



Felicia Watson

Where the  
**Allegheny**  
Meets the  
**Monongahela**

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Where the Allegheny Meets the Monongahela  
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## Chapter 1: Anger and Intolerance

*Anger and intolerance are the twin enemies of understanding.*

—Mahatma Gandhi

IT HAD been just about one of the worst days of Logan Crane's life.

At work, he had volunteered for the hot, dusty job of unloading a bulk delivery of mulch, knowing that it was usually considered a one-man job and he would have three or four hours of toiling in blissful solitude. Unfortunately for Logan, not one but three trucks of wood chips had been ordered by the garden center manager, who was gearing up for the spring rush.

So instead of the peaceful afternoon he'd anticipated, Logan was stuck working with Petey and José, two very young, very loud colleagues who talked non-stop over the radio they had blasting hip-hop music. The constant yammering and grating music competed with the bright sunshine for the privilege of drilling a gash of pain into Logan's brain.

As he clocked out, Logan grumbled to himself that for all the help Petey and José had been, he might as well have worked alone. *Maybe if they'd keep their shirts on and pull up their goddamned pants, they could get some work done.* The sight of sweaty, bronzed flesh and the constant flashes of clinging underwear had jangled Logan's nerves as badly as had the accompanying racket. He dismissed the sensation as annoyance at having to work with these "wild city kids."

Calling them city kids was a slight stretch since North Braddock, Pennsylvania, was not technically *in* Pittsburgh, though it was part of the greater metropolitan area. At any rate, it was certainly more urban than his old hometown of Elco had been. Turning his bright blue Ford 150 towards home, Logan swallowed down the longing for the days when he had earned his living quietly fixing cars in his small, run-down

shop in Elco. Thirteen months earlier, Logan had moved his family forty miles north to take a job in the motor gang at the Edgar Thomson Steel Works. A job that his brother-in-law had arranged at great trouble, a job that had lasted only twelve weeks.

Willing away that gloomy memory, Logan trudged up the steps to apartment D3, situated towards the back of the bustling Palisade Manor complex. As he slouched down the hallway, he did his best to ignore the growing Saturday evening bustle emanating from the neighboring units; right then, Logan craved only some cold beer and a quiet dinner.

His wife, Linda, greeted him at the door, though evidently not offering either of the two things he wanted. She pecked her husband on the cheek, observing, "You're late."

"Took some overtime to finish up the job I was doin'."

"Thank God—we sure can use the money."

"Yeah," Logan mumbled as he headed for the kitchen.

"Where're you goin'?"

"Gonna warsh my hands and get me a Iron City; relax a little before dinner."

"You don't have time," Linda said, frowning at his grimy shirt and jeans. "Just go ahead and jump right in the shower."

"Right now? What for?"

"The Trimbles're having a party tonight an' we're invited."

"You didn't say nothin' 'bout a party this mornin'."

"It's a last minute thing; Kim just called a few hours ago. Come on, hon," Linda wheedled. "It'll be a night out for the two of us and it won't cost anything."

"How 'bout a babysitter?"

"Oh, we don't need one for this. Krista can keep an eye on Meghan for a few hours—bet you did more than that when you were twelve. Anyway, we'll be right across the parkin' lot."

"I ain't up for no party, you jus' go on without me."

"Don't be like this, Logan. At least we can take advantage of havin' people around who like to have a little fun now an' then."

“We just saw the Trimbles last Sunday when I replaced Don’s goddamn water pump, ’member?”

“That’s one of the reasons they invited us—to thank you.”

“If they really wanted to thank me, they would’ve dropped off a case of beer. Neighbors here can’t leave ya in peace. All they wanta do is pry and gossip. I had a rough day and I ain’t—”

“Oh no—you ain’t pullin’ that shit on me, mister. I work just as hard as you, and I need this.”

Logan’s rising annoyance caused an equivalent rise of several decibels in his answer. “So? I said go ’head.”

Linda didn’t shrink from matching his tone or volume. “I already went to two parties without you—folks here’re gonna start thinkin’ there’s somethin’ wrong with you.”

That phrase twisted the invisible band around Logan’s head even tighter, and in response he raged, “What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means you’re goin’ to this party,” Linda shouted back.

Logan was preparing to vent his fury at his mulish wife when he saw the pale, worried face of his elder daughter peeking around the doorway. Knowing his girls, he guessed that her ten-year-old sister was probably right behind her. The kids had evidently been summoned by their parents’ irate voices—though heated arguments had become an all-too-common occurrence during their time in Braddock.

Logan’s anger swiftly died, extinguished by a blanket of guilt. Without another word, he headed for the bathroom to prepare himself for an evening promising only unwelcome noise and unwanted companionship.

Later, at the party, Logan tried to inoculate himself against the misery of the night by indulging in more than his share of the cheap whiskey on offer while completely ignoring the soda and greasy pizza his hosts had provided.

Always a man who prided himself on holding his liquor, Logan showed only the slightest signs of inebriation as he and Linda prepared for bed later that night. The cut-rate booze had done nothing good for his mood while only aggravating his headache; he yearned for oblivion as he sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his work boots.

Unfortunately, when Linda joined him in their small master bedroom moments later, she was not yet ready to let the evening go. “Did you hear what Joann was tellin’ me? They’re takin’ their kids to Disney World for spring break.” Linda’s tone slid from innocent to accusatory as she continued. “Sure would be nice if we could do somethin’ like that for our girls.”

Logan knew immediately that Linda was working her way towards yet another “discussion” of their shaky financial situation. He *hated* the way these conversations ended up as stereo in his ears—his wife’s nagging doubling the drumbeat of his own guilty conscience.

In a vain attempt to head her off, he said, “You know I’m lookin’ for something better.” Squinting wearily into the glare of the yellow light coming from the bedside table, he added, “There just don’t seem to be too many mechanic jobs to be had right now.”

Not mollified in the least, Linda crossed her arms and snapped, “Even if there was, it ain’t like it’d pay as good as the mill did.”

Prodded by the emergence of a stinging subject, the embers of Logan’s anger flared back to life hotter than ever. He jumped to his feet and strode around the bed to face his accuser directly. “Fuck! Do you wanna fight about this *again*?”

“I’m not looking to start a fight; it’s just that Marie says—”

“I know what your sister says, and she doesn’t know anything about it. Let it go, Linda.” He turned away, heading back to his side of the room to finish undressing.

Linda stayed him by grabbing at his sleeve while insisting, “It isn’t just Marie. Bob thinks you could maybe get back in the mill, too. They need another mechanic on swing shift, he says. If you’d jus’ go to Chuck and apologize—”

“I’m tellin’ you,” Logan growled, biting each word off, “for the last time. I ain’t crawlin’ back to that fuckin’ foreman!”

“You stubborn bastard. First good job you ever got, and you gotta go an’ ruin it. Bob warned you that the guy was an asshole when they hired you on—all you had to do was ignore him.”

By now the couple was standing toe-to-toe, breathing fire at each other while their angry voices ricocheted through the small apartment



and across the complex. Logan leaned down into his wife's equally red face, snarling, "Chuck deserved that beating—deserved worse. Son of a bitch called me a cocksucker!"

"So what? Is that the end of the world? Big, bad Logan can't take a little bit of name-calling?"

"Shut up!" Logan grabbed Linda by the shoulders and backed her towards the dresser, warning her. "Shut the fuck up. I've had enough of your mouth tonight." He gave her body a quick shake, as if to punctuate his command.

Unfazed and defiant, Linda screamed back, "Too bad! I've had enough of scraping by. After twelve years we finally had a chance at a good life—and you blew it. My momma always said a man who can't provide for his family ain't no man at all." She poked him in the chest with each word that followed. "That's you. No man at all!"

For months Logan would claim to remember little of what happened next: not violently hurling his tiny wife into the dresser, not hearing the ancient wood splinter and collapse around her, nor watching the waterfall of shattered mirror shards slice into her unconscious form.

He had never meant to hurt her, he told the cops, and then later, the judge.

He had just wanted—no, *needed*—for the jeering, nagging, jagged voice to stop. But in the awful quiet that descended as Logan gaped in horror at the bloody devastation he had wrought, only one voice was silenced. The other howled on, louder than ever.

IT WAS shaping up to be a bad day for Nick Zales.

Nick parted the front room curtains and searched the street; although the bright July sun allowed him to see all the way to the corner, there was no sign of Polly Brill's Dodge Neon. *It figures she'd pick today to be late.* It was now 7:55 a.m., and Nick faced the choice of being late for a Monday morning meeting with his boss or leaving his mom home alone.

Sometimes Agnes Zales seemed lucid enough to be left on her own for the short time it would probably take for the healthcare aide to show up. However, Nick begrudgingly admitted to himself that today was apparently not one of those times. His mom had already asked him *three times* if they were “going home today,” even though Nick’s small house in the Observatory Hill section of Pittsburgh had been her home for the past six years. This particular delusion had meant that his first job of the day had been to convince his mom to unpack her suitcase.

He had just flipped open his cell phone to call Trudy and let her know he was going to be late for their meeting when he heard the scrape of Polly’s key in the front door.

The short, spry woman, hair a shade of red not to be found in nature, smiled guiltily when she spied Nick standing in the hall. “Oh hon, you’re still here.”

“Yeah, it didn’t seem like a good day to leave Mom alone. I’m glad you’re here, I gotta run.”

But Polly, oblivious as ever, compounded her offense by delaying Nick even further with a long-winded excuse for her tardiness. “You won’t believe what I did. I woke up this mornin’ thinking it was *Sunday*. There I was, sitting in my kitchen, drinking my tea and listening to the birds—so pretty this time of year, aren’t they? Anyway, all of a sudden I noticed there wasn’t that usual racket coming from St. Benedict’s up the street. You know how that bunch is—real noisy....”

As Nick edged out the door, he thought, not for the first time, that when you hired someone to watch a demented person, it would behoove you to ensure that the watcher was more than just a little less demented than the watchee. So why didn’t he get rid of her? The answer came immediately on the heels of that silent question—because of the way his mom’s face had lit up at the sight of Polly. The two women were of roughly the same age and background and had formed a quirky, codependent sort of friendship.

Finally escaping the house, Nick hopped into his slightly battered black Jeep Cherokee and sped away. Luckily, if he pushed it, he could usually make it to North Hills in less than twenty minutes, so he had an outside chance of being on time for his 8:30 meeting.

Twenty-two minutes later Nick pulled up to an unmarked iron gate on a quiet suburban street and waved his badge at the key reader. Allegheny Crisis Center, where Nick plied his trade as a counselor, kept a deliberately low profile; there were no identifying signs visible from the road, and the location was divulged on a need-to-know basis only. The center's resident clients, victims of domestic abuse, depended on ACC to be a secure haven where their abusers couldn't find them, exposing them to the possibility of harassment—or worse.

The computer system swiftly confirmed Nick's access and opened the gate; he moved slowly up the driveway. Considering his time crunch, he would have preferred some speed, but Nick knew that was both unwise and unsafe as there were likely to be children playing on the grounds.

Briefly stopping by his cramped, cluttered office to grab a pad, pen, and some folders, Nick skidded into Trudy Gerard's presence at 8:40, only to find her on the phone. She motioned him into a chair at the small table in the corner of her sunny space; Nick sank into it and composed himself to wait, Trudy's time always being in great demand.

Trudy Gerard had been head of counseling services at ACC for twelve years as well as spearheading the community outreach and education program. Despite her having recently passed the half-century mark, her wavy black hair, invariably pulled into a neat bun, showed only a few streaks of gray, and her cocoa-colored skin was nearly unmarred by wrinkles.

Though her brown eyes were as warm as her smile, the impeccable posture and effortless air of command she possessed prevented any but the densest of individuals from ever trifling with Trudy. Nick smiled to himself as he listened to his boss rattle off a list of commands to someone who, it appeared, might have broken that last rule.

"I said today, what part of that word didn't you understand? No, I'm not going to tell you *how*, that's your job. If you were better at it, I wouldn't need to tell you that."

After she'd rapped the phone down smartly and joined him at the table, Nick asked, "Do I even want to know who that was? Please don't tell me it was the Assistant District Attorney."

“Of course it was. I’ve got Cindy Lane all geared up to give her testimony, and it’s going to happen *today*—come hell or high water.”

“She’s going to testify against her husband?” At Trudy’s brisk nod, Nick asked, “How’d you manage that?”

“Because I’m good at my job,” Trudy replied tartly. “Now, let’s talk about how you’re doing at yours. Let’s start with why you were late.”

Despite Trudy’s harsh wording, Nick felt no real concern. For one thing, he knew that his boss prided herself on her bluntness. For another, she had been one of his greatest advocates in the seven years since he’d shown up at ACC, a green-as-grass intern from the psych program at Pitt. “Sorry about that. The aide was late today, and my mom.... Well, let’s just say I thought it best to wait for Polly.”

“Bad morning?”

“Yep.” Nick sighed, adding, “It seems like there’s still more bad ones than good.”

Trudy leaned forward and, in a much softer tone, asked, “You’re not still hoping to see some improvement after all these years, are you?”

“It’s not impossible. With her type of head injury—” Nick stopped abruptly and swallowed several times before continuing. “But we’ve been over this.... And you’re not *my* counselor, anyway.” Pulling out a folder, he said briskly, “Here’s my update on ‘Life Skills’.”

The Life Skills program at ACC was Nick’s brainchild. One of the biggest impediments to domestic abuse survivors building an independent existence was usually their lack of even the most basic aptitudes. Many times their abusers had them so cowed and controlled that they spent years forbidden to even use a phone, let alone drive a car, handle money, or get a job.

Nick had divided the program into several modules: finance, home upkeep and repairs, employment, and literacy/GED. He covered the first two while volunteers taught the rest. He hoped to add two more modules in the near future, but he needed more volunteers to teach

them since he was flat-out with his current caseload and his tiny budget wouldn't stretch to cover paid help.

While Trudy was reading his progress report, she looked over the edge of her glasses and announced, "By the way, I have someone in mind for the 'Automotive Basics' module you want to add."

There was just enough tension in Trudy's deceptively casual tone to put Nick on alert; however, he was used to her unorthodox suggestions, so he merely asked, "A volunteer?"

"Yeah." She paused and amended mirthfully, "Well... more like a volun-told." When Nick refused to take the bait, she continued, "He's a client of mine."

Nick was momentarily nonplussed. "Oh. I didn't know we had a new male client—since I usually get them, I mean." Before Trudy could answer, he added in a rush, "Not that I'm saying that a gay man is the *only one* who can counsel our gay clients, but—"

"I didn't say he was gay—"

"Oh, sorry," Nick interrupted. "It's been a while since we had a straight male victim—"

"*And*," Trudy continued firmly, "I didn't say he was a victim."

"So he's a..."

"An offender."

"Grr-eaat. And you think I'm going to turn over my girls to the care of some *wife-beater*?"

"First of all, we don't use that term anymore and you know it. Secondly—*your girls*? How paternalistic is that?"

"Oh, cut the bullshit, Trudy. You know that my current group is all in their twenties; you call them girls all the time. And I might've heard you use the word 'wife-beater' once or twice."

"I'm old enough to call them girls. Besides, it isn't the words so much as the intent behind them." Trudy drew herself up to her full seated height before introducing a phrase that *always* indicated a hard truth coming. "No harm intended," she used a slight pause to great effect before continuing, "but you've got to get past this prejudice of yours."

“Oh, I’m sorry if I have this *insane* prejudice against men who beat, abuse, maim, and/or kill their partners.” Nick’s sarcasm was meant as much for the sting of conscience echoing Trudy’s point as for Trudy herself. He immediately changed the subject by saying, “And you’re aiming to bring this guy here—”

Trudy cocked an eyebrow and drawled, “Yes—I’ve forgotten one of the first rules of this place—*that I run*—and plan to bring an abuser to the center. In fact I was thinking of throwing it open to all of them.”

Suitably abashed, Nick asked, “So where...?”

“Larry knows a guy who’ll let us use his garage.”

A rueful smile broke across his face as Nick affirmed, “Of course he does.”

Trudy’s husband Larry ran one of the best and busiest diners on the South Side, and it seemed to Nick that he knew *everyone* in Pittsburgh, from the Steelers’ defensive coordinator to the blind man who sang for change on Forbes Avenue.

“Nick, I care about these women just as much as you; I’m not going to expose them to danger. I wouldn’t suggest this if I wasn’t absolutely sure about this guy—you *know* that.”

That statement admitted no argument, so Nick simply asked, “So what’s his story?”

“He’s a mechanic.”

“Well, I sorta figured....”

“And he was referred to me by Sister Ciera—”

“Oh, I should have known. He’s one of Sister Bleeding Heart’s lost causes.”

“Do you call her that when she teaches one of *your girls* to read or helps one get her GED?”

Nick had no immediate answer, since the nun *was* a great help, and moreover, he actually sort of liked the determined little religious who volunteered at ACC and also ran a “Literacy Behind Bars” program. They simply had a basic disagreement about what constituted a “victim” and about the worth of counseling abusers.

Along that line of thought, Nick asked Trudy, “Are you counseling this mechanic *and* his wife?”

“Not yet, but I hope to. Right now, I’m working with him alone; seeing me is part of his probation. Look, I know what you—and the rest of the world—think about couples counseling. I’m sure we’ll continue that debate over a beer sometime, but I can tell you this guy doesn’t fit the classic abuser profile.”

“Meaning what? The abuse was a one-time event?”

“Not only that, but he also has definite anger control issues. And he’s instigated physical disputes with *men*—at work, in a bar—”

“Wait a minute. Something’s not adding up. He’s on probation for smacking his wife *once*?”

Trudy betrayed slight nervousness by licking her lips before admitting, “She was injured rather badly—”

“Uh huh. Has he admitted he’s at fault?”

“Not really. He claims it was an accident—”

“Of course,” Nick snorted.

“Okay, Nick, I admit it. I’m not really getting anywhere with him. He’s angry, morose, and depressed. He’s separated from his wife and children, which isn’t helping, but I can’t testify that he’s ready to go back. I need something to both shake him up a little and make him feel better about himself... and I think teaching basic automotives for us might do it. Now, are you going to help me out or not?”

Nick’s resolve faltered when Trudy made it a plea rather than a command. A half-minute of silent consideration allowed him to say, “Okay. But I’m going to be there during the whole class. I want to keep an eye on your friend, ‘Mr. Good-and-Angry Wrench’.”

“How are you going to find time for that? I’ll do it.”

“You? You’re busier than me,” Nick laughed. “Besides, Life Skills is my baby; I’ll find the time. And I’m warning you, if there’s the slightest bit of trouble with this guy, I’m pulling the plug. Immediately.”

Evidently recognizing a final offer when she heard it, Trudy said, “Okay, fine—on both counts. I’ll tell Logan he has a gig.”

“Logan? Is that his first or last name?”

“First. Last name is Crane.”

NICK split his drive home between worrying about this unconventional volunteer he’d taken on and the fact that he was over an hour late and very likely Polly had already left for the day. In a way, he didn’t blame her. No one knew better than Nick how tiring ten hours with his mom could be, but a “nutty morning” usually presaged a nuttier evening and was always worse when she’d been left alone on such a day.

His mom didn’t disappoint. Nick found her sitting expectantly with her repacked suitcase at her feet and a coat on despite the warm night.

“Ma, what are you doing?” He gently helped her up, saying, “Come on, get that coat off; you’re going to get heatstroke.”

“No, I need to go get Nicky.”

Nick turned his mom to face him while insisting calmly, “I *am* Nick, Mom.”

Agnes reluctantly removed her coat as she shook her head in bemusement. “Nick is twelve years old. I left him in Kittanning.”

A weary sigh escaped him as he led her up the stairs, repeating a familiar litany. “I *was* twelve—twenty years ago, when we *both* left Kittanning. Do you hear me, Mom? We left Kittanning a long, long time ago.”

As Nick watched his mom unpack for the second time that day, he thought: *Yeah, we left Kittanning, but it sure ain’t left us.* He couldn’t help but wonder if it ever would.



## Chapter 2: Against Our Will Comes Wisdom

*And even in our sleep, pain that cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.*

—Aeschylus

LOGAN turned his neck just enough to squint at the clock. 7:40 p.m. Twenty minutes to go in his weekly session with Trudy Gerard, twenty minutes more of feeling like a dismantled engine—laid bare, poked and prodded with impunity.

“It’s about six minutes later than the last time you looked.”

Shrugging sheepishly, Logan mumbled, “Sorry.”

Only a trace of amusement graced Trudy’s announcement. “Don’t worry, we still have plenty of time for you to tell me how the visit with your daughters went.”

“Went okay.”

“Just okay?”

There was no way to scrub his voice of the resentment as Logan blurted, “When can I see ’em without that goddamn—without Linda’s sister bein’ there?”

“Are you ready to talk to them about what happened?”

Every time Trudy asked that question, Logan felt it like a blow to the gut. “What’s that gotta do with me seein’ my own daughters alone?”

Trudy steepled her fingers together on her desktop as she explained, “I think it needs to be one of the first things you talk about when you’re ready for that next step. Which will happen when I’m ready to sign an affidavit that you aren’t possibly a danger to them.”

Logan had let that statement pass one too many times to ignore it today. Through gritted teeth, he demanded, “Where do you get off sayin’ I could ever hurt one of my girls? I’ve never so much as laid a hand on ’em—”

“Had you ever laid a hand on Linda before last March?”

“No! But that was different....”

“Because?”

“How many times do I gotta tell you that was an accident?”

“Then how can I be sure you won’t have ‘an accident’ with your daughters? You say you never meant to hurt Linda—and I believe you, Logan. But until we can get to the root of what made you lose control—”

“A bad day and bad whiskey.”

“If that’s all it took, then you need to tell me what has changed since then.”

“Plenty.” His shoulders slumped as he continued. “But nothin’ good.”

“Then we need to find a good change for you.” When her patient had no response, Trudy plowed ahead. “Remember we talked about you teaching that automotive course?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you still up for it?”

“I guess. It’s for girls who... who’ve had some trouble. Right?”

“Right. Domestic abuse victims.”

Dread tightened the muscles in Logan’s shoulders at Trudy’s plainspoken answer. “Are you gonna tell ’em about... about....”

“They will know that you’re in counseling for a domestic abuse incident.”

“Why? Why do ya have ta tell ’em?”

“So they can make an informed decision about joining the group or not. Logan, most of these women have spent years being manipulated and controlled; we’re trying to give them that control back. We can’t do it by lying to them.”

“It wouldn’t be lyin’ not to tell ’em anything.”

“Yes, it would. Some of the worst lies in life are told with silence.”

“What’a you mean by that?” Logan snapped.

“Just what I said,” Trudy answered. “Why? What did it mean to you?”

Logan ignored the answers buzzing in his head and brushed her off with a brusque, “Nothin’. Now, what about this class?”

Trudy’s head stayed cocked, and she stared at Logan in silence for a few seconds before relenting with, “Things are pretty much set. My husband has made arrangements for a garage we can use—it’s on Arlington Avenue. That’s on the South Side.”

“Where’s that, exactly? I don’t know the city too good.”

“It’s right across the Monongahela—from here you’d take the Fort Pitt Bridge. Then get on....”

Logan missed the rest of Trudy’s directions, distracted by her mention of the river he’d practically grown up on back in Elco. His daydreaming was cut short by the realization that, like everything else in Pittsburgh, the familiar waterway was a very different entity here.

Fortunately, Trudy was writing the address down for him. He figured, when the time came, he’d find it without her directions—one way or another. The counselor reached across her desk and handed him the paper, saying, “Nick Zales, the guy who runs the Life Skills program, would like to meet with you to go over a few things. I suggested tomorrow afternoon; can you make it?”

Though Trudy had been talking about this idea for weeks, it had always been somewhere off in the future to Logan, so the word “tomorrow” caught him off-guard. “No... not tomorrow. Maybe sometime next—”

“I thought you had Thursdays off?”

“Yeah... but I got some stuff I gotta take care of....”

“Can’t you take care of it in the morning?” Trudy leaned forward and speared Logan with her piercing gaze. “I really think this is

important for you. You want to move on, don't you? You want to get unsupervised visitation rights, don't you?"

After two months in therapy, Logan had no trouble recognizing that Trudy was working up a head of steam. Cutting it off by agreeing to her request seemed suddenly more attractive than sitting through one of her fiery lectures. "Yeah, sure, I'll make some time. When's he wanta meet?"

"Nick said anytime in the afternoon before five. What works for you?"

Since Logan had no particular desire to teach a bunch of women who would probably think of him as some kind of monster, he still wanted to put this meeting off as long as possible. "How 'bout four?"

"Okay, I'll let him know." It was Trudy's turn to glance at the clock. "We still have a few minutes. Why don't we spend it exploring why you've never verbalized any desire to see your wife—even though we've talked about your seeing the girls quite a bit. Do you *want* to see Linda?"

The idea of seeing Linda filled Logan with so many conflicting emotions—most of them bad—that to cope he'd learned to squeeze it into as small a space as possible and lock it away in a dark corner of his brain. The thought rarely escaped its confines—until this infernal woman insisted on setting it free. He stared at the rug between his feet as he answered, "Like I've said, that's up to her. In court she sure didn't seem like she wanted to."

"I didn't ask if you could see her, I asked if you *wanted* to see her."

Logan felt a spike of temper shoot up his spine, and he had to work to keep his thoughts to himself: *Fuckin' woman! Never lets nothin' go.* With no other outlet for his anger, Logan's hangnails bore the brunt of his frustration for a few seconds before he finally threw a hooded glance at his tormentor, mumbling, "I don't know."

After waiting in silence for more than those three syllables, Trudy finally rejoined, "Okay, we'll explore that next week. In the meantime, why don't you give it some thought?"

Though he had no real intention of complying, Logan was trapped by Trudy's direct request and felt he had no choice save to agree. "Okay."

Trudy leaned back and twisted her chair gently back and forth as she speculated. "From what we talked about last session, I think working on cars is a real self-soothing technique for you. Some time doing that might unblock you on... well, any number of topics. Are you still looking for a mechanic job?"

Logan stifled the urge to roll his eyes at the phrases, "self-soothing" and "unblock." Instead he answered honestly, "Been looking, but there ain't much of anything—not in Braddock. Guess I'm lucky I was able to hang onto my job at the nursery."

Though he'd never really cared for the work at Scott's Garden Center, lately it had become a refuge for Logan, and he took every bit of overtime possible rather than face the emptiness of his tiny efficiency apartment.

"What about here in the city? I could ask—"

"No, ma'am. Thanks, anyway. Where I am is bad enough. Can't see me working here." To Logan's way of thinking, the weekly trips from North Braddock to Trudy's downtown office near Pitt's campus were disorienting enough. He had no desire to make them a daily occurrence.

"Are you planning to move back to Elco when your probation is up?"

Before the incident in March, Logan would have jumped at the chance, but now the thought filled him with dismay. Since word of his arrest and subsequent guilty plea had certainly reached the small town by now, Logan was sure he'd face a storm of gossip and condemnation. "Nah, just my sister there now. Might as well stay put."

At last the hour was up and Logan could escape Trudy Gerard's seeking gaze and blunt tongue. The drive home to his room tucked into a widow's basement was marked by less relief than usual, since he faced meeting with this Nick Zales the next day. Logan wondered what he was like, almost immediately concluding he was probably some middle-aged stuffed-suit who talked bullshit stuff like "verbalize" and "self-soothing." In the end, it didn't really matter what Zales was like.

Logan would just have to close in, keep his head down, and weather it—just like every other misfortune he had faced in life.

AFTER more than one wrong turn, Logan finally found the address on Arlington. Well, close to it anyway; in this part of Pittsburgh many buildings weren't level with the street but instead seemed to have been carved into the hills that defined the South Side Slopes. His choices for getting to Acken's Auto Clinic itself were a steep driveway or dozens of steps that ran alongside it; he swiftly chose the steps and, ignoring the late July heat, darted up them.

Upon reaching the landing that was level with the repair shop, Logan was amazed to see a man standing on the top railing. He was precariously balanced on the pipe rail and had a hand shielding eyes that were fixed on a spot across the horizon. The dark-haired man looked down at him, and Logan was caught by a flash of dazzling white, a mesmerizing smile that lit up an angular face dominated by deep-set, brown eyes and strong, masculine brows.

The stranger didn't seem the least bit embarrassed by Logan's sudden appearance; his smile only widened as he said, "Great view of The Mon from here."

Feeling suddenly incoherent, Logan croaked, "The river?"

"Yeah. I love it. Love 'em all, really. Allegheny best, though."

Logan couldn't quite work up the nerve to debate the matter, only managing to dart the occasional glance at this fervent river devotee while asking, "Why's that?"

"Grew up in Kittanning and Freeport—got Allegheny water in my veins." He finally jumped down from his perch and motioned to the steps that continued on, climbing upwards to a few houses wedged into the side of the hill. "Guess I was in your way. Sorry 'bout that."

Logan peeped back up at the man from under his baseball cap. "No... I'm... I'm meetin' someone here."

The smile disappeared suddenly, and a puzzled crease marred his forehead as he asked incredulously, "Wait a minute. Are you Crane?"

It took him a few confused seconds before he could even claim his own name. “Yeah... Logan Crane. That’s me.”

“Nick Zales,” was offered back along with an extended hand. It looked like he wanted to say more, judging from the mouth that opened and closed several times, but nothing escaped beyond those two syllables.

Logan shook the proffered hand, wondering how the pot-bellied bureaucrat he’d been expecting had inexplicably turned into a striking man about his own age. There was no sign of a suit. Instead Logan was disconcerted to notice a thin blue T-shirt playing over a muscled chest before sliding into snug Levi’s covering legs even longer than his own.

His discomfort was hardly diminished by the fact that Zales seemed equally startled by his own appearance. He briefly debated asking the counselor what he’d found so surprising but quickly decided against it. *I probably don’t wanta hear the answer to that.*

WHEN Nick recovered from the shock, his first coherent thought was: *I am going to kill Trudy Gerard!* As he led his brand-new volunteer into the garage, Nick fumed to himself, *Why didn’t she tell me this guy was fucking gorgeous?*

A few deep breaths and Nick cooled off enough to admit that a lot of the fault was his own. Going on what Trudy had told him about her patient, he’d developed such a clear and concrete picture of Logan Crane that it had never occurred to Nick that he might not find a hulking, belligerent, knuckle-dragger waiting at Dave’s shop.

*Okay—so what if he’s a shy, muscular piece of mouth-watering male? Just proof that this ugly book sure has one pretty cover. Come on, Nick, remember what else he is—a goddamned abuser.*

Nick tried to distract himself by being briskly business-like. He turned to Logan, noticing that he’d finally removed his sunglasses, but the sky-blue eyes they’d been shielding flitted around the garage, never resting anywhere for long. Nick’s voice echoed around the space slightly as he explained, “So, we’ll have three gir—women in the group. None of them know the first thing about cars, by the way.”

“What am I gonna show ’em on—that?” Logan stopped his pacing across the oil-stained concrete floor long enough to point to a car hiding under a canvas tarp in the corner.

“No, that’s an old car Dave—he owns this place—is storing here. Larry says it needs a lot of work before Dave can unload it. We’ll use Norah’s car; she’s one of the women in the group. She just got herself a ’97 Cavalier.”

Talking more to the wall of tools than Nick, Logan observed, “Shit, they weren’t much good brand new, let alone twelve years old.”

“Yeah, well—that’s the kind of car these women can afford,” Nick answered in a frosty tone. “That’s why they need this course. They generally have old, unreliable cars, live in iffy neighborhoods, and possibly have some abusive nut stalking them.” He eyed Crane to gauge his reaction to that last salvo.

Logan’s shoulders merely hunched slightly as he responded, “Thought they lived in that center of yours?”

“Cheryl and Tish do, but Norah has moved out. Getting back to the course, what I want is for you to start with the basic stuff and work up to auto upkeep—changing oil and stuff like that—and then move on to a few really easy repairs.”

There was no immediate response from Logan as he stood, staring at the tarp-covered car with his hands jammed into his pockets. Nick waited him out, and Logan finally looked up briefly and mumbled, “Yeah, sure, sounds good.”

With that out of the way, the two men quickly agreed on a weekly course to be held every Thursday from three to five p.m. Logan was running his hands lightly over some of the equipment as he asked, “Do you know if I’m allowed to use these tools, or should I bring my own?”

“According to Larry, we can use whatever we want. Apparently Dave had a heart attack a few months ago and doesn’t get here much anymore.”

Logan finally trained his compelling gaze full-bore on Nick, who was surprised at the pain hiding in the impossibly blue depths. Surprised to see it or surprised he recognized it, Nick wasn’t sure. “This a one-man operation, then?”



Nick wanted to ignore the lonesome longing seeping out from under that question, but instead his body strummed with the sudden need to issue a non sequitur in response: *I know, me, too*. Wondering if he had suddenly lost his mind, he shook his head to clear it before answering, “Yeah, think so.”

To cover his disquiet, Nick walked over and flicked the cover off the car. His heart leaped at what he found, and he breathed excitedly, “Oh, wow, a T-bird!”

There was true reverence in Logan’s tone as he elaborated, “A ’62 Sports Roadster.”

The sudden appearance of his teenage dream car enthralled Nick, wholly swamping his revulsion for his companion. “Wonder if it runs,” he said, jumping into the cherry-red convertible and reaching for the key. He ignored Logan’s muttered protests about getting permission and attempted to start the car. It sputtered a few times and died, but Nick persisted, and the engine finally came reluctantly to life.

By now Logan was fully engaged, saying, “Let’s have a look under the hood.”

Nick left the car running but got out to peer over Logan’s shoulder. The mechanic seemed spellbound, standing transfixed with ear cocked to the car. “What are you doing?” wondered Nick.

“If you listen to a motor run, they’ll tell ya most of what ya need to know. Engines never lie—they’re great that way.” Logan then leaned in and started poking around, wiggling a few hoses before tugging at the rusted dipstick.

As Logan worked, he displayed a spectacular view of denim stretched tight over his well-defined ass, augmented by a damp, worn, western-style shirt doing little to hide strong back muscles. Nick was stunned and dismayed when a streak of desire sizzled down his body straight into his cock; he couldn’t help but look down at the slowly plumping traitor and murmur, “What the fuck’s wrong with you?”

Logan straightened up, asking, “Huh?”

“I said, looks like there’s a lot wrong with it,” Nick demurred with a cough, while the reality of who he was addressing splashed ice water on his sudden ardor. “I gotta get goin’,” he added tersely,

wanting to make his getaway before things got even weirder. Companionably examining a classic Thunderbird with a remarkably arousing, eerily familiar, convicted abuser was plenty weird enough already.

“Okay,” Logan acquiesced, though his reluctance was clear.

The two men said an awkward goodbye before Nick re-covered the car, locked up, and clattered down the steps to his Jeep. All the while, he analyzed his disturbing reaction to Trudy’s patient. Nick finally shrugged it off as mere horniness brought on by an undeniably attractive man.

“Obviously, three weeks’s just too long to go without a workout. Could probably fuck that car’s trunk ’bout now,” Nick muttered to himself as he called home to see if Polly could stay a little late. With that taken care of, he punched in the number for The Downtown Athletic Club and asked to speak to the personal trainer, Adam Cecil.

NICK stretched out luxuriantly, enjoying the looseness that always came into his muscles after a good hard romp. He rolled on his side and came face-to-face with a bedside table lamp sporting a plastic Steelers helmet as its base. Nick had already chided Adam more than once on it being more appropriate for a six-year-old than a twenty-six-year-old, but his happy-go-lucky friend had always shrugged him off. Still, he couldn’t resist another try. “You ever gonna get rid of this lamp?”

“Sure,” came the mirthful reply over his shoulder. “When they come out with one that has a Steelers helmet *and* a Pirates cap.” Nick rolled back towards the auburn-haired man and gave him a playful swat. Adam rewarded him with a mock scowl, complaining, “You know if we could fuck at your place once in a while, I could take potshots at *your* furniture.”

“Oh, that would be lovely. I can just see it now—I’d be sucking you off, and my mom would come pounding on the door wanting to know if I’d finished my math homework.”

Adam gave a bark of laughter, finally chortling, “Okay, I can see where that would kill the mood.”

“Worse than when my Aunt Hetty caught me and Alison Barstow, ‘half-nekkid’, on her ‘good sofa’.”

“When was that?”

“Twelfth grade.”

“You were still messing around with girls then?”

“Yeah—not many other choices in a town like Freeport. Besides, at that age any chance to shove your dick in something felt good.”

“Huh,” Adam answered. “Not when what you’re really craving is a cock up your ass.”

“You never bothered with girls?”

“Not much. I always thought they were a pain in the ass. And not the good kind.” Adam waited for Nick to stop laughing before continuing in a more serious tone. “From what I hear at work, it gets worse when they’re older. Always whining about *relationships* and their *feelings*—or wanting guys to dress up and go to stupid things like the ballet or some goopy chick flick.”

Adam warmed to his subject, sliding up onto his knees and affording Nick a chance to admire his muscular form. “I bet if straight men really knew how it was for me and you, they’d die with envy. We can hook up for sex if that’s all we got time for, or shoot hoops together, maybe catch a ballgame, and best of all, you don’t give a rat’s ass what I wear or who I screw when you’re not around.”

“As long as you’re using condoms,” Nick shrugged, comfortable in the knowledge that the caution was completely unnecessary for the health-conscious young trainer.

“Yeah,” Adam answered sheepishly. “Not that I ended up needing one last weekend.”

Sensing a story, Nick asked, “Okay, what happened?”

“You’ll love this. I hit on another straight guy at Sully’s.”

Nick sat up to face Adam, chuckling and shaking his head. “Man, what is *with* you? Is your gaydar broken?”

“Aww, it’s these goddamn *metrosexuals*—they jack me up but good. What kind of straight dude wears fancy shoes, has a manicure, and orders an appetini?”

“What’re you hittin’ on a guy like that for, anyway? And how’d he take it?”

Embarrassment flushed Adam’s cheeks as he answered, “What can I say, I was drunk, it was late, and he was cute. And luckily, he just thought I was having some fun at his expense.”

“*That’s* lucky? Adam—”

“Oh, come on. You’re makin’ me sorry I brought this up. You mean to tell me you’ve never been attracted to a straight guy?”

A memory of thick, dark blond hair, muscular arms, and a tight rear end flashed through Nick’s mind. Suddenly an uncomfortable truth was closer than the sweaty sheets. Nick hurriedly brushed the subject aside. “Of course I have. I’m just not interested in pursuing them. Who the fuck needs that grief?”

Green eyes alight with mischief, Adam nudged him. “I don’t know, you know what they say about every guy being just a six pack away from being gay.”

“Then why don’t you pick up a six of Iron City and try that out on Mr. Appletini? Let me know how it goes.”

“Nah,” Adam laughed. “I guess I should just do all my ‘hunting’ at Woody’s—after all, that’s where I found you.”

Nick swung his feet over the edge of the bed, retorting with a grin, “You ain’t never gonna get that lucky again, boy.”

“Tell me about it.” Adam’s tone took on the slightest shade of pique as he chided, “I wouldn’t even need as many of those freelance fucks if you weren’t so busy all the time.”

While he was struggling into his jeans, Nick sighed. “I know. Sorry. Between work and my mom—”

“Hey, I’m no chick—I’m not tryin’ to lay guilt on you. It’s just, if it would help, I really *would* come over to your place, you know. Your mom wouldn’t faze me.”

Nick had considered the possibility more than once but always rejected it as risky. “I know. But the timing would have to be perfect. Somewhere in between her being so crazy she’d bother us or so coherent she’d figure out what we were up to.”

“Why don’t you just tell her, Nick? I bet it wouldn’t be as big a deal as you think.”

“Oh God,” Nick groaned. “You have *no idea*, do you?”

Adam’s parents, a couple of divorced academics, practically tripped over each other striving to be the one more accepting of their son’s sexuality. As much as he liked Adam, Nick had come to accept that the younger man would never relate to Nick’s conservative, lower class roots.

Nor had their three years together brought Adam any real appreciation of Nick’s other constraints—both professional and financial. Adam worked an undemanding schedule at the gym but still enjoyed a comfortable life, facilitated mainly by his generous parents. Unlike Nick, who was still paying off his graduate school loans, Adam had coasted through his five years at college with his dad footing the entire bill. Even now, his mom paid his monthly car lease and insurance, while his dad kicked in for both cell phone and cable bills.

After Nick said an affectionate goodbye and drove away from Adam’s downtown condo, he brushed aside any vague yearnings for a deeper, more visceral connection in a relationship. He’d never had any illusions about romance or love, and this comfortable friendship with benefits was perfect as far as he was concerned.

Nick thought of those posters they had hung up all over ACC stating *Love doesn’t have to hurt*. Maybe it didn’t have to, but as far as he had seen, it usually did.

## Chapter 3: 'Til We Have Lost the World

*Not 'til we have lost the world do we begin to find ourselves.*

—Henry David Thoreau

OUT of the corner of his eye, Logan watched his daughters carefully carry their trays to a sunny table near the window while he paid the tab. No big fan of McDonald's "cuisine," his own tray held only two double cheeseburgers and a cup of coffee. As he joined Krista and Meghan at the table they had chosen, he unsuccessfully tried to pretend his sister-in-law, Marie Stoats, wasn't sitting right across the aisle, glaring at him occasionally while perusing a magazine.

The sight of his pretty daughters' shining faces cleared away most of Logan's gloom even though an awkward silence descended as he sat down. To break it, he nodded at Meghan's lunch, saying, "You didn't want one of them Happy Meals, honey? Thought you loved 'em."

"Daddy," came the outraged reply. "I'm not a little kid anymore. Those are for babies."

"Oh." Logan had nothing to add, since he was certain telling Meghan that she was still his baby girl would be an unwelcome observation.

Krista smiled at her dad sympathetically, saying, "Meghan tries to act like she's a teenager or somethin'."

"Look who's talking," Meghan shot back. "You've been bugging Mom about wearing makeup. And who's all dopey-mopey *in love* with Nick Jonas? Not me." She turned to her father, saying, "He's all she wants to talk about these days."

Logan guessed that Meghan was referring to the kid who occasionally came to do homework with Krista. "That the red-haired boy who lives in the building 'cross the way?"

“Da-ad. She’s talking about one of the Jonas Brothers,” Krista corrected firmly.

“Ya mean one of Sam Jones’s boys from back home? Them boys’re a little old for you to be botherin’ about.” Logan took a bite of his burger while wondering when Linda had taken the girls to Elco.

Voices laced with equal parts shock and exasperation, his daughters enlightened him in unison, “The Jonas Brothers are a band!” Meghan continued on alone. “Krista has a big poster up in our room. Don’t you remember?”

“Meghan,” Krista said quietly, “I got that after... after Daddy left.”

Logan desperately needed for this visit not to descend into quiet sadness like the last one, so he gamely suggested, “Well, ya gotta get me all caught up. What else is new at home?”

Apparently happy to play along, Meghan piped up, “We’re getting a kitty!”

“You are? When?”

“Some lady Mom works with, her cat had kittens, and Mom said we can have one when it’s old enough to leave its mommy. We went over there last week and picked one out. He’s black with white paws, and we’re gonna call him Boots,” Meghan elaborated breathlessly.

Staring earnestly at the French fry she was toying with, Krista added, “You’ll see him when you come home.” She peeped up at Logan, asking, “You’ll be coming home real soon—won’t you, Daddy?”

That was the question Logan had been dreading, the one that could easily lead to taboo subjects. “Well... I don’t know.... Ya see, me an’ your mom... still got some stuff to work out....”

Hesitantly, Krista said, “You mean about... about what happened—”

Logan cut in with, “You girls don’t need to be worrying about that accident. It’s over an’ done with, okay?”

Krista looked nervously at her aunt and then whispered, “Mom’s still mad at you, isn’t she?”

Logan shoved his tray aside and leaned in toward his girls. “Honey, it’s nothin’ for you to bother about, I promise. I’ll be home by Christmas, at the latest.” Privately, that was the date Logan had always fixed on. With his probation and court-ordered counseling done, he’d always figured the whole episode would have blown over by year’s end.

Inadvertently, rather than cheering his daughters, this news horrified them. With round-eyed surprise, they repeated, “Christmas!”

He rushed again to reassure them. “It’s not that far away. Why, my boss is already orderin’ Christmas trees, and we’re movin’ stuff around to make room for decorations an’ that.” Logan reached over and gently tugged Meghan’s pigtail. Teasingly, he added, “You mean you ain’t got your letter to Santa written yet? Better get a move on.”

Logan was gratified by the giggle he got for his trouble and distracted her further by saying with a wink, “Don’t know if we should get a tree this year though—heard cats like to climb ’em.”

The tightness in his chest eased when Meghan picked up the cue and started assuring him that Boots would do no such thing. “He’s gonna be a real good kitty. He’s so cute, ain’t he, Krista?”

Krista sipped her soda slowly before smiling a little too widely at her dad and sister and agreeing, “He sure is. You’ll love ’im, Dad.”

“IT SOUNDS to me like you missed an opportunity.”

Trudy had her lecturing voice on, Logan noticed. Head in hands and elbows balanced on his knees, he rubbed his temples, wondering how he was going to put up with this woman for four months more. “Like I told them, it ain’t for them to be worrying about.”

“But they *are* worrying about it, Logan. Certainly Krista is. Things don’t go away just because you don’t talk about them.”

“They don’t get better ’cause you do.” Logan glanced briefly at Dr. Gerard. She wore a raspberry-colored silk suit that he found to be a little jarring but fitting. It sure demanded attention—just like Trudy.



The brightly attired psychologist raised an eyebrow as she leaned back in her chair. “Then I’ve wasted my entire life.”

Shifting in the squat, padded chair, Logan mumbled, “If you say so.”

Trudy surprised the hell out of Logan by erupting with laughter before she answered, “Smart ass. Let’s see if you can prove me wrong. Tell me how the rest of the visit went.”

Relieved that Trudy was willing to move on, Logan relaxed a bit. “It went okay. They’re getting a cat from some friend of Linda’s, and we talked ’bout me bein’ home by Christmas.”

All trace of amusement gone from her voice, Trudy asked, “Is that what you expect?”

“Sure.” Logan shrugged his right shoulder against his ear. “It’ll all be done by then. Us,” he waved a hand between them before adding, “and my probation.”

“Have you talked to Linda about this?”

“No.”

“But you’re willing to?”

“Sure... if she’s willing to....”

“To what?”

Resolution straightened his spine and deepened his voice as Logan answered, “To let all of this go. I know she’s probably still a little sore about what happened, but... hell, I done the right thing. I manned up and pled guilty, and I come here every week like I’m s’posed to. She should be willin’ to forget what happened and go back to the way we were before.”

Of all the topics out of his little speech that she could have chosen to explore, Logan was surprised when Trudy asked, “So you and Linda were happy before the abuse incident?”

Logan swallowed a sigh at Trudy’s use of the term “abuse” but managed to calmly say, “Happy enough. Better when we were in Elco, though.”

“I thought it was both of your decision to move?”

A bitter laugh preceded Logan's reply. "More like Marie's idea."

"Your sister-in-law?" When Logan nodded, Trudy confirmed, "It was her idea that you move to North Braddock?"

"Yeah. It was her fault. Her and her new car and split-level house. Her filling Linda's head with all that talk of how much better things would be if we'd move up here and I could make more money—like her Bob does."

"But you did say that your business in Elco had fallen off, right?" It was more statement than question.

"I was almost as busy as ever, folks just weren't payin' their bills on time. You know how it is; times 're tough."

"Yet you still blame Marie for suggesting you take the job in the mill?"

Logan stared at the bookcase without really seeing the dozens of somber-colored book spines filling it. "Yeah. We could'a rode out that rough patch. She didn't have to stick her nose in. But I guess she's had it in for me ever since I knocked up her little sister." When that tidbit slipped out, he swung his head guiltily back towards Trudy.

Like a cat on a wounded mouse, Trudy pounced on the new information. "Oh... so that's how it was. Is that why you got married?"

"Yeah."

"How old were you two?"

"Just a couple'a years outta high school. But I would've 'ventually asked Linda, no matter what," he added defensively.

"Because you were in love with her?"

"Yeah, sure. I guess."

"More than any other girl you ever dated?"

"Never really dated much."

"Really?" Trudy's question was half surprise, half skepticism. "Why not?"

"Too busy workin'. Started fixin' cars for money when I was 'bout fourteen. Trying to help Daisy and Jim make ends meet."

“I see.”

Logan prayed to a God in whom he didn't always believe that Trudy wouldn't ask about his relationship with his brother and sister, one that was nonexistent with the former and strained with the latter.

However, she pulled one of her patented abrupt changes in subject. He always wondered if she did this to keep him slightly off-balance. If so, it was working. “So how was your meeting with Nick Zales?”

Feeling like Trudy had tipped him from her frying pan into the gas flame under it, Logan said, “Went fine.”

“Care to elaborate on that?”

“What do you wanta hear? I'm gonna do that class, every week on Thursdays. Okay?”

“You don't sound too happy about it. Didn't you like Nick?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? I said I was gonna do it! I've done everything you ask, but you keep poking into my business lookin' for... for God knows what. You ever gonna sign that paper? You ever gonna let me see my daughters the right way? Do you get some kinda charge outta rippin' me apart every week?” Suddenly Logan realized he was standing, practically shouting at a stern-faced Trudy; abruptly he closed his mouth and dropped back into the chair.

Trudy took a deep breath before asking, “Okay, then. Want to let me in on what *that* was all about?”

“I don't know. You know I got a bad temper. Never tried to hide that.”

“And it just flares up like that without warning? Without provocation?”

Logan wasn't about to let that pass; he snapped, “You're plenty provoking.”

“Maybe,” Trudy allowed dryly, “but that's my job.” She leaned forward, asking, “Are you completely under control now?”

“Yeah, it was nothin'. Just got a little worked up, is all.”

“And what that I said got you so *worked up*?”

“I don’t know. Just get sick of all these questions, I guess.”

When Logan saw Trudy lean back with her arms folded and her mouth slightly twisted, he knew she wasn’t buying his evasion. He waited for more probing on the subject of his recent outburst and was puzzled when she said, “What I want you to do is think back to a time when you really lost your temper, even worse than you just did. Something we haven’t already discussed. And tell me what happened right before—what you were *feeling*, especially.”

Logan felt too worn out to even try. There were only ten minutes left in his session; maybe he could stall her. “I can’t think of nothin’ right now.”

“There was an incident in your file about you getting into a bar fight back in Elco. You beat the guy up pretty badly, it seems. He even tried to sue you for lost wages while he was laid up, didn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Logan laughed. “His lawyer dropped that idea like a hot rock when he found out we didn’t have any money.”

“Okay. Tell me about that fight.”

“Not much to tell. The guy tried to jump ahead’a me for the pool table. I wouldn’t let ’im.”

“So you hit him?”

“Not right off. I told him we’d put our marker down before his and he should wait his turn. He kinda backed down, and his friends pulled him over to the bar.”

“And?”

“When Red Thompson and me finished playin’, Red called over and said they could have the table. I was puttin’ the cue back, and that asshole comes over, puts his arm ’round my shoulders, and says, ‘No hard feelin’s, huh, pretty boy?’ And then... then I hit ’im.”

“*That’s* what set you off?”

“Yeah.” There was a long silence where Logan could feel Trudy’s eyes boring into him. Almost nervously, he added, “You let a guy get away with treatin’ you that way at a place like Carney’s, and soon everyone’ll think... think they can talk down to you.”

