



FREYA'S BOWER PRESENTS

THE ICE SHACK



M. KING

The Ice Shack

by

M. King



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Culver City, CA

The Ice Shack

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The Ice Shack

Ryan stared gloomily at the cabin. “Please tell me you’re kidding. I mean, you *are* kidding, right? You don’t really mean we’re going to stay here. You’re just fooling. You’re going to whisk me off to a proper hotel, with a hot spa. Aren’t you?”

Devon wasn’t even listening. He’d unloaded their bags from the car and taken them up onto what—if it hadn’t been shrouded in snow and apparently made out of old pallets instead of stout timber—Ryan might have called the porch. The cabin definitely wasn’t what he’d had in mind when Devon said ‘cozy vacation spot’. It looked tiny. It looked cold. Most of all, it *didn’t* look weatherproof.

“Remind me again,” Ryan said, glaring at his better half. “This friend of yours who owns this place...he what? Wants your job, your parking space or something? I mean, he has reason to want you dead of hypothermia, right?”

Devon stood on the porch, rummaging in the pocket of his quilted jacket for the keys. He grinned, his teeth standing out white against his skin and his dark cheeks dimpled. His breath frosted in the air.

“Ever the gay, aren’t you? Come on, Princess. Let’s see if we can’t find you a mattress with a pea under it.”

He unlocked the door and carried their bags inside, still chuckling. Ryan grumbled, stomped his feet in the snow, and reluctantly went after him. He’d have followed Devon to the mouth of Hell if he’d asked...and at least that would have been substantially warmer.

“Prob’ly *gotta* pee under the mattress,” Ryan complained, stooping to avoid the icicles that dripped from the guttering. “Prob’ly gotta go in a bucket’n throw it outside ‘fore it freezes.”

Inside, the cabin had been furnished with much in the way of patchwork quilts, brightly colored throws...and pine. A lot of pine. It smelled of old waxy furniture polish and ageing timbers. Quaint 1980s watercolors of lakes and fishing scenes hung on the walls and, in one corner, a saggy couch stood in front of a wood burning stove. A faux bronze clock loomed on the mantel shelf, threatening to tick sonorously away at every minute of their break. It ground in to chime the hour. Ryan curled his lip and huffed experimentally: his breath clouded in front of his nose. He opened his mouth.

“Don’t say it,” Devon warned.

“*What a dump!*” Ryan retorted, in his very best Bette Davis impersonation. Devon laughed.

“Oh, you find this funny?”

“Actually, yeah. You’re so cute when you’re indignant.”

He shed the quilted jacket and moved across the floor. The worn pine boards creaked beneath him. Ryan held onto his scowl right up until Devon draped the jacket around his shoulders, over his own coat, and bundled Ryan up in his arms.

“Give it a chance,” he murmured against Ryan’s cheek. “Okay? I know it’s not what you were expecting, but give it a chance. If you really hate it, we’ll leave and go somewhere else.”

Ryan twisted his mouth doubtfully. “It’s the day before Christmas Eve. We’d never get in anywhere. And I don’t want to go through that whole thing with the ‘rents again.”

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He leaned back into Devon's embrace and thawed a little, which was more than could be said for the room temperature. Ryan didn't know why it should be, but his boyfriend always made him melt at the edges, even when he had a genuine temper on. This would be their third Christmas together, and the whole point of going away had been to avoid the tug-of-love battles they'd had in the past two years. Ryan's birthday fell on December 25th, so his family expected to see them and got more than a little possessive about sharing his double celebration. Trouble was, Devon's parents wanted to see them too and, while Ryan loved the fact his conservative practically-in-laws treated them like any other couple, the competition between the clans made for tensions and rivalry all the way through fall.

This year, Devon had promised him it would be different. A mystery Christmas vacation; they'd remove themselves from both sets of parents, all their friends and workmates, and take a few days just for them. Completely alone. It had sounded idyllic, and so, he didn't think unreasonably, Ryan had expected something a little more...ritzzy.

"We'll get some decorations up, light a fire. It'll be fun." Devon's voice hummed beneath Ryan's ear, the sound a deep richness that vibrated all the way down to the pit of his stomach and just slid further south from there. "A little Christmas love nest, huh? You'll like it."

Ryan eyed the pine-clad walls and wondered whether the place had central heating. He doubted it.

"It's not a love nest. It's more like that ice hotel thing...."

"All right, have it your way, Princess." Devon nipped his earlobe. "It's your very own ice palace."

