

Sometimes what you're looking for is closer than you think.

Jessie's life is a mess. In the eight hellish months since her husband died in a freak accident, she's been mugged, her house has been trashed, and now she's receiving frightening pranks calls. She resists a friend's offer of a weekend getaway—her grief is still too fresh to consider meeting anyone new.

Then again, since it's a party for gay men, there won't be any pressure, right?

ER doctor Caleb James feels perfectly at ease among his gay brother's friends, but one look at Jessie sparks a sexual tension that's impossible to ignore. A few drinks and a few hours of conversation later, things move a lot faster than either of them expect. Jessie is left confused and Caleb aches with regret—and love for a woman who is still guarding her heart.

Pressure is the last thing she needs. But as it becomes apparent that her string of misfortunes trace back to her husband's death, help is what she's going to get. Caleb's help...ready or not.

Warning: This title contains a two adults playing doctor. But that's okay, one of them is licensed to practice. A prescription for extra-strength Kleenex may be required.

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Because of You

Mari Carr

Dedication

This one is for the gals at work who keep me sane and laughing during the day so I can spend my nights lost in fiction. Your encouragement and support of “my second job” makes all the difference. Thank you, Nan and Lisa!

And for my editor, Lindsey. You may have made me rewrite this book 37,504 times and I wasn’t always happy about it, but I have to admit, I really like Caleb and Jessie’s story now! Thanks for not giving up on them....and me!

Chapter One

“I don’t understand why you can’t tell me who he was meeting with,” Jessie Warner said, her hands shaking with frustration. She’d tried for two weeks to get her late husband’s partner to agree to see her, but to say the man had been evasive was an understatement.

“Client confidentiality, Jessie,” Rex replied so smoothly she wanted to reach across the desk and ram her fist through his smug face.

“You’re an accountant, Rex. Not a fucking priest or psychologist. It’s not like I’m going to grill them about their back taxes. All I want to know is which clients Tommy met with the day he died.”

“Why?”

Jessie sighed, perfectly aware that this discussion was going to end like every other conversation she’d had regarding the night of her husband’s death.

“I just want to talk to them. See if they noticed anything strange in his demeanor that day.”

“Why?” Rex repeated, and for a moment Jessie was struck by the fact that the man was no longer looking at her with annoyance, but rather with pity in his eyes.

Shit.

She hated pity. She’d seen it on the faces of too many people lately and it only made her angrier, more frustrated. She was tired of being treated like she was weak, and she was sure as hell tired of being treated like she was crazy.

“Forget it,” she said, rising quickly. “You aren’t going to tell me a fucking thing. You know it and I know it. Thanks for nothing, Rex.”

“Dammit, Jessie, don’t leave like this. I know you think Tommy’s death wasn’t an accident, but believe me when I say it was. It’s been seven months since he died. You’ve got to let this go.”

An accident. She’d read the police and coroner’s reports and she knew what they all believed. They’d said it was an accident, but she couldn’t shake the idea that it wasn’t—despite the fact she had no proof to the contrary. Tommy had fallen on the ice and hit his head. It seemed to be an easy answer for everyone—everyone but her.

Shortly after his death, she’d begun probing into the details a bit more—asking the police and hospital workers questions, but so far everyone she had encountered had been less than helpful. They thought she was some silly, grieving widow who had watched one too many episodes of *CSI* and had decided to create a crime out of thin air.

Apparently Rex was no different. He'd ignored her phone messages until finally she'd decided to take the direct approach. Her spur-of-the-moment, "oh I was just in the area" visit had been a surprise to him. She knew he was too wrapped up in appearances to throw the widow of his former partner out on her ass in front of an office full of employees. She'd seen in his face that he wasn't pleased about being shanghaied into this visit. No doubt he'd heard the rumors that she was chasing shadows and had hoped to avoid this conversation.

"I can't let it go, Rex," she said quietly as she reached for the door. At one point, she'd considered the man a friend, but nowadays she found it harder and harder to reconnect with the people she'd known before Tommy's death. Aside from her best friend Todd, she'd drifted away from everyone else in her life. "Please help me."

The man shrugged sadly. "I'm sorry, Jessie, but I can't."

"There's a world of difference between *can't* and *won't*. I think you have them confused," she said, storming out. She closed the door loudly behind her and sighed heavily. She'd known when she left the house this morning it would be a wasted trip. She'd been a fool to think that Rex would offer her any sort of help. Hell, the man had avoided her calls like she was a telemarketer.

"Jessie? Is that you?"

"Jordan." She smiled at the older man in the foyer as he leaned down to hug her. Jordan Scott had been a good friend to Tommy in addition to being one of his biggest clients. He'd always been kind to her as well. He'd never forgotten to send a birthday card or his traditional bottle of champagne Christmas gift. They'd dined at his penthouse apartment on more than a few occasions. Neither she nor Tommy had been close to their families and in some ways Jordan had taken on the role of a beloved uncle. One they didn't see often, but with whom they were always happy to reconnect.

"What a nice surprise," she said as he released her. Always dressed to a tee, he was an extremely attractive gentleman in his mid-fifties, with salt and pepper hair and expressive deep blue eyes. She had often questioned him about why he'd never married. She couldn't imagine a whole generation of women letting Jordan slip through their fingers. He was handsome, rich and charming.

"I haven't seen you since—" He paused and Jessie nodded at the silence that followed.

"Since Tommy's funeral," she finished for him.

"How have you been, my dear? I meant to call, but I'm afraid a problem at work pulled me out of the country for a few months. I've only just returned from Italy this past week."

"I'm fine," she answered, the lie a familiar one. She hadn't been fine for seven months. Not since the night she'd found her husband's dead body.

"What brings you to the firm?" Jordan asked. "I thought Rex said you'd sold Tommy's half of the business to him."

“Oh, I did,” she said. She looked into Jordan’s compassionate face and found her suspicions, her fears falling from her lips. “I’ve had this feeling since Tommy passed away that something was wrong and I wanted to know which clients Tommy met with the day he died. I was hoping to speak to them, hoping one of them could help me understand his frame of mind that day.”

Jordan’s puzzled look gave her a moment’s pause. “Frame of mind?” he asked.

“I don’t think his death was an accident.”

“You don’t?” he asked in such a way that for the first time, she felt a glimmer of hope that someone actually understood.

She shook her head.

“I met with Tommy the day he died, Jessie.”

Jordan’s confession stopped her short. She’d anticipated another pitying look, another pat on the head, another condescending comment about being foolish. She hadn’t expected an answer. “You did?”

“We met earlier that morning about the audit he was performing for my company. Rather run-of-the-mill stuff. I can assure you his behavior was perfectly normal. I wish I’d known then that I’d never see him again. So many things I would have liked to have said to the dear boy.” The older man looked away and Jessie could see the glimmer of tears at the corner of his eyes. When he turned back toward her, the look of sadness was replaced with one of concern. “What’s going on, Jessie? Why don’t you believe it was an accident?”

The tightness in her chest that never left eased as Jordan spoke. For the first time in months, someone was listening to her, answering her questions, taking her seriously. “Tommy called me earlier in the afternoon, the day he died. He said something that made me think—” She paused, uncertain how to word her concerns.

“Made you think?” he prodded.

She paused and shrugged, her thoughts were traveling a different direction. Jordan had seen Tommy, spoken to him that day. She couldn’t focus on anything other than that fact. “Was Tommy acting strangely that day? Did he seem preoccupied, overwrought, worried?”

“Not at all. What did he say on the phone, Jessie?”

“Nothing specific.” Tommy hadn’t said anything at all really. Perhaps it was his tone more than his words that had sparked her suspicions.

“I suppose you’ve spoken to the police about this,” he said.

She nodded and sighed. “Yes, for all the good it’s done me.”

“I take it they don’t share your belief that there was foul play involved?”

She shook her head. “No. I sort of get the impression they think I’m insane.”

Jordan laughed lightly at her lame attempt at a jest. “Nothing could be further from the truth. I wish there was something I could say that would help you, but honestly, there was nothing in Tommy’s

demeanor that day that leads me to suspect foul play. Tell you what. Why don't you let me do a bit of digging around? I'll see if I can't scare some information out of old Rex, the shyster."

Jessie grinned. Jordan had never made any bones about the fact that Tommy was his preferred accountant in the firm.

"Would you? Really?"

"I'm not sure what help I can be, but if it will put a smile back on that pretty face of yours, I'm willing to try."

"Oh, thank you, Jordan, you've already been more help than you know. If you remember anything else about that day, will you call me?"

"Of course, my dear. You will be the first person I call."

She said her goodbyes and walked to her car feeling lighter than she had since Tommy's death. She still hadn't discovered any answers, but Jordan genuinely seemed to believe her and wanted to help. For the first time in a long time, she didn't feel as if she was wandering around in a dark room with no doors. Jordan had just offered her a flashlight and, God willing, a way out—back into the sunshine that had eluded her for months.

Maybe she wasn't so crazy after all.

Chapter Two

One month later

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this," Jessie said as she walked up to the front porch of the huge ranch house. The party she'd been reluctantly dragged to was already in full swing if the blaring music and loud voices coming from inside were any indication.

"You need to get out, Jess. You can't hide out in that tiny apartment of yours forever. You need to live a little," Todd said, wrapping his arm around her shoulder and dragging her forward.

"I'm not ready for this. I told you that," she said, repeating the argument that had begun several days ago when Todd, her best friend since childhood, had told her he was taking her out to a party.

"No," Stephen said, walking on her other side. "I believe what you said was you weren't ready to go out and meet other men. That's not going to be a problem here."

"Because?" she asked, waiting for Stephen to elaborate. He and Todd had been very closed-mouthed about where they were going.

Stephen laughed. "Our friend Jacob James lives here and throws this party every year. It's an annual event he likes to call Gay Fest."

Jessie rolled her eyes at Stephen's joke. He and Todd had been a couple for nearly a decade and she adored them both. They'd rallied around her after her husband's death. Although she lived over three hours away, in the city, they'd made the trek to Denver to spend many weekends with her in an attempt to help her through her grief. She was an only child, estranged from her mother and stepfather, and in her mind, Todd and Stephen were her family now.

"Very funny, Stephen. Really. Hysterical." She replied deadpan as Todd laughed.

"It's just a party, Jess. You used to love to go out. We'll down a few shots, dance around Jake's backyard, you can throw your bra on the bonfire, we'll all sing karaoke and—"

"Oh Jesus, you never said *anything* about karaoke." She groaned, stopping mid-step.

Stephen gripped her arm and started moving her toward the door. "Just ABBA songs," he said.

"Shit," she muttered. They made their way up the front porch and into the house. The place was packed with people and Jessie found herself instantly besieged by Todd and Stephen's friends. Jacob was the first to greet them and Jessie instantly liked the man.

“Well, it’s about time you got the girl over here for me to meet,” he said, playfully chastising Todd. “I mean, you do live a *whole* mile away. I’ve heard all about you, Miss Jessie, and I’ve decided I’m going to steal you away from Todd and *we’re* going to be best friends.” As he spoke, he linked arms with her.

Todd grabbed her free hand and pulled back. “Get your own damn best friend. Jessie is mine,” he teased.

Jessie laughed and shoved them away. “I’ll be friends with both of you if you get me something to drink. I have a feeling I’m going to have to be very drunk to tolerate spending time with either of you tonight.”

“Way ahead of you,” Stephen said, fighting his way back through the crowd. He handed her and Todd each a cold bottle of beer. “Good turnout, Jake.”

“Tell me about it. My brothers are gonna go through the roof when they see how many people have shown up. Attendance seems to double every year. Going to have to start renting a banquet hall at this rate.”

Stephen laughed. “Well at least it’s not raining. I noticed you’ve got a good crowd hanging around out back.”

“Doc’s out there right now, working to start the bonfire, and we’ve cleared off the patio for dancing. My brother Matt’s band is setting up to play later.”

“You’re lucky to have such cool brothers,” Todd said and Jacob nodded.

“Tell me about it. They’re the best. Even Mark helped me set up a bunch of tents in the backyard and cleared away some of the living room furniture so people can crash on the floor or outside if they want. Of course, after that, he hit the road. He’s still not comfortable around this many gay men,” Jacob joked. “I told him I had lots of guys I’d like to set him up with. Man, you should have seen him spin tires in the driveway to escape.”

“You shouldn’t tease the poor guy,” Todd said. “At least your brothers tolerate the fact you’re gay. My parents are still convinced therapy and drugs can cure my homosexual affliction.”

“Hey, Jake. Where are the chips?” someone yelled from the kitchen.

“Ah, the duties of hosting never end. Why don’t you all head out to the backyard? Once everyone’s well on their way to wasted, we’ll start the ABBA singing contest.”

“Oh crap,” Jessie muttered so only Todd and Stephen could hear her. “I thought you were joking about that.”

The guys laughed and they walked through the house to the back door. There were even more people gathered on the lawn. Most were men, but Jessie spied a few women scattered amongst the partiers.

“Who are all these people?” she asked.

“Jacob’s got lots and lots of friends. We don’t exactly live in the most liberal-minded of communities, so a few years ago—after he came out—he decided to start holding a Gay Fest. Started out with just a

dozen or so friends who shared the lifestyle. Word seems to have spread though and now folks have started driving from as far as two hundred miles away to attend. It's just a fun night where we can let down our guard and party it up," Todd answered.

Jessie nodded. "That's cool."

She tagged along behind her friends as they reconnected with acquaintances from previous parties. They always introduced her and she tried to join in the conversations, but her heart just wasn't in a festive mood. Before her husband's death, she'd loved a good time as much as the next person, but lately it seemed to take too much energy—something she was definitely lacking. The memory of Tommy floated through her mind. She was certain Todd had suggested this quick vacation hoping that the break would clear her thoughts and encourage her to stop pursuing shadows that weren't there.

Shadows that called her every night.

For the past month, she'd been plagued by midnight phone calls. She'd tried to have them traced, but the number belonged to one of those pay-as-you-go cell phones. The police and Todd had chalked them up to a prank caller and Jessie wished she felt as certain the calls were harmless. There was something very frightening about the silence that always greeted her at the other end of the line.

"You're drifting," Todd said, leaning down to talk loudly into her ear. They were standing far too close to the speakers for her sanity. She spotted a bar set up at the end of the patio with a few empty stools.

"Drifting? I can't even hear myself think. I'm going to go drum up another beer. You guys want anything?" she asked.

"Naw, I'm good," Todd said as Stephen shook his head. She waved and walked away. Climbing up onto one of the tall barstools, she sighed heavily, looking back at the crowd. It really was a terrific get-together. Jacob definitely knew how to throw a hell of a party.

"That's not a fun face," a voice said from behind the bar.

Jessie turned to find a handsome man smiling at her. *Holy wow*, she thought as she looked into the man's deep green eyes. His dirty blond hair was neatly trimmed and he had honest-to-God dimples. Inwardly she groaned. Just my luck, she thought. First spark of attraction she'd felt since her husband died and, of course, it was toward a gay man.

"Oh, I'm having fun," she assured him. "Just a bit tired and not in much of a party mood."

"How about a liquid pep-me-up? I'm mixing drinks tonight because I'm not in a party mood myself. Seemed easier to volunteer for this job rather than to fight my way through the revelers and try to participate in small talk," the man answered. "I'm Caleb, by the way."

"Jessie," she replied, reaching out to shake Caleb's outstretched hand. "Jessie Warner."

"I don't think I recognize you, Jessie Warner. Are you from around here?"

"No, I'm here on vacation. I've been visiting with Todd and Stephen for the past couple of weeks. They live about a mile down the road."

"I know those guys pretty well. I forgot Todd mentioned he had company. Best friend from kindergarten, I think he said."

Jessie rolled her eyes and laughed. "Yep, that's me. Todd loves to tell everyone exactly how long we've known each other."

"Got to admit, I figured Jessie, the lifelong friend, was a man," Caleb said. As he spoke he mixed several liquors with orange juice before handing it to the man sitting next to her.

"Thanks, Caleb," the man said, walking back to his friends.

"Everyone thinks that. Curse of my name," she said.

"What are you drinking?" Caleb asked.

"Oh, just beer. I'm heading back home tomorrow and wouldn't want to do it with a headache."

"Smart woman," he said, uncapping a bottle of ice-cold beer and handing it to her. "Where's home?"

"Right now, it's Denver."

"Right now?" he asked.

"Todd and Stephen are trying to talk me into moving here. I'm a website designer and I basically work out of my house. My friends think I need to move out of the big, bad city." Her words were a joke, but she had been giving their request some serious consideration.

She would never have dreamed of leaving Denver before Tommy's death, but over the past eight months, she'd had more than her fair share of bad karma. She'd been mugged a few weeks earlier and although she hadn't been seriously hurt, it had triggered a fear in her that hadn't been there before. Between that, the prank calls, the feeling of constantly being watched, and her unfounded suspicions about Tommy's death, she was one giant mass of nerves.

Since coming to stay with her friends, the paranoia had gone away. No more late night calls, no eyes watching her every move. Todd and Stephen lived on a nice-sized ranch just outside Saratoga, Wyoming, and the peacefulness of the area, the beauty of the landscape was certainly calling to her. She'd only been here two weeks, but she was already starting to feel like her old self. She was tired of being frightened—jumping at every sound, flinching at every sudden movement.

"Well, I may not be impartial, but I don't think you could pick a better spot on earth to settle down than right here," Caleb said.

"Oh, so you're a local? Not one of the masses who drive hours to attend Gay Fest?"

Caleb laughed long and loud at her question and she wondered what he found so funny. "No," he finally answered. "I didn't drive at all. I live here with the host. Jacob's my insane-but-loveable kid brother. And, sweetheart, I ain't gay."

Jessie giggled at his response until she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Well, doesn’t this just figure.” She turned to see Jacob and Todd standing next to her. Jacob was shaking his head in mock disgust. “Only two straight people at the whole damn party and they find each other. It’s like they’ve got radar or something,” Jacob said to Todd, who laughed.

Jessie shook her head, grinning at Jacob’s joke and feeling slightly surprised at how pleased she was to discover Caleb wasn’t gay. She didn’t even want to consider why that should matter to her. She was nowhere near ready to start thinking about dating someone else. The pain of losing Tommy was still too fresh, too intense.

“I was hoping we might borrow you for a second, Jess,” Todd said.

“Borrow me for what?”

“We want you to kick off the karaoke contest,” Jacob answered. “Todd says you two used to tear up the elementary school circuit with your song and dance routines.”

“Forget it,” she said firmly. “I’m too damn old and too damn sober for that.”

She felt a nudge at her elbow and looked down to find Caleb pushing a shot glass at her. “As luck would have it, Jessie, I’m a doctor and I’m fairly certain I can take care of that sober problem of yours. Take this shot. It’ll make you feel better. Then get up on that stage and sing. It’s a party and it looks like it might do you some good to let your hair down.”

“Now that’s what I’m talking about,” Todd chimed in. “Set us all up with a round of those, Doc.”

Caleb poured the tequila and she was secretly appeased when she watched him include himself in the group. On the count of three, all four of them downed the drinks.

Jessie winced as the hot alcohol burned her throat, but after feeling cold for months, she welcomed the sudden warmth. Maybe Caleb and Todd were right. She needed to cut loose, laugh, give herself one night to let go and forget.

“What song are we singing?” she asked as Jacob cheered.

“‘Super Trouper’,” Todd answered. “Jake and I are gonna be your back-up.”

She heard Caleb laugh behind her and turned quickly, narrowing her eyes. “You owe me for this,” she teased.

“Sweetheart, I look forward to paying up.”

“Oh hell, what time is it?” Jessie asked, leaning her head against his shoulder as they rested against one of the large logs circling the bonfire.

Caleb felt like a damn teenager on his first date with this lovely woman. He’d seen her the second she’d arrived in the backyard and he hadn’t been able to take his eyes off of her. Her long, light brown hair shimmered with auburn highlights accentuated by the firelight. Her chocolate-colored eyes were sweet and had been just a little sad when she’d first sat down at the bar. He wondered about that sadness, but as the

night progressed, it had gradually disappeared until all he could see now was a woman genuinely enjoying herself...with him.

As an ER doctor, he didn't have a lot of time for dating and he struggled to remember the last time he'd spent an entire evening with a woman, talking and dancing and laughing. His brothers constantly chastised him for his workaholic tendencies, but he didn't think there was anything wrong with being committed to his career. Sure, he worked long hours and he was *on* call more than he was off, but that was all a part of the job. Lately, Jacob had begun suggesting that Caleb open up his own practice here in town and start dating, an idea he'd previously rejected outright.

However, after spending the evening with Jessie, he realized something he had never noticed before. He was lonely. He'd assumed his patients and his brothers were enough for him, but now he couldn't help but wonder if something vital was missing from his life.

Jessie was a fun companion and he was more than a little bit sorry about the fact she was leaving in the morning. Although Denver wasn't terribly far away, something about her demeanor told him that tonight was likely all he would get.

"It's after one."

"Ugh." Jessie said, straightening up. "I think my morning departure is suddenly looking like an afternoon one."

He grinned. "Probably not a bad idea. You've had quite a bit to drink."

"That's sort of the pot calling the kettle black, isn't it?" she joked.

He shrugged. "I don't have a three-hour drive tomorrow and I've got plenty of time to sleep this off. I don't have to be back at work until Monday morning."

"I think my chances of dragging Todd and Stephen away are next to nil," she said, her voice betraying her tiredness.

He looked across the yard and spotted her friends in the middle of a huge mass of swaying bodies on the patio. His brother's band was playing and they showed no sign of stopping anytime soon.

"I'll walk you back if you're ready to leave," he offered.

"Oh, that's okay," she said. "I can wait around."

He thought for a moment he saw a flash of fear in her eyes, but she quickly shuttered it away. "Seriously, Jess. It's only about a mile. I don't mind walking you."

She glanced toward the path and again he sensed her reticence.

"I'll have you know I was a Boy Scout. You have my solemn pledge that I will get you home safely." He rose before reaching down and helping her to her feet.

She grinned guiltily as she swayed a bit, betraying her tipsiness. "All right then. I mean if you can't trust a Boy Scout, who can you trust? Let me go tell the guys I'm leaving."

He nodded. "I'll let Jacob know where I'm going and meet you at the bar in five."

Caleb watched her pick her way through the couples who were making out by the giant bonfire and he smiled at her drunken clumsiness. She apologized to a man whose drink she knocked over before dancing her way across the patio to her friends. He looked around and spotted his brother entertaining a large crowd by the bar.

“Hey, Jake,” he called out. “I’m going to walk Jessie back to Todd’s guesthouse.”

Jacob’s eyebrows wiggled suggestively, obviously reading far too much into his actions.

Caleb shook his head. “She’s gotta drive back to Denver tomorrow and her friends aren’t ready to leave. I’ll only be gone a little while. You got things under control here?”

Jacob pulled him aside with a mischievous grin. “Everything here is fine and I think Jessie is a great girl. Take your time.” Then he adopted a stern face and for a minute, Caleb was struck by how much Jacob looked like their father. “However, I feel I should remind you to practice safe sex,” he said in a deep voice, mimicking dear old dad perfectly. Jacob reached into his pocket and pulled out a condom. “Here, take this just in case.”

“Jake, you’re drunk and a dumbass so I’m not going to embarrass you in front of your friends by kicking your ass and making you cry like a big baby,” he teased. “I’m just escorting her home,” he repeated, despite the small hope he harbored that maybe tonight could include something a bit more. There was a special quality about the woman he couldn’t quite put his finger on. He put his hand up to refuse the silver foil packet.

“There you are. You ready?” Jessie asked from behind him. Caleb hastily grabbed the condom Jacob was swinging around and thrust it in the front pocket of his jeans to hide it before Jessie could see. God only knew how she would interpret that move and he fought the impulse to punch his brother for nearly ruining the whole night with his damn foolishness.

Turning, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and directed her toward the dirt path that connected to the James Ranch.

“Ready,” he said as they set off, away from the loud music and into the quiet night together.

Chapter Three

Jessie unlocked the door to the guesthouse as Caleb stood beside her on the porch. She shook herself for her damned reservations in walking home alone with him. It was obvious Caleb was a kind man. Tonight had been one of the nicest nights she'd had in a very long time, thanks to him. He was fun and funny and her damned anxiety was clearly getting the best of her. She never used to be such a nervous Nelly, suspicious of everyone she met.

She was grateful to Todd for his offer of a place to stay, a retreat of sorts these past two weeks. It was hard to admit it, but she felt better simply getting out of the apartment she'd shared with Tommy, surrounded by memories at every turn.

"I have a feeling you're going to have quite a long wait until you can hit your bed. Wanna come in for a cup of coffee?" she offered, sorry to see her night with Caleb end so soon. He was an easy man to talk to.

"I'd love coffee," he said. "Now that I'm away from the madness, I'm not looking forward to plunging back into it right away."

Jessie grinned and led him through the small house.

"Todd and Stephen have done a hell of a lot of work on the ranch. It needed a major facelift and some big time renovations when they moved in. Looks great now," Caleb said. Stephen had inherited the ranch from his parents after their tragic deaths in a car accident two years earlier. Before that, he and Todd had resided in Denver and the two of them had been her constant companions along with Tommy since they'd all lived in the same apartment complex. She and Tommy had missed them when they moved away, but they'd understood their friends' desire to find an easier pace of life and their dream of setting up a bed and breakfast at the house. She knew Stephen, born and bred on this ranch, had never truly been happy with life in the big city and his high-stress job at an investment firm.

"Yeah, I came up with my husband right after they left Denver. I honestly can't believe all the improvements they've made. They'll be ready for business soon."