“So that’s what really made you lose your temper—that he was talking down to you?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think that’s a common thread when you lose control? Did you feel like I was patronizing you when I asked about the course?”

It seemed safest to agree. “Maybe. Yeah, maybe, that’s it.”

“Hmmm, we could be getting somewhere. This week I want you to think if there was ever a time when you felt like someone was putting you down and you *didn’t* lose your temper. Next week we’ll talk about it. Can you do that?”

“Sure.” *Got a whole string of ’em—from today goin’ back to March. Prob’ly more to come.*

NICK was glad to see Cheryl smiling at Tish’s wisecracks as they rode to their first Basic Automotive class. Sometimes Tish’s motormouth wore on him, but if her wild tales of what she was going to do when she moved in with her sister were bringing his newest client out of her shell, he was all for it. Nick glanced at Tish in the rearview mirror. “Well, thanks a lot, sounds like you can’t wait to get away from us.”

Tish pushed her short, curly black hair out of her dark eyes, teasing back, “Not you, honey, all them fuckin’ rules I’ve been under for the last four months. ‘Make your bed, clean up the kitchen, wipe down the shower, no yellin’ at your kids,’ and a curfew! Shit, I ain’t had one of them since I was twelve.” She leaned forward, saying, “You been there a few weeks now, right? Bet you know what I mean, don’t you, girlfriend?”

Cheryl tipped her head forward shyly, bringing a curtain of long, straight brown hair around her freckled face. “It was awful nice of them to take me and the kids in—no notice or anything.”

“A little more freedom would be even nicer,” answered Tish. “Can’t wait for September,” she added, referring to her imminent move.

Since he'd said it a dozen times previously, Nick refrained from telling her again that with an average population of sixty women and nearly as many children, ACC would quickly descend into chaos if it weren't for the tight set of rules. With Nick mostly silent, Tish held court all the way to Dave's repair shop.

When they got there, Nick was disappointed not to see Norah and her Cavalier waiting. It was a few minutes after three p.m., and she had promised to be on time. As he led his charges up the long flight of steps, Nick strained for any sound of Norah's arrival, knowing that her junker was audible from many blocks away.

They found Logan leaning against the front of the shop, taking long drags on a newly lit cigarette; several butts strewn at his feet attested to the fact that he'd been waiting a while.

"Sorry we're a little late," called Nick, though Logan looked anything but relieved to see them. He noticed that Logan immediately pinched off his cigarette and slid it back into the pack which he then hurriedly stuffed into the pocket of a black, short-sleeved shirt hanging open over a white, sleeveless T-shirt.

Nick introduced Logan to his new students. "Logan, meet Letisha Wilson and Cheryl MacLean. Ladies, this is Logan Crane." Tish offered her hand while raking the mechanic up and down appraisingly; Cheryl merely uttered a barely audible hello, which Logan returned, only slightly louder.

Nick noticed Logan giving him the once-over and wondered if there was something about his navy polo shirt and tan chinos that the man found objectionable. *What do I care?* he reminded himself sternly, feeling that responding to this man in the presence of "his girls" would be a betrayal of sorts. Steeling himself against any attraction, Nick shifted his soft-sided briefcase from his hand to his shoulder, fumbled for the keys, and quickly unlocked the shop door.

The four of them trooped inside, where Logan immediately raised the bay door. Looking at Nick, Logan asked, "Where's the car?"

"I don't know. Norah should have been here by now."

Logan nodded and wordlessly turned his attention to selecting a few tools, which he neatly laid out on the workbench. While Tish and

Cheryl popped outside for a smoke, Nick went over to the small, messy desk shoved in a corner that apparently had been Dave Acken's office and removed his laptop from the case. His plan was to work on case reports while he "chaperoned" this module, since he could ill afford losing two hours out of a workday.

A minute later, the girls came back, announcing that it looked like Norah was heading up the driveway, an unnecessary chore since the sound of her car straining up the incline was evident to all. After pulling into the garage, she bounced out of the driver's seat, exclaiming, "Hey guys—the late Norah Seebold, at your service." After more formal introductions, Norah aimed a brilliant, apologetic smile at the group, explaining, "I'm sorry. I got *soo* lost." She pointed to her soft blonde curls, saying, "Guess I proved this is my real color, huh?" While Nick and the girls laughed and even Logan cracked a smile, she added, "I think I took the wrong bridge over the river."

"Which one?" Tish asked.

"If I knew which bridge it was, I probably wouldn't've gotten so lost," laughed Norah.

"That ain't what I was askin'," Tish corrected. "Which river?"

"Isn't it all kinda the same river?" Norah wondered.

While Tish gaped at her in amazement, Nick hastened to explain, "Norah's from New York." He turned back to the transplant, saying, "You may not know it, but you just committed heresy. There are *three* rivers in Pittsburgh. There's the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and those two join together to form," Tish and Nick finished together, "the 'Mighty Ohio'."

Tish explained to an amused Norah, "Growin' up in Western P.A., ya hear that every fuckin' year of grade school."

"Okay, geography is over. Time for basic automotives." He turned to Logan, who had been watching the exchange in expectant silence, saying, "Mr. Crane, they're all yours."

Nick had been wondering how Logan would introduce this group of neophytes to car repair. Upon seeing him start by demonstrating the basic tools they'd be using, Nick begrudgingly acknowledged it to be a logical and savvy move. By the time Tish was asking who this guy

“Allen” was and why he had so many goddamn wrenches, Nick thought it was safe to leave the group alone and get some work done.

Ninety minutes later, Nick had polished off five reports, and Logan was having the girls take turns removing the lug nuts from one of the tires. Tish’s extended and effusive swearing when she broke a nail eroded Nick’s concentration; he decided to take a break and see how the training was going.

Tish had retrieved a nail file from her bag and was repairing the damage while she watched Norah take her turn at the stubborn lug nuts. “So, you moved here from New York? Are you crazy?”

“Upstate New York, not New York *City*,” Norah explained, as she rolled her cornflower-blue eyes. “And if you ever saw Arkport, you’d understand.”

“Bet it was for a man, wasn’t it?” Tish countered.

“You got it,” admitted Norah.

“How’d you meet ’im?” Cheryl asked.

“On the Internet. I was seventeen and knew my mom wouldn’t let me talk to a grown man in person, but online, I thought, was okay—besides, she wouldn’t know.” Norah finally broke the first nut and looked up at Logan for approval.

He smiled encouragingly before saying, “Good job, but you gotta get ’em all.”

Norah went back to work and back to her story. “I met him for real about six months later, and he was so handsome, with this sexy Russian accent—and real sweet at first.”

“I hear that,” Tish interjected. “When’d he start beatin’ on you?”

“When I moved down to Monroeville to be with him. My parents tried to stop me, but I was eighteen by then. Things were okay for a while, but then he started calling me names and beating me up. That went on for over a year. I even left and went back home for, like, six months, but he kept calling, promising to be good, so I gave him another chance. He did let me get a job at the Uni-Mart, but I had to check in with him twice a day. After a while he wanted it to be every hour. If I didn’t do it, he’d beat me up pretty bad when I got home.”



Nick could see that Logan was looking distinctly uncomfortable, but he shrugged off a faint stab of pity, knowing that abused women often derived comfort from exchanging stories. *Sting of conscience, Logan? And if ya notice, Alex was a real cutie too....*

Norah was working on the fifth lug nut as she finished, “One day I was so busy I didn’t call at all, and Alex came to work screaming his head off—demanding to see me. I ran into the office, and my boss finally got ’im to leave by threatening to call the cops. I was too scared to go home, so my manager’s wife called ACC, and I went straight there. Never even went home to pack.”

“How long ago was that?” Cheryl asked.

“Little over a year.” She triumphantly held up the hub cap containing all five lug nuts, saying, “Ta da!”

Logan said, “Okay, now, Cheryl, I’ll put ’em back on, and you have a go at ’nother tire. Then I’ll show yuins how to put the spare on.” He looked relieved that Norah’s story was done, but his reprieve was short-lived since Tish launched into her own narrative as Cheryl worked at the front tire.

“My bad luck started four years back when I met Joe,” she reminisced. “He was one of my bosses at the restaurant where I worked. And yeah, he was real nice at first, too. Until I found out I was pregnant and I didn’t wanta have it. I already had a son, and I thought havin’ another baby at my age would be crazy. But Joe beat me up good and said I was havin’ his kid. I was eighteen and he was thirty—what was I gonna do?” She looked at the other women as if seeking affirmation; Norah nodded knowingly while Cheryl seemed solely intent on the tire.

Tish gave Logan a lightning-quick sideways glance before continuing. “The beatin’s got worse even though I did what he said. I had that baby thinkin’ it might help us, but it didn’t; it just meant I was stuck with him. Last year I got pregnant again; this time he was pissed ’cause he said we couldn’t afford ’nother one, but he still wouldn’t let me get rid of it. He left me black an’ blue almost every day of that pregnancy. When I finally delivered, one of the nurses in the hospital asked if I needed help, and I said I sure did. She got me in touch with ACC, and two weeks later, me and the kids all got away.”

Luckily for Logan, Cheryl showed no inclination for sharing her story, so the rest of the class was mainly filled with chatter about which was worse, Norah's job with Merry Maids or Tish's current stint at Applebee's.

While the women washed up and gathered their things, Nick uncovered the vintage Thunderbird that fascinated him so. That past week, he'd even called Dave Acken to inquire about the car, so he now knew that Dave was willing to let it go as is for a mere eight thousand dollars. Of course, that was eight thousand more than Nick could afford, but he was still tempted. Something in the car called to him, and it wasn't just because he had wanted one so badly back in high school. Nick was sure that beneath that rusted body and corroded engine, a thing of beauty waited to be renewed and released.

"You thinkin' of buyin' it?" Lost in his reverie, Nick hadn't even heard Logan walk up beside him.

"Yeah, how did you know?"

Logan just shook his head and shrugged, mumbling, "Just a feelin'."

"Not sure it's a good idea; it'd take a lot of work to restore it, I guess."

"You bet. More 'an you even think right now."

"You ever done anything like that?"

Storm clouds gathered in Logan's eyes as he answered, "Yeah. Long time back."

Nick had no intention of asking, but he knew with an inexplicable but ironclad certainty that buried underneath those four simple syllables lay a heartbreaking memory for Crane. The man was an enigma for sure; that was why Nick couldn't help thinking about him all the way back to ACC. That was the explanation Nick gave himself, at least.

## Chapter 4: Bridges to Cross

*The hardest thing in life is to know which bridges to cross and which to burn.*

—David Russell

EARLY on Saturday evening, Nick stirred together a quick barbeque sauce and dumped in a pound of Isaly's chip-chopped ham. It wasn't the healthiest meal he could have prepared, but it had been on the table a lot when he was a kid, since his mom was inordinately fond of the cheap and easy local specialty. Agnes had eaten little of the chef's salad he'd picked up for lunch; therefore, Nick was hoping an old favorite would tempt her flagging appetite.

As he set the table, Nick was torn between having dinner with his mother and going for a long run. He could go later, but he hated running right after a meal, just as his mom hated eating after six p.m. The August evening had cooled a bit, making it especially tempting; the recent streak of sizzling weather had by and large confined him to the use of his rickety treadmill in the basement. Musing that Agnes seemed pretty "with it" and that a hectic week had left him in dire need of the Zen found in an extended run, Nick decided one dinner alone wouldn't hurt his mom.

"Hey, Mom," he called up to where she was puttering around in her room. "Are you ready to eat?"

When she appeared a few minutes later, he showed her the pan of liberally sauced meat. "I'll get you set up, and then I'm gonna go for a run. 'Kay?"

Agnes shooed him out of the kitchen, briefly assuming the role of the mother she still was, despite everything. "Go and have your run; I can do the rest. Buns're in the cupboard, right?"

Nick gratefully took off, heading up Matson Boulevard until he could cut over into Riverview Park, where he spent some carefree time racing up and down the hilly trails. Drenched with sweat and feeling pleasantly exhausted, he arrived home well over an hour later. He could see the light on in the kitchen at the back of the house and hoped his mom wasn't still toying with her food.

Nick popped his head into the room, saying, "Mom, I'm back." As soon as he saw the table set now for four rather than two and his mom stirring the pan that had been placed back on a burner, Nick knew Agnes was in the middle of one of her "episodes." He advanced into the room, asking, "Didn't you eat?"

She turned her frowning face on him, answering, "No! I've been waiting and waiting. Where were you? Hetty and Frank are late, and I'm worried sick."

*Oh no. Not this again.* Through gritted teeth, Nick admonished, "Mom, Aunt Hetty is dead. You know that; she died six years ago. And Uncle Frank is in Freeport living with Marcy."

Slowly taking the pan off the heat, Agnes wiped her hands on the ancient apron she'd donned. After a second of visible concentration, she replied, "Hetty died?" Tears sprang up as she rambled on. "Yes... Hetty died. You're right. She did, didn't she?" She wandered over to the table, rubbing shaking hands together as she asked, "So... they aren't coming to get me?"

"No, you're staying here."

Agnes plopped down into one of the kitchen chairs, wailing, "What am I gonna do? Where will I live?"

Nick sat down across from her, feeling his patience worn thinner than his mom's apron, and repeated, "I told you, you live *here*."

"But, Nick, I can't live with you forever."

"Of course you can. It's what I owe—it's where you belong."

Suddenly Agnes's tone turned almost instructive—one she'd used when teaching him the alphabet twenty-eight years earlier. "What about when you get married? Believe me, son, your wife ain't gonna want her mother-in-law in the same house with her."

*Okay, that's a new one.* Nick was slowly shaking his head, bemusement having submerged exasperation when he remembered what Adam had said. *Maybe this is my chance. Maybe it could be a good thing to her.* Figuring he had nothing to lose, Nick sat back and calmly announced, "I'm not going to get married. Ever." He could see his mom was about to protest, so he hurriedly added, "Because I'm... I'm gay."

Immediately and sternly, Agnes snapped, "No, you're not. What a thing to say! Why would you say a nasty thing like that?"

"Because it's true."

"No, it's not. You're sayin' that to get back at me, aren't you? You're mad 'cause I left you." Indignation melted into sorrow as she tearfully assured him, "I was gonna go back for you, Nick. I was. Please don't be mad at me and say somethin' so awful."

*Nice try, Zales. Well, at least it brought her back to one you know.* Nick nimbly jumped to his feet and embraced his distraught mother from behind. "Mom, you didn't leave me. You never left me, okay? I'm not mad and... and I'm sorry I said that. Just forget it, all right?" He patted her arm, saying, "Let me wash up real quick, then we can eat." Forcing cheer into his voice that he couldn't feel in his heart, he said, "We'll see if my ham barbeque is better'an yours."

Nick ran up to the bathroom, feeling his warm, loose muscles tensing with stress he had just tried to sweat out. He peeled off his damp shorts and T-shirt, puzzling yet again about this obsessive notion his mom had that she had "left him." He always figured that there was a part of her that recognized her dementia as a form of abandonment. But why couldn't he convince her that it wasn't her fault? Was it because she couldn't face blaming his dad... or him?

BY MONDAY morning Nick had put his mom's troubles out of his head so he could better deal with the problems of his clients. Nine thirty a.m. found him in the center's small library, trying to wrap up a tutorial on Money Management so he could grab a cup of coffee and a doughnut before his counseling session with Norah at ten. Five minutes

later, coffee in hand and pastry in mouth, Nick headed for his office, currently occupied by Irene Taylor, the volunteer who coached clients in resume writing, interviews skills, and the like.

Before he got within six feet of the door, Irene's megaphone voice let Nick know she wasn't quite finished with Tish. Her bellow of "Fine, don't listen to me! You can work at Applebee's forever" also let him know that things had hit a snag. Irene, a sharp, successful marketing executive, provided invaluable expertise to women who had been unemployed or underemployed for most of their lives. Unfortunately, she was also tactless, abrasive, and insensitive.

Nick lounged against the corridor wall, munching away at his doughnut while he tried to ascertain if his intervention was required. When Tish's response contained several paint-peeling expletives and the phrase "Stone Age crone," he decided to step in. After cautiously swinging the door open, Nick surveyed the tense combatants and, in his most calming tone, inquired, "Okay, what's the problem?"

Tish spread her hands out, exclaiming, "Tell her! Tell her there ain't nothin' wrong with this outfit." While Nick inspected her attire, which consisted of an orange satin polyester blouse and a red pleated skirt, Tish added, "She said I looked like a hooker on my way to clown college."

Nick stifled an inappropriate laugh as he turned to Irene, asking, "Wouldn't it be fine if she just buttoned up the shirt a little more?"

"Were you suddenly struck blind on your way in here?" Irene snapped. "She has an interview at *The Carlton*." She enunciated the name of one of Pittsburgh's finest restaurants with the slightest trace of condescension before adding, "Not Chuckie Cheese." Irene swiveled her chair towards Tish, saying, "I can get you a nice white blouse and a suit from The Closet." The Closet was the term ACC used for the on-site collection of clothing and shoes that Irene maintained for her protégés to wear to interviews. All were donations from her wide circle of contacts.

Though he couldn't really see what was wrong with Tish's choice—other than it being a bit bright—Nick stepped in and soothed ruffled feathers on both sides, eventually convincing Tish to take Irene's advice.

After Tish had flounced out, Irene collected her Furla handbag and file folders while shooting Nick a sardonic look. “For a gay man, you know dick-all about clothes, you know that?”

“How about just ‘for a man’? How does my sartorial knowledge stack up then?” Nick retorted. “Despite what you may have heard, the ‘gay’ part *does not* negate the ‘man’ part.”

Fortunately, Irene, along with all of her other bruising traits, was almost impossible to insult. “Okay. Point taken.” She leaned her tall, athletic frame briefly against the doorjamb, saying, “I promise I’ll never again accuse you of being *fabulous*.”

Despite her imperious nature, Nick couldn’t help liking this difficult woman—and it wasn’t simply because she devoted countless unpaid hours to ACC, though he would have been hard put to give another concrete reason. “Thank you,” he laughed. “You get Tish that job, and I’ll forget it ever happened.”

Nick expected his session with Norah to be less demanding than Tish and Irene’s had been, though there was quite a bit of ground to cover. In May, Trudy had “strongly suggested” that Nick move his appointments with Norah from every other week to once a month. He had acceded to his boss’s wishes, reluctantly acknowledging that most of his misgivings probably sprang from his sheer personal fondness for Norah.

It was Nick who had picked up the battered and shaken girl from the Uni-Mart all those months ago, Nick who had supported her throughout her progress to independence, and now Nick who faced “cutting the cord.” But not yet. He knew with the conviction of an experienced abuse counselor that she was not ready yet.

Twenty minutes into the session he was more convinced than ever. Norah persisted in asking when it would be “okay” for her to start dating again. Nick always fervently advised his clients to delay entering a new relationship until they had a chance to be alone for a while and develop a healthy attitude towards men—and themselves.

“Why? Got your eye on someone?” he joked cautiously.

“No, not that. It’s just that I miss....”

“Sex?” he supplied.

Norah laughed uproariously. “Oh, hell no. Gotta say, never saw what all the fuss was about there.”

“Too bad, but when you meet the right guy, you will.”

“Right.” She nodded vigorously, and Nick saw her trying to convince herself more than anything else.

Feeling the desk was too great a barrier between them for the rest of this conversation, Nick moved to the other guest chair, positioning himself directly across from Norah. “You were saying? You miss....”

“I miss the way.... I miss feeling... important, I guess.” She hastily added, “I know the way Alex treated me was wrong and he had no right to do those terrible things, but there was also the way he was so... so *passionate* about me. I know it got all twisted and fucked up, but... but the love....” By now Norah was staring at the hands tightly clasped in her lap. She went on in a near whisper. “It was there in the beginning....” She turned tearful eyes on Nick, finishing, “Know what I mean?”

Nick took a minute to leach all exasperation from his attitude before he answered, “Norah, don’t confuse possessiveness with a show of overpowering love.”

“I know you told me that a million times, but—”

“No!” Instantly regretting his outburst, Nick took a deep breath, making time to deliberately dial back his approach. “There are no ‘buts’ with that distinction. The two things couldn’t be further apart. The way Alex treated you—even in the beginning—was all about *him*. When you love someone you want *them* to be happy. When you need to control them, own them and order them around, it’s all about *you*.” He dipped his head so he could catch her eye and shoot her an encouraging smile.

“I know all that. But I can’t help wanting.... I been working so hard for so long. When does it start to pay off?”

“It already has. Give yourself some credit. You have a job. Okay, not the greatest job in the world, but they love you there and it’s just a stepping stone. You have an apartment—”

“That I gotta share with two other girls.”



“Yes, but a third of that place is all yours. You have rights and you’re not afraid to exercise them. You have a car that you’re learning how to keep running. It’s all coming together. Give yourself a little more time—time to heal and time to get to know Norah Seebold and what she really wants out of life.”

“And then what?”

“And then when the right man comes along, you’ll be ready to give *and take*, to build something together. When genuine love happens, you’ll know it.”

“Is that how it worked for you?”

Nick wished he hadn’t long ago decided to be completely honest with his clients and patients. A resounding “yes” would have been the capper to that little speech, but he couldn’t possibly lie to Norah’s earnest face. Instead, he evaded wryly, “Umm sure... any day now.”

LOGAN was mentally girding himself for his second automotive class as he parked near the garage steps; he hiked up them hoping there was to be no repeat of “storytelling time.” Hearing about Tish and Norah’s past was hard enough, but the worst part had been figuring that he was now unfairly lumped in with creeps like that Alex and Joe. He felt a brief rush of anger at Trudy... or maybe it was Linda’s doing for holding a grudge... or Marie for putting her up to it....

He was still casting about for a scapegoat when he was stopped short by the sight of the wide-open garage door. It wasn’t even two-forty-five, and there was no sign of Norah’s car, so Logan guessed it must be the owner come to check on his shop. However, when he entered the garage, he found none other than Nick Zales. He was wearing dress pants, Logan noticed, topped by a coarse weave, off-white shirt; his sleeves were rolled up, displaying muscular arms.

Nick had one hand on his hip while the other was carding through his thick brown hair as he stood staring at the red convertible. He started ever so slightly at Logan’s approach and straightened up, saying, “Oh, hey, Logan. You’re early.”

“Yeah. Where’re the girls and the car?”

“Norah’s picking Tish and Cheryl up; I had a court appearance today.” Logan cocked his head, wondering what the man had done to necessitate that. The unspoken question must have been evident, since Nick immediately clarified, “A client of mine needed to get a restraining order.”

Logan wanted that subject taken off the table immediately, so he gestured at the Thunderbird, saying, “Still thinking about that car, huh?”

“Thinking I maybe just made a huge mistake, yes.”

“A mistake. You mean... you went ahead and bought it?”

“Yep. After Dave dropped the price a bit, I took the plunge.” Nick added with a laugh, “Because apparently insanity really does run in my family.” Abruptly the smile left his face, and he cleared his throat while plainly attempting to reassemble his genial face into something sterner.

Logan wondered why the sensation of a cloud covering the sun swept over him even though they were standing inside. He shook it off, asking, “That Dave guy gonna restore it for you?”

“No, he’s still not up to coming back to work. Besides I don’t have the money for that on top of what I just spent. He threw in use of the shop as part of the deal, so I’m gonna try an’ do most of it myself.”

“You ever done anything like that?”

“Nope, but I do a lot of work on my Jeep, and I downloaded a bunch of stuff off the Internet. I figure if I take it slow, I can’t mess it up too badly. What have I got to lose? Besides six thousand dollars, that is.”

Without thinking, Logan blurted out, “I could help.”

Nick’s head jerked towards him as he answered warily, “Thanks, but... I really couldn’t afford to pay you....”

Wishing he could either take his words back or disappear right through the concrete floor, Logan mumbled, “I didn’t mean....” He let the annoyance he felt at himself creep into his voice as he said, “Look, I just like workin’ on cars, okay? I wasn’t lookin’ to make a bunch of money—”

Nick cut off Logan's mounting anger with a raised palm. "Hey, I couldn't let you do it for free." Logan had no intention of repeating his offer, but Nick added uncertainly, "But I really could use your help...."

He made a quick calculation, and before he lost his nerve, Logan offered, "Let me get the parts. I can get 'em a whole lot cheaper than you could. Then, when we're all done, you could just give me a quarter of what ya spent on parts. That way you won't spend no more'an you were gonna, and I'll get somethin' for my work. How's that sound?"

The smile came back with no attempt to hide it. "Sounds good."

Logan tried to disguise his answering smile behind a gruff, "So when did ya wanta start?"

"I really hadn't given it much thought. Do you have time on Saturday mornings... or afternoons?"

"Nope. I work most Saturdays." Logan didn't feel it necessary to add that he also saw his girls every other Saturday afternoon, instead suggesting, "How 'bout Sunday—that's my other day off."

"Yeah, sure, that'll work fine. Can't do it this Sunday, but... wanta get started next weekend?"

Logan gladly agreed. He had nothing better to do with his Sundays and felt an almost giddy eagerness to work on that car. No more was said about their plan since Norah's car was heard pulling up the driveway.

With growing confidence, Logan capably executed his plan for the second class—showing the women how to examine the brake pads and the air filter and how to check the fluid levels. All three pupils were earnest in their efforts, but Tish was picking things up much quicker than the other two, so much so that Logan asked if she'd had any experience with auto repair.

"Not unless you count my brother Butch teaching me how to hotwire a car." She immediately launched into a detailed and accurate description of the process.

Logan cut her off with the reproach, "That ain't gonna do you much good for keepin' your car runnin'."

“Yeah, that’s what Nick said when he talked me into this. He went on about how I’d never really be independent ’til I could take care of my own car.”

Norah wiped the grease off her hands, saying, “He said I’d save a bunch of money and no mechanic could take advantage of me.” She turned to Logan saying, “Umm... no offense.”

Shrugging, Logan said, “None taken; there’s that kind out there for sure.” He was more surprised to learn that he wasn’t the only reluctant participant in this class. He glanced over at Nick intently typing away in the corner and wondered at the effort he’d expended just to put together this one module.

“How ’bout you?” Norah’s question was directed at Cheryl, who was gingerly replacing the dipstick. Her sweet smile appeared briefly as she answered, “Same as both of you. I was kinda scared it’d be too hard.” Warming to the subject, she added with a blush, “But Nick said he knew I could do it.”

“Oh,” Norah laughed. “He pulled the charm card on you.”

When Cheryl’s blush only deepened, Tish joined the fray. “Another one crushin’ on Nick. Get in line, honey. If that man weren’t gay, he’d get more pussy than—”

Logan missed the rest of Tish’s salty observation under the roar of blood rushing past his ears. Involuntarily, his head snapped over in Nick’s direction, and he stared in consternation at the oblivious man. *What the fuck? He’s... that way? And letting everyone know—letting these girls blab it all over creation? What the hell is wrong with him?*

Called back to reality by Norah asking if she should be the one to top off the car’s oil, Logan wrenched his attention back to his students. With monumental effort, he taught the rest of the class with a reasonable show of composure.

Norah had volunteered to take the other women back to ACC, leaving Logan and Nick alone to clean up. Logan barely heard Nick talking about what they should do to get started on the car, as he was wondering if he should broach the subject of Tish’s bombshell. Finally, as they were leaving, he cleared his throat and ventured, “That girl, Tish, she was saying...” The words died in his throat, so he cleared

them out and tried again. “She said right out in the open that you’re....” His eyes darted back and forth between the open door and Nick’s face.

Nick’s frown seemed to indicate he had an inkling of the subject matter; his belligerent tone was confirmation. “That I’m what? Gay? So?”

Logan squinted at him and forced out, “You should be more careful ’bout that.”

“Careful?” A quick step by Nick bridged half the distance between them. “Are you *threatening* me?”

“Threatening? No! Fuck, I’m just saying.... A fella can get.... Some folks out there would hurt a guy bad. Even *just thinkin’* he was... like you.” Logan closed his eyes briefly to find, burning there, an image of a bloodied body lying on a floor very much like the one he stood on. He hurriedly opened them, noting that Nick’s frown was now more puzzled than pissed. Needing to fill the yawning chasm he’d cleaved between the two of them, Logan added, “It happened... a while back in Elco.”

Nick took a deep breath before saying, “Yeah, it happens. But Pittsburgh ain’t Elco, and I can take care of myself. Been doing it a long, long time.”

Unconvinced but out of ammunition, Logan surrendered the battle. “Didn’t mean no harm.”

“Okay.” Nick’s throat muscles moved, obviously swallowing anything more on the matter. He hooked a thumb into his pocket, asking, “You still wanta help with the car?”

“Sure. I ain’t one to....” Logan lost that train of thought in a memory before firmly stating, “I don’t care.”

“Good. That’s all we really want, you know.”

Logan didn’t know, but it seemed he was going to find out.

FRIDAY night, Logan parked in front of his landlady’s house, dog-tired and glad of it. He had pulled four hours of overtime at work, which he

had spent moving all of the sapling trees from the nursery section to the front of the garden center, where they would be displayed as clearance merchandise for the next two weeks. From the passenger seat, he grabbed the paper sack containing a small box of fried chicken and a six-pack of beer—both obtained at the corner store—and slowly headed for the steps leading down to his basement apartment. His plans for the evening were: shower, dinner, TV, and not thinking at all about the events of the previous night. Especially not anything related to Nick Zales.

Logan's plan didn't even make it to the front door, since his path was blocked by a tiny grey and navy figure perched on his top step. The person closed a small leatherbound book and jumped up at his approach, revealing to Logan that it was none other than Sister Ciera. She was one of the Sisters of St. Francis Millvale, a convent with a thriving prison ministry, who had offered her help while he was still navigating the labyrinth of the legal system.

Despite her cheerful assistance, Logan had never really felt comfortable around the woman, maybe because of her propensity for rapid-fire speech colored with her slight Philippine accent, maybe because she didn't dress like that flying nun or the ones in the movies, or maybe because she didn't preach at him and talk about God all the time. Not that he wanted that—not by a long shot—but it would have at least fit his idea of what a nun should be. When she greeted him with an exuberant shout while dusting off her ordinary cotton trousers, he wondered if she fit *anybody's* idea of what a nun should be.

“Logan, I hope you don't mind me dropping in on you.” Without waiting for a reply, she continued, “You've been on my mind so much and you've never called or checked in with me—you still have my card, don't you?—so I thought I'd check in with you.”

“Umm, yeah, I still have that card somewhere....” Not sure that was really true, Logan decided to change the subject by asking her in.

Ciera eagerly agreed, following him into the one-room apartment. “I can see, and smell—smells good by the way—that you have your dinner there, so I won't stay long at all. But tell me, how are you making out? How is the counseling going?”

Logan placed the paper bag on the kitchen counter before turning and answering, “Uh... it’s goin’... fine.” He wondered why she was bothering him about this instead of just going directly to his counselor. “Don’t you see Dr. Gerard at that center sometimes?”

“Of course, but I wanted to hear if it’s working *for you*. Is it? I hope so, I think the world of Trudy; she’s a very compassionate woman and not at all judgmental towards men in your situation.”

If Logan were inclined to be completely honest, he would have told Sr. Ciera that no, the counseling wasn’t doing him a damn bit of good, and that judgmental was exactly the word he would have used to describe Trudy. But Logan was a “better the devil you know” kind of guy and shuddered to think what alternative to Dr. Gerard the active little nun might propose. “Like I said, it’s goin’ pretty good.” To throw her off the trail, he added, “I’m even volunteering—teachin’ car repair to some of them... to some girls.”

“Yes, Nick Zales told me.”

Wiping a rivulet of unease from the back of his neck, Logan asked, “Told you what?”

“Told me about the class. And how is that going? Do you like volunteering? I understand Tish is one of your students. She’s a handful, isn’t she? But no harm in her at all, really. I helped her get her GED, and she was so proud and grateful, the way she hugged me. And you have Norah, too. She’s such a dear. Did you know....”

Logan had learned soon after meeting Sister Ciera that if you simply kept quiet, she would eventually answer most of her own questions, so he just let her ramble on, supplying mainly nods and agreeable-sounding grunts. She finally veered onto a topic that required his actual participation. “And how is your family? Are you seeing your wife and daughters now?”

“Seein’ my daughters some, every other Saturday. But not my wife. Not yet.”

“Oh that’s too bad.” She patted his arm in an unsuccessful gesture of comfort. “She’ll come around. I’m sure when she comes to consider all of the hard work you’re doing, she’ll find the Lord’s forgiveness in her heart.” Logan didn’t point out that he was hoping more for Linda

forgetting than forgiving, but Ciera had moved on again anyway. “But it must be a comfort for you to see your little girls.”

“Sure is, they’re good girls—”

“Oh,” Ciera interrupted, “I just had a brilliant idea! We should have your girls come along on this year’s Kennywood trip.”

Logan and Linda had talked just last year about taking the girls to the huge amusement park not far from North Braddock, but of course, like everything else since March, those plans had been put on hold. “What trip is that?”

“ACC sponsors a trip every summer for some of the children at the center; Nick is actually the one who does all the planning, but I’m always one of the chaperones. I could—”

“My girls ain’t at that center,” Logan cut in tersely. “They’re livin’ with their mom.”

“Yes, I know that, dear, but the trip would be open to any children who’ve been through... what your girls have. I can make the arrangements with your wife, I’m sure she’ll be agreeable. All of the kids always have such a good time.”

As much to shut the woman up as for his daughters’ sake, Logan agreed to the suggestion and was relieved to see Ciera start to make her way to the door. She shook his hand, promising once again to clear things with Linda, and tripped gaily up the steps.

Logan figured he was home free until she turned around on the third step. “I hope you don’t mind—I know you’re not a religious man, but I am praying for you, Logan. It can’t hurt, right?”

“Nope, can’t hurt.” He squinted up into the glare of the sun setting behind her. “Can’t see that it’s helped much either.”

“Oh, I’m sure it has. In some way we can’t even see yet. God’s mercy is often hard to recognize at first. Mysterious ways and all that.”

And finally she was gone, leaving Logan to wonder about those mysterious ways. He concluded that if God was trying to hide a recent act of mercy, He was doing a bang-up job of it.



## Chapter 5: Half Reveal and Half Conceal

*Words, like nature, half reveal and half conceal the soul within.*

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson

THAT Sunday, Nick was feeling in desperate need of his planned diversion. With Agnes having had two good days in a row, Nick felt relatively secure in leaving her alone for a short while. He dashed over to Adam's place, wondering if his assessment of his mom's condition was more blind hope than reality. He shrugged that concern off, figuring that if Agnes got worried or confused, she'd just ring his cell phone. Of all the things his mom habitually forgot, his number was never one of them—a fact that was equal parts blessing and curse.

When forty-five minutes of energetic sex didn't entirely quiet his restless mind, and with his cell phone resolutely silent, Nick gladly accepted Adam's invitation to cap off their afternoon with a beer at Sully's, Adam's favorite sports bar. An hour later, his gambit for distraction proved worthless. Nick was staring into his beer mug, his mind running over Norah's last session while the room around him exploded with joy.

Adam punched him in the arm, exclaiming, "Hey, what the fuck! Wake up, dude. Doumit just hit a triple. The Pirates might actually win a game, and you're missin' it!"

Nick glanced up at the score flashing on the screen. "Wow, when did they grab the lead?"

"Last inning, where the hell were you?"

With a guilty shrug, Nick admitted, "A million miles away."

"Why?" Adam settled back onto his barstool. "Is it somethin' with your mom?"

“Not really. It’s work.” He shifted to face Adam directly, saying, “See, I’m worried about how I’m handling something with Norah.”

“Your boss?” Adam asked distractedly, his attention back on the TV where the Pirate hitter was striking out to end the inning. “Fuck! Sure could’a used ’nother insurance run—the Reds have the top of the order coming up.” As the players trotted off the field, he refocused on Nick. “Sorry, you were sayin’ somethin’ about your boss....”

“No, you idiot,” Nick laughed fondly. “*Trudy* is my boss. Norah is a client of mine. The one I picked up—”

Polishing his beer off with total unconcern, Adam wiped his mouth on the side of his hand before interrupting, “Trudy, Norah.... Chick names all sound the same to me.” He signaled the bartender to bring two more beers before saying, “Come on, don’t waste a great afternoon worryin’ ’bout work. Lighten up. You just had a seriously good fuck.” He paused to look in Nick’s eyes as he murmured, “It was good, wasn’t it?”

“You know it,” Nick confirmed.

“Of course,” Adam crowed. “Though if you were still ‘itchy,’” he drawled, elbowing Nick slightly and nodding towards the very end of the bar, “I could recommend some time with that guy.”

Nick studied the muscular black man Adam had discreetly indicated, asking, “One of your many conquests?”

With a saucy wink, Adam answered, “Oh, yeah. Guy can suck like a Hoover in heat.”

Trying not to seem ungrateful for the suggestion, Nick laughed slightly and said, “No, I’m good. Or... we were.”

“Okay, then. So your itch is fully scratched, and now our perpetually awful baseball team is about to beat the Reds. What more could you ask for?”

Expelling a sigh, Nick answered, “Confirmation that I’m getting through to Norah?”

Adam pointed to Nick’s beer, saying, “How ’bout confirming that you’ll have that finished before that next one gets here?” Nick gave his head a bemused shake but did drain his mug while Adam continued,

“I’m sure you’re doin’ the right thing—whatever it is. And even if it ain’t, geez, you give *enough* to that place. Don’t be worryin’ about it on your day off. I see guys at the gym yakkin’ on their cells to work while they’re tryin’ to do the Stairmaster or somethin’, and it ain’t healthy. Ya know?”

“Yeah, I see what you’re sayin’, but I’m not tryin’ to close a merger or make a million dollars; I’m dealin’ with a person. I know Trudy says I’m coddling Norah, but I can’t help but think—”

“Whatever it is, it can wait ’til tomorrow.” Adam accepted their beers from the bartender, adroitly flipping him a twenty and saying, “Keep ’em coming.” Then he pointed at the TV, saying to Nick, “Do yourself a favor. Worry about Dickerson coming up with one on and no outs and forget about ACC for one fucking afternoon. Deal?”

Knowing it was useless to argue with Adam in this instance, Nick nodded and resolutely fastened his attention back onto the game. Besides, whatever the impulse of the moment, he had never intended to pour out his doubts and misgivings about Norah to his friend. After all, it wasn’t Adam’s job to be that kind of sounding board.

AT CLASS that Thursday, Nick began to think Trudy and Adam were right. Norah seemed, if anything, cheerful to the point of effervescence. She even volunteered to drive Tish and Cheryl back to ACC again. Nick tried to hide his eagerness as he asked, “You sure?”

Norah shrugged. “Yeah, why not? It’s a lot closer to my place than yours, right?”

“Thanks.” Nick wasn’t sorry to forgo the drive that tacked forty minutes onto the end of a long day.

Tish jumped into the front seat, saying, “I’m gonna be getting my own car soon’s I get that job at The Carlton. Then I won’t need the ‘Nick and Norah’ taxi service.”

“Hey,” Cheryl interjected as she took her place in the back, “*Nick and Norah*—just like in them old-time movies.”

A grinning Norah slid into the driver's seat. "Except she wasn't blonde," she said while fluffing her hair in a pose of mock glamour.

"And he sure wasn't gay," countered Nick, thumping the car's roof in a farewell gesture. When he swung back to the shop's entrance, intending to firm up plans for working on the car that Sunday, he saw Logan already standing there, still holding a ratchet wrench, with a guarded frown marring his handsome face.

*Oh, not this shit again.* He was mentally preparing a tirade about Logan getting over himself about "the gay thing" when their eyes met and Nick was stopped dead—again—by the blue-fire ache he found there. "Somethin' wrong?" When the only answer was Logan's sudden interest in the wrench he was toying with, Nick grimly offered, "If you can't make it on Sunday—"

Logan looked up sharply. "No, I'll be here." He reseated his baseball cap more firmly before adding, "Anyways, I was thinkin' 'bout this Kennywood trip of yours—"

"How did you know about that?"

"That Sister Ciera—she told me. She arranged for my girls to go on it."

"Oh." Until that moment, Nick hadn't realized that the last-minute additions belonged to Logan. "I didn't know.... I guess I forgot you even had kids."

"Yep—Krista and Meghan."

As he scratched at his stubbled chin in puzzlement, Nick said, "Ciera left me a note, said the kids were twelve and ten."

"Uh huh, that's right."

Nick tried to remember a birth date from the quick look he'd had at Logan's file *Could'a swore we were born the same year.* "Aren't you kinda young to have kids that old?"

Logan tucked the wrench into his back pocket while saying, "Me and Linda was both twenty when our first was born."

"Huh, that's the same age I finally picked a major," Nick muttered while his thoughts flew to his cousins in Kittanning and Freeport, most of whom had also married soon after high school. For

the first time ever, he wondered whether—gay or not—only his escape to a college in Pittsburgh had “protected” him from a similar fate. Figuring the time wasn’t opportune for that kind of introspection, Nick decided to bring the original subject back around. “You were saying, about the Kennywood trip?”

“Yeah, so I was thinking,” Logan said while pulling a ten-dollar bill out of his pocket. He kept his eyes on the money as he extended it towards Nick, continuing, “You could get ’em an ice cream cone or somethin’.” He finally looked up from under his lashes, finishing, “Tell ’em it’s from their dad.”

At that moment, Nick felt a chunk of the ice wall he’d doggedly erected against this man melt away—and no stern self-reminders had the power to halt the thaw. He reluctantly waved the money off, saying, “They won’t need it. We give all the kids food vouchers,” adding with a laugh, “Plenty enough to make sure one or two of ’em throws up on the way home.”

Clearly crestfallen, Logan tucked the money away, mumbling, “Uh. Okay.”

Pressed by a sudden need to offer consolation, Nick blurted, “Why don’t you come with us? Tracy, one of the other chaperones, dropped out yesterday, and twenty kids’s a lot for me an’ Ciera to handle alone.”

“I don’t think I could....” Logan’s gaze was fixed on a spot over Nick’s shoulder.

The man’s obvious discomfort jogged Nick’s memory as to his situation; he immediately surmised that Logan was restricted to supervised visitation. “It’s not like you’d be alone with ’em. I mean, I could clear it with Trudy, see what she says.”

The faintest smile lifted the corner of Logan’s mouth. “Ya think?”

“Sure.” Nick’s own smile turned mischievous. “But you an’ Ciera’re getting stuck with the ‘Kiddieland crowd’.”

TRUDY not only approved of the idea, she steamrolled over any objections of the visitation mediator. So it was that on Saturday morning, Logan found himself nervously studying the gaudy carousel horse perched in the middle of a fountain at Kennywood's entrance. Nick had told him that the group would be taking one of the city buses to the park; Logan had driven there and wasn't sure where the bus shelter was, but he figured he'd spot them easily from his current vantage point.

However, when the group finally arrived, it was his younger daughter who spotted *him*. She started shrieking "Daddy!" from fifty feet away and was dragging Sister Ciera, who was only slightly taller than Meghan, by the hand towards him, with Krista close behind. Logan reveled in his daughters' hugs and smiles and drew solace from their company that had previously been dimmed by Marie's frowning presence.

Logan looked up from Meghan to find another smiling face directed his way—Nick Zales's. He tried to ignore the surge of blood in his veins by gruffly introducing him to the girls. "Hey, girls, this is Mr. Zales." He put one hand on each girl's shoulder as he continued, "Nick, these are my daughters, Krista and Meghan."

After exchanging a quiet hello with the girls, Nick turned to Logan. "Good to see you here. I'm glad it all worked out for you."

"Yeah, me too." Only after Nick was pulled away by two other ebullient kids did Logan think that he should have thanked the man for championing his participation in the outing. For a second, Logan felt a flush of shame at his apparent show of ingratitude but shrugged it off, figuring he'd catch up with Nick sometime during the day.

Twenty minutes later, the group was inside the park, with Ciera herding the younger children and Nick efficiently barking orders at the older crew. The plan was for Nick to take all the teenagers on the roller coasters and other teeth-jarring attractions while Logan and Sister Ciera did the tamer rides with the younger crowd. At two p.m. the whole group would meet for a late lunch at the Parkside Café before splitting off again.

Logan wondered how Nick was going to handle nine rowdy teenagers but fast observed that they took his directions seriously; even

the boys quieted down to a low rumble while Nick laid out the day's plans. Logan noticed Krista looking wistfully at the older group that was milling around at Nick's right. He leaned over, saying, "If you wanta go with them, it's all right by me."

Krista shook her head decisively, saying, "No, I'll help you and Sister Ciera with the little kids." Logan was glad that he'd have both his daughters with him for the morning but was equally glad her sister hadn't heard that label. Especially since one of the older boys, Jesse, was teasing *his* younger sister, Darcy, about going on "the baby rides."

The little firebrand stuck her tongue out at her sibling, defiantly saying, "We're goin' on the *Phantom's Revenge*, too!"

"Yeah, the sucky one," Jesse taunted back.

Suddenly Nick appeared at Jesse's side, slinging a friendly arm around his shoulder. "Sounds like you don't wanta go see the Pirates with me next month, after all."

Sheepishly, Jesse asked, "Is your friend gettin' us those great seats again?"

Another boy piped up, "Hey Nick, I'll take his ticket!"

Nick threw a glance over his shoulder, saying, "I already said you could come, Ben."

"Yeah, but I could scalp his ticket."

Shaking his head with evident amusement, Nick retorted, "It's the *Pirates*, I don't think you're gonna make much money." He turned back to Jesse, saying, "But I'm sure we could find *someone* who wants Jesse's ticket. Maybe Darcy...."

Jesse gave the matter exactly three seconds of thought before turning to his sister and mumbling an apology of doubtful sincerity. But it satisfied Darcy, and the two groups parted peaceably.

Two hours later, Logan and Sister Ciera were lounging on a bench while their charges stood in line at the famous Potato Patch, waiting for a serving of the legendary fries. Logan looked at the vouchers all the kids were clutching and wondered how the center could afford to splurge like this. "All of this must cost a lotta money, huh?"

“Oh, yes, but so worth it. Nick raises money for months—organizing a car wash and dozens of raffles. Plus he always gets the park to donate most of the admission fee.” A smile lit her dark eyes and olive-skinned face as she commented, “All in all, Nick is a commendable young man.”

Pondering the qualifier, Logan cleared his throat and murmured, “Ya mean even though... even with him bein’... gay?”

It took Ciera a second to parse the last word, as low as it had been uttered, but finally comprehension dawned, and she trilled, “Oh, there is that, *too*.” Rolling her eyes slightly, she said, “No, I was thinking more.... Well, let’s just say Nick and I don’t always see eye-to-eye on matters of rehabilitation.”

That word currently had only unhappy associations for Logan, so he was glad when Ciera veered into tales of trips from years past and talked nonstop as the kids wended their way up to the French fry counter.

There was no opportunity for Logan to speak to Nick at lunch, since his daughters insisted their dad sit with them and a couple of their new friends. Nick seemed fully occupied with monitoring the kids anyway, stepping in to prevent what seemed to be an impending food fight between Jesse and one of the older boys.

At the end of the day, Logan walked his daughters to the bus stop and looked around for Nick. Once again, there was no chance for a private exchange; Nick was busy handing out bus tokens to the kids. Following in his wake were four of the teenagers, all peppering him with questions about the impending trip to PNC Park.

Feeling as exhausted as he usually did after a twelve-hour workday, Logan exchanged a weary wave with Nick as the group trooped past him and onto the bus. Though all three adults and the young children were clearly fatigued, the older kids seemed—if possible—more hyper. Logan didn’t envy Nick and Ciera their task of seeing them all safely home.

On the short drive back to North Braddock, Logan pondered the effort Nick expended to arrange these outings. He had to admit, the kids unquestionably seemed to appreciate it. Some even seemed to have a near case of hero worship for their benefactor. Suddenly, Logan



wondered if those teenage boys hanging all over Nick knew that the counselor was a gay man. At first he thought it wasn't possible, but then Logan remembered that big mouth Tish. He couldn't imagine she left anyone at ACC in the dark about any information she possessed.

His tired mind couldn't reconcile the incongruous notions, so he followed his usual procedure of shoving it all behind a heavily bolted mental door that blocked off a dark corner of his brain. Unfortunately for Logan, that corner was getting pretty crowded these days, and that door was becoming ever more difficult to close.

THE next day, Logan arrived at Acken's shop at nine a.m. to find a yawning Nick lounging on the desk, downing a super-sized cup of coffee. Feeling a pang of sympathy, he asked, "When'd you get to bed?"

Nick gave a weary shake of his head, answering "Don't ask" around the rim of his cup. A second later, after he'd drained the cup, he leapt up, announcing, "Let's get to work."

That sounded good to Logan, so they fell to; the initial work was more painless than he could have imagined. First, the car was in better shape than he had feared; they sailed through the drivetrain inspection, wherein he was relieved to note that the clutch and pressure plate were in tolerable shape. The next step was to take the car out for a spin so that he could see if there were any problems with shifting or grinding during gear changes.

After a twenty-minute jaunt through the neighborhood, Nick took his turn at the wheel, handling the wayward car efficiently on the hilly streets, which left Logan free to listen and observe. His mind cleared and his muscles relaxed as he focused most of his attention on what this engine had to tell him. He had always loved this part of the job—diagnosing the idiosyncrasies of a demanding "patient."

After a few minutes of intense concentration, Logan emerged from his contemplative fugue and looked over to see what his companion was up to. Nick's body language showed a man just as engaged, just as relaxed as Logan, even though the car was fighting

him on the challenging terrain. Logan was shaken by a jolt of insight, intuitively recognizing that Zales was finding this drive equally therapeutic.

The hiding spot in Logan's head was too full to accommodate another item, so on the way back to the garage, he was forced to actively contemplate exactly why Nick's apparent pleasure was such a source of satisfaction to him. In order to dodge some uncomfortable conclusions, he finally decided that it was simply a lot easier to work with a guy who wasn't being pissy the whole while—and that was all.

The sense of harmony continued as they got down to prying off the body trim. Logan was pleased and mildly surprised that Nick showed no reluctance to do the dirty and exacting job. "Make sure you mark everything," he cautioned as he wrestled with a stubborn piece of chrome. "Saves a lotta time when you go to put 'em back on." Finally triumphing over the side molding, Logan looked up to find Nick taking a picture of a wheel well. "What're you doin'?"

"That article I got off the Internet? It said you should take a picture of stuff before you remove it."

"Good idea," Logan admitted. "Why didn't you stop me before I went after this?"

Nick laughed. "Way you went after it with that crowbar? Didn't seem like a good idea to get in your way."

A sudden knot formed in Logan's stomach as he immediately wondered if that was a sly allusion to his anger control issues. Nick gave every appearance of innocence, humming rather tunelessly as he pried away the trim. Logan decided to let it go but wondered why he spent so much time worrying about what this Zales fellow was thinking. *What the fuck do I care if he jus' took a shot at me? It's probably what I should expect.*

They worked in silence for a while until Logan remembered a chore he had forgotten to perform. Deciding to get it over with, he cleared his throat to get Nick's attention. Once he had it, Logan said, "I forgot to say, I wanted to thank you for... for settin' all that up yesterday."

Nick didn't look up from the rusty piece of trim he was labeling but did say, "That's all right. I'm glad you and your girls had a good time."

"They sure did."

"But not you?" Nick asked, sending a knowing grin his way.