Ryan snorted but couldn't pretend he wasn't aware of Devon's hard body pressed against him, even through all those layers of down and windproof polyester.

"Ice shack," he muttered.

Devon laughed and turned him around for a kiss. The softness of his mouth never failed to surprise Ryan; each touch seemed like exploration, as if Devon never quite realized how easy it would be for him to rip open the whole of Ryan's world. Oh, he knew well enough that he could reduce Ryan to a gibbering pile of slush if he wanted to but, sometimes.... Ryan pushed away those thoughts. It wasn't like he needed to say it. Devon *did* know.

Ryan linked his wrists behind his lover's broad neck and closed his eyes. There hadn't been enough of this recently. Kisses for the sake of kisses. Time they didn't have to rush through. Moments snatched away from the jaws of work and the demands of life. He wanted to feel Devon's hands on him, to slide under the sheets next to the indelible warmth and solidity of his body.

"There better be a heater in the bedroom," he grumbled.

Devon grinned, his eyes a little hazy as they broke apart. "Why don't you go see? I'll put the groceries away, get a fire going, and warm this place up."

"All right."

Ryan reluctantly let him go and wondered whether a passing joke about 'me man, me make fire' would piss Devon off. Probably not—he had to be one of the most easy-going people on the planet—but he decided not to anyway. There would be plenty of time for that. He passed through the cabin's dim, chilly, open-plan lounge-diner-with-kitchenette, lumpen and Eighties-tastic in design, and found the bedroom.

"Ugh."

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More watercolors lined the walls, and two smoked glass end tables stood either side of the bed, which had been covered with a huge quilt in themes of blue and orange. It looked to Ryan like the kind of thing successive generations of girls might have been encouraged to sew, only to bleed all over while they were still learning to wield the needle. He'd always found that thought rather off-putting. Closer examination revealed someone had actually bought it from a store. He wrinkled his nose. At least heirloom quilts had the mystique of age.

All the same, Ryan hopped onto the bed and bounced experimentally. It seemed comfortable. The only thing that really worried him was the obvious lack of a heater in the room. He kicked off his sneakers and waited, listening to Devon clattering about in the kitchen. They'd picked up enough food to last them through the time they'd be here, with the added trimmings of a mini-Christmas dinner for two. Ryan suspected he'd miss his mother's turkey and gravy as badly as he had last year; Devon's mom was a great cook, though nothing could ever be the same as the comforts and traditions of a childhood home. Hmm. They could come up with new traditions, he supposed.

He'd got himself distracted into contemplating that when Devon came into the room, a small paper bag in his hand. He set it down on one of the glass tables and perched on the edge of the bed.

"Okay?"

"There's no heating."

"Oh?"

"No. Look around. This room is totally devoid of heat sources, genius."

Devon raised an eyebrow. "There's you."

Ryan scowled, refusing to let that flippant little flirtation blossom within him the way it threatened to do. "You're going to feel *pain*, my friend," he growled. "I mean, I might freeze to death, but I'm going to make sure you suffer before I do."

"Mm." Devon leaned closer and snagged another kiss. "I found two portable heaters in the cupboard in the other room. Eric said he had 'em. There's a box of tinsel and stuff too. If you wanna get festive."

He hadn't moved back much; his breath still grazed Ryan's mouth.

"What I *want* is to get warm," Ryan said softly.

Three years. If you'd asked him back then where he thought he'd be today, he wouldn't have said with Devon Turner. Not in a million years. There were times Ryan still wanted to pinch himself, look at his scrubby-haired, pale-cheeked reflection in the mirror and say: *You don't deserve him*. He had days of believing it, sometimes. Days of wondering what would have happened if he'd never had that argument at work with the lighting director, stormed out of the theater, and gone to cool his heels in the new coffee shop across the street. If he'd never noticed the black Adonis in the business suit and—pumped up with testosterone, lust and sheer terror—actually managed to speak to him. Ryan had never met anyone who skated so close to perfection. It unnerved him every now and then.

However, there wasn't much point in denying his arousal any longer, especially with Devon's hand cupping the front of his pants. Devon smiled.

"Good. Here, or in front of the fire?"

The image of their bodies coupling in the flicker of the flames—black and white both burnished by the orange light—danced behind Ryan's eyes. He licked his lips.

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“Hmm. I dunno. Let’s see where it goes.”

Devon stood and held out his hand. “C’mon.”

