she was more disgusted with herself.*

*Jessie had known since the beginning that Arthur liked to gamble. He'd offered time and again to seek help. Now, it was as clear as a cloudless sky that the offer had been an attempt to placate her, not a serious suggestion. She had been blind to the progression of his problem, deceiving herself. She admitted she hadn't wanted to know how bad it really was, and now she had found this, in her own bed. She couldn't ignorantly believe his lies any longer, not with this staring her in the face.*

*The most she could manage was a withering look at the two of them before she tossed her head furiously and left the room.*

Jessie shot awake with a startled grunt, and sat up briefly before falling like dead weight back onto her pillow. She hadn't dreamed about Arthur in close to six years, and now suddenly he was back like a bad specter, inhabiting her nightmares to torment her. Neither she nor Jacob ever went back to the apartment after that fateful day. Since she couldn't live with a man she couldn't trust, the only option she'd had was a divorce. She had been devastated to learn, through the grapevine, just how bad her husband's gambling had become. He was despicable. He had turned his back on his family for the thrill of the dice. Closing her eyes tightly, she mentally boxed up the remnants of the dream and shoved it back where it belonged. She refused to waste her time dwelling on a man who clearly held little regard for his own son, and even less for his marriage vows.

She hadn't given much thought to relationships since then. Men simply weren't part of the plan. She had Jacob to care for, and he was her first priority. But when Brick had kissed her, she'd lost all sense of who she was, of where she'd been. To hear his desire for her so easily spoken was terrifying. He was so confident in what he wanted, everything she wasn't.

It was wonderful to be wanted, but she doubted she could allow herself to be so close to a man again. She wasn't about to set herself up to be the uninvited guest at another bedroom show like that ever again. For all she knew, Brick would only be in town long enough to find his money, and then he'd be gone. She couldn't afford to get involved with him. And, she admitted to herself, she didn't trust him. Couldn't trust any man was more like it.

She'd always believed she had the strength to try a relationship again, and given the opportunity, she would, but now she knew it wasn't going to happen. Not easily. Not since Brick's kiss had given her a good taste of things to come. She just wasn't that prepared. She still shivered as remembered touches of heat shot down her spine.

Jessie knew there was a vast difference between lust and love. She would not succumb to lust just because one hell of a thrill was right around the corner. She just couldn't take the risk. There was a deep silent fear in her that lust may have been the only thing between herself and Arthur. She couldn't make that mistake again.

With a distressed look at the clock, she knew the rest of night was shot. She'd never get any sleep now, not with thoughts of Arthur and Brick still running through her head. She sighed as she shoved the covers back and rose from the bed. She might as well get a head start on the paperwork she needed to finish.

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The next day, Jessie was distracted and edgy from lack of sleep. As she scooped yet another ice cream cone, she was stunned to see Brick's car pulling into the parking lot --especially after the way he had left yesterday. But she didn't have time to think

about it, when a group of girls came in just before him looking to satisfy a sweet tooth. While she filled their orders, she watched out of the corner of her eye as Jacob approached him. After a brief, hushed conversation, the pair left.

With the girls served and gone, Jessie began to worry. The guys still were not back, and more than thirty minutes had gone by. She inched around from behind the serving counter and looked out the window. Jacob sat with Brick, talking casually at an outside table. The tri-color umbrella above them fluttered in the gentle breeze.

She wondered what they could be discussing. She knew Jacob wouldn't try another lie, but they were deep in conversation over something. Had Brick found some information about the money, and seeing she was busy, didn't want to bother her? Whatever it was, she was sure Jacob would tell her eventually. She shrugged and went back to work.

She was cleaning the ice cream scoops and wiping down the counter when they entered nearly an hour later. She was even more confused to see them both smiling.

"Mom, I'm going to go see Mr. Tipple. I'll see you in a bit," Jacob called out, not waiting for her response. She waved as he bounded back out the door.

Brick leaned against the counter with a bemused expression as she worked. His prolonged silence began to grate on her already stretched nerves. Finally, she threw the towel onto the counter, unable to take it any longer. "What do you want? Don't you have someone's arms to twist somewhere?"

"No."

She huffed at him. "So you're just going to stand there and watch me, is that it?"

"Mostly."

"You have absolutely nothing better to do with your day?"

"Actually, I do, but it involves you anyway."

"What are you talking about?" Agitated, she ran her hand down the front of her smock.

"I think your son, the man, has just given me permission to date his mother." His eyes twinkled, making the deep blue sparkle like a midnight sky.

She startled visibly at that. "Excuse me? Sorry, but I don't date." She wiped at the counter in wide, vicious circles. She was going to have to talk to Jacob. Again. What she'd told him did *not* give him express permission to set her up.

Brick shrugged. "That's what he said."

Jessie fisted her hands on her hips. "Oh, really? Just a fountain of information about his dear old mom, I guess." She wasn't sure what irritated her more --the fact they'd discussed her social life, or the fact that the conversation had been between her son and the one arrogant man she found herself completely attracted to.

"Will you come out from behind there?" Her head snapped up in confusion at the silky, velvet tone he used. She hesitated, battling her indecision. His look was concerned when he asked, "What's wrong?"

Lifting the back of her hand to her forehead to push away stray hair, she eyed him carefully. "I didn't sleep well last night."

"Why?" He reached over and pushed the stubborn lock of hair back for her a second time. Tingles shot down her spine when his fingers slowly brushed her skin.

"Bad dreams. Nothing, really." But she couldn't look up at him.

He lifted his hand to grip her chin and bring it gently upward to meet his gaze. "What kind of dreams?" His voice had dropped to a husky whisper that caressed her, making her heart skip.

"Nothing," she insisted, but her tongue almost tripped on the word.

"It must have been something if you lost sleep over it." His thumb stroked her cheek as he cradled her face in his palm. His comforting touch only confused her more.

"I can't go out with you," she blurted. Her eyes widened, shocked at her own words.

His lips curved in gentle understanding at her outburst. "I haven't asked you to. Not yet, anyway." He angled his head, looking into her eyes. "You were hurt by the way Arthur treated you, weren't you?"

She jerked herself out of his hypnotic hold. "What happened doesn't matter." Taking a deep breath, Jessie stepped back, putting space between them. "I don't date

because I choose not to, and to protect Jacob. I will not give him an amoral picture of relationships." She decided to let her prickly attitude speak for itself, but he didn't seem to even notice.

Brick crossed his arms in front of his chest, leaning his hip against the counter again. "I believe you. He knows he's partly responsible, but he doesn't want to be the only reason, if, in fact, he is." She stood, unblinking, for several breaths before he continued. "I want to kiss you again."

Jessie ignored his declaration, focusing on what he had said before instead. "Jacob thinks he's responsible for me not dating?"

"In a word, yes."

"He isn't. Period."

"Then there's something else? Something that might have to do with those bad dreams you had?"

"When did you get a degree in psychology?" she bit out.

He shrugged with indifference. "Several years ago, Boston University. It wound up being an asset in my line of work."

Jessie frowned at him. "So, my arm is being twisted?" She waved a hand. "Just stop. I don't know what you two discussed, but my private life is just that. Private."

"Then you don't want me to kiss you again?" He hadn't moved, but his whole body was vibrating with energy. She could feel the waves of heat an arm's length away.

"No, I don't," she hissed through clenched teeth, except it took her longer to answer than she would have liked.

Before she could stop him, he swept her up into his arms. "That's too bad, because I really want to kiss you," he growled. Caught unaware, she couldn't stop the onslaught of his lips as they captured hers.

It was so similar to the kiss they had shared before but yet, much, much more. She trembled as he ran his tongue across her lip, making her whimper. When she opened her mouth to gasp for the breath he'd stolen, he slid his tongue between her teeth, conquering the next sensational level of her. His tongue delved and mated with



hers, and she sank deeper, unable to prevent the small cry of need from escaping her lips. Her arms were pinned to her sides as he held her, and she was overwhelmed with feelings and desires she had tasted once, and now recognized.

Where had her willpower gone? Hadn't she told him not to touch her? Hadn't he been just as adamant yesterday about not repeating the last kiss? But the arguments faded while her mind swirled and her body turned molten under the pressure of his lips on hers.

Her shivers deepened as he lengthened the kiss. He released her arms, and she wrapped them around his waist and pulled him closer to feel the heated length of his body against hers. She felt his hands caressing up and down her back before they settled in possessive warmth just over the curve of her backside. She knew that her actions were calling her a liar, in every sense of word, but she didn't care. What he was doing, what she was feeling, was beyond description. She whimpered again, in protest this time, as his lips lifted from hers.

She looked at him through unfocused eyes, watching him look back at her. His grin grew slowly as her words started to spill forth. "All right. I'll go out with you. But I will not become involved. Do you understand? I don't trust relationships. There, professor, I spilled my guts."

He nodded sagely, a knowing light in his eyes. "I'll take that as an acceptable answer, for now." He held up a finger to still her rebuttal, and she narrowed her eyes. "I can wait. You see, there's this certain redhead who's really caught my attention, and the amazing thing is, I can't seem to forget her." He held her loosely, seemingly unconcerned that they were in her place of business. "She's stubborn and protective. Her son is an absolutely incredible boy with a mind like a damn trap, and you know what's happened?"

She shook her head. "I seem to have forgotten how to be angry, which is a trait my sisters will tell you I developed in the cradle. My days have become brighter since I made that awful trip down here." He pulled her in closer yet. "Did I ever tell you I hate

to fly? One of these days I'll have to tell you why." He brushed a light kiss to her temple.

"You hate to fly, hmm?" she asked, her body still living in the land of his kiss, cradled by his arms.

Brick chuckled. "In the worst way."

On impulse she asked him, "Why don't you come over for dinner tonight?" At his surprised look, she pressed her forehead against his chest. "Sorry. I'm sure you have plans for every minute of your time, since you're trying to find the money Arthur borrowed." She extricated herself from his hold and stepped back.

"I do what I want." He winked at her. "So what's for dinner?"

Jessie wasn't sure what frightened her more; her attraction to him and the way he could make her feel, or the way he was looking at her with those enigmatic blue eyes as he moved closer. It was almost as if she were being chased, or maybe hunted?

She met his heated gaze as he reached for her again. It was an odd sensation. Everything about Brick was so intense. So confident, arrogant. She fought down the shiver as his lips dropped to hers again.

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"So, you don't help her in the kitchen?" Brick asked as he laid a queen down on the coffee table. He could hear Jessie in the kitchen finishing the dinner she had invited him to share. His gaze shifted automatically toward the doorway, but Jacob's voice dragged his attention back to the living room.

"No, I think she likes the quiet. I help if she needs it, and sometimes I do the dishes for her, but since the kitchen's pretty small and it's just the two of us, I usually do my homework while she cooks." Jacob picked up the queen Brick had discarded and laid it down with a pair from his hand. "Three queens. Beat that." His grin was victorious.

Brick lifted a jesting brow. "Did your mother teach you how to play cut-throat Rummy?"

"Ages ago." Jacob looked a little sheepish as he added, "I used to get bored pretty easily, if I wasn't doing something that made me think. Now I know how to control it."

"No wonder you know so much. You're worse than a sponge." Brick laid out his cards and dropped his discard with a flourish. "Game."

Jacob's mouth fell open. He was still holding three face cards. "Man, you're not supposed to hold them all!"

"I didn't," Brick said, looking at the two sets he had used for the set up.

"Nuts. Want to go again?"

"Not right this minute."

Jessie's voice came from the kitchen doorway. "Dinner is ready."

Brick looked up and saw the slight flush on her cheeks, he was sure was from standing over the hot stove. She'd witnessed the fair trouncing of her son, and her incredible eyes sparkled with humor. She was a wonder in her pale yellow tank top and black shorts, her creamy skin exposed for his perusal. She would probably knock him out flat if she knew how he viewed her wardrobe--as an enticement for him to consider what lay beneath it--but that didn't stop him from looking.

He was beginning to wonder whether what he was feeling was just lust. One hot-blooded male interested in one incredibly red-hot woman. Good old animal attraction he could deal with, but when he was around her, he couldn't quite rein in his feelings, and it was that lack of control that left him shaking.

There was absolutely no way he was going to regret those kisses. He hadn't gone back to the parlor with the intent of kissing her again. He'd meant it when he'd told her he wasn't going to touch her again, but when he'd brushed that wayward hair from her expressive features, he'd known he was going to kiss her again. He had to. All logical arguments disappeared; stuffed deep into a mental drawer, when she'd looked at him with those warm, pale blue eyes and the soft shape of her lips beckoned him.

He couldn't help his nature. What he wanted, he got, and at that moment, with her hair running through his fingers, he'd wanted to feel her lips under his, her body pressed to his with an urgency that still left him shaking.

He watched color deepen on her cheeks as his eyes lingered on her. He didn't notice when Jacob had left the room, but suddenly, the two of them were alone, their gazes locked for several silent, charged seconds. He rose from the sofa and moved around the coffee table with long strides to stand next to her. She didn't say anything when he wrapped his arm around her waist to lead her back to the kitchen. It somehow felt right, which should have served as another warning, but he chose to overlook it. The warmth of her body flowed into him as he cradled her next to his side, and savored her closeness for those scant seconds, until she stepped away to sit down at the table.

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"Delicious. Do you cook all the time?" Brick asked as he pushed his plate away.

"Most of the time. Since I open at seven in the morning, and I'm usually out by six, it works out just fine."

"Are you making any headway, closing that early?"

"This is my test period. I'll adjust my hours next month if it looks prudent." She reached for the empty casserole dish, but his hand on hers stayed her movements.

"Don't you even think about it," he murmured with a soft warning.

"You know how to wash dishes?" She had been unprepared for his offer, not to mention the shock that traveled up her arm. It seemed her body went on high alert every time she got within ten feet of the man. She should have been insulted, the way he laughed at her stubborn streak. But instead, it felt kind of nice.

"Soapy water, elbow grease, rinse. Yeah I think I got it." But he was chuckling at her. "Jacob and I will do them, won't we?"

He looked at the boy, who obviously realized he was either going to have to do dishes or hear about it for a very long time. "Sure, I'll help." Jacob gave his mother a lopsided grin.

"Smart kid you have there," Brick offered with a playful twist to his lips.

Now she was extremely flustered. "But you're a guest! Remember? I invited you."

"I know. Consider it your night off. Go find a book," he ordered.

His eyes told her he'd give no quarter, and she realized it was a lost cause. She couldn't remember the last time someone had thought enough of her to let her rest. She offered Brick a grateful, if slightly shy smile, and gave Jacob a quick kiss on the head before she made her way out of the kitchen.