"I was glad to spend the time with Krista an' Meghan, but the whole gang of 'em... well...."

"Wore ya out?"

"Sure did. Can't believe you do that every year."

"I'm not gonna say it's not a pain, 'cause it is, a major pain. But those kids...." He shrugged, obviously looking for the right words. "They don't get enough chance to just *be kids*."

"Whaddya mean?"

"They grow up too fast because they see so much misery so young." Nick walked over and grabbed the camera, but instead of going back to work, he went back to his subject, emphasizing his words with short chops of his hand. "Even when we get 'em out, they can't relax 'cause they're too busy worryin' that their old man might find them and their mom. Some think.... Some even think it's somehow their fault. That Daddy beat the shit out of Mommy because they woke him up too early or somethin'."

Logan desperately wanted Nick to stop, to shut the hell up, and he silently cursed himself for posing the question. *Why the fuck did I ask what he meant?* He drowned out as much of it as he could by chanting silently, *It doesn't matter.... It doesn't matter, 'cause none of this is true for my girls.*

Finally Nick crouched down to snap a picture of his next target, and Logan breathed a sigh of relief. It proved premature when Nick continued, "Worst of all, most of them don't ever get to have a positive male influence in their lives. I know how rough that can be, 'specially for the boys."

A well of sorrow sprang from that last phrase, catching Logan off guard. He noted Nick's unusually stiff posture, and the penny dropped for him. Despite knowing he could be entering forbidden territory, he

felt compelled to ask, “Your dad.... He wasn’t one of.... I mean did he...?”

Nick sat back on his heels and shot Logan a long, appraising stare before tersely saying, “Yeah, he was. And he sure as hell did.”

“Sorry,” Logan murmured, almost shocked at how heartfelt his reply was. “Is that why you... why you took up this kind of work?”

“I don’t know.... Yeah, I guess so.” Nick laid the camera on the workbench and picked up a crowbar before continuing, “I always hated to think that bastard had any kind of influence on me at all, but I guess he did. No getting around it.”

“Where’s he now?”

“Rotting in—” Nick bit off his short answer and attacked the door molding without finishing his sentence.

Though the answer had been abruptly cut off, Logan heard the “in hell” loud and clear. Filled with a sudden need to offer comfort, he said, “But look at you now—you’re a real good influence on them boys, where he was a bad one.”

“What makes you say that?” Nick asked, his voice soft with curiosity.

“Come on. The way they were all clamorin’ to go to the baseball game with you. You think that was just so they could see the Pirates get their asses kicked?”

A yelp of laughter escaped from Nick before he said, “I don’t know that it’s all about me. Adam *does* get us seats over the dugout.”

“This Adam—does he work with you?” Logan asked, surprising himself again; if he kept this up, he was going to end up as chatty as Meghan.

“No,” he answered evenly, “we’re really good friends.” Logan detected an air of challenge as Nick added, “And before you can ask, that means *exactly* what you’re thinking it means.”

“I wasn’t gonna ask,” Logan retorted, trying to appear sincere and wondering why he suddenly despised a guy he hadn’t met and likely never would. He vented his rising and inexplicable anger by snapping, “I don’t know where you get off sayin’ that. I don’t wanta know—”

Apparently refusing to match his ire, Nick lobbed back a jaunty, “I get it—don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Logan simmered silently, thinking how he’d love to wipe that cocky smirk off Zales’s face by slamming him up against the wall. He lingered over that oddly appealing image until it shifted slightly and he promptly blanked his mind in alarm. In an effort to distract himself with a familiar ally, Logan attacked the rest of the trim with doubled vigor.

The two men talked of little else besides the car for the next hour, efficiently finishing the exterior and then moving on to disassembling the interior trim, the silent labor serving to restore Logan’s equilibrium. However, before they broke for the day, the final task was a review of the parts list, and Logan found their forearms brushing familiarly as they huddled over the paper. Desperate to escape the dreadfully alluring contact, Logan snatched the list away, curtly promising to start calling around to dealers.

As they ambled to the door, Nick took a long second to stare at the stripped-down car. “Guess it has to get worse before it can get better, huh?”

“That’s the way it works.” Feeling an odd mixture of relief and disappointment, Logan put his hand on the doorknob and turned to Nick. “Same time next week?”

Still seeming lost in the vehicle splayed out before him, Nick answered distractedly, “Sounds good.” He then shook his head and followed Logan to the exit. After Nick locked the shop door, he faced Logan square-on with one hand on his hip. “Can I ask you something? I mean, I get a turn, don’t I?”

Logan suddenly regretted all the prying queries he’d posed earlier, since he felt no choice now but to say, “Sure, go ahead.”

“Why did you do it?”

There was no question in Logan’s mind as to what Nick was asking—it was the question he’d been dodging from everyone for four months. He jammed his hands into his jeans pockets and kicked at some loose stones. “I just kinda.... I... I don’t know.... It’s all a blur. I

can't remember anything about it real clear." He squinted up at Nick warily, wanting to gauge his acceptance of that assertion.

There was no give in Nick's response. "You're deliberately blocking it out. You know that, right?"

Having heard that enough from Trudy, Logan had no need for clarification. He jammed his sunglasses onto his face before snapping, "Even if I was, so what? Why the fuck should I... Who the hell wants to dredge all that shit up?"

Nick pulled his Jeep keys out of his pocket and then cocked his head at Logan. "If you refuse to remember—how're you gonna answer when those little girls of yours finally start asking questions?"

"They ain't asked nothin'," Logan growled.

"They wanta know, Logan. Believe me, they want to know." Nick nodded goodbye and headed down the steps, leaving Logan alone, those last words ringing in his ears.

## Chapter 6: Needs Only to Be Seen

*For truth has such a face and such a mien, as to be loved needs only to be seen.*

—John Dryden

LATE Tuesday morning, Nick had just finished making a pot of coffee when Trudy, loaded down with file folders, a coffee cup dangling from two fingers, cruised into the break room. While aiming a cheery smile at Nick, she thumped the cup down on the counter and started shuffling through the folders. “Good morning.” With her chin, she pointed to Nick’s freshly filled mug. “How many cups is that?”

“Who keeps count?” shrugged Nick as he held the pot over Trudy’s mug. “Want some?”

“Of course. Listen, I’m glad I ran into you. I have two new cases for you.” It took monumental effort for Nick to contain an audible groan; apparently the sound effect was unnecessary, since Trudy could read either his mind or face. “I know how swamped you are, but—”

“But, that’s the way it is around here, you don’t need to tell me.” He accepted the folders and started flipping through the first one. “Marta going to be a resident?” he absentmindedly confirmed.

“Yes.”

“The extra work wouldn’t be so bad, but I just decided to add another finance module; I think the group’s getting too big to be effective.” He scanned the contents of the second folder and noted the home address of the new client. *Hmm, looks like we have a high-rent abuser here....* “Mt. Lebanon, huh?”

“Yep. Not the first client we’ve had from there.”

“Yeah, I know. And I’ll bet anything Mr. Palmer has a high-priced lawyer and tons of connections.”

“You’re probably right. But let’s worry about Sheila Palmer right now, and we’ll worry about what we can do about Dean Palmer later. Okay?”

“Okay. Where’s Sheila living now?”

“She moved in with a cousin. I spoke with her yesterday, and while her physical condition is relatively good, emotionally she’s very fragile. I couldn’t even get out of her what triggered the final break. I think she’s going to need extensive counseling, a few sessions a week to start. You up for this?”

Nick was already mentally adjusting his schedule. “Absolutely.”

“Now, admit it. Aren’t you glad you’re only seeing Norah Seebold once a month?”

“Yes... and no. Sometimes I think...” Nick took a sip of his coffee to help him find words for his nebulous thoughts, but nothing came. “I don’t know.”

Trudy patted his arm sympathetically. “It’s hard to let go of some of them, I understand. But according to your last report, she’s ready, and there are others now who need you more.”

Biting his lip as though it were the qualms he held, Nick nodded. “Okay, you’re right. I’ll get in touch with Marta and Sheila this afternoon, get initial interviews set up for both.” He gulped more coffee, then quirked an eyebrow at Trudy. “You can’t say I don’t earn my money.”

Her red nails clicked rhythmically against her mug while she teased back, “Really? I had just started wondering if we were paying you too much.”

“Where the hell did you get that idea?”

“Rumor has it that you just bought a sports car from Dave Acken....”

“Geez, you hear *everything*.”

“Not me, my husband. Since Dave’s heart problems are still keeping him away from his shop, The Liberty Grill has become his home base. So you *did* buy a classic car?”



Nick laughed as he countered, “Classic wreck is more like it. It barely runs.”

“And you’re going to do *what* with it?”

“Restore it. I hope.”

“All by yourself?”

“No. I got....” Nick found himself tripping over Logan’s name, and he swiftly substituted, “...a guy to help me. Someone who’s done it before.”

“That’s good. But I never knew you were such a motorhead.”

“You mean you can’t tell by the ultra-sleek vehicle I’m in now?” While Trudy snorted in amusement, Nick continued, “I’m not... or I wasn’t.” How could he possibly explain something he didn’t even understand himself? “Maybe I’m having my midlife crisis early?”

“Ahh, ever the overachiever,” Trudy joked. “Well, good luck.” She turned to leave the small room but tossed over her shoulder, “By the way, I’m expecting a ride when it’s done.”

Nick called after her, “Oh, you bet. It’ll be your retirement gift.”

THAT Wednesday night, it was Logan’s turn with Trudy. His ten-minute stint in the waiting room seemed longer than usual, as he couldn’t even fake any interest in the scanty choice of magazines. He spent the time fighting off the desire to snooze even though the springs of the ancient couch were aggravating his sore muscles; several restless nights had left Logan feeling like a faded washrag. *Can’t seem to sleep a full night through. Goddamn hot weather, never used to bother me....*

To his relief, the session started on a much sweeter note than usual. After he dropped into the guest chair, Trudy welcomed him by noting brightly, “Sister Ciera stopped by Monday morning to tell me all about the day at Kennywood. It seems your daughters had a wonderful time—and so did you.”

“Yeah, it was good.” Logan paused and looked out the office window without really seeing the passing traffic. “Good seein’ them without... seein’ them like that.”

“Ciera also said you were a big help with the young kids.” Trudy added with a genuine grin, “Knowing that crowd, I’d say that was almost going above and beyond.”

Logan ducked his head and shifted his line of sight to the floor. “Don’t know why she said that. She did most of the work.”

Trudy retorted, “I don’t hand out many compliments, Logan. You should learn to take them when I do.”

Rather than telling the truth, that all he wanted from Trudy was her signature on a piece of paper, Logan offered a quiet, “Yes, ma’am.”

A sly note snuck into Trudy’s voice as she said, “It also seems like someone else was impressed with your effort.”

At that declaration, Logan’s head and stomach shot in opposite directions—gaze snapping to Trudy’s face while the other sank to the floor. “Who?”

“Your wife.”

The anxiety Logan had felt while waiting for Nick Zales’s name to pass Trudy’s lips only ratcheted up at that unexpected response. “Who—how’d you hear that?”

“I spoke to her directly yesterday morning. And I have good news—”

“You’re gonna sign that affidavit?”

“Um, no. Not yet. I meant that Linda has agreed to joint counseling sessions.” Logan was silent while he chewed over the thought that apparently Trudy Gerard had no idea what constituted good news for him. Before he could develop a response, she continued, “It doesn’t look like *you* consider that good news. Why not?”

“I just want.... This ain’t gonna be about hashing over all that stuff from March, is it? ’Cause I don’t see the point in that.”

“You don’t?”

*Fuck, lady, ain’t I been punished enough?* “No.”

Leaning forward, Trudy slid her forearms across her desk and trained earnest mahogany eyes on Logan. “How do you expect to get back together with Linda if the two of you can’t discuss the abusive incident? If you remember, I told you when we began our sessions that taking responsibility was a prerequisite for entering into couples counseling.”

“I *did* take responsibility. What do you call standin’ up in court and pleadin’ guilty?”

“I call that accepting the blame. There’s a difference.”

“Oh yeah?” Logan folded his arms and snapped, “Well, why don’t ya explain the difference to me? ’Cause from where I’m sittin’, they’re the same damn thing.”

“Accepting responsibility means you stop calling it an accident; stop making it sound like you backed into Linda’s car or broke a dish. You start calling it a mistake. A mistake you made and will never make again because....” Trudy stretched her hand out towards her glowering patient.

Wary of a trap, he merely responded, “Yeah?”

“*You* have to fill in that blank, Logan; no one can do it for you. How about you stand up to your own wife and daughters like you did to that judge? Explain to them what happened and why it will never happen again—and mean every word you say. That’s what they want—and that’s what Linda *needs*.”

“Huh. What she needs....” Logan’s annoyed whisper elicited a frown from Trudy that deepened as his speech continued. “Too bad. I did my best, and if it ain’t good enough... then it ain’t. Who the hell gets what they need in life, anyway?”

”I hope we all get what we need at least some of the time. Are you telling me that isn’t true for you?” Assuming that was more rhetorical than anything else, Logan simply shrugged in response. Trudy probed, “What do you need that you don’t have?”

“Lotta stuff. My old job, my daughters livin’ with me....”

“So you did have what you needed at one time.” Logan waited out a pause, trying to remember if that had ever been true. “Or wasn’t that what you were talking about?”

As he studied the carpet’s pattern, something he now knew better than his truck’s transmission, Logan felt too tired to offer anything but the bald truth. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. It matters a whole lot. Don’t you think you deserve to get your needs met?”

*It ain’t about deservin’, it’s about....* “What if....” Logan’s eyes finally found Trudy’s face. “What if what a man needed is... wasn’t the right thing?”

“I can’t answer that question unless you tell me what we’re talking about. What did you need and not get? Not to have a wife and child to support at age twenty? To hang onto the job you loved? Stay in the town you grew up in? It’s okay to be resentful about those things, to feel cheated. None of that is as bad as losing control and hurting Linda.”

“No shit. Did ya need all these degrees,” Logan pointed at the wall and continued, “so you could tell me that?”

“You’re not getting it. The two things are directly related. Do you know what kind of man *never* gets what he needs?”

“No.” Logan was determined not to give her the satisfaction of asking, but when a long silence revealed that Trudy wasn’t going to volunteer the information, he *had* to ask, “What kind?”

“A very angry one.”

LOGAN spent more time than usual mulling over his session with Trudy but had reached no concrete conclusions by the time he arrived for the automotive class on Thursday. When the clock showed ten minutes past three with no sign of Nick, Logan managed to stifle his disappointment, though he did voice his surprise to Norah. “Whaddya think—Nick ain’t gonna show?”

Norah had no insight into Nick's whereabouts, but Tish finally interrupted her cell phone conversation with her sister to say, "Oh, I forgot, I was s'posed to tell yuins that he's gonna be late. He's getting a new client set up at ACC. But he'll be here."

"Uh... okay." With some effort, Logan cleared all thoughts of both perplexing counselors from his mind and dove eagerly into the class. Though he'd willingly down a quart of motor oil rather than admit it to anyone, he had started to enjoy teaching these women about cars. As he showed them how to change the oil on Norah's Cavalier, he felt doubly pleased. Not only was the car getting some desperately needed maintenance, but the three pupils were very obviously becoming quite comfortable around an engine.

They were halfway into the class when Cheryl bent down to check the progress of the grungy oil draining into the pan; Logan cautioned her about her free-flowing long hair trailing on the ground. As she hastily snatched the mass up and away, he commented gruffly, "You're just like my older girl. Her hair's always gettin' into everything too."

"I got somethin' you can put it up with," Norah offered, and she rooted around in her bag before producing a plastic claw clasp.

Cheryl took the clip and fumbled with her slippery hair; in the process, her wispy cotton shirt rode up in the back to reveal an angry red scar slicing down her skin. Tish reached over and lifted the blouse up a bit more, but there seemed to be no end to the gash. It trailed down the white skin before disappearing inside her jeans. "Girlfriend—what the hell?"

"Yeah," Cheryl whispered when she looked over her shoulder and saw what they were all staring at. "Roger did that. With a huntin' knife."

"Your husband?" Norah asked.

"Soon to be ex-husband—thank God."

Tish smoothed the shirt gently back down, saying, "I can see why you finally left that bastard."

"That ain't why I left him. That wasn't even the first time he went after me with a knife."

Norah closed her gaping mouth enough to ask, “Then what finally did it?”

“It was my little girl. Amber.”

Joining the conversation at last, Logan growled, “He went after your little girl?”

“No, it wasn’t that,” Cheryl said, her voice growing stronger. “It was.... See, I never wanted her to end up like me. I stayed with him all those years ’cause it was what my mom did. I saw my dad knockin’ her around, and I guess I grew up thinkin’... thinkin’ that’s just the way it is. She even told me it was ‘my duty’ to stay with him, even though it kept gettin’ worse. Every time Roger beat me up, I tried to make it seem like no big deal to the kids—so they wouldn’t get upset, you know? Then last time—” Cheryl choked back tears, and Logan had a second to notice a grim-faced Nick had appeared in the shop and was silently listening.

Cheryl recovered and went on. “Then last time... I got home from the hospital, and Roger Jr. was lookin’ at all them stitches, and Amber piped up like it was nothin’, ‘Oh mommy got another boo-boo.’ And I knew... I knew she was gonna end up just like me, thinkin’ a man had the right to beat her and cut her and—” Another shaky sob echoed around the garage before Cheryl finished, “So I had to show her it wasn’t so. I had to get out so she would know....” By now, copious tears were running down her cheeks as she finished, “...so she would know it ain’t right and she shouldn’t let it happen to her.”

Logan watched Nick as he moved to Cheryl’s side and put an arm around her shoulder. She turned her face into his polo shirt, crying, “I’m sorry. I knew this would happen. I shouldn’t’ve started, but I couldn’t help—”

“It’s okay. You have every right to tell your story. We aren’t bothered. It’s all right,” Nick soothed. Tish and Norah chimed in, immediately agreeing that they were glad Cheryl had finally told about her past, too.

Logan was off to the side, mute with horror and frozen with confusion, needing to offer some gesture of comfort but sure it would be unwelcome.

After a few seconds, Nick escorted Cheryl outside to get some fresh air and regain her composure. Logan cleared his throat and said, “We better get this finished up if you’re planning on gettin’ home tonight.” He then ably helped a subdued Tish and Norah finish the oil change on the Cavalier.

Tish, though, could not be silent for long; as Logan did the final check of the engine, she said to Norah, “I never thought about that, you know? I hope to hell my boys don’t think they can go beatin’ on their woman some day. And my baby girl—damn, I’m glad she won’t remember any of that shit.” Norah had no reply, but still Tish went on, “And what about what Cheryl’s mom told her, that it was her duty to stay with that son of a bitch? How fucked up is *that*?”

The hood of the car clunked down, and the shop was eerily silent for a second until Logan dropped three words into the hush. “Plenty fucked up.” He didn’t care that the question hadn’t been directed at him, and he refused to flinch from their evident surprise.

THERE wasn’t much conversation beyond basic greetings when Nick and Logan met up on Sunday morning for their second go at the car. Nick didn’t find it odd that Logan was quiet, and his own mind was wholly occupied by the daunting task of removing the engine from the Thunderbird. The two men worked together efficiently, the only words spoken directly related to the task at hand. By eleven a.m. they had the engine bolted to the engine stand and were ready to begin the tedious process of disassembly.

Nick wiped the sweat off the back of his neck and looked at Logan. “Now what?”

“We gotta remove the parts in groups, clean ’em in groups, and label ’em in groups.”

“Makes sense; where do ya wanna get started?”

“The intake manifold. Then we’ll work our way down to the short block. Then we get at the valve covers, rocker arms, pivots, push rods—”

“Okay, I get it, I get it,” Nick interrupted, afraid that Logan was winding up to name every damn part left in the engine.

Twenty minutes later, Nick was humming happily to himself, intent on the intricate disassembly work, when Logan cleared his throat loudly. Nick now recognized this as the signal that the other man had something of import to say, so he looked over and quirked an eyebrow in a silent signal of attention.

It didn’t take long for Logan to ask, “How’s Cheryl doin’?”

“Good. She’s doing good.” Nick shifted slightly on the concrete floor before explaining, “That was a pretty positive sign that she told you guys all about her situation. A lot of abuse victims have this misplaced sense of shame, and it’s good to see her getting over that. Even though it was probably hard to hear....”

“Sure as fuck was,” Logan grunted. “That boy of hers—Roger Jr., she called him?”

“Yeah?”

“Is he a little redhead? Was on that Kennywood trip with us?”

“That’s him.”

Logan removed his baseball cap and ran a hand through his sweaty blond hair; he tossed the cap onto the workbench as he continued, “Boy seemed like a real handful.”

“He sure is.” Nick stopped to label the head bolts he had just cleaned before adding, “But in a way that’s a good thing too.”

“Don’t see how.” Logan hunched over the engine, his face a study of intense concentration while he removed the water pump. After a few minutes of work, he had it free and managed to complete his thought. “Seems like Cheryl has ’nough trouble on her hands.” He pointed at a tool set near Nick’s foot, saying, “Hand me that puller, would ya?”

Nick exchanged the requested item for the water pump as he explained, “Yeah, but ever since they left Wheeling, little Roger’s had a lot of anger festering. It’s better that it’s comin’ out, even if it’s makin’ things worse right now.” Nick watched Logan gingerly tugging at the harmonic balancer and elaborated to the back of his head, “I’m



doing some work with him, but... I don't know. I'm not really an expert on juvenile counseling."

Without looking up, Logan replied, "Looked like you were plenty good with them kids at Kennywood."

"It looked that way 'cause most of those kids are so damn grateful for a little male attention that doesn't come with fear attached that anyone...." Nick shrugged, then, realizing that the gesture was lost on Logan's back, added, "Well, any guy who cared to could do the same."

Having successfully removed the balancer, Logan straightened up and eyed Nick. By the way he was chewing at his lip, Nick sensed something was coming, and a second later it did. "Them boys... like Jesse and the rest?"

"Yeah?"

"Do they know that you're... um... gay?"

"Never thought about it," Nick replied. "Probably. Most everybody at ACC knows, I guess. I don't hide it, but I don't make an issue of it either." After taking a deep breath, Nick added, "Why do you?"

Resentment and alarm fell like a curtain over Logan's face. "Why do I *what*?"

"Why do you make such a big deal out of it? That friend of yours or whoever it was that got beat up.... Is that it? Or is it that you're worried—"

Logan snarled "I ain't worried!" as he set the balancer down on the workbench with a resounding thump and picked up a wrench.

"You sure you aren't afraid that maybe I'm attracted to you, Logan?" When the other man immediately turned back to the engine and savagely attacked the mounting plate, Nick knew he'd struck a chord. "So what if I am? Does it creep you out *that bad*? I don't leer at you, and I'm sure as hell not gonna make a pass at you. I never hit on straight guys, so you can just *fucking relax*, okay?"

Hands still in the engine, Logan twisted around to glare at Nick. "I ain't worried about none of that shit, so can we just stop talking about it?"

“Sure.” Nick went to work cleaning the water pump but couldn’t resist mumbling, “You’re the one who brought it up.”

Thirty minutes of working in strained silence in the sweltering garage brought both men to at least enough feigned camaraderie to peaceably work together at removing the oil pan and the timing chain set. When Nick nimbly detached the pan, Logan actually grunted in approval. “You’re pretty good at that for....”

Nick waited, but when Logan didn’t complete the thought, he suggested, “For a gay guy?”

“That ain’t what I was gonna say.” Logan laid the timing chain on a drop cloth before adding irritably, “I was gonna say for a guy who doesn’t do a lot of this kinda stuff.”

Not believing him for one second but reluctant to renew the hostilities, Nick retorted, “I do plenty of work on my Jeep.”

His only answer was Logan pointing at the motor and saying, “We gotta turn it over now so we can number-stamp the connectin’ rods.”

“Turn the whole engine over?”

“Yeah, of course. How else’re we gonna get at the rest?”

“Shit, I’m already sweatin’ like a pig,” Nick complained as he pulled his stained, damp T-shirt over his head and wiped his torso with it.

His own un-tucked, faded workshirt drenched with sweat, Logan snapped, “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m hot and I’m takin’ my shirt off.” Nick parked his hands at his hips as he challenged, “Got a goddamned problem with that?”

Logan looked down at the rag he was using to wipe his hands, growling, “You can’t work like that. It ain’t safe.”

Defiantly, Nick threw his shirt on the workbench while asserting, “I’ll decide what’s safe for me, okay?”

Nick watched Logan fling the grease rag to the ground as he yelled, in ascending syllables, “I’m the mechanic here, and I said it ain’t safe!”

“Don’t pull that paternalistic crap on me—”

“Paternalistic?” Logan pivoted one step towards him, snarling, “You fucking shrinks with your fancy ten-dollar words. Why can’t you stop talkin’ bullshit and do something useful instead? You guys wouldn’t know a real job if it bit you in the ass!”

“Is that right? Well for your information, I worked at Weirton Steel as a screenman in the cinderin’ plant every summer I was in college.” He advanced on Logan, who refused to yield an inch; Nick’s voice grew louder and harder as he continued, “And in case your *three months in the mill* wasn’t enough to let you know, that’s one dirty, back-breaking job. So you can shove that holier-than-thou shit right up your ass.”

Logan’s breath was now coming in harsh pants, and his hands were balled into solid fists. He gritted out, “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll get the fuck away from me. Right. Now.”

Rebellion boiling in his veins, Nick yelled, “Or what? You gonna hit me? That’s your answer to everything, ain’t it?” He pointed a finger in Logan’s face, asking, “What’re you so fucking angry about, huh? Why’re you such a timebom—” Nick’s question was cut off when Logan grabbed him by the shoulders and backed him into the T-bird’s frame; Nick’s entire body stiffened, preparing a defense against the inevitable punch.

The blow came in a different form when Logan grabbed his face and fused their lips together in a blistering kiss. Fueled by lust, adrenaline, and relief, Nick’s body slammed his conscious mind into idle and took control. He grabbed Logan by the lapels and pushed back, ramming their tangled bodies into the wall while shoving his tongue into Logan’s molten mouth.

The two men’s sweaty, grease-stained bodies clung together as the kiss deepened. Nick’s blood ran hot and fast towards his rapidly swelling cock; every screaming nerve felt the answering wildness ripping through Logan. Not even the faint ray of sunshine poking through the dirty window could wedge its way between them—not until Logan wrenched them apart, sending Nick stumbling backwards.

Logan shook himself like a wet dog and drew a shaky hand across his bruised lips. Stunned by the sudden loss of heat, Nick stood dazed, in shock and confusion as Logan stammered out, “I gotta go,” and fled the scene.

Nick finally recovered enough to look around questioningly at the cluttered shop, as though the stripped-down motor or empty car had any answers for him. He glanced at the door through which Logan had escaped, murmuring, “Well, fuck me a running.... So *that’s* his problem.”

## Chapter 7: A Hard Beginning

*A hard beginning maketh a good ending.*

—John Heywood

LOGAN woke Monday morning to a grade-A hangover; not surprising, since the only things he'd had in his mouth the previous day were coffee, a doughnut, too much whiskey—and Nick Zales's tongue.

It was that last item that had led him to stop on his way home from Acken's shop and grab a bottle of Jack Daniel's. He'd spent the rest of the day pretending to watch a baseball game and attempting to drown out any deliberations on that kiss with a steady stream of whiskey. After a few shots, it had worked—sort of. Logan had managed to work himself into a muted, drunken fury, blaming Nick, and to some extent Trudy, for unlocking the impulses he'd kept neatly caged for more than half his life. He nursed the whiskey and his anger all night before finally falling into a dead sleep and waking to the angry buzz of an alarm he rarely needed.

Logan drove to the garden center after forcing down some plain white bread and downing a pot of coffee. He knew full well that those palliative measures could do nothing for the real source of his lingering queasiness—the fear that Nick was preparing to spill his guts to Trudy Gerard. *Shit, could'a already done so, for all I know. He could'a called her up right after....*

For a second he was buoyed by a quickly-formed plan to issue an unconditional denial. After all, it was just his word against Nick's. *And who's gonna believe him? He's nothin' but a....* Even in Logan's mind, no epithet came. *He's nothin' but... but... a pretty good guy. Who you attacked.*

*Fuck, seemed to like it well enough... and it's his fault! Why'd he have to go on about bein' attracted to me and then... then go an' take his damn shirt off?* Logan pulled into the employee lot and viciously slammed the Ford into park, closing his eyes against that last reflection. But that only made matters worse when the vibrant picture of a half-naked Nick swirled into view, prompting Logan to pull out a red bandana handkerchief and mop the sweat from the back of his neck.

Logan clocked in, thankful that he was apparently too sick and weary to get hard—unlike his experience on Sunday. His mutinous cock had sprung to life as soon as Nick had started talking about finding Logan attractive. *That bastard. He knew exactly what he was doin'... sure did. Didn't he?* Logan tried to blot out the memory of that short but unmistakable pang of disappointment he'd known when Nick had declared that he would never hit on a straight guy—like Logan.

Diligently unloading a truckload of fall mums, Logan earnestly tried to halt any further recollection of Sunday's events. Easy enough for that time between Nick's surprising confession and his own loss of control. That period was pretty much lost under a red haze of fury and frustration.

But that moment when he had grabbed Zales, oh, that was as clear and persistent as the cartons of burgundy and orange flowers in his hands. Attacked over and over by that phantom sensation, Logan attempted to convince himself that he'd actually meant to throw a punch. But it was a futile effort. There was no blocking out the memory of joy and relief surging through his veins, the pure unadulterated euphoria he'd known when he'd finally given in to his tormenting, demanding, aching need.

By day's end, Logan had managed to wrench his focus onto the most important matter as he saw it: how to handle Trudy... and Nick. There was no way he was going to wait until Wednesday to find out what Trudy Gerard knew. And there was no way he was going to let one stupid fucking moment of madness get between him and reclaiming his family.

He asked for and got a later shift on Tuesday, and he went to bed only after digging out two business cards with the ACC logo on them. He laid the small white rectangles next to his rarely used cell phone;

Logan was determined to start the next day with a couple of very important calls. For once in his life, Logan Crane intended to head off trouble before it came his way.

NICK'S Monday did not prove any easier. It had started with him fixing himself a quick breakfast even though he was anything but hungry. The lack of appetite he chalked up to atypical nervousness about his upcoming one-on-one with Trudy. He forced down a few spoonfuls of cornflakes while musing that the source of anxiety was not Trudy, really, but rather one troublesome mechanic—no denying that. After leaving Acken's shop, Nick had stewed for hours about Logan without reaching a single conclusion.

On Sunday evening, he had attempted his usual cure of sweating out his troubles, but with every bounce of the basketball on the cracked blacktop of his driveway, a different question had pounded into Nick's head. *What am I gonna do about Logan? Pretend it didn't happen? Confront him about it? Is that really what's been his problem all along? Should I tell Trudy?*

That last question had left him tossing and turning Sunday night and had him dumping his barely-touched bowl of cereal down the drain on Monday morning. The bimonthly meeting with his boss was less than an hour away, and he still didn't know what—if anything—he was going to tell her about that kiss in the garage. To withhold the information from Trudy seemed unethical, yet telling her felt like a betrayal of sorts. *Betrayal? Of a guy I barely know?* It seemed seven kinds of wrong to Nick that he felt a stronger loyalty to Logan in this matter than he did to the woman who had mentored him for years, but he did.

*Maybe I don't need to tell her because... because I'm blowing this outta proportion. Maybe he's just bi.... Could be. Could be that kiss was no big deal to him.* Even as that last thought flitted through his brain, part of Nick was already rejecting it. Though he was a mass of confusion about the encounter with Logan, there was one thing of which Nick was certain. That kiss had been a seminal moment for both of them. The dark truth that followed that concession was one Nick had

been avoiding all morning. Maybe telling Trudy didn't appeal to him simply because a full divulgence would surely block any continuation of that tantalizing journey he had glimpsed on Sunday afternoon.

*Why do I care so much? Why has this guy crawled under my skin this way? Shit, in the end am I just like Cheryl, attracted to an abuser just like my mom was?* While he packed his briefcase, Nick shook his head at that notion. Six short weeks after meeting Logan, a man he had originally dismissed as an unrepentant wife-beater, Nick now recoiled from branding him as nothing more than just another abuser.

The sound of his mom shuffling down the hall provided a welcome diversion for Nick. Agnes wandered into the kitchen and pecked her son on the cheek, the dry cough that had been plaguing her for over a week still in evidence. "Good morning."

"Morning, Mom. That cold doesn't seem to be easin' up any. Maybe Polly should get you to the doctor?"

"A doctor? For a little summer cold? I don't feel poorly, an' Polly said it's nothin' to worry 'bout."

"Maybe we should let a doctor tell us that."

"Huh, that las' doctor I saw was still in diapers when Polly was nursing at Mercy General." Agnes picked up the enamel teapot and carried it to the sink while continuing, "If you think some wet-behind-the-ears kid—Nicky!"

"What?"

"Did you dump this cereal here?"

"Yeah, I'm not that hungry this mornin'."

"That's no excuse for wastin' good food. You know that drives your father crazy."

"And I care because...?"

"Don't get smart with me. Your dad works hard for the money he brings in and—"

"Mom, the only thing Dad's earnin' these days is nineteen cents an hour stamping out license plates. Anyway, I'm the one who paid for that cereal, and I can waste it if I want to."



Agnes's mouth twisted in annoyance, and she filled the kettle in irritated silence. Nick was left to wonder if his response had brought her back to reality or if she was still lost in some foggy version of life in Kittanning where she needed to worry about Sam Zales's reaction to some soggy cornflakes. A few minutes later Polly's arrival released him for the day, and he left them both clucking over the tale of wasted food.

On the drive to ACC, Nick finally decided that telling Trudy anything without first talking to Logan would be unfair. That decision lightened his mind considerably and allowed him to start the meeting with Trudy with at least an outward air of calm, aided by her starting the discussion with a subject of passionate concern for him.

"Did you manage to arrange a session with Sheila Palmer last week?"

"Yes, saw her on Friday afternoon."

"How'd that go?"

Nick pulled Sheila's file out as he answered, "Surprisingly well. She really opened up to me. It took a bit of work at first, but then the floodgates opened." Combing his fingers through his hair as he recalled the intense couple of hours with Sheila, Nick flipped through his notes and continued. "Her husband has been emotionally abusive for most of their marriage, going on eighteen years. Classic case—the man was controlling, domineering, withheld affection yet demanded sex at his whim, kept up a constant stream of criticism, you name it."

"Any physical abuse?"

"Lots of threats but no actual incidents. Though he apparently liked to give her gifts and then destroy them in front of her—often violently."

"So what was the break point for her?"

"He bought her a puppy for her birthday last May, and then whenever he was mad at her, he'd tell her he was going to kill it. Two weeks ago he went so far as to hang the little guy up by his collar because Sheila took too long doing the grocery shopping. She came home and found the poor thing crying and choking, ready to pass out."

"Oh God!"

“I know,” offered Nick, nodding in validation of Trudy’s horror. “Sheila rushed him to the vet—over Dean’s objections, of course. The dog’s okay, by the way. The very next day, as soon as her husband left for work, she packed up and moved in with her cousin. Thank God.” He closed the manila folder but tapped it on the table pensively. “Though I can’t help but wonder....”

“What?”

“Why she could do it for a puppy—get away from him, I mean—but not *for herself*?”

“I could give you one of my lectures on the psychology of abusive relationships, but I know you already understand all that.” Trudy’s smile took on a weary cast as she shifted in her chair and recrossed her legs. “I get what you’re *really* asking, but the deeper answer has to come from Sheila herself. How many sessions per week did you decide on?”

“I was thinking two, but I also want to get her in Life Skills right away, so we’ll see how much we can fit in without overwhelming her. I’m definitely starting the Finance Module with her. She never handled any of the money in her marriage. Maybe the Career Module too, if I can convince Irene to go slow.”

Without looking up from the notes she was jotting, Trudy asked, “Speaking of Irene, any word on Tish and The Carlton?”

A soft sigh of disappointment escaped from Nick’s lips before he answered, “The word was ‘no’—she didn’t get it. But Irene already has her set up with another interview—at Dish.”

Trudy looked up, her dark eyes alight with curiosity. “Where’s that?”

“It’s on the South Side. Seventeenth Street. You’ve never been? It’s this kind of... uber-hip Italian pub.”

“No, I’ve never been.” Trudy patted her neat hairdo, adding, “*Uber-hipness* not really being my style. *Any more*.”

Nick grinned freely at her quip. “Not exactly mine either—never was. But the pasta is great. Ask Larry about it, I bet he knows the place. I can see Tish fitting in there much better than at The Carlton.”

Readily accepting Nick's assessment on both points, Trudy asked, "And Norah? Is she still interested in that Medical Assistant Program?"

"We talked about it briefly last session, but she still hasn't even applied for the grant. Maybe she needs another push."

"You mean besides your finding the MA program, tracking down the grant, and getting her all of the forms?"

"Yeah. I know." Nick's sigh this time was sadder and more pensive. "I wish she was as interested in finding a better job as she is in finding a new guy."

"That order of priorities isn't too surprising, when you think about it. Underneath all the pain and heartache, she's still just a twenty-two-year-old girl who hasn't had much fun in her life. How's she doing in the automotive module? In fact, how are they all doing?"

With minimal effort, Nick was able to broach the subject with the appearance of unruffled approval. "It's going really well. Just one more week after this Thursday, and then the crew is ready for graduation." Resolutely shelving his private concerns about the instructor, Nick added cheerfully and firmly, "They've *all* come a long way."

"Super." Trudy's sunniest teasing smile appeared as she asked, "Does that mean you're willing to say I was right about our volunteer?"

After only a second of hesitation, Nick was able to answer honestly, "Logan is.... He's not the man I thought he was when you first told me about him, that's for sure."

"You don't know how glad I am to hear you say that. The progress with him has been painfully slow, but I have high hopes for healing that family. If all goes according to plan, I'm going to start couples counseling with them very soon."

Doubts of all kind—professional, ethical, and yes, personal—churned in Nick's mind. "Are you sure...."

"What? That Logan is ready? No, but I think he's very close."

"That's not what I was going to say. Are you absolutely sure that Logan getting back with his wife is... is right..." Nick hesitated, then finished in a rush, "for everyone concerned?"

“Nick, what did I tell you about your prejudice? Not every abuser is your father; some men can grow beyond their mistakes—”

Cutting off her lecture, Nick interrupted, “Don’t they need to get *at* the mistake before they can get *beyond* it?”

“Of course.” Trudy raised a speculative eyebrow at Nick. “Are you intending to give me a recap of the course I taught you in graduate school?”

“Nooo,” Nick drawled, eyes on the doodle he was scribbling on his pad as he frantically searched for a way to ask without asking.

“Don’t worry; I’ve been making real progress with Logan of late. His wife was encouraged about my last report... and frankly, so was I.” Nick glanced up to find Trudy wagging a finger at him. “I really hope some day you’ll know the thrill of putting a ‘Humpty Dumpty’ family back together. It can be immensely satisfying.”

“Okay.” With two short syllables, Nick threw all of his faith behind Trudy’s superior experience and judgment. *She’ll figure it out sooner or later. She’s too smart not to see the truth, and then she’ll deal with the... the issue.*

There was no way Nick was going to label Logan being gay as a problem; the only problem was what he was going to do with the knowledge until the eventual revelation. Having already resolved to delay any decision until he talked to the man at the heart of his dilemma, Nick felt that the few days between Monday and Thursday suddenly stretched to eternity.

LOGAN hit the off button on his cell phone with a much steadier hand than he’d started the call; Tuesday morning was starting off much better than had Monday. *Good—went easier than I could’ve hoped. And now... and now... Nick.* He diligently punched in the number from the card Nick had given him at their first meeting.

After two short rings, a familiar voice said, “Nick Zales.”

“Yeah, hey, Nick.”

“Logan?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Why’re you.... What’s up?”

“I wanted to talk to you. First off—thanks for not sayin’ anythin’ to Trudy.”

“How’d you know? You talked to her?”

“Yeah... right before I called you.”

“You’re not stopping therapy, are you? You don’t have to—”

“No, I ain’t stoppin’ anything except....” Logan took a deep breath and started over. “You know I gotta keep up with that so I can get my daughters back. That’s all that really matters to me.”

“Okay.”

It seemed like Nick wasn’t going to make this easy for him. Logan swallowed in an attempt to moisten his parched mouth and said, “That thing... what happened on Sunday? I’m real sorry about it. I don’t know why I did that.”

“You don’t? ’Cause I’ve got a pretty damn good idea why.”

“Weren’t you listenin’ to me? Whatever that was, it doesn’t matter. I gotta concentrate on doin’ what I need to do to get my girls back.”

“What if dealing with that kiss is.... It could be a big part of what you have to do.”

“No, it ain’t. It’d just get in the way of.... See, Trudy’s gonna arrange for me to talk to Krista and Meghan at her office. I’m gonna do it, Nick. *Really* talk to them about... about what I did to their mom.”

Nick’s surprise was evident even through the tiny receiver. “You mean it? Wow, that’s great.”

“Yeah, I mean it. Me and Trudy just decided. I was tellin’ her about what Cheryl told us and how I don’t want.... I don’t ever want my girls ending up like her. And... I’ve been thinkin’ that you’re right.”

“That they wanta know?”

“Yeah. I’ve been tryin’ not to see that for a long time, but....” Logan paused to take a sip of bitter black coffee, trying to wash down other recollections with it. “Anyway, the best part is, Trudy says after I do this, she’ll sign the affidavit and I can get my daughters every week, just me and them. And they can stay overnight, even.” Logan glanced around at the small apartment, mentally arranging things for the anticipated visits.

“But Logan, none of that means—”

“Yes, it does! It ain’t right for us to.... I’m not that way—not *really*, and I’m never gonna be more than a friend to you. If that ain’t okay with you, then we should end things right here and now.” Logan felt his own words slice into his very gut; he took a deep breath and dragged the blade up to finish the job. “After all, you got that... that Adam fella... and I got Linda.”

“Okay, I get it.” Nick’s tone was clipped, though it seemed to Logan there was as much sarcasm as frustration in it. “I think I can keep my hands off you—if you’ll return the favor.”

Ignoring both the implications in that statement and the leap in his heart at the chance to keep seeing Nick, Logan plowed ahead. “I sure was sorry leavin’ you in such a mess with the car.”

“So you still wanta keep at it?”

Thinking that he detected suspicion, or perhaps merely surprise, in Nick’s question, Logan confirmed, “Yeah. Don’t you?”

“Sure, I don’t think I can see that baby through alone. I guess that means I’ll see ya Sunday morning?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there, same as always. But what about Thursday? Ain’t you comin’ to the class?”

There was a pause on the line as if Nick was considering the matter. “Nah, I’m kinda jammed up at work, and I don’t think you guys need a babysitter anymore. I was gonna come to talk to you, but... but we just did that, right?” Logan was silent as he tried unsuccessfully to warp his disappointment into relief, causing Nick to ask, “You still there?”

“Yeah, sorry, I was thinkin’ that I better get started trackin’ down those parts for the T-bird. That sounds fine. See ya Sunday.”

“Sure thing. Good luck with your daughters, Logan. You’re doin’ the right thing; you won’t regret it.”

Logan hoped Nick was right. He hoped they both were.

AFTER speaking to Linda and the visitation mediator, Trudy had delayed Logan’s usual session until late Friday afternoon, when she could get Krista and Meghan to her office. Logan walked into the waiting room to the unusual sight of Dr. Gerard sitting on the small couch; she motioned for him to join her. When he did, Trudy started speaking in an undertone, saying, “I’m going to leave you alone with your daughters, Logan, but if you need me for anything, I’ll be right out here.”

Logan stared at his knees while he wiped his damp palms on them. He let out a shaky breath and looked up at Trudy to ask, “Do they know why they’re here?”

“I told them on the way that you wanted to talk to them—alone—about the incident with their mother.”

“How’d they take it?”

“Hard for me to say, but if I had to put a name to it, I guess I’d say they’re in a ‘wait and see’ mode.”

That sure sounded like his girls to Logan. He glanced at the closed door that loomed so large right then, feeling as if his entire future hinged on what happened once he walked through it. “Any idea how I should do this?”

“Let them ask the questions. Answer them fully, but don’t give them more than they want. Understand?” Logan nodded and she patted his arm, asking, “Ready?”

Though he wondered how the hell he could ever really be ready for this moment, Logan announced, “Yeah, sure.” Without further comment, he walked into Trudy’s cramped office.

Each girl was sitting in one of the guest chairs, looking nervous and smaller than usual. Logan leaned down to hug first Krista and then Meghan and accept their subdued greetings; he then tried to decide

where he was going to sit. It didn't seem appropriate to sit behind Trudy's desk, but there was no other chair in the room. He quickly pulled the chair out and wheeled it near them. "Why don't you scoot over here so we can all see one another." As they quickly complied, he said, "That's it."

Logan had hoped that Meghan, at least, would have some questions to ask about Trudy or the office, but his daughters were resolutely silent, and he realized there was nothing to do but plunge in. "I know Dr. Gerard told you what you're doin' here... right?"

A soft "yes" barely escaped from both mouths.

Talking to his own flesh and blood suddenly seemed harder than anything he'd ever done before—including burying his parents. Luckily Logan remembered Trudy's advice and started, "I know you girls probably've had a lotta questions you been wantin' to ask about why... why I hurt your mom like I did. And I'm finally gonna let you ask 'em—but first I got somethin' I need to say."

He looked into each set of bright eyes, searching for the courage to do this, but the push finally came from the memory of Cheryl saying, "*I grew up thinkin'... thinkin' that's just the way it is.*"

His voice was stronger than he would have expected when he said, "What I need you to understand is, I had no right to do that, and it was nobody's fault but my own. Your mom didn't cause it and neither did... anyone else. What I mean is, it sure wasn't anything you girls ever did." He tried to ignore the tears that were welling in both girls' eyes, but Logan choked up slightly as he continued, "You gotta know, I didn't mean to hurt her, and I'm awful sorry about it, but... but that doesn't excuse it."

He put a hand on the arm of each girl's chair as he added firmly. "And no one ever has the right to do anythin' like that to you. In fact... well, I'd kill any guy who tried—with my own bare hands." It occurred to Logan that Trudy would probably object to that statement, since she would never condone any threat of violence, but it was God's own truth and it felt right to him to say it.

"Now you go ahead and ask me what you want." Neither girl spoke up but simply glanced timidly at her sister. "Come on, Krista, I know there's things you been wantin' to ask. It's all right."



On another day, Logan could have laughed at the sight of Krista staring at the carpet in unintentional mimicry of her father. Finally she looked up at him, asking, “You said you didn’t mean to hurt—to do that... so what happened?”

“I guess... I had a whole lotta things buildin’ up that I wasn’t dealin’ with like I should’ve. And it all came bustin’ out at the wrong time... and at the wrong person.”

“You didn’t wanta move from Elco, did you?” Meghan asked, joining the conversation.

“No, I didn’t; that was part of it.”

Krista cocked her head at her dad, inquiring in a soft voice, “What was the rest?”

“Oh...” Since he couldn’t deal with it right then—if ever—Logan ignored the picture of Nick Zales that flashed through his mind. “Money, work, and stuff like that.”

Leaning forward with genuine concern, Krista asked, “Is it gettin’ better? Is that what Dr. Gerard is helpin’ you with?”

“Yeah, she is. And I’m tryin’ a take things head on now, instead’a lettin’ ’em eat at me like I used to.”

“That’s good, Dad,” Meghan said.

Breathing a slight sigh of relief, Logan answered, “Sure is.”

“So....” Krista was obviously screwing up her courage, and Logan nodded encouragingly. She glanced at Meghan, leaving Logan to surmise that this question was for both of them. “You’ll never do anything like that again?”

The realization that this fear had been haunting his daughters was a sorrow Logan suddenly felt he might carry to his grave. Nothing but unqualified honesty would do here. “I wish I could say no right out, honey—I really do.” Knowing some demons dogged him still, Logan offered, “I can tell you this. I’m gonna do whatever it takes to make sure I won’t. And I won’t be movin’ back home until I do.”

Both girls sat in silent contemplation while Logan looked for some sign that his answer had been sufficient reassurance. Instead Krista asked, “Does Mom know all of this?”

Logan let it go, slowly grasping that while a family could be shattered in an instant, healing couldn't be accomplished in one short session of truth-telling. "She knows some... and she'll know more when she starts seein' Dr. Gerard with me."

In a suddenly bright, high-pitched tone, Meghan said, "When will that be?"

"Real soon."

"Are we—" Krista stopped short and swallowed down the rest of her question.

Logan was determined that no member of the Crane family was going to have to leave things unsaid anymore, so he prodded, "Go 'head. What were you gonna say?"

"Are we allowed to tell Mom what we talked about here?"

The most comfortable answer for him would have been "no," but Logan felt that wouldn't be fair to his daughters, so he answered, "If you feel you need to do that, then... then it's okay by me. I want you to do whatever is gonna make all of this easier for you. Understand?"

"Yes," Krista and Meghan chorused.

"Anything else?"

There were quite few more questions; some about how his therapy was helping him but mainly centered on the new visitation rules and when their dad would be ready to move back home. He answered each one as best he could, and over twenty minutes later, Logan ushered his girls out into the waiting room, where Trudy was making notes in report folders.

She rose gracefully to her feet, asking, "Ready to go home?" When both girls nodded, Trudy fished her keys out of her bag and looked at Logan to add, "We'll debrief next week, Logan, but I'll have the affidavit in the mediator's office first thing Monday morning, okay?"

"Sure. Thanks." Logan watched them leave, enjoying the relief and happiness washing through him but plagued by the feeling that he had just fixed a flat but hadn't started work on the engine.

ON THE other side of town, Nick was trying to keep his mind from straying to Logan and the monumental talk he was having with his daughters. His distraction techniques worked about as well as his attempts earlier in the week to avoid brooding about Logan—which was to say, not at all. Every time Logan intruded on his thoughts, Nick doggedly told himself that he was glad the totality of their relationship was destined to be nothing more than one heady, ill-conceived kiss. *I'm glad, damn it, glad! The last thing I need is some stupid fascination with an abusive male.*

When his self-lectures proved fruitless, though, Nick got even sterner. *Goddamnit, Zales, you're nothing but a fucking statistic. Do you need to go back and read some of your old textbooks? Do you even listen to yourself when you're counseling Cheryl?* And that was another thing, Nick's conscience insisted: he should be grateful his afternoon session was with Cheryl—a sobering reminder of the possible fate he'd just narrowly escaped.

When Trudy had popped her head into his office to tell him she would be spending the afternoon at her downtown office, Nick had tamped down his curiosity about her meeting with the Crane family. He carefully displayed only the most cursory interest and had offered nothing beyond, “Okay, have a good weekend.”

Nick spent the next forty minutes writing up notes on Marta Cabrera's orientation sessions, stubbornly persistent in his task though he was managing to eke out only one word every three minutes. When Cheryl's soft knock on the door interrupted his sluggish progress, he was finally actually truly glad about something that day. “Hey, Cheryl, come on in. How are you?”

“Good.” She flopped into one of the guest chairs, adding, “Tired, but good.”

“Long day in the child care center?”

“Oh, yeah. Eight hours in that place can sometimes feel more like sixteen.”

“I can always get you another assignment if it's getting to be too much.”