Ryan sighed and sat up. He let Devon lead him back into the ghostly open-plan living room where, sure enough, a fire sputtered invitingly in the wood burner. It provided a gentle soundtrack of pops, cracks, and burrs as Devon pulled him down onto the saggy couch. Fat flakes of snow bumped against the window, the late afternoon washed into a pale, streaky mist. The firelight suffused the couch’s faded grey upholstery, though the smell of musty fabric and incipient damp fractured the romance of the moment a little. Ryan considered complaining, but the odor dropped into insignificance next to the heady proximity of Devon’s body. Ryan ran his hand up under Devon’s shirt, eager for the direct touch of skin on skin. Devon smiled, evidently amused by that, and swallowed Ryan up in more kisses, purposely slowing the pace. His fingers raked through Ryan’s short brown hair, cupped his long, lean jaw, always moving over him, as if in a quest to learn him by touch alone.

The room still felt cold; the air raised gooseflesh when they stripped, slipping to the floor, ever closer to the flames. The warmth from the fire was patchy. It licked over Ryan, toasting part of his side and one foot, but left the rest of him chilly. Devon did his best, trailing heat from his lips and stirring sparks with his fingers. In turn, Ryan took the time to rediscover his partner’s body, each caress an apology for every late night, every hurried breakfast or postponed date or outing. Devon stretched out under him, arms above his head, his ribs lifted, and his chest high, like an old physique model. Ryan straddled his hips, slid his hands up the glorious planes of muscle to the hard lines of his breastbone. His thumbs crowned Devon’s hardened rose-dark nipples, eliciting a squirm and a low croon of satisfaction. Devon sank his teeth into the soft pink inner of his lower lip.

His cock jutted, hungry and demanding, against Ryan’s. Ryan grasped it firmly, delighted by the shiver that ran across Devon’s skin. He chased it, tried to replicate it with the movements of his hand, stroking them both together, their similarities and their differences never more potent than like this. Ryan loved the way they looked; white and black, working towards the same goal, his hand stretched around twin shafts, Devon’s fingers coming to close the gap he couldn’t. Devon rested his head on his free arm, looking up at Ryan with bright eyes, his lips parted.

“Hm-mm,” was the only sound he made, just before he came.

But then, Devon never had been a talker. That one small whimper, that broken syllable cracked with bliss and affection, became something so intimate for Ryan. His own half-shaped cries seemed cheaper, like they could be meant for anyone. Not with Devon. Listening to that one small noise, nestled between sighing breaths and satiated smiles, Ryan could really believe it belonged to him. *Devon* belonged to....

Ryan rolled neatly onto the floor beside him. The rug might not have been terribly fresh, but at least it wasn’t bare boards. The firelight burnished warm shadows onto their flesh. A log popped in the grate, and Devon glanced over at him.

“Feeling better about this place yet?”

Ryan shrugged into the rug’s rough pile. “Meh. I’m getting hungry.”

Devon chuckled. He sat up, patted Ryan’s thigh in passing, and padded to the kitchenette. Ryan lay in the afterglow and watched him, admiring the hypnotic symphony of buttocks, back, and legs. All the best parts of a man.

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Devon had a swimmer's body—everything tapered down from those beautifully defined shoulders and powerful arms to a trim waist and strong, solid hips—though he'd put on a little weight since he stopped going up to the pool three times a week. Just another sacrifice on the road to promotion, Ryan supposed. He licked his lips as he gazed at the dimple that graced the base of Devon's spine.

In his mind, it tasted like honey and wafers.

They ate dinner part on the couch and part in bed. Devon made pasta with eggplant and a tomato-wine sauce and got out a carton of ice cream he'd bought on the way here. Ryan found a stack of CDs in the bedroom, along with a stereo that surprised him by actually working. They listened to Nat King Cole, and Devon commented that, in his experience, chestnuts roasting on an open fire usually meant someone was standing too close to the flames. Ryan laughed and looked for a long time at his handsome, smiling lover. It had been too easy to let this slide. Too easy to forget to make time for each other. He worried about making a mess on sheets that weren't theirs, but Devon assured him the cabin had a washing machine.

"I'm not doing laundry on Christmas Day!" Ryan protested, but it didn't stop Devon chasing another spoonful of ice cream down his belly. "Oh, God, don't...that *tickles*...."

"It's supposed to, smartass."