Jessie had been making the coffee as she spoke, but even with her back turned she sensed Caleb's sudden tension. She turned to see his eyebrows lowered, his face serious and upset.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, wondering what she could have said to have produced such a rapid change in his disposition.

"Husband?" he asked and she saw his eyes dart to her ring finger. She given up wearing her diamond engagement ring, but she couldn't seem to part from the actual white gold wedding band.

She sucked in a breath at his question. She'd carefully avoided talking about Tommy all night. She'd wanted a night to forget, a night to pretend that her life was normal and happy and that she hadn't had her heart ripped out of her chest eight months earlier.

"I'm a widow," she said and the sound of that simple word released the flow of ice cold water throughout her body once again. For a few hours, she'd been warm. Hell, between Caleb and the alcohol, she spent more than a few moments on fire and it had felt so damn good.

"I'm sorry," he said, rising and crossing the room to take her icy hands in his. She didn't realize until his touch that she was shaking. In just one evening, he'd diminished the shadow of fear that constantly hovered over her. He'd rejuvenated her, made her feel alive.

She shook her head, desperately willing away the chill, the sadness. Dammit, she didn't want to be cold anymore. She was tired of being afraid. "It's been eight months and I'm afraid I sometimes tend to talk about Tommy in the present tense, like he's still here."

"Had he been ill?" he asked and she smiled sadly. He sounded very much like a doctor.

"Freak accident. He slipped on a patch of ice and hit his head on a car door. It was late and brutally cold and he was the last person leaving work that night. It was several hours before I found him and by then—"

"You found him?" he asked, pulling her gently to a chair in the kitchen. He pushed her down before sitting next to her. He never released his grip on her hands and she knew he felt the coldness in them as he began to rub them with his own as if to warm them.

"I was concerned when he didn't come home and didn't answer his cell. He was an accountant and it was audit season, so he worked late occasionally, but it wasn't like him not to call and check in. Finally, I worried myself into a frenzy and decided to drive by his office, fully prepared to give him holy hell for scaring me so."

He nodded. "I'm sorry it was you who found him."

She shrugged and closed her eyes. She was a master at controlling her tears, yet here with Caleb it seemed harder to do. She'd managed to push her pain deep inside her and she even found it easier of late to discuss Tommy's death. Tonight, whether it was the alcohol or her tiredness or Caleb's compassion, the emotions were threatening to bubble over and she refused to let that happen.

"Well, I suppose I managed to bring tonight's fun level down. That's me—the official ruination of all parties," she tried to joke. She pulled her hands out of his comforting grip and went back to the counter. "Do you like cream and sugar in your coffee?"

"No, I drink it black, and, Jessie, you didn't ruin anything. You're going through a damn hard time right now, dealing with something no one should ever have to deal with. Don't be so hard on yourself. I wish I could give you an easy fix, but I'm afraid nothing except time will cure this."

She grinned over her shoulder, determined to return to the easy banter they'd enjoyed all night. "That's quite a bedside manner you have, Dr. Caleb." The flirtatious line felt rusty and foreign as it fell from her lips, but Caleb didn't seem to notice.

He gave a short, brief laugh. "Oh yeah, I'm a master at bedside—" He paused mid-sentence and she was surprised when he walked over to her and placed his hands on her cheeks. "Christ, Jess. I want to kiss you so badly it hurts."

"So kiss me," she whispered, uncertain where the words had come from, his and hers. From the second he touched her face, she wanted him with a passion she'd thought long gone.

He leaned down and took her lips gently, sweetly, but she refused to be patronized, treated with kid gloves. She was a living, breathing woman and she wanted him. Wanted him beyond reason, beyond care.

She reached up, gripping his hair in her fingers roughly, pulling his face more firmly to her. She opened her mouth and welcomed his tongue, before pushing it out of her way to explore his lips, his teeth with her own.

He moved his hands down to her waist, his grip stronger, more certain, more controlling. She was giving him everything her broken shell of a body had left to give and she sensed he was more than ready to take her up on the offer.

His lips slid from hers, gliding along her cheek to her earlobe, down her neck. The whole time he worshipped her with his mouth, his hands roamed, finding their way beneath her T-shirt to her breasts. She groaned at the hot touch of his hands against her taut nipples and he ground his hard erection into her pussy.

"God," she gasped, his touches, his lips, his body pushing hers rapidly into overdrive. "More," she demanded. "Please, Caleb. More."

He continued his sensual assault and she fought to keep up. She shoved his hands off her body for a moment so that she could pull his T-shirt over his head. The image of his bare, sculpted chest was a visual treat, but she couldn't make herself take the time to enjoy it. She was on fire and her body was demanding that she take everything he had to give immediately. She leaned down, nipping at his small, hard nipples and he hissed with delight. His hands began working at the button and zipper of her jean shorts, shoving them and her panties over her hips, leaving her bare from the waist down.

Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she wondered what the hell she was doing, but that thought was quickly squelched by a single touch of his fingers against her clit.

"Yes," she whispered hoarsely. His hand delved farther and soon she found herself roughly pushing her hips toward him, forcing the two fingers he plunged inside her deeper, harder, faster. She was cresting on the edge of an orgasm within moments, but she refused to come alone. Caleb had given her so much tonight. Without realizing it, he'd offered her an escape, a refuge from the mourning, and she wanted to give him back some small part of the incredible pleasure he was building inside her.

"You," she demanded. "I want you." She struggled to free his cock from his pants, her hands clumsily attempting to find his zipper. He helped her and as soon as his erection was free, she gripped him, stroking the rock-hard, yet velvety skin.

He moaned against her mouth, taking her lips in a volatile kiss that blew every thought, every emotion out of her mind. Nothing, nothing on earth mattered at this moment, but this man, this feeling.

She vaguely heard the tearing of foil and glanced down in time to watch him rolling on a condom.

"Hurry," she cried. She had only a second to react as he lifted her onto the counter and stepped between her outstretched legs. He paused as the head of his cock entered her. Looking into her face, his gaze locked onto hers, leaving her with the impression that he could see straight into her soul. No doubt he was giving her a chance to refuse.

"Hurry," she whispered again and he smiled. A smile so sweet and kind, she felt tears prick at her eyes. Then he was inside her, hard and full and wonderful.

Together, they thrust against each other in a familiar rhythm that felt completely unique and new and she was lost in the sensations, the wonder of the act.

She came far too quickly and was pleasantly surprised when he refused to give way to her climax.

"Not enough," he spoke through gritted teeth and she knew he was right. This magic was too special to waste on a quick ending.

Harder and faster he moved, his hips pumping into her with a ferocity that should have hurt, but instead felt too astonishingly perfect to dispute. She welcomed each of his blows and when her orgasm came again, she screamed with the power, the force of the impulse.

She heard Caleb's cries mingle with hers as hot jets of semen caressed her womb. He rested his head against her shoulder as she clung to him, too overwhelmed by the emotions inundating her to let him go.

After a few minutes, he slowly extricated himself from her tight clasp and she felt him slide out of her. She missed his body the instant he left her.

"Oh hell," he muttered. "Oh, baby." He looked up at her with regret and she sensed the word *sorry* on his lips.

"Caleb?" she asked, confused by his apologetic response to such a powerful act.

"The condom broke," he said.

The second the words passed his lips, she recalled the feeling of his seed filling her.

"It's okay," she reassured him.

He seemed to ponder her words before grinning guiltily. "It is?"

She nodded and he leaned forward, kissing her so long and lustfully, she suspected they could spend a lifetime in the kitchen without ever taking a sip of their now-cold coffee.

"I'm clean, Jess. I swear it," he muttered against her lips.

"Me too," she answered. "I've only ever been with Tommy."

He kissed her harder and she couldn't decide if he was trying to comfort her or to erase her dead husband's name from her lips.

"Stay with me," she whispered and again she was shocked by her words. She'd spent eight months' worth of lonely nights in a cold, hard bed and just for tonight, she wanted to feel Caleb's arms wrapped around her as she slept.

He nodded his assent before helping her off the counter and wrapping her securely in a bear hug. She wasn't a short woman, but Caleb's height, his broad shoulders dwarfed her in comparison and made her feel safe, protected.

Arm in arm, they walked to the bedroom. They helped each other finish undressing and crawled under the cool sheets together. She curled into his outstretched arms and immediately fell into the deepest sleep she'd had in months.

Caleb felt a slight movement on the bed next to him and for a moment, he tried to figure out where the hell he was. Straining to make out the room in the darkness, he remembered Jessie and the kitchen. The bed moved again and he glanced over to the naked woman lying next to him. She had her back to him, but he could see her shoulders shaking. He heard her soft, strangled gasp for breath and his heart broke at the sound of her silent crying.

"Oh, Jess," he whispered. "Please don't cry, baby."

He heard her snuffle, but she didn't roll over to face him. "I'm not crying," she said.

He turned and wrapped his arm around her waist. She stiffened for just a moment before relaxing in his grip, letting him drag her to him spoon fashion. "You regret this," he said, shame suffusing him. They'd both been more than a little drunk and he'd been an ass and a fool to take her so roughly. Christ, he took her on the damn kitchen counter.

"Oh no," she said, looking over her shoulder at him. His eyes had adjusted to the dark and he could see the wet tears clinging to her eyelashes. "I don't regret this, really I don't."

"Then why are you crying?" he asked.

"I don't know why," she confessed. "God, Caleb. I'm such a mess. I can't seem to make anything in my life work lately. My head is fuzzy, my heart feels like a two-ton rock and I honestly don't know if I'm coming or going most days."

"You're grieving, Jess. All of that is natural, normal."

"It doesn't feel normal," she spat out angrily. "It feels like shit."

He leaned down to press a soft kiss on her bare shoulder and heard her sigh. "You've never been with another man. Don't you think that may be why you're upset?"

"I never thought I'd *ever* be with any man but Tommy," she said quietly. "We started dating in high school and stayed together all through college. It wasn't supposed to be like this."

He tightened his grip on her waist, wishing he could take some of her pain away, wishing he could erase every sad, scared, uncertain thought in her head. "It was obviously too soon for you. I'm so sorry, Jessie. I don't have any excuse other than to say I had a bit too much to drink tonight. I rushed you when I should have made sure you were ready for this. I've behaved like an ass."

She turned in his arms and pulled his face toward hers with her hands. "Don't say that," she insisted. "Hell, don't even think that. Tonight was wonderful, Caleb. You were wonderful and absolutely everything that I needed you to be. This sounds corny and is probably the world's biggest cliché, but it's me, not you. This last year has been twenty kinds of miserable. On top of Tommy's death, I've been getting these stupid phone calls—"

"What phone calls?"

"Just a prank caller, and then some asshole mugged me a few weeks ago and I—"

"You were mugged?" he asked, tightening his grip on her. It was no wonder the woman was falling apart. Hell, he couldn't figure out what was holding her together.

She grinned ruefully. "I'm starting to sound like a walking train wreck."

He frowned, a growing feeling of concern tugging at his gut. "You need to be more careful, Jessie. Denver is a big city and I'm not so sure I like the idea of you staying there alone considering all that's happened lately."

"You're starting to sound like Todd."

"Well, then Todd is apparently speaking common sense."

She leaned forward and kissed him lightly. "You've been so kind and patient. I can't imagine too many men who would stick around when they wake up to hear the crazy woman they just had sex with crying over her dead husband."

As she said the last words, her voice broke. He moved toward her and kissed her gently. "Shhh. Don't be silly. You aren't crazy. You just need more time."

"Time," she said with disgust. "If I hear that word again, I swear I really will go insane. Everyone says I need time, but time moves too damn slow and nothing ever changes."

He chuckled at the ferocity of her words. He imagined that once Jessie's mourning passed, she would be a force to be reckoned with. There was a powerful soul in her tiny frame. "I wouldn't say that. You went out tonight and let yourself have a good time."

"Yeah, but I had to think about having fun every minute," she added.

"And you'll probably have to think about it the next time too, but eventually, you'll remember how to have fun without having to make the conscious effort."

“Caleb, tonight with you, the party, the kitchen, it’s all been amazing, but—” She hesitated and he knew what she was struggling to say.

“But it’s not time for this yet,” he finished for her.

“I can’t do this. I can’t give you what you deserve. I’m only a tenth of the person I was a year ago and until I track down the rest of myself, I—” She stopped again.

He smiled sadly, aware that she was truly a one-in-a-million woman. She’d been warning him all night in little ways that tonight was all they would have. He respected her honesty and her courage.

“I understand,” he whispered, kissing her again, desperate to have one last taste of her before she disappeared from his life completely. They broke apart and he lay back, pulling her to his chest, relishing the sound, the heat of her soft, deep breaths as she fell back to sleep.

Jessie opened her eyes, squinting against the harsh sunlight and her throbbing head. “Shit,” she muttered. She glanced around the empty room, surprised to find she was alone.

Rising, she threw on her robe and walked out to the kitchen. At the table, she found a note from Caleb.

Jess,

Got an early call from hospital. ATV accident—bad one. I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you woke up. Call me when you’re ready.

Caleb

At the bottom of the paper, he had scrawled his cell phone number. She folded the paper and considered picking up the phone right away. She missed him, but calling him now wouldn’t change anything. She’d merely drag him down with her into this murk and mire she called a life. That depressing thought was just taking root when a knock at the door distracted her.

“Come in,” she called out.

Todd staggered in, bleary-eyed and definitely the worse for wear. She tried to hold back her amusement and failed, giving in to her laughter.

“Oh yeah,” he said, his voice uncharacteristically rough, “laugh it up. This isn’t funny. This is agony. Why didn’t you stop me?”

She shrugged. “You were having fun.”

“Christ, I don’t think there’s enough fun in the world to justify this hangover.”

“Why are you out of bed so early then? Go sleep it off.”

“It’s your fault I’m not in my bed. I crashed on Jacob’s couch last night. I was staggering back about an hour ago when I passed Caleb on the path. I actually crawled into bed and tried to sleep, but you know me. Curiosity won out. What the hell happened between you two?”

She sat down in the kitchen chair and gestured for him to join her. Once he settled, she leaned her head back, closed her eyes and sighed.

“I slept with Caleb.”

She expected an outburst, a loud exclamation, something noisy and dramatic, which was why she was so surprised by the silence that greeted her. She slowly dragged her eyes open, even more shocked to see Todd smiling at her.

“Did you hear what I said?” she asked.

“I heard you,” he answered.

“And?” she said, frustrated by his unusual reticence in expressing his opinion.

“And I think that’s great.”

“Great?” Her voice sounded too loud in the tiny kitchen. Then she felt her shoulders droop and her fears came falling out in a rush of words. “You don’t think I betrayed Tommy, that I was wrong to hop into bed with another man so soon? Tommy’s only been gone eight months. What the hell was I thinking? I barely know Caleb. Does this mean I’m a slut? Don’t you think—?”

“Now wait right there,” he interrupted her. “You are not and never have been a slut. Hell, Tommy was your first and only lover before last night. And no, I don’t think you were wrong to invite Caleb to your bed. I’ve watched you drift away from me, from life these past few months, and I was so afraid I’d never be able to get you back. Last night, you laughed, you danced, you sang and you opened your heart enough to let a kind man love you.”

She winced at his use of the word *love*, but he waved her off. “I don’t mean you’re in love with Caleb and I’m not saying he’s in love with you, but I know you, Jess. You’re not the type of woman who hops into any man’s bed. You and Caleb talked last night for hours at the party and I watched you let go of some of that damn armor you’ve wrapped yourself in these past few months. I’ve known Caleb for years. He’s a nice, honest, decent guy and there’s no way I would have let him walk you home if I hadn’t known he’d take care of you.”

“I didn’t bring him back here with the intention of having sex with him.”

“I’m sure you didn’t, but the fact of the matter is you needed last night, kiddo. I have a feeling you’ve turned a corner and whether you see Caleb again or not isn’t really the point. You’re letting yourself live again. You didn’t die eight months ago. Tommy did.”

“I know that,” she whispered.

“No, Jess, I’m not sure you do. At least, you didn’t seem to before last night.”

She considered his words. Had she checked out the night she found Tommy’s body? Had she been hiding, playing dead, wallowing in Tommy’s death rather than moving on? She’d blamed the mugging, the phone calls, the irritating feeling she had of being watched for her escape from society. In her mind, she

had a mystery to solve and that thought had consumed more and more of her time. But had she been using that as an excuse? A reason to stop moving forward with her own life?

Last night with Caleb, she'd felt as if she were coming to life again, or at least, out of hibernation. It had been wonderful, freeing, and she found it difficult—no, she found it impossible—to face the idea of returning to the coldness, the loneliness that had plagued her for months.

"So what's the plan?" he asked.

"I'm moving here," she said, the words flying from her lips without thought and she realized that was another decision she'd unconsciously made during the previous evening.

"For Caleb?"

She shook her head. "No, for me."

"And this investigation into Tommy's death?"

She considered Todd's question. She knew he thought she was grasping at straws, trying to make something out of nothing. For months, she'd been so sure, but now? What if his death had been an accident? What if the mugging and the prank calls were nothing more than that? What if in her grief she had created this idea of a crime, just as everyone suspected?

"Maybe it's time to accept that I may never learn the truth of his death." Even as she spoke the words, she fought to believe the wisdom of them. Common sense said it was time to move on, to start living again, but her sense of conviction, the tiny voice in the back of her brain that wouldn't let her rest disagreed.

He grinned. "I would like to go on the record as saying if you'd given me the news that you were moving here any other day, I would be screaming my head off and dancing you around this kitchen. However, as my head is about two minutes away from exploding, you're just going to have to take my word for the fact that I'm happy as hell."

She laughed. "Yeah, well, I'll trust you and you're forgiven for not dancing. Seems to me you did enough of that last night."

"Don't remind me. I have a feeling the only reason I'm not crying in agony over the pain in my legs is because my head hurts worse."

She stood up and pressed a soft kiss to his brow. "You have been an amazing friend to me these past few months. I don't think I would have survived without you."

Todd shrugged and offered her a sad smile. "Tommy wouldn't have wanted you to be so miserable, and he wouldn't have wanted you to spend the rest of your life alone and in mourning."

He'd spoken the same words to her before, but for the first time, she could see, could feel the truth behind them.

Her friend was right, Tommy would hate to see her so consumed by grief and loneliness. However, her heart also knew that were the situation reversed, there was no force on earth that would stop her husband from seeing justice served. Didn't she owe the same to him?

Chapter Four

Jess was halfway between Saratoga and Denver when her cell phone rang. The return trip home was slowly erasing the positive effects of her vacation. The tension she'd managed to shake loose was returning to her shoulders. She dreaded the return to her cold, lonely apartment, facing long nights waiting for her faceless caller to begin tormenting her again.

She snatched the phone up from beside her on the car seat. "Hello?"

"Jessie?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Hi, this is Dawnette." Jessie was surprised to hear Tommy's secretary on the other end of the line. She hadn't spoken to the woman since Tommy's death. There had been several times when she'd wanted to call to talk to Dawnette about her suspicions, but the secretary had taken his death hard, blaming herself for not staying late to work with him and Jessie hadn't wanted to add to the poor woman's pain.

"Hey, Dawnette. How are you?" She'd always liked her husband's assistant.

"I'm doing fine. I hope I'm not calling at a bad time."

"Actually I'm on my way home from Saratoga. I've been visiting a friend."

"Oh, that's nice." Dawnette's voice seemed distant, distracted. "Listen, I'm actually calling because, well, because there's been a bit of a problem at the accounting firm."

"A problem?" she asked.

"More than a problem. An arsonist burned the whole place down."

"What?" Jessie asked.

"Two nights ago. The fire marshal found some sort of incendiary device and he's sure it was foul play."

"Oh, how awful. Was anyone in the building?"

"No, the cleaning crew had just left, so no one was hurt at least. Thing is, they think the fire started in Tommy's old office."

Jessie considered her words. "Dawnette, the day Tommy died, he called me and mentioned finding something interesting in an audit he was doing. Do you have any idea what he meant?"

"Interesting?" Dawnette asked. "I remember he was stressed out for a couple of days prior to his, um, accident. You know how he was, always so calm, cool and collected. It was weird to see him so uptight."

"Do you know what account he was working on? What could have possibly upset him?"

“He was a brilliant accountant. He always had five or six accounts on his desk at one time. It’s hard to say for sure, but I’ve been a secretary in accounting firms for years and nothing short of an IRS audit or embezzlement gets an accountant as worked up as Tommy was.”

Embezzlement? The word resounded in Jessie’s mind and she tried to recall whether or not she’d noticed his anxiety at home. They’d both been bogged down with work. Perhaps the signs that something was bothering him had been there all along and she hadn’t been paying attention.

The image of Tommy as he lay dying alone, outside in the cold, came into her mind, only this time the picture changed and Jessie imagined someone was with him, standing over him. What if someone knew Tommy was getting close to uncovering evidence that would expose his crime and the villain had decided to silence him forever?

“I’m sorry to bother you at all,” Dawnette continued, “but something told me you would want to know about the fire.” The soft, urgent tone of the secretary’s voice clued her in that Dawnette had heard about Jessie’s visit to the firm and about the nature of the questions she’d been asking. She was grateful to the woman not only for her information, but also for her call. Clearly Dawnette was one of the minority who didn’t think Jessie’s concerns were unfounded.

“I can’t tell you how glad I am that you did.”

“Well, goodbye, Jessie.”

“Bye, Dawnette.” She closed the cell phone and tried to focus her attention on the road. She considered the woman’s comments about the fire starting in Tommy’s office. She had gone over the day of her husband’s death so many times, she thought she’d lose her mind. Since then, she had been mugged and plagued by phone calls.

Her immediate suspicions fell to Tommy’s partner, Rex, but why would he torment her and why would he burn down the firm? If he’d been part of an embezzlement scheme, he had access to all of Tommy’s records. He could have destroyed or hidden all the evidence long ago. There was no logical explanation for him to burn down his own building. However, given the fact she was questioning him about who Tommy had met with, the man knew she was suspicious.

Dawnette’s comments also suggested that the villain could be someone who worked for the targeted company and once again, she felt frustrated by Rex’s silence in telling her the names of the clients Tommy had met with that last day. Was Rex protecting someone? Jordan said he’d met with Tommy that morning and her husband had been acting normally. Who had Tommy seen after that? And why would the embezzler turn his attention toward her after Tommy’s death? She didn’t know his identity. She had no proof against him. Or did she?

She sighed and signaled as she approached the exit that would put her on the highway that would take her back to Denver. Her head ached and the familiar coldness that had permeated every part of her body returned with a vengeance.

“So much for that vacation,” she muttered as she felt all traces of the optimism and happiness she felt in Saratoga drift away.

“Why are you there, Jessie?”

She shrugged, then grinned as she became aware of the fact that Jordan couldn’t see the gesture through the cell phone. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m simply a glutton for punishment.”

“You’ve just returned from a lovely vacation, young lady. You should be wading through a sea of mail and laundry. Instead you’re sitting outside a burned-out building. Why?”

“Hell if I know,” she admitted wearily. She’d been unable to sleep more than a few hours last night as she’d tossed and turned, thinking of all Dawnette had said about the fire and the possibility of embezzlement. “The answer to Tommy’s death may have been in there.”

“Well, if it was, it’s been reduced to rubble and ash. This isn’t healthy for you, Jessie. I wish you’d take a few steps back from this investigation and take care of yourself. I thought that trip to Saratoga might help you see that continuing down this path will only lead to exhaustion and pain.”

“I thought you understood,” she said sadly. Jordan had been her only confidant, her staunchest supporter as she attempted to puzzle out the mystery surrounding Tommy’s death. The idea of continuing the search alone again depressed her.

“I do understand and you must know I’ll help you in anyway I can, but I care about you and I have to admit to being more than a little worried about you. You’ve become the daughter I never had, dear Jess, and I would give anything to see you happy again.”

She smiled at his kind sentiment. “Just help me see this through to the end, Jordan. Your friendship, your belief in me has meant more than I can say.”

“Then that is precisely what you’ll continue to have. So how long are you going to sit there?”

She laughed lightly. “Not long. I’ve got too many errands to run downtown today to dawdle for long.”

“Well then. I’ll leave you to your ruminations, Sherlock Holmes. I have a board meeting to attend. Goodbye, Jessie.”

“Goodbye.” She closed her cell phone and looked at the burnt-out shell of her husband’s office building. She recalled the day he and Rex had decided to open the firm together and smiled as she remembered Tommy’s excitement as he led her through the building the afternoon they’d signed the contract to buy it. She was glad he wasn’t here to see his dreams, his future plans reduced to a pile of charred planks and dirty ashes.

She was surprised when a car pulled up beside her. Glancing over into the driver’s seat, she found Rex looking at her. Obviously, he wasn’t happy to find her here. She forced a faint smile and opened her car door as he opened his.

“Hey, Rex.”

He looked tired, sad. “What are you doing here, Jessie?”

“I guess the same thing as you,” she replied. “Remembering.”

He crossed to the front of his vehicle and leaned against the hood. She joined him.

For a moment, she felt sorry for him.

At least, she did until he spoke. “Still trying to build conspiracy theories out of thin air?”

She fought back her anger at his hostile tone. The man had suffered a second major blow to his career in less than a year, so she struggled to make her reply kind, non-threatening. He and Tommy, while not bosom buddies, had worked together in relative peace and harmony for many years. Losing his partner and now his office had to be taking a toll on him.

“I’m just trying to make sense of all of this, Rex.”

“Dammit, Jess. Sometimes life kicks you in the teeth just for the fucking hell of it. Why does it have to mean something?”

Her temper rose at his casual dismissal of what he had to see as further proof that her suspicions weren’t unfounded. “What is wrong with you? Are you so apathetic, so cowardly, that you prefer to close your eyes to everything that’s going on around you rather than confront it head on?”