“No, I really like it. It’s just towards the end of the day I look forward to just havin’ two to deal with.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Before I forget,” she said, digging in her pocket, “here’s the keys to the shop.”

She set the key ring on his desk, and Nick was compelled to ask, “How’d it go yesterday? What did you learn?”

“Tune-ups.”

“Great, that’s something you’ll be doing a lot when you get a car.” Stifling the urge to ask more questions about the module—all centered on the instructor—Nick flipped open Cheryl’s file and clicked his pen into the ready position. “Speaking of which, we need to start working on your transition plan.”

“Transition? To what?”

“To getting you out of here.”

Cheryl slid her palms against her denim-clad thighs, asking, “Is there a limit? I mean—do I have to be outta here by a certain date?”

“No, there’s no concrete deadline,” Nick assured her, refraining from explaining about all the paperwork he’d need to file if her stay extended past four months. “But I’m sure you want to be settled somewhere more permanent.” When Cheryl simply nodded, Nick asked, “Any idea where? You said you don’t want to go back to Wheeling....”

“Oh, no—I’m sure I’m the talk of the town there. ’Sides, that’s where... where Roger’s still living.”

“You’ve got a restraining order in place, and he seems ready to comply.”

“I know, but I just don’t wanta have to worry ’bout running into him *every day*—at the grocery store or the Big Lots or the movies—”

“I understand. Are you interested in staying in Pittsburgh?”

“Not really. My Great Aunt Catherine said I could come stay with her; she lives in Steubenville. Not far enough, but at least it ain’t

Wheeling. And she never did care for my dad... or Roger. Said if he ever bothers me again she'd take a butcher knife to *him*."

"I think I like your Aunt Catherine," Nick laughed as he made a note in Cheryl's file. "We'll consider Steubenville to be the goal, then. And how are the sessions with Irene? I know she thinks you could find work in a daycare center; is that plan still a go?"

Nick watched Cheryl chew the inside of her cheek for a minute before she answered, "I guess...."

"It doesn't have to be a lifelong career, just something to tide you over. Is there something else that would you *like* to do? Something we could start working towards?"

"I don't know...."

Nick decided to pull out an old ploy that often served to uncover buried dreams. "What did you want to be back when you were in high school?"

"Oh... I mainly just wanted to get married."

"Really?" He showed more surprise than he really felt with that question, knowing all too well that children from abusive homes often dreamt only of escape. Digging a little deeper, he asked, "You never wanted to be a fashion model or travel the world or sing in a band—"

"Nothin' like that," Cheryl cut in. "I did want to—see, before I started goin' out with Roger, I was datin' this guy Leroy, and he was gonna be a teacher. And back then I thought I did, too. We used to joke about how he wanted to teach high school and I wanted to teach first grade or maybe even kindergarten, so I'd start 'em out right and he'd get all the benefit."

"A teacher, huh? That's a great career, one I considered myself at one time. And you are good with children; that's something you could definitely still pursue. What do you think?" When Cheryl simply squirmed in response, Nick asked, "What happened there? How did you go from wanting to teach to just wanting to get married?"

Cheryl's frown deepened, and her brow furrowed. "I guess it was 'cause... 'cause of Roger. He sure didn't like the idea of me goin' off to college."

“I’ll bet. What happened to Leroy?”

“I don’t know. I lost track of him when we broke up.”

“And what caused that?”

“I’m an idiot, that’s what caused that. I broke up with a nice guy who treated me better’an I—who treated me real good, so I could go out with a ‘cool guy’ who played football and treated me like dirt. Even back then.”

Seeing the tears well up in Cheryl’s eyes, Nick nudged his handy box of tissues towards her, saying, “You’re not an idiot. It’s just.... It happens to a lot of women who grow up with abusive dads.”

Cheryl wiped her eyes in a futile effort to stem the tide as she wailed, “I know you said that... but *why*?”

*Good question.* “The conventional wisdom is that we—that the child is trying to repeat the dysfunctional relationship, but looking for a better outcome. Trying to fix the original relationship with this new person, in other words.”

A derisive snort erupted from Cheryl. “Yeah, right, *great idea.*”

Figuring they’d both had enough of that topic, Nick steered the conversation back to Cheryl’s plans. “You don’t *have* to let the past dictate the future. You could still be a teacher, you know. If you do go live with your aunt, Steuby U. is right there. It’s a great school, turns out a lot of teachers.”

“I know... but... I’m too old for—”

“Cheryl, you’re twenty-five. That’s hardly too old.”

After a second of consideration, Cheryl shook her head dismissively. “It’s not just my age, you know. How ’bout money? Where’m I gonna get tuition money?”

“There are grants we can look into, and maybe scholarships, too.”

“Scholarships? You gotta be a genius to get one of them.”

“Not hardly—that’s how I went to college. Believe me, I was no genius.”

Cheryl cocked her head curiously, asking, “Was it a sports scholarship?”

Nick laughed, “No, as much as I love playing basketball, Carnegie-Mellon didn’t recruit me for that. It was a special scholarship for kids who—” *Who had jailbird dads.* “Who were poor,” Nick nimbly inserted, while shrugging off the white lie with the thought, *Well, that’s true for most kids with a parent in prison.*

A genuine smile broke across Cheryl’s face. “Okay, poor, I got that covered!”

“Great.” Nick, seeing her emergent spirit, couldn’t help but smile back. “Are you saying you want to look into it?”

“Yeah, let’s do that.”

## Chapter 8: To Hang a Question Mark

*In all affairs it's a healthy thing now and then to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted.*

—Bertrand Russell

SATURDAY, when Nick's mom hadn't appeared by ten in the morning, he went up to check on her. After knocking softly and getting a feeble "Come in," Nick opened the door to find his mother still in bed. "You okay, Mom?"

She rolled to face him, saying, "Just tired, son."

"What's wrong? Didn't you sleep well?"

Plucking fretfully at her blanket, Agnes answered, "Not really. These hospitals are so noisy at night."

"Mom." Nick shook his head at her. "You're not in the hospital."

With a listless shrug, she amended, "Nursing home or whatever you call this place, then."

Internally, Nick sighed, realizing his mom was lost in a nearly twenty-year-old memory, thinking herself back at the South Fayette Nursing Center. Since becoming his mom's primary caregiver, Nick had always strongly insisted on reorienting her and wrenching her back to reality as much as possible, even though his efforts had never seemed to have much effect beyond upsetting her. Today he had neither the heart nor the energy, so he decided to simply play along. "Well, it's quiet now. How 'bout I bring you up some tea and toast, and then you could try to catch a nap. How does that sound?"

"Why don't you let one of those lazy nurses do it?"

"They're all busy. I'll do it."



Ten minutes later, Nick sat in the chair between the window and the bed, watching Agnes idly munching her toast and sipping the tea; he noticed that she really did look more worn out than usual. “I think we should get you to the doctor for a check-up.”

“Why? So he can tell me that bonk on the head left me crazy? I don’t need to hear that again.”

“You’re not crazy, Mom, you’re just—”

“Confused, Nicky. I’m so confused.” She wearily pushed the graying strands of hair back from her face and sipped more tea before turning watery hazel eyes on him, saying, “I wish I could see your father. Do you think they’ll let him visit me?”

The last thing Nick wanted was to relive that awful period when his mom finally woke from her coma and kept asking for the bastard who was the cause of all her ills. “Mom, don’t—”

“He’s still my husband.” A bony hand reached out and clutched Nick’s arm as Agnes stubbornly continued, “And he’s still your father.”

“The hell he is!”

Agnes shook her head, insisting, “You think you can just wish him away like that? Well, you can’t. Hetty said he’s been askin’ to see you. You should go.”

“You think I’m going up to Fayette County *for him?*” Nick felt himself slipping into the fantasy with Agnes and fought the regression to his agonizing twelfth summer—but the pull was too strong. “No way, let him rot in prison. It’s where he belongs.”

“Son, he’s not all bad.”

“How can you say that? He’s the one who did this to you.” Nick’s tone grew louder as his unbearable memories grew stronger. “Over a stupid hammer! Just ’cause I left it out in the rain.”

“It’s not all his fault. I left and—”

Nick jumped to his feet and paced beside the bed, ranting, “Not until he was in prison, you didn’t! No matter how bad it got, you stayed and stayed. Until the son of a bitch tried to cave your skull in, and you wound up here—” Nick caught himself, suddenly realizing that he sounded every bit as crazy as Agnes. “You wound up like this,” he

added more calmly as he shook off the delusion and dropped back into the rocking chair.

Watching his mom's hands shake as she placed the empty cup on the bedside table, Nick felt a sharp stab of remorse. He reached over and settled the covers back around her and then relaxed back into the squeaking rocking chair. Both sat in private contemplation for a few minutes. Nick's mind strayed to Logan, and he spent the time toting up all the ways Logan wasn't really, had never been, couldn't be, anything like Sam Zales.

Softly, and almost against his will, Nick asked, "What did you ever see in him, Mom?"

"Oh, Nick," Agnes breathed, abruptly shedding her lethargy. Her eyes sparkled as she explained, "He was like no other boy I'd ever met. He had so many dreams and plans... about startin' his own contractor business and makin' somethin' of himself." She turned a wistful smile on him, adding, "And he could charm a bird right out of the sky."

It was impossible for Nick to reconcile Agnes's description of Sam Zales as a charming, ambitious man with the ill-tempered, erratically employed handyman Nick remembered.

*At least he doesn't sound anything like Logan.* The more cynical part of his mind briefly took the helm, asking, *You sure about that, Zales?*

Nick noticed that Agnes had dropped off to sleep and quietly left the room, his mind still on Logan—and his father. As he padded down the staircase, an impulse wholly foreign to Nick swept over him, a need to visit Sam Zales at last and see for himself. The idea was discarded as quickly as a flaming ember, but the smoke from it lingered, swirling around him all day.

LATER, early in the evening, Logan was heading home from work when his cell phone rang. Never one to answer the blasted thing when driving, he let it ring, figuring he'd check the message when he got home. As he sat idling at a light, it did occur to him that the call might have been from Nick. *He has my number now, could've been him.*

*Maybe he's callin' it off for tomorrow... or maybe he just wanted to ask something about the car....* Unable to resist, Logan pulled the phone out of his pocket and flipped it open to check the number.

What he found on the face of the phone sent a shock wave through his body. He hadn't seen that number in a long time. It was Linda's. The surprise bled away gradually, leaving only dread in its place. He semi-deliberately stretched out his trip to the grocery store, all the while feeling the phone like a lead weight in his pocket.

As he loaded his two bags—containing little more than cold cuts, bread, chips, coffee, and two six-packs of Iron City—into the truck bed, he considered simply pretending he'd never noticed the message. The thought that Linda had some news about his daughters squelched that idea, and twenty minutes later, after stowing away his groceries and popping open a beer, he settled onto his worn loveseat and returned the call without bothering to listen to her message.

She picked up on the third ring and answered, "Hello, Logan."

He was momentarily stunned speechless until he remembered that, like him, she could recognize her spouse's number—after all, she had bought the damn phone for him as a Christmas present three years past. Finally he croaked out, "Hey, Linda." The line crackled with static before he added, "I'm returnin' your call."

"Yeah, thanks." More static, and then she asked, "How are you?"

"I'm good. The girls okay?" Belatedly, he added, "And you, hope you're doin' okay."

"Yeah, we're all fine. Krista and Meghan, they told me 'bout... about what you said yesterday."

"Uh, good. I said they could."

"I'm glad you did that; it was good for them to hear." Irritation honed an edge to her voice as she continued, "And it was nice *they* finally got a apology."

Wearily, Logan answered, "I said I was sorry, Linda. In court."

"You told the judge, not me," Linda shot back. Logan was still searching for a response when Linda went on in a more conciliatory

tone. “I guess that’s one of the things we’ll talk about in therapy. That Dr. Gerard you been seeing wants to start that next month.”

“Yeah, I know,” Logan sighed, though the September timeframe was news to him. “Is that why you’re callin’, to tell me that you’re gonna do the counseling?”

“Yeah... but I also wanted to tell you.... The girls told me about what you said, about not wanting to leave Elco. And I thought you should know, I ain’t goin’ back.”

“I’m not so keen on the idea, myself. I just wish we hadn’t... well, you know.”

“No, I don’t know. You never told me. Anything. But that ain’t all of what I meant; it’s not just Elco I’m not goin’ back to.”

Rolling his eyes as he slurped his beer, Logan finally said, “Well, ya lost me now.”

“I’m not goin’ back to the way things were in Elco—ever. I’m not goin’ back to you hiding out in some garage twelve hours a day, seven days a week—”

“Is that what you call me tryin’ to make a livin’?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know what I’m talking about. I’m not stupid. I figured out a long time ago that you were usually happier in your shop than you were at home. Just like I figured out that you’re still blamin’ me for ruinin’ your life.”

“I never blamed—”

“The hell you didn’t,” Linda interrupted firmly. “You blamed me for gettin’ pregnant when you was the one didn’t wanta wear rubbers.”

“Just like your big sister put all the blame *on me!*” Logan suddenly wondered if their counseling sessions were going to consist of re-fighting every disagreement of the past twelve years. Suspiciously, he asked, “Why the hell are we even talkin’ about this now? Where’s all this comin’ from?”

“I’ve been in therapy, too, you know. If we get back together, it’s gotta be different this time, Logan. You gotta start tellin’ me what’s going on inside your head so I don’t have to guess all the time. I don’t wanta go back to bein’ two strangers who live in the same house.”

“Just ’cause I wasn’t runnin’ off at the mouth all the time doesn’t mean I treated you like a stranger.”

“Say what you want, but you gotta know before we even start counseling that I’m aimin’ for something different this time.”

“Okay.” Logan was too busy dealing with warring emotions to develop any better response. He saw some hope that their joint sessions wouldn’t be dominated by recrimination, but he was unnerved by Linda’s new demands.

Hesitancy and hope bloomed in her voice as Linda asked, “Does that mean... you want that too?”

Cornered by her directness, he felt compelled to say, “Yeah... I guess I do.”

Later, as he chewed their conversation over, Logan was surprised by the thought that maybe he hadn’t been simply fobbing her off. Maybe he, too, wanted a change in their status quo. The unacknowledged truth Logan could barely face was that, as ever, he and Linda wanted very different things.

LOGAN looked around for Nick’s Jeep as he pulled onto Arlington Avenue that Sunday, knowing that they both always parked on the street to leave the entire shop floor open for working on the Thunderbird. He was slightly irked that the black vehicle was not in evidence, since it was already after nine. As he loped up the steps, Logan set aside any disappointment, figuring the time could be put to good use grabbing a smoke and settling the nerves he was trying hard to ignore. When he got to the landing and found one bay door wide open, Logan stopped short in mild surprise. *Must’a missed his Jeep.*

Upon entering the garage he was greeted not by Nick Zales but by a rotund stranger who had his feet propped up on the corner desk and his face hidden behind the Sunday *Post-Gazette*. Logan cleared his throat loudly in an attempt to get the oblivious man’s attention. It must have worked, since the paper was slowly lowered to reveal a round, creased face topped by a shock of white hair.

“Hey there. You must be Crane.” The man rose unhurriedly to his feet and offered his hand, explaining, “I’m Dave Acken.”

Logan shook his hand, mumbling, “Good to finally meet you.” He gestured at the shop, wincing internally at the mess they’d left in the main bay but managing to say sincerely, “Nice place ya got here.”

Dave seemed unfazed by the disarray. “Thanks. Nothin’ fancy, but suited me for thirty years.” The white hair grazed his bushy and equally white eyebrows when he shook his head, musing, “Thirty years... don’t seem possible.” A chubby hand brushed the hair back as he exclaimed, “Oh hell, what’s wrong with me? You must be wonderin’ what I’m doin’ here.”

“Yeah,” admitted Logan, glad to be relieved of the burden of asking outright.

“Nick called and asked if I’d shoot over and let you in. He’s runnin’ late—some trouble with his mom.”

“Oh, that’s a damn shame.” Logan shuffled his feet nervously while wondering if that meant Nick had headed home to... Kittanning, wasn’t it? “Wish he’d called me.”

“He would’ve, but he doesn’t have your number.”

“He should. I called him just a few days ago,” Logan answered, feeling ever so slightly defensive for reasons he couldn’t understand.

“I think he said he left it at work or somethin’. Well, no big deal. I didn’t mind. Gave me a chance to see what you’re doin’ with the T-Bird.” Dave scratched his stubbled chin while gazing intently at the car and motor. “Looks like you boys got a good start there. I’m itchin’ to jump in and help, but my doctor’d have my hide, I guess.”

Logan was stunned that the man was neither annoyed nor surprised at the chaotic scene on his shop floor. As Dave went on to leisurely and cheerfully describe several rebuilds he’d done over the years, it occurred to Logan that, from the looks of the desk alone, Dave Acken was a man who could live with a mess.

When Nick finally showed up at ten a.m., Dave’s monologue was still going strong as he scrutinized Logan’s technique for removing the cylinder bore ridge. Logan turned and watched the two men shake hands, noting that Nick was wearing a loose, raggedy pair of chinos

topped by a faded, untucked, blue oxford. He swore there was some sort of message in Nick's choice of attire, but he wasn't going to examine the matter too closely.

Nick rolled up the sleeves slightly while saying, "Sorry I'm late. What can I do?"

"Plenty," Logan answered with mock ease. "But how's your mom?"

"She's okay. She's got this cold that's wearin' her down, and I just had to make sure she drank plenty of juice and got some protein..." Nick trailed off, apparently reluctant to give more detail. Logan had a few follow-up questions he would have liked to ask, but Dave's presence made him skittish.

And Acken showed no inclination to leave. He kept up a running commentary while Nick and Logan rolled the engine over again to remove the pistons and rods and finally the crankshaft. When Logan started his examination of that last part, carefully searching for any deep grooves or excessive wear, Dave finally took off, saying that he didn't want to miss out on Sunday lunch at The Liberty Grill.

Nick walked him to the shop door and waved Dave off with the exhortation, "Say hi to Larry for me."

Logan's stomach performed somersaults as Nick strolled over and leaned casually against the workbench. There was a streak of grease on Nick's cheek, and Logan dug his fingers into the engine part he was holding to resist the temptation to reach over and wipe it off. Nick nodded at him, asking, "How bad is it?"

"Huh?" Logan gulped, fearing his thoughts were that transparent.

"The crankshaft—can we get away without regrinding it?"

"Oh, yeah... looks like I can just polish it up some and cross drill it, and it'll be better than new."

Nick's smile looked like it had cost him some effort, but he said cheerfully, "Good news."

Noting the strain, Logan asked, "You worried 'bout your mom?"

"Always." A shrug punctuated the response before Nick added, "She has dementia, so a cold is the least of her problems."

“Geez, Nick. That’s rough.”

“Yeah, it is.”

Ready to examine the condition of the pistons, they needed Dave’s micrometer set. While Logan was rooting through the tool chest, Nick said, “Speaking of rough and family members, how’d it go with your daughters yesterday?”

Emerging with his prize, Logan opened the micrometer case, saying, “It went real good.” He was tempted to leave it at that but couldn’t resist the chance to unburden himself on a sore point. He put the tool kit down gently and turned to face Nick. “There was this.... Krista did ask me if I was ever gonna do anything like that again.”

Nick shrugged, apparently unfazed by Logan’s revelation. “That’s a fairly common fear. It’s good she was able to articul—to tell you that right out.” He straightened and trained a suddenly intent gaze on Logan. “What did you say?”

“I said I was gonna do my damnedest to make sure nothin’ like that ever happened again.” Logan started his examination of the pistons but kept one eye on Nick, measuring his reaction as minutely as the condition of the pistons.

“Good, but she’s gonna need to hear that again. They *both* will probably need to hear that a few times.” Nick picked up one of the micrometers and examined it idly. “That’s the worst part, you know.”

Logan studied Nick’s unusually blank face, asking, “What do ya mean?”

Eyes still on the delicate instrument, Nick answered, “The waiting and wondering. ‘When’s it gonna start again? Tomorrow? Next week?’ Even when nothing’s happening, there’s always this fear....” He shook his head, finishing, “You can never relax.”

“That’s what it was like for you, huh?”

“Yep.” Nick put the micrometer down and leaned back against the bench, his eyes directed towards the window but unfocused. “The worst times were when he was between jobs. See, he was a contractor. Well, he *claimed* to be a contractor, but he really just picked up odd jobs, painting, putting up sheds—stuff like that. Anyway, when he was outta work for a couple of weeks, it was inevitable....” Suddenly he



turned to Logan, saying, “I don’t know why I’m telling you all this... it’s not like you’re....”

Logan gave him a few seconds, but when there was no continuation, he demanded, “What?”

Nick’s voice got more formal as he answered coolly, “What I mean is, your girls will have this fear, and you’re going to have to deal with it. Especially when....” The dark eyes slid sadly away from Logan’s face as he finished, “When you get back with your wife.”

Anything but grateful for that reminder, Logan managed to choke out, “Yeah, I understand. Thanks for the advice; I’ll remember that.” He resumed silently examining the pistons but felt the air between them fairly crackle with tension. Logan wondered if Nick joined him in cursing fate or if he had a more human target for his frustration.

Nick broke into his reverie, drumming his fingers on the workbench, asking, “What can I do while you’re doin’ that?”

Glad to put some distance between them, Logan dredged up his best instructor demeanor, saying, “You can look the block over real good, see if there’s any wear, scratches, or cracks. Then we can put the lifters in that box with dividers. That’ll be enough for today.”

“Sounds good.” Nick worked in silence for a few minutes, then affirmed that the block was in reasonably good shape. He moved on to the second task and asked over his shoulder, “How was class on Thursday? Everybody ready for graduation?”

“It was good. I’d say they’re ready.” Logan withheld the news that he’d missed Nick’s presence keenly—didn’t seem like something one *friend* said to another. “It’s weird though. I think I’m actually gonna miss doin’ it.”

The only immediate response was the soft thud of metal against cardboard, but then—Reluctantly? Tentatively? Logan wasn’t sure which—Nick offered, “You don’t have to. If you’re willing, I could set up more modules. I have plenty of other clients who need to learn about cars.”

Trying to hide his eagerness, Logan strolled to Nick’s side, casually answering, “Okay.”

“Really?” Nick directed a wide smile—the first of the morning—up at him. “You’re willin’ to be a permanent volunteer?”

“Sure.” Logan crouched down to join Nick in his task. “Why not?” The idea of having this lasting connection with Nick—one that would stretch out past finishing the T-bird—gratified Logan in a manner he was unwilling to scrutinize directly.

Together they quickly polished off the chore of numbering the lifters and stowing them in the box. As they were finishing up, Nick gave him a sidelong glance and said, “Look, I’m not trying to recruit you or anything—I already have my ‘Queer Scout’ merit badge—but there’s somethin’ I gotta ask.”

Logan ran his tongue over his suddenly dry lips. “Okay.”

Sitting back on his heels, Nick said, “That was a joke, you know? The ‘Queer Scout’ thing. It’s okay to laugh.”

In an effort to don a casual front, Logan jibed back, “Maybe it just wasn’t funny, Zales.” He carried the box over to the workbench, saying, “What did you wanta ask?”

“That guy you told me about, the one that got beat up in Elco. Was that you?”

Almost dropping the box in shock, Logan shoved it onto the bench and whipped around. “What? *Hell* no!”

Nick slowly rose to his feet to face Logan. Raising a hand in a placating manner, he said, “Okay, sorry, I didn’t mean to.... I just wondered, is all.”

Logan glared at Nick for a long second, his mind a whirl of fury, confusion, and memories. Finally, he grunted, “It was this guy, Jerry Sievers. Was a senior when I was a freshman in high school.”

“So what happened?” Nick prodded, walking over to join Logan at the workbench.

“He hired me to restore this MG Midget he’d gotten his hands on. His plan was to drive it ’cross the country after graduation.”

“And he was gay?”

Shaking his head as he stared at the grease-stained concrete, Logan murmured, “I don’t know.” He cleared his throat and continued

in a stronger voice, “Some folks thought he was ’cause he was... different.”

“Effeminate?” Nick guessed caustically.

Logan looked at Nick, taking in the grim set of his face. “No, not at all. But he wore weird stuff like... leather pants, and striped socks, weird shirts that pulled over instead of buttonin’ up. And he quoted poetry. All the girls was wild about him, but he never really seemed to have a girlfriend. Stuff like that.”

Nick snorted, “He could’ve been gay... or he just could’ve liked thinkin’ for himself. I guess they’re equally bad in Elco. What happened to him?”

“One day after school, I went to work on the car and found the garage door wide open and Jerry bleedin’ on the floor. Some guys had worked him over good.” Logan paused to swallow down eighteen-year-old sorrow before he continued. “They used one of my wrenches, even. He was laid up for months. Had to miss graduation and everything. His family moved away that summer after his dad sold the MG to some junkyard. We never even got to finish it.”

“Did they get the guys who done it?”

That was hitting too close to home. “Nope,” Logan answered tersely, turning to retrieve the tools they’d left on the floor. “We done here?” He peered over at Nick and was discomfited to be met with a puzzled frown.

Fortunately Nick broke his inspection after a second, saying, “Yeah, I better get home.”

As they loaded the T-bird parts into the Ford’s spacious truck bed, Logan felt the work slowed by Nick’s efforts to avoid so much as their sleeves brushing. Their awkward interaction had Logan weighing the pros and cons of the morning. “That was good, right?” he asked Nick. “Good morning’s work, I mean.”

Nick tilted his head and jiggled his keys before answering, “Yeah... sure. And we even managed to—um, yeah, to get things ready for the machine shop.” Briskly, he asked, “How long do ya think it’ll take to get things rebuilt and re-bored?”

“It’ll take ’em a few weeks at least to get ever’thing done.”

“So, does that mean there’s nothin’ to do next Sunday?”

“No,” Logan rushed to assure him, certain he had detected some disappointment in his companion. “We’ll start getting some back before then. I’ll ask ’em to stage it.”

“Okay, see ya next week.” Nick gave him that forced smile again and then turned towards the Jeep. The smile seemed more genuine when he looked back to wave, adding, “And Thursday. See you then.”

It hadn’t escaped Logan’s notice that the wave had replaced their usual handshake. He was left to wonder if the lack of contact was due to residual resentment or because Nick didn’t trust that they could share a simple handshake without losing control. Either way, it seemed Nick was determined to keep up his end of the bargain. Logan was glad... and he kept reminding himself of that fact all the way home.

## Chapter 9: Start It Like a Car

*They say love conquers all, You can't start it like a car*

*You can't stop it with a gun.*

—Warren Zevon (“Searching For A Heart”)

WEDNESDAY evening, Logan walked into the small waiting room adjoining Trudy’s downtown office, feeling calmer than he had last Friday, though not as relieved as he would have expected. Still bothered by restless nights, awakened several times each night by dreams he couldn’t quite remember, Logan had almost been tempted to skip the session. However, the hope that Trudy would have news about his enhanced visitation rights kept him from canceling.

His effort was rewarded when Trudy started the hour by saying, “I did get the affidavit to the mediator’s office on Monday; you should be hearing from him soon. I would guess you can start overnight visits with your daughters as early as next weekend.”

Some of the knots in his neck and shoulders loosened as Logan answered, “Good. That’s real good news.”

“We haven’t had a chance to talk about the discussion you had with them. How did you feel about it?”

“I felt... I guess it was good.”

“You don’t sound so sure.”

“Yeah, I think I went in expectin’ too much.”

“How so?”

“I was thinkin’ that I would do that and it would....” Logan shrugged and wished for his cigarettes before finally finishing, “...would be the end of it.” He rubbed his fingers across his bottom lip. “But it was more like the start, it seems.”

Trudy raised her eyebrows and smiled encouragingly, asking, “The start of what?”

“Of them really... dealin’ with it.”

“Is that true for you, too?”

“Me?” Logan glared at her across the desk. “I’ve been dealin’ with it all along.”

“Have you?”

Cursing his counselor’s evasive, infuriating ways, Logan rubbed the back of his neck, retorting, “Yes. But I guess you’re tellin’ me you don’t think so.”

“No, I’m not telling you anything. I’m looking for a more thoughtful answer from you. Now, what was it that clued you in about Krista and Meghan?”

“It wasn’t anythin’ in particular...” Logan broke contact with Trudy’s intent gaze and shifted his line of sight to the window. “I could see it in their eyes, hear it in their voices. This has been weighin’ heavy on them. And it ain’t gonna be fixed by me sayin’ I’m sorry or even by me gettin’ back with their mom.”

He looked back to Trudy to find her nodding in agreement. “You’re right; I’m really glad you realize that. What do you think *will* fix it?”

“Aren’t you s’posed to tell me that?”

“No, I’m not. But maybe I can help you—and Linda—find the answer for your family.”

At the mention of his wife’s name, Logan offered, “Talked to her on Saturday.”

“Linda?” Trudy asked.

“Yeah.”

“That’s the first direct contact since your court appearance, wasn’t it?” When Logan nodded, she asked, “What did you talk about?”

“She said she wanted me to know....” Logan tilted his head up slightly, trying to recall the particulars. “Oh, a bunch of stuff. That she

doesn't wanna move back to Elco, that she wants somethin' different—"

"A different kind of relationship?"

"Yeah, somethin' like that."

"And what's your response to that?"

"I told her okay 'cause—"

"No, Logan. I'm not asking what you told her, but, right now, what's your feeling about that?"

Logan expelled a puff of exasperation, feeling like Trudy was backing him into a corner. "Guess it'll have to be different, won't it?"

"Why?"

"'Cause of all that's passed between us, right?" He let his irritation seep out from under that last word.

"But do you want things to be different? Or would you prefer going back to the life you had before you moved to North Braddock?"

Involuntarily, Logan blurted, "No."

"Yet, you told me once that you and Linda were 'happy enough' back in Elco." When Logan had no response, Trudy exhorted, "Come on! Talk to me. Tell me what you want from your marriage. What you're going to need in this new relationship." Trudy made air quotes with her fingers as she said those last two words. "It seems like Linda has learned to state her needs. That's good, that's healthy. I want the same for you. It's a simple enough question: what do you want?"

His treacherous mind started up an endless litany—one syllable repeated over and over: *Nick... Nick... Nick...* In a desperate effort to shut that voice down, Logan interjected, "Why can't you let up on this?"

"Because if we don't answer this question before you and Linda get back together, then you're eventually going to end up right back here—only things will be even worse. Because you'll be a repeat offender." Trudy leaned forward, saying, "There are two things you're going to have to do in joint counseling with Linda. You're going to have to deal with the past and the future; admit the wrong you did, yes, but also ask for what you need going forward. You're getting closer on

the first item—I see a lot of movement there. But you won't budge on the second. Why?"

As he had expected, Trudy had cornered him again. Weary and anxious, Logan fell back on a safe answer. He stared at his old friend the carpet and sighed, "I don't know."

Trudy eased back into her chair before saying, "I bet you don't let your girls get away with that answer, do you?" When Logan simply rolled his eyes in response, the counselor seemed to change the subject. "What was your parents' marriage like?"

Caught completely off guard, Logan hunched forward, lost in reflection. After some thought, he answered, "It was... good 'nough, I guess. They didn't fight a lot or anything, not as I remember. Though my dad sure had a temper on him."

A rueful smile streaked across Trudy's face as she said, "Runs in the family, eh?"

Logan couldn't help but grin back. "Seems to. Me and Jim both take after my dad in that."

"Did you have a good relationship with him?"

"My dad?" At Trudy's nod, Logan continued, "Yeah, I did. I was hanging around the garage with him soon's I could walk. Taught me everything I know."

"Jim, too?"

"Nah, he never took any interest in learning about fixin' cars. Or—" Out of longstanding reticence about family matters, Logan stopped short.

"Or?"

After a second, Logan rationalized that anyone in Elco could tell Trudy the rest, so he answered, "Or anything much besides raising hell."

"You two didn't get along?"

"I didn't say that." Logan shook his head, searching for the words to describe something as complex as his feelings about Jim. "Most of the time he treated me okay... 'specially after our parents died."



“But before that?”

“He kinda... resented how close me and my dad was.” Logan snorted before adding, “Though it was his own choice to never set foot in my dad’s shop. Too much like work, I guess.”

“You were, what? Fourteen, when your parents died?”

“Not quite fourteen.”

“How old were your siblings?”

“Daisy was twenty-one, and Jim had just turned seventeen.”

“That was a lot for Daisy to take on, raising you two.”

“Yeah, family’s real important to her. She always says family sticks together no matter what.”

“You haven’t talked much about her. She’s not standing by you through this?”

To avoid discussing the longstanding distance that separated him from Daisy, Logan evaded, “I didn’t wanta bother her with any of this. She gets ’nough grief from Jim.”

“In what way?”

Logan hesitated, but, figuring the taboo was already breached, he explained, “Ten years ago, he took off for Florida—workin’ on some real estate scam he got mixed up in. Now we hardly ever hear from him, unless he needs money. I told him no, real firm, the first time he ever asked me, but Daisy—he’d bleed her dry if it weren’t for her husband. She still sneaks him as much money as she can, then Jim’ll take off again soon’s he’s got it.” Despite the problems between them, Logan still sympathized with his sister’s perpetual disappointment in their brother. Pensively, he added, “She never learns.”

“Is that something else that runs in the Crane family?”

Logan had no immediate answer, though he couldn’t help but wonder if it was true.

NICK was trying to navigate heavy I-279 traffic while keeping his cell phone to his ear as he drove to class on Thursday afternoon. Polly was on the line, giving him an update on his mom, though the conversation so far had focused on Polly's complaints about Agnes's doctor. "Yeah, doctors do get backed up these days. I'm sure everybody had to wait that long—"

"Oh, no they didn't," contradicted Polly. "I saw some pretty young thing just sashay in ahead of us—she hardly waited at all. They see two little old ladies and think we got nothin' better to do with our time except sit around and wait and wait."

Forbearing to ask what other pressing appointments Polly and Agnes *did* have, Nick tried again. "So what did the doctor have to say *after* you got in to see him?"

"Rude little snip—asked why it'd taken so long to get your mom in. I had half a mind to tell him it wouldn't 've been so bad if we hadn't been waiting for an hour and—"

"What wouldn't be so bad? What was the diagnosis?"

"Pneumonia, he said. Though seems to me if that were true, your mom would have a more productive cough. I remember learning that back in nursing school. In fact I'm pretty sure—"

Nick lost the rest of Polly's diatribe, first in the blare of a horn and then in dealing with the owner of said horn: a speeding tractor trailer. When he refocused on Polly, she was finally saying, "...so we're at Allegheny Suburban right now."

"What? She's getting admitted to the hospital? Is it that bad?"

"Oh, I don't think so, hon. They're mainly worried about the fact that she's not eating much. Just lookin' to make some money off your poor mom, if you ask me."

Already looking for the next exit, Nick said, "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Don't worry about rushing; they're still trying to find a room for Agnes. Looks like it could take three or four more hours."

"Okay, I'll be there by...," Nick did some mental calculations before saying, "By five at the latest."

“Like I said, don’t rush. These hospitals have no more respect for your time than those damn doctors do. And nobody tells you what’s goin’ on or—”

“Yeah, I know, I hate that, too,” Nick interjected, and before Polly could re-launch her complaints, he said, “Bye, see you in a bit,” and hit the off button.

Nick was on autopilot the rest of the drive to Acken’s shop and arrived on Arlington Avenue with no memory of the ride after his talk with Polly. Still torn between guilt and worry about his mom, he fervently hoped he hadn’t run any red lights or knocked down any pedestrians on the way to South Side. He’d already decided to spend fifteen to twenty minutes congratulating the students and the instructor before rushing back to North Hills. Nick grabbed a bag off the passenger seat and jogged up the steps.

When he entered the shop, the class was already in full swing, though the festive atmosphere bespoke more of a party than a learning module. The girls were in a small knot, Tish in the center, obviously holding court. Nick’s eyes immediately sought out Logan. He was standing slightly aside, looking as happy and relaxed as Nick had seen him since Kennywood.

Nick cleared his throat theatrically to get the group’s attention, and Logan’s smiling eyes found his. Maybe it was because he needed to believe it right then, but Nick could have sworn the smile deepened before being covered by a grease-stained hand.

Tish looked up and hooted, “Well, look who’s decided to grace us with his royal presence.”

Putting on a relaxed front, Nick shot back, “Yeah, I can see I was holding up the class. What’s up?”

“Me!” Tish laughed. “You’re looking at Dish’s newest waitress, that’s what’s up.”

“That’s great news.” Nick held the bag aloft, saying, “How fortunate that I brought presents.”

Tish’s dark eyes sparkled. “For me?”

“For all three of you.”

The women rushed to him, demanding to know what the gifts were, and Nick quickly handed each one a small, slim, silver rod. Norah and Cheryl thanked him immediately, though they sounded slightly puzzled; Tish stared at the gift for a few seconds before saying, "You shouldn't have." She looked at Nick while emphasizing, "*Really.*"

"They're digital tire pressure gauges," Nick explained.

Logan eyed the presents and nodded approvingly at Nick, offering, "Damn nice ones, too."

There seemed to be more he wanted to say, but nothing else was forthcoming, so Nick said, "I'm sorry I'm late. Got caught up at work. And I can't stay long either; I got..." Nick had long since wearied of expressions of sympathy veering into pity about his mom; besides, he rationalized that bad news would put a damper on the occasion, so he finished, "My mom's got a doctor's appointment this afternoon."

"Ever'thing okay?" Logan asked.

"Guess that's what I'll find out." Nick forced what he hoped was a convincing smile. "From what I've heard, it doesn't sound too bad."

Norah interrupted the general murmurs of concern to say, "Hey, Nick, before you go, I wanted to tell you I'm not going to make our session next week."

Nick searched her face for signs of distress, asking, "Why not?" While waiting for an answer, he mused that canceling sessions could sometimes be a good sign, a recognition on the part of a client that they were ready to move on and no longer needed counseling.

He breathed easier when she gave him a sunny smile, responding, "I'm going home to Arkport for a visit."

"I think that's a good idea. You've been wanting to see your folks."

"Yeah, it's long overdue." She gestured at her car, saying, "And now with this fine running vehicle, I got no excuse."

Nick turned to Logan. "So, what do you think? Will the Cavalier get her to Arkport?"

"Hell, shape this car is in now, it could get 'er to Alaska."

After Logan started the girls on their final lesson, Nick said goodbye and moved towards the door. As he reached for the knob, Cheryl called, "Do you want me to bring the keys back for you again?"

Impulsively, Nick called back, "Nah, just give 'em to Logan." He looked over and caught sight of Logan's blank face and wondered if the mechanic was surprised or annoyed. "You can lock up and give 'em to me... later, right?"

A nonchalant air fell over Logan as he mumbled, "Sure."

ON SUNDAY morning, Logan arrived at Acken's shop at quarter to nine. All the way to the city, he'd tried to shrug off the feeling that Nick bestowing the keys to the shop on him had been a big deal. *He probably didn't wanta bother Dave again, in case he's late.* His dismissive thoughts couldn't stop Logan feeling, as he let himself in, that he'd been granted a rite of passage.

Twenty minutes later, Logan had started feeling like Nick had given him the keys perhaps because he *knew* he'd be late. *'Course, he ain't really late, I was kinda early.*

Logan used up some time by dragging a rusty, battered step stool over and forcing open the ancient window; it was hardly worth the effort, as the heavy, muggy air made little difference in the stifling garage. The humidity was so high, Logan expected it to start raining any second, and he wasn't surprised when a clap of thunder erupted a few minutes later.

While he listened to the drumbeat of rain on the roof, Logan unpacked the few parts the machine shop had made ready in a week. Suddenly the shop door banged open and Nick dashed into the garage, carrying a cardboard takeout tray containing two Styrofoam cups and a waxed paper bag. The tray—like Nick—was soaking wet. "Damn! It's pourin' out there."

Logan couldn't help but laugh. "Yeah, I noticed." He also noticed that Nick was wearing a black T-shirt and knee-length shorts. If the clothes had been dry, they might have been unremarkable, but as it was, they clung to every curve and plane of the body they covered. Logan's

eyes took a journey that his hands were aching to follow, sliding up and down Nick's drenched form. As he felt the stirrings of desire, Logan hurriedly shifted his eyes to the tray, asking, "Whaddya got there?"

"Breakfast." Nick put the cups down on the workbench, explaining, "I stopped at the Liberty Grill and picked up coffee and crullers."

Gladly accepting the coffee, Logan said, "Crullers. What the hell's that?"

"They're these doughnut things; they fry 'em up fresh every morning—can't beat 'em." Nick took a twisted strip of fried pastry out of the bag and tore into it; he swallowed hastily and tilted the bag towards Logan, asking, "Want one?"

Mesmerized by the sight of Nick's tongue snaking out to snatch a flake of glaze from the corner of his mouth, it took Logan a second to answer, "Sure," as he reached inside the bag, pulling out a cruller.

Both men leaned over the workbench, chomping down the pastries and gulping the coffee in companionable silence until Nick asked, "We got a lot to do today?"

"Nah, not much at all," Logan said, hoping Nick wouldn't ask what the hell they were doing there, in that case. In an effort to extend this leisure time together, he asked, "How's your mom doin'?"

Nick peered down into his cup before answering, "She's okay." There was a beat, and then he added, "I guess I should say, she will be okay."

"Why? What's goin' on?"

"She's in the hospital."

Logan thumped his cup down on the bench and stared at Nick. "What? When'd that happen?"

Nick finally met Logan's gaze as he answered, "Thursday."

It took him a moment to connect the dots, and then Logan asked, "Is that why you rushed out of class?"

After another swallow of coffee, Nick admitted, "Yeah."

"Why didn't you say somethin'?"

A melancholy shrug accompanied his explanation. “I don’t know. Maybe I was hopin’ if I didn’t make a big deal out of it, then it wouldn’t be a big deal.”

“Is it?”

“The doctor tells me no. But she looks... not good.”

“What happened to her?”

“She’s got pneumonia—had it for a couple weeks now, probably.” Nick slammed his fist down on the bench, exclaiming, “Damn it! I should’ve gotten her to the doctor then! I knew somethin’ was wrong, but she kept insisting she was fine, and so did Polly...”

“Who’s Polly?”

“She’s the aide I have in to watch my mom. She used to be a nurse, so I guess I thought she must know what she was talking about.”

“But the doctor said your mom’s gonna be okay, right?”

Nick exhaled forcefully before saying, “I know, can’t help worryin’ though.” He went back to his breakfast, seeming lost in thought as he stared down at the workbench.

Logan looked over at Nick’s hunched back, longing to put a hand out in a gesture of comfort. *Should I? Why not?* He could show Nick that they could touch without it meaning... anything, really.

*Liar! That ain’t what you want at all.* Logan couldn’t fool himself for long; he ached to touch Nick, and consolation wasn’t the reason. The sight of Nick’s muscles moving and shifting under wet cloth drew him in—an irresistible lure. Like a toddler to a hot stove, like a moth to a flame, Logan reached out, powerless to resist. When his hand finally landed, the hot skin burned him through the damp of the T-shirt, sending a streak of fire up his arm, licking across every nerve.

Suddenly he was facing Nick, fingers still stretched across that strong, masculine—no mistaking that—back; their eyes met and held. Logan was lost in that gaze, drowning in Nick, frozen in time. He would never know how they got there—who moved first, or if they moved together, it didn’t matter, nothing mattered except he was kissing Nick and Nick was kissing back.

A thrill shot up Logan's spine as Nick groaned into the kiss, his vibrating tongue filling Logan's mouth with the taste and texture of Nick—layered with an undertone of coffee and pastry, a new flavor as necessary as air. Just as exhilarating was the feel of Nick's chest crushed against his denim workshirt, the feel of Nick's gripping, searching hands. Logan shifted, fitting their bodies together until he could feel Nick's cock prodding his own aching hardness. Logan broke the kiss to gasp for air before diving back in, his hips thrusting desperately, needing the contact, needing the friction, needing... *oh God*, needing... Nick.

Logan felt an orgasm starting to build when suddenly he was yanked out of the vortex of desire by a shove from Nick that rocked them apart. "No, Logan!"

Panting breathlessly, Logan asked, "What?" He was still holding on to Nick's shirt, holding on fast as if to life itself—because it was, his authentic life, finally within reach, and he wasn't letting go. "What the hell, Nick? You don't wanta—" He stopped, since he hadn't even filled in that blank for himself. Logan just knew he could go on kissing for, oh, hours, at least.

"No. I don't want to be the thing you regret. After," Nick clarified as he shook his head sadly, eyes shifting away, fixed on a spot over Logan's shoulder. "Or tomorrow. Or... ever."

"I won't," Logan gasped, reaching up to pull Nick's face to his so Nick could see the truth—the one Logan felt in every cell of his body. He might regret a lot, but not Nick. In fact, this dark-haired man was one of the few things in his life right then that he didn't regret. "I swear, I couldn't." Logan stared into Nick's eyes, praying, hoping, silently chanting, *Please, oh please, you gotta believe me.*

He got his answer when Nick leaned in and renewed the kiss. There was no hesitation, and the passion built faster, burned hotter, more primal than before. Nick's rough hands were biting into Logan's ass, welding them together, and Logan was shaking with desire, wild with need, and he leaned into Nick and whispered huskily, "Where're we gonna.... We gotta find—"

"A bed," Nick groaned. "I know. I know." Logan could feel Nick's heart pounding under his hand as he continued, "There's a little



motel... on Carson.” Logan watched Nick swallow, then add, “You can follow me there.”

Breaking out of his stupor, Logan answered, “Yeah. I’ll follow.”

Sitting in the parking lot of a Motel 6, Logan remembered absolutely nothing about the five-minute trip there except Nick’s parting words. “*If you decide not to show, it’s okay.*” Nick had given him one last chance to back out, an option Logan had no intention of taking. He watched from the cab of his truck as Nick walked out of the motel office swinging a key, oblivious to the rain, not looking at Logan, fixed on his destination. He quickly unlocked the door and slipped into Room 9.

Nine it was; Logan put a hand to the dashboard and took a deep breath to quell his nerves. *This is it—you go in that room and you’re gonna... you’ll really be... with a man... with Nick.*

Ten seconds later, he was knocking softly on a weathered brown door that opened quickly. A strong arm yanked him into the room and right into Nick’s embrace. Logan felt his back hit the door and then knew nothing else except Nick, who was all over him, who was pushing against him, who was as frantic as Logan to kiss and lick and bite and thrust.

No words were spoken or needed; they seemed to be of a single mind, both pursuing the mutual goal of skin on skin. Logan hardly noticed Nick unbuttoning his damp workshirt, so occupied was he in ripping off Nick’s T-shirt and shorts. When Nick pushed Logan back onto the gaudy bedspread and pressed him into the bed with his welcome weight, when Logan felt their bare bodies lined up, felt Nick grinding and pumping against him, when their naked cocks met at last, Logan felt pleasure burning through him, intensity bringing it near pain, didn’t even know he could feel like that, didn’t think anything could feel better—until Nick reached down and gripped their dicks with his hand.

Nick started pumping slowly, then faster; Logan had to look at Nick, glad to see his eyes open, see dark fire blazing back, wanted to say—to tell him... what? He didn’t know, too lost in the overwhelming sensation. Logan knew he was close, could feel the tightening low in

his groin, *gonna come... so fuckin' close... yeah, Nick, just like that, oh God....*

And then he was shooting all over Nick hand's, relief and release shooting out of him, pulling out of him all that hidden longing, all that tamped-down, blocked-up desire, free at last, and goddamn it, nothing had ever felt so good. He was thrilled to feel Nick join him seconds later, thrilled to see Nick's face mirror his own elation. *'Cause of me, 'cause of us, what we just did, he looks like that.*

Gulping air like he had broken the surface after a long time undersea, Logan stared up at Nick and felt no regret but was shocked to see Nick suddenly frowning down at him. "What? What's wrong? Wasn't that—"

"The best sex... ever?" Nick interrupted archly as he rolled off Logan. He propped himself on one elbow, explaining, "Yeah, but wasn't 'xactly smart."

"Smart?"

"Yeah, we should've talked some, maybe even gotten some condoms." Logan was still processing that idea when Nick put a hand to Logan's chest and added, "It's okay, what we did was pretty safe, and I'm clean—you should know that. I've been tested."

*Oh, that.* Logan gripped Nick's hand, though he shifted his gaze to the curtained window. "Umm.... Yeah, me too. Clean, I mean."

When Logan peered back at Nick, he saw a full-force smile aimed his way. "Good to know." The smile faded as Nick continued, "But I'm still sorry. I should've—"

Logan rolled on his side, leaned into Nick and stopped him with a quick kiss. "Nah, playin' it completely safe don't seem right for us."

"No?"

Grinning widely, Logan teased, "Nope, you're the most dangerous man I know, Nick Zales."

"Likewise, I'm sure," Nick shot back with a yawn.

"You tired?"

"Yeah, I ain't been sleeping much."

Logan felt an answering yawn pulled out of him, too. “I know what you mean.”

Having at long last given his body what it craved, Logan was rewarded with loose muscles, relaxed nerves, and a quiet mind; he felt himself drifting off as Nick did the same. He took a second to acknowledge that when he awoke there would be questions, problems, maybe even awkwardness, but for now, there was only the sound of rain against the window and Nick’s warm body snug against his.

## Chapter 10: A Man's Errors

*A man's errors are his portals of discovery.*

—James Joyce

NICK'S eyes blinked open, slowly focusing on the ugliest curtains he'd ever seen. The brown, orange and pink-flowered cloth put to shame even some of the ruffled monstrosities his mom used to hang in their house in Kittanning. His mind skipped from contemplation of the curtains to his present location. *Where the hell am I?* A soft snore from the other side of the bed sent a wave of memories crashing through his mind. *Logan! What the fuck did I just do?*

Rolling gently to his other side, he was presented with the sight of Logan, sound asleep on his back. Despite the surge of shock and dismay he was fighting through, Nick took a moment to admire the masculine beauty of his bed partner, contrasting with the dowdy bedspread crumpled underneath them.

The blond-haired man, body open and face softened by sleep, looked more at peace than Nick had ever before seen. The realization made his breath catch in his throat. He reached out, unable to resist the urge to run his hand lightly over the supine body. As Logan stirred slightly beneath his touch, Nick tried to ignore the rush of tenderness in his veins, stubbornly calling it desire and jeering at himself. *Whaddya want, Zales? Another quickie before he runs back to his wife? Wife! Shit—I'm an adulterer.... Great, can add that to my long list of sins.*

Nick paused briefly in his mental tirade, trying to remember how it worked. Was he an adulterer? Or was it just Logan? Sunday school was too long behind him for Nick to be sure. *Bet my mom would know. Great idea, I can ask her at the hospital, that will sure perk her up. "So, Mom, I slept with this married guy. Did I commit adultery or what?"*

He couldn't help smirking slightly at that imaginary scenario, though the thought of his mom left Nick wondering about the time. He slid off the bed and went in search of his watch. Collecting his clothes from random spots in the small, musty room, Nick checked the time, gathered his things into a ball under one arm, and scooted quietly into the bathroom.

When he emerged a few minutes later, dressed in his still-damp clothes, Nick saw Logan yawning wide enough to crack his jaw, his eyes fluttering open. Feeling suddenly awkward and confused, Nick murmured, "Hey, you awake?"

Logan closed his eyes again and stretched while answering, "Yeah. Umm, what time's it?"

Trying unsuccessfully not to stare at Logan's muscular body arching off the bed, Nick answered, "Little past one."