Did she even own a book *to* read? She found an old novel, curled up on the couch, and tucked her feet underneath her, but her mind wasn't on the writing. She kept hearing snatches of youthful laughter echoed by another sound, a deep laugh that made her insides turn to jelly and made it next to impossible to concentrate. She forced herself to refocus, rereading the first three lines again and again. Finally, she just gave up.

She rested her head against the back of the sofa and closed her eyes. Like an unrepentant eavesdropper, she listened to the sound of dishes clinking and the rush of water. It was relaxing in the way it felt so normal, just the three of them.

*The three of them?* Her head jerked up. What was she getting herself into? She couldn't ever let herself think like that, not while there was Jacob to consider. She refused to let her son become a victim of another bad relationship choice on her part. The last thing she needed was for him to realize she didn't know how to keep a man happy.

Ultimately, that was why Arthur had turned to other women, why she had no choice but to leave him. If she had tried just a little harder...if she had made him see he had a problem. She snorted quietly. Who was she fooling? She hadn't even seen the problem for what it was, and she had slept next to the man every night for years. If only

she'd made the connection to his late nights and long weekends, if she had done something...anything. Instead, oblivious to everything around her, she'd walked in on him and another woman, and her world had rudely unveiled itself for the ugly farce it had become.

Her husband, the man she'd loved, had a whole other life, a secret life. She'd known he gambled, but she'd had no idea until the divorce how badly and to what extent. Back then he had owed not just one or two, but nearly a half-dozen different casinos, and not just a few hundred dollars, either. Thousands. Somehow, he'd come up with the money to pay them.

Her thoughts stilled as an icy finger coursed down her spine, yanking her upright as if a string through her spine had been pulled taut. A hollow, empty feeling started to overcome her, as she watched her son and Brick, still joking, make their way back into the living room.

"Mom, I'm going to go my room to read," Jacob called out as he left the room.

She nodded her head, scarcely acknowledging her son's departure. Brick sat on the sofa next to her. She barely moved, eyeing him with a wariness born of suspicion. "How much did Arthur borrow from you?" she asked without preamble, her words emotionless.

"Fifty thousand dollars. Why?" Brick's gaze became unfathomable and she stiffened as her anger and distrust rose to the surface again.

"Was that the only time he had borrowed money from you? Tell me the truth."

He sighed. "No. I lent him nearly twenty thousand several years ago."

Her lips felt numb. "Why would you lend him money? Who was he to you? And I need to know how I suddenly figure into all of this."

Brick sat back and squeezed his fist as if he held something, then flexed his fingers. "Why? Well, he needed it, for one thing. As to who he was, I met him on a stateside trip. I'm sure it was long before he met you. He was a civilian informant in New York, a young one, but he'd proven to be reliable. Somehow he managed to track me down and used his good history to convince me to loan him the money." She

listened in silence, not letting a single flicker of emotion cross her face. She felt frozen on the inside. "As for how you came into it, I explained that on that first day. Arthur used the shop as collateral for this last loan." He looked at her, his expression puzzled. "Why all the questions?"

"I just came to a very sudden conclusion, and I don't like it. First of all," she started, squaring her shoulders and turning to face him on the sofa, "I don't believe you about that spy business. I met Arthur in college. Second, he wasn't old enough. He was twenty-three, and had just finished with his own classes when I married him." She couldn't stop the snide hitch in her words as she spoke. "You're noble enough to not take away the only means I have to make my mortgage payment, so why not take me instead?" She forced herself to remain calm even as every instinct told her to run, to not believe anything he had to say. Her hands calmly across her lap, a simple camouflage to her inner turmoil.

To his credit, Brick looked sincerely appalled. "That's crazy!"

"You've made it fairly obvious what you would like to do with me. And you've won over my son, who is naturally suspicious of most men."

He shook his head. "Wait a minute. You were in college when you met Arthur?" His eyes widened. "My God, you didn't know! He lied to you."

"What are you talking about? I didn't know a lot of things, but I found out quick enough." She glared at him, daring him to be truthful.

"No, you really didn't know. Arthur was thirty-nine when he died," he explained softly. "He was twenty-six when I found out he had married."

She gulped in a lungful of air. The one she'd been using had forced its way through her body with a painful punch. "That's impossible! I knew him for years! I lived with him," she choked out. Her heart started to race as this new picture was brought for her to inspect, a picture of her life as she saw it, and of Arthur's. It was simply unbelievable that she could have been so blind to the world around her.

He gentled his voice. "I can pull his stat file if you want me to, and show you. He said he was only twenty-three when you met him?"

She nodded once, weakly. "He told me he had just turned twenty-three. I didn't think anything about it. I was only eighteen. He had a nice car, and could buy drinks--not that I drank, but --Oh, God. Is it true?" Torn, she swept her hair out of her face, feeling betrayed again. "Tell me something about him, something that probably only I would know." Her eyes pleaded with him. *Please don't make this true.*

He thought for a moment. "He had a scar on his left calf from a motorcycle accident."

Her eyes drifted closed, and she swallowed. She felt very light-headed. Her lips formed the words before her voice caught up. "How do you know that?"

"It's in his medical report."

"Are you trying to tell me he was in the military and I, somehow, was a blind idiot for not knowing it?" Her voice was weak. She felt ill, and incredibly gullible. She felt herself pale more as he continued with his story.

"No, he wasn't military. He was an informant. That was how he made such good money. It was probably also what gave him the inclination to start gambling. Easy money for easier money."

"But we never had any money." The whole idea seemed too bizarre to be true.

"Our unit stopped using him when I learned he had gotten married," he told her, his voice soft. She knew he was trying to soothe her discomfort, but she didn't know how he could.

She doubled over with her arms wrapped around her middle. The light-headed feeling became worse, and she fought it with a deep breath. "Oh God. My marriage was a lie...my whole life was a lie!" she wailed, her voice thick and harsh. "First Arthur gambles our life away, then I find him in bed with another woman, and now this! Have I ever done anything right?"

When he moved toward her, she gasped. "Don't touch me," she whispered, her voice anguished. "Don't you see I failed? I saw nothing in him that was true, only what I wanted him to be. Who was he? What was he? Why would he do that to me? He said he loved me. He lied to me, lied about everything." A jagged sob escaped her throat. She



felt nothing but loathing for herself as the reality of her failure rained down around her, crashing over her with the strength of a summer hurricane.

Brick's voice remained soothing. "You and I both know that isn't true."

"How would you know? You didn't know anything about it. You weren't here to witness any of it." Pain lanced her deep.

His fingers were tender on her tear-streaked cheeks. She couldn't summon the energy push him away. The emptiness inside her was just too great to have any strength left for the effort. Her lashes fluttered in torment, for the ache caused by the truth of the past she now knew was a lie. His voice was soft as he inched nearer to pull her into his embrace. "None of this is your fault, not a single thing. He was a sick man. When we released him, I really thought he was doing all right. He went to school, found you, got married. This is not your fault," he repeated. "Addiction of any kind is a hard thing to deal with, to try to break."

"I should have helped, but I didn't see it! I thought everything was fine, even until I walked in on him with another woman. He used me." She sobbed against his warm body.

"Jessica, I know I came down here because of the money." He lifted her tear-ravaged face up to his. "But I didn't stay for the money. I didn't need to stay here to find it. I stayed because I met you. *That* is how you figure into all of this. Arthur was an idiot and a fool to not realize what he had."

"He lied to me, about everything! How could I have been so blind?" She was tormented with doubts. The ache was like a crushing weight of stone, cold and hard, lying against her heart.

"Because you loved him," he told her.

She sagged against his chest. There was no argument for the truth.

## Chapter Eight

Jessica watched as Jacob did his homework at the usual corner table. He'd invited Sammy --Samantha, actually --over to work on a mutual assignment. She was a sweet-natured girl, and pretty, with honey-gold hair that was wrapped into a ponytail reaching almost to her waist. With her gray eyes and what would someday be a model's face, Jessie had no doubt Sammy would leave the men lying prostrate in her wake.

Sammy, on the other hand, was awed that Jacob's mom owned an ice cream shop. Every once in a while, Jessie caught the girl looking around in wonder. Then she would smile at something Jacob said, and in turn would say something in her young, light voice to make him laugh. It looked to Jessie like her son was the target of a girl's first crush.

Jacob's voice broke into her thoughts. "Mom, Mr. Settlemeir wanted me to bring this home. Said it has to do with the award ceremony they're doing right before Thanksgiving," he told her, handing her a sealed letter he'd pulled out of his study book.

She opened the letter and read it with a quick glance, and a real surge of pride bloomed in her. Jacob had been accepted as the recipient of the Fellowship Award. "Do you know anything about the ceremony?" she asked, attempting innocence.

"Naw. I don't care about some ceremony. I was more worried I might be in trouble again."

"You're safe there," she joked. "Actually, I think we'll go to this one, since it's your last year at Somerset Hills before you transfer."

"Do we have to?" He gave her his best hangdog look.

"Yes, I think we will. I think you might even enjoy it." She turned, heading into the office to drop the letter into her purse, and stubbed her toe on the plastic box she'd all but forgotten about. She had wondered when Mr. Coppers first brought it to her how Arthur could have had only one box of belongings. Most people would have multiple boxes of stuff, even if they were living sparsely, and yet, the lonely life he led was evident in the single box. Maybe she was judging Arthur too harshly. Maybe he'd been where he wanted to be, doing what he wanted to do. She would never know.

She bent and lifted the box off the floor to see what might be in it, when suddenly she wasn't so sure she was ready to face what she might find. She set it back down, acutely aware she really didn't want to know if he'd been lonely, or if he'd been happy. A few more days, she reasoned, wouldn't change anything.

Thanksgiving weekend was coming, and she planned to close the shop for the holiday weekend. She would go through the box then. With a final tap on the lid of the box, she walked back out to the front.

She did have a few good memories of Arthur from years ago. A kind, considerate man who had seemed totally besotted with her, and she had fallen for him. She shook her head. What she knew about him now contradicted so much of what she had believed, compounded by what she had learned about him from Brick over the last few weeks.

She'd made some hard breakthroughs over that time. She hadn't been an idiot, for one. It didn't diminish the pain of her new found enlightenment any less to know she had been played like a deck of cards to suit one man's whims. Arthur may not have planned his life with the best of intentions, and as she had acknowledged any failures she may have felt responsible for, he, at the very least, shared them with her.

No matter how much Arthur's actions had hurt, at the time, she was forever thankful for Jacob. She hadn't known it then, but as her life had unraveled, mangled by

divorce, Jacob had been her shining star, her reason to pull it all back together and keep going. She probably wouldn't have done it as quickly, or as efficiently, if she'd only had herself to worry about.

Instead, she had bought the house within a year. She had a stable job, and once Jacob started school, she was able to encourage his advanced intellect. When it became apparent Arthur really didn't want to have anything to do with them, she had moved on with her life. Now she understood he didn't do it because he hadn't cared. It was because in his mind, he couldn't have a family and his true love, gambling. The sickness he didn't even know he had, had won. In the end, he'd had no family and no life.

Jessica no longer hated Arthur. Now, she pitied him. He'd tried to be something he didn't want to be: a husband and a father. When they had met, it had felt so real, so all consuming. She had turned a blind eye to his faults, only allowing herself to become blinder as the years passed. That was where she knew she'd failed. If she had been honest with herself from the beginning, she probably wouldn't have married him at all, but she had wanted to believe love would conquer all.

Now, the weather had progressed into a cold fall, and the ice cream shop kept her more than busy. She stared out the glass window in the front, watching the thick flakes of snow falling. It had started early in the morning, and she had not had a single customer all day. She was stubborn, though, and refused to let the weather bring her down. Not during the first good snowfall, anyway. The fifth or sixth, maybe. She knew business would be slim during the cold months of winter, but she hoped it was a circumstance for which she had calculated correctly.

Somerset, on a good day, had less than twenty thousand residents. The whole downtown district was only eight blocks long, with a picturesque park and a historical town square. It wasn't a resort town like Taos or Silver City, but it was close enough to the slopes if anyone wanted to get there. They could even get to Las Cruces in a good hour or so.

She rubbed her hands together as two vehicles pulled up at her door, her optimism paying off. She walked behind the counter to wait as the first customer entered.

The man's smile was genuine and playful. "I've been told you have the best hot chocolate in town. That wouldn't be just a rumor, would it?"

"No," she answered, thrilled people were sending her business. "Definitely not a rumor. In fact, for the holidays, I have two specialty flavors, Peppermint and Holiday Spice."

There was a faint *Mmm* from him as he made up his mind. "That Holiday Spice sounds great. The largest you have, please. It's still a long drive to Albuquerque."

She started the tap. "So, driving through, then?"

"No, I've been here almost a week. Business," he offered, as Jessie handed him the steaming cup. He sighed in contentment as he took his first sip, licked his lips and closed his eyes in enjoyment. "That is good. Real good." He reached for his wallet to pay, and handed her the cash and a business card at the same time. "I'm in town pretty frequently," he explained as she took his money, her brow arched questioningly at the card right on top. "Maybe the next time I'm in town, we could get together?" His gray eyes twinkled at her stunned expression.

Finding her voice, she told him, "Thank you, but I'm afraid I can't."

A look of uncomfortable realization clouded his eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry. When I didn't see a ring, I just assumed you weren't married." He ended on a soft mumble, sounding as if he were trying to apologize for his assumption.

"That's all right. I'm not."

"So, you're serious with someone, then." That seemed to make him even more crestfallen.

"I'm very flattered, really. But I just don't date. And it would probably be worse with someone who was only passing through," she pointed out.

"Oh, I see what you mean. Well, I guess when I do move out here, I'll at least know where to find good hot chocolate." When she didn't rise to the bait, he finally

admitted defeat. "Can't blame a guy for trying to convince a pretty woman to go out, can you?"

She shook her head as he saluted her with his cup, then turned to leave.

After the door closed, Jacob piped up. "Holy cow, Mom. That guy was *totally* flirting with you." His eyes were round and huge.

She looked at him, trying to force an appalled look, but her lips were twitching. "Is that what that was? I didn't even recognize it. So your mom's a hot babe after all, I guess." She started laughing as Brick came in.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"Brick, you missed it! That guy was flirting with Mom. He wanted her go out with him."

He shot her a sly grin. "You're kidding. Really?"

Jacob and Sammy both nodded, while Jessie ignored Brick. "So what did she say?" he asked Jacob, as if she weren't in the room. She glared at all of them.

"She told him she didn't date. That's what she always says," Jacob told Brick, but his eyes dropped, and there was a sense of emptiness in his words.

"Well, we're going to fix that."

When Jessica looked directly at him, there was a glow in Brick's eyes, something hot and needy that melted her insides. She was beginning to believe Brick really didn't know how to be superficial, or do anything in half-measure. He never bothered to hide his thoughts from her.