“What am I facing? Tommy fell and hit his head. It was an accident. An arsonist threw a Molotov cocktail in the window of my office building. In case you failed to notice, we live in a relatively large city where crime is on the rise. Jesus, you were just mugged. Surely, you aren’t pretending that crime doesn’t exist in Denver?”

“How did you know about the mugging?” she asked, shocked to discover he knew about it.

“Jordan mentioned it the last time he was in.”

She nodded and considered his answer. Jordan, true to his word, had been trying to discover more information regarding Tommy’s clients and she suspected her dear friend had been harassing Rex relentlessly. The thought offered her a bit of petty pleasure. Rex had always been the weaker of the two accountants, perfectly content to ride Tommy’s coattails as her husband landed account after account, building their firm into one of the most prosperous in the city.

A new thought occurred to her. How was Rex doing now that he was the driving force of the firm? What if he’d burned down the building himself in an attempt to hide the fact he was failing on his own?

She mentally shrugged. Rex’s lack of business savvy certainly didn’t explain Tommy’s death, the mugging or the damned phone calls.

“What accounts was Tommy working on?” she asked when Rex turned back toward the destroyed building and sighed heavily. She hoped his obvious exhaustion would weaken his defenses.

“You’re relentless,” he said, turning toward her, anger written on every line on his face. Stress had taken its toll on the man as she noticed how much he’d aged in the last year. Tommy had always called him

his pretty boy partner, teasing Rex relentlessly for his vanity and playboy lifestyle. His typically clean-cut face was shadowed with a couple days worth of growth. He had dark circles under his eyes and his mouth was drawn tight, his ever-present cocky grin missing.

"I prefer the word determined," she said.

"You're a fool." He raised his hand quickly and she fought to hide a flinch. He shook his finger in her face angrily and by his loud, harsh words, she knew she'd pushed him too far. "And an annoyance. I'm going to tell you one more time, Jessie. Tommy's death was an accident and this was a random act of arson. Now I want you to get off this property before I call the police and have you charged with trespassing. I don't want to see you here again."

She started to argue, but whatever restraint he'd held on his fury slipped completely. "Get the *fuck* out of here!" he yelled.

She sucked in a breath at his livid tone and cold face. She'd never been afraid of Rex, but at that moment, with his narrowed eyes and clenched fists, she sensed a cold-blooded hostility she'd never seen before.

She climbed into her car and pulled out of the parking lot, fighting to still her trembling hands. Glancing in the rearview mirror, she could see his heated gaze following her as she drove away. Apparently she'd lied to Todd. Her move to Saratoga would have to wait.

Caleb dragged himself into the ranch house after pulling a double shift. He was pleasantly surprised when he opened the front door to find the place back in order and all the guests finally gone.

"Hey, Doc," Jacob called, coming down the stairs with a full garbage bag. "Everything okay at the hospital?"

"Yeah, the flu seems to be making its rounds though. Left us short one doctor and two nurses."

"You got home late from the party," Jacob said, placing the heavy bag down. "Or should I say early?"

Caleb rolled his eyes. No doubt his brother was hoping for some juicy details. "I'm tired, Jake. I'm going to bed."

"Too tired to talk, huh? I wonder what on earth could have made you so tired."

He shook his head and grinned. "Not going to let me rest, are you?"

"Nope, so you might as well spill it all," Jacob replied. Caleb resigned himself to telling Jacob about his night. He had always been closest to his baby brother, despite the wide gap in their ages and the fact they shared few common interests.

Jacob was a reader, a writer, an artist, while Caleb lived his life firmly ensconced in the sciences. Jacob liked loud rock music, while he preferred a slow country melody. Caleb was a red-blooded heterosexual male, while Jacob...well, Jacob was not.

It had taken him some time to come to grips with the idea that his youngest brother was gay, but seeing the transformation in his brother, who'd always been too quiet, too insecure while growing up, was worth the effort. Jacob had grown into a confident, outgoing young man and Caleb was extraordinarily proud of him.

"Jessie is an amazing woman," he said.

"So I hear. Todd is crazy about her," his brother said, "and worried about her."

He nodded. "Her husband died about eight months ago, some sort of accident."

"Yeah, I remember Todd telling me about it at the time. Said Jessie shut herself up. Never went out, didn't cry, talk, smile."

"She loved her husband," he said, the image of Jessie crying softly in bed returning to him. "We made love," he added quietly.

"Made love or had sex?" Jacob asked. "There's a difference, you know."

"I know," he confessed. "And I said it right the first time."

"Shit, one night and you're falling for her."

He shrugged and turned away from his brother. "If I am, it doesn't matter. Jessie's not ready for a relationship."

Jacob placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "She may not be ready now, Doc. That doesn't mean she'll never be ready. I'm just happy that you're finally putting yourself out there. At last. Started to think you were going to milk this damned bachelor lifestyle until the grave."

"Kind of jumping the gun, aren't you? I spent one night with a woman who isn't ready for a relationship. Let's face it, Jake, it's probably a little too late for me to be considering the dating scene. I'm too old and set in my ways."

"You're not old at all. The only thing wrong with you is that you've spent your whole life giving to others and now you've forgotten how to take something for yourself."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Caleb asked, confused by his brother's comment.

"You give one hundred and twenty percent of your attention and time to that hospital, to your patients, to us, but, Doc, when's the last time you took something because you needed it? Hell, when's the last time you took something just because you wanted it?"

When he'd graduated from medical school, all he'd wanted was to help people, to be a success. As the eldest brother, he'd taken on the responsibility of caring for his brothers after their parents passed away. He'd never been involved in a serious relationship because he'd never had the time. His one night with Jessie supported the truth of his brother's observations. He was lonely, and the lovely widow had uncovered some latent yearnings he'd never realized were there.

"You know, for someone who thinks he's so smart, you would think that talent would carry over to buying decent condoms. Where in the hell did you get that one you gave me that night?"

“You gave it to me,” Jacob said.

“When?”

“When I was heading out to junior prom.” His brother adopted the same deep voice he’d used last night, this time, no doubt trying to sound like a pompous, younger version of him. “You said, ‘Jake, I know how boys are and prom is a big night. Make sure you practice safe sex.’”

“I thought you were mimicking Dad last night with that line.”

“Shit, when would Dad have ever given us condoms and said the word *sex* to us? You were the one who explained the birds and bees to me.”

“Looks like I did a hell of a job,” he joked and Jacob laughed.

“You did fine, dumbass. Holy hell, you didn’t try to use that thing, did you? It’s ancient.”

Caleb bit his tongue, unwilling to confess his idiocy. “Why are you still carrying the damn thing?”

“Sentimental value. I like to think of it as my lucky charm. Actually, if you don’t mind I’d like it back.”

He felt his face flush a bit at Jacob’s request.

“Crap, you did use it.”

“You didn’t mention wanting it back,” he said.

“Yeah, well. I didn’t actually think you and Jessie would hook up and then I figured you were smart enough to realize I was imitating you and that you’d see how fucking old the thing was.”

“It was dark and I was more than halfway to drunk, Jake.”

His brother laughed. “Just tell me it didn’t break.”

“It broke,” he said.

Jacob’s jaw dropped and Caleb watched the color slowly seep out of his brother’s face.

“It’s okay. Jessie assured me it was fine. She must be on the Pill or taking those birth control shots. I’m clean and she’s only ever been with her husband, so it’s not like STDs are an issue either.”

“Phew, that’s a relief. I almost made myself an uncle. Who’d have thought it? And at Gay Fest too.”

Caleb laughed and picked up the bag of garbage. “Shut up, you idiot. What’s left to clean up around here?”

Chapter Five

“Thank you, Officer,” Jessie said, closing the door behind the policeman and quickly throwing the deadbolt in place as well as sliding the chain into its notch. She turned and looked at the mess that was her apartment.

She’d driven to the grocery store after her conversation with Rex, then headed to the post office to pick up the mail that had accumulated while she was on vacation. She’d even treated herself to lunch at a new tapas bar, hoping that by forcing herself into normal activities, she could stop feeling so out of control, so helpless.

She didn’t realize as she left the restaurant that she was driving back to hell. Someone had broken into her apartment while she was out and the culprit had certainly done a number on the place. Nothing had been left untouched or undisturbed. It didn’t appear that anything had been stolen. Her television, stereo, even her big bowl of loose change were still in place.

On the plus side, the police were now admitting that she seemed to have attracted the unsavory attention of some criminal. They still didn’t think this break-in had anything to do with Tommy’s death, but at least they didn’t think she was blowing things out of proportion anymore when she mentioned the feeling of being watched.

Some consolation.

According to the police officer, either the person was a vandal trying to wreck havoc and scare her or he was someone looking for something. Regardless of the asshole’s intentions, she was immediately besieged with the same uneasy, fearful feelings she’d just spent the last two weeks on vacation trying to cure herself of.

Reaching for her cell, she started to dial Todd’s number. She’d only punched in a few digits when she stopped and considered calling Caleb. She felt certain he would know what to say, know how to help her. She wished she had extended her trip, stuck around a few more days. She felt a bit like a coward for leaving town without even saying goodbye to him.

“Shit,” she muttered to herself.

One night.

She’d spent one night talking to the man. They’d had sex once. It was over. The last thing she needed right now was to start thinking of Caleb as anything more than a one-night stand.

She finished dialing the phone.

“Hey, Jess,” Todd answered on the third ring. “What’s up?”

“Someone broke into my apartment. Trashed the place,” she said, her annoyance overshadowing her initial fear.

“Are you kidding me?” he asked.

“Am I laughing?” she answered.

“Shit, Stephen and I will pack up and head out this evening to—”

“No,” she said, interrupting him. “You aren’t driving all the way down here. Nothing was stolen. The police have come and gone and all I have to do now is clean up. I can do that on my own.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“I’ve got three more months on this lease and then I’m getting the hell out.”

“Screw the lease and come to Saratoga now,” Todd interjected.

She took a deep breath and bit her tongue. She was too damn tired to argue with her best friend, and if she told him of her plans to stay close to Denver to continue her investigation into Tommy’s death, the battle was likely to be epic. Evasion was her best bet. “No. I’m going to finish out the lease. I thought I’d use the time to do some major cleaning out. Do you mind if I send a few boxes your way to keep in your attic until I find a new place?”

“Of course I don’t mind. I’ve already got that box from Tommy’s office up there. You know there’s plenty of room. Send them on.”

“I’d forgotten about that box,” she said quietly, remembering the night her husband had died.

“Christ, I’m glad you’re moving here. Clearly Denver has gone mad if a woman gets mugged walking out of Starbucks and has her apartment trashed while she’s out.”

“Todd...” She paused, almost ready to dump all her concerns, her fears on him. She shook her head. She didn’t want to worry him. Whatever was going on, she would get to the bottom of it alone. “I’ll be fine. Goodbye.”

“Bye, kiddo.”

She hung up and crossed the room. Grabbing a cushion from the floor, she replaced it on the couch and dropped down heavily.

Her mind began to drift back to things she had purposely pushed away for months. Now as she looked around her destroyed living room, everything came back to her in a rush.

The last time she had spoken to Tommy had been lunchtime on the day he died. He’d called to tell her he’d be a bit later than usual getting home and that she shouldn’t wait for him to have dinner. She could tell by his voice he was anxious, upset. When she’d asked him about it, he merely said he’d found something interesting in his latest audit and that he was handling it. She remembered making some joke about an interesting audit being an oxymoron and Tommy laughing.

She'd spent the evening designing a web banner and had lost track of time. Coming up for air, she'd been surprised to discover it was after ten o'clock and Tommy still hadn't come home...

After repeated calls to his office phone and cell phone, she given in to her anxiety and driven to his office. It was just before midnight and his car was the only one in the parking lot as she pulled in. She knew immediately that something was wrong because the light was on inside the car and although she was facing the passenger side, she could see the driver's side door was open.

She saw Tommy lying on the pavement beside the car as she drove closer. She threw her car into park and rushed to him, slipping on the black ice at her feet and falling to her knees next to him. The instant she touched his face, she knew he was dead. Pulling his stiff, cold body to hers, she rocked him gently, calling his name, begging him to come back to her.

The rest of the night seemed a blur. She dialed 911. She followed the ambulance to the hospital and listened as the doctor told her he was dead. Head trauma—an accidental death. She answered a thousand questions for the police officer so he could type up his report. She called Todd in Saratoga and then drove straight back to Tommy's office.

She wasn't sure why she'd come to the office rather than returning home. It was nearly dawn and she had never felt so numb. A train could have run over her at that point and she was certain she wouldn't have felt a drop of pain.

Todd found her there. "Oh, thank God, Jess," he said from the doorway.

She glanced up, surprised to see him.

"Stephen and I have been all over the place looking for you. He's back at your place right now, calling all your friends. What are you doing here?"

"Packing things up." She needed to clean out Tommy's office. He was dead. He wouldn't be back and someone new would be moving in.

"Christ, Jessie. Why are you doing that now? Have you even been home? Have you slept at all?"

She shrugged and continued throwing items from Tommy's desk into the box she had found earlier in the filing room. "I need to get this stuff out of here, Todd. They need this space." Her voice was shrill, distant and for a moment, she was struck by the fact that it sounded like someone else was speaking with her mouth.

"Oh, kiddo, please stop. Don't do that anymore. This can wait until later." Todd came over to her and gripped her hands in his, trying to halt her actions, but she pulled them back, overwhelmed with irrational anger.

"I have to do this now," she said sharply.

She felt Todd studying her face for a long time, but she ignored him and continued throwing things in the box. A Rolodex, computer disks, a thumb drive, Tommy's diplomas, the paperweight he'd received

from Jordan when they'd signed him on as a client, the fancy pen set she had given him for Christmas. Her hand paused when she picked up the frame that held their wedding picture.

"Shit," she whispered. Then louder, she repeated the word several more times. "Shit!" she screamed, throwing the frame across the room, against the wall where it shattered.

Todd reached for her as she crumpled and together they huddled on the floor behind Tommy's desk while her sobs erupted and the tears flowed.

It was at that point that time betrayed her, began its cursed slowness, taunting her with minutes that seemed to last for days. As the memory of that night faded again, Jessie remembered Todd picking her up, walking her to his car, and putting the box in his trunk.

Sighing, she looked around at the mess and stood up. This wasn't a random act of destruction. She shivered as the sense of being watched returned.

"Damn you," she whispered to the empty apartment. "What do you want from me?"

Jessie tried to concentrate on the movie, but her heart wasn't into the story. In the past the romantic comedy had never failed to lighten her heart, but tonight, her gloominess, her misery was just too heavy to penetrate. The phone rang beside her and for a moment her heart raced in fear. A quick glance at the clock showed her it was only nine-thirty and she shook herself for her irrational fear. Checking the number, her heart began to race again, but this time for an entirely different reason.

"Hello?"

"Jessie?"

"Yes."

"Hey Jess, this is Caleb James."

"Caleb, hi," she said, grinning widely at the sound of his friendly voice. She'd plugged his number into her cell the day after their one-night stand. It had taunted her for the past week as she considered calling him about a thousand times a day. She'd thought of her night with the sexy doctor more than she cared to admit.

"I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" he asked.

"Oh no, I'm just sitting here watching a movie."

"Do you want me to let you go? I can call back later."

Jessie laughed. "Don't you dare hang up. Some brilliant person invented this marvelous thing. It's called the pause button. Besides, I'm watching my favorite movie and I've seen it about a thousand times."

"Favorite movie? What are you watching?" he asked.

"Overboard."

She giggled at the long pause on the other end of the line as she mentioned the title of the ultimate chick flick.

“*Overboard*? Isn’t that the one with Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell?” he asked. She could almost picture the look of male distaste on his handsome face.

“Yep.”

“And this is your favorite movie?”

“Of all time,” she answered, laughing at his disbelief.

“Oh, Jess, I gotta tell you. That really isn’t a very good movie.”

“Are you kidding me? It’s awesome. Romance, comedy, a sexy hero. What more could you want?”

“A car chase, a few explosions, some aliens, maybe a shark,” he joked.

She shook her head. “Uh oh. So let me guess, your favorite movie has to be *Die Hard*, *Alien* or *Jaws*?”

“Or all of the above, plus the Terminator movies,” he added.

Jessie groaned and they laughed together.

“I hope you don’t mind me calling you out of the blue like this.”

“I don’t mind at all. Todd mentioned that you’d asked for my number. I was kind of wondering if you’d call.”

“Yeah, well. I should have called earlier. I’ve been worried about you and I wanted to make sure that, I wanted to see if—” He stumbled, but she knew what he was asking.

“I’m fine, Caleb.”

“No regrets?”

“Not a single one,” she assured him.

“Good.”

“How about you?” she asked. She’d relived their night together so many times in her head, she’d cemented every minute of the evening in her brain in perfect clarity. She worried that perhaps she’d built the moment up to mean a hell of a lot more than it had. No doubt a handsome, successful doctor like Caleb had women throwing themselves at him on a daily basis. She’d be a fool to think that night had been as special for him as it had been for her.

“Not a single regret,” he said. “Well, except,” he paused again and her heart started to pound again.

“Except?” she prodded.

“Except that you seem to have ruined me for other women. I haven’t had as much fun on a date since the night you and I spent together.”

Jessie laughed and shook her head. “Oh yeah, right.”

“I’m serious. You would not believe what passes for conversation with a couple of the women I’ve taken out lately,” he said.

She winced at the image of Caleb out on a date with another woman, then shook herself for her foolish jealousy.

“You make it sound like dating is a new concept to you,” she said, pulling the blanket more firmly around her and settling down in her comfortable couch. It felt so good to have a real conversation with a nice man. For the first time since her return home, she felt her entire body relax.

“Well, I have to confess, it sort of is.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m a doctor. I don’t have a lot of time for dating. Or I should say I never made a lot of time for dating.”

“And you are now?”

“Jacob pointed out to me the day after his party that I have a tendency to let work dictate my life. I had such a good time with you that I thought I’d try to cut back on my hours at the hospital and start going out more.”

“And it’s not going well?” She tried to brush away the slight tinge of irrational jealousy that surfaced when she pictured him going out to dinner and the movies with another woman.

“That would be an understatement.” For several moments, Caleb related his two dating horror stories while she laughed. She was sure he didn’t realize it, but she had to admit that ironically he was just what the doctor ordered. She’d been feeling unusually tired lately as her investigation into Tommy’s death seemed to occupy all of her spare time.

“Clearly you aren’t asking out the right sort of women,” she added.

Caleb sighed on the other end of the line. “Tell Jacob. He’s the one who made the list.”

“List?” she asked.

“When I admitted that I might be interested in dating, Jake pulled out a list of available women he thought I should ask out.”

Jessie laughed long and loud, tears streaming down her face at Caleb’s admission. “Jacob made a list? For you? Oh, Caleb, no wonder it’s not going well.”

“Don’t get me wrong. The women are straight. Well, I mean, I think most of them are.”

They both dissolved into laughter together. “Do me a favor, Doc,” she said, adopting the nickname she’d heard his brother use the night of the party. “Make your own list. You might have better luck.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Todd says you’re looking to move here in a couple of months.”

Her heart missed a beat at his segue and she silently chastised herself for foolishly hoping he’d asked the question because he wanted to see her again. Then she dismissed the thought. She wasn’t in any better shape now than she’d been a week ago and unbeknownst to Todd, she wasn’t so sure a move to Saratoga was in her immediate plans any longer. Her thoughts were still consumed by the past and Tommy’s death. Until she settled that, she couldn’t even consider planning for the future.

"I have a few more months on my lease, but yeah, I hope to eventually move to Saratoga."

"Good," he said softly. "You sure you're doing okay? You sound tired."

She closed her eyes and felt the words she'd intended to hold back falling from her lips. "The phone calls haven't stopped."

She thought for a moment he'd actually growled. "Have you called the police?"

"Oh, the police and I have gotten quite chummy. Someone broke into my apartment last week." While her words were light, her tone betrayed her anxiety.

"Shit. To hell with the lease, Jess. Pack your stuff and move up here now."

She smiled, touched by his concern. "You sound like Todd again. Unfortunately, I have some unfinished business I need to take care of first."

"What sort of business?" he asked and she took a deep breath, wondering what he would say about her suspicions concerning Tommy's death.

"I think these phone calls, the mugging and the break-in are all connected to my husband's death."

"I thought his death was an accident."

"The police ruled it as one," she said. Her breathing accelerated as she feared his response to her words. She'd been scoffed at, laughed at, her feelings dismissed by strangers for months, but the idea of receiving the same treatment from Caleb terrified her. She desperately wanted him to believe her.

"But you don't think it was?"

"No," she admitted. "At first it started as a feeling. Tommy was acting strangely when he called me the afternoon he died. Then all these strange things started happening. I guess I really became convinced when an arsonist burned down the accounting firm where Tommy worked."

"Someone set fire to his office?" he asked.

"They don't know who did it, but I'm starting to think that Tommy stumbled onto some shady dealings, perhaps an embezzler."

"What is this unfinished business you have in Denver?" His voice throughout her recitation of events had been monotone, devoid of emotion. With this question, she heard his concern, perhaps even a bit of anger.

"I want to find out the truth," she said defensively.

"Let me see if I've got this right. You believe your husband uncovered some sort of embezzlement scheme and was murdered for it. Since his death you've been mugged, robbed, tormented by phone calls and his office has been burned down."

"That's right," she said.

"And now you're determined to find this person, this killer on your own?"

She pulled the phone away from her ear as his question was delivered with a yell. The old saying *be careful what you wish for* drifted through her mind. She'd definitely gotten what she wanted. Caleb believed her and now he was furious with her for pursuing the mystery.

"Caleb—"

"Jess. I want you to stop this now. You're in danger."

"I'll be fine. I'm simply doing a bit of digging around."

"And it seems clear to me that whoever this asshole is, he knows what you're doing."

"I need to do this. I can't stop yet," she insisted.

She heard him sigh on the other end of the line and for several moments, there was an uncomfortable silence. "Regardless of what I say, you're going to continue, right?"

She stared across the room, her eyes landing on a picture of Tommy at the bottom of the ski slope, grinning from ear to ear and wearing the goofy ski cap she'd knitted for him. "I have to continue," she replied.

"Will you at least promise me that you'll be careful?"

"That I can definitely promise. Thanks for calling, Caleb."

"Would you mind if I called again? Just to check on you and maybe for dating advice and such?"

She grinned, pleased at his attempt to lighten the moment once again. "I'd love for you to call again."

"Good night, Jess."

"Night, Doc."

Jessie hung up the phone and considered continuing the movie. Caleb always seemed to bring out a feeling of security in her. Even through a phone line, three hours away, he created in her a sense of peace that didn't exist any other time.

She sighed and pushed the power button to turn the whole thing off. She was worn out. Rising, she went to check that the front door was locked when she noticed an envelope had been shoved under the door.

Her heart raced as she bent down to pick it up. She knew who it was from. The person who'd been tormenting her had been right outside her front door, just through this wall as she'd talked to Caleb. While laughing with her handsome doctor, she'd felt safe—even if only for a moment—but clearly that safety had been an illusion. She tore the seal open and her hands shook as she pulled out the only item inside. A single sheet of paper.

As she looked at the paper, she felt herself leave her body.

An escape mechanism?

A way to escape the agonizing pain tearing through her physical form?

She felt like a spirit, like she was floating above herself, watching the scene unfold. A part of it, yet apart. She could see the woman below—her—as she screamed in horror and crumpled to the floor. She watched her body shake as the tears came out in giant, breath-gasping, rib-cracking sobs.

“Tommy,” she heard herself whisper. “Tommy.”

The paper contained only two words, written in bright red marker.

You’re next.

Glued to the page was Tommy’s obituary cut from the newspaper. She flew back down into her own body, the pain ripping through her, shredding her like a thousand knives. How long she lay, crying and broken on the floor, she couldn’t say.

When she was finally able to rise, she noticed the dark of night had given way to the gray of pre-dawn. She walked over to the phone. Pulling out the card of the police officer who’d investigated the break-in, she dialed the number.

Her mind continued to whirl with the same words, floating through her brain over and over.

I was right.

I was right.

Tommy had been murdered and now his murderer had set his sights on her.

Chapter Six

Jessie dragged in a deep breath and tried to still the queasiness that never seemed to leave her these days. The virus had hit her like a ton of bricks the morning after she'd received the frightening message under the door and, in the past three months, it had never gone away. She'd blamed the lingering illness and the unending nausea on her depression.

She'd finally gone to the doctor this morning, after weeks of nagging from Todd, and she was hoping the damn man would call her back soon with the test results. Todd had a fit when she'd told him how long the virus had been hanging on, but she absolutely hated going to the doctor, which was kind of ironic considering how much she'd loved talking to Dr. Caleb James on the phone these past few months.

The phone rang and she grinned. Speak of the devil.

"Hey, Caleb," she said.

"Hey, yourself. You okay, Jess? Your voice sounds funny."

"Actually, I'm just waking up from a nap. I ate something that disagreed with me at breakfast." She wasn't sure why she lied to Caleb about her health. He was a doctor, for God's sake, and probably could have offered her some medical advice. For some reason, she didn't want him to know how weak, how vulnerable she was feeling. Their phone conversations had become her lifeline, her brief touch with sanity while everything else around her seemed to be falling apart. When she was talking to Caleb, she felt like the same old Jessie, the one she'd been before death and terror had taken over her life.

"It's not food poisoning, is it? You shouldn't mess around with that. Why don't you go to the—"

"I'm fine," she interrupted. "Truly. Actually, whatever it was has passed and I was just getting up to do some more packing. How was your date last weekend?"

"Hell." He replied so seriously and succinctly that she giggled.

"It couldn't have been that bad," she said, secretly pleased that Caleb hadn't had any more success with his own list than he'd had with Jacob's.