A frown clouded his face as Logan muttered, "Hell, I slept like the dead." He swung his legs over the side of the bed and flicked the bedspread over his groin, saying, "Sorry 'bout that."

"For what, fallin' asleep? It's okay, I been out, too. Just woke up a few minutes ago."

Nick thought he detected a blush as Logan nodded and rose to his feet, quickly slipping on his discarded boxers. The pink was heightened as Logan hurriedly gathered the rest of his clothes before disappearing into the bathroom.

Nick was still tying the laces on his sneakers when he heard the door open; he looked up to find a fully-clothed Logan standing in the bathroom doorway, hands jammed into the pockets of his jeans. "Ready to get to work?" Logan asked.

Nick assumed the question was directed at him, though Logan seemed to be asking the bedside lamp. "I'm afraid I can't." He watched Logan's frown deepen, so he hastened to explain, "I gotta get to the hospital."

"Oh yeah, your mom." Logan seemed to relax a bit and met Nick's gaze as he offered, "Don't worry 'bout it. I can take care of what little bit needs doin'. You go on and see her."

“Thanks.” Nick rubbed the back of his neck as a thousand questions jockeyed for position in his mind. The unlikely winner turned out to be, “So... how’re you feeling?”

“Good,” Logan answered in anything but a convincing tone. “You?”

“Great,” Nick laughed, finding Logan’s solicitous inquiry surprising. *Ain’t me that just had sex with a man for the first time.* At least he assumed it had been Logan’s first time; there was so much he didn’t know about his companion. Nick stood up, saying, “I really hate to run off on you, but... we’ll talk more next time, okay?” When Logan’s only response was a sharp intake of breath, Nick immediately amended with a sinking heart, “That is, if you want... if there’s gonna be a next time.”

If the pause that ensued wasn’t pregnant, it was at least trying to conceive. “I... yeah....” Logan swallowed before clarifying in a murmur, “I do want... um... want... that.”

“Good.” *Sure about that, Zales?* Ignoring his doubts, Nick suggested, “I gotta be at the hospital next couple nights.... Why don’t we just meet right here next Sunday mornin’?”

Logan chewed on a hangnail before saying, “Can’t, I’ll have my girls next weekend. Pickin’ ’em up on Friday night.”

“Oh.”

Nick felt slightly foolish and was beginning to wonder if Logan *really* wanted a next time when the other man blurted, “We could get together Thursday night, couldn’t we? We don’t have class no more.”

As he was about to agree, Nick smacked his forehead. “Shit, I can’t. That’s the night me and Adam’re takin’ the kids to the Pirates game.”

“Adam, huh?” asked Logan, voice filled with gravel and ice. “So you’re gonna keep on...,” he waved his hand vaguely before continuing, “with him?”

“We’re *friends*, Logan.” Nick pivoted on one foot and ran his hand through his hair before turning back and saying, “Besides, we’ve had this game planned for weeks. You think I should just let the kids down?”

“No, I—”

“And what about *you*?” Nick challenged. “Are you still getting back with your wife?”

“Yeah....” Logan’s brow furrowed as he added, “I guess.”

Arms akimbo, Nick spat, “You are?”

Logan threw up his hands, protesting, “I don’t know. Fuck, Nick, you gotta give me some time....”

“Yeah, okay. I need time, too,” Nick admitted more calmly. “I don’t know what to make of this, any more ’an you do.”

His disclosure seemed to amuse Logan. “You don’t?” He grinned as he nodded at the bed, saying, “You sure *seemed* to know what you were doin’.”

“I don’t think sex is our problem,” Nick retorted with a chuckle. More soberly, he added, “It’s just... everything else.”

“It sure is.” Logan drew his hand across his mouth before saying, “Like you and that Adam guy, me and Linda, Trudy....”

Nick’s head whipped up at that name. “What about her? You’re not plannin’ on tellin’—”

“Hell, no.” He studied Nick briefly before adding, “I was afraid you might....”

“Tell *my boss* I’m screwing one of her patients?” Nick asked in disbelief. “Um, no, not a good idea.”

Logan nodded thoughtfully, saying, “Uh huh. Guess I can see that.” His frown returned as he asked, “What about Adam?”

With a shrug, Nick answered, “I should say somethin’. He always tells me....”

“Tells you what?”

“’Bout other guys.” He saw Logan’s eyebrows shoot up, so he explained, “See, we don’t have that kind of relationship—you know, exclusive.” He came close to laughing out loud at the very idea of Adam being monogamous.

Logan was staring at his wedding ring as he twisted it idly on his finger. “That means... you both have other guys?”

Nick was almost tempted to lie and say yes—it seemed easier and... safer, somehow. Instead he found himself saying, “Adam does, but I...”

Bright blue eyes betrayed intense interest as Logan prodded, “Yeah?”

“Don’t.” With an ironic smile and a slight toss of his head, Nick amended, “Didn’t.”

“But he’s gonna expect—”

With a protesting hand raised, Nick interrupted, “He’s not gonna expect anything on Thursday except a baseball game.”

“Okay.”

Nick tried to guess what was going on behind that pensive frown and that clipped retort but failed. “Guess we can talk more—”

“When?”

“You tell me.”

After a half minute of silent concentration, Logan said, “I’m s’posed to drop the girls off at home by one o’clock next Sunday. I could be here by... say, two? Would that work for you?”

“Yeah, I could swing that.”

“Great.”

Offering an outstretched hand to seal the bargain, Nick received a nervous smile and a firm grip from Logan as a reward. At the moment of contact, there was that now--familiar electric spark, and Nick was momentarily dazed, feeling the impulse to pull Logan into a tight clinch before deciding that would be unwise. He did step a bit closer and give him a clumsy thump on the back. They stood frozen in the near-embrace for long seconds before Logan cleared his throat and said, “You better get goin’, see your mom.”

Nick took that as his cue to step back. He pulled his keys from his pocket and headed for the door before looking back to say, “See ya next weekend.”



On the way to the hospital, Nick veered wildly between thinking it would be the longest week of his life—and the shortest.

THURSDAY evening, Nick wrestled with all of the annoying and endless minutiae it took to get six kids to PNC Park on time for the Pirate's seven-fifteen start. During the day he'd actually thought he would be glad for the distraction, needing something to take his mind off his mom and Logan. Those two topics had fully consumed him for four long days—when he was being completely honest, the latter even more than the former.

When the night's aggravations actually started, Nick couldn't quite consider them a blessing after all. Several weeks' reprieve had obviously dulled his memory of the lowlights of these baseball outings: the bickering in the van on the way to the city, the hassle of finding parking at Station Square, shepherding everyone over Clemente bridge, and of course, refereeing the heated debate of who would sit where after they picked up their tickets at the Will Call window. "Just *take* the ticket I gave you, and we'll sort it out at the seats, *okay?*" Nick snapped.

Suddenly a merry voice sang out, "They're *all* good seats, guys. I'd never let you down."

Nick turned and grinned at Adam, glad to see not only a friend but another adult at last.

His relief was cut short by Jesse whining, "I don't wanta sit next to a girl." He turned to Isabel Cabrera, a last-minute addition to the group, and sneered, "I don't even know why you let her come. Girls don't know nothin' about baseball."

Isabel shot back, "I know as much as you do—probably more!"

Nick stepped in between the pair, saying, "That's just fine, Jesse, since I was hoping Isabel would do me the honor of sitting next to me."

As they walked to the seats under a temporary truce, Adam muttered, "Actually, I was kinda hoping for that seat next to you."

Sotto voce, Nick assured him, “Don’t worry, you get the other one.”

Luckily once the game started, all the kids settled down, fascinated by the surprisingly tight contest between the Pirates and their archrivals, The Philadelphia Phillies. Still, Nick was acutely aware of the audience and didn’t relate anything of a personal nature to Adam other than an update on his mom’s situation.

His young friend’s eyes darkened with compassion as he responded, “That’s rough, man. Sorry to hear that.”

Not much more besides comments on the game passed between the two men until the seventh inning. The Phillies had pulled ahead by three runs, and the disappointed crowd was somewhat subdued. Isabel disappeared in search of a ladies room while several of the boys went off on a cotton candy hunt. Nick was already bracing for the aftereffects of the inevitable sugar rush but appreciated that there were now three empty seats between him and his nearest charge.

When Adam asked, “Why’re you so quiet tonight? Think they can’t pull this out, or is it your mom?”

Nick decided to take advantage of their relative privacy. “Yes, and yes and no.”

Laughing and shaking his head, Adam said, “Care to explain? ’Cause I didn’t quite get that.”

“I don’t think they can come back from this collapse, I am worried about my mom, but there is something else on my mind.”

Adam glanced over at the kids and, seeing the remaining boys occupied by the game, asked, “Like what?”

Hesitating for only a second, Nick plunged ahead, whispering, “I met someone.”

In an equally low tone, Adam asked, “A guy you’re interested in, you mean?”

“Yeah, a guy.”

“Guess it’s about time,” Adam responded with a shrug. “I always wondered why you didn’t... you know.”

Nick licked his lips nervously before elaborating, “I’m not one for... What I mean is, I was perfectly happy with what you and I had—”

“Had?” Adam’s eyebrows slanted upwards in consternation. “Whoa, are you trying to say we’re through? Fuck, don’t tell me you think you’re *in love*.”

“No!” Nick saw Ben shoot a puzzled glance their way from four seats over and lowered his voice again as he clarified, “It’s just that I might not have much time for you for a while, and I wanta be upfront about it.”

A grin broke across his face as Adam said, “Okay, gotcha.” Hearing a restrained cheer ripple through the crowd, he turned to watch McLouth take first base on a walk before continuing. “For a second there, I thought you’d lost your mind.” His smile took on a sly cast as he added, “You realize I want details, don’t you?” Adam made a “give me” gesture with his hand, demanding, “Come on, who is he, where’d you meet ’im, and most important of all, how’s the sex?”

Faking a sudden interest in the game afforded Nick a minute to consider what he was going to tell Adam. *It isn’t like he’s gonna know me taking up with an abuser throws into question my supposed recovery from my childhood.* Still, even Adam was savvy enough to realize that, based on everything Nick had ever said about his work, he was now, literally, sleeping with the enemy.

Nick cringed with embarrassment at the thought of revealing such a lapse in judgment, so he finally hedged by admitting only, “He’s a volunteer. At ACC.”

“Huh, never thought you’d mess around at work. He must really be somethin’. What’s he look like?”

“Muscular build, blond, almost as tall as me.”

“Sounds hot.” Adam doffed his Pirates cap and tapped Nick on the arm with it, saying, “Good for you.” His voice grew more animated as he suggested, “Hey, some guys are gettin’ together at Sully’s this Sunday to watch the Steelers game. Why don’t you two swing by?” His grin turned wolfish. “I’d love to meet your new conquest.”

Eyes on the relief pitcher warming up in the bullpen, Nick quietly demurred, “Sorry, we can’t make it.”

“Some other time, then?”

“I really don’t see us goin’ out together much.”

“Why? Is he ugly?” Adam teased.

“No.” Nick laughed in spite of himself, turning to Adam to add, “He’s actually *really* good-looking.”

“So the problem is...?”

Nick had a sinking feeling that Adam wasn’t going to let up on this. In desperation, he supplied, “He’s married. With kids.”

Puzzlement wrinkled Adam’s brow as he whispered incredulously, “You’re messin’ with a *closeted* guy from work? What the fuck?”

“Logan isn’t like that,” Nick interjected. After taking a deep breath, he explained, “He’s... he’s never *ever* been with a guy before.”

Adam’s mouth fell open, and his eyes grew wide. His voice still low but his tone urgent, he said, “What? He’s straight? Holy shit!”

“Well, obviously he’s not straight,” corrected Nick dryly.

“You know what I mean. I know you’re not gonna like this, dude, but that is so hot.” Nick resumed watching the game, determined to ignore Adam’s sudden fascination with Logan until Adam mused, “What do ya think? Maybe I can have a crack at this guy when you’re done?”

An unfamiliar feeling crawled into Nick’s gut, sending a flush of temper through him; it took some effort for him to clamp down on the sudden need to tell Adam to go fuck himself. *What the hell is wrong with me? You’d think I was jealous or something.* In an effort to prove the green monster had no hold on him, Nick joked back, “You think you’re gonna have time for anyone else but me when this thing with Logan is over? You better think again.”

“Oh promises, promises,” Adam laughed. “And I’m still waiting for those juicy details.”

Nick nodded discreetly in the direction of the kids, saying, “And you’re gonna have to keep on waiting—for a better time.” *Or until hell freezes over.*

“Okay,” Adam sighed. He signaled one of the vendors over, asking Nick, “Want another dog?”

“Sure. Who’s buyin’?”

“You are.” Adam turned twinkling green eyes on Nick. “It’s the least you can do after puttin’ me on a diet.”

Nick reached for his wallet, protesting, “Okay, but I know you’re not really gonna be going hungry.”

“Looks who’s talking,” Adam retorted. “The guy whose menu now reads ‘fresh hot blond’.”

As Nick bit into his hot dog, he muttered under his breath, “Yeah, with a side order of ‘heavy baggage’ and a whopper of a bill.” He didn’t say it aloud, since he had no explanation as to why he was so eager for a second helping.

FRIDAY afternoon, Logan found himself standing totally perplexed in the cereal aisle at Kroger’s. He’d intended to make a quick stop on his way home from work to pick up a few things for the girls, cereal being one of them. He wanted to get his daughters’ favorite kind; he’d never really taken note of the name or the brand but figured he’d recognize the box when he saw it. Instead he found a bewildering array of choices, most looking pretty similar and none looking all that familiar. He fingered his cell phone, tempted to call Linda and ask, but that felt like an admission of failure.

*How can I not even know what kind of cereal they like?* Maybe Linda was right. If you added it all up, he’d spent most of the girls’ lives in his garage in Elco. And during the time in North Braddock before the separation, he’d been aware of little save his own misery. Determined not to let this first weekend be ruined by regret, Logan shelved his guilt, grabbing a box of Honeycombs—something he

vaguely remembered eating as a child—and dumped it in his cart. *They're comin' to spend time with me, not eat cereal.*

As he stood in the checkout line, Logan tried to calm nerves that had been stretched tight as a bow the entire week, though the impending visit with the girls wasn't the only cause. Wednesday's session with Trudy had been dominated by preparations for joint counseling with Linda. The list of rules Trudy had required Logan to sign had been vaguely insulting, but the worst part was feeling like a fraud as he wrote his name. But how could he tell Trudy that he had no interest in reconciling with Linda? Was that even true? And even if it was, how could he explain himself without revealing what was going on with him and Nick?

Logan snorted to himself, thinking that first he'd have to know what was going on before he could explain it to somebody else. Thursday night Logan hadn't even been able to listen to the baseball game knowing that Nick was there with... *him*. Venom pooled in his chest at the idea of Nick Zales's... *whatever the hell he is*. Logan was tormented by the thought that Nick would keep seeing Adam yet terrified of the implications of Nick breaking it off. *It ain't like there's any kinda future in this thing between me and Nick. I know that. Hope to hell he does.*

Two hours later, Logan pulled up in front of his old apartment building, no closer to answering any of the questions that had plagued him all week. As he climbed the stairs, he decided to focus on his girls instead of his problems. Maybe if he'd done that before, he'd know what kind of goddamn cereal they liked. His resolution lasted up to the very weird experience of knocking on the door that used to be his own, but not much beyond it since the person opening it turned out to be Linda.

He should have been better prepared to face his wife, but for some reason Logan had assumed that his sister-in-law, Marie, would be the liaison that evening. Suddenly he realized he was standing frozen in the doorway and hadn't even returned Linda's greeting. He got hold of himself and choked out, "Hi, Linda."

As he trailed her into their old living room, Logan was nagged by the feeling that something was different in Linda's appearance, until it

hit him: her formerly soft brown hair was now platinum blonde. Belatedly, he told her, “You look good.” An awkward pause followed before he added, “You changed your hair.”

Linda nodded before answering, “I thought you were gonna say somethin’ about the scars all bein’ gone.”

A memory of Linda as he’d seen her last—bruised and bandaged—assaulted him without warning, along with a wave of shame and guilt from which he’d been hiding for six months. The sensation almost made him retch, but he fought through it with no outward symptom except a hacking cough.

There was still no sign of Krista or Meghan, so it was Linda who brought him a glass of water. He thanked her before laying the blame for the incident on his pack-a-day habit. “Been thinkin’ of quittin’,” he added.

“I did.”

“Quit?”

“Yeah,” Linda answered as she settled on the couch. “They wouldn’t let me smoke in the hospital, and by the time I got out, I was pretty near to quittin’, so I figured, what the hell?”

The mention of her hospital stay brought on aftershocks of guilt, and Logan made a sudden decision. He glanced nervously towards the bedrooms and asked, “Where’re the girls?”

“They’re packin’ up. You know how they are—you’d think they were gonna be away for a month.”

Logan nodded and, before he lost his nerve, parked himself in the chair across from her. With no preamble, he said, “Last time we talked, you were sayin’ how... how I never told you direct that I was sorry for what I did. Well, you were right. But I’m sayin’ it now. I am sorry, Linda.”

Tears sprang up in her eyes, and she reached for the glass of water she’d brought for him. After a few small sips, Linda whispered, “Thank you.”

“Yeah, well, guess it was long overdue.”

Linda nodded, saying, “It sure was.” She took her own peek at the hallway before continuing. “Can you tell me why, Logan? Why it took ya so long?”

Logan just shook his head. No words came to him, not any that his wife wanted to hear. The good feeling he’d enjoyed after that “thank you” had lasted all of five seconds. When Linda said, “Guess we’ll talk about that on Wednesday,” Logan felt the world closing in on him again.

It wasn’t anything Linda had said—Logan guessed she had the right to say that, and more. It was that he saw his feet being set back on that same old path, that grim death march of a life where he was always doing more than he wanted but less than he should. Where every day was a sacrifice that was never enough and couldn’t be appreciated—or even shared.

Thankfully Krista appeared right then, dragging a suitcase and beaming at her dad. Meghan was bringing up the rear, carrying her own overloaded bag and already talking about the weekend. Logan ushered them out of the apartment as quickly as was decent. When Linda reminded him to have the girls back on time on Sunday, it was all he could do not to enthusiastically retort, “Don’t worry!”

On the short drive to his apartment, Logan let the happy chatter of the girls flow over him while he contemplated his plans for Sunday afternoon. A brushfire of shame burned through him as he considered the reason he had no intention of getting his daughters back home late. What would they think? What would his daughters, or his wife—or anyone—say if they knew? Knew that Logan was counting the hours until he could be with a man? Logan understood precisely what they’d think and was well acquainted with the words they’d fling at him. He’d heard it all often enough from his father and brother.

*Well, they don’t know,* Logan argued back to his scolding conscience. *No one does—or has to.* He didn’t care that meeting Nick wouldn’t solve any of his problems, might even make some worse. For the first time in a long while, Logan Crane had done *exactly* what he’d wanted to do. For the first time ever, he’d tasted pure freedom and unfettered joy—and no power on earth was going to stop him from going back for more.



## Chapter 11: Things We Give

*Secrets are things we give to others to keep for us.*

—Elbert Hubbard

THOUGH Logan was watching his elder daughter, his body was attuned to the ticking of the clock behind him. He'd hoped to feed the girls their lunch quickly, since it was already after twelve, but Krista was taking longer to make a sandwich than Logan did to shop for the fixings. "Somethin' wrong, Krista?"

"Is this all you've got?" She waved her hand dismissively at the paper-wrapped packages of cold cuts.

"Bologna and chip-chopped ham, yeah. What's the problem?"

Krista's mouth twitched before replying, "They're both so fattening, Dad. You know I only eat turkey breast."

As a matter of fact, Logan didn't know that but figured it best not to admit it. Was this something recent? He could have sworn she used to love chip-chopped ham....

In the meantime, Meghan munched potato chips and toyed with her meal. Pulling a slice of bologna out from between the pieces of bread, she surveyed it, saying, "Maybe we should've gone out for lunch."

Logan shook his head at both girls, sighing, "We went out for lunch and dinner yesterday." He plunked his own sandwich on a paper plate and parked himself at the small table across from Meghan. "I gotta get you girls home in less 'an a hour, and you ain't even packed up yet. If you don't want a sandwich, Krista, there's canned soup in the cupboard."

“Soup?” Krista exclaimed, her tone more appropriate to a suggestion of fresh blood than Campbell’s tomato soup. “It’s too hot for that.”

To Logan’s thinking, both girls had seemed frequently peevish and whiny over the weekend, so he had trouble dredging up much sympathy for Krista’s dilemma. “Then if you don’t wanna go hungry, I guess you’ll have to settle for ham or bologna.”

With nothing more than an exaggerated sigh and a roll of her eyes, Krista complied with her dad’s directive, though she only deigned to fix a half-sandwich.

Twenty minutes later, on the drive to the Palisade Manor apartment, Meghan’s cat was on her mind—as it had been for much of the visit. “Boots is sure gonna be happy to see me. Poor little guy, I hope he wasn’t too lonely.” She turned to her dad, speculating, “Maybe we can bring him with us next time. Whaddya think?”

His eyes still on the road, Logan countered, “My landlady doesn’t allow pets, honey. I’m sure your cat was just fine with your mom.”

“Nuh-uh! He sleeps with me, Dad, and Mom doesn’t let him up in her bed.”

Logan was tempted to ask Meghan if her damn cat was more important than spending time with her dad, but he refrained from posing the question since, in the first place, he wasn’t sure he’d win that contest, and in the second place, his mind was mostly fixed on his upcoming rendezvous with Nick.

Actually his mind had been on Nick for most of the morning, but now his body was getting into the act. Sweat beaded on his forehead and his pulse sped up whenever he thought of how soon he’d be seeing the man in the flesh. Literally.

When they pulled up in front of the apartment building, Logan considered just dropping the girls off at the door, since his chance of making it to the motel in Pittsburgh by two p.m. was growing slimmer; moreover, he had no desire for another encounter with Linda. It was a short struggle with his conscience. No way was he going to let his little girls drag their suitcases up the stairs unassisted.

The reward for his sacrifice was a stilted exchange with Linda and a five-minute introduction to Boots that included Meghan talking for the cat in a high-pitched, singsong voice and insisting “Dad” give his kitten son a peck on the head.

After a hurried conference about next week’s visitation, Logan made good his escape. He clattered down the staircase, musing that he had a much more satisfactory kissing partner in the offing. He squealed into the parking lot of the Motel Six on two wheels at five minutes after two, half-relieved, half-concerned that there was no sign of Nick’s black Jeep. He shed his disappointment with the thought that Nick was often a little late and there was no real need for worry. Nick wasn’t the kind of guy to stand somebody up.

Besides, the delay afforded Logan a chance to pay for the room this time—he didn’t want Nick paying every time they got together. Back when Logan was meeting up with Linda, he’d always paid for the motel, and he didn’t need Nick treating him like some goddamn girl. As he sat in the truck waiting, jiggling the room key and thinking over that last encounter while stewing about the upcoming one, Logan started to get annoyed that Nick hadn’t given him the chance to split the cost of the room the previous Sunday. *Maybe he’s already treatin’ me like a fuckin’ woman... and he don’t even know yet that I... that maybe I...* Logan felt all the spit dry up in his mouth, and he swallowed several times before he could moisten his tongue enough to breath easily.

The previous night, Logan had lain awake long after he’d heard the girls drift off to sleep on his sofa bed. The cause for his insomnia wasn’t the hard floorboards underneath him but rather his restless mind. He couldn’t help wondering what they were going to do this time. Would it be like last time? Or would they do more? If so, how was it that two men decided which way it would go? Did Nick have any idea what Logan wanted? And the biggest question of all: did Logan even *want* Nick to know?

Now, so close to time zero, those same questions pressed on Logan more insistently. Staring at the floorboard, trying to get his wayward nerves and frenzied emotions under control, Logan was startled by a rap on the passenger window. All of his anxiety, all of his

worry and frustrations, were blown away when he caught sight of a smiling Nick Zales.

Logan felt himself smiling back—an instantaneous, involuntary reaction; a smile that required more than just his lips and teeth. It called his heart and mind up for duty, too. Before he could shut it down, an acknowledgment flitted through his mind: heretofore, that particular smile had been reserved for his daughters alone.

NICK'S effort to get to the hospital as soon as visiting hours allowed so he could spend a few hours with his mom before racing to the motel was well rewarded when he saw Logan's slow-burning smile spark into full flame.

Neither man was smiling when they slipped unobtrusively into the room—number six, this time—a minute later. Nick was surprised by how much anxiety was mixed with his arousal; his tension wasn't alleviated by noting that Logan looked distinctly pale. *Shit, what the hell is wrong with us?*

When he saw Logan turn to the nightstand and drop his watch onto it, Nick decided to simply follow his instincts. For seven long days, he'd been aching to touch this man, so he quickly advanced on Logan and slipped his arms around that slim, masculine waist. With his head on Logan's shoulder, Nick whispered, "I missed you."

Logan's gruff reply, "It's only been a week," was belied by the way he sagged back against Nick and pulled Nick's arms tighter to his body.

Nick lifted his lips from the path they were making across Logan's neck long enough to murmur, "Sure seemed longer."

While his tongue laved a madly pulsing artery, Nick heard Logan gasp, "Yeah, you're right."

Since his mouth was still lingering over the taste of salty skin, Nick made no answer. His hands were busy unbuttoning Logan's shirt. Logan groaned as he turned and thrust his tongue into Nick's mouth.

The kiss became complicated by their effort to continue disrobing without breaking contact.

Nick's fevered mind finally admitted the futility of that endeavor, and he pushed back slightly so he could pull Logan's jeans down. His eyes were immediately drawn to the bulge in the faded boxers. Nick cupped his hand around Logan's swelling cock, enjoying the heat and hardness and the way it jumped at his touch. His trance was broken when Logan grabbed his hands and pulled them up to facilitate the removal of Nick's T-shirt as he rumbled, "You're wearin' too much."

Seconds later, both were naked, and their bodies collided with a force that knocked the breath from Nick's lungs, nearly knocked the sense from him, too. The thrill from a full-contact kiss was just as strong as before—far better than the memory he'd played over and over to get him through the week. Blazing lust shot through him, leaving him dizzy with the need to push Logan down on the bed, climb on him, and rut like a wild ram.

Fortunately, the presence of mind it took to consider the logistics of his impulse put Nick's brain back in the driver's seat long enough to kill that plan entirely. Instead, he took a deep breath and stepped back. Logan gulped air like a drowning man and shot him a quizzical look.

Nick grabbed his discarded shorts and retrieved a small box of condoms and some lube from the pockets. When he noticed Logan watching, Nick smiled and winked at him. His attempt at reassurance seemed unsuccessful. He tossed the stuff on the bedside table and flicked the bedspread down, but Logan was frozen in place, eyes wide. Nick slid onto the bed and patted the space next to him, saying, "Come on, let's get comfortable."

Logan did stretch out next to him but looked anything but comfortable. After giving him a second, it became clear Logan wasn't going to break his silence, so Nick said, "I thought we should talk 'bout what... what you'd like... to do." Logan's body stiffened beside him, and his dick was now at half-mast. Nick pulled him closer, running a lazy hand across the still-heated chest. "It's all right," he whispered. "We ain't gonna do nothin' you don't want. I just need to know... you know, what it is you *do* want."

Logan's brow crinkled as though in puzzlement or deep concentration; he reached out to brush his fingers through Nick hair, gaze fixed on the motion. "I don't know," he mumbled, finally dropping his eyes to Nick's face to ask, "What do you like to do?"

"Everything," Nick laughed. When that answer didn't relax Logan, Nick clarified, "I like what we did last week. I love blow jobs—giving and getting—and I like to fuck, like that a whole lot, and also gettin' fucked. Any of that sound appealing?"

Rather than helping, Nick's list seemed to have put Logan further on edge; he was staring at the sheets, and Nick was concerned that Logan's jaw might crack from the strain of his tightly clenched teeth. He reached over and caressed Logan's chin, pulling it up slightly so Nick could see into those liquid blue eyes. The desperate yearning he found there just about broke his heart. "What's wrong?"

A shuddering sigh broke through Logan's defenses, and he whispered, "So... you've let guys do that, huh? To you."

"What?" Nick queried, though he was beginning to see a streak of daylight in the dark mystery that was Logan Crane. "Fuck me? Sure," he shrugged. "I like it, so why not?"

Logan bit his lip until it looked close to bleeding before answering with a frown, "You know what they say...." He nodded glumly at Nick before continuing. "About takin' it up the ass."

With a toss of his head, Nick retorted, "Sure, I know what they say about takin' it up the ass; they use it like some terrible insult. Just like 'cocksucker'. Well, I do take it up the ass, and I *am* a cocksucker, Logan, and I like it that way. And I ain't gonna let some empty-headed bigots ruin it for me." Nick leaned in and gave Logan a quick kiss before running his tongue across his stubbled jaw. Defiant amusement punctuated his whispered assertion. "I never knew a guy who threw that word around who for sure didn't want his own dick sucked. Maybe that's their problem."

Nick got to his knees and straddled Logan, licking and suck-kissing his way down his sweat-covered neck onto the lightly furred chest. Directing a saucy smile up over the hills of muscled flesh, Nick teased, "See if you find anything insulting about this." By the time he'd

worked his way down to the groin, it was clear that Logan's cock had no issue with Nick's intent.

When he finally took Logan into his mouth, Nick nearly swooned with relief. It felt like he'd been dying to do this for ages. Starting his assault, greedily sucking and slurping, Nick considered the difficulties involved in giving a guy a blow job for the first time—no knowing for sure what he liked, how much pressure, how much attention to the balls, a little teeth action okay or unwelcome.... So why did Nick feel absolutely confident, feel like he knew exactly what Logan wanted? And why, based on the reaction, was he right?

By the time Logan jackknifed off the bed and erupted into his mouth, Nick no longer cared. This wild trip was too good to miss; he was just going to hang on and enjoy the ride. He swallowed down the bitter, salty essence of the man beneath him, already hungry for more—not more seed, but more of Logan. More, especially, of this Logan grinning down at him, eyes glazed with sated lust. Nick pulled himself up to the head of the bed so he could kiss this apparently happy man, almost forgetting his own stiff, leaking cock until he felt it engulfed in a heated clasp and heard Logan growl, "Your turn."

"Damn straight."

Nick's intention to crack wise about his own ironic answer was stopped cold by Logan's husky murmur. "So, what do *you* want?"

Running his tongue around Logan's ear and chewing on the lobe gave Nick a second to think. Deciding his request would probably do as much for Logan as himself, he finally whispered, "I'd like to be inside you, Logan. What do you think about that?"

Logan's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, once, twice, before answering, "I think...." He flicked a heated glance at Nick from beneath his lashes. "I think we should do that."

Trying to ignore his own impatient, rising need, Nick slowly readied Logan to be entered, all the while searching his eyes for reluctance or distress, finding nothing except determination that quickly yielded to pleasure and wonder. Before rolling on the condom, Nick said, "The first time it's better, easier... from behind." Breathing heavily and growing ever more erect, Logan wordlessly complied.

As quickly as he dared, Nick moved into position and slid home—a private phrase he’d always used to describe that mind-numbing sensation of being suddenly engulfed in heat and pressure. “Sliding home”—previously, he’d always associated the term with baseball, with a goal achieved, but for the first time ever, Nick joined his body with another man and felt that “home” was a place he’d found, one he’d been missing his entire life, one he’d been looking for, aching for, without ever acknowledging the quest.

Though he had intended to draw out this first bout of lovemaking as much as possible, once engaged, Nick’s body took over. He’d been craving this connection too long to go slow, to be gentle, to savor. As soon as he heard Logan’s hoarse shout and felt him flowing over his hand, Nick let loose, giving in to an orgasm that pulled him under a crashing wave of ecstasy. He collapsed onto Logan, pushing them flat onto the mattress, sweat welding their skin together.

When Nick regained his senses, he quickly took care of the condom and spooned around Logan’s heavy, warm, slack form. Taking a second to enjoy the tranquil pleasure of the moment, he ran a hand down Logan’s arm, asking, “How do you feel?”

A contented murmur of “Good,” came from Logan’s side of the bed.

Propping himself up on one elbow, Nick teased, “Just good?”

Logan rolled to face Nick, giving him a mock shove as he rejoined playfully, “Fishing for compliments, Zales? You know it was great... right?”

“Well, I know it was for me,” Nick shot back, grabbing Logan’s hand from his shoulder and holding on tight.

“Me, too,” Logan confirmed. “Can’t remember the last time....”

“Yeah?”

Logan shook his head, directing his attention to their clasped hands. After a few deep breaths, he continued, “I can’t remember ’cause... it was never like that before—not for me.”

Rather than admitting that on a certain level, he felt the same way, Nick asked, “Why? Why’d you wait so long? Just because of what happened to your friend?”



Pulling his hand free, Logan levered himself into a sitting position. “Just because? Jesus, Nick! Do you know what it was like? Seein’ that and knowin’ my own brother—”

“Your brother?” Nick sprang up to face Logan, exclaiming, “*Your brother* was the one who did that?”

“Yeah,” Logan admitted, running a hand across his forehead. “I knew it as soon as I seen Jerry on the floor.” He turned sorrow-filled eyes on Nick as he explained, “They was in the same grade, so Jim knew when Jerry had his short days and headed to the shop. ’Sides, Jim had a key to our dad’s garage, same as me.” Seeming lost in a far-off memory, Logan’s gaze drifted to the window as he snorted, “Knew right away it was Jim. Sure as hell it was him and that rotten friend of his, George Syches.”

Nick took a deep breath, reigning in dozens of accusations, and managing to calmly ask, “Did ya ever think of confronting him?”

Logan’s head snapped back to Nick, and his eyes blazed cobalt fire. “Of course I did. As soon as I got back from the hospital, I cornered my brother and told him if he didn’t turn himself in, I was gonna do it for him.”

“But—you didn’t,” Nick said.

“Nope. Because of Daisy, my sister.” The passion gone from his voice, Logan explained woodenly, “She said if I turned my own flesh and blood in to the cops, she’d disown me for good.”

“What about your parents—”

“They were both dead by then, killed in a car accident the year before. Daisy was raising both me and Jim all by herself.”

Raw pain bled from Logan’s broken voice, inciting Nick to reach out and pull him into a protective embrace. “Those bastards,” he fumed. “How could they do that to you?”

Logan seemed to accept the comfort for a minute before he whispered into Nick’s chest, “Maybe they did it... ’cause they knew.”

“Knew what?”

The answer was barely audible. “I’ve always thought that maybe Jim had guessed... that I liked... him.”

“Jerry?” When Logan nodded, Nick pondered for a second before confirming, “You mean you were attracted to him?”

Logan pulled back, silently considering the question before saying, “I think so. I didn’t know it for what it was at the time, but lookin’ back... I think maybe... maybe I was.”

“So fucking what,” Nick raged. “I bet your brother didn’t even know. How could he if you weren’t even aware of it?” When Logan only shrugged in reply, Nick said, “And even if he had some inkling, you think that makes it your fault, not his?”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t Jim’s fault, just that if Jerry hadn’t gotten mixed up with me... none of that would’ve happened to him.”

“Logan, put the blame where it belongs, on your brother and his friend. And yeah, to some extent, your sister.” Nick whispered, “Come ’ere,” and pulled him down until they were once again spooned on the bed.

Nick let the skin-to-skin contact soothe them both, thinking they were done with the subject, until Logan quietly said, “I never told anyone else *any* of that before.”

“Not even Linda?”

“No.”

For a few minutes, the only sound in the room was their synchronized breathing; Nick spent the time contemplating whether or not Logan’s revelation required a response from him. When he heard a soft snore, he knew they really were done talking—for the time being. His mind occupied with thoughts of fate, guilt, and confessions, Nick stayed awake while Logan napped.

FULLY dressed and freshly showered, Nick stood over the bed and jostled it deliberately. Logan cracked open first one eye and then the other before saying, “You want somethin’, Nick?”

“Yeah, I wanta know if you’re gettin’ up.”

Logan rolled over and stretched, saying, "I doubt it. Not after comin' twice not more 'an..." he grabbed his watch and finished, "a hour ago." While Nick enjoyed a laugh, Logan asked, "What's your hurry? You got somewhere else you gotta be?"

"Well, if I'm not mistaken, I saw some of the T-bird's parts in the back of your truck, and I figured we got some work to do. Seein' as it's almost four, I think we'd better get to the garage. Soon."

"Shit," Logan exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "I almost forgot about that. Just give me a sec."

"You always like this after sex?"

As he disappeared into the bathroom, Logan tossed over his shoulder, "No. I ain't."

Rather than ponder that statement for long, Nick yelled through the closed door, "You hungry?"

Logan popped his head out of the bathroom, a towel around his neck. "Now that you mention it, I could eat a horse."

"There's a pretty good takeout place down the street. I could pick us up some burgers and meet you at Acken's. Sound good?"

"Sounds great."

Nick headed for the door, asking, "Want beer or pop?"

A frown appeared on Logan's face. He leaned against the doorframe and started sternly, "No beer—" He seemed to catch himself and amended, "No beer for me when I'm workin'. Pop is fine."

Nick reflected briefly before answering evenly, "Yeah, I can see that. Pop for me, too." He moved to leave but stopped with his hand on the doorknob. Taking a deep breath, Nick resolved to follow through on a decision he'd made while Logan slept. Turning back to the room's interior, he looked at Logan and said, "Listen, thanks for tellin' me that, about your brother. Couldn't've been easy."

Logan nodded and tugged on the towel around his neck before mumbling, "Thanks for listening." He gave Nick a crooked smile. "And for not bein'... put off by my crazy family."

"No problem." Positive he'd heard some uncertainty in that last statement, Nick rolled his eyes, adding, "Besides, I got the market

cornered there.” He slipped out of the door after promising, “See ya in a bit.”

Double Days Famous Hamburgers was surprisingly packed for a Sunday afternoon, and it took Nick twenty-five minutes to make it to the head of the line. Consequently, Logan handily beat him to the shop and was already unloading parts when Nick got to Arlington Avenue. He swung the loaded bag of food over his arm and helped Logan get the parts up to the shop.

Nick tossed a burger to Logan, asking, “So what’re we gonna do today?”

“We gotta get the crankshaft, rods, and pistons ready for final assembly.”

Nick saw that Logan had some parts laid out on the newspaper-covered workbench. “Got quite a bit done last week, huh?”

Logan shrugged the praise off and opened his burger, protesting, “I just cleaned the crankshaft and pistons real good and left ’em to dry. There’s a lot more to do this week. We gotta get off all the burrs and scratches from the connectin’ rods and pistons.”

“Okay.” After swallowing a huge bite of his burger, Nick asked, “We use the sandpaper for that?”

Logan took a swig of his coke before answering. “That or a deburring knife.” After setting the bottle down, he displayed the tool in question. “Then we gotta go over ever’thin’ with the Scotch Brite.”

They fell into an easy rhythm with Logan performing the initial work on each part before turning the final polishing over to Nick. He was squinting down the length of one piston, checking for scratches, when Logan said, “Forgot to ask before, how’s your mom?”

Nick winced at the subject, admitting, “Not great. She’s got a feeding tube in now.”

“Shit.” Nick heard a soft thud that must have been Logan putting a part on the bench. He looked over to find Logan staring at him with concern. “When’d that happen?”

Showing far less distress than he felt, Nick answered, “Friday. It’s not as bad as it sounds. The doctor says it’s only temporary, so she

doesn't lose more weight. But... it's still rough seein' her like that." Before Logan could ask any more questions, Nick changed the subject by asking, "How was the weekend with your girls?"

"It was... good."

Sure that the truth of the matter was contained in that pause, Nick prodded, "But...?"

Logan picked the piston up again and went back to sanding, explaining, "They were kinda... let's just say they were a little harder to deal with than before."

"Weekend visitation with you is a change; they could just be adjusting to that." Nick almost left the subject in that comfortable place, but feeling an impulse to give Logan the whole truth, he added, "Or it could be that some of their anger is finally coming out."

Braced for an outburst, Nick was surprised when Logan just nodded sadly and said, "Yeah. Trudy warned me about that."

"Good."

His voice took on an edge as Logan retorted, "Sure, she found time to do that after makin' me sign that goddamn *no violence contract*."

"That's pretty standard with her for joint counseling."

"Why? Like I'm gonna haul off an' hit Linda right in her office?" Logan objected. He held out a piston to Nick while adding, "It's stupid—and insulting."

Instinctively, Nick snapped to his boss's defense, grabbing the part while insisting, "Trudy knows what she's doin', Logan."

"Yeah, then why's she tryin' so hard to get me and Linda back—" Logan bit down on the rest of his objection.

He needn't have bothered, since Nick heard the rest anyway. Unintentionally using his counselor voice, Nick asked, "You don't want to get back with Linda, do you?"

Nick had to strain to catch Logan's soft reply. "No."

"Then don't. Tell the truth."

Logan started on a connecting rod with unnecessary vigor while snarling, “I thought you didn’t wanta let Trudy know about us.”

“Fuck!” Nick put the piston down on the workbench and threw up his hands. “I didn’t realize a homosexual affair was the only grounds for divorce in the state of Pennsylvania. Just tell ’em both the marriage wasn’t workin’ for you and you want out. Which is the truth.”

“You think it’s that easy, huh?” Logan hurled a spent piece of sandpaper at the trash can while insisting, “You don’t understand. What would I tell my girls? You think it would be easy tellin’ ’em I won’t be comin’ home—ever?”

Taking a minute to absorb that objection, Nick finally offered, “Easier than explainin’ why you broke your promise.”

Hand suspended halfway to the pack of sandpaper, Logan whirled to face Nick. “What promise?”

“The one where you said you’d do your best to make sure you never hurt Linda again. Remember that?” The only answer Nick got was Logan taking up a fresh piece of sandpaper and going back to work. He stepped over and touched Logan on the arm, saying, “Just think about it, okay?”

Logan didn’t look up from the rod but sighed, “It’s harder than you can imagine.”

Nodding at Logan’s bent head, Nick admitted, “I guess it is.”

By silent accord, they let all serious discussion lapse and talked about nothing but the car and the Steelers’ prospects for a repeat championship while they worked. Ninety minutes later, they stood at the shop door together, looking over their handiwork with tired but pleased expressions. Nick asked Logan, “They gonna have the rest of the parts ready by next week?”

“They should.” Logan shuffled his feet nervously and reseated his baseball cap before saying, “So... we ain’t gonna get together again... ’til then?” He squinted over at Nick, clarifying. “Next Sunday, I mean.”

Nick felt a smile splitting his face in half. “We don’t have to wait. You busy Tuesday night?”

“Nope.” Logan smiled back just as wide, adding, “Your turn to get the room.”

Nick nodded and ran a hand over his mouth. Suddenly he said, “Hey, why don’t you come to my place instead?” The look on Logan’s face told Nick his offer had surprised both of them.

Recovering quickly, Logan agreed, “Sure. Uh, where is it?”

“Observatory Hill.” Nick found a piece of paper on Dave’s desk and scrawled out directions before he could change his mind. He tucked the paper into Logan’s shirt pocket after collecting a dazzling, two-minute-long, breath-stealing kiss as a reward.

On the drive home, he had to contend with a voice in his head asking what the hell he was up to. His answer, “Big deal, I’m havin’ a friend over to my house—high time,” didn’t fool Nick or quiet the voice.

## Chapter 12: Always Something More to Say

*The truth is always a compound of two half-truths, and you never reach it, because there is always something more to say.*

—Tom Stoppard

THOUGH it was still early on Monday morning, Nick muttered his tenth salty oath of the day, cursing Microsoft, Bill Gates, and computers in general. He was frantically trying to finish his budget report, and Excel was definitely not cooperating. The quarterly budgets had actually been due the previous week, but Nick hadn't gotten around to preparing his. He rationalized his tardiness with the thought that technically it was still September, so he wasn't *really* late. He was rooting around in the top drawer of his desk, looking for some receipts, when the phone rang. Nick didn't bother to look up, just grabbed the receiver and put it to his ear. His greeting, a curt "Nick Zales," put his irritation on full display, not that he cared at the moment.

"Well, good morning to you, too." Trudy Gerard's voice was split between amusement and admonishment.

"Sorry, Trudy. What can I do for you?"

"You can tell me why your butt isn't in my office as of ten minutes ago."

Nick's eyes snapped to the clock display in the corner of his computer screen. *Fuck! How did it get so late?* Though he'd gotten in two hours early, Nick's plan to get his budget done before his meeting with Trudy was now in shambles. "Sorry, I lost track of the time; I'll be there in a minute." In an effort to stop his morning from getting any worse, Nick diligently saved his spreadsheet before leaving his office. Whatever paltry progress he'd made on his budget report, it was better than starting from scratch.



On the way to Trudy's office, Nick grabbed a fresh cup of coffee, sure he'd need the caffeine jolt to get through the meeting. He found out how right he was ten minutes later. After a brief chat about his mom's situation, Trudy started grilling Nick about his late budget report. "Janice says your department expense accruals aren't in yet. What's the problem there?"

Since he was feeling that he'd already worn out the word "sorry" that morning, Nick explained, "I'm afraid I didn't make it a priority last week, but I've been working on it all morning and I'll turn it in before I go home today." Immediately, Nick started wondering how he was going to keep that promise, since he had a full day of sessions and a four p.m. meeting with his mom's doctor.

Trudy peered sternly over her reading glasses as she reproved, "It's not like you to be late, Nick; Janice said she sent you two reminders. She does need a full week to get the site report together."

"I know," Nick acknowledged tiredly. He sipped his bitter black coffee, silently hoping Trudy was done with her lecture. Fortunately his boss did turn her attention to his clients, and things went smoothly for a while. Nick was able to relate two pieces of good news about Cheryl. "She and the kids will be moving to Steubenville to live with her great aunt in a couple of weeks. And I've found a continuing education grant for her. It's aimed at disadvantaged, adult students. I think she's a shoo-in. And Cheryl is all over it—she has most of her paperwork done. I think she could start taking classes in the winter."

"That's great," Trudy enthused, her warm smile appearing briefly. "How much tuition will the grant cover?"

Nick consulted Cheryl's file before answering. "It should cover about two courses per semester. That's really as much as she should take on with working full time anyway."

"And what about her sessions with you?"

"We're going to cut back to twice a month."

Some sardonic observation was coming—Trudy's quirked eyebrow convinced Nick of that. He was not disappointed. "Good. That should give you more time to spend with Sheila Palmer."

A resigned sigh escaped from Nick before he said, "You heard."

“I usually hear when a client runs out of here crying. What happened?”

“Sheila was all excited that her husband *voluntarily* entered anger-management therapy. I had to explain that he doesn’t have an anger problem, he has an abuse problem.” Aggravation sharpened each word as he continued. “I also had to tell her that if she went back to him, the abusive behavior would undoubtedly return within a month.”

Trudy studied Nick intently before suggesting calmly, “That wasn’t very diplomatic.”

“She doesn’t need diplomacy, Trudy. She was already talking about giving Dean another chance. She needs the truth,” Nick snapped.

“Maybe she needs both.” Nick was struggling to control his temper when Trudy observed, “You can *usually* manage both.”

“What the hel—” Nick caught his rising anger and amended more quietly, “What the heck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you’re under a lot of stress right now, and I’m worried about you. Knowing you—and I do—that bleak report you gave me on your mom isn’t even the worst of it.” Nick wasn’t about to congratulate Trudy on her powers of perception, so he stubbornly remained silent. His boss leaned forward and fixed her shrewd eyes on him; Nick had a moment to appreciate the true concern he saw there before Trudy asked, “Are you sure you don’t need a leave of absence?”

“Jesus, Trudy!” Nick huffed. “One late budget and an over-emotional client, and all of a sudden I’m not fit to do my job?”

Trudy shook her head sadly, but her voice was crisp as she retorted, “I didn’t say you weren’t fit, and you know it. I said you’re obviously stressed, and you look worn out. I’m offering you the option of some FMLA time until your mom is out of the woods, so dial down the outrage.”

With more confidence than he actually felt, Nick answered firmly, “Things are a little rough right now, I admit it, but I don’t need FMLA. I can deal with the stress.” The thought of the stress relief he had planned for Tuesday night enabled Nick to give Trudy a sincere smile. “But thanks, I appreciate the concern.”

Apparently his firm assurance and convincing smile mollified Trudy enough that she dropped the subject of a leave of absence. “Is there anything I *can* do to help?”

“How about we cut this meeting short so I can work on my overdue budget?” Nick asked.

Trudy pushed her chair back and waved her hand at the open door. “Done.”

Breaking into surprised laughter, Nick joked, “Whoa, who are you and what have you done with Trudy Gerard?”

“Careful, smartass. I could just as easily extend this meeting for another two hours.”

His hands held in mock surrender, Nick said, “I take it back. Every word.”

“Okay, then. Get out of here.”

Nick leapt to his feet and hurried back to his office, determined to finish his budget report. He did turn it in by the end of the day, but only by delaying Marta Cabrera’s counseling session until Tuesday, though the only slot he had for her was at the end of his day. As he climbed into his Jeep, Nick sighed, thinking longingly of his date with Logan the next night. He would still have plenty of time if all went well, but since not much in his life was trending that way lately, he decided to warn Logan he might be late. Nick headed for Allegheny Suburban Hospital, hoping for some good news for a change.

AS SOON as Logan turned off Route 19 onto Matson Boulevard, he relaxed slightly. The calming factor wasn’t just that he had nearly arrived at his destination; it was that the neighborhood was so obviously a working class one. The houses were mainly modest, two-story structures with older cars lining the streets, and kids could be seen—and heard—playing on many of the small front lawns. Logan didn’t know much about the city of Pittsburgh, but Nick had referred to this area as Observatory Hill, and to his ears that sounded like some

fancy kind of neighborhood. He was glad to find nothing could have been further from the truth.

When Logan parked behind Nick's Jeep in front of 54 Matson Boulevard, he saw that the place was a small brick house with a slight incline of steps running beside the driveway. The steps led up to a front porch that stretched across the front of the house. Seeing the Jeep had been another relief. Nick was evidently already home, even though Logan was a few minutes earlier than the appointed hour. Nick had left a message on his cell phone that morning saying he had a late counseling session but should be home by seven, traffic permitting.

As Logan trotted up the steps, he wondered why Nick didn't park in his driveway, but upon noticing a well-worn basketball hoop attached to the porch railing, he considered that as one possible answer. Before he got to the front door, he was greeted by the smell of burning charcoal; Logan had thought it was a neighbor's grill until he stepped onto the porch and saw a cast-iron hibachi smoldering in the corner. Nick evidently had immediate plans for dinner, which delighted Logan's stomach but sorely disappointed another part of his anatomy.

That part of him had grown more impatient for this meeting with each passing hour, so much so that towards the end of the day, Logan had feared a coworker might notice the distinctive bulge that made him grateful for his loose-fitting work jeans. During his after-work shower, he'd soaped his crotch well, idly considering taking the edge off his impatience before deciding against it. He'd also taken care to clean the rear quarter well; unlike his Sunday morning shower, this time Logan didn't have to pretend there was no particular reason for the attention, though he still preferred not to examine his craving too closely.

In that motel room with Nick, *nothing* had seemed wrong. In fact, everything they'd done had seemed exactly right to Logan, in a way nothing he'd ever done with a woman had. He fit with Nick—in every sense of the word—like the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle falling into place. The only interaction before in his life that had ever felt that natural had involved a wrench and a gasoline engine.