Ryan gave in, knowing there wasn't much point in playing the frost queen when he felt like this, or when Devon meant business. Weird, how these things could happen. Since school, his first line of defense had been bitchy comebacks, snappy putdowns...a crude kind of wit, but effective. It had never disguised him, but it had given him an identity, a wall to hide behind when the stones started flying. His work at the theater—set design, a use for the art degree his father had always said was pointless—added another dimension to that persona. Maybe that explained why it had been so easy to become that person, for nothing much to touch him, nothing much to matter. So easy to be cynical.

Devon sat up, his body streaked with sticky, creamy trails of vanilla swirl and the occasional bit of toffee crunch that had escaped Ryan's tongue. He retrieved the paper bag from the end table and pulled out condoms, strawberry-flavored lube, and a bullet vibrator, grinning as he watched Ryan's eyes widen.

"You never said—"

"Merry Christmas?"

"Probably."

* * * *

The electric heater clicked quietly to itself. The room had warmed up a great deal, though Ryan really hadn't noticed. He lay under the covers, Devon's hand splayed on his chest, and just listened to the rise and fall of his breath. Snow still battered against the windows. Everything seemed so quiet in the wake of the yelling and hollering. He hadn't come like that in months. Neither had Devon. He got ice cream in his cornrows, though. Among other things. He'd gone to the bathroom and taken them out, leaving his hair to spring wildly out in its natural 'fro, untamed and, Ryan thought, magnificent.

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He turned his face to it now, buried his nose in it and breathed in. Devon murmured from the depths of his slumber.

Ryan still fought the droop in his eyelids. He didn't want to sleep. Not if it meant missing anything. Christmas Eve tomorrow. They planned to decorate the cabin. Stupid, really, but it wouldn't have felt right to have Christmas without decorations. Tinsel, twinkly lights, and plastic holly. Cookies. Ryan had been insistent about buying cookies. Devon had laughed at him but hadn't complained. He rarely did. Sometimes, Ryan disliked the feeling of being treated like a pet, a child to be indulged or a princess to be pandered to—Devon's nickname for him when he wanted to tease—but he knew he brought it on himself. He supposed it wouldn't really be that hard to change, to be braver than he usually was and drop the act more often.

Only...he'd never been that exposed in front of anybody.

Ryan wriggled further under the covers, careful not to dislodge Devon's arm, tempted to burrow closer to him in all his warmth and comfort. Devon knew him better than anyone ever had, that much was true. He breathed through his mouth; each gargling exhalation grazed Ryan's skin. Ryan swallowed nervously and twisted against the pillow. He bit his lip.

"I..." he tried, his voice sticky and cobwebbed in the hush. Devon, oblivious to everything, couldn't hear him. The words glued up in his throat all the same. Ryan winced. *So stupid. He's asleep, damn it.* He took another run at it, rounded the treacherous utterance up and attempted to push it out of his mouth before it could slip back away into the darkness, defeated and cowardly. "I-I I.... I don't know what I'd do without you, you know."

He let out a breath. *Coward.* He thought, for a moment, that Devon's palm flexed against his chest, but it was probably just a coincidence. A sleep reflex. Something like that, anyway.

Ryan let his eyes close and drifted off to sleep.

Christmas Eve dawned in a soft palette of white and gray, touched with pale gold sun and the promise of a blue sky. They spent a lot of the day in the cabin. Devon ransacked tinsel from the box of decorations in the cupboard, and they flung it over the more offensive of the tacky watercolors. Ryan put up the artificial tree and complained it didn't smell right and no-one should be without a real tree at Christmas. Devon pointed out that there were plenty of pine trees outside. Ryan pulled a face and offered to redo Devon's cornrows, rather than face the thought of venturing out into the snow.

At least, that was his excuse. In truth, Ryan relished the intimacy and the contact of the job. Devon sat between his knees, and Ryan worked quickly and easily, used to the technique now. He felt proud of that; the braids suited Devon so well, and he'd done them. Devon reached up and touched his arm when he'd finished.

That afternoon, they went for a walk. Ryan put up token resistance, made token complaints, and tried to let Devon believe he'd persuaded him. Snow lay thick on the ground, pine trees crisp with frost like glass chains. What Devon called the village was less than a quarter of a mile away; Ryan frowned at the collection of squat buildings, dark against the bright, sharp blue of the sky.

"It's hardly civilization," he said, because he didn't really want anything to interrupt this time of theirs, alone and sacred. "Anyway, nothing'll be open."

"How d'you know? C'mon. Let's just go take a look."

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Ryan sighed and traipsed after Devon. He turned out to be right; they found a little coffee shop that overlooked a partially frozen pond and the only general store for about fifty miles. Nevertheless, the cappuccinos were good.