Brick pointed outside. "Do you guys see that? There's at least four inches out there, and if we pack it up now we can be on the slopes in an hour."

"Brick, I can't just close up," she said with a hesitant catch in her voice. She eyed the snow on the ground with wistful longing.

"Why not?" He wiggled his brows at her, enticing her to do it. "Do you want to ask the owner if you can play hooky for the day?"

"Mom, can we? Please?" Jacob begged.

"I don't know." It really did sound like a lot of fun. She and Jacob hadn't touched their skis since last year, and here it was, almost Thanksgiving.

"Can Sammy come too?" Sammy's jaw dropped at Jacob's offer.

"I don't think I can afford--"

"My treat, for everyone." Brick's smile was warm and inviting. "What do you say?" he asked her in a soft, persuasive voice.

Considering Jacob's hopeful expression and Brick, who was making it way too hard to say no, she gave in. "All right. I'm outnumbered anyway."

Jacob let out a whoop and started cramming books into his bag.

"Jacob, let Sammy call home first and ask if she can go. Find out when they want her home, if they say yes." Jacob ran for the office, practically dragging his friend by the hand behind him.

Jessie turned to smile at Brick. "Thank you, Brick. This is very nice of you."

He moved to stand in front of her. "I want to do it. And I have an ulterior motive."

Her heart sped up as he worked his handsome face into a mischievous grin. "I want you to go out with *me*, not some guy who walks in off the street." The heat in his eyes produced a tremor down her spine again. His hand cupped her chin, and the tremor intensified.

"I do believe you have just accomplished your goal then." But her eyes were laughing at his tactics.

Jacob barreled out of the office. "Sammy can go! Her dad said she has to be home before ten. Is that okay?" He shot Jessica a hopeful look.

She nodded in agreement at his exuberance. "Jacob, please go tell Mr. Tipple we're taking the day off." He grabbed his bag and flew out the door, a stunned Sammy following after. "He likes to share a coffee before he goes home, and I don't want him to worry if he comes down here and finds us gone so early in the day," she explained to Brick.

After locking up the office and storage, she closed down the register and made sure the coffee pot was turned off. With a final check, she walked out the door, following behind Brick. She shifted her gaze from the keys in her hand to the door to lock it, and caught sight of a red light under the counter beside the cooler. "Brick, what's that?"

Brick moved to stand behind her, peering in to where she pointed. She could just make out a black square shape tucked under the rounded edge of the countertop. His eyes widened as the small red light blinked again.

His answer was coarse and succinct as he grabbed her by the shoulders, and threw her to the far side of the storefront. She landed with a jarring thud, his heavy weight covering hers on the snow covered grass. Less than two heartbeats later, the deafening sound of an explosion rocked the ground, followed by the whoosh of a fireball that blew the whole storefront into a shower of hot glass and metal.

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The first thing Jessie became conscious of was her face. Wet, and being pressed deeper into more wet. She heard the moan come from behind her, or maybe from over her? Her fingers clenched something hard and sharp in her palm. *Her keys.* Okay. Details were becoming sharper. She was cold now, too. Cold, wet and holding her keys. *What on earth happened?* She felt something heavy as it shifted, then the weight rolled from her. Suddenly she could breathe. *Smoke!*

"Mom! Mom! Are you Okay? Mom? Come on, Mom say something! Please!" It was Jacob's voice, but it sounded like he was crying. He never cried. She heard sirens in the distance, then there was silence.

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Jessie's eyes hurt. The lights were too bright, even from behind her closed eyelids. Why did Jacob have every light in the house on? Her eyes were dry and heavy, as if she'd had far too little sleep in too many days. When she tried to open them, her stomach made a heavy, rolling threat. She rested for a moment, then tried again. When she finally managed to open them, it was still bright, and there was too much white.

Her bedroom had yellow wallpaper with a very light stencil of wildflowers and butterflies. It had been one of her prouder achievements, but she couldn't see them anywhere. So, where was she?

She shifted herself, and saw Jacob's bowed head. He was sitting very close to her. Was she lying down? She tried to speak, but only a low dry croak emerged instead of words.

His head snapped up at the whisper of sound. "Mom! Oh, thank God." She heard him then, from a distance. "Nurse! Nurse! She's awake!" Then Jacob was holding her hand. "Mom, how are you feeling? Do you want anything? Are you thirsty? Can I get you anything? Does it hurt? Tell me if it hurts."

"Slow down there, fella," came another voice. "She's going to be fine, but give her a chance to catch her breath. She really took a hard hit." The woman in white reached for Jessie's wrist and held it between two firm, if chilly, fingers. She smiled a satisfied smile as she laid Jessie's arm back down and gave it a gentle pat. "Yes, she's coming along just fine." The nurse glanced up, checking the monitors.

Jacob looked sheepish in response, but continued to eye his mother with openhearted concern. "Mom, she's right. You're going to be just fine."

Jessie licked her dry lips. Immediately, she felt the rim of a cup against them as Jacob lifted it to her mouth to let her sip. After a few quick drops, she let her head fall back on the pillow, and tried again to speak. "What happened?"

"It was awful, Mom. The whole parlor is gone."

"What do you mean, gone? We were just there," she managed, but it was all foggy in her mind.

"Someone blew it up. Brick saved you. He threw you to the side where the snow was, but the concussion of the bomb was too close. It knocked both of you out."

"Brick? Where is he? Is he all right?" She had a vague memory of being pushed, but could remember nothing else.

"He's in surgery." When she looked at him sharply, he went on. "He's going to be fine. He had some bad cuts from the glass. It tore up his coat really bad, and a few of the shards went deep, I think." Jessie nodded, and he told her, "It's okay for now, Mom. The nurse told me before you just need to rest."

"All right," she agreed, her eyes drifting closed as if unable to hold their weight open any longer.

"I'll be here when you wake up. I promise." Jacob watched her for few worried moments, until he could see she was asleep again. He didn't want to tell her how much blood there'd been. That was what had scared him. It had been everywhere by the time he and Mr. Tipple had charged down to them, minutes before the emergency crews. Sammy had stayed and helped as much as she could, but being there for him was really the most she could do. Even numb and so terrified he felt sick, Jacob was glad he hadn't been alone. Sammy had left when her father picked her up, but swore she would be back to check up on them and to see if he needed anything for his mom.

Going to Mr. Tipple's Bakery had been his saving grace. Jacob didn't believe in guardian angels, but when he got a minute to think about it, he was seriously going to reconsider. He and Sammy had been far enough away to escape injury, but they had felt the blast all the way down to their shoes. Mr. Tipple called the police and the fire department as soon as he'd gotten himself off the floor and checked on the kids. He wouldn't let either Jacob or Sammy out of his door until he could go with them himself, and he knew help was on the way.

Jacob had never been so scared in his life. He had seen the explosion, had watched in awe and horror as fire had rolled like a billowing red and orange cloud from the front of the parlor, scattering glass in all directions. Brick's car had not survived the

blast. The heat melted the tires and shattered the windshield. It had been several long, panicked moments before Jacob could even see Brick's back through the thick smoke.

With Mr. Tipple and Sammy in tow, he had raced to find his mother and Brick. He'd found Brick; his back sliced open and bleeding from shards of glass and metal. Two larger shards of glass protruded from the wounds on Brick's back, and the sight made Jacob's stomach lurch, but he ignored it in his panic, searching for his mother. Brick rolled slightly, and Jacob spotted his mother on the wet ground beneath Brick's larger shape. He'd run to them, calling her name. When she'd opened her eyes, briefly, a wave of relief had washed over him. At least they were both alive. He realized later that Brick had thrown himself over Jessica to protect her, but at the time, his only concern had been for his mother.

When the emergency vehicles arrived, Jacob and Samantha were allowed to ride in the ambulance. When the paramedics asked if he wanted to ride with his mom or his dad, Jacob didn't even blink. He told them to take Brick first, but he would ride with his mom. He knew Brick would understand.

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Jessica awoke later and heard breathing, a soft snoring, and could see through the window that it was now dark. She focused on the stark paleness of the hospital room as she tried to remember.

They were supposed to be skiing. They were going to hit the slopes, probably at Silver City, but for some reason she was here, flat on her back. She took a deep breath and felt a stabbing pain across her upper body. She tried to move her hand, but it moved with tortured slowness, and she realized it was attached to a menagerie of tubes and wires. Her eyes followed the wires up to the blinking monitors. Her hand eventually reached her stomach, and with fingers that felt unattached, moved around the sheets. Then she felt the swath of bandages across her ribs. She took another deep breath. Yes, that still hurt.

She remembered seeing Jacob. He had been fuzzy, but she remembered speaking to him. Something about the parlor, and an explosion. *An explosion!* She shuddered. She could remember fragments now, and heat. There had been the sound of glass shattering, flying everywhere, and the acrid smell of smoke. Her eyes drifted across the room. She was in a hospital room; she could make that out now. Where was Jacob?

"Jacob?" she said, her voice a hoarse croak from smoke inhalation and the sedatives they had given her earlier in the day. There was a rustling sound, and then he stood at her bedside.

"Are you okay, Mom? Do you need anything?" He pushed the hair away from her face.

"I didn't wake you, did I?" she asked with a mother's concern.

"Naw. I was listening to a CD."

Jessica managed a weak smile at the fib. "What time is it?"

"Late, I guess. Around two or three in the morning. Why?"

"How long have I been asleep?" she asked him.

"Pretty much all day. I checked on Brick. He may need a few extra days in the hospital, but I think if you behave yourself, they'll let you go home day after tomorrow." His wisecrack brought another smile to her lips.

"Good. I think I'll be all right until morning, then. You'd better get some sleep."

"I will. And Mom?"

"Yeah, honey?"

His voice was low, a whisper in the silence of the hospital. "I've changed my mind about not needing a dad. Is that okay?"

"I think we can do something about it. Why don't we talk about it tomorrow?" She was starting to feel groggy again.

"Sure. I love you." He kissed her cheek as she started to drift.

"I love you too."

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"Good morning, Ms. Harden. How are you feeling today?" the nurse asked as she entered her room with her breakfast tray.

"Much better. Thank you, Lucy." Lucy had been a regular nurse at the doctor's office where Jessica had worked, so it was a warm surprise to see her that morning. When she'd awakened, Jessica had moved her bed upright to see better. As the smell of the food reached her, she was quite surprised at how loudly her stomach complained that she'd ignored an important aspect of her daily life.

Sammy and her dad had taken Jacob home to pick up a few things while Jessie was at the hospital. They had talked a little more that morning. Jacob had also checked on Brick again and reported that he was doing better as well.

"That sure is a fine-looking man who saved your can yesterday," Lucy said while she checked Jessie's pulse.

"I know. He knew that thing under the counter was a bomb. I would still be standing there staring at it with a dumb look if it hadn't been for him." Talking about it helped to put it into perspective, but she was still confused. Why would someone put a bomb in her shop? The shiver returned.

"A bomb! Are you serious?" Lucy's jaw dropped. "All the admittance report said was that it was a structural explosion."

"I'm pretty sure of it. We were on our way to play hooky and go skiing. There was absolutely nothing different about yesterday that would have caused the whole place to go like that. I just had everything inspected before we opened."

Lucy let out a low whistle.

"I probably shouldn't say anything until I can tell the police what's going on. Could you keep that to yourself, please?"

Lucy nodded emphatically. "You have my word. I won't say beans." And Jessie knew she wouldn't.

She didn't have to worry about it for long, because the police were her next visitors. The two officers asked her about everything she could possibly remember.

When they questioned her about customers, she explained about the one man who'd said he was been passing through. She gave them as much of a description as she could, but her memory was still fuzzy and filled with gaps.

"Well, if you think of anything else," the police officer told her, handing her a card, "Could you give us a call?"

Jessie assured them that she would. She was finishing her breakfast when Jacob came bounding in with an overnight bag stuffed to the gills, followed by Sammy and her dad.

"I thought you might like to meet my dad, Ms. Harden," Sammy said cheerfully.

When Jessica reddened and pulled the sheets up to her chin, he chuckled in understanding. "I tried to convince her to wait until you got home, but you know kids."

Jessie grinned in agreement and relaxed a little as she tucked the sheets around her body. "I do appreciate everything you and your daughter have done. Especially the way you've helped Jacob," she offered. She pushed the meal table away and Sammy moved it against the wall. "Thank you," she told Sammy. "You've got a good kid there, Mr. Carson." Sammy smiled at the praise.

"I like to think so, but I think the medals will go to your friend Mr. Donnelly, and to your own son. It seems everyone knows Donnelly saved your life, and Jacob has hardly left your side."

Jacob blushed a little at the accolade. Pride for her son filled Jessie again. "I know he did what came naturally. He has a good head on his shoulders, and I can vouch for Mr. Donnelly. You could say he was trained to deal with stressful situations." She hadn't forgotten that part, any detail of it.

"Ex-military?" At her nod, he added, "Me too. Navy."

Lucy came bustling in with a frown on her face. "Sorry to break this up, but I have been asked --no, that is way too polite," she said with a firm shake of her head. "Let's just say I have been ordered to direct Ms. Harden to Mr. Donnelly's room. I swear, he's stubborn. If he can't reach the mountain, he wants to have the mountain wheeled to him." Her hands were on her hips as an orderly brought in a wheelchair.

Lucy took charge of the chair, and sent the orderly out again before turning to Jessica. "Do you feel up to this, Jessica?" she asked quietly. Their years of working together at the doctor's office gave Lucy a chance to be more personal. "He'll roar like a bear, but if you can't do it, then he can just be unhappy."

"I take it you're used to his kind?" Jessie replied, well aware of Brick's controlling and commanding temperament.

"I've had my share," Lucy confirmed, her knowing grin matching Jessie's.

"Is it good for her to be moving yet?" Jacob asked while Lucy lined up the chair at Jessie's nod.

"She'll have some discomfort, but it's all right for her to move. Mr. Donnelly said he would walk down here himself if I didn't bring her. And there is no way he should move at all for at least two more days," Lucy huffed, sounding annoyed at Brick's demands.

"My mom wishes you the best." Sammy leaned in and gave Jessie a quick, light hug before she and her father made their exit.

"I'm going to walk out with them for a minute," Jacob said, and followed them out the door.

Jessie's body was stiff; her movements slow as she rose from the bed. "It'll get easier in a day or so. You won't feel like this for long," Lucy assured her. "You took a hard fall when you landed. You're lucky you only bruised your ribs."

Suddenly remembering she wore only a hospital gown, Jessie dug through the bag Jacob had left on her bed, and was grateful to find he'd packed her bathrobe. With Lucy's help she was able to wrap it around herself, then settle into the chair carefully. She nodded, slightly breathless from the exertion, but immediately felt better as they headed for Brick's room. She was as anxious as he was to see for herself that he was all right.