Unfortunately, the further away he was from Nick—in both time and space—the more insubstantial that comfort became. As he shaved Monday morning, though the welcome soreness in his ass was

subsiding, Logan had stared at his reflection in the mirror, wondering if there was some visible sign of his weekend activity. Was he now marked in any noticeable way? Would other men now sniff him out like wolves did a weak member of the pack?

However, at work, none of the guys seemed cognizant of any change—great or small—in Logan Crane. The only verbal observation had come that afternoon from Jeanie, one of the more flirtatious checkout girls at the garden center. She had coyly asked if “that smile” was for her, and Logan had adroitly brushed her off with the answer that his smile had been for quitting time and nothing more.

Of course none of that mattered to him now; now that he was on the verge of seeing Nick, nothing, no unresolved questions or qualms nor his fluttering nerves, stayed his eager hand from pressing firmly on the doorbell. When Nick opened the door and let him in, Logan was as lost in a haze of dark eyes and white smile as he’d been upon first meeting the man—but this time he didn’t need to hide from the reason. Even better, this time he got to kiss him, and Logan immediately pressed forward, every part of him engaged: thrusting tongue, grasping hands, and aching cock, a kiss without surcease until his lungs protested and the need for air finally beat back his need for Nick.

When his power of speech returned, Logan grinned back at a smiling Nick, gasping out, “Nice place you got here.”

An equally winded Nick answered, “Thanks. It’s kinda small and needs some work, but I like it.” He paused uncertainly before offering, “You wanna tour?”

A devil who rarely saw the light of day popped out in Logan, and he responded archly, “Sure. Let’s start with the bedroom.”

Laughter bubbled out of Nick and bounced off the walls of the narrow entryway. “I can’t believe I’m turnin’ that offer down, but I thought we’d have dinner first.” A sly grin broke across his face as he added, “Course, I could just leave the burgers in the fridge.”

There was a renewal of hostilities between Logan’s gut and his dick, but the winner turned out to be the part of Logan touched by the thought of Nick bothering to cook for him—his heart. Though as he trailed Nick down the hall to the kitchen, there was no conscious acknowledgment of the victor on Logan’s part.

He watched Nick retrieve a plate containing four hamburger patties from the ancient fridge, and Logan took a second to glance around at his surroundings. The furniture, worn and slightly dowdy, matched the refrigerator, all of it a far cry from the sleek bachelor pad Logan had been picturing. Belatedly, Logan remembered that Nick wasn't really living the bachelor life. "How's your mom doing?" he asked while gladly accepting Nick's silent offer of a cold IC Light.

Nick took a long pull of his own beer before saying, "Not great. But I met with the infectious disease specialist last night, and he put her on a more aggressive antibiotic regimen. He says he's had some success with it in the past on advanced cases."

"That's good," Logan answered, though there really didn't seem to be much good in that report, but he wasn't about to add his own dose of gloom. He followed Nick out to the porch and watched him flip the burgers onto the miniature grill before asking, "Did they ever figure out what brought on all this trouble for your mom?"

Nick shrugged sadly before tilting his head up at Logan and saying, "Nah. The one doctor was telling me it happens to a lot of Alzheimer's patients—supposedly they forget how to swallow properly or something...." He rolled his eyes at Logan, adding, "I've told him three times now that my mom doesn't *have* Alzheimer's."

Puzzled, Logan stammered, "But, uh, I thought you said your mom was... um, demented?"

The porch light was dim, but Logan could still see a crease that spoke of pain appear on Nick's forehead as he explained, "She is, but it's not from Alzheimer's—it's from brain damage."

"Sorry. How awful—for both of you."

Logan took a long swallow of beer, debating whether or not to ask how she'd been injured when Nick blurted, "My dad did it to her."

Shock and sorrow stole any eloquence Logan might have possessed. "Fuck! That's brutal." Nick was busying himself with the burgers, so Logan softly asked the back of his head, "How old were you?"

Nick straightened up and looked at Logan, answering in an audibly controlled tone, "Twelve. I had just turned twelve." Logan was

still struggling to formulate a reasonable response when Nick started talking in a jumpy register. “Never gonna forget that birthday. Ya see, it was—well, not my fault, I know that....” Logan heard a man trying to convince himself more than his audience but stayed wisely silent as Nick continued, “Anyway, I got this basketball hoop for my birthday, and I wanted to put it up. God forbid the old man help me, you know?”

His own father would have jumped at the chance to help either of his sons with such a task, so Logan really couldn’t relate, but he nodded, encouraging Nick to go on.

“I wasn’t allowed to touch his tools, so my mom gave me this useless old ball-peen hammer used to belong to her dad. I could’ve hammered all night with that thing, for all the good it would’ve done me, so I snuck into the shed and got my dad’s brand new hammer without her knowin’. Had the hoop up in no time, but I got so excited with the idea of tryin’ out my birthday present that I forgot to put the hammer away—left it layin’ there in the grass.”

Logan had a sickening feeling he knew where this was going and wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the details, but, remembering how good it had felt to unburden himself, he prodded, “Forgot all about it, huh?”

“Yeah, until I was in school the next day and it started pourin’ rain.” Nick squinted off in the distance, staring at the hazy moon as he polished off his beer. Seeming fortified, he continued. “The old man came home early, found the hammer layin’ in the mud, and went berserk.” There was a long pause, and Logan thought he might be done, but with a great heave of his chest, Nick added, “Beat the hell out of my mom with it.”

“Fuckin’ bastard,” Logan fumed, his hands tightening on the neck of his beer bottle, a poor substitute for the real object of his fury. “Can’t believe a man could do somethin’ like that to his wife.”

“I could, with him. I wasn’t even surprised.” Nick hurled his empty bottle at the recycling bin in the opposite corner, hitting it dead center. He brushed his hand across his eyes and, in a choked voice, continued, “I prayed to God that whole day, begging Him to let me get home before my dad. I was still sayin’ ‘please, oh please’ as I ran home from the bus stop. Right up ’til I spotted the ambulance in front of my house and saw the cops loadin’ my dad into a squad car. I knew right

away what'd happened. Right then I figured out that God—if He exists—sure don't hear the prayers of Nick Zales."

Grasping for some comfort to offer, Logan stepped close to Nick, saying, "You know, Sister Ciera says when it seems like God's abandoned you, that's when He's workin' the hardest for you."

Nick snorted with bitter amusement, retorting, "Yeah? She also thinks there's hope for guys like my dad."

He almost let it go, but something made Logan say, "And me."

"What?" Nick was staring at him like he had started speaking in Swahili.

"They ain't all like your dad. Maybe some of them're like me."

Nick waved his hand as though he were batting Logan's suggestion away. "You're nothin' like... those other guys. Any of 'em."

"Bet that ain't the way Linda sees it." This was a recent revelation to Logan, one that he had avoided for months—one that had caused him some sleepless nights of late. Now that he'd finally said it out loud, he was anxious to hear Nick's answer.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean..." Nick trailed off as he squatted down to check the burgers. "They're done," he announced a trifle too heartily. "Come on, let's eat."

Logan was as glad to let the unhappy topic drop as he was to eat, though there was a part of him that wished Nick had finished his thought. It was good to know Nick didn't lump him in with those other guys, but Logan would have liked to hear the basis for that belief.

Over dinner, Logan told Nick that the machine shop had all of the Thunderbird's reconditioned parts ready, and they could probably finish the engine that Sunday if they devoted most of the day to the task.

"Hot damn! You mean it might actually be a car again instead of lookin' like the end row of a junkyard?"

Logan licked a glob of ketchup and meat juice off his thumb, then cautioned, "Well, it's still gonna look pretty rough until we get it painted. Given any thought to what color you want it?"



“Red, it’s gotta be red—just like God intended,” Nick laughed.

“First time I ever heard anyone confuse Ford with God.”

Nick laughed even harder as he stood up and collected their empty plates. He dumped them unceremoniously in the sink, then turned towards the table, asking, “Had enough?”

Logan jumped up and trapped Nick against the sink, one steely arm on either side of Nick’s body. “Enough food, yeah. But I want you for dessert,” he growled before diving for Nick’s mouth.

The kiss continued and built upon itself, Nick only briefly breaking to say, “You read my mind,” before pulling Logan back for more. Logan ground against Nick’s hard body and harder erection, sparks of passion igniting when cock met cock until Nick grabbed his hand and said, “Come on, let’s christen my bed before we think of doin’ it in the sink.”

That startling revelation was tucked away for later contemplation as Logan eagerly followed Nick up the stairs. When they got to Nick’s sparsely furnished bedroom, Logan felt Nick pushing him towards the bed and was happy to go along for the ride. He felt the edge of the mattress hit the back of his knees and fell purposely back onto it, dragging Nick down on top of him.

The solid weight of Nick felt so good, so right, and Logan tightened his arms to keep that man right where he belonged, though Nick seemed a most willing prisoner, entwining his legs with Logan’s and returning the ardor in full. Logan pulled Nick’s head down for a deep, probing kiss, lips rough, tongue wet and voracious, teeth nipping at tender lips; Logan moaned deep in his throat, wanting more contact. There was too much cloth between them, he wanted—*needed*—to feel Nick naked against him, needed it now.

Reading his mind or the tremors in his body, Nick joined Logan in removing any obstacles, stripping clothing off himself and off Logan. After shucking his jeans, Logan reached into the pocket and pulled out his “goods.” He dropped the brand new condoms and lube on the rumpled sheets, grinning proudly at Nick. Nick laughed in return, pointing at the bedside stand where a twin set of supplies waited. Logan threw his jeans over the edge of the bed and smirked at his lover, saying, “Well, that should last us—for tonight.”

Nick seemed to agree with that sentiment, rolling on top again until he was straddling Logan. A wicked smile lit those intense brown eyes from within as Nick bent down and puffed in his ear, “Been thinking of this all day. Thinking of what I was going to do to you, how you was gonna taste and look....” He breathed in deep, adding, “And smell.”

Logan groaned deep in his throat, his cock growing ever more erect; his eyes fluttered closed when he felt a tongue snaking from the side of his neck down to his collarbone, felt the mouth grow more demanding, sucking and biting. Logan knew there was going to be a mark there but couldn't care right then, was inspired to launch his own attack on Nick's neck, intending to return the favor and finding the taste of Nick's skin and sweat enthralling.

By the time Nick thrust his slick fingers into Logan, he was more than ready for the welcome intrusion and thrust down greedily onto Nick's hand. Logan was taken with the sight of Nick's face—pupils dilated with lust, tousled hair looking wild. He didn't want to lose that view, delighted to do it this way, so glad when Nick pulled his legs up and placed his cock in position.

Nick teasingly placed only the tip inside and then, committing sweet torture, ever so slowly thrust inside. The rhythm gradually picked up until each stroke was pushing Logan higher and higher, nothing could be better—until Nick grabbed his heated cock and started stroking him inside and out. He was nearly delirious with the sensation of Nick being everywhere, his body surrounded by Nick, wrapped securely in his man.

Logan struggled to keep his eyes open despite the overwhelming sensations, wanting to watch Nick this time, see the obvious pleasure dripping off him. His own nerves were singed by the sight. Logan couldn't stand it any more, had to let go, found that watching his come splatter onto Nick's chest had to be the most goddamned erotic thing he'd ever seen. An elated grin stretched across his face as Nick joined him in orgasm seconds later. Nick kept them joined for a shuddering moment, then rolled off and collapsed onto the mattress, allowing Logan to stretch his long legs out with a primal groan of satisfaction and pull his lover into the sheltering circle of his arm.

NICK woke with Logan's body half-draped around his. He'd never been one for cuddling, and neither had most of the men he'd slept with, but something about this was okay. More than okay. It was damn good. A tongue rasping against the back of his neck and a deep rumble in his ear, "Mmmm," let Nick know that Logan was also awake.

He let Logan continue his ministrations for a few seconds before stretching and rolling over to give his bed partner a cheeky grin. "I see you're up."

"Not yet, but I'm gettin' there," Logan joked, though his eyes were searching the bedside table. Nick figured Logan was looking at the clock and glanced over to see that it was 10:30. *Still time for another round—I hope.* However, Logan evidently hadn't found what he needed on the table, since he was now looking over at Nick's dresser.

"What're you lookin' for?"

"An ashtray." Logan pushed the sweaty blond strands off his face, saying, "Guess you don't smoke in here, huh?"

"I don't smoke at all."

"Oh, right." Logan shrugged sheepishly. "Been thinking of quitting, myself. Krista nags me 'bout it all the time."

"Good idea," Nick declared, though he didn't mind the smoky taste that was part of Logan's unique tang. It reminded him of his own days as a smoker. Nick leaned in for a quick kiss before pulling back to say, "It's rough to quit. I won't lie to you 'bout that."

Though apparently engrossed in playing with the damp curls on Nick's chest, Logan asked, "You used to smoke?"

"Yeah, all through high school. Then I showed up at Carnegie-Mellon, and it seemed like none of the kids in my classes smoked. It was bad enough being a scholarship kid—didn't need 'nother reason to stick out."

"Seems to me havin' a scholarship is somethin' to be proud of."

“Not at that school.” Nick paused as memories of those first lonely weeks at college, when he was sure he’d never fit in, rushed upon him. “And especially not my scholarship. See, it was for... kids who...” Nick swallowed, wondering why this was so hard—surely Logan had guessed the rest by now.

“Kids who were gay?” Logan ventured into the breach.

That suggestion pulled a surprised laugh out of Nick, and he relaxed slightly, enough to say, “No. Carnegie-Mellon wasn’t looking to build a super-race of genius queers. Besides, I didn’t even come out ’til my junior year.” He forced the rest out in a rush. “It was a partial scholarship for kids with a parent in prison.” Nick snorted, “I was able to go to CMU ’cause my dad went to Fayette County.”

Logan reached over to massage Nick’s shoulder gently while asking, “Is that where he died?”

“He ain’t dead—’cept to me,” Nick answered sourly. *Wish he was.* “He would’ve been due to get out soon, but he got some years tacked on back when he first went in.”

“Why?”

“I heard he caused a bunch of trouble his first few years in the place.”

“You ain’t never gone to see him?” Logan asked, pulling Nick close.

Nick snuggled in gratefully, murmuring, “Hell no. What for? So I can thank him for making me an accessory to the crime?”

“You ain’t—”

“Responsible,” Nick cut in with a sigh. “I know, but I can’t help thinkin’ how different everything would’ve been if I had just put that goddamn hammer away. Or had listened to my mom and not touched it in the first place.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t blame you,” protested Logan firmly.

“No? Right after she moved in, I was putting up that hoop out front, and she came out to tell me I better not be usin’ my dad’s good hammer.”

Logan stroked Nick's hair, murmuring, "That don't mean nothin', Nick. You said she's got that dementia."

"I know, I know," Nick agreed faintly. And he did know. He knew how kids from abusive homes tended to blame themselves, and he knew how fucked up that was, but he also knew that his case was slightly different. Tired of the subject, not just from this discussion but also from a lifetime of regret, Nick felt the need for distraction, and he knew one damn fine way to accomplish that goal.

"Do you wanna...." Nick chewed his lip for a second, wondering if this was a good idea but continuing anyway. "Spend the night?" There was no immediate answer, and though Logan's face held nothing but surprise, Nick read the hesitation as a no. "It's okay," he soothed. "I know that's a long drive back to North Braddock to make first thing in the morning."

"I could stay," Logan blurted. "I'd just have to get outta here by...." He squinted at the ceiling, evidently doing some calculations. "By about six."

The surge of happiness Nick felt at Logan's offer was strong and swift, banishing any gloom that had crept into the room with the topic of his father. "That's fine. I can get out early, too. I've got a bunch of work that's been piling up. That'll give me a chance to get some stuff done before my first finance session."

Logan quickly rolled on top of Nick, pinning him to the mattress and saying, "So. That means we got all night."

"I thought you had to get up early," Nick teased.

"I'll lose a little sleep for 'nother bout—or two—with you."

Nick arched up for a kiss, whispering, "Glad to hear it."

LOGAN yawned and shook his head as he inched along in the early evening traffic. It had been a long day after a night of little sleep. He and Nick had gone at it until well after midnight and had even taken time for a quickie first thing in the morning. Logan grinned at the

memory. The sacrifice of sleep had been well worth it, even if it had left him ill-prepared for his session with Linda and Trudy.

The dashboard clock showed six forty-five p.m.; that meant Linda's session had already started. Trudy had arranged it so that Linda would start half an hour before Logan, and then he would continue on for the same period after Linda left. Trudy said they'd do this for a few weeks, since it was likely there were still things they weren't ready to share as a couple.

Logan wasn't really ready to share much with either woman, though he did finally feel ready to make amends as much as possible with Linda, even if the idea of moving back in with her filled him with dread. *Gotta remember, it'll mean moving back in with my girls, too.* Grim determination to do right by his daughters was the only thing keeping Logan on this course of action.

He did plan to put the reconciliation off as long as possible, hoping to stretch out his time with Nick as much as he could. *And then what, get back with Linda and never see Nick again?* The thought was staggering. But Nick didn't seem like the kind of guy who would settle for being a piece on the side. Luckily for Logan, he had arrived at Trudy's office building and could set aside this dilemma while he concentrated on getting through the next hour.

When he knocked on the door to Trudy's office, Logan was surprised to hear faint laughter coming from the room. Tears, he would have expected—but mirth? *What the hell?* Trudy's voice boomed, "Come in," and Logan walked in to find them both smiling.

Trudy pointed at the chair next to Linda, directing, "Have a seat. Linda was just telling me some stories about work. Did you know she got promoted last month?"

Mildly surprised at the news, Logan shook his head. He congratulated Linda as he plopped down in the chair. When Linda had taken the job as an administrative assistant at a collection agency in North Braddock, Logan had figured it to be a temporary situation. Personally, he couldn't think of a worse place to work. But Linda had said it wasn't that bad and had always spoken fondly of the energy and camaraderie of the place. "You ain't hounding deadbeats for a living now, are you?" he offered awkwardly.

“No, I’m the office manager.” Linda seemed to swell with pride at the announcement. “They gave me a real nice raise, too.”

Logan nearly answered that he supposed a collection agency was one of the few places doing well in the present economy, but he changed his mind, thinking that might come off as a cheap shot at Linda’s good news. “That’s great. I’m sure you deserve it. You always worked real hard there.”

“Thanks. And how are things at the garden center?”

“Good, real good. Gettin’ busy again.” Logan almost cringed to hear himself chatting with his wife like a near-stranger, but the sudden realization hit him: wasn’t that, deep down, what they were—and always had been—to each other?

Trudy broke into his reverie, saying, “Linda and I were talking about her goals. Why don’t you tell Logan what you were telling me?”

“I was talking with my other counselor about getting some formal training in accounting.”

While Logan was searching for something to say other than repeating “That’s great,” Trudy prompted, “I was thinking of the more personal goals we were discussing, Linda.”

“Oh yeah,” Linda breathed while nervously twirling a lock of her hair around her finger. She turned beseeching eyes on Logan, explaining, “It’s like I was telling you on the phone that time. I want us to be close again, Logan. To laugh and talk, really talk ’bout things. Remember how we laughed and had so much fun on our honeymoon? I want us to be like that again.”

Logan did remember that week in the Poconos, back when he’d still thought he might find some passion for Linda, back when he was actually kind of proud about the baby Linda was carrying, thinking it proved something about his manhood. Now he knew the truth, knew what he really wanted, knew Linda could never provide it for him. In fact, he couldn’t imagine anyone other than Nick Zales could.

For the rest of the joint session, as Logan saw the false hope he was provoking in Linda, he felt like two men. One man who was going through the motions as the Logan of old always had, and another one

who was standing back and observing the deceit with a disgusted but slightly detached air.

By the time Linda walked out, leaving him alone with Trudy, Logan had decided. He was determined to put an end to this charade. Nick was right. If he got back with Linda, he would end up hurting her in the long run, emotionally for sure and maybe even physically again. Who knew what he would be driven to if he had to go back to that miserable life of hiding and constant pretense?

He looked up to find Trudy looking at him expectantly. “I’m sorry, I missed that.”

Trudy shook her head as if he were a naughty pupil. “I said that you never really shared with Linda what *your* hopes for the marriage are. We need to get you—”

“I can’t,” Logan exclaimed suddenly, every fiber of his being protesting against the future she was holding out to him.

Frowning in puzzlement, Trudy asked, “You can’t what?”

Before he lost his nerve, he stated, “I can’t go back to that....” He swallowed hard and added in an almost pleading tone, “I don’t wanna be married to Linda anymore.” He bit his lip before adding softly, “I don’t think I ever did.”

To his surprise, Trudy was smiling at him. In a tone of indulgent forbearance, she said, “I know exactly what is going on with you. In fact, I was expecting this.”

Horrified, Logan gaped at her. “You were?”

“Sure. You’re just now seeing the hard work ahead, what it will take to get past the abuse incident and forge a strong relationship with Linda, and your impulse is to give up—to run away.”

“Trudy, that ain’t—”

She shook a reproving finger at him, saying, “I’m not going to let you get away with it. You’ve come too far to give up now.”

“I’m not giving up....” Logan struggled to find words to convince her without giving his secret—and Nick’s—away. “I’m just.... I don’t want to get back with her.”



Trudy leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. “I see,” she said dryly. “You’ve suddenly come to this startling conclusion just tonight, after months of telling me how much you wanted to get back with your wife. And the reason for this thunderbolt is you ‘just don’t want to’. Sorry, mister, I’m not letting you off the hook that easy. You’ve got to come up with something better than that.”

Defeated, Logan’s shoulders slumped, and he stared at his boots, feeling trapped—again. Right back where he’d spent most of his life. “Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he lied, looking up in Trudy’s direction though not meeting her eyes. “About why I said that.” He halfheartedly finished the session by telling Trudy whatever he thought she wanted to hear.

Logan drove home, dejected and frustrated, with a new sympathy for those animals he’d heard of that would chew their own legs off to get out of a snare.

## Chapter 13: Landing Is Inevitable

*Taking off is the hard part, landing is inevitable.*

—Edward Stickney

THURSDAY morning, Nick woke suddenly to the shrill jangle of his bedside phone. His heart thudded in panic as his thoughts flew to his mother in the hospital. He shot upright, immediately swinging his legs over the side of the bed and grabbing the receiver. “Hello,” he croaked. Even to his own ears, his voice sounded apprehensive.

“Hey, Nick.”

“Logan?” Nick’s heart rate slowly returned to normal as he checked the time. *six a.m.* “Is somethin’ wrong?”

“No. Sorry, did I wake you?”

Nick peered out the window at the dimly lit street, where the neighborhood was just showing signs of coming to life. “Yeah, I don’t usually get up for ’nother half hour.”

“Aww, geez, I never thought about that. I wanted to reach you before I left for work.”

“You’re workin’ today? I thought you had Thursdays off?”

“Not anymore. I changed my schedule so I could get weekends off, for when I’ve got the girls, you know?”

“Oh, right. What’s up?”

“I was just wondering....”

Any impatience Nick might have been feeling was banished by the yearning he heard stuttering across the line. “Yeah?”

“I was thinking, we sure gotta lot of work to do this weekend, and it’d help if we could get a head start. How ’bout we get some stuff done tonight?”

Nick couldn't keep the smile out of his tone as he confirmed, "With the T-bird, ya mean?"

"Yeah—for starters," Logan said.

From the purr in that throaty voice, Nick could easily picture Logan smiling back, but he was nagged by the feeling that there was something more to this call. "Everything go okay with Trudy and Linda last night?"

"Yeah, sort of." There was a beat and then Logan added, "Not really. I'll tell ya all about it tonight."

"All right, but... you could tell me now. I'm in no hurry, and isn't that why you really called?"

"Nah, I'd rather wait. I'm no good over the phone."

"Okay, no phone sex, gotta remember that." Nick was pleased by the amused snort he got for his small jest, but he couldn't let go just yet. "You sure it can wait 'til tonight?"

"Yeah. Meet ya at the garage later?"

"Sure. I can be there by...." Nick paused, factoring in a visit to his mom's hospital room. "Let's say, six-thirty?"

"Sounds good." Then Logan added, "Don't be late, you've got the key—"

"—I got the key, so don't be early," Nick warned at the same time. Loud and strong this time, Nick's laugh rang out as he promised, "I'll call if I'm gonna be late."

"Great." Logan seemed ready to ring off, then added uncertainly, "Hey, Nick. Can I ask you something?"

Convinced that the truth behind this call was about to be revealed, Nick said smoothly, "Sure, anything."

"That thing you said about your bed—was it true?"

Nick racked his morning-fuzzy brain but was at a complete loss. "What thing I said?" With a slight laugh, he joked, "If you're gonna quiz me like this, Logan, you gotta wait 'til I've had some coffee. What're you talking about?"

"What you said... about us, you know... christening your bed."

The memory of that unintentional confession came rushing back to Nick. He rubbed the back of his neck as he stalled. “Oh. Yeah.”

“Oh yeah, what? That was the first time—”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

After briefly considering feigning confusion about the question, Nick said, “Why didn’t I ever have a guy over before? Umm... just the way it worked out, I guess.”

“Uh... okay.” Nick swore he could hear the wheels turning in Logan’s head but didn’t know what was being manufactured. He wasn’t enlightened any by Logan finishing, “See ya tonight—”

“Probably because I never really wanted...,” Nick blurted, but then he hesitated, not sure that Logan was ready to hear the rest, certain he wasn’t ready to say it, maybe not even ready to believe it. He continued, “It just didn’t seem right, with my mom here and all.”

“Makes sense.”

After a moment of hesitation, Nick decided to seize the opportunity to get something off his own chest. “Listen, speaking of the other night....”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry I laid all of that on you—’bout my dad and the hammer and all. But thanks for listening.”

When the only response was a sharp intake of breath, Nick wondered if he’d only made things worse until Logan proclaimed, “It’s okay. You had every right to tell your story.”

Nick was touched—and slightly amused—to hear the echo of his words to Cheryl. “Guess all this time with me and Trudy is rubbin’ off on you.”

“No way. You’re the only one rubbin’ off on me. I swear.”

When he stopped chortling, Nick said, “Good to hear. See ya tonight at Acken’s. Have a good day.”

“Sure thing, Nick. You, too.”

NICK took advantage of the extra half-hour in his day by going for an early morning run. The exercise helped alleviate most of the tension resulting from the knowledge that he was facing a nine thirty a.m. appointment with Sheila Palmer. As he ran, Nick reviewed the last session he'd had with Sheila, noting all the reasons this client could be particularly exasperating. He reminded himself that Norah Seebold had also insisted on defending and finding excuses for her abuser in those first few weeks at ACC. *Gotta be patient with Sheila. She'll come around, just like Norah did.*

Later that morning, Nick efficiently typed up some notes while awaiting Sheila's arrival and made a bet with himself. Though most people would have been petulant at best with a counselor who sent them home in tears, he wagered that Sheila would try to make amends almost immediately. An intense craving for approval was one hallmark common to many abuse victims, and one he suspected Sheila had in spades.

At precisely nine-thirty, after a soft knock on his door, Sheila walked in carrying two Starbucks coffee cups and a couple of cellophane-wrapped biscotti. She gave Nick a small, lopsided smile as she dropped the cookies on his desk and handed him one of the cups, saying, "Good morning; I got you a cappuccino—and some biscotti."

Nick smiled warmly, answering, "Thanks, but you didn't have to do that, Sheila," while thinking, *Bingo, Zales, got it in one.*

Sheila, a pretty, petite woman with beautifully coifed light brown hair, took her seat in front of Nick's desk, smoothing out her buff-colored twill skirt before delicately crossing her legs. "Oh, it's no big deal. I pass a Starbucks on my way here."

"As much as I appreciate the gesture, I want to be clear," Nick said, pausing briefly to look Sheila deliberately in the eyes. "You didn't do anything wrong. You had every right to leave if the things I said upset you."

The only sound was the crinkle of plastic as Sheila unwrapped a cookie, apparently mulling over Nick's statement but finally saying, "Okay, but neither did you. You were right about Dean." She took a

bite of biscotti and sipped her coffee before adding, “I think what really upset me was that part of me knew it, too.”

“Okay, let’s explore that for a bit. Why didn’t you let that part of you that knew the truth have her say?”

“Because....” Sheila stopped for another gulp of coffee, then shook her head dismissively, whispering sadly, “I don’t know.”

“I think you do know. Well, that same part of you does. You’re shutting ‘her’ up again. Why do you think that is?”

By now Sheila was tearing up while she stared down at her manicured nails. “I wish I knew.”

“Maybe because it’s a habit?” Nick suggested gently. He sipped his own drink before explaining, “For the last eighteen years, you’ve pretty much had to watch every word you’ve said. You don’t have to do that anymore. In these sessions, you can just say whatever pops into your head. In fact, that’s the very best thing you can do.”

Sheila took a deep breath and sat up straight, avowing, “Okay. I’ll give it a try.”

“Good. Now tell me why you got so upset when I told you Dean’s behavior showed no signs of true reform. Don’t think too hard, just answer.”

In a rush, she said, “I wanted to believe that Dean had changed because then I could go back with him.”

“And that’s so important... why?” Seeing Sheila biting her lip in thought, Nick prompted, “Because you love him, because you miss him, miss your house, your friends—”

“Because then I wouldn’t be stuck... here.”

Nick leaned across his desk, asking softly, “Where’s here?”

Sheila expelled a short, humorless laugh before retorting, “Here is being a forty-year-old woman living off her cousin, with no job, no life. A woman whose only chance for a significant other from now on is going to be her Cavalier King Charles spaniel.”

Even though Nick had been expecting something along the lines of Sheila’s bleak self-assessment, he sat back in surprise at the sheer vehemence of it. “Whoa, whoa. Sheila, don’t you think you’re being

kind of rash, and really hard on yourself? You're judging what the rest of your life, fifty or so years, will be based on the past month? You've set up this false dichotomy in your mind: either life with Dean or no life at all. No wonder you're so stressed."

Sheila tossed her empty cup in the trash can, asking in a biting tone, "How are you so sure it's false?"

"Because I see you as you really are, which you can't do right now. You've been blinded by eighteen long years of verbal abuse and control." Nick waited until he caught his client's eye before continuing. "When I look at you, I see an attractive, charming, healthy, and well-educated woman with plenty to look forward to. For starters, you're not going to be living with your cousin forever, if you don't want to. After all, you're due for a very lucrative divorce settlement—"

"Maybe."

"No, certainly. Your husband is a wealthy man. Why do you think he's trying to placate you by doing that anger management thing? He's worried about losing half of a considerable estate."

"I guess," she sighed. "I'm still not sure I'm going to get enough money to live off for the rest of my life...."

"You don't want to get a job?"

"Oh yeah," Sheila snorted, "I'm sure my unused anthropology degree is going to do me a lot of good in one of the worst job markets ever."

"The money you'll get in the divorce will give you some time to figure that out, time to build a life—a good life. Your choice isn't living in fear with Dean or not living at all. You've already done the hardest thing of all—leaving him. The rest will fall into place. As long as you're willing to work at it."

A sincere smile appeared on Sheila's face for the first time all morning. "I'm willing if you're willing."

Nick winked at her, answering jauntily, "That's why I'm here."

SINCE he'd deliberately arrived a little before six-thirty, Logan was almost disappointed to see Nick's Jeep parked on Arlington Avenue when he turned up the drive leading to Acken's shop. Even if Nick had shown up right on time, Logan had planned on teasing him unmercifully about being late and making Logan hang around waiting, even letting the pizza he'd picked up on the way to the shop get cold.

The short trip up the driveway gave Logan time to reconsider. Could be that Nick being early for their appointment was a sign of eagerness, maybe even equal to Logan's own. He pulled into the open garage bay door, beeping his horn and yelling, "Pizza delivery for Nick Zales." The way Nick jumped in shock at the sudden entry more than made up for him foiling Logan's other plot.

Nick continued to gape in surprise as Logan jumped out of the driver's seat and plopped the box and two sodas down on the workbench. "You really did bring a pizza."

"Yeah, I figured it was my turn to provide some grub," Logan answered easily, though his pulse quickened as he heard Nick advancing on him.

Before Logan could turn around, Nick had grabbed him from behind and nuzzled his neck. In a husky whisper, he said, "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach, eh?"

The feel of Nick's right hand trailing down to his groin caused Logan to gasp, "That ain't my stomach."

A throaty chuckle poured melted butter into Logan's ear. "Don't I know it."

Logan twisted around suddenly, facing Nick and taking advantage of the opportunity for a teeth-jarring kiss. His own hands found their way to Nick's ass, and Logan roughly pulled him even closer.

When they broke, Nick grinned at him, still in the embrace, saying, "We let this go on too much longer, and we ain't gonna get any work done on that car."

Logan reluctantly released Nick, admitting, "Yeah, you got that right."

Nick pointed to the pizza box, saying, "Guess we can eat first, though."



“Yep, may as well eat before we get down and dirty.”

“Thought we just agreed we weren’t gonna do that,” Nick quipped as he opened the box and grabbed a slice. “Mmm, sausage and mushroom.” He grinned around a huge bite, mumbling, “Great choice.”

“You’re sure in a good mood,” Logan said, shaking his head fondly as he dove into the pizza himself.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Nick held the half-eaten slice aloft, saying, “Good food with a good friend, and my car’s almost done. Right?”

The jolt in his stomach at Nick calling him a good friend surprised Logan; to cover his confusion, he bit off half a slice and swallowed before answering, “Almost is a stretch. Let’s wait an’ see how far we get by Sunday night.”

“We can finish up next weekend, can’t we?”

“Only got next Sunday afternoon to work on it. I got the girls next weekend.” As soon as it was out of his mouth, Logan braced himself for the questions he’d hoped to dodge until later.

As if on cue, Nick said, “That reminds me. On the phone this morning, you said it didn’t go so well with Linda last night. What happened?”

A weary sigh escaped from Logan as he explained, “Linda was saying how she wants us to be closer and share everything and all that crap.”

Nick took a gulp of his soda, then cocked his head at Logan, asking, “Okay. What did you say?”

“Me? Well....” Logan grabbed another slice of pizza before admitting, “I pretty much went along with it.” Rather than look at Nick, he concentrated on eating as if it required the full force of his attention. Logan finally peered up to see Nick frowning down at his second slice of pizza. The silence was more unnerving to Logan than a lecture would have been, so he quickly offered, “’Til later when I was alone with Trudy.”

Nick looked up sharply, asking, “Then what?”

“Then I told Trudy I didn’t want to be married to Linda anymore, that I never really did.”

A sparkling smile, rivaling any marquee Broadway had to offer, gleamed at Logan as Nick enthused, “You did? That’s great, so what—”

Before Nick could get too worked up, Logan cut in, “Trudy cut me off at the knees.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning she blew me off.” Logan grabbed a few napkins and wiped his mouth before finishing, “Said I was bailin’ out because I was afraid of all the hard work ahead and she wasn’t gonna let me do it.” He punctuated that statement by tossing the used napkins in the wastebasket. “Let’s unload the parts.”

He turned to find Nick standing stock-still with his hands on his hips, frowning at him. “Wait a minute. Trudy said that, and then you said...?”

“I said....” Logan slammed his tailgate down and hoisted the first box out the truck bed, mumbling, “She was right.”

Nick appeared next to him and accepted the box as he glared at Logan, snapping, “Why the fuck did you say that?”

Logan watched Nick put the box next to the T-bird and ran a hand through his hair, muttering, “I don’t know.” He turned to get another box and added, “She’s just thinkin’ of my family—more ’an I am, seems like.”

When he handed the next box off to Nick, Logan was stunned to see a softened expression on his face. “Aren’t you part of your family, Logan?”

“Of course I am.”

“Then you got as much right to be happy as they do,” Nick grunted as he moved the heavy box next to the other one. “And Trudy’s not your sister, by the way.”

It was Logan’s turn to stare in shock. “Well, thanks for the newsflash. What kind of mushrooms were on your part of the pizza?”

Nick walked over and put a hand on Logan’s shoulder. He gave it a squeeze, explaining, “You’re following an old pattern here, don’t you see? Daisy made you sacrifice what you felt was the right thing to do

for the sake of your brother, now you think you have to listen to Trudy and sacrifice your own happiness for your wife and daughters.”

As he unpacked the reconditioned parts, Logan searched desperately for a way to refute Nick’s analogy, but the frustration and resignation he’d experienced in Trudy’s office the night before was just too familiar. He hadn’t made the connection himself, but now he remembered feeling the same way eighteen years earlier as a teenager, wilting under Daisy’s lecture about the necessity of sticking by your family.

The sad truth was that recognizing this connection solved nothing for Logan. He straightened up and looked solemnly at Nick, asserting, “I don’t care about Daisy no more. What I do care about is my girls, and yeah, Linda—in a way.”

“Then care enough to be honest, Logan. You think goin’ back and living a lie again is gonna make anyone happy?”

Halfway to the tool chest, Logan whipped around to face Nick. “Be honest? Are you saying I should tell them—”

“That you’re gay? Yeah, I think you should.” A couple of strides brought Nick right in front of Logan, close enough to hear him ask softly, “Because you are... aren’t you?”

A lifelong expert at dodging that question from his own mind, Logan didn’t immediately answer. Instead he gave a dismissive shrug, saying, “That ain’t the point,” and headed back over to the tool chest.

As he selected tools, a voice floated over his shoulder. “Then what is?”

Silently contemplating the enormity of what Nick was asking of him, Logan went to work. Tell Trudy—and Linda? Face his own wife’s sneering condemnation? And it wouldn’t stop there, would it? No, Linda would tell Marie, who’d tell Bob.... Shit, word would get back to the mill, even. Then guys like Chuck would know the truth—how right they were about him.

Logan started seeing a confession to Trudy as a pebble dropped into a pond, the ripples of his big news spreading out into the wide world, confirmation to all those who had previously questioned his manhood. Like wildfire, the news would spread to everyone in his

life... Logan sat back on his heels as the worst part of this plan hit him like physical blow: *Krista and Meghan*.

As if no time had passed since Nick's inquiry, Logan wheeled on him, protesting, "No way am I gonna tell Trudy or Linda that. The girls would have to know, too!"

Nick looked up from the piston in his hands, tilting his head at Logan. "Okay... so?"

Rather than facing the question directly, Logan snarled, "So? So Linda and her lawyer would take 'em away from me for good. I might never see them agai—"

"What?" Nick straightened up and moved towards Logan, his outrage sizzling through each word. "They can't do that! You got visitation rights as an abuser and you think they're gonna keep your girls from you because *you're gay*?"

Logan felt his own anger rising in response. "Maybe they won't have to take 'em away because the girls won't want nothin' to do with me once they find out!"

Calm returning to him, Nick stated firmly, "I don't believe that."

"Cause you know 'em so well, huh?" Logan snorted. "After meeting 'em that one time."

"I saw how much they love you."

Logan's treacherous mind immediately turned the word into the past tense, "loved." He swallowed down most of his panic at that thought, managing only to say, "No kid wants a dad who's... like that, Nick. You know they don't."

"They wouldn't let that stop—"

"I can't put 'em through that. Not on top of everything else they've been through." He turned pleading eyes on Nick, aching for his understanding. "It's just too much, too soon."

Relief washed over Logan when Nick nodded in apparently reluctant agreement. "Then you gotta find a way to make Trudy believe you without tellin' her... everything."

"Yeah, okay. I'll think of somethin'," Logan promised wearily, hoping that would be the end of it for the night. He nodded at the car.

“Let’s get some work done.” Intending to lighten the mood, Logan quirked an eyebrow at Nick, saying, “Or we won’t have time for anything else tonight.”

Nick grinned at the obvious gambit. “Does that mean you’re comin’ back to my place when we’re done here?”

Logan nodded towards the passenger seat of his Ford. “That overnight bag answer your question?”

“Hot damn!” Nick rubbed his hands together enthusiastically. “Let’s get busy now,” his smile widened as he finished, “so we can get busy later.”

THEY worked diligently, not only Thursday night, but every spare minute the two could find through the weekend, making so much progress that Sunday at five p.m. found them taking the Thunderbird, with its rebuilt engine, out for a spin through The South Side Slopes.

After taking a sharp corner at 45 mph, Nick revved the motor and headed up the hill on Coast Avenue. He grinned at Logan, crowing, “Damn! I can’t believe this is the same car!”

With one hand braced on the dash, Logan shook his head, admonishing, “You keep drivin’ like a maniac, and it’ll be a junker again soon enough.”

Since Logan’s proud, happy grin matched his own, Nick just waggled his impressive eyebrows and gunned the car up Canton Avenue, the steepest street in all of Pittsburgh. When Nick crested the hill easily, he felt like a dad whose son had just won the Little League World Series. He finally slowed and turned down Hampshire, pulling into the first open parking spot he saw.

Turning to the man next to him, Nick was entranced by the sight of a relaxed, ebullient Logan. He had to grip the steering wheel tightly to keep from reaching over and dragging Logan into his lap for a wild makeout session right then and there. Nick sublimated his impulse through a fond shove to Logan’s shoulder. “You are one hell of a mechanic, ya know that?”

The blush that suffused Logan's face as he shook the compliment off made him look almost exactly like he did at the height of passion, and Nick felt his already interested cock stand up and take notice. He was half-tempted to slam the car back into drive and head straight for home—and bed—but the other part of him preferred to draw out this festive night and delay the literal climax of the evening. “We gotta celebrate g'tting' this car back together, you know that?”

“Sure.” Logan must have been feeling the tension, too, since he asked archly, “What'd you have in mind?”

A growl from his stomach reminded Nick that he hadn't eaten since his skimpy breakfast. “How 'bout we get some dinner before anything more... elaborate?”

“Sounds good. Is there some place around here?”

A second of thought brought the answer to Nick. “Liberty Grill! You haven't even been there yet, have you?”

“Nope.” Logan frowned, asking, “But didn't you tell me Trudy's husband runs that place?”

“Yeah, but Larry never works on Sunday night. It's okay.”

Skepticism laced Logan's question. “You sure?”

“Yeah, I'm sure. I wouldn't've suggested it if I wasn't.” Logan was still mulling it over, so Nick prodded, “Come on, Logan. It's a Pittsburgh landmark. And the food's the best.”

“Okay.” A sly smile graced Logan's face as he added, “Wouldn't wanta miss this landmark of yours.”

Twenty minutes later, they were ushered to a corner booth with a good view of the busy counter by the evening hostess, Maddie, whose familiar greeting to Nick seemed to interest Logan very much. “Seems like you know everybody here.”

“Yeah, pretty much.” Sensing where this was headed, Nick rushed to calm his jumpy companion. “It's not like anyone's going to be reporting back to Larry that I showed up tonight, or with who. They're too damn busy to keep score. 'Sides, it's not like I'm a novelty or anything, I've been comin' here since I was a starving college student.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I knew Larry before I knew Trudy.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope, I used to come here for dinner and bring my books. Larry served me probably... thousands of cups of coffee when I was studying into the night, right there at that counter.”

Confusion ironed a crease into Logan’s forehead. “Thought he ran things around here. What was he doin’ working the counter?”

Nick shrugged, explaining, “He’s done just about every job in this place. Still mans the counter whenever he can.” He smiled at a distant memory and mused, “Couldn’t believe it when I was applyin’ to the graduate program at Pitt and Larry suggested I talk to his wife, who just happened to be Dr. Trudy Gerard.”

They were briefly interrupted by the perky waitress who introduced herself as Becky and took their drink orders after explaining the specials. Logan got his usual Coke, but Nick asked for a root beer, advising Logan that it was on draft at Liberty Grill—best damn root beer in the city. Nick wondered if Logan had heard him, since he had a definite air of distraction as he studied the menu. Nick asked, “Somethin’ wrong?”

Logan folded the menu and leaned his forearms on it, saying, “The way you said you were so surprised to find out Larry was married to Trudy—is she famous or somethin’?”

“In the field of abuse counseling, you bet she is. Famous *and infamous*.”

“Whaddya mean, infamous?”

“Well, she’s one of the few—” The conversation was interrupted again when Becky brought their drinks and took their meal orders. Logan asked for the meatloaf special while Nick got the T-bone pork chop.

As soon as she disappeared, Logan took up right where they’d left off. “You were sayin’, about Trudy?”

“Oh yeah, she’s kind of a controversial figure in that she strongly supports couples counseling—like she’s trying to do with you and Linda.”

“And why’s that such a big deal?”

“Cause hardly anyone else does it—or believes in it.”

“You don’t?”

“Hell no.” When he saw the hurt look flit across Logan’s face, Nick hastened to soften that pronouncement. He leaned forward and, in an urgent whisper, explained, “Like I told you before, most abusers... they aren’t like you, they don’t want a change, and they aren’t... they couldn’t even if they wanted to.”

Logan studied the parking lot briefly before turning to Nick and asking, “But Trudy believes otherwise, huh?”

“She believes it’s worth a try some of the time. And she’s had some *limited* success,” Nick admitted. He gulped some root beer before admonishing, “That’s why you gotta be firm with her, Logan. You gotta convince her there’s no hope for saving your marriage, or she’ll be like a bulldog—won’t let go.”

“Tell me ’bout it,” Logan sighed.

“Thought any more about what you’re gonna say?”

“Same as I said last time. I don’t want a go back to Linda... but stick to my guns this time.” Logan let out a puff of exasperation, grouching, “She’s been asking for weeks what it is I want, and then when I finally tell her, she don’t listen!”

“Yeah, well, this is her pet cause, reuniting families.” Nick ran a hand through his hair as he elaborated, “After all, she wrote a whole goddamn book about it.”

“She did?”

“Yep, a bestseller in our field. There’s an autographed copy on my bookshelf at home.” Nick didn’t find it necessary to add that the only part of the book he’d ever read had been Trudy’s inscription on the flyleaf.

Their food arrived just then, and Nick took advantage of the break to change the subject. He pointed to the T-bird that could be seen in the parking lot. “Can’t wait ’til it looks as good as it runs. Where should we get it painted?”

Logan chewed his meatloaf while he seemed to consider the subject. “It’s a shame—the best place I know is back home in Elco. The guy used to do a lotta work for me.”



“Maybe we should take it there.”

“Nah, gotta be a place closer.... Let me think about it.”

The topic of conversation drifted to Logan’s continuing efforts to find a mechanic position in North Braddock, and on to work in general, and finally got around to Nick’s mom. At last there was some small bit of good news on that front, and Nick gladly gave it. “I saw her doctor yesterday, and he’s talking about moving her out of the hospital.”

“She’s comin’ home?”

“Not right off. They gotta move her to a nursing facility first, ’til she gets stronger.”

Their plates were cleared, and Nick started teasing his companion about dessert. “You gonna have some pie?”

The look on Logan’s face suggested that he’d never heard a crazier idea. “After that meal? No way.”

“Come on.” Nick flicked a hot glance from under his sooty lashes. “We’ll work it off later.”

Logan’s ready laugh spoke of the success of this celebratory meal, though he protested, “Not if I explode first.”

“But the pie here—”

“Is the best in the city,” Logan finished, provoking a shout of laughter from Nick.

Nick was just about to agree that they should skip dessert and head back to his place for the next event on the evening’s schedule when he saw Dave Acken enter the restaurant. His friendly smile quickly faded when he saw that Dave was closely trailed by the imposing bulk of Larry Gerard. Bringing up the rear was none other than his wife, Trudy. Nick instinctively dropped his head and hunched forward as he calculated their chances of remaining undetected.

Logan, whose back was to the door, noticed the change in Nick immediately. “What?”

Before Nick could answer, Dave’s voice could be heard booming down the aisle. “There they are! I knew it.”

Dread squeezed a steel band around his heart as Nick suddenly found their cozy booth surrounded by the last three people he had

expected—or wanted—to see. He flicked a glance across the table and knew the jig was up; Logan looked as guilty as a murderer caught with a smoking gun in his hand. Somehow Nick found the courage to nod and greet the group nonchalantly. “Hey, guys. Didn’t expect to see you here tonight.”

Dave and Larry were both smiling widely, but Trudy’s face wore a suspicious and guarded frown. Larry clasped Nick on the shoulder with a meaty, dark-skinned hand as he exulted, “Can’t keep you away from this place. I guess I’ve more ’an made back every double order of fries I ever slipped you.”

Mustering up a wan smile, Nick said, “You’re the one who’s here on his night off.”

The ever-genial Dave jumped in to explain, “That would be my doing. Trudy and Larry took me out for my birthday to this place nearby.” He paused and glanced at Trudy, asking, “What was it called?”

“Dish,” Trudy supplied. “It was Nick’s suggestion.” Her voice unusually cool, she added, “It was every bit as good as you said.... Oh, and Tish says hi.”

Nick just nodded, not daring to check how Logan was faring as Dave informed them, “So we was passing by on the way back, and I spotted the T-bird in the parking lot. Had to stop in and congratulate you two on getting it running.” He turned his attention to Logan next. “Guess you figured out that problem with the valve seat heights, huh?”

No longer able to avoid looking at Logan, Nick watched him stutter out an inaudible reply and felt compelled to say to the Gerards, “Logan has been helping me with the Thunderbird.”

Larry greeted Logan directly and offered his hand while Trudy said, “Is that right? *Funny* you never mentioned it before.” She turned to Logan, spearing him with her annoyed gaze. “*Or you.*”

Nick’s guilt was submerged under a wave of irritation at being treated like a couple of naughty schoolboys, and he quipped, “Guess my last few biweekly reports have been light on details about *my personal life*, huh?”

Seeming to play along, Trudy drawled, “Yes. I guess we can rectify that at our eight a.m. meeting tomorrow.”

Since there previously had been no morning meeting scheduled, Nick got the message loud and clear. He took a deep breath before asserting calmly, "I'll be there."

"Good." Trudy nodded at the duo in the booth before saying to Larry, "Honey, we've already kept the sitter waiting, and we still have to drop Dave off."

Larry laughed. "Just more money for her." But the group quickly said their goodbyes and left.

After watching them move to the door and tracking them out to the parking lot, Logan turned to Nick and barked, "She knows."

Nick didn't bother refuting the assertion. "Well, she suspects, anyway." They paid the bill in gloomy silence.

On the short drive back to Acken's shop, Logan asked, "What're you gonna tell her?"

The question echoed the one that had been playing through Nick's mind, and he'd come to one solid conclusion. "The truth."

"The truth?" Logan leaned into Nick's space, warning, "It ain't just your truth to tell."

He made no answer until the T-bird was safely parked in the garage. Nick cut the engine off and turned to Logan. Quietly but firmly, he asserted, "I'm not going to lie to Trudy."

Logan leaped out of the car, yelling, "What the fuck! You didn't have any problem with me lying to her!"

Nick bounded out and raced around the T-bird to face him. "I never asked you to lie." More calmly, he added, "What's the point, Logan? You said it yourself, she kno—"

"She can't prove anything."

"It doesn't matter."

Logan sagged back against the frame of the car, folding his arms. His eyes on the floor, he defiantly enunciated, "It does to me."

"Why?" Nick leaned down to try and read his eyes. When they flicked back up, Nick was cut by blue steel.

"If she can't prove it, then she can't tell anyone."

“What, are you nuts? You think she’s gonna let this go if I tell her we’re just friends? A friendship I’ve deliberately concealed from her for months?”

Logan pushed off the car and started pacing the floor, muttering angrily to himself.

“What did you say?” Nick demanded.