"Well," Devon teased as they sat at a small veneered table beside the window, luxuriating in the warmth and the scent of roasted beans in the air, "it's the edge of the Catskills, not the Artic Circle."

Ryan tried to look unconvinced, but a traitorous smile tugged at his mouth. The coffee shop hadn't many customers—the ubiquitous plastic holly, tinsel, and insanely grinning Santas could well have driven them away—but the waitress acted friendly and didn't try to rush them. Christmas carols played on the speakers; the pure harmonies of a professional choir.

"So, what do you wanna do tomorrow?" Devon asked.

Ryan blinked. He hadn't been concentrating, distracted into gazing at Devon's face and thinking about how strangely similar this place seemed to the coffee shop in which they'd first met and how, somehow, he'd always associate those eyes with the smell of a full city roast. Last Christmas, they'd gone to midnight mass with Devon's parents. Ryan's folks weren't churchgoers; their holidays got filled up with tin foil, yelling kids, and 'Schmaltziest Movies on TV' contests, and he'd expected to find the church service awkward and unpleasant...but he hadn't. It had been moving, in a weird kind of way. The same way that, today, the whole world just seemed to be a little bit more at peace.

"Huh?"

Crazy talk, obviously. Christmas was just another day in the year. People still died, got born, made love.... Natural disasters still happened.

"Birthday-wise. D'you want to open your birthday present or your Christmas gift first?"

But people had to believe in magic. That hope, that faith in perfection, made the world go around. Ryan curled his lip.

"How am I supposed to answer that if I don't know what the choice is?" He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "What's my birthday present?"

"Not telling. You'll have to guess."

"No fair!"

"Don't sulk."

Ryan pouted, just for kicks, amazed to find he actually wanted to go back to the cabin. It might have doubled as Marvin the Mass-Murdering Lumberjack's summer retreat, with its horrific décor and pervasive whiff of decayed furnishings, but it promised comfort and privacy enough for what he had in mind.

"Christmas first, then."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I know how you like to wake up early and start ripping at the stockings. You're just an overgrown child."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am not!"

Ryan grinned. "Stop it, or I'll spank you."

"Promise?"

The waitress' snort of laughter echoed from behind the cake display stand she'd been pretending to clean, so they paid up and left. The walk home

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descended first into a snowball fight and then snow-wrestling, which left them both shivering by the time they got in.

They put the shower to good use, and afterwards Devon made hot chocolate. They curled up with their mugs on the saggy couch and stared at the flickering embers of the fire. Ryan found it hard to believe so much tension could drop out of a person like this, that everything that crowded into life back home could suddenly cease to matter. He laughed softly.

“What?”

“Just thinking. I’m actually feeling kinda excited. All Christmassy.”

Devon smiled and traced unknown messages on the back of Ryan’s neck.

“You look it. You’re all bright-eyed, bushy-tailed.... Haven’t seen you look so relaxed in months.”

Ryan turned his head and leaned into the crook of Devon’s arm.

“I haven’t been. Can we do this again? Time out, I mean, not necessarily—”

“You love the ice shack!” Devon crowed triumphantly. “Ha! I gotcha! I knew it. You love—”

“I love *you*.”

Ryan froze, unable to believe the words had left his mouth. The heat of a blush crested his face and met the prickles of a cold sweat in a sick, dizzy moment of confusion. Devon’s smile broadened, washed through with such warmth Ryan could hardly bear to look at him. But, when he tried to avert his gaze, Devon touched his chin, turned him back to center.

“Look at me.”

The depth of his voice, full of tenderness, wasn’t something Ryan could ignore. Devon’s dark eyes searched his face; his expression held something a little like wonder. Ryan felt exposed and vulnerable, as if he’d been wrung out like wet laundry and pegged out for the wind to flay off all his remaining dignity.

“You never said that before. Ever.”

Ryan felt sweat break out on his upper lip. He wanted to look away—run away—but Devon wouldn’t let go, his touch featherlight but totally unbreakable. Ryan heard relief in his voice, and it hurt.

“I thought you knew,” he mumbled wretchedly. “Y’know. That I didn’t need to....”

“You didn’t. But I’m glad you did. I love you too.”

Ryan gulped. He’d only heard that from Devon once before, and it had almost crippled him. Ryan didn’t *do* talking about feelings. It left you too open, made pathways for deceitful words that tangled themselves around each other until they said things you didn’t mean.

He leaned in and kissed Devon hard on the mouth. He tasted of chocolate.