"I don't think there are words to describe the eternity that passed during that two-hour dinner. All she wanted to talk about was her work."

"What does she do for a living?" she asked.

"Real estate law," he replied with a groan.

Jessie smiled. "Oh my, that was probably a stimulating conversation."

“Very funny. When are you getting here? If I don’t have a meal with a nice, normal woman soon, I’m likely to die of indigestion.”

She’d been burning the candle at both ends lately and had decided it was time to hit Saratoga for a brief vacation. She was looking forward to relaxing and hanging out with her friends. “I’m coming next week. Hey, are you asking me out?” she joked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess I am. Is that okay?”

She paused to consider his question. Was she ready to go out on a date? “Yeah, I think that’s more than okay,” she said, her answer surprising her as much as him.

“Good,” he said. “Listen, I actually called for another reason. I ran into Todd last night and we had a long talk. He agrees with me that you need to stop this insanity.”

“By insanity, I assume you are referring to the fact that I am pursuing Tommy’s killer?” she asked, her voice seizing up with the sudden tightness claiming her chest. She silently cursed her best friend and his big mouth, praying that he hadn’t told Caleb about the death threat. “Glad the two of you had such a nice chat about me behind my back.”

“We’re worried about you, Jess.”

She hadn’t told Caleb about the terrifying note she’d received. She hated keeping it a secret but given the fact that he didn’t like the idea of her investigating her husband’s murder, she was fairly certain he’d go ballistic if he learned that the killer had threatened her as well.

“I don’t like the idea of you staying in Denver alone,” he said.

“I’ll be there very soon.”

“Just for a visit. I don’t like the idea of you—” She heard another voice in the background before Caleb came back on the line. “Looks like my break is over. Rescue squad just pulled in and I’ve got to get back to work. You’re sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, Caleb. Really.”

“Call me as soon as you get into town.”

“Okay. Bye, Doc.”

“Bye, Jess.”

Damn. She had hoped to keep her past problems separate from her future. And the fact was she was kind of looking forward to exploring a possible future with Dr. James. She’d given up feeling guilty about her fascination for the man weeks ago. It looked like Todd had been right the morning after her one-night stand with Caleb. She had turned a corner. She stood up and glanced at the pile of boxes surrounding her.

Her lease had expired and she was going to stay in Saratoga for a couple weeks until she figured out what the hell she was going to do with her life. Despite the fact she seemed to be living in utter limbo, she refused to stay in this apartment any longer. There were too many memories—good and bad—and she was

anxious to make a fresh start elsewhere. Problem was her heart longed to live in Saratoga while her conscience screamed for her to remain in Denver until justice was served. Tommy deserved that.

She'd gone through the apartment with a fine tooth comb as she'd packed, looking through every disk of Tommy's she could find, spending countless hours on the computer, searching through old files. She'd found nothing strange.

Despite her lingering sickness, she actually felt better mentally than she had in months. She felt happy and there was this amazing optimism bubbling inside her that wouldn't be contained. She'd been right to decide to move out and as soon as she'd settled her mind to the idea, it had become paramount to her happiness.

The phone rang as she was reaching for another box and she silently hoped it was the doctor. At this point, she was ready to admit defeat and take whatever drugs he was willing to offer.

"Ms. Warner?"

"Yes, Dr. Griffin. Thanks so much for getting back to me. It's the flu, isn't it?"

"Actually, no. I ran a series of tests and I have to say I was so surprised by the results, I had them run the test again."

Jessie's heart beat a little harder at the doctor's words. She didn't think she could stand any more bad news. She'd had enough of that to last a lifetime. "What is it?"

"It would appear that you're pregnant."

Jessie's legs gave out at his words. Fortunately, the couch was behind her and she dropped down to the cushions. "That's impossible," she whispered.

"Is it?" the doctor asked. He had been her doctor for years. He knew she was a widow and he knew the trouble she and Tommy'd had trying to conceive.

"No," she confessed. "Not entirely impossible." She'd had sex. The condom had broken, but she had thought—

"Jessie, I was surprised too, but we hadn't actually started the fertility tests before Tommy—"

The doctor's words faded as did most peoples' when faced with saying any variation of the word *death* to her.

"We tried for five years, Dr. Griffin. My periods have never been regular and I always thought it was me. I mean never, not once, were we able to—"

"We never determined for sure if the difficulty lay with you or with Tommy. I know you've suffered from irregular periods your whole life, but I guess now, well, I guess now we know."

"Now we know," she repeated, awestruck by his news.

"Do you know exactly when you conceived?"

Jessie thought back to the last night of her vacation and Caleb. "August thirtieth."

She thought she heard the doctor chuckle. Obviously he wasn't expecting such a quick, specific answer. "Well, as this is now the end of November, we can safely say you are three months along. That also means you will probably begin to see an end to your morning sickness."

"I wasn't just sick in the morning."

"That is sometimes the case, which no doubt led to your confusion about the cause of your illness. I wish you'd come to see me sooner, Jessie. You're almost through the first trimester. I'm going to have my secretary call you tomorrow morning once you've had time to let this sink in. She'll make an appointment for you early next week."

"I'm moving," she said. "I was planning to pack up my car and a friend's truck to leave this weekend for a brief vacation." Jordan had offered to help her move her belongings to Todd's guesthouse for the time being.

The doctor was silent for a moment. "If I might suggest, have your friends load the vehicles or pay a moving company. Are you moving away from Denver?"

She thought about his question for only a moment. "Yes, I'm going to live in Saratoga."

"Ah, well, I will miss you as my patient, Jessie. Call the office as soon as you get settled and find a new doctor. Don't wait too long. We'll have your medical records transferred."

"Thank you, Dr. Griffin."

"Good luck, Jessie."

She hung up the phone and sat staring for several moments at her newly bared walls. Pregnant? Ever since their first year of marriage, she and Tommy had tried to conceive, desperate to have a child. Shortly before his death, they'd scheduled an appointment to talk to a fertility specialist. She'd truly believed she couldn't have children. Her hands went instinctively to her stomach. A baby. She was going to have a baby.

She smiled. Then she laughed, long and loud and until tears streamed down her face. She was going to have a baby. She wasn't going to be alone anymore. She would have a child to take care of, to love.

She calmed down as she thought of Caleb. Christ, one lousy night with her and the poor man had dealt with her tears, her insane life, and now she was dropping this bomb on him. She leaned back and considered her options. She was having the baby. Of that there was no doubt. But what about Caleb?

Keeping the truth from him wasn't an option she wanted to consider. It wasn't as if she was asking him to marry her, but she couldn't live with herself if she didn't at least give him the choice to decide what role he would play in their child's life. She would simply leave the decision to him. If he wanted to wash his hands of her and the baby, so be it. However, if he wanted to know his child, help her raise it, then that was fine too. With her living in the same town, it would be easy to include him in the baby's life...and hers.

The idea of seeing Caleb again started her heart doing flip-flops. She reached over to her purse and dragged out her phone. Caleb's number taunted her. As she looked at the cell phone, she tried to imagine what the hell she would say.

Hi there, Caleb. This is Jessie. Remember when we had sex on a kitchen counter a few months ago and the condom broke? Well, guess what? I'm pregnant.

Yeah, that would be a hell of an awkward conversation. No phone call, she decided. She was leaving this weekend for Saratoga, her planned visit now a permanent stay. She would call Caleb once she was settled in at the guesthouse as they'd planned. She'd invite him over for dinner and tell him in person.

There was no question of where she would live now. A small pang pierced her heart. She'd been determined to discover the truth of Tommy's death, but there was no way she would jeopardize the life of her baby. Moving away from Denver and the ominous threat that hovered over her here was now a necessity.

Mind made up, she picked up her cell phone. Todd was waiting to hear about the results of her doctor's appointment. He'd threatened bodily harm if she didn't call him back. Shit, what would he think of this? She'd convinced him she had the flu.

She chuckled as she considered the fact that for once in her life she stood a good chance of leaving her outspoken best friend speechless.

Chapter Seven

“Thanks again, Jordan. Are you sure you don’t want to stay for some hot tea before you go?” Jessie offered.

Jordan had followed her all the way from Denver with a bunch of boxes in the back of his brand new black F-150 pickup truck. They’d finished moving them all into the guesthouse and Jessie sighed at the thought of unpacking all the things she’d just packed up.

“No, I’m afraid I need to head back for the city. I have a meeting with Rex in the morning. Hope it won’t hurt your feelings if I say the man was clearly pleased to learn you were moving to Saratoga.”

Jessie laughed. “I’m sure he was. I think poor old Rex has come to view me his arch enemy.”

“Ah yes, I can see it now. You are Lex Luthor to his Superman.”

“The Joker to his Batman,” she added with a grin. “Oh, Jordan. How can I thank you for all your help?”

“No thanks necessary. I wanted to check out this new town you’ve chosen to make your home and to make sure you arrived here safe and sound.” Jordan turned to Todd. “See that you take care of our young lady here.”

“No worries there, Mr. Scott. I’ll look after her.”

“Well, I’m pleased to see that you’re staying somewhere nice. Saratoga is truly lovely. So picturesque and quiet compared to the crowds and noise of Denver. Take care, Jessie, and stay in touch.”

“I will, Jordan. And thanks again for helping me move.”

She hugged him fondly as she and Todd walked the older gentleman back to his truck and waved as he pulled out of the driveway.

She’d taken the doctor’s advice, hiring a moving van to bring the bulk of her heavy furniture later in the week and the move had been relatively easy as a result. She had already packed up a bunch of the smaller bits over the past three months and sent them to Todd to store in his attic. Until she found a place to live everything else she owned in the world, other than her clothing was going into a storage unit.

“A baby,” Todd exclaimed as they walked back to the front porch of the guesthouse. He was the only person with whom she’d shared her unexpected news and she grinned at her friend’s unabashed enthusiasm.

“I know,” she gushed. “I can’t quite believe it myself.”

“When are you going to tell Caleb?”

“Soon,” she answered. “I was going to get settled and then call him to come over for dinner one night. You think he’ll be okay with this, right?” Since her decision to tell Caleb about the baby in person, she’d worried incessantly over his response.

“He’ll be fine with this, Jess, and if he’s not, then screw him. You know Stephen and I will help you raise the baby. A baby,” he repeated in awe.

“I know,” she agreed.

“No more prank phone calls?”

She had called Todd the morning after she’d received the death threat. He’d come to Denver and spent a week with her, trying to convince her to move to Saratoga immediately. She’d been tempted, but at the time, she’d been determined to find Tommy’s murderer and she knew Todd would try to stop her.

“No,” she said. “Fact of the matter is I’ve hit a roadblock. I’ve gone over every scrap of evidence I could find in the apartment. I’ve questioned every person I can think of who may know something about this possible embezzler and I’ve found absolutely nothing.”

Her friend looked at her and nodded. “Jess, I understand your need to find this guy. I really do. If the roles were reversed, I’d want Stephen’s killer brought to justice. But now there’s this baby and I don’t think—”

“I’m finished, Todd.” As she spoke the words, she realized they were the truth. For the first time in nearly a year, she felt an overwhelming need to plan for the future. The past had consumed too much of her present and now there was too much to lose.

“In the past eleven months, I’ve been mugged, tormented by phone calls, received a death threat, and had my apartment trashed. Tommy’s office building has been burned to the ground and I—”

“Christ, do you have to spell it out in black and white like that?” Todd asked, interrupting her. “You’re scaring the shit out of me.” She could see the genuine fear in his eyes.

“This baby is all that matters to me now. I loved Tommy more than anything on earth, but he wouldn’t want me to jeopardize this child’s life, even if it brought his murderer to justice.” The truth of her words resonated in her heart.

“That’s a nice idea, Jess, but aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What?”

“What makes you think the bad guy is going to give up on you?”

“He’s been quiet since the death threat. Maybe he merely wanted to scare me away and he’ll see this move as a sign of his success. He didn’t follow me here last time. I spent two weeks here with you last summer and there were no phone calls and I didn’t feel like he was watching me.”

“I’m ashamed to admit that when you first mentioned the feeling that you were being watched, I thought it was just that overactive imagination of yours.”

“Things are going to be better now. I’m sure of it. It’s a fresh start.”

“Jessie wills it and so it will be,” he joked. “We’re having Thanksgiving dinner early tonight.”

“I wish you hadn’t gone to so much fuss. I swear, Todd, with the way my stomach has been acting lately, I didn’t really miss the holiday.”

He had declared he and Stephen would throw her a late Thanksgiving, since she’d elected to stay in Denver over the holiday rather than spend the actual day with them. She’d been bogged down with work, packing and dealing with her morning sickness. Plus she’d been afraid to risk the long drive with her nausea.

“Stephen and I have to pack up for our convention after dinner. I’m sorry we’re leaving the day after your arrival.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m here to stay so we’ll have plenty of time to spend together. Besides my only plans for the next few days are to go house-hunting and relax. Go to the convention and start drumming up some business for this bed and breakfast of yours. You’ve worked hard and the place looks magnificent. I have no doubt it will be the toast of Wyoming soon.”

Todd laughed. “I’d just settle for being the toast of Saratoga.”

“I thought you said there weren’t many bed and breakfast inns in Saratoga.”

“So it’s an achievable goal,” he joked. “I can already smell success.”

“All I smell is that yummy turkey,” she teased, laughing. She pushed her friend back toward the main house. “Go away, you idiot. I need to unpack.”

As her friend stepped away, Jessie glanced around at the surrounding woods. She hadn’t felt her tormentor’s eyes on her during her last visit, but the sensation was definitely here now.

She was tired of playing mouse to this villain’s cat and she prayed her intuition was wrong. There was too much to live for now. Her hands instinctively went to her stomach. She wasn’t showing yet, but it wouldn’t be long.

Please leave me alone.

The future was quickly approaching and she felt the powerful need to escape the past before it arrived.

Jessie bid farewell to the real estate agent and climbed into her car. She was disappointed in the houses the realtor had shown her, but the woman assured her there were many more choices. She wanted to buy a house with a backyard big enough for a swing set and room for a child to run around, to grow up.

Discouraged, she tried not to lose heart. There was always tomorrow. Suddenly that idea didn’t seem to bother her as much as it used to.

She’d said goodbye to Todd and Stephen early this morning as they’d left for Denver for an innkeeper’s convention. They hoped to learn more about the bed and breakfast trade as well as drum up

some business and make contacts in the field. She was pleased for her friends. They truly seemed to have found their niche in life and she hoped they would find success.

Driving down the county road toward their ranch, her thoughts drifted to Caleb and the baby. She'd intended to call him this morning, but chickened out at the last minute.

As soon as I get home, she thought. I'll call him the second I get home.

She was anxious to share what she prayed he would think was good news. The problem was she didn't really know Caleb James that well. They'd spent one fun, drunken night together and had spoken on the phone no more than a dozen times. Sometimes Jessie worried that she had built the man up in her mind, made too much of his kindness. He had come to her at a time when she'd been terribly lonely and grief-stricken. He'd made her laugh, made her feel like a desirable woman. Hell, he'd made her feel alive.

She slowed down at a particularly nasty curve in the road, squinting against the brutally bright afternoon sun. She reached up to put down her sun visor when another car came into view. For a split second, she considered the fact that this was the first vehicle she'd seen on the road since leaving the town limits, then she realized the car was on her side of the road and close. Too damn close. She swerved to the right sharply, attempting to avoid hitting the other vehicle. Her actions took her off road and she had only a second to panic as she saw the tree directly in her path.

Her scream was cut short when her car crashed roughly into the large tree. She felt a sharp, hard blow to her head and her surroundings became fuzzy. Her car horn blared nonstop intensifying her pain and she blinked against the grayness at the edge of her vision.

"It'll be okay, Jessie" a man said from beside her. She tried to turn her head, but the action hurt too badly and she gasped at the cruel, throbbing ache.

"Help me," she whispered, fighting not to lose consciousness.

"I'm sorry. I..." the man murmured. His calm tone penetrated her panicked mind as his words drifted away from her. Relief suffused her. Someone was with her. He would help her. She gave up her fight and succumbed to the darkness.

Chapter Eight

“Dr. James, the rescue squad just called ahead. They’re five minutes away with a car accident victim. Woman, late twenties, early thirties. She’s sustained head injuries and is complaining of pains in her stomach,” the nurse said as Caleb emerged from the break room. He’d been just about to leave for the day when the call came through. Trauma was his specialty.

“They’re here,” an orderly shouted from the ambulance entrance.

The EMT pushed the stretcher in and Caleb could hear the woman’s anguished cries as she got closer.

“Dr. James,” the EMT said as he approached them.

Looking down, he was shaken to the core to see Jessie, bleeding and in pain on the stretcher. “Jessie? Jesus, baby.”

“Caleb? Oh God, please help me. It’s hurts.”

He struggled to catch his breath. He was an ER doctor and no damn stranger to blood or pain, but seeing Jessie, crying in agony, he had to fight against the overwhelming feeling of nausea and fear. She’d obviously suffered a nasty cut somewhere on her head. There was an uncomfortable amount of blood on her face and in her hair. The EMT had a bloody pad pressed against her brow line.

“It’ll be okay, Jess. I’m here. I’m going to take care of you.”

“It hurts,” she gasped, clutching her stomach and Caleb realized she’d obviously sustained more serious injuries.

“Where, Jessie? Where does it hurt?”

“Ow,” she said, attempting to bend forward, fighting off the EMT who was holding her still.

“Try not to move, sweetheart.” He walked beside her as they rolled the stretcher into the first available examining room.

“No,” she sobbed. “The baby. My baby.”

Caleb froze in horror at her words. Baby? He pulled off the sheet covering her and felt his body turn to stone at the sight of the blood pooling around her hips. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to shut down the emotions whirling inside him.

He glanced at the nurse by his side. “Mollie, prepare for a possible D&C and I’m going to need blood typing.” Looking at the EMT, he gestured for the man to remove the bandage he was using to apply pressure to Jessie’s scalp.

“I don’t think it’s that bad,” the man said.

Although it had bled a lot, the bleeding seemed to have slowed down. “She’ll need stitches,” he said. “And possibly a tetanus. Keep pressure on that. It can wait for now.”

Jessie seemed to calm at his words. He bent forward, gently wiping away a tear that had fallen down her cheek. “Where does it hurt, Jess?”

“Stomach, cramps,” she said hoarsely. “Head.”

“Anywhere else?”

“No,” she whispered.

“How about here?” He slowly and methodically checked her ribs, arms, and legs for other injuries.

“The baby?” she asked.

Caleb stopped his ministrations and looked at her. He knew the baby had been lost, but his courage deserted him. “I’ll do what I can,” he said. “I’m going to give you something for the pain now. It may make you a bit drowsy.”

He gave Jessie a shot and once again had to fight back his frustration, his fears, his anger at the situation. She winced when he pressed the needle in, but didn’t complain. Within moments, her eyes drifted shut and he managed to take his first real breath since she’d been rolled into the emergency room. The idea of her suffering any amount of pain was like a dagger in his chest.

“A miscarriage?” Mollie asked softly.

He nodded sadly. “I’m afraid so.”

“Poor thing,” his nurse muttered. “You know her?”

Caleb nodded, his words trapped by the lump in his throat. “Let’s see about getting her cleaned up. She’s going to need stitches to close that gash. Start an IV.”

Jessie squinted against the brightness of the room blinding her and sending an unbearable shooting pain through her head.

“Ow,” she said, lifting her hand to her head. She was surprised to feel a bandage covering her hair, just above her forehead. Dizzy and disoriented, her eyes flew open wide when she realized where she was. Hospital.

“Easy,” a deep voice said beside her.

“Tommy,” she whispered, her head pounding, the drummer beating out a furious rhythm against her brain.

“No.”

Caleb’s face as he leaned over her after they pulled her out of the ambulance flashed through her foggy mind.

“Caleb.” She tried to focus on his face despite the pain created by the light.

"I'm right here, Jess." He reached out to take her hand and she was amazed by the comfort that surrounded her whenever he was around.

"What happened?" she asked, her thoughts seemed hazy and distant, a jumbled-up mess in her mind.

"Car accident," he replied. "Do you remember anything?"

She closed her eyes and tried to recall. She was driving back to the guesthouse after a trip to town. The sun was in her eyes, another car. Then nothing. "Sort of," she said after a few moments.

"You cut your head open. I had to put in about two dozen stitches."

Her hand automatically returned to her bandaged head. "My hair?"

Caleb grinned at her and she found herself returning the smile. "The first thing women always want to know about. I didn't let them shave your hair. It made the stitches tricky to put in, but I didn't think you'd want a big bald patch on the top of your head."

She smiled until another memory came crashing over her. Her hands flew to her stomach. She looked at Caleb, but her question wouldn't come. It didn't need to be asked. She knew. She knew by the empty feeling inside her and the sadness in Caleb's eyes that she'd lost her baby.

"No," she whispered, tears springing to her eyes. She squinted against them, but nothing would stem the flow. The pain in her head was forgotten as her heart cracked painfully in two. "No."

"I'm so sorry, Jessie. There was nothing I could do. I think you miscarried during the trip to the hospital in the ambulance."

She nodded once, turning her face from his kindness, his compassion. She'd lost their baby. The baby she'd failed to tell him existed. Closing her eyes, she gave in to the loss, the agony and for several minutes, she let the tears fall. She hadn't realized until that moment how much the little being living inside her had come to mean to her. All her hopes for a happier future had been wrapped up in the tiny baby who would never know life.

She was surprised when she felt a weight pressing down on the bed beside her. Glancing to her left, she saw Caleb climbing on to the hospital bed, lying next to her and reaching over to embrace her. She turned to him, wincing slightly at the pressure the position put on her stitches.

"Shhh," he soothed, carefully wrapping his arms around her as she felt the dam break completely. She sobbed her heart out against his chest, clinging to him and silently wishing he would never let her go. She was so tired of being alone. For the briefest of times, she'd had the baby—his baby—with her. Now she was on her own again, besieged with a grief that seemed to know no end. She hadn't cried like this since the night she discovered Tommy had been murdered, but then she'd needed to remain strong, lest she fall apart irrevocably. There had been no one to share her pain with on a daily basis. Now with Caleb to look over her, to help her carry the load, she let it all out.

She wasn't sure how long she lay with him. His right hand rubbed gentle circles on her back, while his left hand cradled her arm, careful not to disturb the IV. He whispered soft, comforting words in her ears.

She thought she might have drifted to sleep for a little while because when she opened her eyes, the light in the room seemed dimmer, less harsh.

She pushed up on to her elbow to look at him.

“Lie down,” he said, his voice lined with the slightest bit of command.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m keeping you from your work.” She suddenly felt awkward in his presence, uncomfortable, guilty.

“My shift is over,” he said, gently pulling her head back down to his shoulder. “Was it our baby?” he asked.

Her heart constricted painfully at his question and she fought against the fresh onslaught of tears. She wasn’t the only person in the room who’d lost something today.

“Yes,” she whispered.

He lay so still, she fought against the desire, the need to lift her head, to see his face. What was he feeling? Anger, sadness, relief?

“I was going to tell you,” she said at last. She wanted him to know the truth. She’d never meant to hide her pregnancy from him. Never intended that he wouldn’t know of the child they’d created. “I only just found out myself. I was going to come see you, talk to you.” She pushed up again, desperate for him to see the sincerity of her words in her face. “I would never have kept you from your child if you’d wanted to be a part of his or her life. I swear it, Caleb.”

“I believe you,” he said and she could see in his face that he did. “And I’m sorrier than you could know. You would have been a wonderful mother.” His kind words undid her and she closed her eyes, fought against the tears. She refused to cry any more tonight. “You really should try to get more rest. I’m afraid the police have been here a couple of times, wanting to talk to you about the accident. I have a feeling they’re still hanging around. I’ve also managed to track down Todd.”

“He and Stephen are out of town, for business.”

“No,” he said. “They’re on their way back here. I asked Jacob to call them, to let them know about the accident.”

“I wish you hadn’t done that,” she said as Caleb started to rise. He helped her to her back and checked the IV in her hand. “I always seem to be interfering with their life.” She winced when he touched the needle. “Can you take that out?”

“No,” he said. “You’ve lost quite a bit of blood. You need the fluids.”

“Please,” she repeated. “I really hate needles. Take it out.”

He shook his head. “Maybe tomorrow. If you’re a good girl tonight.” His words were teasing, but the mirth didn’t reach his eyes.

“Knock, knock.”

She looked up to see Todd standing at the doorway and the tears she thought she'd battled away returned full-force.

"Dammit, you shouldn't have come," she choked out as her best friend came into the room. Caleb stepped away and Todd reached down and grasped her face in his hands.

"I can't leave you alone for one second," he teased and she laughed through her tears. "What do you mean I shouldn't have come? Of course, I need to be here."

"You're supposed to be at your convention. This was your chance to advertise for the bed and breakfast. I'm always screwing everything up for you."

"Hush," he whispered as her words grew more slurred with the sobs that were wracking her body. "Are you okay?"

"The b-baby," she whispered, unable to say more.

Todd glanced over his shoulder at Caleb and then back at her.

"He knows," she said, in answer to his unspoken question.

"I'm sorry, Jess. Jesus, I'm sorry." Todd placed his forehead against hers and she honestly felt as if her friend was attempting to will some of his strength into her. She took several long deep breaths and tried to smile, although she felt certain she fell far from the mark.

"Go back to Denver," she whispered. "Go to your convention. I'll be fine here."

"Are you crazy? There's no way I'd leave you here alone."

"Um, excuse me," came a deep voice from the doorway. Jessie looked up to find a police officer standing there. "Now that you're awake, Ms. Warner, I was hoping I could ask you a few questions about the accident."