Stopping right in front of him, Logan avered through gritted teeth, “I said, I knew no good would come of all of this.”

“No good!” Nick yelled back. “No good? Is that what I’ve been to you?”

“You don’t get it,” Logan snapped, then shook his head wearily as he explained more quietly, “You don’t have anything to lose.”

Nick took a deep breath, biting back every vicious word fighting to get out of his mouth. When he had better control of himself, he glared at Logan, asserting, “I guess you’re right. I’m sure not losing anything important.” Nick tossed the keys to the shop at him, saying, “Lock up, will you? I’m going home. Alone.”

As he stalked to the door, a snarl followed him out. “Good! We should’a been doing that all along. Then none of this would’ve ever happened.”

Nick ignored the salvo and drove back to Observatory Hill in muted, stoic fury, wondering how a bright, glittering day had shattered so quickly—and irrevocably.

## Chapter 14: For Every Truth There Is an Ear

*For every truth there is an ear somewhere to hear it.*

—Ivan Panin

SUNDAY night at eleven p.m., Nick trudged slowly home, sweat-soaked after a long run but still unsure whether or not sleep was an attainable goal. He barely remembered traversing the lamp-lit trails of Riverview Park, so occupied had his mind been with doomsday scenarios, each one more catastrophic than the last. *Trudy's gonna reprimand me for sure. Maybe even fire me... and the job market for counselors isn't exactly jumping. I could lose the house—then Ma won't have a place to come home to.... Good thing I wasted my savings on that stupid car.* He immediately shook that reflection off, since it brought his train of thought to an unwelcome stop named Logan Crane. Suddenly the contemplation of financial ruin was more attractive than thinking of his still-silent cell phone.

A short while later, Nick stared sleeplessly at his bedroom ceiling and attempted to calm his raging fears. *Trudy won't fire me. She can't! It's not like I broke any clear-cut rules. If she tries to, I'll... I'll sue her ass off.* Abruptly, he was inspired to jump out of bed and dig out an old boyfriend's business card—one who specialized in employment law and was known in the gay community for anti-discrimination suits. When Nick finally found the card tucked into a desk drawer, he clutched it like a talisman and laid it carefully on his dresser. He hadn't spoken to Mark Billings in almost four years, but they had parted on very amicable terms, and Nick felt slightly better for having taken some kind of action.

When he dressed for work the next morning, Nick was still girding his loins for battle, already mentally arguing with Trudy in his head. *I can't believe you'd do this to me, after all I've given to this place.* Not bothering with any kind of breakfast, Nick filled his travel

mug with coffee and headed for ACC at 6:20 a.m., since pacing in his small kitchen wasn't accomplishing anything. Once at work, he decided to use the extra time to dig out his last few performance reviews. Trudy had written them and was fully aware that his ratings had all been exemplary, but Nick planned to go in armed with as much ammunition as possible.

He was scanning e-mails without comprehending a single word when his desk phone rang at five minutes after seven; the LED screen indicated that the call was from Trudy. Nick picked up, saying, "Good morning, Trudy."

"Good morning. I saw your Jeep in the parking lot."

"Uh huh."

"So... you're here, I'm here. Let's do this thing."

Nick was almost tempted to ask Trudy when she had started talking like Tony Soprano but found the joke died in his parched throat. "Okay. I'll be right there."

When they were seated across from each other in Trudy's office, she cleared her throat and said calmly, "I'm not going to beat around the bush. What's going on between you and Logan Crane?"

Though he had been preparing for this question for the last twelve hours, Nick was momentarily at a loss for words. After a centering breath, he sat up straight, hoping to appear unruffled. "We're good friends." Not wanting to delay the inevitable, he added, "And lovers."

No surprise showed on Trudy's face as she ground out, "I see." Fully aware of a counselor's usual bag of tricks, Nick expected the silence that ensued and did nothing to fill it. Trudy eventually broke it by asking, "And how long has this been going on?"

When he paused to do the calculation, Nick was shocked at the answer. "Three weeks—almost to the day." *Only three weeks. How is that possible?* If he'd answered without thinking, Nick would have said a lifetime. He felt like a different man from the one who'd walked soaking wet into Dave Acken's shop that Sunday morning several weeks earlier.

"If you only crossed that line three weeks ago, why didn't you ever tell me that you two—"

“I didn’t understand...,” Nick interrupted. “I mean, I was confused.”

“Confused?” Trudy fumed. “Confused about what? How long it would take to seduce him?”

Unable to restrain a snarl, Nick shot back, “It wasn’t like that. I had no intention.... Fuck, I thought he was straight.”

“Right up until three weeks ago?” Trudy’s words dripped with skepticism.

“No,” Nick snapped. “I thought he was straight up until five weeks ago.”

“When you made a pass at him?”

“Yeah, sure. Right after he grabbed me and kissed me.”

Trudy’s face at last showed surprise—bordering on shock. “*Logan* kissed you? Right out of the blue?”

“Yes,” Nick hissed.

“And you responded by...?”

“I... uh... I... kissed him back.” Wanting to end the interrogative nature of the questioning, Nick added, “If you want any more details, you’ll just have to wait ’til my autobiography comes out. Suffice it to say, we kissed, nothing more happened for a couple of weeks, and then....”

“And then, you decided to take advantage of the situation?”

“No! I didn’t decide anything. It just happened. And I am not the one—” Nick stopped abruptly, shutting that thought down before it had a chance to fully form.

Her interest obviously piqued, Trudy asked curiously, “You’re not the one? Meaning *Logan* is? He took advantage of *you*?”

“He’s not—nobody took advantage of *anybody*, okay?” Frustrated and tired of being on the defensive, he adroitly flipped the subject around by saying, “What I was going to say was, I’m not the one who missed all the signs from *my* patient. That’s why you’re really pissed off, Trudy, isn’t it?” From her sharp intake of breath, Nick knew he’d scored a direct hit. He thrust the knife in a little deeper by adding,

“What happened, were you out the day they covered ‘latent homosexuality’ in Psych 101?”

Trudy bit her lip as she resettled in her seat. After a moment spent visibly composing herself, she cocked an eyebrow at him, admitting, “I guess I deserved that.”

After a brief pause, Nick leaned back, saying evenly, “I guess you did.”

“But I don’t think that’s what you were going to say.” Nick refused to give her the satisfaction of confirming her supposition, and he was wholly unprepared when she leaned forward and said, “Nick, do you think Logan is the only one I’m concerned about in all of this?” While he was still parsing that question, Trudy added, “What about you? With your history, have you given any thought to the *implications* presented by this relationship?”

Nick closed his eyes while he slumped to the side and ran a hand through his hair, murmuring, “You’re better at this than me.”

“Better at what?”

“Throwing your patient off balance.”

“You’re not my patient.”

Nick’s head shot up, and he grabbed for his victorious moment. “Exactly.”

Trudy did not appear discomfited in the least. “But I think you should be *someone’s* patient.”

“Oh, God, not this again,” Nick groaned. “I thought we closed this subject years ago. And I availed myself of therapy in graduate school, as you full well know.”

“Six sessions, Nick. How much do you achieve with a client in six sessions?”

“We’re not having this discussion again. We’re not,” Nick insisted through gritted teeth. “If you want to ream me out because you think that I interfered in Logan’s therapy, then do it.”

“Okay, let’s talk about that. You still haven’t explained why you concealed the friendship from me back when that’s all it was.”



“I told you, I was confused because...”

“Because some part of you knew something was up back then—whether you admitted it to yourself or not. And once it did start, what did you think was going to happen? Were you just going to let this man go back to his wife, knowing what that might mean for her?”

“I was trying not to let that happen. I kept telling Logan that if he went back to Linda, he might end up hurting her again physically—and he’d sure as hell hurt her emotionally.” Nick shrugged sadly, asserting, “The rest was up to him.”

There was no immediate answer as Trudy mulled his response over. She mused quietly, “That must be why he told me...,” before resuming her lecturing voice and steely glare. “Do you realize how much damage we’ve already done to Linda? How much worse the truth is going to be now that her hopes have been raised?”

“I didn’t want it to get this far,” Nick sighed.

“But you let it happen. You’re absolutely right, I blindly ignored all of the signs, and it was Logan’s place to tell me, or his wife. But when none of that happened, you,” Trudy wagged a finger at him, “should have felt some obligation to step in.” In a softer, searching tone, she asked, “Tell me, how does the Nick Zales *I know* not do everything in his power to keep an abused woman from further harm?”

A shroud of sorrow and shame fell over Nick at the question, and he couldn’t answer without losing composure; the only reply he could manage was a shake of his head while reaching for the cup of coffee perched on the edge of Trudy’s desk.

The softer voice stayed as Trudy prodded, “What was going on in your life three to four weeks ago, Nick?” She supplied the answer herself, saying, “You were letting Norah go, you had just taken on two demanding new patients, and worst of all, your mom was very ill.”

Hearing concern but feeling condescension, Nick slammed the mug back down, blurting angrily, “None of that has anything to do with—” He paused for a deep breath before calmly insisting, “I know what you’re suggesting, but it wasn’t poor judgment ’cause my head wasn’t on straight, Trudy.”

“Then what was it?”

“It was....” How to explain what he couldn’t understand himself?

While Nick was still foundering, Trudy crisply interrupted his thoughts with, “You should take some time to think it over.”

Nick’s eyes locked with Trudy’s as he asked, “Meaning what? You’re suspending me?”

“I don’t want to, and I won’t have to if you’ll take the FMLA we talked about last week.”

There didn’t seem to be much choice in the matter. “For how long?”

“Why don’t we talk in, say, two weeks and see how much life has stabilized for you? I hope you’ll spend the time wisely.”

“Which in your mind means ‘not with Logan’. Right?”

“Frankly, yes. As you’ve pointed out, you’re not my patient—but he is. I’m going to suggest he spend some time alone, getting his own house in order; first on his agenda has to be an honest talk with Linda.” Trudy paused and leaned forward, her hand stretching across the desk. “And Nick? I think you’ve got some things to take care of, too.”

“And what do I tell my clients?”

“The truth. You’re taking a short leave of absence to deal with some personal matters and you’ll see them when you get back. Anyone who can’t wait, well, Tracey and I can help them.” For the first time all morning, Trudy smiled. “You need to take care of yourself. Then you can go back to taking care of others.”

Nick stood and stretched, dolefully mumbling, “Okay, that’s a plan.”

He gathered his file folders and took his leave, turning back when Trudy said, “I know therapy is a sore subject, but *please* think about what I said.” He nodded his assent, since he would be brooding about her nagging suggestion for the rest of that day—though that was all he intended to do about it.

After glumly sitting behind his closed office door for a quarter of an hour, a stone-faced Nick finally mustered up enough energy to inform the office manager, who doubled as HR rep for ACC, of his intention to take some FMLA time. He stoically bore Janice’s coo of

concern as she found the necessary forms but escaped as soon as he could. Walking out to his Jeep with leaden steps, Nick burned with shame, feeling that he'd failed—failed Trudy, his clients, his calling, and yeah, maybe even Logan.

NEVER before had Logan been so glad to be handed an ass-busting assignment. Right after he'd clocked in on Monday morning, Mack had informed him that they were short-handed and Logan would be unloading two tractor-trailers of merchandise by himself. Mid-October was a busy time at Scott's Garden Center. Out front, customers were loading up on Halloween decorations while in the back, all the winter paraphernalia was being staged so it could be whisked into place on November 1st. Logan accepted the job without complaint, since staying as busy as possible seemed the best antidote to the fury still burning in his gut.

Though his hands were fully occupied, the work didn't really stop Logan from dwelling on his list of grievances against Nick. His anger hadn't abated one bit since their fight the night before—quite the reverse. New complaints occurred to Logan with each box that he wheeled into the warehouse. *He wouldn't listen, would he? I told him what a bad idea it was, goin' to that fuckin' diner, but no, Nick know-it-all Zales had to have it his way. Him and his precious fuckin' landmark.*

Logan grunted as he shoved a box into place on an upper shelf and the sound almost turned to a moan when he spied the label. *Holly-Daze 4-pak Christmas Ornaments*. He couldn't help but think of his promise to Krista and Meghan that their dad would be back home by Christmas. A promise that was shattered now, all thanks to Mr. I-Cannot-Tell-A-Lie.

A quick glance at the huge warehouse clock told Logan that it was after nine a.m. already. Nick's meeting with Trudy was probably over, and Logan's fate was sealed. *Hope he's happy....* As Logan continued to grouse to himself, an insidious thought occurred to him. Maybe Nick really was happy about this turn of events; maybe he'd had planned it all along. *Smart guy like Nick, he had to know how*

*dangerous it was for the two of us to go waltzin' into The Liberty Grill. Yeah, sure, Nick's been tryin' to get me to come clean to Trudy, and now he's fixed it so I don't have a choice.*

The rest of the morning passed slowly for Logan as he finished unloading the trucks, mired in a fog of resentment. At 1:20, he was taking a late lunch break, desultorily gnawing at a ham and cheese sandwich, when his cell phone rang. He flipped it open and saw that the call was from Nick. *Perfect!* Logan was sitting alone at the back picnic table and could tell the big-mouth off without an audience. "Yeah?"

The connection was really bad, and Logan could barely make out Nick's voice as it faded in and out, swallowed by static. "Lo... didn't expect to get you... just gonna leave... message."

"Well, too bad for you, then, 'cause now you gotta talk to me direct."

"Wanted..." More static, and then Logan heard, "I'm sorry." The sound faded again, though Logan thought Nick added, "I had to tell..." The rest was lost.

"You had to tell Trudy, huh? Is that why you called?"

"You gotta know... goes against my ...rinciples... don't believe in outing...."

"What? Could you speak up?"

"This ...onnection sucks... see if they have a payphone."

*Why didn't the idiot just call from his desk phone?* Logan got up and started pacing with the phone to his ear. "Hang up and call from—" Suddenly he heard Nick yelling the question about a payphone. Something wasn't adding up. "Where in the hell are you?"

"Uhh, ...orget the name... this place. Hang on... ask the bartend...."

Logan's anger melted quickly into concern, and he stopped dead in his tracks. *Ask the bartender? Is that what he said? What the...?* "You're in a bar?"

"Yeah."

"What the fuck are you doing in a bar in the middle of the day?"

“...ood question.” Static drowned out the tail-end of Nick’s mirthless laugh, and the unease Logan had been feeling turned to full-blown panic.

*Fuck, she wouldn’t’ve—couldn’t’ve—fired him?* “Trudy didn’t.... Nick, you didn’t lose your job, did you?”

A fresh burst of static came over the line, and all Logan heard was, “...relieved of duty.”

*Son of a bitch! Wasn’t that just fancy talk for fired?* In a wheedling tone of voice, Logan cajoled, “Hey, listen to me. You stay right there, and I’ll swing by and pick you up as soon as I get off, okay?” A frisson of alarm shot up his spine when a flash of movement nicked the corner of his eye. Logan whirled around to find Mack smoking a cigarette and regarding him with intense curiosity.

He turned his attention back to his phone to hear, “Don’t bother... gonna get go... soon. I really am sorr... ake care, Logan.” There was nothing more as the line went dead.

His heart sinking like a stone in the sea, Logan flipped his phone closed before looking over at his supervisor. With a sheepish shrug, he said, “Buddy of mine. He’s havin’ a rough day.”

Mack nodded sympathetically. “Sure sounded that way.” He flicked his cigarette butt on the ground and stubbed it out while offering, “Look, if you wanta take off now and get him out of that bar, go ’head. Might save his wife some grief.”

“He’s not—” Logan clamped down on that admission and tried to seem unconcerned as he explained, “He’ll be all right. No use anyway, he wouldn’t tell me where he is.”

Mack shrugged and ambled back into the garden center. With no other choice, Logan followed him in and finished his shift, barely aware of what he was doing as he unboxed some of those shiny Christmas ornaments. His self-righteous anger was a distant recollection now, so consumed was he by shame and regret.

The memory of telling Nick that he had nothing to lose stabbed at Logan’s conscience. *What a stupid thing to say. Nick had plenty to lose, and it looks like he did. Couldn’t Trudy’ve given him a break? He told*

*her the truth. Wonder if he's sorry, now? 'Course he is—isn't that what he said on the call?*

Logan suddenly wished he could tell Nick not to be sorry, to be proud that he did the right thing and screw what anyone else thought. *Too bad I pretty much came right out and told him to lie; can't believe I did that. What was I thinkin'? I was just as bad as Daisy.* For the first time ever, Logan saw the situation with his sister from the other side, and he didn't like the view at all. *No wonder Nick don't wanna see me right now.* The idea of his friend sad and alone in an unfamiliar bar disturbed Logan on several levels, not least of which was the thought of some strange guy jumping at the chance to comfort Nick.

At three p.m., Logan finished up work and practically ran out to his truck. In the privacy of the cab, he punched in Nick's cell phone number. The voice mail came on immediately every time he called, which meant the damn thing was probably turned off. *Maybe he's home by now.* Logan immediately tried that number but got only the answering machine. "Hey, Nick? It's me. If you're there, pick up." No response.

The next number he dialed was the last person he wanted to talk to but the only one who could tell him what had happened with Nick. Unfortunately, when he asked to speak with Dr. Trudy Gerard, he was informed that she was with a client. "How much longer do you think she'll be?"

"I'm not really sure. I can take a message for her, if you'd like."

Logan stifled the urge to curse at the receptionist and instead left a message for Trudy to call him on his cell phone as soon as she got a chance. He sat lost in thought for a moment and then, with no better idea, headed for Nick's house. *Just because he ain't pickin' up the phone don't mean he's not there.*

AFTER Nick ended the call to Logan, he stared down into his half-full mug, trying to decide what to do next. A fourth beer on an empty stomach would make driving a dicey proposition, and Nick felt no

desire to spend the rest of the day in this dark and dank bar. He wasn't even quite sure how he'd ended up there.

He'd left ACC and moped around the house for a few hours until the walls had started closing in on him, but for once going for a run or shooting hoops held no appeal. Looking for a source of cheer, Nick had headed to the hospital to see his mom, thinking a visit would surely buoy both of them, especially as this was her last week in Allegheny Suburban. Three days earlier, Nick had made arrangements with the social worker to transfer Agnes to the Heartland Healthcare Center.

Sadly, the visit ended up only adding to Nick's gloom. His mom looked more frail than he'd ever seen her before and seemed more incoherent than not. After twenty minutes, Agnes had drifted back to sleep, prompting Nick to go out in search of sustenance. While driving around aimlessly, he'd made an impulsive stop at Slim and Ernie's Tavern, an establishment where serving food didn't appear to be a priority or, judging by his time there, even a possibility.

A growling stomach reminded Nick of his original mission. He slowly finished his beer, weighing the options. The idea of heading home to an empty house tempted him not in the least. In all honesty, Nick knew where he wanted to go. *Been feelin' the pull all morning, just can't admit it. Why? It ain't like it's gonna make anything worse.* Mind made up at last, Nick paid the tab and headed outside.

Twenty-five minutes later, he walked through the door of The Liberty Grill, finding it unusually quiet. Of course, he was there smack-dab between the lunch rush and the early bird special crowd. The afternoon hostess, Sharon, greeted him like the old friend he was. "Nick! What're you doin' here?"

"Looking for somethin' to eat." He swept the entire restaurant with a cautious glance. "Is Larry around?"

"He's busy in the kitchen, hon. You want I should get him?"

"Nah, don't bother him," answered Nick, unsure whether he was disappointed or relieved. "I'll just take a seat at the counter." He hopped on a stool at the far end of the restaurant and waved the menu away. "I know what I want. Medium-rare cheeseburger, loaded, and a double-thick chocolate shake."

The waitress, a new girl Nick didn't know, nodded as she wrote his order up, asking, "Fries or potato salad on the side?"

"I wanna substitute macaroni and cheese."

With raised eyebrows, she confirmed, "You want a side order of macaroni and cheese with your *cheeseburger*?"

"Actually, I want a full order," Nick corrected, smiling in spite of himself at her disbelief.

"Okay." She winked and smiled back. "You got it."

Nick snatched a discarded newspaper from a nearby booth and paged wearily through it as he waited. A little while later, the clunk of a heavy stoneware plate hitting the counter signaled that his food had arrived. Nick lowered the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* to find Larry shaking his head while sliding a tall, frosty glass next to the plate.

"Sharon told you I was here?" he asked, reaching for his half-pound burger.

"She didn't have to. You think I don't know that order? I heard it being fired in the kitchen and figured either you were here lookin' for comfort food or some other customer was trying to commit suicide by calorie."

"Yeah, well, I need some comfort." After taking a huge bite, Nick muttered, "My order wasn't the only thing that got fired today."

Larry drew a mug of coffee for himself and tsked at his young friend. "Is that what you call taking a voluntary leave of absence?"

"Ha, *voluntary*," Nick scoffed, slowing his assault on the burger to tackle some macaroni and cheese. "I guess you talked to your wife today?"

"No, I *listened* to her last night after we dropped Dave off—for over an hour."

"Sorry 'bout that." Nick sighed at his plate before looking back up at Larry. "She knew as soon as she saw us?"

"Didn't even take that long," Larry harrumphed. "When Dave saw the car and started talkin' about you and Logan workin' so hard on it, Trudy got real quiet. I looked over and could see the wheels turnin'."



in her head. I'll admit, I didn't get what was up 'til she started ranting about it later."

"She was really pissed off, huh?" Nick picked up his glass and tried to drown some guilt in chocolate shake.

"Son," Larry drawled, the deep rumble soothing to Nick's ears. "I think she was more hurt than pissed."

"She thinks I went behind her back?"

"There's that. But she seems to think it's a bad idea all around—bad for both you and Logan. As she put it, 'Nick could have any gay man in the city, but he has to fuck around with one of my abusers.'"

Nick devoured his burger with renewed vigor, objecting, "It wasn't like that. We aren't just 'fucking around'." He swallowed and added indignantly, "And Logan is more than just another abuser."

"Well, I'll be damned." A deep chuckle erupted from Larry. "What is it you're tryin' to say?"

"What?" Nick asked. His annoyance spiked when Larry just laughed harder.

"Did you just hear yourself? You practically came right out and told me you were in love."

"I did not." His heart sped up as he examined his admission. To cover his confusion, he wolfed down more food, but his mind wasn't distracted. *Shit, what did I mean? Am I... in love?* Around a mouthful of macaroni and cheese, Nick mumbled, "I don't know... maybe."

He looked up at Larry, expecting more amusement but instead finding dark brown eyes filled with gentle compassion. "I thought Nick Zales didn't believe in love."

Nick wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, then squared his shoulders and looked Larry in the eye. "Yeah, well... could be that love believes in Nick Zales."

Larry nodded, saying with some satisfaction, "It's about time."

"Are you crazy?" Nick threw his napkin down on his nearly empty plate. "Do you know how fucked up this whole thing is?"

“As fucked up as some fry cook fallin’ in love with a fancy PhD from Bethel Park?”

“That hardly compares, Larry. And you’re not just ‘some fry cook’.”

“And you told me Logan wasn’t just another abuser.”

“He’s not.” Nick sighed and ran a hand across his forehead. “Still. There are too many complications and repercussions here—”

“This is why you and Trudy drive each other crazy sometimes,” said Larry as he leaned a shoulder against the coffee urn. “You two are so much alike.” Nick shot Larry a quizzical look, prompting him to explain, “You both analyze everything to death.”

”Not lately,” Nick laughed.

“You are now—”

“Larry,” Nick interrupted, leaning forward and lowering his tone to explain. “Me falling in love with Logan could mean... mean...”

“So deal with your daddy issues and then—”

“How did you know...?”

“Do you think I’ve lived with that woman for over twenty years without pickin’ up a thing or two about her business? Like I was sayin’, deal with what you have to and then, if the feelings are still there, find a way to make it work.” He faced Nick, hands braced against the counter. “Love is worth fightin’ for.” Larry’s smile flashed white against his dark skin as he added, “Looks like I’m not the only one who thinks so.”

LOGAN was so relieved to see Nick’s Jeep in the parking lot of The Liberty Grill, he could have kissed the damn thing, even though his stomach twisted at the thought of going in that restaurant. He took a deep breath, slipped through the double glass doors, and was immediately greeted by the ebullient hostess. “Hi, hon, booth or table?”

“Umm,” Logan stalled, looking around for Nick. He spotted him sitting at the counter, deep in conversation with Larry Gerard. Nodding towards the two men, he said, “I’m meetin’ him.”

“Okay,” she answered gaily, stepping aside.

Logan walked slowly down the aisle and slipped onto the stool next to Nick. “Hey, there.”

Nick swiveled around and regarded him with apparent shock. “Logan, what the hell are you doin’ here?”

“Lookin’ for you.”

“Why didn’t you call?” Nick asked, pulling his cell phone out.

“You have it turned off.”

“I do not,” Nick said. He looked down at the phone and said, “Oh, looks like the battery died.” He shrugged, asking, “How did you know I was here?”

“Trudy told me—”

The glare Nick shot Larry would have stung a lesser man, but Larry was clearly unabashed. “It wasn’t me.”

“You didn’t let me finish. Trudy told me this was the best place to look for you.”

“I gotta get back to work,” Larry said. He turned to Logan, asking, “Can I get ya anything?”

“Cup of coffee.” Larry efficiently grabbed a mug and filled it, putting it in front of Logan in the blink of an eye. “Thanks.”

“Sure thing,” Larry said as he picked up Nick’s plate and strode back towards the kitchen. “See ya ’round.”

Logan breathed a sigh at being left alone with Nick but then found himself at a loss for words, so he said the first thing that popped into his head. “Returned to the scene of the crime, huh?”

His weak jest backfired as Nick’s face fell. He grimly answered, “You think me bringin’ you here was a crime?”

“It was just a joke. I guess this place really is kind of special to you?”

The smile Logan’s question evoked seemed a little sad, but at least it was a smile. “Yeah, it is. Why were you looking for me?”

“After you called me, I was worried you got fired, but Trudy said you just took some time off. Is that right?”

“Yeah.” Nick stared down at the Formica countertop, adding, “I’m gonna take a couple’a weeks and get my mom settled in the nursing home. Stuff like that.”

Trying to catch Nick’s eye, Logan pushed his coffee aside and leaned on the counter. “You didn’t sound too happy about it on the phone.”

Nick looked at him, saying, “What do I have to be happy about, Logan? You said it yourself last night—”

“I said a lotta stupid things last night.”

“Maybe. But it doesn’t immediately follow that you were wrong.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means that.... I guess it means I should’ve handled things better. A lot better.” Nick reached for Logan’s untouched coffee and took a sip as he swiveled to face him directly. “I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. Especially you. It looks like I have a habit of doin’ that to people that I...” He trailed off and looked out the window. “That I’d never wanta hurt.”

“Jesus, Nick.” Logan thumped his hand on the counter, insisting, “You didn’t hurt me. You were right to tell Trudy the truth, and I was dead wrong to want you to lie.” With a sigh, he added, “I just got a bunch of stuff to... to deal with, now.”

“Like your wife?”

“Yeah. That’s first on my list. One of the few things me and Trudy—” Logan shrugged as he ran his thumbnail along the bright chrome edging of the counter. “Fuck, I ain’t lookin’ forward to tellin’ Linda.” He glanced at Nick, searching for understanding in those dark eyes. “This is gonna hurt her awful bad.”

“I know, but the longer you wait, the worse it’ll be.”

“Is this week soon enough?”

Nick’s mouth fell open. “You’re gonna talk to Linda this week?”

“Yes. Trudy wants me to do it at her office.” He rolled his eyes, adding, “She says it’ll be best in a neutral place, plus she’ll be there to offer her support....”

“But?” Nick prodded, apparently reading him well.

“But that don’t seem right to me. I think Linda should be in her own home so she can... yell or holler or throw things at me if she wants.” Logan reached for his tepid coffee, taking a gulp before he added, “I think Krista and Meghan have Girls Scouts some night this week. I’m gonna see if I can do it then.”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

Nick’s smile seemed more genuine this time, and he found himself smiling back, but the air between them hung heavy with the unspoken question: Now what?

Logan took a deep breath and forced out the other decision he’d made on the way to Pittsburgh. “Nick, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but I’m gonna need some time to... some time.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that.”

Surprise and alarm replaced the trepidation in his gut. “You are?”

“Yeah.” His voice dropped a full register as Nick added, “Coming out is a hard thing, Logan, I know that. Everyone should be able to choose their own moment, and I’m real sorry it got forced on you. If you didn’t need some time to deal with that, I’d think you were nuts.”

“It was hard for *you*?”

“Of course. Why are you surprised?”

Logan was too astounded to offer anything but the truth. “I didn’t think anything was hard for you.”

His reply drew a real, honest-to-God belly laugh from Nick. “Yeah, right. If you only knew.”

When they parted in the parking lot a few minutes later, Logan drew some solace from the hug they shared; however, the embrace was not only too brief, there was a new awkwardness marring it as well. Wanting to end on an up note, Logan called out to Nick’s retreating figure, “Hey, Nick!”

“What?”

“I might take the T-Bird and get it painted this weekend. I’ll call you if I get it done.”

A patented Nick Zales grin beamed at Logan from ten feet away. “Sounds great. I can’t wait to see it.”

Logan drove home feeling slightly better but wondering why he hadn’t told Nick he was planning to take the Thunderbird to Elco. It didn’t take too much soul-searching to find the answer. He’d wanted an out in case facing up to Linda turned out to be all he could handle in the space of a week.

## Chapter 15: Pain Too Lonely

*Doubt is a pain too lonely to know that faith is his twin brother.*

—Kahlil Gibran

AS HE started the solo counseling session that Trudy had arranged for Tuesday evening, Logan wanted, up-front, to get something out of the way. He took a deep breath, sat up straight in his chair, and faced his counselor head-on. “Before we get started, I wanta thank you for tellin’ me where I could find Nick yesterday. I know you didn’t have to do it, but we needed....” That admission was leading into a room marked “private,” so Logan let the thought trail off and mumbled, “Anyway, thank you.”

Trudy gave him an almost pained smile before replying, “You’re welcome.”

The look on her face prompted Logan to ask, “If I hadn’t gone along with what you wanted, would you have told me?” There was no immediate answer, so Logan clarified, “I mean, me and Nick taking a break—”

“I knew what you meant. I was just giving it some thought.” Trudy tilted her head and shifted her eyes slightly as she admitted, “To be perfectly honest, I don’t know what I would have done.” She looked back at Logan, asking, “Are you having second thoughts about not seeing Nick for a while?”

Rather than admit the bald truth, that he was having second, third, and fourth thoughts, Logan stammered, “I, um... I, guess... it’s for the best. For both of us, right?”

Sounding much more like her usual assured self, Trudy said, “Yes, for both of you.”

That answer had come out a little too fast and sure for Logan's liking, prompting him to challenge, "Sounds like you don't think I'm good for Nick."

Once again, Trudy seemed to be mulling over the question. Finally, she sighed loudly and said, "You must realize, whenever a child of an abusive parent gets involved with—" she shot a guilty glance at Logan before continuing, "even a *one-time* abuser, there are questions about.... Well, there are questions."

Logan felt like he'd had the wind knocked out of him. "That ain't why... Nick doesn't think of me like that. He's as much as said so."

"I'm not trying to say that's what's going on with you and Nick. I was just explaining why I had my doubts." She actually smiled briefly at Logan before saying, "I talked to Larry about it, and from what he's told me, it might not be the case here."

"Wait a minute," Logan growled. "You talked to *your husband* about me and Nick?"

Trudy remained unruffled as she explained, "More like Larry told me what he and Nick talked about—which was you."

"Oh." Logan didn't like the idea any more than he had before but supposed he couldn't fault her in that case. "What did he say about me?"

"I'd rather you and Nick discuss that—in a couple of weeks." When Logan frowned at her, Trudy soothed, "Whatever the truth of the matter is about the genesis of your relationship, both you and Nick still need to deal with your issues—separately."

Her assurances couldn't prevent Logan from blurting, "But Nick's gonna be.... I mean he's kinda down right now, and he shouldn't be all alone. Maybe I should... check in on him now and then. That'd be okay, wouldn't it?"

Trudy let out a huff of exasperation—or was it amusement? Logan wasn't sure, and what followed didn't enlighten him any. "I really don't have any power to enforce a ban on your association with Nick. I am *asking* you to give this break a chance, but the rest is up to you. And by the way, Nick seemed fine when I spoke with him this



afternoon. He spent most of the day at the nursing home getting his mom settled in.”

Relief quickly followed surprise at Trudy’s assurance, and unthinkingly Logan offered, “Oh, you two are speak—I mean... that’s good to hear.”

One eyebrow was elegantly cocked as Trudy dryly assured him, “Yes, Nick and I *are* speaking. You know, in the end, this whole episode is probably going to be good for our relationship.”

Logan’s eyes snapped to Trudy’s face, and he studied her for any signs of humor, but she seemed perfectly sincere. “Yeah? How?”

“When you get right down to it, a pedestal is an uncomfortable perch for any human being.” Logan was still trying to refrain from asking what the fuck that meant when Trudy added, “You seemed surprised to find that I’m worried about Nick, too.” Once again not sounding much like the counselor he knew, her voice soft and sad, she murmured, “Can’t you at least give me that much credit?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

She waved him off. “Please don’t apologize. Besides, you’re stealing my thunder.”

*Fuck, she’s more confusing than ever.* “What’s that mean?”

“It means I want to apologize to you, Logan. I should have listened better when you tried to tell me your marriage wasn’t working for you and never had.”

If she was trying to make him feel better, that statement had the opposite effect. Logan squirmed uncomfortably under her earnest gaze. “That’s all right,” he said. “You couldn’t’ve....” He expelled a weary breath before admitting, “I can see why you thought what you did. I was doin’ my damndest to make sure you didn’t catch on to the truth.”

“Why was it so important to you that I not find out you were gay?”

“Are you kidding?” Irritation and incredulity frosted and sharpened every word. “I wasn’t ready to admit that to myself, let alone to you.”

“Are you ready now?”

Logan massaged his tense brow before sighing, “I don’t know. Guess I have to be.”

“You said you weren’t ready to admit the truth to yourself, meaning you’ve been hiding from this knowledge for a while?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“How long?”

Unwillingly, Logan offered up the truth. “Long time. Since before I married Linda.”

“God, that must have been exhausting. There must be some relief mixed in with whatever misgivings you have about coming out, yes?”

Logan gave it some thought but couldn’t find any relief lurking in his heart. “If there is, it’s hidin’ from me better than the other stuff ever did.”

“Have you thought about what you’re going to tell Linda?”

“Yeah.” Which wasn’t exactly a lie. Logan had thought about it, he just hadn’t come up with anything. “Sure ain’t looking forward to it.”

Trudy issued an encouraging smile as she leaned forward, briskly offering, “How can I help?”

“I don’t think you can.”

“That’s not true. There must be something I can do. Perhaps we could try some roleplay?”

Logan was fairly sure Trudy wasn’t propositioning him—especially after recent revelations—but he wasn’t clear on what she was offering. “Try what?”

Judging by the sparkle in her brown eyes, she was now definitely amused. “You pretend I’m Linda and tell me what you’re going to tell her. And I’ll respond as if I were your wife.”

It seemed to Logan that shrinks never ran out of crazy-ass ideas. He shook his head dismissively, protesting, “But you don’t know what she’s gonna say or how she’s gonna act. How’re you gonna play her?”

“Oh, we’ll try a number of different scenarios—anger, tears, pleading, accusations....”

Now it seemed clear to Logan that what Trudy was offering him was basically an hour of hell—on steroids. “Ma’am, I can’t.... That ain’t gonna work for me.”

Though she was clearly crestfallen, Trudy soon put her professional demeanor back on and said, “All right, it’s up to you. But we still have an hour here and two more weeks of court-ordered therapy. The question remains: how can I help?”

The ensuing silence stretched out for several dozen ticks of the clock before Logan finally screwed up his courage and told the truth. “I think I’d like to talk about Daisy.”

“Your sister?”

“Yeah. There was somethin’.... See, she kinda forced me to cover up for my brother over somethin’, but I don’t really wanta talk about what. What I wanta talk about is how I felt about her askin’.... Can we do it that way?”

“You know we operate under the rule of doctor-patient confidentiality here, Logan. You don’t have to be afraid—”

“It ain’t that,” Logan explained, failing to keep the exasperation from his voice. “I just don’t wanta talk about it. Okay?”

Trudy’s brow furrowed, but after a few moments of consideration, she said, “Okay. If that’s what you need.” Logan felt some of the tension leave his shoulders as his counselor encouraged, “So, go ahead. Tell me about your sister.”

When Logan walked out of Trudy’s downtown office forty minutes later, some of his burden had been lifted. Not by a miracle of psychiatry or self-analysis, not by any epiphany, but by having a simple plan of action. Trudy had readily approved of his plan to talk to Daisy when he took the Thunderbird to Elco to get it painted. She had even done her best to convince Logan that it was a good idea to confront both Linda and Daisy immediately.

Of course, her “rip the Band-Aid off” analogy hadn’t been his favorite pep talk ever, and he still thought putting off the trip to his hometown for a bit would be best for him. After all, neither Daisy nor the car was going anywhere. What was the rush?

LOGAN had expected to feel nervous—and God knew he was—but the dread that clawed at his nerves as he walked towards his old apartment building on Wednesday night was an unwelcome surprise. Linda had definitely been suspicious on the phone that morning, asking several times why they weren't meeting at Dr. Gerard's office like before. He'd dodged the question as much as possible, and Linda had finally given up and acquiesced to a private seven thirty p.m. get-together.

Though it was approaching quarter to eight, his feet seemed made of lead as Logan slowly climbed the stairs. Still, no matter how much he dawdled, the inevitable could only be delayed for so long, and he soon found himself perched uncomfortably on the edge of the sofa. Logan took a deep breath while he watched a grim-faced Linda set a cup of coffee in front of him. She seemed unfazed by a loudly purring Boots, who was weaving in and out between her legs.

Linda settled in a chair across from the couch and looked at him expectantly. For lack of a better start, he asked, "How long will Krista and Meghan be at Girls Scouts?"

"Debbie's mom said somethin' about goin' for ice cream after, so they should be a while. I don't expect to see 'em 'til after nine."

"Who's this Debbie?"

"She's a girl in Meghan's class who's in Scouts with them. Her mom, Alison, has been takin' all of the girls to their meetings since school started." Linda sipped her own coffee and shot Logan a piercing glance. "But I know you didn't come here to talk about Debbie or Girl Scouts, so why don't you just give me the bad news?"

Logan was momentarily stunned into silence. Linda sure had learned to speak her mind since they'd split up. "What makes you think I got bad news?"

A slightly shrill laugh emanated from her. "I'm psychic, don't you know? Logan, a man don't arrange for a private talk like this unless he's got bad news up his sleeve, so go ahead and spill it."

"All right," Logan sighed. "Thing is, Linda...." That was exactly where he'd gotten stuck every time he'd practiced this speech in his head. *Guess I should've done that play-acting thing with Trudy.* Linda

was staring at him through narrowed eyes, and Logan made a split-second decision to withhold any but the most basic information until a later date. Much later—if “never” could be called later. He kept his gaze fixed on the coffee table and said, “Thing is... I don’t think it’s gonna work. You and me gettin’ back together, I mean.” Logan peered up at Linda to find her glowering at him.

He braced for the worst, but she simply sighed sadly before whispering, “Yeah... that’s what I figured. Carol—my counselor—warned me ’bout this.”

“About what?”

“About you bolting if I started sayin’ right out what I wanted and needed from you in our marriage. She said most abusive spouses can’t take that.”

“That ain’t... Jesus Christ, Linda, I ain’t like that, and you know it.”

“You ain’t? Then what the hell is this about?”

“I just can see now that...” Logan paused, searching for words that would explain without saying too much. Finally, he avowed firmly, “That you’re better off without me. We was never right for each other.”

Linda folded her arms and sullenly suggested, “Meaning I was never pretty enough for you.”

“What? That’s the stupidest—that’s crazy.”

“Is it? I know everybody back in Elco used ta wonder how mousy little Linda Strickland ever caught a hunk like Logan Crane—’til Krista was born, then I guess they all counted up real quick and figured it out.”

“Krista wasn’t the only—”

Linda was having none of Logan’s protestations and steamrolled over his objections. “But I ain’t that drab little Linda no more. Guess it’d surprise you to know how many guys give me the eye these days. Go ahead and leave, Logan. Find another little mouse who won’t ask you for any effort or consideration, but I ain’t gonna sit on the shelf for long.”

“Well, good for you,” Logan sneered.

“What’s that mean?” Linda looked at him appraisingly. “Seems like you don’t even really care. You’re already plannin’ on replacin’ me double-quick, aren’t you?” Logan failed to keep the guilt from slashing across his face, causing his wife to ask with dawning suspicion, “Or have you done it already?” When he didn’t answer, her voice rose as she challenged, “Have you?”

It took some effort, but Logan managed to refrain from squirming as he rumbled, “Linda, calm down—”

“Oh, I’m plenty calm, you cheating son of a bitch,” she barked. “Who is she?” Tears were welling as Linda jumped to her feet and faced him over the coffee table. “Some little teenage slut you picked up in a bar? Does she know what you did—”

“Will you give me a fucking break?” Logan shouted. “I ain’t hooked up with any teenage slut.” He did his best to avoid meeting her accusing stare and watched the cat slink quickly from the room, obviously unhappy with the crackling tension in the air.

“Right. So, she ain’t a teenager, just a—”

Grimly attempting to salvage his plan, Logan defiantly asserted, “There ain’t no ‘she’.”

Linda stood in silence, gulping air and studying him intently. The faint glow of hope seeping through her anger almost broke him. “God, I’m sorry. Guess I really flew off the handle.” She flopped back down in her chair and hid her head in her hands. Though it was muffled, Logan still heard her say, “It almost felt good to have somethin’ concrete to blame.”

The knowledge that, without the whole truth, Linda might blame herself pierced Logan so badly the pain felt almost physical. Though some part of his mind was screaming “no,” he still forced himself to woodenly declare, “There is somethin’ concrete to blame.”

“What?” Linda brushed a blonde lock out her eyes, saying, “Me? Me wantin’ more out of this marriage than—”

“No. It ain’t that, it’s...” Logan ran out of steam, wondering how he could possibly say those words. He took one more look at his wife’s tear-stained face and started again. “There is someone else.”

Bitterly, she spat out, “You lied to me.”

“No, I didn’t,” he said tiredly, crossing his arms tightly against his chest. “There ain’t no she because... because it’s...” His gaze fell briefly to the carpet as he quietly finished, “It’s a he.” Time seemed to freeze for Logan with his admission hanging in the air while Linda stared at him incredulously for what seemed like hours.

When she spoke at last, her pleading eyes and strangled cry of “What the hell does that mean?” practically begged him to explain it away. He saw no need for any response; the words would have to stand.

“Are you tryin’ to tell me that you’re fucking a guy? My husband of twelve years is... gay?” Wild-eyed, Linda waited for an answer, but when Logan solemnly nodded, she leaped up, saying, “I can’t sit here and listen to this shit!” She moved towards the hallway, gasping, “Oh my God... oh my God... I can’t believe it.”

Logan rocketed up and blocked her way before she could leave the room, pleading, “Linda, I’m sorry. Ya gotta know, I didn’t wanta hurt you—”

He reached out a hand to her shoulder, but she slapped him away, snarling, “Don’t! Don’t you dare touch me.”

Logan stoically bore the weak punch she landed on his arm before drawing his sobbing wife into his embrace. He felt there was nothing he could do except let her cry, so he led her back to the couch and sat awkwardly beside her until the tears subsided. When she was finally hiccupping with her head thrown back against the couch, Logan offered, “Can I get you somethin’?”

Linda turned to stare at him for an uncomfortable stretch of time before answering, “Like what? Twelve years of my life back?” When he shifted his gaze to the wall, she said, “Forget it. I sure could use a beer, though.”

Logan left to fulfill her request, whispering, “Me, too.”

He came back with two IC Lights moments later and handed one to Linda. After a long swallow, she looked him in the eye and asked evenly, “It’s true, huh? You’re not makin’ this up?”

After gulping some of his own beer, Logan answered, “Yeah, it’s true.”

"I'll be damned." Linda shook her head and put her beer to her lips, muttering, "I sure didn't see that one coming." She cocked her head at Logan. "You ain't nothin' like... you know... what you see on TV and all."

"Nope," Logan answered shortly, hoping to keep this calmer version of Linda around as long as possible.

Another sip of beer fortified Linda enough to ask, "So what, you just figured this out recently?"

A tired shrug was his first response, followed by, "Not really. I guess I been ignoring it for a lotta years. Finally caught up with me."

"A lot of years? Since before we were married?" There was a definite wobble in her voice. "Does that mean you *never* loved me?"

Logan shook his head as he chewed at a hangnail. When he'd done enough damage to taste blood, he finally answered, "That ain't so. I did—I *do* love you, but it ain't.... I just.... I never loved you like you deserved."

A bitter snort signaled her opinion of that statement. "Too bad you didn't figure that out before you nearly killed me throwin' me through that dresser."

Ignoring that, he tried to redirect the conversation by asking, "Where do we go from here?"

"You're asking me?" Linda said. "Damned if I know." Her hand flew to her mouth as she gasped, "Fuck, what're we gonna tell the girls?"

"I don't wanta tell 'em *this*," Logan answered firmly. "Not yet."

"No shit." Linda shot him a look that suggested Logan had taken leave of his senses. "But they're gonna wanta know why we're splittin' up."

"Can't we just tell 'em we decided we're better off apart?"

"Yeah, somethin' like that, I guess." Linda ran a hand through her hair, adding, "Let me think on it, Logan." She turned to him, asking sarcastically, "Are you in a hurry about this? You wanta run off to San Francisco with your *boyfriend* or somethin'?"



“Hell no,” Logan snapped. If anyone else had asked that question, there would have been grave consequences, but he clamped down on his anger and let it go. “We can tell ’em when you’re ready.”

Suddenly, Linda leaned back against the couch and demanded, “Who is this guy, anyway?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“I ain’t gonna—”

“Oh, forget it,” Linda said, waving her hand dismissively. “I don’t even know why I asked. Just wondered where you met him, is all. Can’t picture you hanging out in some gay bar—”

“I been working on a car with him,” Logan supplied tersely.

“Wow, another grease monkey. You two sound perfect for each other,” Linda jeered.

Logan was tempted to tell her she was right about that last part, but he ignored the dig, figuring there was much worse she could have said. Rising from the couch, he said, “Guess I better get going.”

“Yeah, I need some time to pull myself together before the girls get home.”

Logan nodded and turned to go, but the mention of his daughters prodded him to confirm their plans. “Speaking of them, you still gonna let me have ’em for the weekend?”

“Are you gonna take ’em over to meet your *friend*?” Linda imbued the last word with extreme bitterness and irony.

Using up the last of his patience, Logan ground out, “No.” He let that sink in and then added, “Though I was sorta thinkin’ of takin’ ’em to Elco with me.”

“Elco? What the hell for?”

“I need to get a car painted at Cal Titus’s place, and I thought I’d stay with my sister when I do. I haven’t talked to her about this yet, so nothin’s certain, but she ain’t seen the girls since we left,” he finished lamely, hoping Linda wouldn’t point out the fact that Daisy hadn’t seen them all that much when they lived in Elco.

Linda stood up and gathered their beer bottles and coffee mugs and seemed to be mulling over his plan. Finally she said, "Okay. You can have the girls, but I wanta know before Friday if you're takin' 'em to Elco or not." She drained her beer before turning to him. "You ain't gonna let people back home know 'bout this, are you?"

"No, 'course not," Logan scoffed. He took a deep breath and asked, "Are you?"

"Yeah, sure." Linda rolled her eyes as she said, "All my life I been dyin' to become the laughin' stock of Elco."

There was nothing good to say to that, so Logan pulled his keys out of his pocket and said, "I'll see ya Friday when I pick the girls up."

"Yeah, I'll have 'em packed up and ready before six so you won't have to hang around waiting," Linda answered. It was obvious from her tone that her offer was as much for her own sake as his.

LATE Thursday morning, Nick jogged up the front porch steps to get another leaf bag from his stash. He stopped to gulp some coffee from his thermos before heading back to work. He'd already filled four large bags with leaves after steadily raking for a couple of hours, yet he still had quite a bit of work in front of him, which was surprising considering the size of his tiny yard. But the plot of ground was covered with oak trees, and they made their presence known each fall. Nick usually paid a neighborhood kid to rake them up, but this year he had the time to tackle the job himself.

In spite of the crisp October weather, Nick had removed his jacket, since the manual labor was keeping him plenty warm. He'd nearly filled the fifth bag when he heard a car coming up the driveway. Nick looked over and immediately recognized Trudy's silver Honda Civic. It was all he could do not to roll his eyes at this unexpected visit. Trudy had checked in with him by phone every day since Monday, now this.

As she walked slowly over to where he stood, Nick swallowed back an impulse to tell her he still had a mother, thank you very much,

and instead waved a hand at her wool suit, saying, “That isn’t the best work outfit I ever saw, but the extra rake is in the back shed.”

Trudy could barely muster up a smile at his lame quip, but she did look around and say, “The place looks good. You’ve been busy.”

Nick leaned on his rake and looked at the house and yard with some satisfaction. “Yeah, I’ve been doing a little painting and cleaning up an’ that.” He shot his boss a slightly sardonic smile. “So did you drop in to see if I’ve been using my time off wisely?” When Trudy didn’t answer immediately, only searched his face with her large brown eyes, Nick felt a cold lump of unease settle into his stomach. “Is something wrong?”

Rather than answering directly, Trudy said, “Let’s have a seat, okay?”

“Sure,” Nick answered, taking a few shallow breaths to quell his rising alarm. *Get a grip. She ain’t gonna fire me now. What could’a changed since Monday? I ain’t even talked to Logan since then.*

When Nick dropped his rake, she steered him gently to the porch, and they both settled in on the top step, Trudy seeming unconcerned about her good suit. He stiffened his spine and looked at her, saying, “Okay. What’s up?”

“I have bad news, Nick.”

That phrase sent panic racing through his veins. Bad news, said in that tone and given by one counselor to another, could only mean one thing. “One of my clients?” Trudy’s faced confirmed it. “Who? Oh, God, is it Sheila? It’s her, I—”

“It’s not Sheila,” Trudy broke in gently. “It’s... it’s Norah.”

Nick felt like there was a disconnect between his ears and his brain. Those words didn’t make any sense—couldn’t make sense. “No, it can’t be. She’s still in Arkport, she’s with her parents. She’s—”

“According to the police report, she left Arkport over two weeks ago, but she never came back to Pittsburgh. Instead she headed to Monroeville to stay with Alex.”

“She’s been with Alex this whole time?” Nick was practically shouting, but he couldn’t help himself. “What the fuck, Trudy! How

bad is she hurt?" Even as he asked that question, there was a small boy inside begging brokenly, "Please, oh, please, God, no. Please don't let her be...."

"She's dead. It was a murder-suicide, apparently—"

Trudy's words hit Nick like a block of black ice, freezing his core and knocking out all possibility of rational or coherent thought. When he brushed the tears from his face, he felt oddly disconnected from them, as though they'd been shed by another man entirely. Vertigo swooped down on him, and Nick lowered his head, trying to ride out the wave of nausea.

"Nick, did you hear what I said?" Trudy's steady voice broke into his reverie. "I want you to pack a bag and come and stay with us for a few days."