“I...love you,” Ryan whispered against his lips, crawling to straddle his lap, trying the words on for size. “Love you.”

“Don’t wear it out,” Devon teased, though neither his tone nor his eyes suggested he’d heard enough.

On the mantel, the atrocious bronze clock began to chime.

“Midnight,” Devon observed. He took one arm from around Ryan’s waist. “Merry Christmas.”

Ryan dipped in and stole another kiss. “Merry Christmas. What are you doing?”

Devon held a small package in his hand, pulled from his pocket. He held it out, a brightly wrapped cube nestled in his broad palm.

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"I've been carrying this around all day. It's meant to be for later on, but it's technically Christmas Day now, right? So, I guess—"

Uncertainty drifted over Ryan, and he hesitated. "Devon...."

"Just open it."

Ryan ran a thumb under the colorful wrappings, shed it to reveal a small jeweler's box. He frowned, but Devon urged him on.

"Go ahead."

The ring was antique gold, just a simple band with a beveled edge and a lightly hammered finish. It shone in the firelight. Ryan stared, hardly daring to look at Devon's face.

"Wh...?"

"It's just a ring, Ryan. If you want it to be. But...if you want...that is.... If.... Damn. Um. I meant to do this properly, with champagne and stuff, but...will you marry me?"

Ryan nodded, the reply he wanted to shout choked up in his throat like a whisper. They'd talked about this before, but he'd never thought.... He hadn't expected this for a minute. He gave a damp smile, tried to force away the shock and the desire to laugh, cry, and a dozen other things besides. What if it wasn't the right thing to do? What if they weren't ready, or this changed things? Was it even a good idea?

"Yes."

Devon hugged him, their lips meeting again in brief urgency. "You will?"

"Yes, I— Yeah."

"Whew." Devon let out a long breath. "Thank God for that."

They laughed, kissed, foreheads rested close together. After a moment, Ryan pulled back and looked seriously at Devon.

"So, what do I get for my birthday?"

Excerpt from
Breaking Faith

by
M. King

A Freya's Bower M/M Novel

Breaking Faith

Brett swallowed hard. His mother hadn't stopped talking, but he couldn't catch all of it through the rushing in his ears.

"...came up that way and he said there's police all over, but there hasn't been anything on the news. Not yet. Awful, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Brett tried to marshal his thoughts, think clearly through the jumble inside his head. *No way. Coincidence. Isn't it?* "Uh, thanks, Mom. I have to, uh.... I'll have somethin' to eat later, okay?"

He got up and left the room, just as Monica set the plate of bacon and eggs down in front of him. She called out, but Brett didn't respond, already halfway to the front door as he pulled his cell phone from his pocket and sought out the number he hadn't had the heart to even think about deleting.

Come on. Pick up. Prove me wrong. Please....

It probably wasn't anything but a stupid, sentimental impulse, Brett told himself. He didn't even know why he'd thought it could be anything to do with—

"Hello?" A woman's voice.

His stomach lurched. "Who is this?"

"Uh, my name's Jacqui Austin. I'm with the Hill County Sheriff's Department. Who—"

Brett shut off the phone quickly. *Fuck!* Why the hell would the sheriff's department have Tommy's phone? Unless—*Oh, God.*

He gunned the Bronco into life, driving without thinking, despite the whirl of thoughts in his head. Brett turned off his phone when it rang; Monica, probably wanting to know why the hell he'd left like that. What could he tell her?

Brett drove through the Sunday morning traffic just on the legal side of too fast, taking a loop down by Deacon's Bar, passing close enough to see the scene of crime tape. He hauled the truck in and wound down the window to ask the woman from the florist across the road what had happened.

"Carl Delaney from the corner store found him," she said, sucking on a cigarette, squinting a little at this wild-eyed, crazy kid demanding answers. "Only a couple hours ago. Some Indi—"

"How old?"

"How old?" The woman frowned. "Why the hell w—"

"Please."

"Well...middle-aged, I guess Carl said."

"Thank you," Brett called. The Bronco's tires squealed.

Oh, God. Oh, Tommy...what did you do?

He hit the gas and just drove, not even aware he'd headed for Fresno until he drew up alongside the campground. Brett stumbled out of the truck, sick to his stomach. Tommy wouldn't have, surely. He couldn't have. No...he could. *You can't keep protecting people like that. Not forever.* Brett's own words echoed back at him. He finally caught sight of the Chevy parked sloppily down by the trees that led to the water.

He's here.

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