## Chapter Nine

Brick's last conscious thought before the explosion, as he caught Jessica's questioning look reflected in the glass of the shop, had been that the tiny red light blinking under the counter like a warning beacon for planes atop a tower was a bomb. Instinct had told him to get out of there, but since there was nowhere to go, he had just pushed. He remembered the searing heat as it exploded across his body. The impact had knocked the wind out of him, and the sound of the bomb had deafened him temporarily and made his ears ring. They were still ringing, giving him a hell of a headache.

He was sitting up in a hospital bed with close to eighty errant stitches in his back and another twenty on his shoulder. He remembered Jacob being there as the wail of sirens grew. He'd felt tender touches on his skin, a faint young voice asking if he could hear. He realized later it had been the girl in the shop with Jacob, not some angel finally calling for his soul. Beyond that, the details blurred. Now he was wide-awake and surly, because he couldn't see Jessie. He needed to know she was all right. He needed to see her, and damn it, he wanted to see her now!

When he'd threatened to march down the hall in his nothings to her room to see her for himself, the staff hadn't believed him. He'd nearly gotten completely out of bed, but at least now they understood he meant business. Lucy, the floor nurse, had said it would take a few minutes, but she would bring Jessie to him. Now he waited with a pounding heart and a new feeling in his body.



Never in his life had he been so close to being blown away. The bomb had been intentional, and he wasn't conceited enough to think it had been meant for him. Someone wanted Jessica dead. His mind had been clicking ever since he'd awakened. In all the investigating he'd done on Arthur, he'd had no idea there was someone else out there searching in silence. It chilled him to the bone. He regretted now that his interest in finding the money had lessened since he'd decided to pass on it for the opportunity to get to know his tempting redhead better.

The minute he could call his office, he was going to order a background search that would dig up Arthur Harden's past with a vengeance. He would see to it every last dust mote was uncovered. This had gone beyond the money. Now it involved Jessica and Jacob.

"How does my hair look?" he heard Jessica ask as she neared his door.

"Honestly? A little fried on one side, but a good hair cut will fix it." He smiled, knowing the floor nurse was trying to keep her calm. Brick couldn't have cared less about her hair. She was alive, and he realized she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen when she was pushed through the door, fried hair and all.

"Can you stand?" he asked her. When she nodded in answer, he made room for her on the bed. "Then get your rump up here." His command was rough but playful as he patted the bed next to him. Lucy locked the wheels of the chair, and helped Jessie from the chair to the bedside. Brick shot Lucy a daggered stare, and the look she gave him in return told him to behave himself.

"I'll be back in fifteen," Lucy warned them.

"Make it thirty, or so help me, I will walk down that hallway," he growled belligerently.

"It's against policy."

Brick started to get out of bed, and Lucy threw up her hands. "Fine. Thirty minutes." Lucy gave him an exasperated glare, and with that, left them alone. Poor Lucy had already had to deal with his attitude twice that morning, and Brick knew he

had worn her down, but right now he had Jessie next to him, and she was the only thing that mattered.

Brick felt her warmth and the brush of her hair against his skin as she leaned forward to kiss him. Unfortunately, the kiss ended too soon when lines of pain tightened her features and she gingerly sat back up. He caressed her cheek, willing the pain away for her.

"Sorry I can't do that for longer. I would really like to," she admitted with a shy glance. His entire body grew warm and heated when she pressed her cheek into his palm.

"I understand. I want to hold you so badly, but my arm is immobile." She gasped as she looked up and down his arm, searching for damage. "They shot it full of some nerve agent and now it won't move, probably for another four hours or so. I got a pretty deep slice in my shoulder, and they were afraid there would be damage if it twitched during surgery, so they put it to sleep."

"Brick! That's awful!" Her hand trailed up and down his arm until she was convinced there was no other damage. He reveled in her attentions, regretting he couldn't feel her touch.

After investigating his arm thoroughly, she began to stroke his hair. It wasn't as short as it had been on his arrival, and she ran her fingers through the caramel-colored length. His eyes closed at the sensual caress.

"That feels wonderful, though," he murmured, his voice husky with reawakened desire. He luxuriated in the feel of her touch for a few minutes before he asked, "How's Jacob? I haven't seen him much this morning."

"He walked Sammy and her dad out. They were all with me when you made your imperial demand," she said, laughing at him.

"He's one hell of a kid. I don't know who I was more proud of; him for not losing his head, or his girlfriend for staying by his side."

She lifted an eyebrow. "His girlfriend? You think so?" From her expression, he realized that thought hadn't occurred to her yet.

His chuckle rumbled through his chest. "If not, it's only a matter of time. He'll realize she's a good find, too, when he thinks about how well she handled herself."

"Oh, my. He's growing up so fast." She shook her head sadly. "He's changing, and I'm not handling it very well. I noticed it on his birthday. In a couple more years he'll be taller than me, too. Do you know he needs new shoes? Again?"

He captured her roaming hand in his good one, bringing it to his smiling lips. A new-found contentment filled him. "Don't worry so much. It'll be a few years yet before he asks to borrow the car."

She sighed. "I know." But he could see the ache in her eyes.

"Jessie, there are a few things we need to talk about." His voice lowered, his tone no longer as relaxed. He shifted on the bed, to ease the soreness in his lower extremities. The damage to his legs had been light, but he had taken a hard, full-impact fall, and he was beginning to feel it.

She dropped her hand to the sheet, enfolding his numb hand into her own. "Can you feel that?" There was curiosity in her voice.

"I can feel the motion and the warmth, but that's about it. Don't change the subject."

"All right. I'll behave." But she bit her lip anyway.

He fought the urge to bite her lip also. "We need to find out who set you up like that. Who wants you dead."

Her eyes flew to meet his. "Dead? I doubt that--"

He cut her off with a stony stare. "There is some reason, somewhere. You just survived a small-plastics explosion in a confined space. If we'd been inside, we would have left there in little plastic bags. Not even large ones --little ones." He raised his hand, his thumb and finger less than an inch apart to emphasize his point. At the thought, he felt a hard slam in his chest. He took a deep breath, trying to dislodge the uncomfortable weight.

She swallowed once, slowly. In a subdued tone, she admitted, "I know. It's just hard to think of it like that. Jacob...me...Sammy." Her eyes lifted to meet his. "You. It was so close, but why? I just don't understand."

"I don't either, but I intend to find out. As soon as I can, I'm going to set a squad down here. We'll do a ripple and see what falls out."

"Ripple? What's that?"

"It's where you start at a centralized point for your investigation and slowly move out in ringed increments. It's especially helpful if something happens to make a wave in the ripple, but that's work, and I think I am going to be too personally involved with the target to be able to do this one. Plus, I'm going to need to be still for almost a week. The doctor said the nerve damage won't be permanent, but I have to be careful for a while, just the same."

"What are you going to do? You can't stay at the hotel like that." Her eyes flashed with immediate concern for his condition. Her gaze searched his arm again for anything telling.

"I don't know yet. I was thinking about asking my sisters down. I can't ask just one. They're like Lays' chips." He grimaced. "Anyway, if I do that, I'm in for a week of coddled, temperamental meddling, and I just don't know if I'm up to it." He leaned his head back on his pillow with a groan of only half-playful despair.

"Sounds so rough." But she was laughing again.

His brow rose at her laughter. "Don't you laugh at me. You haven't met them. They're worse than any drill sergeant I ever had." And the only real soft spot he had had in his life, until now.

"Can Brick stay with us?" Jessie turned to see Jacob pop through the doorway, looking a little guilty for interrupting them. "Sorry. I wasn't trying to listen in, but I heard what he said, and he had told me some of it earlier. Can he? Thanksgiving break is coming. I could get my assignments and stay with him myself to drive him nuts." His eyes glowed with the very idea.

"I don't know Jacob. I don't how much is going to be involved," she started. "And I don't know if you missing your classes is such a good idea."

"We have the spare room. And I've already got homework to make up," he reminded her.

"I know how many rooms we have, Jacob."

But Jacob ignored her, smiling broadly at Brick. "You'd like it. Mom won't be working for a while anyway."

Jessie moaned, having forgotten that without the shop, there was no mortgage payment. "Oh God. You're right. What am I going to do about money?"

"The store was insured, wasn't it?" Brick asked.

"Of course," she answered, but he felt her tremble a little.

"Well, leave the rest to me. If you let me stay, I'll help you out. Call it a trade. I'll pay for the room." He also knew it gave him a chance to be closer to her. That idea was just too enticing.

"I couldn't let--"

"Yes, you could," he said, and grinned.

"Would you quit that! Interrupting people is rude." She glared at him.

"But it's so much fun to watch you get all hot and bothered over it," he teased her. He turned his attention to his unknowing accomplice. "Jacob, would you mind checking with Dr. Hughes to see about discharge care? Might as well know what we're up against." He shifted a little higher on the bed, his sleeping arm lying useless on top of the sheet. He wondered how long she had been holding it, or if she had ever stopped. He really wished he could feel her touch.

Jessica watched her son take off for the nurse's station. "You did that on purpose."

"Guilty as charged. I didn't want an audience for this." He cupped the back of her neck with his good hand and drew her mouth down to his, tasting her with finesse, with every flick of his tongue.

Her hands formed against his chest, and she leaned into him as he drew her closer. It felt so wonderful to feel her beneath his palm, her flesh warm beneath his fingertips.

She sat up with a startled squeak, her eyes snapping wide. "Cripes, you're completely naked!" She blushed a deep, rose-red when her glance dropped lower than the edge of the bed sheet, and the apparent proof of her statement hidden beneath it.

"Do you know how cute you are when you blush?" She shook her head in mortification. He lifted her chin with a finger, drawing her gaze to his. "Do you still think this is only lust?" he asked her softly. His eyes searched hers for immeasurable heartbeats. "When I told you I felt something for you, it probably was just lust. But when that bomb exploded yesterday, I almost lost you, the both of you. That bothers me more than I had ever thought possible. And the thought that someone out there wants to hurt you makes me want to find them just so I could use some of my old tricks on them." She shuddered as his words hit home. "I know it bothers you to know what I can do, what I'm capable of, but that was before. I haven't been that man in years."

"I know, but I can't let myself fall in love again. All I would be doing is setting myself up for another fall." Her words were a whisper of her pain. "I couldn't stand it if something happened to you, either," she offered on a broken sigh.

"I don't think you're giving yourself much credit, Jessie." When he spotted Jacob coming into the room, he said in a clear voice, "I guess I'm moving in, Jacob. Your mom says it's fine with her."

Her eyes instantly narrowed as she glared at him for lying. But by the sound of Jacob's quiet cheer behind her, he knew she wouldn't say anything to negate his statement.

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"What do you mean they didn't die?" yelled the voice on the phone.

"Look, it's just a woman and her kid. They probably don't know anything about it," Tony said.

"It doesn't matter if they do or don't. If Arthur left them anything, and I mean anything, it could lead back to us," the voice snarled in an impatient way. "I wish you hadn't shown your face when you set the place to go up."

"It was cold as a witch's butt out there! It seemed like a good way to set it up anyway. All I had to do was secure one base while her back was turned. It was too easy."

"That's no excuse. Sloppy work, Tony."

"Don't give me that. You know exactly how good I am. Arthur looked like a damn suicide, and no one blinked an eye." He had been incredibly easy, actually. Poor schmuck never saw it coming.

"Tony, fix this. I don't want another screw up. Do you understand me? Either they both wind up dead, or you find me the money. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'll take care of it. Just your regular fix-it man, right? What about her new boyfriend?"

There was a chilling silence on the other end for a few moments. "Kill him."

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Jessie was ready to get home. Three days in the hospital had been more than long enough for her. Lucy had been right about the stiffness, but she was starting to move normally again, albeit a little slowly.

After being tricked into allowing Brick to stay with them, she didn't feel quite so bad about leaving him there alone. It would serve him right to have to stew in his white room for another whole day.

"I hope you like what Samantha and I did with the house, Mom," Jacob said, breaking into her thoughts.

*So it's Samantha now?* She cast a quick look at her son. *Was he getting taller?* "I'm sure whatever the two of you did will be fine."

"Her mom sent over some food. It's in the freezer." He fiddled with his seat belt.

"That's really nice of them. Did you tell them thank you?" Her hand flexed on the steering wheel as she made the turn onto their street.

"Of course. Even the kids at school want to help out. They set up a donation box at all three schools to help us rebuild the parlor."

Her head snapped back around. "Oh, honey. That's so sweet, but they didn't have to do that. The store was insured."

"I know. I think they just want to help."

Jessie smiled at the thought. *One of the nice things about living in a small town*, she mused.

Her little house had never looked so inviting as it did the moment they parked in the drive. Covered in snow, with icicles hanging from the eaves, it looked like a gingerbread house. It felt weird somehow, coming home now. Things had changed. She was staring off into space when Jacob's voice brought her back.

"Mom?"

She gave her head a little shake. "Sorry, I guess we should go in."

"Um, no. There's something else." She turned in her seat to see his face, watching as he tried to put his thoughts into words. "Do you remember when you woke up that first night, and I said something about changing my mind about not needing a father?"

She had a vague memory of what had been said that night, and nodded her head for him to go on. "I want you to know it doesn't mean I want to be with you any less, but I did change my mind." His gaze dropped to the tips of his shoes.

She rested a hand on his shoulder. "I think I know where you're going with this Jacob. Before you start making plans, I want you to understand. Like I said before, relationships take time and trust." When his eyes became hopeless, she reached for his chin. "I care for Brick too, but I don't know what's going to happen. He lives in Boston and we live here." Her admission caught her by surprise. When had she started to care?



Did she like him enough to care? That didn't take much thought. He'd saved her life. There was a lot there to like, and to respect. She moved to stroke Jacob's hair, waiting to see if he would provide another argument.

Instead he did something completely unexpected. With his seatbelt undone, he scooted across the seat and enveloped her in a huge hug. "Mom, I was so scared. If Brick hadn't pushed you--"

"Shh. I know." They sat like that for a long time before they finally left the car and went inside the house.

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Jessie and Jacob went back to visit Brick that afternoon at the hospital. He didn't try to kiss her again, even though it was something he really wanted to do. Now wasn't the right time. There were some things he needed to discuss with her, and that was his first priority.

He explained to Jessie that the police had been in to talk to him that morning. They had asked some personal questions about his involvement with Jessie and his own military knowledge, but they had been as brief as possible.

That bothered him, a lot. There had been an attack on a place of business, endangering a woman and her son, and the most they could offer was 'We'll look into it, Donnelly.' He understood cops and detectives, but he didn't have to like their tactics. After they left, he used his cell phone to call his own people and go over in detail what he wanted done. He knew Stan and Loco would be down by afternoon, and he warned them to keep a low profile. He had a feeling the attack on Jessie was just a beginning.