She nodded her assent and the policeman walked in. Todd claimed the chair to her left, never letting go of her hand and she was grateful for his support. She winced slightly as a fresh wave of cramps hit her. Caleb must have noticed her pained look as he walked around her bed and adjusted something on her IV.

"You'll suffer with the cramping for a few days, I'm afraid," he muttered, low enough she was certain she was the only one who heard.

She nodded stiffly, refusing to think about the return of her period and what that meant.

"Ms. Warner. I've been to the accident site and I have to say you were lucky you were wearing your seatbelt. You hit that tree pretty hard. Can you tell me why you ran off the road?"

"It was the other car," she said. "The afternoon sun was shining in my eyes, so I didn't see the other vehicle right away. When I did see it, I realized it was in my lane and that the only way to avoid it was to swerve. Unfortunately, the tree was there."

"What other car?" the police officer asked.

She was taken aback by his question. "I-I don't know exactly what it looked like. As I said, the sun was rather blinding. The man stopped to help me. He's the one who called 911."

The officer shook his head. "There was no one else at the accident scene and the 911 call came in from an elderly woman who happened along later, coming from the same direction as you. She saw you in your car and called dispatch."

"But the man spoke to me. He knew my name. Said he was sorry," she said. Her thoughts had been confused upon waking up, but now that she recalled the scene, it was becoming much clearer.

"He knew your name? You knew him?" the officer asked.

"No" she replied. "I mean I don't know who—"

Todd cleared his throat and her eyes flew to him.

"The embezzler," she whispered as Todd nodded slightly.

She closed her eyes, a wave of exhaustion threatening to take hold. She was so fucking tired of this, of everything. Maybe if she could just sleep for a few years, she would wake up to find life much easier.

"Tell him all of it, Jess," Todd said and she opened her eyes in time to see Caleb's head jerk up at his comment.

"Tell him all of what?" Caleb asked.

The policeman leaned forward. "Do you think someone purposely ran you off the road?"

She shrugged. "Possibly." She glanced up at Todd's scowl. "Probably. But I have no idea who."

Together, she and Todd explained to the police officer and Caleb about her mugging, the apartment break-in, and the fire at the accounting office. She mentioned her feeling of being watched all the time and her belief that Tommy's death wasn't an accident, but was instead murder. She mentioned all the things that she'd done over the past year to investigate his death. She could feel Caleb's disapproving looks and once she heard him mutter something about putting herself in danger.

Then she told them about the death threat. She kept her gaze glued on the police officer as she spoke of the letter that had been slid under the door and what it said. She was too afraid to see Caleb's face, too afraid to see his anger, his disappointment in her for hiding such a dangerous secret.

The policeman took down her information and promised to call the Denver precinct to get copies of her police reports regarding the other incidents. He gave her his card and said he would be in touch.

Through it all, Jessie fought to remain awake. Her body and mind were weary beyond belief and she felt as if she could sleep for a year.

"You need to rest," Caleb said and he started to tinker with her IV again. No doubt to increase the pain medication that would help her sleep.

"Wait," she said, glancing over at Todd. "I'll only be able to rest peacefully if you promise to go back to your convention."

"No way," Todd said.

"Please," she said. "I've monopolized your life this past year. This is your chance to get a jumpstart on your dream. Go back. I'll be fine here. I swear. I'm stuck in this joint until at least tomorrow." She looked at Caleb for confirmation.

"You'll be released tomorrow or the day after," he said.

She nodded, continuing her argument with her friend. "I'll get a ride back the guesthouse and lock myself in, I promise. I'll stay in bed and I won't move until you and Stephen get back."

"Jess, we wouldn't be back for four days. There's no way—"

"You're not going back to the guesthouse," Caleb interjected.

"Fine, then I'll stay in the big house. You've just installed that alarm system," she said, looking at Todd, who was still shaking his head no.

"You aren't going there either," Caleb said.

Jessie looked over at him, confused by his firm refusal. "You just said I could leave here—"

"You're coming home with me. You're staying at the James Ranch."

"No," she whispered, but Caleb ignored her and leaned down, his face so close to hers she could feel his warm breath against her cheeks.

"You are coming home with me until you are one hundred percent well and this bastard who's tormenting you is caught. This is *not* negotiable." Caleb stood up and adjusted her IV. "Promise you'll come with me," he said gruffly. She didn't answer, her eyes fighting to remain open and he tapped her cheek gently. "Promise, Jess. Say it."

"I promise," she whispered, willing to give, do or say anything for just a few minutes of sleep.

"Good," she heard him say before the night went black.

"Caleb," Todd began, standing.

"No use arguing, Todd. I meant what I said. She's staying with me, regardless of whether you go back to your convention or not."

"Why?" Todd asked.

He considered the man's question and decided Jessie's best friend wouldn't accept less from him than the absolute truth. "She lost her baby. We both did. I want us to be together to deal with that. She's been through hell this last year and I want a chance to help close up some of those wounds."

"You love her," Todd said softly.

Caleb shrugged. "I don't know her well enough for that. But I do know I want the chance to fall in love with her. She's beautiful, strong, courageous and I'm fucking tired of seeing her with tears in her eyes."

Todd smiled and nodded. "Tell her I'll see her in four days. But be forewarned. I'm calling your ass for progress reports every hour until I get back."

Caleb grinned and shook the man's hand. "Fair enough."

Chapter Nine

"I don't need a wheelchair, Caleb. I'm perfectly capable of walking out of this damn hospital on my own." Jessie pouted.

"You're going to be a difficult patient, aren't you?" he teased, helping her stand and pushing her gently into the chair. "I told you, the wheelchair is hospital policy."

"Stupid policy. If I've been deemed well enough to leave this place, I should be allowed to do it on my own two feet."

"Stop grumbling and enjoy the ride." He pushed her through the hallway with a grin on his face, happy to see her energy had returned enough that she was fighting with him. He'd kept her in the hospital an extra day because he'd never seen anyone quite so drained or exhausted. Her head injury and miscarriage alone weren't grounds to keep her another night, but he wondered how much she'd slept in the past few months. In addition to her fatigue, she was too thin. She was underweight for a woman her height and he intended to see that fact change as well. It was clear to him that Jessie had not been looking after herself since her husband's death.

"You know, I really think it would be best if you just dropped me off at Todd's guesthouse. I feel much better."

"Nope, you promised to stay with me at the ranch and that's where we're going."

"Yeah, but you drugged me to get that promise."

Caleb chuckled at her words, aware they were probably true. "Sweetheart, I'll be the first to admit I'm not above using any means at my disposal to get what I want."

"I just don't understand why you'd want me around. I'm not gonna be very good company for awhile."

He pushed the wheelchair up the passenger side of his pickup truck and helped her climb in. She swatted his hands away when he attempted to buckle her in. "I can do it," she said.

Her hormones were going to be out of control for awhile due to the miscarriage and he knew her irritability was just a part of that. He watched as she hooked the seatbelt in place before looking back at him.

"What are you staring at?" she asked belligerently.

"I've got a beautiful woman in my truck. Let me savor the moment."

She smiled guiltily at him. "I'm being a bitch, aren't I?"

He shook his head. "Not that I've noticed."

"I'm tired of being in the way, of being a pest and a bother to everyone I know."

"Who are you bothering, Jess?"

She shrugged sadly. "Since Tommy's death, I can't seem to do anything on my own with any degree of success. I've always been independent, but now every time I turn around, Todd and Stephen or you have to rush to my rescue. It's a pain in the ass."

He laughed, understanding how much it would frustrate her to think she was putting others out with her problems.

"You are never a pain in the ass. If anything, I'm the one being selfish in this instance. I'm looking forward to talking to you again, getting to know you. One night and a few lousy phone calls weren't enough for me."

She seemed taken aback by his words and he smiled as a light blush colored her pale cheeks. "They weren't enough for me either. I've thought about you a lot since August."

Her admission pleased him and he was secretly relieved that his obsession with her wasn't one-sided. "I think it would be good for both of us to be together right now. Especially right now," he added.

She nodded and offered him a sad smile. "Maybe you're right."

"Shall we go?" he asked.

"Ready or not," she added with a feigned shudder and he laughed. He pushed the wheelchair back to the hospital before climbing into the truck, pulling out of the parking lot and onto the highway.

"Don't look so grim. I'm not taking you over to the dark side."

"Four brothers, living alone together. I'm reserving judgment on that dark side comment until I see for myself."

When they pulled up to the ranch, she was surprised to see the other three James brothers waiting for her on the front porch.

"No one works?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Not out of the house. Mark and Matt, the twins, keep this place a working ranch. We've got quite a bit of cattle, and business has been good enough lately that they're looking to expand and hire on a couple of ranch hands."

"Yee haw," she cheered and he laughed. "What about Jacob?" she asked.

"Right now he's working on his master's degree online and he's been doing some freelance writing for a couple of magazines. I keep telling him he's going to have to buckle down at some point, grow up and get a real job like an adult. Not sure he listens though."

He got out of the truck and crossed around to her side of the vehicle before she'd managed to unhook the seatbelt.

"Who are you, the Flash?" she teased, startled by his super quick appearance.

He reached in when she started to climb down and lifted her into his arms. "I can walk," she said, squirming to be put down. Having Caleb's strong arms around her after so long brought back a rush of memories of their single night together. This man surrounded her, filled her with such a feeling of safety and comfort, it made her giddy, lightheaded. He was the only person who'd managed to wiggle his way under her guard since her husband's death. While her mind screamed it was too quick, too rushed, her traitorous heart insisted it was right and good.

"Yeah, well, humor me." He carried her up the front porch and she smiled at Jacob as he held the door open for them. Caleb didn't stop for introductions with the twins, but instead carried her through the house to a back bedroom. He crossed the room and gently placed her on the big bed. It took Jessie only a moment to take in her surroundings.

"This doesn't look like the guest room," she said as she glanced at the dresser covered with a variety of bits and bobs, all rather masculine looking. Her gaze traveled to the open closet, full of clothing.

"It's not," he said. "It's my room."

She shook her head and started to climb out of the bed, but he halted her with a firm hand on her shoulder, holding her down. "Oh no. I'm not stealing your room from you. I'll be perfectly comfortable in the guest room."

A disturbing thought crossed her mind. "Oh crap, you do have a guest room, don't you? Please tell me you're not trying to be a gentleman because all that's left is some lumpy couch."

He laughed. "We've got a guest room, but you aren't using it. Lean back against those pillows."

She complied, but only because the room was beginning to spin a bit. Damn, she hated feeling so weak. "Caleb, it's sweet of you to offer me your room, but there's no reason why you should be inconvenienced—"

"Not going to be an inconvenience at all. I'm not staying in the guest room either."

Jessie's heart began to race at what he was insinuating. Surely he didn't mean—

"I'm going to be staying in this room with you," he added, confirming her fears.

"Oh no, you're not." Her heart's race ended as quickly as it began and she wondered if it had exploded with the thought of what he was proposing. Share a room with Caleb?

He grinned at her words, but didn't try to refute them. Mainly because she was certain he was ignoring her.

"I mean it, Caleb. There is no way you and I are going to sleep in here together. We barely know each other."

Her comment seemed to give him pause and he stopped to look at her. She returned his stare and for a moment it felt as if they were communicating not with words, but by looks. The second she'd mentioned their relatively short acquaintance, she'd known she was wrong. Maybe they hadn't spent a great deal of time together, but somehow, perhaps instinctually, she felt like she did know this man—very, very well. She bit her lip, uncomfortable with his close scrutiny and watched him nod slowly. He felt it too.

Leaving her in his bed, he crossed the room and picked up a suitcase she hadn't noticed before and opened it. "Jacob went by the guesthouse and packed up some of your clothing. He couldn't get it all in one trip, so he said he'd go back later for the rest."

"I don't need all my clothes. I won't be here that long. My head's only sore and after a couple more days of sleep—in the guest room—I'll be back in tip-top shape."

"Jess, you promised to stay here until you were well *and* until the man who's been tormenting you is caught. He's been after you for the better part of a year if I understand the situation correctly. You could actually be here for quite a while."

She sighed and tried to make sense of what the hell was happening. As she watched, he began shuffling his clothing around in the dresser to make room for her things. He looked entirely too pleased with the idea that he'd managed to maneuver her not only into his house, but into his bedroom.

She fought desperately to restrain the small part of her that was thrilled to see her clothing next to his. What he was suggesting didn't seem like such a bad thing. She was tired, lonely and scared. Maybe for just a little while, Caleb could keep those emotions at bay for her. A few nights of good, solid, peaceful rest and she'd be back on top of her game, ready to face the world.

No, she dismissed the thought as soon as it came to her. Regardless of what she might need, might want, this was wrong.

It's too soon, she thought tiredly.

"You might as well stop wasting your time," she said, gesturing to him as he walked to the closet and began hanging up her shirts. "I'm not staying here beyond the end of this week and I most definitely *am not* staying in this room with you."

He continued unpacking and she fought back her growing annoyance at the fact he was ignoring her.

"Do you hear me, Caleb?" she shouted, her anger breaking out.

"I hear you, sweetheart, but there seem to be a few things you don't quite understand."

"Such as?" she asked.

"I'm your doctor and I fully intend to keep my eye on you twenty-four seven until I'm convinced that you're well. You've suffered a nasty knock on the head and that's not something to take lightly. There is also some danger of infection with—" he paused, but she was grateful when he finished his sentence, "—a miscarriage."

She'd spent a year around well-meaning people who censored their words carefully in regards to death. She appreciated that Caleb didn't attempt to pretend the truth didn't exist.

"You can keep an eye on me in the guest room."

He grinned. "I'm not finished yet. There are dark circles *under* the dark circles beneath your eyes and—"

"Gee thanks," she said. "Look that good, do I?"

"You look good enough to eat, but damn tired, Jess. There's some asshole tormenting you and until he's caught, I don't anticipate getting much sleep. I can see in your face you're afraid, that you haven't been sleeping well. I'll rest a whole hell of lot easier if I've got you within reaching distance and maybe you will too."

She was floored by his concern, touched by it.

"And the last reason is a purely selfish one," he continued, "but it's probably the main one."

"What reason is that?"

"I want your clothes in my closet and I want *you* in my bed."

"That doesn't make sense," she said. "I mean, we barely know each other." She repeated the words weakly, but he merely dismissed them for the lie they were.

He shrugged, his smile the perfect blend of mischievous boy and confused male. "Didn't say it made sense. Just telling you why you're staying in this room. Besides, if none of those reasons work for you, there's always the fact that I'm bigger than you and I can make you stay."

She laughed at his threat and rolled her eyes. "Ah, the macho male shit has emerged. Terrific," she added. "You know after a few days in my presence, I have a feeling all of those reasons of yours are going to seem like pretty cold comfort and you'll beg me to move back to the guesthouse. I'm not a woman who is easily commanded."

He laughed. "I never thought you were." He rubbed his hands together as if in anticipation. "This is gonna be fun."

She grinned. Fun. Yeah, it was.

Jessie pushed her chair back and stared at the computer screen. Her mind raced in a thousand different directions and no matter what she did, she couldn't seem to calm it down. She'd hoped starting back to work would help and she'd tried to concentrate on the web design before her until the pictures and words began to blur together.

She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead, trying to head off the headache building in her temple. Guilt assuaged her as she thought about her actions this past week.

There was no other way to say it. She'd become an utterly horrible person since moving into the James Ranch. Her emotions were riding on some sort of never-ending, hellacious roller coaster and she was aggravated by her complete lack of control. She'd always prided herself on being level-headed, easygoing. This week, she'd fluctuated between acting like a screaming banshee and producing enough tears to flood a town, and she couldn't believe the James brothers hadn't tossed her out on her ear.

A loud sigh escaped as her frustration bubbled to the forefront.

"Trouble?" Caleb asked. He was lounging on a couch in the corner of the office reading a medical journal, and she bit back her annoyance at his overprotective, hovering tendencies. He had become her personal shadow.

At first, she'd been touched by his concern, but lately irritation had taken over. Every time she raised her voice to him, he responded with a serenity that made her want to shake the living shit out of him. She was an emotional wreck since losing the baby—their baby—and it infuriated her to see him walking around like Dr. Calm, Cool and Collected.

To make matters worse, every time she tried to call the police to see if any progress had been made, he distracted her, telling her to give them some space and more time. She was beginning to suspect he was trying to curb her attempts at finding Tommy's killer, their baby's killer. Prior to the car accident, she'd planned to stop looking for the villain. Now, in light of yet another loss at the hands of the same asshole, she was out for blood. She wouldn't rest until she uncovered the man's crimes and saw him locked in a jail cell for the next three eternities.

"Jess, is something wrong?" he repeated when she failed to answer.

"No," she said sharply, hoping her short, terse answer would deter him and he'd leave her alone. She desperately wanted to call the police officer from the hospital again. Surely they had some idea what sort of car had run her off the road.

No such luck. Caleb continued speaking to her.

"Maybe it's too soon for you to try to jump back into your work," he suggested. He'd made the same comment several times in the last few days.

"Gee, Caleb, you think?" she said, her tone bitchy and piercing.

As always, he let her angry comment pass without response and she squeezed her eyes shut against the uncontrollable fury brewing in her chest. She'd bitten his head off no less than twenty times since breakfast and every time he met her insults with infuriating silence.

"I just don't want to see you push yourself too hard too soon, Jess. Give yourself some time to—"

She cut him off with a sharp hiss. "Shut up!" she yelled.

She rose from her chair so quickly it fell backwards, crashing against the floor, but she ignored it, crossing the room to stand in front of him. "Shut up."

He rose slowly from the couch and for the briefest moment, she saw a flicker of anger in his eyes before he shuttered the emotion away.

“Jess,” he began calmly, but she was too far gone to appreciate any of his conciliatory attempts. She was itching for a fight. Itching to tell the heartless bastard what she thought of him.

“Don’t,” she said, pushing her finger into his chest. “Don’t tell me to calm down, don’t tell me what I can and can’t do, and don’t be so fucking nice to me.” Her voice was loud, piercing and for a moment she wondered what the hell she was saying. Her breathing was labored, hard, but she couldn’t contain the hateful harpy she’d unleashed within herself.

She watched his eyes go hard with fury and felt an irrational relief at the heated look.

So Mr. Detached from the World could have a human moment.

“Fine,” he yelled back. “Fine, Jess. I’ll stop being nice. Stop trying to help you.”

“Help me? Since when is hovering over me like a goddamn cloud helpful?”

He erupted in response. “You know what? To hell with this. To hell with this and to hell with you! You walk around with your fucking anger and sadness hanging out all over the place and nothing I do or say helps.”

“If you want to help me, call the cops, ask some questions. Let’s find this guy.”

“Find him? Christ, Jess. Are you seriously still going to pursue this man? After everything he’s done?”

“Yes, of course, I am. I would think you would want to find him now too.”

Caleb’s eyes narrowed and she could see his attempt to control his temper wavering. “I’m trying to be patient, trying to be understanding—”

“Understanding? Is that what you call this stone façade of yours?”

“You want me to behave like you? Chasing every shadow and biting off everyone’s head every minute of the day?” he roared.

“I’d rather be emotional than emotionless,” she taunted. “I’m so sorry if my pain annoys you. All the more reason I would think you’d want to get the hell away from me. Go ahead, Caleb, go ahead and tuck your head back in that hard shell of yours and pretend nothing’s wrong.”

“I’m trying to be here for you. I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“Why the hell not? It’s clear I’m an annoyance to you. Why don’t you just escape my miserable presence rather than maintain this irritating stoic hovering of yours?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” he yelled.

“It means you’re like a goddamn robot. Doesn’t anything ever bother you? Hurt you? We lost a baby, Caleb. We, not just me.”

He sucked in a sharp breath at her words and she watched with agony as his angry eyes flooded with pain. “You think I don’t feel that loss? You think it’s not ripping me to shreds knowing that our baby, that we—”

His voice broke and Jessie’s heart shattered. What the hell had she done? She’d felt so alone in her grief over the miscarriage—she’d mistaken Caleb’s calmness for coldness. She’d lost control of herself again—fallen once more into the bottomless pit of grief and anger. Only this time, she’d taken Caleb down with her.

“Caleb,” she whispered when a single tear escaped his eye. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t think you—”

“Cared?” he finished for her when her voice seized up. “I fucking care, Jess. I just didn’t want to dump my pain on your shoulders. You were having a hard enough time with your own grief.”

“Dammit,” she cried, her anger flaring up briefly. “I’m not fragile. I’m not weak.”

“I never thought you were,” he said.

“Why do we have to grieve separately? Why does it have to be my pain and your pain? Maybe we could just share—” Her voice broke, but Caleb didn’t seem to need to hear the rest. He engulfed her in his embrace, clutching her so tightly she struggled to breathe.

“I’m so sorry,” he murmured against the top of her head.

“I thought you didn’t care,” she mumbled against his chest and he hugged her tighter.

“Jessie. When I saw you on that stretcher, when I realized you’d lost our baby and I was helpless to save it, I died a million deaths. I thought I’d failed you. I’m a doctor. I’m supposed to be able to save people, but I couldn’t—”

“Oh God, Caleb. Don’t say that. Don’t even think that. You took care of me. You couldn’t have done anything.”

“You’ve been so angry and I’ve felt like I deserved your scorn, your hate because I couldn’t save our baby.”

“Hate? I don’t hate you. It’s just, nothing seems to bother you and I felt like I was the only one who felt the loss.”

Caleb placed his hands on her cheeks drawing her face up to look at him. His thumbs gently wiped away the tears falling from her eyes. He grinned, but she could still detect the slightest trace of pain in his eyes. “Seems we’ve both been misreading each other.”

She nodded. “I’m sorry. Sorry for yelling at you and sorry for thinking you didn’t care. I’m not sure how I could have believed such a thing.”

He kissed her forehead before resting his brow against hers. “I should have told you how I felt. I don’t think you’re weak, Jess. Christ, just the opposite. You’re the strongest, most amazing woman I know.”

She tilted her head up and placed a light kiss on his lips. “No more hiding our feelings. If you’re hurting and need a shoulder, come find me. I can take it, I swear.”

“And if I’m annoying you, tell me to get the hell away from you,” he said and she laughed.

He reached around her shoulders and pulled her close again as she rested her cheek on his chest. “I’m glad you’re here,” he murmured. “I don’t think I could stand to go through this without you.”

She smiled as she listened to his strong heartbeat. For nearly a year, she’d lived alone with her grief. Having Caleb with her as she struggled to overcome another devastating loss helped more than she could have imagined. Made her pain more bearable. However, as he held her, she realized that she was still alone. She would continue to live with Caleb, but her search for the killer would be a solitary one.

“Feel better?” he murmured against the top of her head.

She nodded and pulled back to look at him. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“For what?”

“For being here. For sharing some of the load.”

He looked at her closely and she suspected he wasn’t completely satisfied with the way they’d resolved things. He sighed, clearly dismissing his thoughts, his concerns for the time being and kissed her forehead.

“I’ll always be here. And Jess,” he paused, “I’d like to share all of the load.”

Chapter Ten

Jessie slowly rocked on the front porch swing, overwhelmed by a feeling of contentment, peace. She'd been living at the James Ranch for over a month. During the first two weeks after the miscarriage, she'd fluctuated between extreme grief and anger as her hormones triggered excessive emotions that seemed destined to battle for dominance forever and Caleb's assurances that her behavior was normal didn't make her feel any less out of control.

The sound of Matt and Mark fighting about some video game drifted out to her and she grinned. The James brothers were a loud, raucous, fun bunch of guys and she spent most nights in the family room, watching movies or playing board games with them, laughing until her sides hurt. Her life had fallen into an easy routine and she was surprised by the overwhelmingly welcoming reception of Caleb's brothers. Jacob made room for her in the family office and the two of them spent most afternoons side by side working on their laptops, her on web designs, while Jacob tapped away on class assignments or magazine articles. Mark and Matt welcomed her into the kitchen and as a trio they made all the meals, often challenging each other to ridiculous cooking competitions.

The holiday season she'd dreaded had come and gone. She'd approached her first Christmas without Tommy with trepidation. However, the abundance of new males in her life—the James brothers as well as Todd and Stephen—had kept her so entertained, so surrounded and outnumbered, she'd never had a single moment alone to be sad. As they'd celebrated the New Year, Jessie realized she wasn't viewing the coming months with fear or uncertainty, but rather with excitement and anticipation.

She called the Denver and Saratoga police departments weekly—much to Caleb's dismay, but the detectives at both precincts seemed to have hit a wall in the investigation and she was beginning to suspect the officers were viewing her continual calls as a nuisance.

Nothing new there.

Jordan kept her abreast of happenings in Denver and he'd informed her that Rex had fallen on hard times. The accounting firm was struggling without Tommy's business savvy and Rex's attempts at finding a capable partner had failed. According to Jordan, the man's lack of management skills, combined with the mess of reestablishing the data lost in the fire, had destroyed any credibility the firm had once claimed.

Jordan had been a blessing, checking in weekly, helping her to rehash all the details until she thought she'd go mad. Jordan had befriended Dawnette, recruiting the secretary for her help, but she was unable to shed much light on which of Tommy's clients could have been up to any shady activities. She'd offered a

few names, all of whom Jordan had done background checks on. Jessie spent night after night pouring over the information her friend supplied, frustrated by her lack of success. There was clearly a vital piece of the puzzle missing, but despite her tireless efforts, she simply couldn't find it.

Since his botched attempt to take her life, the embezzler had been quiet. No more phone calls, no more death threats, but she knew better than to become complacent. The man was nothing if not patient. For weeks, she'd run through the accident in her mind, the man's voice eerily familiar and yet she still couldn't put a face to it.