"So when do you get out?" Jacob asked.

"Tomorrow morning, and once again, I think they'll be happy to see me leave." He smiled a wicked grin at Jessie. His arm was now wrapped in a sling, and lay across his bare chest.

"I doubt that. You only made, what, two threats if you didn't get your own way?" she teased him as she seated herself next to him on the bed. His hand inched over to cover hers. He needed the contact, needed to know she was all right.

"So, what are you going to do now?" Brick asked her, trying to ignore how good her skin felt in his palm.

"Now that the agents have gone over the place, I'm meeting with the insurance adjuster tomorrow. I'm glad for one thing." When he studied her, she went on. "The back office and storage were closed up tight. Just that much less to have to repair. And all my receipts are still in their file."

"That is good news. There's something I need to tell you. Jacob can you shut the door, please?" He held her hand a little tighter as the boy complied. "I want you to know I've called in reinforcements. I don't feel comfortable with the level of police attention on this. Considering what happened, they're too laid back to suit me. When Stan and Loco get here, I'll tell you, but I don't want you to meet them. It's for your own safety. Both of you will have a tail, and I don't want you to change a single moment of your day because of it."

She blinked once, her hand trembling within his. "Brick, I asked you in the beginning if we were in danger because of your money. You swore we wouldn't be. What's going on?"

"I don't think this has to do with the fifty thousand any longer. I think this is someone Arthur knew who thinks you are a loose cannon."

"What's that supposed to mean? I told you, I haven't seen or talked to Arthur in years."

"I know that, but whoever blew up your place doesn't, and now I'm not willing to risk either of you. Do I make myself clear? It isn't as hard as it sounds. Just be aware of where you are, who you're with, and if anything even looks a little suspicious, call me."

"Wow," came Jacob's whispered voice.

He stilled Jacob with a warning glare. "This isn't a game. I mean what I say. You need to look out for each other, as well. I won't be much help, housebound for the next few days, but the minute I can, I'll be out there, too." Sooner, if he had anything to say about it.

"And Jessica, if there's anything at the parlor you need, pick it up when you go with the adjuster. You'll have someone with you, but I don't think it's a good idea to go back. Not any time soon. I intend to keep you both safe." His tone left no room for argument.

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Jacob was a hero at school. Everyone wanted to talk to him about what had happened, and how he'd made it out in one piece. The girls were concerned for his mom, but the guys wanted to know what it looked like, especially the part about the fireball blowing out the front of the store.

Even Mr. Settlemeir had listened with avid curiosity as Jacob regaled the story when he'd gone to see his teacher for his homework. He was going to take two extra days off for the Thanksgiving break to stay home with Brick.

"So that's everything?" Jacob asked.

"That should about cover it. I'm not giving out anything for the holiday break, so this can be turned in on Monday, when you come back."

"No problem. An essay isn't anything. And I'll make sure I read the chapters for Monday's surprise quiz."

"What quiz?" Mr. Settlemeir asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Exactly. It's a surprise."

Mr. Settlemeir's shoulders shook with laughter. "You're too smart for your own good, Jacob. By the way, how's your mom doing?"

"Much better. She's doing a lot to try to get the insurance to pay quickly so we can rebuild. She wants to see it open again by summer, maybe even spring."

“Really? Well, tell her I wish her luck”

“I will. Thanks again, Mr. Settlemeir.”

“No problem,” he said as he watched Jacob leave.

## Chapter Ten

Jessica was thrilled for Jacob. He was getting an honorable mention by the faculty and the school. She wouldn't be surprised if they made some comment about his bravery at the parlor on the day of the explosion, either. Even the paper had done a short article, honoring him and his courage.

It had been just a little more than a week since it had happened. Her ribs still felt tender, but she could move like a normal person again. About Brick...well...she was a little peeved with him.

He had come home with them earlier that day, but he had downplayed his injuries from the beginning. The reason the doctors had been concerned about nerve damage wasn't because of a simple skin slice, but because the glass had exploded directly behind him, and numerous shards had been imbedded his shoulder and back. When he had rolled off of her, he had pushed them even deeper, so he had spent hours under the scalpel to remove shards from nearly microscopic, to as large as three inches in length. It was surmised that the broad cut across his back was from a metal window support as it whipped from the front of the building with enough force to have impaled him had the angles been different. She'd been far luckier than he. She'd had his expertise to help her get out of the way; he'd been on his own, trying to save her.

He was sleeping in the spare room, practically unconscious, thanks to the painkillers and medication Dr. Hughes had prescribed. Otherwise, there was a good

possibility she'd have told him exactly what she thought of his macho attitude in trying to keep the true extent of his injuries from her.

"Jacob, are you almost ready?" she called.

"Just about. Are you sure we need to go to this?" he asked, a forlorn sound weaving into her room from his.

"Yes. I'll tell you why, but not what's so important. How's that?" she said, joining him in his room. It was a typical thirteen-year old boy's room. A computer sat on a desk against one wall, and the bed was along the opposite wall, with a nightstand beside it. His sneakers were carelessly thrown on the floor. As he sat to pull on his socks, she said, "The school has something for you. And I want to personally see you receive it. Is that okay with you?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I guess so." He reached for his sneakers, and she remembered it wouldn't be long before she needed to buy him new ones again.

"Have you talked to Sammy --sorry, Samantha lately?"

"Yeah, she's going to her grandparents for Thanksgiving, but she said she would call as soon as they got home." He tugged his sweater down.

He was a handsome young man in his black jeans and a comfy knit sweater. "You look wonderful, and I'm not just saying that."

He gave her a dismissive groan. "Will Brick be okay while we're gone?" Jacob asked. He grabbed his heavy jacket off the chair as he moved to leave his room.

"Sound asleep, but he knows where we are tonight. Don't worry, he'll be fine." He followed her to the door where she grabbed her coat and closed the door firmly behind them.

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The auditorium was packed for the festivities. The choir started with the National Anthem, and then led into a few Christmas carols. "Just a taste for the

Christmas concert,” the director said amid loud applause. Then Mrs. Jang, the principal, rose to the podium to begin the evening’s announcements.

She addressed and congratulated several students on their extreme improvements or on their advancement to regional or state finals in different categories. When she began speaking about the Fellowship Award, Jessica sat up a little straighter.

“It goes without saying the reason for this award is quite literally in the name,” Mrs. Jang told the attending parents and student body. “The individual who has earned this has excelled above and beyond the expectations of the school system and his peers. He has worked hard on all aspects of his academic goals, and has even on occasion surpassed the skills of the faculty.” A few twitters followed this remark from the audience. “In order to receive this award, it is a requirement the recipient be recommended by at least one teacher and any portion of the student body, with valid reasons for the recommendation.” She paused, building the momentum for her final few words. “This student has been an asset to the school system, to the students of this school, to those in his class, to others in need of help, and most recently, to his mother. Please, would Jacob Michael Harden come to the stage?”

It took a gentle nudge from his mother before it registered that had been his name he had heard. With a blank, uncomprehending look, he approached the stage as the applause grew and thundered around him. When he reached Mrs. Jang’s side on the stage, she handed him a beautiful wooden plaque with his name engraved on it in gold lettering.

“Would you like to say anything, Jacob?”

It took a minute before he could nod his head, and with a step that faltered only once, he made his way to the microphone on the podium. As he stood there, the applause died away into silence.

He found his mom in the group before him, and she smiled proudly. “I want to thank you, anyone who thought I deserved this. Thank you.” And before his eyes, everyone stood and gave him a round of applause.

Half an hour later, as they made their way to the exits, some classmates who had supported the recommendation and were in awe of the plaque sidetracked Jacob, stopped him to talk about it. Everyone wanted to see it.

Jessica watched with pride, her heart ready to burst for him. She felt the nudge of a body next to her, and turned to find Marc Settlemeir.

"I can tell you're proud of him, Jessica. I don't even have to ask."

"Extremely. Thank you for doing the recommendation."

"I don't get all the credit. I wasn't the only one who thought he deserved it."

"He was taken completely by surprise. I had to practically give it away to make him come," she said with a chuckle. Jacob was laughing with friends in the bower of the school banners. She felt Marc's cool fingers wrap around her arm as he motioned her into a corner.

When they were a few feet away from the crowds, he asked her, "Have you thought about what I asked you? I'd still like to take you out."

"I appreciate the offer, but I just don't want any complications, especially after the fire at the parlor." She had taken Brick's advice to play down the explosion. "I have a lot of details to get straightened out."

The cool fingers on her arm tightened marginally. She wasn't sure why, exactly, but suddenly she didn't want his hand on her. "I understand you may be seeing someone already. If that's it, just tell me."

Her mouth dropped open. "That's rather presumptuous, Marc. I'm not seeing anyone. If it bothers you, a friend of mine was there the day of the fire and he was injured. I have been helping him, but there is not a relationship there."

"I'm sorry. That was out of line." He dropped his hand. Rubbing his eyes briefly, he continued. "I guess when I found out about the fire and how close you had been to being seriously hurt; I realized how much you mean to me."

"But you don't even know me," she answered, stunned. What on earth was he talking about?



"Yes I do. I see the mirror image of you everyday." His smile was sincere and helped to melt away some of her indignation. "I know Jacob wouldn't be the boy he is if it weren't for you."

"Thank you, Marc. But I don't think..."

"Mom, are you ready?" Her head snapped back toward the hallway, thankful at least Jacob knew where she was. For once, she was glad for the interruption.

"I better go." She started to turn, but Marc grabbed her arm again. His touch was not as gentle. She met his eyes with hers, wide and slightly apprehensive.

"Just please think about it, Jessica." He paused, and on a desperate breath leaned in and said next to her ear, "I think I'm falling for you." She had no chance to respond, his exit was so sudden.

She was silent on the return home.

"I'm going to go show Brick," Jacob said excitedly, disappearing into the house. She closed the door behind her as he bounded away.

"Hang up your jacket," she called after him, but she knew he hadn't heard. She could hear Jacob from down the hall, reciting the whole speech, and his acceptance, in a fast flood of words. She dropped her purse off in her room and made her way to join them at her own pace.

When they had first settled Brick into the room, he had been short tempered and non-vocal from pain, probably for Jacob's sake. She, on the other hand, could barely keep herself from trembling as she touched him and aided his move.

Discovering during a kiss in the hospital that Brick had been naked had really done something to her blood pressure. It had occurred to her with a phenomenal sense of awareness she wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed with him, if she had been in any capable shape. To be held by him, kissed by him and to find out whatever wonderful discoveries fortune had set at her doorstep. Him merely holding her hand sent her pulse rate up, and had her mouth salivating like a starving woman.

Maybe she was starving, but after being propositioned again by Marc, she knew it was becoming more than just a physical craving, the want to cure an itch, and it was terrifying.

When Marc pulled her aside and asked again to see her, she'd felt uncomfortable. She knew she wouldn't say yes. His admission of his feelings was even more difficult to digest. How could a man claim to have feelings for her when he didn't know her?

Brick knew her, sometimes better than she knew herself. Living under the same roof, he was going to get to know her a lot better, whether she was ready for it or not. She watched from the doorway as Jacob sat on the edge of the bed, regaling the moment he made his thank you to the crowd.

"And everyone applauded, huh?" Brick prodded him.

"Yeah. A standing ovation. It was wild." Jacob was still glowing with pleasure.

Brick glanced up to find an angel standing in his doorway, and just like that, he couldn't breathe. Good Lord, she had the most incredible legs under the sway of the dress she was wearing. His body was already starting to show appreciation. He reached for the book he had been reading, lifted it from his chest to double check the page, and then surreptitiously laid it over the obvious statement of his attraction. He was beginning to wonder if he'd made a huge mistake by staying there after all. He had no idea how long he'd be able to keep his hands off of her after tasting the sweet softness of her lips.

"Jacob, why don't you give me a minute with your mom?" Jacob didn't notice the slight hoarse catch in his voice. Brick cleared his throat. He couldn't have stopped the words; they were so necessary to him at the moment, just like she was.

"Sure, I'm going to go find the perfect place for this." In a hop and a rush, he was past his mother and out the door.

"Do you think he would be concerned if the door was closed?" Brick asked Jessie. She didn't say anything, but she nudged the door, leaving it open only a crack. "Perfect," came his response, as she strolled with purpose to his bedside.

“Wait, let me just look. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in heels.” She flushed, but let him stare as long as he wanted. He held out his hand. “I don’t think I can wait another minute.” He wrapped his hand around hers and pulled her down to the bed, cradling her into his chest.

“Brick, I--”

He laid a finger across her lips. “In a minute. I have something very important I have to do.” And holding her face in his hand, he settled his lips down to hers. It was a gentle kiss as his lips brushed over hers in a deliberate motion, sipping at her warmth and softness, bringing lightening to strike his nerves and melt her into him. She stroked his chest, running tender hands over his skin. Her fingernails grazed his neck, forcing a growl of pleasure from deep within him. His heart thumped hard against his ribs as her softness molded against him. It was the closest to heaven he had ever experienced.

Jessie took a breath as he started to lift his head, but instead of giving him his freedom, she wrapped her arms around his neck, keeping him right where he was. Pale eyes glowed as he watched emotions race across her lovely features. She touched his mouth with her tongue, reenacting the torture he had just delivered. As she stretched over him, she brushed her breasts against his arm where it still lay in the sling across his chest. It was a wanton move, a seductive caress that destroyed his thoughts with the sensation. His moan was soul shattering.

He wrenched himself free, but could move no further than the end of her grip. “Woman, what are you doing?” he asked on a harsh gasp for air. His eyes closed, and his body pulsed with incredible electricity. So much punishment, such delicious punishment. “Are you trying to kill me?”

She sat up and looked at him with a stare that was heat and desire through and through. His hand shook when he lifted it to thread his fingers through her hair. She’d had it trimmed to rid herself of the fire damage, but it was still gorgeous, and long enough to wrap himself into, to lose himself.

“I made a decision tonight,” she offered.

"Obviously. But why? Not that I'm complaining," he was quick to add. If the pounding of his heart was any way to judge, then he would die before he complained.

"Someone asked me out for a date again." Her eyes bored into his with an intense, searching question. Fear-filled doubts lurked within her gaze, and made him want to hold her close and never let her go.

"So, I'm a safer alternative," he offered, almost insulted, his thoughts immediately going to his prone body and forced bed rest.

"God, no," she replied, her eyes widening. "You're not safe, not to me." She lifted her hand to stroke his face. He leaned into her caress, soaking up the softness of her palm against the edge of his jaw. "It made me realize I've been a chicken. I've been fighting how much I want to be with you, Brick, and it's so natural, I should've known better."

"You just needed to get comfortable with the idea, and if that was any indication, honey, you're clearing those hurdles better than Superman." He laughed a deep throaty laugh when she blushed at his compliment. "Believe me, you are not safe territory for me, either," he whispered.

"But what happens if we become involved?" she asked softly, her voice conveying all the fears she had. "You don't even live here, and you have a business to think about. And I want to rebuild mine, hopefully without any more problems."

He understood. He didn't have any answers yet, either. "Before you have a panic attack, let's make sure you and Jacob are safe. Then we'll think about us. And honey..." He drew her back down to his waiting lips, "I'm already involved up to my eyes."

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Thanksgiving passed quietly, bringing a sense of home to Brick. Jessie cooked for the three of them, making it feel like a real family holiday to him. A feeling he hadn't experienced in years.

Stan and Loco had arrived right before he was released from the hospital, and had been working on keeping Jessica and Jacob safe. They'd had no luck regarding the attack on the parlor, but it had only been a few days. Brick could be a patient man, in this case.

He called his mom and his sisters to let them know he was doing fine and where he was, and wished them a good holiday. He explained he was on a long assignment, and wasn't sure when he would be back. He didn't mention the explosion to any of them, but that didn't stop his sisters from finding out. They were as good as ferreting out information as any of his employees. This time it annoyed and irritated him, because they took it upon themselves to make sure he was all right.

Jessie had left to run some errands, but promised she wouldn't be long. It amazed him how comfortable he had become in just the four days he had been with Jessie and Jacob. He was also wondering just how deep his attraction and affections were for Jessica. He sat on the sofa, staring blindly at his book, while Jacob did homework Sunday morning.

"Brick, do you understand algebra?"

He looked up from the book he couldn't concentrate on anyway. "Do I understand it? No. Can I do it? Well enough to help you get it."

Jacob smiled at the quip, and picked up his book. As he was settling himself near Brick for his mathematical wisdom, there was a knock on the door. He looked at Brick, unsure of what to do. Brick was proud the boy hadn't forgotten the warnings.

"It's all right. I'll be right behind the door."

With a nod, Jacob went to answer the persistent knock. He opened the door, but didn't say anything for several seconds.

"Well, young man. Are you going to let us in, or do we get to freeze out here?" The woman's voice, while kind, held a definite edge of command to it.

Brick's air left him on a hiss. "Sarah." He moved from behind the door, and his whole face fell. "Sally, Sarah." He moved aside to let the twins inside. "How did you find me?" Brick snapped. Jacob closed the door behind them, speechless.

"You of all people should know when you call Mom and tell her in that arrogant way of yours that you're fine, just unattainable, she's going to go through the roof," Sarah told him.

The ladies sat on the sofa as Brick took the chair. Jacob sat on the floor. One of his sisters noticed Jacob's shocked expression. "Are you going to introduce us, or is that poor boy going into heart failure?" she asked, her sweet voice full of bubbling laughter.

"Jacob, meet Sally and Sarah." With a twinge of guilt, he remembered the comment he had made about them being twin witches and prayed the boy had tact. They would fry him alive for that one. "This is Jacob Harden. His mother Jessica is the woman I came to help," he explained on a sigh. When Jacob's head swiveled around to contest, he shook his head abruptly. Jacob immediately understood, and stayed quiet. Brick almost smiled. He had always believed the kid was smart.

"You didn't answer my question. How did you find me?" he persisted. His brows crossed. Someone in Boston was going to be in trouble.

"I have my ways," Sarah told him inspecting her nails with a smile on her lips, smug and proud of her tactics.

"Okay. Then why are you here? And if you say it's because Mom was worried, I'll wring both your necks." He glared at them in turn, but they ignored him. "I'm surprised Tom and Shannon would let you two go wandering around out in the big wide world at this time of year by yourselves."

"Who said we're by ourselves?" Sarah offered. Her ruby lips pouted making Brick glare in return. "Oh, for goodness sakes, Brick. We came down here for a ski trip. When we found out you were on the south side of the state, we came down to make sure you were all right. And before you start ranting and raving, Mom was worried." Indigo blue eyes flashed at him, daring him to argue.

"Brick," Sally said, breaking the tension between her two siblings, "What did happen?" She pointedly eyed his arm still cradled in the sling. Her words were more lyrical in sound, softer. She wasn't a timid mouse by any standard, but she had become

the mediator in way too many confrontations. The household of their childhood had not been a quiet one.

Brick gave them a brief account of the explosion and how he had been hurt, and had two men down from Boston to help get whoever was behind it. They silently nodded their heads, accepting the story at face value. They knew better than to ask questions. They'd learned early on that he would tell them only what was safe for them to know.

"So, Jacob helped you after the fire?" Sarah said turning her attention to Jacob.

"Yes, he did. He didn't lose his head, and neither did Samantha, a friend from his school."

"Thank you, Jacob. Whether he likes it or not, we all worry about him." Sally gave Jacob a bright smile, while Brick and Sarah continued to frown at each other.

Jacob ducked, hiding his expression, but his head snapped back up as Jessie made her way through the door.

"Jacob, could you help with the groceries?" She was startled by the two blondes on the sofa talking with Brick and her son. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know we had company." She closed the door, sat her bags down and met them with a growing smile when she realized who the two women were.

"You must be Brick's sisters. It's nice to meet you." When they nodded, she continued, "I hope Jacob has been polite, but I do need to borrow him for a moment." With a tug of her chin, she silently ordered him to help her. He rolled his eyes, but joined her at the door to get the rest of the bags.

After the door closed behind them, the twins instantly set in on their brother. "That's the woman you're supposed to help? Wow!" Sarah started. "Did you see that gorgeous hair?"

"He's always been a sucker for redheads," Sally offered in a soft tone.

"Just stop it, the both of you. I'm here as protection, nothing else." Even to his ears it sounded thin, and all he and Jessie had shared was a few secret kisses. He

refused to budge when they both stared right back, one set of indigo blue eyes and one of sea green, both too damn watchful for his taste.

He leaped to escape when he heard the door again. Jessie came through the door, and as she started to juggle something, he reached for it, and was rewarded with a glorious smile. He couldn't help himself and smiled right back. He caught the knowing look his sisters exchanged, but chose to ignore it.

"Can I get you two anything to drink?" Jessie offered.

"No. They were just leaving," Brick explained with an exasperated rasp in his voice.

"Do you have to?" Jessica exclaimed.

When Sarah opened her mouth, Sally quickly grabbed her hand to cut her off. "Yes, we probably should. We've done our duty as pests and interfered enough for today. Plus, the kids will want to meet on the slopes at some point today."

As Jessica expressed her sorrow that they wouldn't be staying, Brick threw on his jacket, careful of his sling. "I'll walk them out. I'll be right back." And with that, he ushered them through the door.

"Wow," came Jacob's breathless exclamation. "No wonder he talks like he does about them. He needed a brother, badly."

"A force to reckon with, huh?" Jacob nodded his head sharply. No doubt about it.

"Sorry about that," Brick offered when he returned. "That was completely unannounced."

"No problem. I'm just sorry they couldn't stay." Jessie stretched up to put a can on the top shelf. Brick slipped the can from her fingers, and placed it for her. She turned to him with a smile of thanks.

"No you're not. Believe me." He started to nose through the bags, trying to think of a way to change the subject.

"Brick, is that your phone?" She tilted her head, positive she heard the sound.



With a grunt he went to retrieve his cell phone. It was only a few minutes before he returned. His face could have been cut from granite; it held such a cold ferocity

“Jacob, I need to talk to Jessie.”

Jacob left with a fearful look on his face. The sound of Brick’s voice had changed to an ominous warning.

“Jessie, they found the connection.” The pulse at her throat had begun to beat rapidly. “Arthur was hiding money from his gambling deals. Whoever is after you thinks you have the money.”

## Chapter Eleven

Jessie's heart slammed to a dead stop as she reached for the table. "They think I have Arthur's money? Arthur was hiding money?" She whipped around to face Brick, and her hand clutched at the table for support. "How much?" When he shook his head, she nearly shouted, "How much? If I'm supposed to die for money, I have the right to know how much."

"Two million has been accounted for. Loco thinks it could be more."

She collapsed with a boneless whoosh into a chair. She couldn't comprehend what Brick was saying. Arthur had money--had millions--to gamble with! Who was the man she had been married to? "He had two million dollars," her voice was weak with incredulity. "What kind of deals?"

"Arthur's last bet was made through an individual, but something leaked. That person discovered Arthur had more, evidently far more than just the fifty thousand he had originally needed. Now, with him gone, whoever this is thinks you have it. Loco is working on getting a name now."

"Well, tell them I don't know anything. I don't have it." She swallowed down the screaming fear as the situation threatened to overwhelm her completely.

His frustration at hitting a dead end on the person responsible for her problems was apparent in the tight pull of his features, the harsh glitter of his gaze as he told her the details. "It wasn't a legal house, Jessie. He made the bet through a mob contact, and I need that name," he told her flatly.

She cringed at his answer. "So they come after me until they get what they want." Her voice was emotionless. She sought his gaze. "Brick, what am I going to do? I don't know anything about it."

He pulled her from the chair and wrapped his good arm around her. "You're not in this alone, honey. We'll figure out something. I promise."

\* \* \*

On Monday, Jessica brought in the salvaged receipts and boxes from the destroyed ice cream shop. After looking through the trunk, ensuring she had everything she needed, she reached for the box that held Arthur's things. This time she was going to go through it, regardless of how scared she was. Or how furious she was with Arthur. Her life may just very well depend on it.

Brick left shortly afterward for his follow-up appointment with Dr. Hughes about his shoulder. He was ready to toss the sling. Jessie knew he hated it by the way he was always tugging at it, flexing his fingers and winding his arm in irritation. Jacob went back to school, unaware of the majority of what had been said between them. She feared he had heard some of it when she had raised her voice, but if he had, he didn't show it.

Alone in the house, she sat with the box in front of her and her back to the kitchen window, the heat of the sun filtering in to settle across her back. As the warmth of the beams flowed over her, she felt stronger. She could do this. She had to do this.

Taking a deep breath, she removed the lid. Her lungs hitched hard when her gaze fell on a picture resting right on top. A picture of her. Her hand shook when she realized the photo wasn't very old. The picture showed her laughing, while looking away from the camera. She looked carefree and happy.

It wasn't the only photo she found as she dug through the layers. There were several, taken at different times, in different settings. There were snapshots of Jacob leaving school, or the library. There were pictures of her at the doctor's office where she

had worked, and a set of her and Jacob walking downtown on a sunny day. She was smiling or laughing in most of them, snapshots of her life. It was eerie looking at them now. Had Arthur done this? Why did he have the photos? Why so many? Had he been following them? Did he have someone follow them to make sure they were still around? To make sure they were safe? Happy? Why would he do something like that? She was at a loss.

As she dug deeper into the box, she found receipts for debts paid. The incriminating proof of what he had done was at her fingertips. Old receipts, some with *Paid in Full* scribbled across them. Only a few looked recent, apparently no more than a year old. She separated those to keep things organized. She categorized the papers into small piles, hoping to discover what was putting Jacob's life and hers on the line.

Her movements were slow, deliberate as she searched through the box and moved each item. As she neared the bottom, she found two envelopes. One, surprisingly, had her name and address on it. It was stamped, as if it was to have been mailed to her. The second envelope was slim and blank. With the remnants of the box's contents surrounding her on the table, she laid it on the floor beside her with unsure fingers.

She heard the click of the front door. "I'm in here, Brick," she called out.

"You never did call, Jessica," Marc chided her. She swiveled her head up to look at him, and the fearsome gun he pointed at her.

"Marc." Fear rippled through her, but she tried to remain calm. "What do you want?"

"I think you and I both know what I want."

"I don't think I do. If you're trying to convince me you care for me, I think you just lost the argument," she said quietly, with a slight nod toward the gun. Her voice was cool, but her hands were trembling, clasped in a tight ball on her lap, under the table.

He sneered at her. "Of course I don't care for you! I needed to get close to you to find the money, you frigid bitch." His lips lifted into an angry snarl as his brown eyes flashed.

Jessie ignored the insult. "What money? I don't have any money." *Where the devil was that tail Brick had promised?* She sure could use him now. She peeked over Marc's shoulder, but saw nothing.

He scoffed at her ignorance. "Because Arthur left it to you. Somewhere, somehow you have it, and I want it." His eyes flashed at her as his jaw worked back and forth. "Now where is it?"

"How do you know what Arthur did?" She wanted to keep him talking. She needed time to think of a way out of this. *Where the hell was everybody?*

"It doesn't matter, because as soon as I have it, you're dead anyway." His mouth formed a thin, cold line.

"Well, if I'm going to die, then why don't you tell me?" she coaxed him, softly flippant; letting him think it really didn't matter. She hoped stroking his ego would help. God, how was she going to get out of this? She couldn't move. If she tried to stand, he would be immediately suspicious. Her eyes snapped to his as he started to speak.

"You're right. It won't matter in a few minutes, and it was a damn good deal even if I do say so myself." His lips curled into a self-satisfied smile. "A teacher's salary is the absolute worst one there is, you know. Arthur had schmoozed a bet for over a million dollars. When I wanted to do it again, the house wanted insurance on the cash. We pooled our resources and won. I got my share, but that was when I discovered he had been hiding money behind my back, money I should've had. He's been socking it away for years, some nervous habit he acquired after you left the picture. He never would share that information. He only used what he had in his pocket to gamble with, but I know better. Now I want what he had. I know he stashed it with you." She pressed herself into her chair as his glare became cruel. "It's a shame about the parlor,

too. I really liked that place. He used so much of his pocket change to fix it up, it was almost a sad thing to see it go like that."

Her eyes shot open. "You did that? You almost killed Jacob! You almost killed me!" she shrieked, jumping to her feet. He waved the gun at her and she collapsed back onto her chair, numb with shock.

"You forgot your boyfriend. I was closer to killing him than either of you, but I needed him out of the way to get to you. He won't be bothering us any time soon. Neither will your bodyguard. He was easy to take down. Not very well-trained at all," he mocked her as he stepped closer, brandishing his gun in a relaxed fashion.

"What did you do to Brick?" she whispered, suddenly very frightened. A pain knifed through her chest at the implications.

"Let's just say he never made it to the doctor." He laughed a low chilling sound. "And by the time he gets to one, it won't matter."

Her mind was whirling. God, what had he done to Brick? She just had to find a way out of this! "You blew up the parlor, but why? I don't understand why you would do that." She inched the chair back soundlessly. She carefully watched the loose way he was holding the gun, swinging it in punctuation. She could tell he was feeling very comfortable in his position of power.