She continued to look for a house to buy, often scanning the classified ads in the newspaper, despite Caleb's insistence that she wasn't going anywhere until she was safe from her unknown assailant. Jessie was beginning to believe he would be happy to keep her at the ranch permanently. Unfortunately her feelings about such an occurrence ran the gamut from utter joy to sheer panic.

Caleb had filled his brothers in on her stalker prior to bringing her home from the hospital and although, she couldn't actually prove it, she suspected they'd worked out a schedule ensuring that she was never at the ranch alone. She'd shared some of Jordan's findings with Caleb but she sensed his interest was based more on his need to assure her safety than in actually catching the killer.

She sighed as she thought of Caleb. When they'd first met, she'd felt like half a person and as the weeks passed, she realized he had helped her find the part that was missing. For the first time since Tommy's death, she felt like Jessie again.

After dinner, Caleb had gone back to the bedroom to change into comfortable clothing and she'd come outside to think. He spent most days and more than a few nights at the hospital and she was struck by his devotion to his work, his dedication to his patients. They continued to share his bedroom—platonically—often talking into the wee hours of night. He was an amazing man, a dedicated doctor and the better she got to know him, the more she genuinely liked him as a person.

"There you are," Caleb said from the front door. "I've been looking for you. What are you doing out here? It's chilly."

"It's not cold," she said, shaking her head at his endless pampering. It was actually a rather balmy night for early January in Wyoming. "It's a nice evening and I thought I'd enjoy the fresh air. Come sit with me." She patted the cushion next to her.

As he approached, she found herself fighting back the undeniable sexual attraction she felt that constantly overwhelmed her senses whenever he was near. While he'd never broached the subject of sex or alluded to the desire to extend their relationship beyond the bonds of friendship, she sensed that his brothers and her friends viewed them as a couple and she struggled with that idea. She embraced their newfound closeness and enjoyed his companionship. The problem was she had enough friends and she wasn't entirely sure that was all she wanted from her handsome doctor.

There was a large part of her that longed for Caleb to touch her, to make love to her. Her body ached for much more than his casual touches. Every night, he offered her a sweet, rather brotherly goodnight kiss on her brow and he'd never done more than hold her hand while they watched television.

However, there was another part of her that balked at her growing feelings for him, a small bitter piece of her heart that chastised her for her unfaithfulness to Tommy. There was also the undeniable fear firmly planted inside her that insisted love hurt. By falling for Caleb, she felt certain she was setting herself up for more heartache and pain.

His touches, though sweet and friendly, had started to grate on her nerves and lately she'd begun to wonder if he would ever kiss her again. Despite all the fears and worries tugging at her mind, the truth was she desperately wanted him to kiss her.

He joined her on the swing and wrapped his arm around her shoulders pulling her close.

"How old are you, Jess?" he asked after a few quiet contented moments had passed.

She smiled at his question. After hours and hours of conversation, she just realized she'd never asked his age either. "Twenty-eight," she said. "I'll be twenty-nine on February twenty-first. How about you?"

"Thirty-four. You're awfully young to be a widow," he added.

She shrugged, surprised by his words. He hadn't mentioned Tommy in quite a long time.

"I suppose so," she said, wondering at his strange mood tonight. He'd been unusually quiet throughout dinner, but she'd merely thought he was tired from work.

He looked down at her and she glanced up at his face, hoping to be able to read something about what he was thinking. She was shocked to see undisguised lust and desire in his eyes.

"Caleb," she whispered.

He leaned down and brushed the rest of her words away with his lips. The kiss was soft, yet she didn't mistake the intensity of the feelings behind it for a minute. He still wanted her. She felt like singing.

After several moments, he pulled away, resting his forehead against hers. "If you aren't ready for this, Jess, tell me now."

She closed her eyes and considered his words. Back in August, her grief over Tommy, her guilt of betraying his memory had too strong a grip on her heart. Now, her heart felt freer, more open. It felt like it was hers again.

"I'm ready," she whispered against his lips. He took her cheeks in his hands and pulled back, forced her to meet his gaze.

"I don't just mean for tonight."

"I know," she said. She reached up to run her fingers through his thick dark blond hair and smiled.

He returned her grin and pulled her closer, this time kissing her with all the power she felt tugging at her body as well. Like two people who'd been trapped in the desert for months, they were suddenly at a pool of cool water and neither of them was able to restrain themselves from diving in.

“Bedroom,” he murmured against her lips and she giggled. They stood up together and he grasped her hand in his. She shook off his grip at the front door.

“Race ya,” she called as she ran down the hallway to his room. She saw Jacob grinning at them from the kitchen door, shaking his head, but she didn’t have time to acknowledge him. She hit the bedroom and sprinted for the bed, jumping onto it a split second before she heard the door close behind her, the lock being turned.

Rolling onto her back, she fought not to groan as she watched Caleb pull off his shirt. Though they had shared a bed for over a month, they’d both worn T-shirts and soft lounge pants each night and Caleb did all of his dressing for work in the adjoining bathroom. She hadn’t seen his bare chest in months and the image of him walking toward her, unzipping his jeans threw her libido into overdrive.

She sat up as he reached the side of the bed, pulling her sweater over her head. He stilled her hands when she started to peel off her pants as well.

“Slow down, Jess,” he said, dragging his hand through her hair. “We’ve got all night.”

She fought back a groan of frustration. “I don’t wanna go slow,” she said, fully aware of the fact she sounded like a six-year-old complaining about eating broccoli. He laughed and she narrowed her eyes.

“Tough,” he said.

“Caleb, please,” she said, reaching up, anxious to have his hot, hard body against hers.

He bent at the waist and kissed her, gently at first, but it quickly built in intensity and pressure until they had to break away to catch their breath.

He reached around and unhooked her bra, pulling the lacy material away from her overheated flesh. With a firm hand on her shoulder, he pushed her onto her back, kneeling over her.

“You’ve gained some weight,” he said, taking her full breasts into his hands. “I’m glad. You were too damn thin.” He toyed with her nipples as he spoke and she tried to decide whether or not to take offense at his words.

“I think I’ve finally discovered why you never married,” she teased, wondering if he realized how touchy women were about their weight.

“Why’s that?” he asked as he bent down to suck her taut nipple into his mouth. She gasped at the sensitivity, the pressure his suckling sent through her body, centering on her pussy.

“Never mind,” she breathed and he chuckled before turning his attention to her other breast. She knew from the leisurely way he nibbled, licked and kissed he would not be rushed tonight despite the fact her body was screaming for more. She ran her fingers through his hair, pulling him closer, holding him to her. She wanted this man more than she thought possible.

For a moment, she thought of Tommy and she stiffened. Caleb must have sensed the shift in her body.

“Jess?”

She shook her head and relaxed in his grip. Tommy's beloved face flashed in her mind, grinning at her, nodding, and she was overcome with the sudden feeling of rightness. She smiled to herself. If her late husband could have picked any man on earth for her, she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt he would have selected Caleb.

"That's a mysterious smile," he said, lifting up and moving her to the center of the bed.

"No," she said, "it's a happy smile."

He grinned at her and she saw a look of pleasure suffuse his face. He reached down and unbuttoned her jeans. He kissed her lips, her cheeks, her forehead as he released the zipper. She lifted her hips as he tugged the denim down over her legs, dumping her jeans and panties on the floor by the bed. When he had her completely naked, he knelt before her and simply looked. She thought she should be embarrassed by his intense scrutiny, but his face was too awed, too appreciative and she suddenly felt like the most beautiful woman on earth.

"I didn't get to see you properly the first time," he murmured. "Thank God I didn't." She jerked back a bit, confused, until he finished speaking. "I would have been tormented mercilessly by the memory of this body. Wouldn't have been able to sleep a wink for wanting you."

"I want to see you," she said, propping up on her elbows and gesturing at his pants. "Please."

He rose from the bed and as she watched, he finished taking off the rest of his clothing. She sucked in a breath at the size of his erection and the undeniable proof that this man truly did want her. Rolling to her side, she stopped him from returning to the bed with a quick touch to his stomach. Moving closer, she dragged the tip of one finger down the length of his cock and fought back a giggle at his anguished "Dear God".

Leaning down, she breathed in the essence of him as her mouth watered for one little taste. She placed her lips over the head of his cock and swirled her tongue over his sensitive, hard flesh. She was inundated with the smells and flavor that were so distinctly Caleb. The drop of fluid she captured at the tip was salty, while she could detect the slight scent of his soap still lingering from the shower he must have taken before coming to find her on the front porch.

His hands moved to her head as she took more of him into her mouth and she began a back and forth motion with Caleb's fingers guiding her, holding her. The words that fell from his lips seemed to be the mindless chatter of a man in the throes of something too powerful to fight, but she found comfort in his praise, his directions.

"You're killing me, Jess," he said breathlessly when she swallowed him to the back of her throat. His hands tightened almost painfully in her hair for a moment, proving his words true. She knew he was struggling to hold back, knew he would never intentionally hurt her, but she didn't want his restraint, his calmness. She wanted him to be as wild as he'd made her feel that first night at the guesthouse. She wanted

to bring him to his knees with delight and desire. She dragged her hand along the inside of his thigh and cupped his balls. He hissed, while pushing his cock more firmly inside her mouth.

She squeezed gently and felt a sense of incredible victory. She felt her Caleb, her gentle, peaceful friend disappear as Caleb, the hot, insatiable lover she'd only met once reappeared.

He used his hands to move her head against his cock and she followed gladly. She massaged his balls, teased him with her tongue and teeth, groaned against his rigid flesh, all while fighting back her own growing desire, pressing her legs together to fight the incredible pressure building there.

"Dammit," he said, pushing her away before his imminent eruption. He'd been so close, too close and she growled with frustration.

"Caleb," she started to argue, but he cut her off with a hard, demanding kiss that seemed to last an eternity.

She was vaguely aware of him reaching over to the dresser and donning the condom, but she was too lost in the touch of his lips on hers, the feeling of his hard body as he pushed her back on the bed.

When he finally gave her a reprieve, separated for a moment so that she might gasp for air, he spread her legs and moved between them.

She glanced down, felt his fingers touching her swollen clit, rubbing it firmly, once, twice, and she shattered. Struck down by an orgasm she never saw coming. He continued to touch her as she shook, crying out with the intensity of it. His fingers prodded into her, driving her up the cliff again. Not content with her first climax, he worked her tender flesh until she felt as if she'd sell her soul to the devil for one more, just one more.

"So wet," he murmured, but she was too mindless to hear, to comprehend.

He moved his cock to her opening and slowly pushed his way in. She wanted to scream, to demand he fuck her, thrust in hard, but he wouldn't be moved from his present torturous path.

"Please," she cried when at last he'd seated himself fully.

"Together this time," he whispered into her ear as his hot breath singed her cheek. Her whole body felt like a live wire, ready to spark. Her skin was sensitive to every touch, every breath.

He moved out with the same cursed slowness and she pushed against his chest in frustration.

"Hard," she gasped, desperate and begging. "Fast," she hissed. "Now."

He stopped moving completely on his retreat, only the head of his cock still within her. She squirmed beneath him, shook her head, but he never moved, never gave into her body's anxious demands.

"Look at me," he said and she fought back a snarl. It was all she could do to keep her eyes from rolling into the back of her head. He didn't understand. She'd never needed with this intensity, never wanted with this much passion.

"Look at me," he repeated and she forced her gaze to his, awestruck to see he did understand.

“Don’t take your eyes off of me,” he commanded. She only had time to nod once before he shoved back inside her with all the power, all the might she wanted. She fought to close her eyes against the tremors building in her body, but she felt captured by his gaze. She watched as he made love to her, felt as well as saw each powerful thrust.

Caleb.

Their eyes never faltered and when they came together, though her vision clouded with glorious, white hot stars, she never lost sight of him.

Caleb.

He held himself over her, adoring her, loving her, caressing her with his gaze and she gave him back the same affectionate look.

He dropped down on his elbows to kiss her cheek and as he did so, he breathed the words she never thought she’d hear again against her skin.

“I love you,” he whispered.

He did. She’d seen it in his eyes. It was that look that had held her, restrained her during their love-making, binding her to him, but she could see now she hadn’t been captured at all. She’d been freed.

Caleb.

His name pounded in her brain and tattooed itself on her heart, the image of his face slowly seeping into the wounded organ, breathing life back into the bits of it that had died with Tommy.

“I love you too,” she said.

Chapter Eleven

“Move in here,” Caleb said the moment she opened her eyes. She was lost in the mesmerizing memories of their night together and struggled with his abrupt, unexpected choice for a morning conversation. She had hoped they could pick up where they’d left off the night before.

“In case you haven’t noticed,” she teased, “I’ve been living here for over a month.”

“Move in with me, Jessie. Get your stuff out of storage, move those boxes out of Todd’s attic and stop looking at those damn real estate ads in the paper.”

She stared at him, uncertain how to answer. He was usually easy-going, fun, but his seriousness, the relentless determination she sensed in his face, took her unaware. “I’m not sure what to say.”

“Then say you will.” His words, though seemingly light, sounded strained, tense.

“No. It’s not as easy as that. This is all too fast. None of this is happening the way it should be.”

“The way it should be?”

She could see she’d angered him with her quick refusal, but she couldn’t shake the idea that they’d approached their entire relationship starting with the middle first. “I don’t mean I’m not happy here with you, but good Lord, look at us. We had sex the first night we met and made a baby. Three months later, we meet again and within two days, I’m living in your house, in your bed. This is nuts. This isn’t how normal people date. Hell, we haven’t even been on a date.”

He laughed at her words and shrugged. “So we’ll go on a date. I’ll take you out to dinner and then we’ll swing by that storage unit you’re renting and empty it. Sounds like a pretty romantic evening to me.”

“Will you be serious?”

“I am being serious. I don’t want to follow this so-called accepted path of yours or to color within the lines. I’m not a young man with his first crush. I’m thirty-four fucking years old and more than old enough to know what I want without following some preconceived idea of how people are supposed to meet and fall in love.”

“It’s too soon,” she repeated. She couldn’t even begin to ponder what he was suggesting. She couldn’t, in good faith, plan a future with Caleb until she’d laid the past to rest. Until Tommy’s killer was caught, her life wasn’t truly her own.

“To hell with that,” he yelled and she winced at his sudden anger, feeling her own rise in response. “I know you’re hurting, Jess. I know you’ve suffered for your love and I’m sorry about that. And maybe I

haven't felt that pain personally. For years, I've let my job rule my life, but that's changed since you. I love you."

"You don't understand," she said. He couldn't know the agonizing price they would pay if all of this suddenly ended one day.

"You're wrong. I'm surrounded by death and dying everyday. I've watched people with broken bodies overcome amazing odds, fighting for life. Your heart's been broken, Jess, but you aren't letting it heal. You're picking at the wound, keeping it open, fresh, painful."

"So I'm just supposed to forget about Tommy? Pretend he never existed? Let his murderer get away?"

"Christ. Of course not. But Tommy died, Jess. Not you. Stop curling up in a ball and throwing your life away on some wild goose chase."

"Wild goose chase?"

"I don't want to lose you, Jess."

His words beat a painful tattoo on her heart and she realized her reasons for rejecting him weren't solely based on her search for a killer. "I could lose you," she whispered, the true root of her fears flying out. "You could die on me."

"Do you want me to promise I'll never die, Jess?" he asked.

"I don't need you to promise to live forever. I just need you to outlive me." She tried to force a grin to her lips, a lightness to her voice that would contradict the truth of her request. It was an irrational, impossible demand, but she still wanted his reassurances.

"You know I can't promise that. Love is all about risks."

She shook her head slowly, terrified by the truth of his words.

"Then your decision is made," he said.

She rose from the bed. Dammit, why did it feel like every step forward was followed by ten steps back? She felt like she needed to justify her concerns, her fears. "I *am* fighting for my life, fighting to move on, but it's not that easy, Caleb."

"I never said it was." His voice was quieter, but no less angry, no less frustrated.

She reached down and picked up her sweater, uncomfortable with her nudity in the face of their argument. Rather than put it back on, she held it in front of her like a shield.

He stood as well and paced to the window of the bedroom, fury evident in every step he took.

"I'm sorry," he said with a sigh after a few tense, silent moments. "My words were uncalled for, but I feel like I'm fighting a fucking ghost." He turned and she could see the pain brimming in his eyes. "It's a fight I can't win, Jessie. I need you to stop taunting his killer, daring the man to come after you. I want you to look forward, not back. Are you turning down my offer to live here permanently because you don't want to be with me or because of some misguided loyalty to Tommy's memory?"

She stared at him as her hands begin to shake. Her insides felt cold, the feeling reminding her of the months she'd spent alone and grieving for her lost husband.

Why was she refusing Caleb? She loved him, she knew that with all her heart. She knew he loved her, she could see it in his face as he stared at her now, his heart firmly held in her trembling hands. He'd handed it to her and now he was waiting for her next move. She could crush it, destroy it and him or she could accept his gift of unconditional, unreserved love.

She fought to say the words she knew he needed to hear, but her voice deserted her, the same old fears and anxieties creeping in and striking her mute. She shook her head, unable to utter a single sound. She knew he could see her panic and she saw the exact moment when his patience ran out.

"That's it," he yelled, coming toward her so quickly she didn't have time to move despite the fact that the look in his eyes warned her she shouldn't simply move, she should run.

"I'm the man who's here now," he said, roughly pulling the sweater from her hands and throwing it to the floor. "I'm the man who loves you, who wants you, who's tired of playing second fiddle to a dead man. You want to hang on to your ghost, your past? Fine, try it. I dare you. I dare you to think of another man right now."

As he spoke, he turned her abruptly, pushing her down on the bed, covering her body with his, taking her lips roughly. She didn't have time to consider his words or the meaning behind them as he took absolute possession of her. His hands, his tongue, his lips caressed her body, touched her everywhere, kissed and tasted every square of skin as she squirmed beneath him, silently begging him for more. While he staked his claim on her body with his hands, his words infiltrated her mind, stealing every fear, every worry away, scattering them like dust in the wind. He never stopped speaking. Words like *mine*, *love*, *need* and *forever* drifted through all the cold, dark places in her mind, erasing the lingering thoughts that told her being with this man was wrong.

Her legs parted as his covered cock pounded inside her quivering, needy body and she welcomed him gladly, taking each hard thrust he gave, guilt suffusing her as she felt him working to drive out all the demons for her. He was offering her a second chance at happiness. With every touch, kiss and word, he forced himself not only into her body and mind, but her heart. As they came with hoarse cries, she knew there was nothing on earth more precious than this moment, this man.

The image of Tommy as he lay cold on the ground outside his office flashed through her mind. He was dead and his killer still walked around free. She'd loved Tommy too. Didn't he deserve closure, justice?

Caleb lay on top of her for several moments before pushing himself to her side, gathering her in his arms. She turned to look at him, ashamed at herself for causing the undeniable pain that laced his gaze.

"I do love you, Caleb," she said.

"But?" he said and she knew he'd heard the hesitance in her voice.

"But I can't stop looking for Tommy's killer. I can't believe you'd ask me to. This man killed our baby too."

He shook his head sadly. He was silent for so long, she wondered if he would ever speak. When he finally did, his voice was cold, emotionless. "There's more to living than avenging the dead, Jess. In fact, what you've been doing this past year can't even be considered a life—you're merely existing."

Tears stung her eyes at his cruel words and she felt an invisible wall spring up between them as he moved away from her and rose from the bed.

"You think I don't know that?" she asked, her voice thick with the anguish lodged in her throat.

"Do you?" he said bleakly. "Because from where I'm standing you seem to be reveling in your grief, in your anger. It's feeding you. It may be keeping you alive, but that's all it's doing."

She swallowed heavily. "I'm sorry I hurt you. I didn't realize that I'd dragged you so deeply into my own pain. It's just I can't stop. Please don't ask me to."

"If you continue, he'll kill you. He *will* kill you and I can't accept that. I'm not about to sign on for a lifetime of looking over my shoulder wondering when the villain is going to strike you down."

"Don't do this, Caleb," she said, her voice loud, panicked. "Don't force me to make this decision."

"What decision?" he yelled. "Jesus, Jess. I'm asking you to move in, to embrace a future with me. I love you, goddammit. What's on the other side of that? What's keeping you from saying yes?"

"This man," she said. She was finding it difficult to catch her breath in light of the fears crushing her chest. "He killed Tommy. He killed our baby. You should want him to pay for that."

"At the risk of losing you?"

She was struck mute by his anguished question. "You won't lose me," she whispered.

"No," he said, his voice eerily devoid of emotion. "You're right, I won't. Apparently I never had you to begin with. I'm sorry. I won't bother you with my silly plans for the future again. It's clear that's not what you're looking for."

He started to move toward the door, but before he left, he bent down to kiss her lips softly, briefly. The light touch was clearly one of farewell. "Don't make plans to leave the ranch," he warned. "I meant what I said in the hospital. You will remain here until I'm satisfied you're safe. I'll be in the guest room if you need me."

"Hey, Todd. What brings you over here?" Jessie said, stepping out onto the front porch to greet her friend. It had been a week since Caleb moved into the guest room and the silence that had reigned in the house since then had taken its toll of her.

"You look like shit," Todd muttered.

"Gee thanks."

“Dammit, Jess, how long is this going to go on?”

She shrugged. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Liar. Jake said you and Caleb had a fight. It’s clear you’re both hurting, so go make up, have some sweaty sex and move on.”

“It’s not that easy,” she said. She hadn’t told Todd any of the specifics about her fight with Caleb. The words simply wouldn’t work their way around the miserable lump clogging her throat.

“It can be as easy or hard as you make it. Wanna talk about it?” he asked. He’d offered his shoulder more than a few times this week and for the first time in her life, she’d refused it. She couldn’t cry anymore. There weren’t any more tears left in her body.

She shook her head. “What’s all that in your car?” she asked, determined to change the subject.

“I figured you could use a distraction,” Todd said, putting his arm around her shoulder. “If you don’t want to talk about your troubles, then I’m going to make you forget about them.”

“How?”

“I’m gonna load you up with work.”

“Work?” she asked.

“Yep. Stephen and I want you to do a proper webpage for us. I know you helped us with that mock-up, and at the beginning it was good enough, but business is booming and we want to make a lasting first impression.”

“Um, okay. Sure,” she said. In the past, she’d loved the idea of creating a new webpage, designing a site that was unique and inviting, but the prospect of starting this project held little excitement for her.

“Try to contain the enthusiasm there, Jess,” Todd teased and he opened the car door.

“What is all this stuff?” she asked.

“Boxes. Some of your stuff from the attic. I figured if I was going to put you to work, the least I could do is give you back some of the tools of your trade. I dragged down these two that were labeled *office*. I also brought by some pictures Stephen took that we’d like to incorporate on the webpage as well.”

Jessie picked up one box while Todd grabbed the other and she secretly wished she was moving the boxes into the ranch for good. The moment the thought passed through her mind, she dismissed it. She refused to think about anything that touched on her argument with Caleb. Her heart had been cut open by his injured look and the wound seem to have become infected by the silence permeating the house.

Caleb had reverted back to form, working double shifts at the hospital. Jacob and the twins had pulled out all the stops over the past week in an attempt to cajole Caleb out of his bad humor, but they were wasting their time. Until she moved out, she knew Caleb wouldn’t do more than sleep in the house, but the damn man and his misguided principles refused to allow her to leave. She’d actually packed up, prepared to move back to the guesthouse two days ago only to be met at the door by the twins. No amount of begging

or badgering would budge them and she'd eventually given in angrily and returned to Caleb's bedroom—alone.

“Well, come on then,” she said as they climbed the stairs and entered the house. “Here's hoping your plan works because I have to admit, I'm tired of thinking.”

Todd laughed. “Damn, Jess. Those aren't real comforting words considering the fact that I'm asking you to create a webpage that will help boost business.”

She smiled at his jest, then laughed. She would push her worries aside for an afternoon. Shut out the damned world and escape into her computer for awhile. Who knew? Maybe when she came back, her life wouldn't seem so bleak.

Several hours later, Jessie stood up and stretched. They'd planned the basic format for Todd's webpage before he'd returned home and excited by the prospect of a distraction and a new project, she'd thrown herself into the design. Mark and Matt had driven to Laramie for the weekend and Jacob was puttering around in the kitchen, baking a cake for a friend's birthday.

Jordan had called to check in earlier, but she'd been too tired to rehash the same old, pointless information. She'd said goodbye, claiming she needed to work on Todd's website and unpack some office boxes her friend had retrieved from his attic. Shortly after she hung up the phone with Jordan, Caleb called Jacob to say he would be working late. *Big surprise.*

She walked around the room, trying to work out the kinks in her neck and back from sitting in front of the computer for so long. As she paced, she studied the room and imagined some of the improvements she would make to it if she lived here. The walls were screaming for a fresh coat of paint and given the stack of books and files on the floor, it wouldn't hurt to invest in another bookshelf and perhaps a file cabinet. She quickly stopped her plans as the pain in her heart that she'd pushed away for a few hours returned with a vengeance at the thought of a future that wouldn't be.

She turned and her gaze landed on the two boxes Todd had brought by. Kneeling down, she opened the first, somewhat relieved to find it filled with the things from her home office in Denver. She'd been worried she would have to dig through mountains of stuff in the storage unit to find her reference books if they hadn't been in one of these boxes. Pushing the box aside, she opened the second one.

Her heart stopped as she saw the broken glass of the frame holding her wedding picture to Tommy. She fought for a breath as she realized this was the box she'd packed the night her husband died. She pulled out the broken picture, running her finger over Tommy's face.

“I miss you so much,” she whispered to his smiling image. Reaching back in, she pulled out the pens, the paperweight. She lifted up the Rolodex and spun it as a multitude of names flew by, some she recognized, others she didn't. Could one of these names be the name of the man who killed Tommy?

At the bottom of the box, she found a handful of disks and the relatively new thumb drive she'd put in Tommy's stocking the previous Christmas. It had been a silly, last minute gift, but the man was forever digging through disks for things and she'd insisted the flash drive would help him be more organized. She doubted if he'd even used it. While technology was her love, numbers had been his and she'd had to drag him kicking and screaming through it every time the firm introduced some new software.

Was the evidence that would put the murderer away on one of these disks? It certainly hadn't been on any of the disks in their Denver apartment. She felt a slight shiver of excitement at the thought that perhaps at last, she would uncover the embezzler's identity. Rising, she carried the disks and thumb drive over the computer and sat back down despite her body's protesting muscles. Caleb wouldn't be home for hours and she didn't like sleeping in the bed without him. She'd been spoiled by his presence and after nearly a year of sleeping alone, she found herself reluctant to return to a cold, lonely bed.

One by one, she systematically worked her way through the disks. She'd done much the same thing when she was packing up her apartment in Denver. Although she was no accountant, she had a basic working knowledge of spreadsheets and ledgers. She clicked in and out of files, aware Rex would have a fit if he knew she had such information. Once she finished looking at them, she would destroy them.

She'd finished looking at the last disk and reached over to pick up the thumb drive when she was struck by the silence in the house. As she worked, she'd heard Jacob humming in the kitchen, the clattering of dishes, but now there was nothing. She knew Caleb's brother well enough to know he wouldn't go to bed without saying goodnight. The hair on the back of her neck stood up and she felt a familiar prickling as the same nagging sense that she was being watched returned.

"Jacob," she called out, standing and walking to the office door. She felt foolish for the fear that was suddenly coursing through her. For a moment, she was paralyzed, waiting, praying for Jacob's reply. When it didn't return, she repeated his name, this time her voice breathless, shaking. "Jacob."

"I'm afraid your friend has been detained."

Chapter Twelve

“Jordan?”

The man drifted out of the shadows in the hallway and walked toward her slowly. As he came into plain view, she was assaulted by several things at once. His kind face suddenly looked menacing, he was pointing a gun directly at her and it was his voice she’d heard after her car accident.

“It was you,” she whispered, besieged with an uncanny awareness that all her fears, all her questions and concerns were about to be answered. She was also overwhelmed by the conviction that before the night was over, there was a very good chance she would be dead.

“Of course it was.”

She fought her growing panic, trying to figure out a way to escape. Unfortunately, one horrifying thought interfered with her ability to plot, to plan.

Jacob.

She was overcome with terror for her dear friend. Surely he was alive. Surely she would have heard a gunshot.

“Where’s Jacob?” she asked, surprised by the sudden strength in her voice that belied her total, utter horror.

“He’s not dead,” Jordan replied, gesturing with the gun for her to step into the office. She backed away, continuing until he harshly commanded her to stop. “Don’t move any farther,” he said. “Your friend won’t die as long as you give me what I want.”

She shook her head, inundated with confusion, panic. “I don’t know what you want.”

He seemed taken aback by her words and she watched a strange, dark smile cross his face. “You really don’t, do you? Ah, Jessie. All of this unpleasantness could have been so easily avoided if you’d only behaved as a normal, grieving widow. I should have known the night of Tommy’s death that it wouldn’t be so easy.”

“Tommy’s death?” she repeated. “Don’t you mean Tommy’s murder?”

Jordan shook his head sadly and for a moment she almost believed the crocodile tears forming in his eyes. He’d fooled her once with his false pretenses, but now, with his mask off, she saw him for the heartless killer he was.

“It was inevitable, Jess,” he said.

For the first moment since she saw him, her fear gave way to anger at his use of her nickname. Only her friends called her Jess and hearing it fall so casually from this bastard's lips infuriated her. "That's Ms. Warner to you," she replied hotly.

He laughed at her words, shaking his head. "Such spirit—even in the face of death. God, you are magnificent. You truly don't realize what you have, do you?"

She knew what she had. Knew that she'd only just found the proof tonight. "I have the evidence that proves you're an embezzler. I have the means to put you behind bars for a very, very long time."

"Very good, Jessie, very good. For nearly a year, you've held my downfall in your hands. This all could have been avoided. All of this could have ended the night of Tommy's accident, if you'd only accepted the police report, only accepted the truth of Tommy's death."

Jessie felt a streak of red-hot anger flood her system. "The police report was wrong. His death was no accident. You killed him, you fucking murderer," she screamed, as all regard for her own safety vanished in the fury she felt toward this man.

"I'm sorry to disillusion you, my dear. I know you did so like the idea of a murder, but the sad fact is Tommy's death was an accident. I only meant to frighten him, threaten him. I held a gun on him in the parking lot and demanded that he give me the evidence he'd accumulated against me or you would pay the price with your life. The foolish boy refused to listen and actually tried to unarm me."

She smiled at the image. Tommy had never fit her mold of what an accountant should act or look like and she imagined he'd been quite amazing, threatening to expose Jordan to the authorities.

He continued speaking. "I managed to shove him off, but he fell on the slick surface and hit his head. I watched him die, Jess. Watched as the life left his eyes, but I can assure you, it was not my intention to kill him. I had hoped that—with the proper motivation—he would come to work for me."

Jessie felt her blood turn to ice as this man she'd considered a friend described her husband's last precious minutes of life as if he were recounting the plot of a movie or a book.

"I can't tell you how much his passing has haunted me," Jordan added.

Several months after Tommy's death, she had researched brain trauma. She knew that in addition to the hypothermia he'd suffered, his brain had swollen, the flow of blood disrupted. Perhaps if he had been found sooner he could have been saved. That thought had caused her weeks' worth of sleepless nights as she berated herself for not going out to look for him earlier. To learn that Jordan had stood over Tommy's injured body and watched him die brought all her anger to a full-blown boil.

"You fucking, nasty, repulsive bastard." Her hands instinctively clenched into fists, but Jordan waved the gun, reminding her of her helplessness without words. "You won't get away with this," she whispered. "You may kill me, but the police will find you, they'll lock you up."

"Tommy made the same threat. And yet, here I stand, the one with all the power once again."

"A gun isn't power. It's a coward's weapon. Besides, you haven't won yet. You still don't have your evidence," she replied.

"Oh, but I do. It resides on that thumb drive lying on the desk behind you. Tommy was so proud of that new bit of technology when you gave it to him. Bragged about how much easier his life would be without having to shuffle through stacks and stacks of CDs. Hand it to me, Jessie."

"No."

He shocked her by slapping her. She hadn't expected such violence from him. Though she was terrified, there was a small part of her that had believed he wouldn't hurt her. The needles coursing through her cheek from his hard blow dispelled that tiny hope.

"So Tommy figured out what you'd done. Why not be a man and own up to your crime? You were his friend. *You were his friend.*" She battled desperately against the tears in her eyes as she struggled to keep her voice from breaking. She refused to let him see her pain, her fear.

Her face was on fire from where he'd struck her and the realization that he intended to kill her suddenly inundated her. Her heart raced as her breathing became shallow, labored. Her hands shook uncontrollably and she clasped them tightly behind her back to hide the evidence of her terror. He'd killed Tommy. He would kill her. Caleb's prediction had come true.

Caleb.

The thought of everything she'd left unsaid to him flooded her body, drowning her heart in a sea of regret. She'd given up the last year of her life, trying to uncover the truth of Tommy's death and now that she'd found the truth, she realized how precious little it mattered. She'd squandered her one real chance at happiness, at a lifetime with Caleb. Oh how she wished she could turn back the clock.

What have I done?

Jordan pulled her from her thoughts. "Tommy really was a bright young accountant. So much smarter than that idiot partner of his. I must admit it gave me no pleasure to silence such an amazing mind. Oh, what I would have given to have him join my team. But he threatened to expose me, Jessie. Threatened to tell the world about my crime. I couldn't allow that to happen. I simply couldn't."

"So it all comes down to money," she said with disgust, wondering if she could stall long enough for help to arrive.

Help? What help?

Caleb was working late and the twins were out of town. God only knew what Jordan had done to Jacob.

"Money does make the world go round, my dear," he said and she felt a twinge of pity for the man in front of her.

"No, Jordan, it doesn't. Love does. But you'll never know that. Never understand what that means. I could almost feel sorry for you if I didn't hate you so."

“Love,” he scoffed. “And what pray tell will that buy me? What has love gotten you? Nothing but heartache and despair as far as I can tell.”

Her face flushed with anger. “Love hasn’t caused me pain. You’re the one doling that out. It’s love that’s saved me.” As she spoke the words, she realized the truth. Caleb had offered her love, security, a bright future. And like a fool, she thrown it all away on vengeance and a misguided desire for a justice that wouldn’t make one damn bit of difference. Regardless of whether or not Jordan paid for his crimes, Tommy would still be dead.

“Why did you come after me? I didn’t know what Tommy had discovered.” She desperately tried to come up with some plan for escape. She had to get away from here and find Jacob. She could run to Todd’s house, call the police and Caleb, warn him to stay away. She shuddered to think what lengths her brave doctor would go to, to save her from this man.

He smiled at her sadly. “You were perfectly safe in the beginning. Think about it. Your problems didn’t begin until you began asking questions about things that were better left alone.”

The prank calls, the mugging, the break-in. All of those events began after she’d seen Jordan at the accounting firm.

“You simply couldn’t leave well enough alone.”

“I had the thumb drive,” she interrupted.

“A surprise turn of events, I will admit. What wife cleans out her husband’s office the night he dies? I searched Tommy’s office the day after he died, pretending to have left my glove there the day before. His stupid secretary was too preoccupied with his death to care about me—a trusted client—going in to retrieve a lost belonging. I managed to wipe his computer clean with a clever virus in under five minutes.”

“So that should have been it.”

“Oh no, my dear, I can assure you I leave nothing to chance. Tommy and I had a meeting shortly after Christmas and I watched him store all of the audit information on the thumb drive.”

“How did you know I had it?” she asked.

“I overheard Dawnette talking to one of the other secretaries about you coming in and clearing out your husband’s office during the night.”

Jessie sucked in a pained breath. She’d inadvertently thwarted Jordan’s attempt to retrieve the evidence against him.

“I expected you to mourn normally, but again, my dear, you surprised me. Finding you at the accounting office months later and hearing your suspicions, well, I knew I had to act. The problem was you rarely left that stupid apartment for more than an hour at a time and I needed lots of time to search it thoroughly. I stole your purse, hoping perhaps you carried the thumb drive with you, but you didn’t.”

“Quite a resume you’ve built for yourself, Jordan. Embezzler, mugger, murderer.”

Jordan laughed, though she could detect no pleasure in the sound of it.

"I've become a great many things this past year. I even broke into your apartment to search for the disk."

"You burned down the accounting firm."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Insurance. When I failed to retrieve the thumb drive from your apartment, I decided to hedge my bets in case I'd missed it in the office. I have to admit that until tonight, I didn't realize there was the possibility that the evidence was in Todd's attic."

"You ran me off the road."

"Yes," he confessed.

"You hoped the car accident would kill me."

Jordan smiled sadly. "I must confess the idea of killing doesn't sit well with me, but you were becoming a liability I could no longer afford. A car accident seemed preferable to—"

"Shooting me?" she asked as she looked at the gun in his hands. She noticed they weren't as steady as she thought. Jordan wasn't lying. He took no joy in the idea of killing her.

"But alas, my dear, as I said earlier, I've become a great many things this year, not the least of which, is—as you so eloquently put it—a murderer. All I have to do is pull this little trigger and all my troubles go away."

She shivered with the realization that he seemed perfectly prepared to do just that.

"Another dead body isn't going to help you."

"Perhaps not, but this gun doesn't belong to me."

She frowned, confused, until he answered, "It belongs to Rex. Your husband's former partner has fallen on some rough times. Your death, along with some information I planted in the man's home, should make for a rather smooth getaway. The police are about to discover that your husband uncovered his partner laundering money. The two argued and Rex killed him. When you discovered his perfidy, he killed you as well. You said it yourself, my dear. Rex considers you his arch enemy."

"I don't understand why you didn't just take the money and run. You were safe. Regardless of my suspicions, no one believed me. You'd killed Tommy. You'd gotten away with it."

"Had I? What were you doing tonight?"

She'd been moments away from finding the evidence. He grimaced as her face must have confirmed the truth. She'd been on the verge of uncovering his crime.

She tried to look covertly around the room, desperate to spy anything that could be used as a weapon. Her back was up against the desk, the only thing on the surface, her laptop. It wasn't much, but perhaps she could use it to knock the gun out of his hand, to give her the precious few seconds she needed to run.

"You won't win," she said.

He laughed coldly. "But, Jess, don't you see? I already have."

This man had killed her husband and unborn child, tormented her for nearly a year. Her anger welled up and, strange though it seemed, she felt a certain level of relief, of peace at being able to confront him finally. All thoughts of self-preservation vanished in the face of finally being able to tell this asshole what she thought of him. An image of Caleb flashed through her mind. She'd asked him to promise to outlive her and he'd refused. Seemed she didn't need the promise after all.

"You're a murderer and coward. Believe me, whether you kill me or not, you're still the loser in this room because you will never be anything more than those two things."

"Now, now, Jessie, there's no reason why we can't be civil. Give me the evidence and maybe I'll decide to be generous and let your lover and his fag of a brother live."

His threat terrified her. Did he intend to wait here until Caleb returned? Would he kill Caleb and Jacob? She couldn't let him hurt another person she loved.

"Oh, I'll be civil. I'll be civil as hell when they flip the switch on you in the electric chair."

"Give me the thumb drive, Jessie," he demanded.

She turned slowly toward the desk. This was it, she thought. The moment of truth. She reached for the small thumb drive, picked it up, then quickly grabbed the laptop as well, turning at the same time and swinging hard. She had one shot. One chance or she was a dead woman.

"Caleb?"

"Jake? What's wrong? I can barely hear you."

"Someone is here. A man." Caleb struggled to make out his brother's words, at first thinking the connection bad, then realizing Jacob was gasping in pain.

"Are you hurt? Jesus, where's Jessie?" he asked as his fears came crashing down on him. He'd pulled a double shift at the hospital hoping to avoid the pain that awaited him at home. Suddenly pure terror had adrenalin coursing through his body.

"I don't know. She was working in the office. There was a tapping on the back kitchen door. I thought it was that mutt that's been coming around. Someone hit me on the head, hard. I just woke up a few minutes ago and I think I'm locked in the shed out back. I can't see anything. Luckily whoever took me down didn't think to look in my front pants pocket for my cell."

"I'm on my way home. I'm almost there. Sit tight, Jake."

"Caleb," his brother said and he could hear the pain in Jacob's voice. "Don't come alone. Call the cops. Go get Todd and Stephen. They have hunting rifles. You need help if you're going to save Jessie. If you get killed, she'll never survive."

His brother's words resonated in his mind. *She'll never survive.* Dear God, she had to survive. She had to live because the fact of the matter was he'd never survive without her.

"Don't move, Jacob. I'll be there soon...with help."

He disconnected, then called 911. He reported a break-in and requested an ambulance as well as the police, but they lived too far out to expect assistance soon. He called Todd and Stephen who assured him they'd have weapons ready. Thank God, he'd already been nearly home. If he'd received Jacob's call while still at the hospital, he'd have gone insane trying to cover the distance.

Within five minutes, he pulled up in front of Todd's house. True to their word, both men were waiting for him on the front porch, weapons in hand.

"We've discussed it," Stephen said. "If the man who knocked Jacob out has Jessie, then the best way to approach the house is by foot."

Caleb wanted to argue the point, but he could see the value in their plan. By driving up to the house, they might force the hand of the villain by announcing their presence.

"I'm running the whole way," he said quickly, turning toward the dirt path that connected their houses.

"Lead on," Todd said. "We'll be right behind you."

They arrived at the ranch after a few minutes. Todd and Caleb crept to the back porch door, while Stephen went to the shed to free Jacob and make sure he was okay. If the man had surprised her in the office, there was a good chance they were still there. They entered the kitchen carefully. Each step a painfully slow process in their attempts to remain undiscovered, silent.

As they approached the hallway, Caleb could make out voices speaking in the office, one speaker clearly female. After two more steps, he could distinctly hear Jessie's voice. His heart rejoiced with the knowledge that she was alive, unharmed. He wasn't too late.

His relief only lasted a second as he heard the report of a gun.

"No," he cried, racing for the office door, noise be damned. He skidded to a stop at the doorway, taking in the scene before him. Jessie was on top of an older man, pounding away at him with both fists flailing, pummeling the bastard as he struggled for freedom. There was a pool of blood on the floor beneath them and Caleb's heart stopped at the sight. Who was bleeding? Jessie or the man?

He and Todd stepped into the room with their weapons aimed at the stranger, who stopped fighting when he saw them. Jessie, however, continued to attack the man, seemingly unaware of their presence.

Caleb saw Todd's eyebrows fly up to his brow line at the vulgar, angry words that flew from Jessie's lips. "You won't hurt them. I won't let you, you fucking asshole. I'll never let you hurt Caleb."

"Jordan," Caleb heard Todd whisper.

In her furor, she hadn't seen them come into the room. Caleb carefully laid his weapon on the desk, while Todd kept his gun trained on the man. He walked over to her and attempted to pull her away from the

stranger, but Jessie kept swinging, kept cussing. She fought him as he tried to drag her away and her anger turned toward him.

“Let me go,” she screamed. “He was supposed to be our friend. He’s a murderer. A murderer!”

“We’ve got him, Jess. Todd’s got the gun on him. He won’t get away. The police will be here soon.” He continued talking, trying to make his words penetrate her incensed, persistent attack. She knew this man?

“He said he’d hurt you, hurt Jacob. He killed Tommy,” she choked out as Jacob and Stephen came rushing into the room. Jacob was unsteady on his feet, a goose-egg sized lump on his forehead. Caleb only spared them a glance as he felt his heart break at her anguished words. This man had been a friend and he had killed her husband.

“Then he’ll go to jail,” he whispered softly, engulfing her arms in a tight embrace from behind, more for comfort than restraint. The fight drained out of her slowly as he rocked her, soothed her with a quiet *shhh*.

“He killed our baby,” she whispered.

For a moment, he fought back his own overwhelming rage at the stranger on the floor, this man who had caused so much pain, so much suffering over the past year. Suddenly jail seemed too good for the bastard and Caleb’s grip on her slackened.

Jacob stepped forward and he wondered if his brother had read the murder in his gaze. “He’ll go to jail, Caleb,” he said, repeating the words he’d just uttered to Jessie.

A siren blasted in the distance and he fought down his anger. Justice would be served tonight. Murder would be avenged.

“The blood,” he said, looking at the pool of it on the floor.

“I knocked the gun out of his hand. It discharged when it hit the wall and the bullet went into his leg.”

He tightened his grip on her at the thought of how closely she’d come to taking that bullet. As her anger gave way to agony, she collapsed in his arms, the pain of the past year escaping in a barrage of sobs that seemed to see no end.

“I’m so sorry,” she cried. “So sorry. I love you. I love you, Caleb.”

“It’s okay, Jess. It’s over now,” he whispered repeatedly. “It’s all over. You’re safe now. I won’t let you go.”

Jessie curled up on the couch in the living room and read the article about Jordan Scott’s arrest in *The Denver Post*. Information regarding the millions of dollars he’d embezzled over the course of twenty years made national news and the image of the man handcuffed to the stretcher as he was rolled into the hospital brought her only a small measure of comfort. Tommy was recognized for uncovering the man’s costly

crime. Jordan had been her husband's friend and he'd killed him. The idea of the man paying for his crimes, however, didn't make her as happy as she'd thought it would.

Today was the one-year anniversary of her husband's death. She hadn't mentioned that fact to Caleb although she suspected he knew. He'd inexplicably been missed in the ER rotation today. He told her it had been a scheduling error on the hospital's part, but she knew he had taken the day off to be with her.

The night before Caleb had crawled into bed with her and held her as she cried herself to sleep. This morning when she awoke, he'd been gone. She'd made a mistake. She'd chosen revenge over love and happiness and she wondered if she'd ever be able to make amends, to make things right again. She loved Caleb, wanted to be with him, to spend a lifetime with him. But how could she convince him to take a chance on her after she'd rejected him, hurt him?

She picked up her old wedding photo from the end table beside her and looked at Tommy's smiling face. "We got him," she whispered. She smiled as she recalled her happiness on her wedding day. The lead singer of the band had shown up drunk and the table holding the wedding cake had actually collapsed, but through it all she and Tommy had laughed and danced and loved. She thought she'd never feel such happiness, such love again.

She was wrong.

Caleb had found her, pulled her out of her misery. Helped her recover her lost soul, breathed life into her empty shell of a body and slowly, methodically put all the pieces of her shattered heart back together.

She laid down the picture and looked at her left hand. She pulled off her wedding band and placed it on top of the photo. "I'll always love you," she said to Tommy's image. "But I have a new life now and a chance at happiness."

She sensed Caleb's presence before she saw him. How long he'd been at the doorway she couldn't say. She smiled tremulously when she glanced at him.

"Are you sure?" he asked, gesturing at her wedding band.

She nodded. "You never asked me to take it off," she said, the statement belying the question behind it.

He shrugged and remained silent for so long, she wondered if he'd dismissed the conversation. "I don't want to erase Tommy from your life, Jess, and I'm not trying to fill in as a replacement."

"I've never considered you a replacement. God, never."

He smiled as he sat down beside her, pulling her into his arms. "Good. He was an important part of your life. All I've ever wanted is to be the same thing."

"You are the *most* important part of my life," she said, placing a soft kiss on his cheek. "Caleb, if the invitation to move in is still open, I really want to make a future with you. If you'll have me."

"If I'll have you?" he asked, taking her face in his hands. "How can you ask that? You are the only woman I've ever wanted in my life. I love you, Jess."

“No more living in the past, I promise. You’re my future and I love you.”

Chapter Thirteen

“Where are we going?” Caleb asked as Jessie took him by the hand and led him down the front porch steps of Todd and Stephen’s house. Nearly a month had passed since Jordan’s arrest and Todd had decided to throw a Valentine’s Day party for the guests at the inn and friends. After a marvelous dinner, everyone had moved into the large living room for a game of charades and the game had become quite heated as the men competed against the women. Mark and Matt had made some sort of secret side bet with a guest of the B&B, a beautiful young woman named Bridget and it seemed both sides were determined to win at any cost. They’d begun to argue over one of the clues and Jessie used the distraction to pull Caleb away.

“I thought we could take a walk,” she said, leading him across the yard.

“A walk? No offense, Jess, but it’s cold as shit out here.”

“We won’t be outside for long.” She reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out the key to the guesthouse.

“What’s that for?” Caleb asked, pressing himself against her back and placing a quick kiss at the nape of her neck as she unlocked the door.

“I was wondering if you wanted to come in for coffee,” she said, repeating the question she’d asked him in August. “Looks like that game is going to go on for some time.”

“I’d love coffee,” he murmured in her ear as she opened the door. They stepped into the dark house together and Jessie giggled as memories of their first night together surrounded her. She walked into the kitchen, but rather than start the coffeepot, she leaned against the counter and smiled at him seductively.

“You keep looking at me like that and you’re going to find your pants around your ankles,” he teased.

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

His gorgeous green eyes narrowed and he stepped closer to her. “I want to kiss you so badly it hurts,” he said and she was assaulted by the glorious memory of their single night in this tiny house and the heated, sexy tone of his voice.

“So kiss me,” she whispered.

He wrapped her up in his embrace and his lips took everything she had to offer. Not satisfied with just her lips, he forced her mouth open with his tongue, claiming every gasping breath she struggled to take. Their tongues tangled together, playful one moment, hard and desperate the next. She had never been kissed so thoroughly or gloriously in her life.

She felt his hands drift to her waist and in seconds, Caleb's promise of shedding her pants came true as she felt the stiff denim material fall to her feet. She toed off her sneakers, then kicked off her jeans and panties. His strong hands lifted her to the counter and she welcomed him between her legs, pulling him closer. His hands brushed her clit as he struggled to unzip his jeans and she gasped at his accidental touch.

"Christ, Jess. I can't wait to be inside you," he said between kisses. She looked down to see him pull a condom out of the back pocket of his jeans before pushing them down his hips to his knees. If she hadn't been so hot, so needy, she would have giggled at his haste, his undeniable desire. He moved to open the foil packet, but she stopped him with her hands.

"No," she said.

"Jess?" He paused, looking at her.

"Don't put it on," she added.

He stared at her for several silent moments, but she refused to back down, refused to be denied. She knew what she wanted, knew where she was meant to be. "Please," she whispered.

"If we do this," he said, his voice thick with the same emotions that clogged her throat, "you marry me. I won't, I can't accept less than that."

"I'll marry you," she said softly.

He smiled at her, his beloved face so sincere, so wonderful, she fought back tears. She loved this man with a passion she'd never experienced, with a heart she'd thought dead to the emotion. He'd given her so much in such a short time and she didn't know how she'd survived a single second of her life without him.

He threw the condom on the counter and stepped closer, pushed inside her while taking her to paradise.

Over and over, he pounded inside her body as she struggled to bring him into her. She needed him so badly, she was shocked when he retreated from her entirely. "Turn around," he said, lifting her down. She turned to face the counter as he bent over her back, entering her from behind. This position fit her needs perfectly as she pushed against him, each thrust touching her womb and her heart.

She fought back a scream as her orgasm coincided with his climax, his hot sperm filling her. She smiled to herself, so sure that this night was giving her more than just love recovered. For several moments, they clung together and she soaked up the pleasure, the joy of being in his arms.