"I didn't want to, not really, but I had to find some way to search in places that I wouldn't have had time to if I had just broken in. I needed to know if the money was there. To see if he had hidden it in places he had mentioned. You see, he'd used the parlor as a safe house for his money. Whatever he had, he kept there until he wanted to use it to make his bets. Sometimes he would keep nearly a million dollars there so I wouldn't be able to get to it. I never knew his schedule, when he would be there or not, or when he would use the parlor. You just became a minor inconvenience when he wouldn't tell me where he hid the money." His eyes narrowed at her in speculation. "In all the time you spent there, you had to have found something."

His accusations were making her head spin. He was trying to make her believe Arthur had managed to make such grandiose schemes when she had barely managed to

keep them living paycheck to paycheck since the divorce. Even Arthur wasn't that evil, but she was beginning to think Marc was, and he had absolutely no qualms about killing her or anyone else he thought could be in his way. She was only a means to an end for him.

"I don't know what you are talking about. I swear, I didn't find a single dime, not even a penny in a crack in the floor." She glanced around, looking for anything she could use as a weapon. The stove! The pan from breakfast was still sitting there, close, within reach. She pushed on the chair again and inched toward her only weapon.

He pointed to the items scattered around the table. "I can see now that he was a smart man after all, because all I had to do was wait for you. You were kind enough to bring it all home. I knew he would give it to you. Arthur was a walking guilt trip."

"I don't know what any of it is. I just started to go through it," she explained. Take a breath; let it out. She moved to stand, pushing her chair out of the way, making the move natural to be closer to the stove. "Whatever is there, it's yours. I never wanted his money."

Marc waved the gun at her again as he neared the table, pushing her further toward her goal. He stood sideways with the gun aimed directly at her as he started to shuffle through the items. He grinned when he saw the two envelopes. "You just saved me a lot of trouble. You've had it all along."

His head whipped up as the door crashed in, splintering explosively, just before the clang of the pan resounded through the kitchen. Marc's eyes slowly rolled backward as he slid from the table to the floor, a limp excuse for a criminal.

Jessie straightened and screamed when she saw a tall man with black hair and murderous, flashing black eyes standing in her doorway, holding another very deadly gun.

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Brick groaned as he rolled onto his sore arm. Damn, his shoulder hadn't hurt this bad in days. He opened his eyes, blinking in a bleary fashion, and looked around the parking lot. Why was he lying next to Jessie's car on the cold, hard ground? He managed to push himself to a sitting position, and gently touched a knot on his head as he lifted himself to rest his back against the fender. His eyes closed as snapshots of memory came back to him.

He was going to see Dr. Hughes about his shoulder. He glanced down at his watch and realized he was supposed to have been there almost an hour ago. Someone had jumped him and knocked him out when he had moved from the car. His head reared back, instantly cleared. *Jessica!*

With a snarl he ripped the sling off. Throwing himself into the car, he raced from the parking lot, leaving tire tracks when they bit into the pavement. As he approached Jessie's house, his mind went into overdrive with fear for Jessie and Jacob. He spotted the unfamiliar car parked at the curb, pulled into the drive and forced himself to walk on silent feet to the door. His vision became a red haze when he saw the wrecked doorframe, torn from the house by an obviously violent entrance. Steeling himself, he inched forward on the damp, snowy ground, careful not to make a sound. And without a single weapon, damn it. He bit off his anger. With what he had learned, he'd never guessed he'd be *this* right. Slipping silently through the doorway, he saw the back of a man who was holding a gun, and Jessica's terrified face.

Before anything else registered, he was flying through the air, and landed square on the other man's back. He roared as they fell in a grunting mass to the floor. They tumbled back and forth for several minutes, both trying to get the upper hand. After a few bone-crunching moments, Brick had him turned over with a fist poised over his face for a brutal blow.

"Loco!" he shouted.

"Donnelly! What the hell was that?"

Brick moved away and offered a hand to his employee, wincing at the pull on his shoulder. After Loco was on his own two feet, Brick's hand automatically lifted to rub



on the sore spot. They had started arguing over tactics, and Brick heatedly pointed out the other man's lack of attention to his post, when there was another loud clang from the kitchen, and once again Marc's body slid to the floor.

Jessie glared at the two men shouting at each other. "Look, if this is all I have to do all day, maybe you boys should take it outside. While you're at it, perhaps someone should call the police." She smiled in sarcastic sweetness, aware that in the tussle they'd completely forgotten about her presence, and the whole reason they were even in her house. "I guess I could have just saved myself. Oh, hey. I did." She crossed her arms, brandishing the pan.

Brick looked properly chastised, and, not caring he had an audience, stepped over Marc's body and pulled her into his arms. "I always knew you were one tough gal." He wisely took the pan from her before he kissed her.

\* \* \*

All three made their statements, and after the cops left, Loco took off to find Stan at the school, leaving Jessie and Brick alone in the house.

"So now what?" he asked.

"We should probably go through the stuff that seemed to cause all of this." She eyed the box one more time, having dropped everything in it before the police arrived. "Do you really think there's two million dollars in all that junk?" she said as she lifted the box and dumped the contents into a careless heap. She didn't need to reexamine any of it to know there wouldn't be.

He sat at the table facing her, resting his sore arm in front of him. He was holding an ice pack to his shoulder as she rifled through Arthur's belongings.

She found the envelope addressed to her first. Casting him a dubious look, she opened it to find a single folded letter. It was dated just two days before Arthur had died. She started to read, then hesitated and started again, reading it out loud.

*Dear Jessica – I'm writing this because I have to tell someone. I've been a fool for years, but nothing was ever more foolish than what I did to you and Jacob. If you are reading this, then something has happened. Maybe you have forgiven me, and I have found the strength to tell you I am a fraud. Everything I have ever been has been a lie. I never stopped loving you and I will never stop loving our son, but I can't go on like this either. I don't have the right to be a husband to you or a father to Jacob. I never did earn that right the way I should have. I know I will most likely go to jail for what I have done, regardless of who I manage to pay off. There will never be enough to cover my many debts, especially the ones to you. I've sold my soul to make up for losing you. I hope you can someday forgive me.*

*I know how you must think of me and I don't blame you. I hope to make amends with my gift. I have spent years condemning my weaknesses; this was my strongest effort to overcome that weakness. You were my reason to try to be a better person. I have given you the key to your future. Please tell Jacob that I love him. Yours forever, Arthur.*

Jessica's eyes filled with tears as she finished the last words. "I never knew." She realized Arthur had tried, had wanted it all to end, but it was too little too late for him. She felt the first tears drop from her lashes as Brick's arms wrapped around her. "I never knew. But he did. He knew what was going to happen all along, didn't he?"

"I think he did, and he didn't want to bring you down because of it. I think he wanted to be a better man for you, but he just didn't know how." Her head curved into his shoulder as she let silent tears fall from her eyes. His fingers were tender as he touched her cheeks, lifting the warmth of her tears from her skin. "He loved you enough to keep you from falling with him."

She drank in Brick's comfort for several minutes, letting the discovery she'd made meld into what she had learned, and now had to accept. Arthur had known all along he had a problem, but no matter how much he had cared for her, he couldn't stop. His last wish was to never hurt her because of it.

"What was he talking about, though? What key?" she said softly in a voice thick with tears. She sniffed a little as she reached for the envelope again. Looking inside, she

found two little silver keys. She turned the envelope upside down, and they tumbled with a delicate tinkling sound into her open palm. "What do these go to?"

"They look like safety deposit box keys," he said, turning one over in his hand. She reached for the sealed blank envelope, still perplexed. She gasped as she opened it. A single bank check made out to Brick was the only contents.

"I've never seen ten thousand dollars in my whole life," she breathed. Her eyes were huge as she lifted it out. "I guess this is yours," she said, handing it over. His hand wrapped around her fingers. His eyes were dark, endless in the sunlight, freeing feelings deep inside her. He dropped his head to grace her lips with a kiss just as Jacob came through the front door.

"Holy cow, Mom! What happened to the door?" When Jacob saw Brick sitting at the table, lifting his head from his mother's, and that dreamy look was in his mom's eyes that she seemed to get more frequently when she was with Brick, Jacob smiled.

## Chapter Twelve

It'd been three weeks since the attack and subsequent arrest of Marc Settlemeir. He and Arthur had been fleecing casinos without repercussions until Marc had recently decided to try for some big money. Arthur went along with it, until the mob became involved. By then, Arthur was knee-deep into the fray and couldn't get out. That was when Arthur knew he needed to make the effort to stop gambling. Knowing it was only a matter of time before he was caught, or worse, he had done what he could to protect Jessica and Jacob. Instead, he had brought them right into the fray with him.

Brick discovered through his investigation that Arthur had needed the fifty thousand for Marc to transfer to the Las Vegas bet house they'd used. But somehow, Marc had come across the bank account information and deduced Arthur had been hoarding the majority of his winnings. Tony, Marc's cohort who had planted the bomb, had been unable to get any information out of Arthur before he'd murdered him. The only alternative Marc had was to try to find out what Jessie knew.

Jessie had given the rest of the information, as she knew it, to the police. Only two days ago, she had received notice the police were well on their way to arresting and indicting nearly a dozen suspects on interstate gambling charges. Marc, hoping to get a lighter sentence, turned into a non-stop chatterbox. He gave them information on several men who were already in the database, plus Tony, the guy who set the bomb at Ice Cream in the Snow.

But that backfired when they picked up one of the fingered men, who confessed Marc had paid to have Arthur murdered, and had put a hit on Brick.

It'd been nearly three weeks since she had seen Brick, too. He'd left town after making sure her door had been repaired, and all the new locks worked. He hadn't given much of an explanation before he disappeared, except to say he needed to make sure his company was up and stable before he took a long leave of absence again. When Jessie had asked what he meant, he didn't elaborate, and she had decided she wasn't going to push.

It had torn her heart right down the middle when she realized he was leaving, and how she felt about it.

"Believe me, I don't have a choice," he explained. He'd stuffed his clothes into his bag obviously not caring if they wrinkled. Evidently, now that Brick had his money, he couldn't get away from her fast enough. It was all of her worst fears come to life.

"I understand, Brick. This whole fiasco started because of your money, and now you have it." She tried to project an unconcerned attitude, leaning against the door to the spare room he had called his. She was calm, but was inwardly shaking from a heavy coldness. If he would just say something. Tell her if he cared, or anything, but he didn't. She didn't have the strength, or even the courage, to mention how she felt.

She couldn't call it love. She wasn't even sure she believed in love after all the shocks she had lived through in the past weeks. She knew she yearned for him, ached for him, but didn't know how to take it one step further if he didn't encourage her. She felt as if she'd lost her way.

"I know what you're thinking, so don't look at me like that. I'm going to be back," he told her firmly, pushing more clothes into his bags.

She stood straight, then walked up to him. She laid a cool hand on his arm, stilling his frenetic movements. When he met her gaze, his eyes were hooded and heavy with emotions that made her heart ache. She just knew he wouldn't be back. It was too much to expect.

She shrugged. "You have your money. You're free to return home." He threaded his fingers into her hair, drawing her to him, and captured her lips with his kiss before she could say more.

His arms circled her in a crushing hold, and he deepened the kiss as a growl of desire rumbled from him. His lips became harsh with need, taking and taking while she bent to his desire. Her hands trailed through his hair, memorizing the texture, the thickness, for the future. If she had nothing other than that moment, then she was going to take as much as he was.

She realized this might really be her last chance, her one last moment of delirious, desirous wanting. She started to move even before she'd had time to rationalize the decision. She fumbled with the buttons on his shirt, shaking with a sense of desperation. She felt like she was a breathing flame. When her hands met his skin, she shuddered and moaned like a north wind, deep and dark.

His mouth was on hers, conquering all she was, when she felt his hand cover her wandering fingers. His voice was hoarse, sending shivers along her skin when he spoke. "Jessica, I know what you are doing, and I know why." His breath was hot on her flesh as he held her hands tight. His eyes remained closed, keeping his thoughts from her. "But I promise you, I will be back. Please, believe in me."

His eyes dragged opened. "I told you once I hate to fly. I need to tell you why. Maybe then you'll understand how much I hate to leave you, and why I have no choice. This is something I have to do." He buttoned his shirt, taking a deep breath.

Finished with the shirt, he raked a hand over his hair. "I was scared to hell and back. We --my sergeant major, three gunmen and I, were on our way back from a recon near the Persian Gulf. Our contact turned out to be one big liar, and a wimp at that. He passed out before we even touched him, but he'd set us up. When we were about five miles from our lift-off point, we were shot down." He nodded when her eyes flicked to the scar on his temple. His hand cradled hers when she lifted it to caress him, to ease the remembered pain she could see in his gaze. "We were hit on the tail, in the dead of night, and crashed into a very unfriendly neighborhood. It turned out to be kids. We

were shot down by kids with a launcher.” His laugh was a coarse tight bark. “Everyone made it out, thank God, but I decided that night I’d had enough. It was a year later when they asked me to leave the unit. When my window to re-enlist opened, I packed up and moved back home. Some guys can take it; it’s what you do in the military, any branch. You fight to protect. I did, but I came too close to having to protect myself from a nine-year-old kid.”

The shadows in his eyes were bleak as his words faded into the room around them. His voice was filled with remembered anguish, as he told her quietly, “I just couldn’t see myself like that. I hope one day to have a nine-year-old kid. I didn’t want to think about whether or not I have to stop one with a grenade or a bullet.”

She nodded softly in understanding. “You’d better leave then. If you come back, you know where to find me.” She moved to step away to put space between them.

He grabbed her arm. “Don’t talk like that.”

She forced a smile. “No, Brick. I see what’s happened. I can see it in your eyes. Thank you for everything, for so much.” Her voice cracked. “You better finish packing. You don’t want to miss your flight.” It was too hard to hope. She felt crushed all over again. Now that his money had been found, everything else was moving too fast.

When he pulled away from her, she had no choice but to let him, even though in her heart it was hardest moment of her life. To watch him walk away from her, to see him leave through her door one last time, to watch as her heart went out the door with him. She’d been right all along about becoming involved with him. He had taken all her fears and wrapped them up into one soul-shattering kiss. He might say he felt something for her, but he never did say what. It boiled down to just not being enough to keep a man. Again.

If she was taking Brick’s departure hard, Jacob took it harder. Her bright child had become sullen in Brick’s absence. Every time the phone rang, he lit up, praying it would be Brick. Even when it was Samantha calling, he couldn’t muster much enthusiasm. She feared his heart had been broken, too.

Now it was only one week until Christmas. Some Christmas, she reflected bitterly. Her son thought he had found the perfect father, and believed he had found his mom the perfect husband. It wasn't until Brick had walked away from her that she'd recognized what she had been too terrified to admit. She had fallen hopelessly in love with him.

Given the chance, she knew she could have been more than enough to keep Brick happy. Arthur had had so many distractions. When she had needed his affections, she had mistakenly made more room for the pull of his addiction to compensate for her own needs by rarely questioning his need for the long weekends or his out-of-town work schedules, believing that was what he had needed, what would get her the affection she wanted. She discovered her mistake a decade too late, when Brick walked out her door. She hadn't needed anyone else to make her feel like a complete woman, yet she had allowed herself to believe that because of Arthur's lies and betrayal, she could never really function as one.

She had learned many truths about herself that had been buried by her anger at Arthur's deception. She had found herself able to let it all go, and to believe in herself one more time, to finally allow herself to feel something real and beautiful for another man. But she had said nothing when he'd left. She'd let him go without a single word, even going so far as to let Brick think she didn't believe in him. That had been a cruel lie. She did believe him, but it was too late.

Now she was marching up the steps to the bank to uncover the last piece of Arthur's life, the safety deposit box. As she walked through the double glass doors into the warmth of the bank, she made a vow that the minute Jacob got home, they were going to find Brick. She would fly to Boston if she had to. She wasn't going to let him walk away from her without saying what had grown in her heart. She may have been a fool once, even twice when she had let him walk away, but she wasn't going to let history keep repeating itself. She was a braver, smarter woman now. If he didn't want her, he could tell her to her face.



With that resolve firm in her mind, she finished what she had come to do. She was faced with the secret Arthur had left for her as the teller accompanied her to the vault where the boxes were kept. He stepped just outside, giving her a moment of privacy. Her hand shook as she inserted the key into the little lock. With a twist, the key moved, and she heard the sound of the tumblers as they clicked. She took a breath and pulled out the box.

There was a page lying within, a single folded paper. As she lifted it, she saw color beneath it, but her eyes fell to the page in her hand.

It was a court order demanding the rights of the account enclosed be turned over and entrusted to one Jessica Harden, in all responsibility and authority, in the whole sum. It was dated a week after their divorce. That knowledge shocked her again. Arthur had wanted desperately to make amends.

She lifted out the account summary and locked the box. With the pages in hand she met the teller and accompanied him to a desk. She sat in silence as he punched up numbers in the computer.

He swallowed after a moment and asked, "Ms. Harden, were you planning on withdrawing this amount today?"

His question surprised her. "I hadn't thought about it. Is there a problem?"

He tapped the desk with his fingers. "Well, no, but in order to withdraw this amount, I would need the bank manager's approval and you would most likely need a guard."

She laughed a light laugh playing it off as an honest mistake. "You must be wrong. It can't be that much." What had Arthur done?

Had Marc been right after all? She suddenly felt sick to her stomach. She had almost been killed for this! She forced a calm she barely felt. Arthur may have saved some pennies, but he was never the kind to make a worthwhile effort to put cash away.

Giving her an odd look, he grabbed a pencil and jotted down the numbers. He flipped the note over and slid it across the desk. Her eyebrow arched at his manner of delivery, but other than that, she lifted the page and looked at it.

She set it back down. Face down. Her playful smile had vanished. "Are you sure?" she whispered, feeling waves of sadness and shock. "This is the correct account?"

He nodded to both questions.

She couldn't even think in numbers that large. By all that was holy, it had two commas! She took a deep breath, then lifted it to peek once more, not daring to peel it completely off the desk again. Her mouth went dry. There was an eighteen before the comma. She felt light-headed for a split second.

"I guess you had no knowledge of this account?" he asked attempting to break through her fog.

She shook her head. "None." When she lifted her gaze to his, he stood with a kind smile, and held out his hand.

"Merry Christmas, Ms. Harden." She felt him shake her hand but never remembered lifting her hand.

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"So what are you doing for Christmas break, Jacob?" Samantha asked.

"Nothing, really. I think we're going to get a tree this weekend." Jacob poked a stick into the snowy asphalt at his feet. He hadn't really thought much about it. With Brick gone, he just didn't feel much like celebrating anything.

He wanted to hate him. He really, really wanted to, especially for hurting his mother, but he just couldn't. Jacob missed him too much to hate him.

"You haven't gotten it yet?"

"No, Mom's been busy clearing up things about the fire at the parlor," he told her, a little morosely.

"Jacob, isn't that your mom's boyfriend?"

He almost laughed. "She doesn't have a boyfriend. He left." He knew it sounded bitter, but it was exactly how he felt.

She pointed beyond his shoulder. "He's right there."

Jacob jumped up and spun around in a single leap, and there was Brick, leaning against a brand new car. The dealer page was still in the rear window.

"Well, I better let you go. Do you want to go Christmas shopping later?" she asked hopefully.

"Yeah, sure. Give me a call when you want to go," he replied in a distracted way.

She gave him a quick peck on the cheek, and blushed. "Merry Christmas, Jacob," she whispered, and then she took off at a trot in the other direction.

Jacob's steps were slow as he neared Brick. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything," Brick said, a teasing glance shooting beyond Jacob to a disappearing Samantha.

"Oh, um, no. You came back." It wasn't a question, but the confusion was loud and clear.

"I told you both I would." Brick was leaning against the car with his ankles crossed, his arms over his chest. "I stopped by the house first, but your mom wasn't home. I guess I get to surprise you first."

Jacob shook his head. "She went to the bank today with the keys. She needed the police to let her know if there was any tie to the lockbox before she could access it."

He nodded his head, accepting the reason. "You know what then? You and I need to do a little Christmas shopping." Brick's smile was easy.

"What for?" He still sounded sullen, and he didn't care.

"You'll understand when we get there. Get in." And with no further explanation, Brick walked around the car and got in on the driver's side.

Jacob shrugged his shoulders, threw his empty book bag onto the backseat and climbed into the car. "Nice car," he offered.

"Thanks. I just bought it." Brick was smiling secretively as they left the parking lot.

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Jessica was seated at the kitchen table when she heard the front door open. Her coffee felt hot on her tongue as she continued to struggle to come to grips with what Arthur had left her.

She would never know what he had done to amass that amount. She would never know if it had been guilt, greed, if she had truly been his reason, or if because of his addiction he just couldn't help himself. Maybe there had been some secret intent only he'd had knowledge of, but when the chips were down, he had left it to her. She was heartbroken that so many questions wouldn't be answered. It saddened her deeply that the parlor had been destroyed in the search for it.

She heard Jacob's voice from the living room. "Hey, Mom, come out here, please."

She set the coffee on the table at Jacob's call, and brushed her hair back before she walked into the living room. Her mouth fell open when she saw Jacob just inside the door, holding a huge tree. It had to be at least seven feet tall.

"What do you think?" His eyes laughed with merry delight.

"I love it! But how did you get it home? How did you get home?" Her eyes flipped back and forth between her son and the beautiful fir he held. She smiled as the scent of pine reached her, and she took a deep breath, letting it fill her lungs. "God, I've always loved that smell. But how did you get it home, honey?"

"I had some help," he told her with a wide grin.

She placed her hands on her hips. "Did Samantha's dad do this for us? They are such good people."

"Nope." He fought back a laugh and almost choked on it.

"Well, then who?"

Her mouth fell slack, and she felt her heart hammer hard against her ribs when Brick stepped from behind the tree.

"Merry Christmas, Jessica."

Elation filled her, lifting her higher. “Brick,” she breathed in disbelief. She shivered when he lifted his fingers to her face, touching her chin like the softest stroke of a feather.

“I thought you were a tempting woman the day I walked into *Ice Cream in the Snow*,” he said in a reverent tone. “Today, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on.” He brushed a hand down the length of her hair as it framed her face. His hands cradled her face as he dipped his lips to caress hers with tantalizing electricity. She felt the air catch in his throat as his body surged toward hers, seeking her with a need as strong as hers. He lifted his lips with difficulty, his breathing short, and his words velvety-smooth. “For as long as I live, I will never forget that first kiss. Do you know you almost brought me to my knees that day with your kiss? You could have asked anything and I would have done it just for the touch of your lips.”

“Brick,” she whispered again, embarrassed, looking over his shoulder, but Jacob had disappeared. Her tongue tripped as she spoke again, “What are you doing here?” She couldn’t believe he stood in front of her, holding her. Was she dreaming?

“I said I’d be back. You didn’t believe me.” He dropped his hand to remove his long coat, and tossed it over the arm of the sofa. With both hands he grasped her arms. “I had to finalize the sale of my business. I want to start over, doing anything, so long as it’s with you.”

“You sold your business?” She couldn’t have been more shocked than if he’d said he had just purchased Jupiter and it was sitting outside on her walkway.

He smiled tenderly. “I’m still on the board, but that doesn’t require but a trip or two during the year.”

She felt faint. She reached for his arms, needing his strength to keep her upright. His arms wrapped around her, holding her tight against his chest. “You want to be with me, with us?” She felt the thrum of his heart just beneath her ear. The feeling was glorious as his warmth fed into her every pore, her body drinking in his heat.

“Forever.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “Go look on the tree. There’s an early Christmas present for you.” She gave him an uncertain gaze as he released her with a gentle nudge. “Go on. Go look.”

She was a little wobbly as she turned and faced the tree. After a few seconds, she found a small, black box with a golden bow the size of a thimble on top. Her hand was shaking as she reached for it. Brick stepped close behind her. She stood trembling, his breath on her neck. “Open it.” His voice caressed her with its husky softness.

She did as he asked, her mouth dropping into an astonished ‘o’. “Brick, it’s beautiful.” She blinked rapidly, fighting the tears as she stared at the sparkle of the stone. The diamond winked back at her, and her hand shook harder.

His hold was loving as he curved his palms over her shoulders and turned her to face him. Kneeling before her, he reached for one of her hands. “Jessica Harden, I love you. Will you please marry me? Will you and Jacob be my family?”

The tears were flowing too freely to speak. She was filled with so much happiness the most she could manage was a single nod. The light glowed in his dark eyes as Jacob's whoop was heard from the hallway. Jessie melted into Brick's embrace without a single doubt when he stood and swept her into his arms.

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“I can’t believe you got this house so quickly. It’s just gorgeous,” Sally said in honest appreciation. They were gathered in the formal living room, near the roaring fire. It was a beautiful Christmas Eve. Heavy snow fell steadily outside, making the picture complete.

“We were lucky. The first offer fell through, so ours was accepted. This one was our favorite out of the three we'd found.” Paying in cash sure had sped things up too, Jessie thought with a deliriously happy grin. She sipped her champagne in celebration of the purchase. “Jacob don’t overdo it,” she warned her son.

"My last one, I promise," Jacob said as he took one more glass of champagne. It was only his second, after all.

She felt Brick's arm wrap around her waist. "Don't worry, honey. I think I could find his bed to pour him into, even in all this mess," he joked as he tugged her hair gently and looked around at the stacks of boxes. "I'm sure it's here somewhere." He turned his head, searching with a slight frown. "Isn't it?"

"It's already in my room, Brick," Jacob laughed back. "I've probably got the only clean room in the house."

Brick snorted. "Probably. Tomorrow's going to be hectic." He looked around once more, sharing a bemused smile with Jessica.

"You'll live," she said, poking a finger into his ribs. "Just remember, it was *your* idea to rush the move. Who moves over Christmas, anyway?" she muttered in good humor.

"Hey, Jacob voted for it too," he said, willingly sharing the blame. The living room floor was still mostly covered in boxes, with hints of furniture showing through in different places. The movers had finished just a few hours before everyone arrived. Nothing was where it was supposed to be, but no one seemed to care.

And now they stood celebrating, along with one of Brick's sisters and her husband, and Samantha's family.

"Ah, Christmas love. Nothing like it," Sally said with a sigh. "I don't think I've ever seen my brother so in love in my life. It does my heart good."

"I just needed the right mix. Someone who could take all of me, and my temper," he said. Their gazes locked in memory of their first encounter, that first clash of wills.

"Yeah, he can be just a bit overbearing," Jessie said with a laugh. "But so can I." She winked at Sally, who giggled.

"So, when is the wedding?" Sally asked.

"Right after the new year. January. No later."

Sally raised a questioning brow at the rush in his words.

"We want to try to have a baby," Jessie explained. Sally nodded in womanly understanding. "Look, there's Sarah and Tom. They made it." Brick quickly opened the door, swinging his sister up into a hug and greeting Tom with a hearty handshake as they made their way into the house.

"How odd," Sally said. At Jessica's quizzical look, Sally said, "I don't remember getting that kind of reception when we were down here the first time." She looked directly at Jessica. "I want you to know you have done a miracle on that man. He was always so angry, eager to fight. The arguments between him and Sarah are legendary in our family."

"Really? But I guess you're right." Somehow it wasn't that hard for Jessie to picture.

Sally laughed lightly, laying a hand on her new almost sister-in-law. "Jessie, how do you think he got that way? He needed to be able to fight off the Twin Witches. It never was fair to him, two against one." She sighed in a wistful way. Jessie almost choked on the champagne at Sally's joking reference to what Brick called her and Sarah. "Oh, yeah, we know," she said in her lyrical voice.

Jessie saw Brick talking to Tom about the house, gesturing over the fireplace and staircase that wound from the living room to the bedrooms upstairs. She had never expected him to come back to her, but she had been prepared to find him, if it took forever.

He had come back, though, and she was due to be married in just weeks. Her lips curved in a soft smile as she watched the group in her new home. Friends and family abounded in a way she hadn't experienced in too many years. Jacob had cousins, and definitely a girlfriend, and he laughed the way a thirteen-year-old boy was supposed to. Her whole being warmed as the picture became a permanent memory in her mind.

"What are you smiling for?" Brick breathed into her ear. Sally and Sarah had started to make the rounds to introduce Sarah to Samantha's family, giving Brick and Jessie a quiet moment.



"I was just thinking how perfect all of this is. It's Christmas, and I got the best present of all." She turned to face him and wrapped her arms around his neck as he settled his hands over her waist.

"That's what Christmas is about." He nuzzled her ear. "I love you. I don't know what I did without you, before you, but you are some kind of woman. And I'm the luckiest man in here tonight."

"And you are most definitely my man. I love you." Her gaze captured his. "I didn't think I could ever love again. I was so scared to let it happen."

He kissed her tenderly. "I know, but I had a feeling that first day, when you weren't afraid to tell me how you really felt, that you were going to be someone worth watching."

She walked her fingers across his neck, causing him to tremble against her. It was a powerful, heady feeling. "Really?" She blushed lightly. "I had no idea. I just knew you were a pain," she teased him.

"Well, I'm going to make up for all of that tonight," he told her as his voice dropped to a seductive caress. His warm breath slid over her skin, making her shiver in response.

"How's that?"

"Tonight, I get to open my present," he breathed into her ear. His eyes glittered with a dark blue passion that rocketed a shiver down her spine before he took his time to kiss the 'o' right off of her lips.