The sound of his chuckle caught her attention and she pushed up, turned to face him. "What's so funny?" she asked.

"Your name will be Jessie James after we marry."

"Oh shit," she muttered, shaking her head. "That's not good."

"It's actually quite appropriate," he said, bending down to place a quick kiss on her lips.

"Why's that?" she asked suspiciously.

"Because you stole my heart the first night we met."

Mari Carr

She laughed, thrilled by his sweet words. “I love you so much, Doc.”
“And I love you, Jessie James.”

About the Author

Some people fall apart on their thirtieth birthday, others on their fortieth. For Mari Carr, thirty-four was the year that took her down. After she spent the day crying and saying, “I haven’t done anything I thought I would,” her husband finally asked what was left undone. Her answer was simple—she hadn’t written a book or decorated her house. “So do it,” he said.

Six years later, the house is sparkling with fresh paint and new furniture and her computer is jammed full of stories—novels, novellas, short stories, and dead-ends. The lesson: it’s never too late to achieve a goal or two!

High school librarian by day and mother of two teenagers, Mari Carr found her time for writing by squeezing it into the hours between 3 a.m. and daybreak when her family is asleep and the house is quiet.

To learn more about Mari Carr, please visit www.maricarr.com. Send an email to her at carmichm1@yahoo.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Mari: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/maricarr/>.

Look for these titles by Mari Carr

Now Available:

Erotic Research
Tequila Truth
Learning Curves

Coming Soon:

Evening Songs

One's the loneliest number. Two's company. Three's a fantasy come true.

Tequila Truth

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The rules of Tequila Truth are quite simple. Shots are poured, a question asked, and only absolute truth can be the answer. Kylie Halston has been playing the game with her roommates, Colt and Heath, since their freshmen year of college.

On his twenty-fifth birthday, Heath poses a question: "What is your ultimate sex fantasy?" While Colt and Heath's fantasies are too hot for words, it's Kylie's sex dream that hits a little too close to home for all of them. Her wish? For a ménage a trois with two men, complete with bondage and a bit of spanking for good measure.

Colt and Heath are only too willing to make Kylie's fantasies come true and they make a proposal—one no-holds-barred, sexed-up weekend where nothing is off the menu. The only question is, come Monday, will their platonic relationship survive the passion?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Tequila Truth:

"What is your ultimate sex fantasy?" Heath filled the shot glasses with Jose Cuervo.

Colt grinned while Kylie groaned. "Christ. Surely we've answered that one before?" She knew they hadn't, but this particular question made her uncomfortable. Quite frankly, she didn't think her two testosterone-laden buddies were ready to hear about her fantasies. They believed her desires to be somewhat chaste. Silly men.

The trio had been following this same tradition since the early days of their friendship. Kylie initiated the celebration, calling it Tequila Truth, explaining that birthdays should be a time of reflection. The concept of the game was simple. The birthday boy—or girl in her case—posed a question and then each member drank a shot of tequila and answered. The only rule was the answer had to be completely honest.

Unfortunately, her attempt to bring deep introspection to her male roommates fell quite a bit short of the mark. They'd played the game since their freshman year of college and Heath's questions always revolved around sex.

"That's an easy one." Colt licked the salt off his hand, downed the tequila and sucked the lime. Licking his lips, he settled in for a long story. He was nothing if not an imaginative storyteller. "I've got this busty blonde all to myself on a desert island. We're stranded and she's completely at my mercy. Begging me to save her and all that crap. She's wearing nothing but a bikini top and thong, as all of her clothes were ripped off during the shipwreck."

Kylie interrupted at this point. "Holy hell, Colt. Why do these imaginary women of yours always have to be blonde *and* stupid?"

Heath and Colt laughed, but she merely raised her eyebrow, waiting for his response.

Colt stopped laughing when she failed to join in. “Oh, that was a serious question? I thought it was one of those rhetorical ones.”

She grinned despite herself. Colt was the ultimate male chauvinist pig and, for some inexplicable reason, she adored him anyway. He and Heath were the best friends she’d ever had and she didn’t doubt both of them would lay down their lives for her. They’d mistaken her for a male—Kyle, not Kylie—when she wrote expressing a desire to share an apartment with them during their first year of college.

“So what are you doing to this blonde with questionable intellect?” Heath, as always, was relishing Colt’s detailed descriptions.

“Well, I don’t know if you know this about me or not, but I’m a man who likes to be in control.”

She gasped, as if amazed, and laid her hand on her heart. “No, absolutely not. I will *never* believe that of you.”

He grinned at her sarcasm and continued. “There’s some rope that’s washed up from the shipwreck and this chick is hot for me. I mean way hot. She starts begging me to take her.”

At this point in his story Kylie faked a bored yawn, but he continued anyway. “I grab the rope and take her over to a coconut tree. I throw the rope over one of the low-lying branches and tie her hands above her head.”

“Have you ever seen a coconut tree?” she asked. “The branches are miles off the ground.”

“Shit, it doesn’t matter what kind of tree. Kylie, will you let me finish?”

“Fine,” she answered shortly, pressing her thighs together. The problem with his fantasy was she knew exactly where it was going and she would be hard-pressed to hide her reaction. The idea of being tied up and left completely at a man’s mercy was certainly pretty high on her list of fantasies as well. Definitely in the top five.

“So I tie her to the tree with her hands above her head. She’s helpless that way and her whole body is mine to explore and possess. I pull the thong down her legs and throw it into the sea. I tell her on this island, she’ll always be naked, that she will never hide her body from me. I can tell she likes the way I’m talking to her, all stern and powerful and shit, because she starts squirming and whimpering.”

Kylie struggled to stop reacting in completely the same way.

“I tell her to open her legs and she does. When I touch her, the woman is dripping wet and hotter than hell. I nearly come in my pants right there because I want her so bad. I reach into the back pocket of my ripped-up shorts and pull out a knife.”

He paused briefly and looked at her. No doubt he expected her to make some smartass comment about the convenience of having a knife, but she was struggling to catch her breath, overwhelmed by her own arousal.

Colt, satisfied with her silence, continued talking. “I use the knife to cut off her bikini top and I have to step away because I’m telling you this girl is stacked, with a capital S. She’s got these enormous big brown nipples and they are pointing straight at me.”

He continued describing the woman’s body in detail until finally she cried, “Enough. I think we get the picture.”

“I’m not sure I do,” Heath joked and she sent him a nasty look. “Maybe visuals would help. I’ve got some dirty magazines in my closet leftover from high school days. We could find a model who fits your description.”

“Can I help it if I’m a breast man?” Colt asked the question with a look of injured innocence that fooled her not one bit.

“That’s a rhetorical question, right?” she asked and then lifted her hand in a gesture that said *continue*.

“Well, I was going to go in to detail about how I suck the life out of those babies, but I can skip ahead. You get the picture.”

“Hell yeah, I do. This fantasy is a thing of beauty.” Heath sighed with appreciation apparently enjoying Colt’s answer to his question.

“So once we’re both good and hot, I take off my shorts and tell her to wrap her legs around my waist. She’s holding on to the rope around her wrists and this woman is strong. She uses her toned legs and arms to fuck the hell out of my cock while she’s hanging there naked from the tree. She’s driving her cunt down on me hard and it’s all I can do to hold on to her hips.”

She swallowed hard as she imagined the woman riding him. Problem was the blonde wasn’t a blonde, but a redhead who looked suspiciously like her.

Heath adjusted his pants under the table without bothering to hide his arousal. If there was one thing she had gotten used to in seven years of living with these men, it was that they were always functioning at half-mast. Shit, a strong breeze could arouse her roommates—she never ceased to be amazed by their intense sexuality. Over the years, she’d watched the revolving door of women who passed in and out of their lives and she’d heard enough moaning and banging headboards through the walls to last her a lifetime.

She consoled herself with the thought that through it all, she was the one constant woman in Colt and Heath’s lives. Through college graduation and first jobs, broken hearts and promotions, she was the steady one, the reliable one, their buddy with boobs.

“That was hot, Colt, but not as hot as mine.” Heath poured another round of shots.

“So hit us with your best shot.” Colt picked up his tequila, clearly enjoying his pun and ready to continue with the drinking part of the celebration.

Heath drank his tequila shot and leaned forward. “In my fantasy, I’ve got this smokin’ hot babe spread across my lap and I’m spanking her full, firm ass. It’s flushed red with my handprint and she’s moving into my smacks while her arousal is dripping down her legs. She’s begging me for more and I’m giving it to

her. Then she starts pleading for my hard cock. When I think she's been punished enough, I push her down to the floor and tell her get on her hands and knees. Then I fuck her from behind, hard and fast. She's so hot she's burning the flesh off me, but I don't care. I keep pounding into her tight cunt, while she's crying and screaming for more."

She sat motionless after his fantasy for several moments before she realized her mouth was gaping and she closed it.

Colt shook his head in obvious disgust. "That's the problem with you, Heath. No foreplay. That was the worst description of a fantasy I've ever heard. You don't build the scene or give good descriptions. You just go straight to the climax, so to speak." When he finished chuckling about his second pun, he pushed her shot glass closer to her. "So what about you, little darlin'?"

Taking a deep breath, she licked the salt, swallowed the burning alcohol and skipped the lime. Before she could think about it, she heard her unspoken dream falling out of her mouth.

"In my ultimate sex fantasy, two guys are taking me the way you both described...at the same time."

Caught in love's undertow...

Riptide Love

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The Thorns, Book 2

Rescue swimmer Ethan Thorn is used to pulling people from the swirl of the ocean, but he never expected to pull a woman straight out of his past. Denae Button was the first woman who meant more to him than great sex, until he realized she was his brother's fiancée. Now the one woman he hoped never to see again is back—with the three-year-old son he never knew he had.

Denae knows she's made her share of mistakes, especially when it comes to the Thorn brothers. Royally screwed up by her religious-zealot parents, now she just wants to be a good mother. She doesn't want anything to do with Ethan—and she knows the feeling is mutual—but she can't deny him a chance to know his son. Even if facing the Thorn family means confronting a past she'd rather leave behind.

A resurging riptide of love drags Ethan and Denae back into each other's arms. But exposing the secrets that nearly destroyed the Thorn family could tear them apart for good.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Riptide Love:

Nate grew quiet, but every once in a while he opened his eyes, peeking. A few minutes later, De surprised them both by joining them.

With her sexy legs bare, she stepped over his outstretched legs and climbed into the small bed with Nate. The boy rolled over to press his face into De's body.

They made a nice picture.

It was a few minutes before De lifted up partway. "He's asleep." She eased over her son to stretch a foot to the floor. When her second foot touched down, he caught her hand in his. Though he acted to help her over him, he wanted to drag her down to the floor with him.

A thrill rolled through his bloodstream as the touch lingered. His prick hardened. Pressed against the confines of his pants.

"Oh." She let out a gasp alerting him to the fact she felt the heat between them.

He had trouble catching his own breath. It'd been like this for them before... Instant combustion.

Steady once more, De jerked back. "Sorry about that." She wiped her hand on the long T-shirt she wore. "Well, he's asleep for the night."

"Yeah." Enjoying the quick rise and fall of her breasts, he pushed to his feet.

"Well, I guess we'll see you tomorrow then?"

"Eh, you bet."

De's arms folded under her breasts. Watching her nipples pebble caused arousal to tingle in his balls. Sweat coated his palms. It'd been a while since he'd fucked. Maybe that was the deal with his increased reactions to her. It had to be.

Still he wanted to know. Needed to know. And no time like the present to find out. Using two fingers, he reached out and caressed the pulse in her graceful neck and slowly ran them down along the vee in her night shirt.

His fingers slid across to drag over a single nipple.

On a moan, her hips arched, her breasts thrust forward.

He stepped into her space to press his stiff prick into her.

De whimpered.

He inhaled roughly, enjoying the feel of her along his body.

Christ, she smelled good. Damn good. He inhaled again. Nuzzling her temple, his mouth buzzed a kiss. He shifted impossibly closer. Lips trailed a line of kisses to her mouth. Greedily he played over her lips. He groaned at the feel of her mouth under his as she opened for him. Her sweetness made him drink. His thirst for her shuddered through him.

It's been too damn long.

The fire for her that'd stayed kindled nearly brought him to his knees at the feel of her hands on his chest.

The craving, the yearning he'd always had for her erupted on a groan. He deepened the kiss. His tongue and lips explored, teased hers. His rigid prick throbbed in need.

It's been too damn long.

"I missed you, De." He relished her sweet taste.

The soft sounds she made caught in his mouth. His balls drew up in warning.

"I missed you so damn bad." No one had ever compared to her. Not ever. He wanted her back. What she'd done to him. The way she'd made him feel.

Groaning, he slid a hand down her body to cup her hip. He pressed his hard prick into her.

Focus, mate. Ignore your own growing need for release.

He eased back to allow his hand to trail under the nightshirt she wore. Her panties were wet to his touch.

She gasped into his mouth.

"I missed you, luv."

De whimpered on an arch of her hips.

His free hand caught the back of her neck to keep her anchored to him. Her pussy was hot as he worked her clit through the cloth.

With a turn of her head, she broke the kiss off. "Ethan." Her hand pushed at his chest.

He stilled. A new type of tension sank into his muscles.

Nervously she pressed her hand over the heartbeat in her neck. "Ethan..."

"Yeah?" He eased back to look into her gaze.

"I've already experienced this...move of seduction." She motioned between them. "And I have the proof to show it."

Cold water washed over him, through him. What the hell had come over him? Trying to seduce De? What was he thinking? He hadn't. Unless it was with the head below his waistline.

No. It'd been more than his prick thinking. She'd been hot for him too. He'd felt it. But he'd abandoned her. Hell, he'd not only abandoned her... She'd never been his. She'd belonged to his brother. A bloody fine mate. A second chance wasn't something he deserved. Guilt and a rising tide of insecurity caused him to step away to give her space.

"I have to be at work early tomorrow." She led the way from the bedroom to the entryway. "You're welcome to visit Nate. We'll be here by five most days. But...but..." Her arms went back under her arms. "I'm a mother, and the last thing I want to do is become involved with a player again."

Ethan's teeth clenched. He hadn't been a player since she'd walked out his door.

"What we had was a fun time..."

Fun time? His arse. She'd bloody well had the time of her life. He'd made sure of that. Hell, what they'd shared those two weeks had been the best of his bloody life...

She turned away from him to pull the door open. "It was no more than sex."

Only sex? He'd thought he'd suffocate from wanting her. Even after he'd tried to forget her. De had gotten into his system. She'd affected his life just as his calling for a career as a rescue swimmer had.

When she faced him, her face held tight lines. "Let's stick to being friends for Nate's sake."

Muscles along his back bunched. Rejection wasn't something he'd ever experienced before. She'd just rejected him and he disliked it. Disliked being compared to the man he once was.

"Sure, for Nate." He forced a smile. "Goodnight, sheila. I'll see you both tomorrow."

"Hooroo." She closed the door before he left the steps.

Christ. What had gotten into him? And why did he want to prove he'd changed?

A killer's obsession could destroy their second chance for love

Obsession

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A Love on the Edge Romance

Only a year ago, Officer Alex Juran and his wife Tess had it all. Love, a solid marriage and a baby on the way. Then in one heartbeat they lost everything.

Now, Tess is doing her best to move on. She has a thriving business and while she may be lonely at times, she's proud of the new life she's built without Alex.

Two days before their divorce is final, Alex is shot in the line of duty and left for dead. He faces a difficult recovery so Tess finds herself postponing the divorce and offering to care for him until he can live alone again.

At first, cohabitation is little more than combat. Alex's incapacitating injuries, the looming divorce, and his inability to remember who shot him have him lashing out at the nearest target: Tess. When someone begins stalking her, he suspects his shooter has returned. Convinced that Tess is in danger, Alex becomes desperate to recover his strength.

Because no matter how much she's hurt him in the past, they've been given a second chance—and he'll do anything to protect his wife.

Warning: This book does not come with a box of Kleenex, so please grab one before you start reading. Contains two people struggling to learn to love again, along with sex, violence and realistic language. And some very hot cops.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Obsession:

Tess opened her eyes and pushed the hair out of them to look at the clock but it still wasn't there. "Damn, Alex, it'd be nice to know what time it is."

She couldn't really be angry at him. Not when he'd gone to such lengths to finish her Christmas season for her. If watching him struggle to bake cookies hadn't told her how much she loved him, then curling up next to his warmth last night had.

She didn't know how many times he'd woken her, forcing her to swallow her medicine and drink the fluids the doctor recommended. His thoughtfulness surprised her, and yet she remembered a time, long ago, before careers got in the way, when he'd been the same man he was last night—tender, thoughtful, generous and loving.

A lone tear leaked out of her clenched eyes. It wouldn't last. It never did. He'd go back to his career and slowly drift away from her.

Rolling to her side, she pulled her knees up to her chest and closed her eyes again, willing herself back to the oblivion of sleep.

Small things broke her concentration. The slam of a car door, the slurp-slurp of Othello drinking out of his water bowl, the low murmur of the television, the soft hiss of the furnace right before it kicked on.

As sure as sunshine in July, she knew Alex was somewhere in this house. How often had she awoken with that knowledge?

Not often enough.

She was reluctant to face him, yet knew she couldn't hide forever. What would they talk about?

Face it, Tess, you have nothing in common with your husband.

They'd been living together for almost two weeks. Two weeks of constant activity between baking, delivering, shuttling him from doctor appointments to physical therapy. Weeks of avoiding the topic of divorce. They hadn't sat down and had a normal conversation in months. Now she feared they'd forgotten how.

Thirty minutes later Tess emerged from the bathroom freshly showered and wearing clean flannel pajamas under her robe. Her bones felt like rubber but she was tired of lying in bed so she headed for the living room.

The flickering of the television screen mingled with the flickering of the tree and fireplace. Alex was slouched in one corner of the couch, his bad leg resting on the coffee table, the other leg bent at the knee. A longneck bottle of beer dangled from his hand. Ragged jeans hugged his thighs and lay loose across his abdomen. A faded gray University of Cincinnati sweatshirt hitched up slightly to reveal a small sliver of skin between the jeans and shirt. His hair looked like he'd been raking his hands through it.

"You look better." His brown eyes reflected the fire in the grate.

"That's some compliment, coming from you."

He smiled and set the beer bottle on the table beside the couch. Using both hands, he grasped his bad knee, lowered his leg to the floor, grabbed his cane and stood. "You're probably hungry. I'll fix you something to eat."

"I can get it."

He hobbled to the kitchen, his gait stiff until he'd walked a few steps. "No problem."

Tess followed. "What time is it? I think someone stole my alarm clock."

"That would be me. Want to file a report?" He looked over his shoulder and threw her a grin that had her stopping in her tracks and trying to regain her breath. It'd been a long time since she'd seen that grin and Lord, how she'd missed it.

She cleared her throat and continued on to the kitchen. "What good would it do? You've got an in with the cops around here."

He laughed—a rich, deep sound that vibrated through her and made her heart ache. They used to laugh like that all the time. Before things fell apart.

“Did you get the cookies delivered?” She looked around the pristine kitchen. Every speck of flour had been wiped away. Every pan cleaned and stored. The appliances gleamed.

Alex opened the refrigerator and stuck his head inside. “Yup, all done.”

Tess glanced at the digital clock on the stove. Eight o’clock. “You managed to make all the deliveries *and* clean up by eight?”

Alex backed out of the refrigerator, the makings of a ham sandwich in his hands. “That was yesterday, Tess.”

“Yesterday? Are you saying I slept over twenty-four hours? That means today is—”

“Christmas.” He slapped thick slices of ham on rye bread and slathered it with mustard, just the way she liked it.

“I slept through Christmas Eve? And Christmas day? Oh, Alex, I’m sorry. You were all alone on Christmas.”

“No need to apologize. I’ve done the same to you once or twice.”

Taken aback, she just stood there, twisting the belt of her robe in her hands. What could she say? He *had* abandoned her on many a Christmas Eve, but for him to acknowledge it was a huge step and one that left her confused.

He reached into the fridge again, pulled out a can of root beer and handed it to her. “You’ll have to carry this. I only have one free hand.”

Tess followed him into the living room, matching her pace to his. He placed the plate on the coffee table and sank into the couch with a sigh. She stood in front of him, still stunned she’d slept so long and missed most of Christmas.

Alex held his arm out, indicating the spot next to him where she could curl into his side. “Sit beside me, Tess.”

She clutched the cold can and looked at his outstretched arm. Her wobbly legs gave out and she sank into the opposite end of the couch.

Alex’s arm dropped, disappointment evident in the crease of his brow. Tess reached for her plate and ate her sandwich, chewing methodically while not tasting anything.

They watched *It’s a Wonderful Life* in silence while the fire crackled in the grate and the dog snored at Tess’s feet. The heat from the flames made her drowsy, but she refused to fall asleep. She wouldn’t abandon Alex on Christmas night too.

After the credits stopped rolling and an infomercial began, Alex turned the TV off, but he continued to stare at the blank screen, occasionally lifting the beer bottle and taking a swallow.

The sandwich sat heavy in Tess’s stomach. She took a sip of root beer to calm the churning.

This is what you dreaded, isn't it? Not the lack of communication, but the lack of having anything to say to each other.

Her gaze darted around the room, flitting here and there, everywhere but at Alex. She settled on the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree. Her attention sharpened, focused. She pushed herself up from the couch and walked with slow, hesitant steps to the tree where she touched the apple-shaped bell, sending a merry tinkling through the still house. Her gaze shifted to the bear pulling a tree behind him and then to the red glass globe painted with the Cincinnati skyline.

Memories hit her with enough force to double her over in pain. Only the weight of Alex's watchful gaze kept her back stiff.

When she swung around to face him, his brown eyes bore into hers, daring her to say something.

"When did you do this?"

"Two days ago."

"You had no right—"

"I had *every* right."

"How do you figure? We're—"

"Still married."

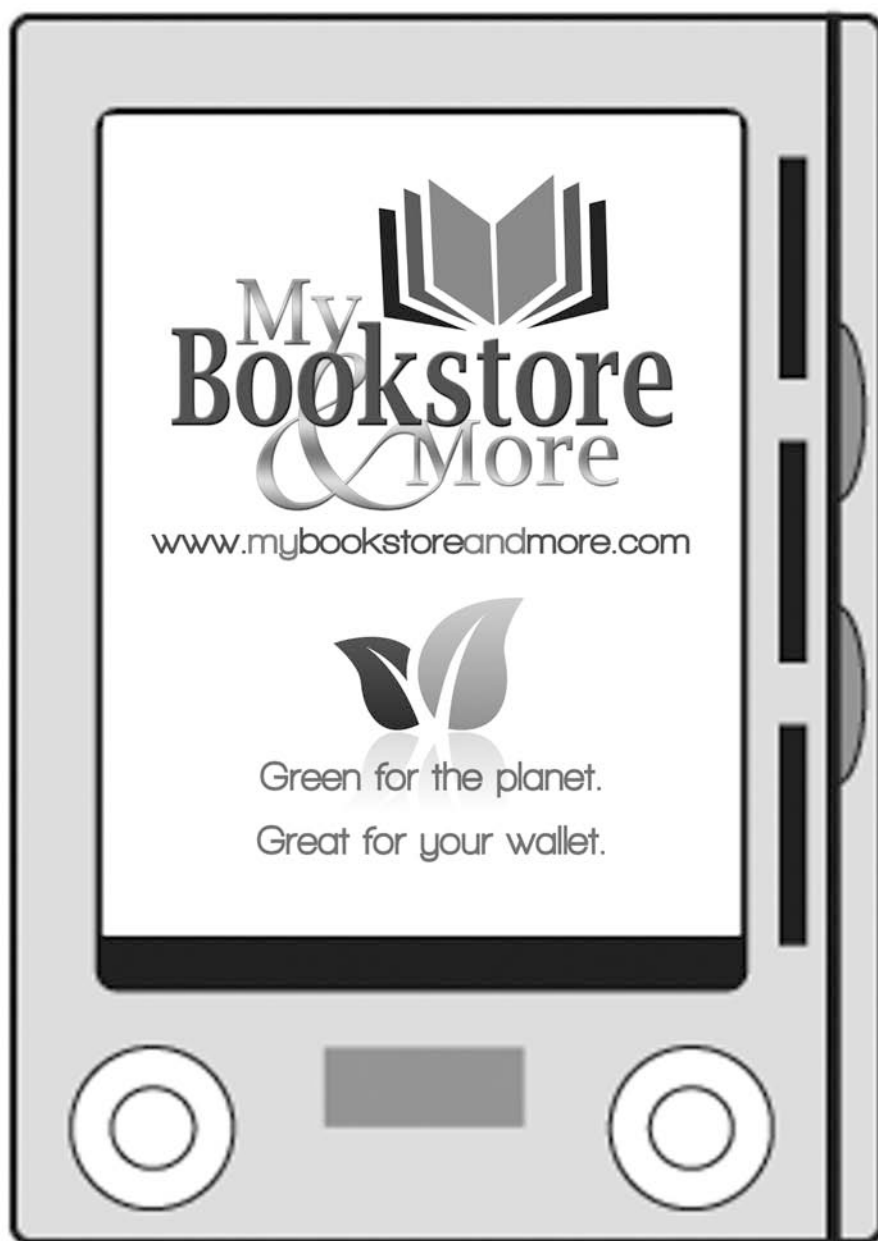
She took an involuntary step back, startled at his angry tone. He had a tight hold on the beer bottle and his shoulders were tense. He acted as if he hadn't known. Surely his attorney had told him she'd canceled the court date. Surely Alex had known she would never dissolve their marriage while he was in the hospital.

His lips thinned into a tight line, his eyes narrowed.

He hadn't known.

But he knew now.

Oh, God.



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