"No," Nick answered firmly, finally finding his voice.

"I really think it's best—"

"No." He got to his feet. "I'm gonna pack a bag, all right, but not so I can go hide out with you and Larry. I gotta get to the funeral."

"The funeral isn't until Saturday," Trudy said, following him to the door.

"Why not?"

"They're doing an autopsy today." Nick closed his eyes against the image of his beautiful friend laid out on a cold steel slab. "Besides, I don't think it's wise for you to attend the funeral. Not alone."

Nick spun on his heel, snarling, "You don't think it's *wise*? You don't think I owe that to her? After I abandoned her, threw her to the wolves like—"

"Jesus Christ, Nick, will you listen to yourself? I knew you'd try and take all of the blame. I knew it!"

"If not me, who?"

"How about blaming Alex, the fucker who pulled the trigger?" Trudy grabbed hold of his sleeve. "How about blaming me, the one who told you to let her go? How about blaming Norah—"

“No,” Nick cried, wrenching away from her and moving towards the front door. He put his hand on the knob and managed to say more calmly, “I need you to leave now.”

Trudy followed him, asserting, “I don’t think you should be alone right now.”

“Too bad, ’cause that’s exactly what I want.”

“Nick—”

“Please, go.”

It was clear Trudy was wavering, but she finally nodded, saying, “Okay. But you call me if you need *anything*. And I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“I’ll be on my way to Arkport tomorrow.”

“Then let me take you.” When Nick glared at her, she amended, “Or let someone go with you. I’m sure someone else at ACC—”

“No.”

“I insist—”

Nick whirled on her angrily. “Do you need a fucking hearing aid? I said no! Besides, you can’t insist. You’re not even my boss anymore.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means when you get back to your office, you can make my leave of absence permanent.” Nick turned back to the door and opened it.

“I will do no such thing.”

“Well, you better, ’cause I quit.”

If he didn’t quite slam the door in Trudy’s face, he came close enough. When he finally heard Trudy’s car pull away, he had to fight the childish impulse to crawl into a closet or under a bed. Those had been his favorite hiding spots as a kid faced with the sounds of his dad whaling on his mom. Nick knew he was too big for hiding now. Besides, as he’d always found out, it didn’t solve anything. With no better idea, he curled up on the couch under his mom’s old afghan and fell into a troubled sleep marred by violent, blood-drenched dreams.

WHEN Nick awoke to the ringing phone, he was totally disoriented. The light coming in from the front room window was soft and dim, and he had apparently fallen asleep on the couch. Still unsure of what day or time it was, he grabbed the receiver and groggily answered, "Hello."

"Hey, Nick."

The husky voice on the other end of the line was sad and somber, and the events of the day came rushing back to him. "Logan." A shard of guilt cut some of the elation that voice brought to Nick's heart. What right did he have to be glad about anything when Norah was dead? Especially upon hearing from a man who was—essentially—one of Alex's brethren. Wasn't he?

"I heard about Norah. I'm so sorry—"

"Yeah, thanks," Nick cut in. "How did you hear?"

"Trudy called me."

If he'd had the energy, Nick would have said something about meddling ex-bosses who didn't know when to leave well enough alone. But he didn't. It turned out that "Oh" was the best he could manage.

"Yeah, so... she says you're gonna be goin' to the funeral, and I thought maybe we could go together—"

"Was that your idea or Trudy's?"

"Does it matter?"

A second of consideration allowed Nick to admit, "No, I guess it doesn't. Because I'm going alone."

"Norah was my friend, too."

"Would you be going if it weren't for me?"

"Well..."

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

"So? What difference does it make? I still wanta go with you."

"I'm a big boy. I can go to a goddamned funeral without a babysitter."

“Okay! I was just tryin’ to help,” Logan answered defensively. “How ’bout I come an’ get you? We can go to The Liberty Grill for some dinner.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Fine, how ’bout a beer?”

“No, I can’t be around you. I don’t want any company right now.”

There was a long silence on the line before Logan said, his voice choked, “You don’t want any company, or you don’t want the company of a guy like me? Like Alex? Or your dad? Ain’t that what you’re thinkin’?”

“Fuck, Logan, don’t make this about you.”

“I don’t think I’m the one doin’ that.”

Nick heard the hurt behind Logan’s accusation but felt numb to it. “Look, I just know that Norah’s dead, and I...” *Let it happen.* “...need some time to deal with that. And I need to say goodbye to her.”

“Yeah, okay.” The voice on the other end of the line was still thick with emotion. “I ain’t him, Nick.”

“I know that.” Even to his own ears, his assurance sounded unconvincing. “I’m just not.... I’m not up to talking about this right now.”

“Sure. I understand.” There was silence on the line until Logan added, “I guess you gotta take care of your business and I gotta take care of mine.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means I’m gonna be out of town this weekend, too.”

“Then why’d you offer to go to Norah’s funeral with me?”

“’Cause I just decided for sure.”

Nick couldn’t make sense of what Logan was saying right then, and he couldn’t muster up the strength to try. “Okay, I’ll... I’ll talk to you next week. I guess.”

“Yeah, take care of yourself.”

Though he'd slept for hours, Nick felt exhausted. After downing most of a quart of orange juice right from the carton, he fell back onto the couch and pulled the afghan back over him. As tired as he was, sleep was a very long time coming.



## Chapter 16: The Long Uphill Climb

*It isn't for the moment you are struck that you need courage, but for the long uphill climb back to sanity, faith and security.*

—Anne Morrow Lindbergh

SATURDAY morning, Logan woke and rolled over on his sister's rec room couch so he could squint groggily at the oversized wall clock in the dim light filtering down the open staircase. It was just after six a.m., and he considered grabbing a little more sleep since they'd all been up late into the night talking over old times. Well, truth be told, Krista had been almost as quiet as her dad while Daisy and Meghan did the lion's share of the talking, aided by Daisy's oldest child, Lisa, with the boys, Mark and Pete, chiming in occasionally.

The latter nephew in particular had peppered Logan with enthusiastic questions about the Thunderbird parked in the driveway. Logan had been a bit bemused by the conversation, finding it difficult to reconcile the appearance of this gangly teen with the memory of a squalling baby who, fifteen years earlier, had made a habit of disturbing Logan's sleep.

Though the attitude puzzled him, it hadn't escaped Logan's notice that his brother-in-law had seemed almost disapproving of his older son's interest in the sports car. The two men had always maintained a cordial, if distant, relationship, so he finally chalked it up to Chuck's permanent state of crankiness, always in evidence by his habit of growling out complaints about nothing and everything in his raspy voice. Upon Daisy and Chuck's wedding, Logan had felt welcome enough in their home to stick around until he married Linda, but not enough that he wasn't relieved when he finally got a place of his own.

After stretching out on the tweed couch and staring at the dropped-panel ceiling for a few minutes, Logan decided that the early

morning hours might be the perfect opportunity for a private chat with his sister. He threw off the blankets, pulled his jeans on, and grabbed his shaving kit before heading upstairs to the bathroom, passing silently by the front room where his daughters slumbered, snug in their sleeping bags. The house was very quiet, probably in deference to his brother-in-law, who liked to sleep late on the weekends even though Daisy had always risen with the sun. However, when Logan crested the threshold of the cluttered kitchen fifteen minutes later, he found his sister standing at the stove frying bacon while her husband sat at the nearby table reading the paper. "Morning, folks."

"Good morning," Daisy exclaimed. "What'a you doin' up so early?"

For lack of a better excuse, he mumbled, "Habit, I guess. Plus I gotta get the car over to Cal's by eight if he's gonna get the paint job done by tomorrow." Logan ambled into the room and stopped next to the white-enameled range, where he towered over his petite sibling. "Fixin' breakfast already?"

"Yeah, I like to make sure Chuck gets a good breakfast in him before he goes off to work. Knowin' him, he'll probably skip lunch an' all."

Logan refrained from observing out loud that, from the appearance of things, his brother-in-law hadn't missed too many meals in his life. Instead, he turned to Chuck, saying, "You workin' today?"

Chuck brushed his poker-straight, thinning hair back before gruffly replying, "Yeah, I had'a let some more guys go, so there's no one to cover the Saturday shift but me." He shrugged before grumbling, "Not a goddamn thing I can do about it. Twenty-three years I been bustin' my ass at that lumberyard, and now I'm back to workin' the weekends."

After grabbing a clean mug from the dish drainer and filling it with coffee, Logan sat at the table across from his brother-in-law. "Things still slow?"

"Hell, yeah. Can't see orders really picking up 'til the housin' market gets better."

Daisy leaned down and put a dish heaped with bacon and scrambled eggs in front of her husband. Her eyes sparkled warmly at her brother as she said, "I'll have a plate ready for you in a second."

"You don't have to bother, I'll just have some toas—"

"Like hell you will," Daisy scolded. "Looks to me like you lost some weight since I saw you last." She turned back to the stove and plopped six strips of fresh bacon in the pan, noting, "That's what'll happen with a man living on his own." Over the sizzle, she asked, "But you'll be gettin' back with Linda soon, won't you?"

That was one subject Logan had no desire to explore in front of Chuck, so he dissembled quietly, "We were just talking about that on Wednesday." Which was, if misleading, still sort of the truth. He and Linda had been talking about how that wasn't going to happen, but still, not an outright lie. To change the subject, he asked Daisy, "Can you give me a ride back from Cal's place after I drop off the Thunderbird?" Even though the ten-minute ride wouldn't give him much time for talking to his sister, it would be a place to start.

"Sure thing, hon."

Suddenly, inspiration struck, and Logan asked, "And could we swing by my shop on the way back?"

Chuck stopped shoveling in his breakfast long enough to growl, "What the hell for? Ain't it empty?"

"Pretty much." Logan shrugged and looked at Daisy, who was stacking hot, crisp bacon onto a melamine plate. "But I still own it, and I just wanta check it out."

Daisy appeared to consider the request as she scooped a mound of fluffy eggs beside the bacon and set it in front of Logan. "Okay, don't see why not."

"Don't see the point," Chuck ventured, tone as sour as his scowl. "The realtor's takin' care of it for you, ain't he? Nothin' to do there, unless you've heard of somebody finally wantin' to buy it."

"Nothin' like that," Logan answered honestly. There hadn't been a flicker of interest in the shop in all of the months it had been on the market. "Just wanna make sure Nate's keepin' the place from fallin' down. God knows, it was close enough when I left it." He turned to his

sister, saying, "A trip to the shop won't be keepin' you from anything important, will it?"

"No, 'course not." Daisy turned to her husband and said, "No real harm in me taking Logan over to High Street, is there?"

Chuck pushed his stocky frame away from the table, answering, "It's your time, Margaret. If you wanta waste it, guess that's your business."

That was good enough for Daisy. She cleared her husband's place as she promised Logan, "We'll go right after breakfast."

"Go where?"

The three adults immediately swiveled their heads towards the doorway, where Pete stood waiting for an answer to his question. His mom immediately filled him in on the plans they'd just made, causing the boy's eyes to light up. "Can I go, too? It'd be cool to see 'em painting Uncle Logan's car."

Logan wanted to groan as his careful plans for a private talk with Daisy came close to ruin. He was silently struggling with a response, wanting to say no but unable to do so without hurting his guileless nephew's feelings. Unexpectedly, Chuck came to his rescue. "They ain't gonna be hanging around watchin' Cal paint that car. And you got leaves to rake. I want that yard cleaned up *today*."

"I'll do it as soon as we get back."

Chuck grabbed his canvas coat off the back of his chair and watched his son take a seat at the table. "No, you'll do it first thing. What's the rule 'round here?" Not waiting for an answer, he turned towards the door and said, "Chores first. Then you can screw around all you want."

Feeling the need to soothe the problem he had inadvertently caused, Logan offered, "Your dad's right, Pete. There won't be nothin' to see this mornin'. You can go with us tomorrow when we pick the T-bird up."

Pete sighed with resignation but said nothing as his dad pecked Daisy on the cheek and headed off to work. After his mom laid a plate piled higher than Logan's in front of him, he said to his uncle, "If only you'd'a waited a few more months. I'll have my permit, and I could've

taken it out for a spin.” He smiled shyly, asking, “Maybe you could bring it back next year?”

“I don’t think so,” Logan said. Seeing Pete’s face fall, he hastened to explain. “Remember, it ain’t my car. It belongs to my friend, Nick. I’m just helpin’ him restore it.”

“Maybe he’ll let you borrow it sometime?”

Daisy was beating more eggs in a bowl and gently scolded, “Don’t pester your uncle, Pete. This man ain’t likely to let Logan take his car all over creation. Them Pittsburgh folks ain’t like ’round here.”

Instinctively, Logan leaped to Nick’s defense. “He’s as good a guy as you’d ever find in Elco, Daisy. Better, even.”

There was mild surprise in her eyes as Daisy smiled at her brother. “Well, now, that’s good to hear. Good you got a friend like that.”

“Then maybe he *will* let you bring the T-bird back here in the spring?” wheedled Pete.

“Could be,” Logan offered doubtfully. How could he tell Pete that he was unsure where he now stood with this “good friend?”

A LITTLE over an hour later, Logan was lost in thought as he stood in the middle of his abandoned shop, frowning at the peeling paint and cobwebs.

“I’m sure glad Daddy can’t see it like this, aren’t you?” Daisy asked, bringing him back to the present.

“Why? It didn’t look that much better back when he had it. Dad never was one for fixing up.”

“I know that,” she laughed as she walked the perimeter of the small space. “I meant seeing it empty an’ that, you know?”

“Yeah,” Logan sighed sadly. He took off his baseball cap and scratched the back of his head. “Where’re folks gettin’ their cars fixed these days?”

Daisy stopped pacing around and stopped in front of her brother, answering, “Most everyone I know goes over to the Wal-Mart in Belle Vernon.”

“Damn, you gotta be kiddin’ me,” Logan snorted. “I hope it’s just for oil changes and small stuff, ’cause they do shitty work there. I know, I had to fix some of their handiwork myself.”

“Maybe... but they sure are cheap,” Daisy countered.

“Ya get what ya pay for.” Before Daisy could answer, Logan held up a hand and said, “I know. That don’t matter to desperate folks facin’ foreclosure or tryin’ to stretch out their unemployment checks. It’s still sad, though.”

Daisy was gazing up at him, a speculative look on her face. “So why did you really wanta come here? To see just how sad it is?”

That was the opening Logan had been waiting for, but he couldn’t seem to grab it. He looked into the round, benign face of his sister, knowing her intentions had never been anything but good towards her brothers, and his courage faltered. He shrugged and bargained for more time by saying, “I don’t know. Hard to let this place go, ya know?”

“Yep.” Daisy reached out and patted his arm. “Guess it brings back a lotta memories, huh?”

“Sure does,” Logan agreed, since part of his mind was screaming “now or never,” he ventured, “Some of them... not so good.” When Daisy had no answer and resumed walking around the shop, Logan knew he had to press the issue. “Like seein’ Jerry Sievers—”

She stopped short and whirled to face him. “Don’t start on that, now.”

Logan took a deep breath before avowing, “I have to.”

A world of hurt and frustration was summed up in a single, sharp syllable. “Why?”

“Because it never went away for me.”

Daisy waved a dismissive hand in Logan’s direction. “I don’t even know what that means.” She hurried towards the shop door, saying, “We better be gettin’ back—”

Logan moved swiftly to halt her progress by stepping directly in front of her. “It means I got a lotta anger I been keepin’ in, and I gotta—” Seeing Daisy’s trembling lip and wet eyes made him pause and soften his stance slightly. “And I wanta talk about it. Finally.”

After nervously tucking a curl of soft brown hair behind one ear, she took a shaky breath and whispered, “You say you been mad all these years. Mad at Jim, or mad at me?”

“Both, I guess, but mainly him,” Logan admitted, finally breaking eye contact and staring sightlessly up at one of the fogged windows. “But I gotta know. Why?” He glanced back down at his sister, demanding, “Why’d you take his side against mine?”

“It wasn’t his side against yours,” she insisted angrily. “It was the family’s side against some stranger.”

“Jerry wasn’t ‘some stranger’ to me. He was my friend, my friend that Jim hurt real bad.” It was Daisy’s turn to look away, but Logan plowed on undeterred. “You don’t think he deserved to pay for that?”

“Oh, Logan.” Daisy looked back at him as she reached a tender hand up to his arm. “Honey, I felt awful about your friend. I really did.” Her tone turned pleading as she added, “But Jim didn’t think it through. You know what he’s like when he’s angry. He didn’t mean to hurt him that bad.”

“He didn’t mean to?” Logan sneered. “I’m sure that would make Jerry feel better about all he suffered. You should’ve gone to see him in the hospital like I did. Then maybe you couldn’t wave it all away with ‘He didn’t mean to’. What you’re really saying is that you agreed with Jim that ‘the queer’ had it comin’.”

“I am not,” Daisy protested vehemently. “How dare you say that! The whole thing didn’t even have anything to do with that. Jim was just so jealous of him—”

“What? Why the hell would Jim be jealous of Jerry?”

Looking more miserable than ever, Daisy sniffled, “‘Cause of how close you two were. He told me once that you spent more time with ‘that queer’—” She stopped at Logan’s glare and amended, “With Jerry, than you did with either of us. I guess it reminded him of how it was with you and Dad.”

“Whose fault was that?” Logan snarled. “And if he was so goddamn jealous of how close I was to Jerry, maybe he could’ve hung around the garage with me some himself.” He flung his arms wide as he finished angrily, “He didn’t even try to help when I was fixin’ his car.”

“He just didn’t have a knack for it. Jim has a hard time concentrating on things—”

“You’re still making excuses for him! You picked up right where Mom left off. That thing with Jerry wasn’t the first or last time you covered up for him or took his side, just the worst.”

Daisy was shaking her head sadly as she entreated, “I had to stop you from goin’ to the cops. Jimmy wouldn’t’ve been able to take goin’ to jail or anything like that. I know he seems tough on the outside, but underneath he’s kinda... fragile.” When Logan’s scowl only deepened, Daisy added, “I’m sorry it seemed like I was favorin’ him, but you were always the strong one. I never really worried about you, but Jim needed me to—”

“He needed you to make him face up to even one of the messes he made,” Logan cut in, his angry words echoing around the empty room. As Daisy’s copious tears ran down her cheeks, he took a calming breath and added more quietly, “I know you meant well, but you didn’t do him any favors. Look at him now, thirty-five years old and I can count on one hand the times he’s done an honest day’s work in his life. He still bleeds you dry for money whenever he comes to town. And that’s the only time he even knows you’re alive, isn’t it? And that girl in Uniontown he knocked up. Did he ever give her any child support?” Seeing no answer was forthcoming from Daisy, whose wet gaze was fixed on the concrete floor, Logan snorted cynically, “That kid’s older than Meghan and probably never seen his dad more ’an once or twice in his life.”

Daisy’s eyes found Logan’s as she demanded, “And you think all of that’s my fault?”

“No,” Logan shouted. “It’s all *his fault* and *his problem* and you gotta stop making excuses and trying to fix everything for him.”



“I know he’s screwed up plenty, but I can’t help....” Daisy stopped to wipe the tears from her eyes before continuing. “I still love him.”

Suddenly, Logan felt like a heel for putting Daisy through the wringer, but he reminded himself that she needed to hear this and he needed to say it. “Yeah, well, love him enough to stop babying him.”

“Meaning what? Cut him off? Don’t try to help him when he asks?”

“Yes, meaning *exactly* that.” When Daisy just shook her head, Logan put his hands on her shoulders and insisted, “You have to try. It might be the only thing that can help him at this point. Or he might be past help, but for your sake if nothing else, promise me you’ll try.”

After staring up at Logan in silence for a few long moments, Daisy drew a shaky breath, but her voice was surprisingly firm when she said, “Okay, I’ll try.” Logan managed a small, pained smile and drew her into a hug, which she gladly accepted. Drawing back slightly, his sister looked up at him to say, “And I guess I should say how sorry I am that I forced you to go against your conscience.”

Logan choked up for the first time and could only manage a gruff “Thank you.”

But Daisy wasn’t finished. She hugged him again, throwing all of her weight into it as she asserted, “I am sorry, Logan. I’m sorry I didn’t understand that you needed me to take your side not because you were strong or Jim was weak, but because you were right. You were right about Jerry. I think I always knew that, but owning up to it meant admitting something about my brother that I just can’t... couldn’t face.”

Logan patted Daisy on the back and returned her embrace as he felt the tight knot of anger that he had carried inside him for far too long finally start to loosen. On the way back to Daisy’s house, her relieved chatter filled the car, but it mainly flowed past Logan without impact. Her words, “You were right,” were still ringing in his ears, and he suddenly knew how badly he had needed to hear that and how long he’d been waiting. He also knew they had other truths to face. Other confessions were looming on the near horizon—but not now. This

weekend was for savoring one more victory in his battle to escape his stifling past.

NICK circled the block for the third time, noticing that each time he passed Flander's Funeral Home, the crowd had gotten slightly larger. He was trying to pretend to himself that he was simply looking for a good parking spot, but even on a Saturday, finding a place to park in the small town of Hornell, New York, wasn't really a problem. On the fourth try, he finally pulled into a spot on the street about half a block from the funeral home. After cutting the engine, he stayed behind the wheel for a moment, watching the sun drop and trying to deal with the reality of the situation. When he went into that staid brick building, there was going to be a coffin in one of the rooms, and Norah was going to be in it. *How is that even possible? In what kind of fucked up world could that be real?*

It wasn't like this was the first time Nick had attended the funeral of a client. During his third year at ACC, a woman he'd been counseling had been killed by her ex-husband, and less than two years later, another client had been gunned down by her stalker boyfriend. It was an unfortunate fact that mortality rates were heartbreakingly high for women who left abusive relationships. But neither of those women had been as close to him as Norah. That reflection only served to deepen the pool of guilt in which he'd been mired since Trudy had broken the news. *I guess I should've felt this way about those two.* The only saving grace was the lack of self-blame he'd felt regarding those deaths. The thought that had been his constant companion for the last two days assaulted him yet again. *I knew there was something wrong. Why did I ever let her go?*

Nick glanced at his watch and saw that it was after five p.m. Norah's family had scheduled a viewing from five until six p.m. with the funeral service following immediately after. He knew he'd delayed as much as possible. It was time to face up to this awful duty. Nick slowly got out of the car, straightened his tie, and walked with leaden steps into the funeral home. After a somber employee directed him into the correct room, Nick moved quietly inside and signed the guest book.

His eye was immediately drawn to the front of the space, where the flower-draped coffin was displayed. During several sessions, Norah had talked about her family, and from her description, Nick thought he recognized her parents greeting mourners in front of the casket. That beefy man with the red-rimmed eyes had to be Butch Seebold, and the small blonde woman at his side was certainly his wife, Nancy.

Nick knew propriety demanded he offer his condolences directly, but he decided to wait until the line thinned out a bit, so he killed some time by looking for the flowers he'd sent. He finally found the arrangement of pink and white roses at the opposite side of the room, near a small sofa. Not yet feeling up to greeting Norah's family, Nick dropped onto the couch and steeled himself for the looming confrontation.

What would they say to him? What would they say when faced with the counselor who had so badly failed their daughter? Suddenly a burst of defensive anger welled up in Nick. *What about them? Didn't they let her down, too? What happened here that she went running back to Alex after the visit? Sure, I failed Norah, but they did, too.*

Nursing this embryonic grudge gave Nick the first reprieve from his solo guilt in days, so he was happy to expand upon it. Norah had always spoken well of her family, but was that the truth? Had she been hiding something from him, something dark that would explain why he'd failed to reach his client? Looking at Butch's huge frame overshadowing his small wife, an insidious thought occurred to Nick. Wouldn't it make a whole lot of sense if Butch was an abuser? Maybe Norah just never wanted to admit it. The more he brooded about it, the more merit the idea seemed to gain. Soon he was quivering with self-righteous anger and glaring at the front of the room. *Go ahead and blame me. But what did you two do to her? How did your fucked-up marriage—*

"Mr. Zales?" Nick looked up in surprise to find a pretty, well-groomed blonde woman standing next to him. She must have noticed his shock, since she said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you, but you are Nicholas Zales, right? I saw your name in the guest book."

Nick recovered enough to answer, “Uh, yes, I am.” He stood to face her, explaining, “I didn’t mean to be rude. I just wasn’t expecting anyone here to know me. Were you a friend of Norah’s?”

“No, I’m Amanda Seebold—her sister.”

“Oh, of course, you even look like her.” Swallowing past an enormous lump in his throat, he said, “I’m so sorry about Norah. I thought the world of her.” There was more he would have liked to say, but he found it impossible without starting to cry.

“Believe me, the feeling was mutual. The way she talked about you, she thought you hung the moon. That’s why it makes it so hard to understand....” Amanda stopped and wiped away the tears coursing down her cheeks before continuing. “To understand why she would go back—” The rest of her statement was lost in choked sobs, and Nick put a comforting arm around her shoulder. Amanda regained control and looked at Nick gratefully. “I’m sorry about that.”

Finally letting a few tears of his own escape, Nick said, “Don’t be. She was worth our pain.”

“Yes, she was,” Amanda whispered. Then she straightened up and looked over to her parents. Once she caught her father’s eye, Amanda waved them over to that side of the room. Nick watched in surprise as the couple broke away from the man they had been talking with and moved quickly to where he stood with their surviving daughter. “I was right,” she said to her parents. “This is Nick Zales, Norah’s counselor.”

Nick was abashed and humbled at the way Nancy hugged him, and Butch pumped his hand, saying, “It was real good of you to come all this way. Norah talked so much ’bout all you did for her—”

It was all too much for him, too much undeserved praise. Nick had to break in with a choked voice, saying, “I’m so sorry for your loss. And I’m sorry I couldn’t have done more for her. Couldn’t help her.”

Nick was suddenly engulfed in Nancy’s firm embrace as she cried, “I know, hon, I know. I keep thinking the same thing. What didn’t I give my baby? What was she missing that—” Nancy was unable to finish and turned her face into her husband’s sleeve, sobbing helplessly.

“All right, Nance,” Butch said tenderly. “Maybe you should go sit down by your sister again, okay?” He nodded goodbye at Nick and steered his wife over to the front row of chairs.

Amanda said, “I’m gonna go get my mom some water. Thanks again for coming, Nick. If I don’t get a chance to invite you later, there’s a hot supper at the Village Café in Arkport after the funeral. Please stop by if you can.”

“Thank you,” Nick said. He sank back down onto the small sofa, shame now adding further weight to his misery. His temples were starting to pound with an oncoming headache; he closed his eyes against the light from the lamp next to him and rubbed his forehead.

A few seconds later, he felt someone sit next to him on the couch and looked up, expecting to see Amanda, but the figure who greeted him left him momentarily speechless as he struggled to decide if he was glad or annoyed.

“Hello, Nick,” Sister Ciera said solemnly, though her smile was warm.

Nick wasn’t sure what surprised him more, that Ciera was there or that she was there garbed in full nun’s regalia. After returning her greeting, he gestured at her outfit, saying, “Uh, I didn’t even know you *had* the... umm... get-up.”

“It’s called a habit. Since I’m staying with the Sisters of St. Joseph over in Wayland, I thought I’d better dress the part.” At his puzzled look, she explained, “They’re a bit more formal than my order.”

Having recovered from his initial surprise, Nick asked suspiciously, “Did Trudy send you here?”

“No, I’m not representing ACC, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Not yet convinced, he said, “I didn’t think you and Norah were that close—” he stopped in mid-sentence as he abruptly remembered the connection. “Oh, yeah. She used to help you with the literacy classes when she first came to ACC.”

“That’s right.”

“I almost forgot that.”

Ciera was definitely more subdued than Nick had ever seen her. She didn't answer immediately but gripped the strand of rosary beads that hung at her waist in silence before saying, "I'll never forget." She sighed sadly and added, "Even back then, I really thought she was going to make it."

Nick slumped back, resting his head in his right hand, saying, "Maybe she would have. If we had.... If only I hadn't let her go so soon. Too soon."

"Nick," Ciera said with a hint of exasperation. "This was not your fault. Stop blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong with clients." Her hand went back to her rosary. As she fingered the beads, she said, "Speaking of habits—yours is rather destructive. Plus... you're not as all-powerful as you seem to think."

Rather than finding comfort, Nick was annoyed by her firm absolution. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that trying to take on all the blame presumes a power you don't have—no human has. As much as we sometimes want to deny it, we're mere mortals, and no matter how good or strong or perfect we try to be, bad things are going to happen. If we can't accept that, then we can't accept life."

"So it's all just random fate, huh? Nothing I could have done to stop it?"

"Probably not. And it wasn't just random fate. It was evil, evil perpetuated by another human being. A human being over whom you had no control."

To his consternation, Ciera's words were reaching a part of him that Nick kept locked away, a part of him that spoke with the voice of a young boy who was tired of carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders and was crying out for relief. But with the promise of respite came terror, for releasing the burden also meant giving up control. Even if the power was only an illusion, he had clung to it for a long time and found some comfort there. In desperation, Nick tried to stop the control from slipping away. He stabbed back at Ciera, snapping, "So explain to me how your 'all-loving, all-powerful God' let this evil happen to Norah."

Instead of rising to the bait, Ciera seemed to actually consider his question carefully for a few seconds. She stared at the coffin, answering, "I know it has something to do with the free will that God gave to Alex Bogdanov." Her usually bright eyes were dulled with pain when she looked back at Nick. "But tonight that answer just isn't good enough."

After waiting in vain for a "punch line" to that last statement, Nick asked, "So what are you going to do?"

"Pray for the strength to get through this and hope I'm eventually face-to-face with God so He can explain it to me."

For reasons he didn't quite understand, the nun's uncertainty comforted Nick more than any platitude ever could. Though he would never share her absolute faith in God, that didn't mean Nick had to try and take His place. Maybe no matter what they believed, *everyone* still had to live with doubts and dangers.

In that moment, Nick knew he was grateful for Ciera's company. The unlikely pair comforted each other during the evening, exchanging quiet reminiscences about Norah for the rest of the viewing and standing side-by-side as the minister read the funeral rites.

Afterwards, Nick walked Ciera to her ancient Subaru Outback. Still undecided himself, he asked, "Are you going to the wake?"

"I don't think so. It's in the opposite direction of the convent, and I'm not up to a crowd right now. Are you?"

"I feel the same way," he agreed. "Not up to a crowd, I mean."

Ciera cocked her head at him. "Well, I was thinking of getting a drink. Would you like to join me?"

"What do you mean, coffee or something?"

Shrugging, Ciera answered, "If that's what you want. I was more thinking of a gin and tonic."

"Really?" Nick asked incredulously.

"Yes. I noticed what looked like a quiet little bar on my way here. Joe's Tavern on River Street."

Though the thought of going to a bar with Ciera sounded almost surreal to Nick, he could do with a drink. “Okay.” He glanced at her clothing uncertainly. “Aren’t you going to change first?”

“No. Would you prefer that I did?”

“Umm.... I meant... I didn’t think you could... that you were *allowed* to go into a bar like... that.”

Ciera’s grin looked almost cocky. “Are you kidding? From what I hear, your drinks are usually cheaper when you’re dressed like this.”

Nick actually managed a small laugh. “Okay, I’ll follow you there.”

Thankfully the bar was every bit as quiet and dark as they could have hoped. The cocktail waitress did seem mildly surprised when they first walked in but escorted them to a booth in the corner without comment. Their drinks, the gin and tonic Ciera had craved along with a shot and beer for Nick, arrived quickly. They sipped in silence until Nick asked Ciera how his clients were doing in his absence.

“It’s only been a week, you know. But everyone misses you.” The characteristic twinkle in her eye appeared for the first time all night. “Especially Trudy, though God knows she’d never admit it. She can be every bit as stubborn as you.”

Upon hearing that assertion, Nick almost choked on the whiskey he was downing. “You think I’m as stubborn as Trudy?” he sputtered.

“No, I think you’re even more stubborn.” She reached for her frosty glass and swallowed a bit of the cocktail before adding, “It’s one of your greatest strengths, I think. But it can also be your biggest weakness.”

Nick turned his attention back to his beer while trying to parse that pronouncement. Before he came up with a retort, Ciera asked about his mom. He bit his lip, remembering how confused and weak Agnes had seemed at his last visit. “She never really recovered from the pneumonia. I had to put her in a nursing home.”

“Yes, Trudy told me. But it’s only temporary, isn’t that right?”

“That’s what they say.” Nick polished off his beer before admitting, “But I don’t see it happening. Her coming back home, that



is. The dementia seems worse than ever, and physically... she's not doing so well."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Nick nodded and signaled for another beer as Ciera offered, "Your mom's only a little older than me. She could fight her way back from this."

"Maybe." Nick gave it some thought for a minute or two before demurring, "I just don't see much fight in her these days." The waitress put a fresh beer in front of him, and he took a gulp before snorting, "What am I saying? She never had *any* fight in her. If she had, she would have stood up to—" Nick caught himself before he went too far down that road. Even though he knew Ciera probably had a sketchy idea of his past, it wasn't something they'd ever discussed.

So he was wholly unprepared when she rather matter-of-factly said, "I tell him about you, Nick."

His head shot up, and he stared at the little nun in disbelief. "What? Who? Who do you tel—"

"Your father, of course."

The room started spinning around him, and it had nothing to do with the alcohol he'd consumed. Nick finally gathered his wits enough to ask, "How did you know?"

Ciera gave a short, rueful laugh. "You have the same last name, for starters. He's incarcerated for gravely injuring his wife. It wasn't that hard to figure out."

The truth was suddenly so obvious, Nick felt foolish for not having guessed before. Ciera ministered regularly at Fayette County Prison. Of course she would have run into his father sometime in the past twenty years. However, she'd kept her silence about Sam Zales all the years she'd known Nick, and he fervently wished she hadn't decided to break it that night. With barely suppressed fury, he demanded, "Why bother with him?"

"It's what I do. I minister to everyone because if God doesn't give up on people—and He doesn't—then I have no right to do that either."

"Are you trying to tell me he's changed?"

“Not that I can see. He’s still very much a violent, angry, bitter man.”

“Of course,” Nick sneered. “So why the hell are you telling him anything about me?”

“Because he likes it, even if he won’t admit it. Because it helps me reach that core of humanity that’s there, even in him.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Which part, that he likes to hear about you or that there’s humanity in him?”

“Neither.”

“If you’re so sure, then there’s no harm in seeing for yourself. Is there?”

“No harm... but no point.”

Ciera looked at him shrewdly and said, “I guess the only point would be if you wanted to see what he has to say to you after all these years. But since you don’t...” She shrugged and finished her drink. “Are you almost done? I have to be getting back to the convent. I hope you’re not planning on driving home tonight.”

Though he was suspicious of the abrupt change of subject, Nick said, “Nah. I’m staying at The Sunshine Motel on Seneca.” However, she didn’t raise the subject of his father again, and he walked Ciera to her car in silence. This time they parted with a handshake.

After picking up some takeout on his way to the motel, Nick let himself into the small room and gratefully flopped on the bed. He rested for a few minutes, running the events of the night over in his head. Finally, his growling stomach demanded attention, so he got up and changed into a sweatshirt and jeans before tearing into his food. All the while he ate, Nick stared at his cell phone lying abandoned on the dresser. He was imbued with an overwhelming desire to call Logan, or even Trudy, but finally decided against it.

In the end, the number he dialed was to his mother’s room in the nursing home. His five-minute chat with her was as frustrating as ever, with Agnes fading in and out of coherence. After complaining that the

nurses were trying to get her to eat “six or seven meals a day,” she was lucid enough to ask, “When’re you comin’ to see me again?”

“I’ll be there tomorrow.”

“Okay, good night, son.”

“Wait a minute, Mom. There’s two things I wanna tell you.”

“What?”

“The first thing is, I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, I can wait ’til tomorrow for your visit.” Without further ado, Agnes hung up her phone.

Nick stared at the dead phone in his hand for a moment before shaking his head and saying, “The second is that I forgive you.”

He started getting ready for bed, ruminating on the conversation with his mom. In the end he decided that it had been fine. After all, that last sentiment hadn’t really been intended for her benefit.

## Chapter 17: Another Heart

*The person who tries to live completely alone will not succeed as a human being; the heart withers if it does not answer another heart.*

—Pearl S. Buck

SUNDAY evening, Nick pulled into the driveway of his house feeling both physically and emotionally drained. When he'd arrived in Pittsburgh five hours earlier, he'd headed straight to the nursing home to see his mom. After his epiphany of forgiveness—for both of them—he had expected the visit to be... different. He wasn't exactly sure in what way he'd expected it to be different, or significant, but it didn't really matter since it had pretty much been the same as all his other visits to the nursing home. He, ever the dutiful son, had helped feed his mom lunch and watched some old movies with her, all the while initiating several fruitless conversations with Agnes, who seemed frail, confused, and withdrawn.

Having failed to find the comfort he was looking for in a visit with his mom, Nick rested his head against the steering wheel as a wave of overwhelming isolation swamped him. His mind immediately turned toward Logan, the one man who'd managed to completely and thoroughly breach the lonely shell Nick had spent years erecting around himself. Yet as much as he yearned for Logan, he recognized that there was now a distance in their relationship, a distance Nick had put there when he'd conflated Logan with Norah's murderer and his own father.

Part of Nick wanted to wipe that moment away, to loudly protest to his own conscience that he'd been upset when he'd made that connection, had been merely lashing out in pain, and that no such doubts existed. But he couldn't. For too long he'd lied to himself, swept all uncertainties under the rug, and now there was a price to be paid for that longstanding denial. If he and Logan were to last—and

Nick could admit that he wanted that more than anything—then they had to face those questions together.

Even as he started to face up to that harsh reality, silently Nick protested, *Does it have to be tonight?* He felt chilled, heart and soul, and he ached for the warmth of Logan's presence. Having at last decided on a course of action, Nick snatched his overnight bag off the passenger seat and hurried to the house. By the time he reached the entrance, he already had his cell phone out and paused only to flip the hall light switch on before punching in Logan's number.

Logan answered after two rings, but rather than the "hello" Nick expected, he got, "I know I said we'd be there by now, but we ran into some traffic, Linda."

"Uh, what?"

"Nick?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"Aww, shit. Sorry. I thought it was—girls, would ya pipe down? I'm on the phone here."

Logan's daughters could be heard offering not-very-contrite apologies in the background. Since he had no desire for an audience, Nick said, "I guess I caught you at a bad time. Give me a call when you can talk."

"Sure thing. Won't be that long."

Nick stuck his phone back in his shirt pocket, relieved to have made even minimal contact with Logan, and philosophically decided to take the opportunity to unpack and do some laundry. After he started the first load, he headed upstairs to the kitchen and made a sandwich out of salami that smelled like it was still okay to eat. He started reflecting disconsolately on the empty week that stretched ahead of him when he was blindsided by a sudden thought. *Shit! I quit my job. I don't have another week off, I have... forever off. What the fuck was I thinking?*

After Nick was done smacking himself, both metaphorically and literally, he made a vow to call Trudy first thing in the morning and see if he could retract that impetuous resignation. Fortunately, the ring of his cell phone stopped him from dwelling any longer on his possible

state of unemployment. A glance at the screen confirmed that it was indeed Logan returning his call. “Hey, Logan.”

“Hey, Nick. Sorry ’bout that earlier. I didn’t bother lookin’ at my phone ’cause I was on the road. Just assumed it was Linda callin’ again ’bout us getting back from Elco so late.”

“Is that where you went this weekend?”

“Yeah. How was your—how’d you make out at Norah’s funeral?”

How the hell could Nick sum up the mixed bag of emotions he’d experienced over the past forty-eight hours? “It was okay. Hard, for real. Seeing her in the coffin and meeting her family sure tore me up, but I’m glad I went.”

“I still don’t think you should’ve gone alone.”

“I wasn’t alone. Ciera was there.”

The silence on the other end spoke of Logan’s surprise, but after a few seconds he breathed, “Oh. That’s good. I guess?”

Not bothering to hide the wonder in his own voice, Nick answered, “Yeah, it was.”

Another awkward pause ensued, and Logan offered, “If you was with Sister Ciera, then I suppose ya had ’nough talkin’ this weekend.”

The halfhearted attempt at humor fell flat, but Nick heard the question behind it—*Are you ready to talk to me?*—so he answered it. “Not to the right person.” The only answer was a sharp intake of breath from Logan, so he persevered. “I know how early you have to get up for work, but do you think you could come over, or I could come to your place if you just give me direc—”

“I’ll be there in half an hour.”

“Great.”

To distract himself from his almost painful eagerness for Logan’s arrival, Nick busied himself with more laundry and other chores. He was in the basement hanging up some damp shirts when he was startled by the blast of a horn from outside. Nick ignored it at first, thinking it was for a neighbor, but when the sound repeated, he jogged up the steps and peered out the front room window.

In the dim glow from a streetlight, Nick could make out the Thunderbird—as he'd never seen it before. Every other thought flew out of his head. He banged out the front door and ran up to his now shiny red car. He and Logan stood across from each other, separated by the car, twin grins of pride and satisfaction illuminating their faces. Nick was nearly speechless. He ran a reverent hand across the hood, saying, "I can't.... I can hardly believe it's the same car."

Logan stared down at the gleaming sports car, nodding in apparent agreement, but then squinted up at him. "It ain't, thanks to us."

"Damn skippy," Nick answered with a smile. And suddenly he was moving towards Logan, who was already on a collision course with him. In seconds, he was hugging the solid warmth of that man to him with a fierce, desperate need. Nick buried his face in Logan's neck, knowing that their problems loomed as large as ever but also knowing that this feeling, this solace, this rightness was worth fighting for. With one arm slung over Logan's shoulders, he said, "Come on. Let's go inside."

THE greeting was everything Logan could have wished for, especially when Nick kicked the front door shut behind them and immediately pushed him up against the wall, diving for his mouth. All Logan could do was sag back against the ancient wallpaper and go with the flow. He groaned into the kiss as Nick's tongue demanded entrance and greedily plundered his mouth before moving to plant a series of sucking kisses along Logan's stubbled jaw.

Abruptly, Nick pulled back and trained on him a laser-intense flash of eyes gone black with intensity. "You know we gotta talk later, right?"

Logan emerged from his daze of lust just long enough to answer, "Yeah, I know." But he didn't let go of Nick's arms. In fact, he held on tighter. There was no way he was letting go, not when he finally had this man right where he needed him after being too long apart.

Nick leaned back into the embrace, rumbling in his ear, “The operative word being ‘later’. Now is for—”

“Fucking,” Logan growled back.

“And there was a time I thought you weren’t so eloquent.”

Logan barely noticed the joke, since the jester was dragging him up the stairs as he said it. Soon they reached the bedroom, and Nick immediately tore his oxford off and started to work on Logan’s snap front shirt. Logan let him have his way, since his own hands were busy yanking Nick’s jeans open. With singleminded intent, they managed clumsily, haltingly, with frantic kisses drawing the process out, to get rid of all bothersome clothing. When he pushed Nick’s naked body down on the bed and climbed on top, Logan felt like he’d found the oasis in his own personal hell of a desert.

Nick was groaning, “Need you bad, babe. I gotta—”

Logan cut him off with a kiss before whispering in his ear, “Me, too. Gotta have you inside me, all I been thinking about.” Recognizing Nick’s intent to move, he pushed him back with a none-too-gentle shove, mumbling, “There’s somethin’ I been wantin’.... I wanta try....” Never articulate to begin with, Logan found it almost impossible to spell out his plans for their coupling.

A wanton grin slid across Nick’s face as he murmured, “Okay, we’ll do it your way.” He leaned up and kissed Logan before saying with a sexy smirk, “Whatever that is.”

Logan answered by using his body to pin Nick flat against the bed, enjoying the skin-to-skin contact, sweat-damp, strong bodies glued together from chest to thigh, both panting from the electric charge as their erections pressed together. They gasped and moaned in each other’s mouths, Nick pushing up desperately, sending a spike of increased arousal through Logan.

With a shaking hand, Logan fumbled for the lube in Nick’s nightstand and prepared himself as quickly as he dared. Finally he crawled up his lover’s body until he was straddling him. Logan levered himself up on strong thighs before sinking down, tortuously slow, onto Nick’s engorged cock. The sear of heat and stretch of fullness was



everything Logan had been dreaming about, though the look of surprise and wonder on Nick's face was better than any dream he'd ever had.

The friction Logan felt riding Nick this way was painfully wonderful in its intensity, and he increased the rhythm of his movements as he leaned in for another bruising kiss. When Nick started working Logan's cock, the pressure was already building, and shudders of desire went through his body. He was faintly aware that he wasn't going to last very long, but he kept pistoning up and down, harder and more frantic, grabbing at Nick's sweaty, slick skin for a grip.

Nick pulled him down for another kiss, biting at his tender lips, rougher than before, answering Logan's own burning need. Nick's eyes glittered with hot, dark desire, and something else, something he'd never recognized in those depths. The realization caused him to gasp for air. Logan leaned his forehead against Nick's and stilled for a moment, trying wordlessly to let Nick know: *Me too. It's more than just this for me*, until moving became an imperative and he went back at it, even more frantic than before, almost uncontrolled.

Nick threw his head back, arching up as he came, a white-hot flood pushing up into Logan, who couldn't help but follow, coming so hard his world narrowed to just him and his blinding orgasm until he collapsed onto Nick, their bodies forming a sweaty tangle, heartbeats thudding a matching tempo, both shuddering with aftershocks as they came back down to earth.

WHEN Nick woke, he found half of his body covered by a slumbering Logan. Extricating himself from the position proved tricky, since the two of them were glued together by a mixture of dried sweat and semen. When he did push away, it felt like two pieces of Velcro pulling apart, and either the sound or the sensation served to awaken Logan.

Nick smiled into those sleep-dazed, lust-sated eyes. "Hey, I was gonna get a drink. Want somethin'?"

"Yeah," Logan rasped. "I'm pretty parched."

"Guess we both lost a lotta fluid," Nick answered. "How does a beer sound?"

“Sounds good.”

Nick dashed downstairs and grabbed two IC Lights out of the fridge. When he returned, Logan was sitting up against the headboard, looking much more awake. Sliding in next to him, Nick passed one of the beers over, then opened his own. He took a long swallow before getting down to business. “Did you go to Elco just to get the car painted, or was there something else?”

Logan fortified himself with a taste of his beer before replying, “I mainly went to talk to Daisy.”

“‘Bout what?”

“Jerry Sievers.”

Though Nick wasn’t sure what he had expected as an answer, that was a surprise. “What did you.... So what happened?”

“I told her that she had no right to blackmail me into keepin’ quiet about what Jim did to my friend.” Nick nodded in agreement, about to voice his approval, but Logan plowed ahead, his tone and face growing more agitated with each word. “I said she’d been covering up for Jim his whole life and it’s time for her to stop. And....” Logan shook his head and swallowed hard, as if it was too difficult to continue.

“And?” Nick prodded.

A shaky breath, and then he answered, “And I told her how mad I been all these years. Mad at Jim, sure—but her, too.”

“How’d she take it?”

“She was hurt, tried to push it all away—pretended it didn’t matter anymore—but I kept at her, and she finally admitted that she’d been wrong. She even apologized.”

Nick bit his lip as he mulled over Logan’s report. “Do you feel better now?”

There was no immediate answer forthcoming. Logan’s crinkled brow showed he was giving the matter some thought. He gulped more beer before replying, “Yeah, I do. It really cleared the air between us. Felt good, but there’s more.” A weary sigh escaped from Logan as he put the bottle back to his lips.

“More what?”

Logan ran a hand through his sweat-matted hair, answering, “More I gotta tell her....”

“Meaning you didn’t tell her ’bout bein’ gay, huh?” ventured Nick.

“Nope.”

“That’s okay,” Nick offered, along with a firm pat on the arm. “You can’t do it all at once. Or all by yourself. Even I finally figured that out.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means that this weekend, I decided Trudy was right. I need...,” Nick sighed but forced himself to say it out loud, “to see someone.”

“What?!”

Nick was momentarily confounded by Logan’s burst of indignation, until it clicked and he hastened to explain. “A counselor, Logan. I’ve decided to see a counselor and talk out all that stuff about my mom and... my dad. I’ve had that all walled away too long. Now I need to deal with it.”

“But... you know all that stuff, right? You *are* a counselor,” Logan stated firmly.

After releasing a slight snort at Logan’s confidence in him, Nick clarified, “It doesn’t work that way. You gotta talk these things out with what we call ‘a disinterested party’.”

After considering that justification for a few seconds, Logan said, “This is hard stuff. Fixin’ your life.” He turned solemn eyes on Nick. “Ain’t it?”

Nick’s laugh this time was obvious. “Sure is.”

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh,” Nick shrugged as he said, “I was thinking of this joke we used to tell in grad school.” Sheepishly, he turned to Logan and asked, “How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb?”

Logan cocked his head at Nick, his expression almost suspicious. “I don’t know, how many?”

“Just one—but the light bulb really has to want a change.”

With furrowed brows, Logan answered, “Huh?”

“It’s what we always say about our patients. They can only change if they *really want to*. There’s no magic to it, just a lotta hard work.”

Logan seemed to take a moment to ponder that pronouncement. Then he speared Nick with an intent gaze. “I know what you mean. I’ve changed a lot since the thing with Linda, and it sure was hard work. Hardest stuff I’ve ever done.” Nick nodded in agreement, though Logan’s statement hung heavy in the air, and he evidently felt the need to resolutely add, “Not that I was ever really... a bad guy or anything. I don’t want you thinkin’ I’m like Alex... or your dad. I ain’t.”

It nearly killed Nick to speak his mind on that point, but this was one wound that had to be bled out. He finished his beer and set the empty bottle on the floor. “I know you aren’t... but you were. Even if it was only for a moment, you *were* on that day.”

A sullen frown clouded Logan’s face as he pulled back and glared at Nick. “So that’s it for you, huh? I’m never gonna be anythin’ but the guy who hurt his wife. Case closed.”

Rather than offering more ire in return, Nick calmly asserted, “That *ain’t* what I’m sayin’. You *can* be the guy who’d never do anythin’ like that again—”

“Of course I wouldn’t!” Logan polished off his own beer and slammed the empty down on the nightstand for emphasis.

“Why?”

Logan stared at Nick uncomprehendingly. “Why what?”

“Why won’t you? More to the point, why *did* you?” Logan turned away in palpable anger, but Nick held him back with a firm hand. “No, you can’t run away from this. We gotta talk it out.”

There was a long minute as Logan stared at the wall, obviously ready to bolt any second. Nick held his breath until his lover turned back, saying, “Okay. Guess you’re right.” He rubbed his hand across his jaw. “But I’m not sure what you’re asking.”

“A long time ago, I asked why you did it, and you didn’t give me an answer. Now I gotta know. I’ve gotta understand what drove you to that.”

The bedroom was silent except for the faint background noises of the neighborhood drifting in from the windows until Logan grunted, “I was mad.” He paused for a moment, then added, “All the time.” Nick nodded encouragingly, and he continued. “Mad at myself, mainly, for bein’... bein’ gay.” Logan stared down at the bed covers, the tension in his jaw clipping his words. “It was hard, hiding all the time—from everyone, even me. And underneath that, I was scared all the time, too. Scared someone would figure it out and I’d end up....”

“Like Jerry?”

“Yeah. The only place I ever felt like I could relax was my garage.”

“And Linda took that away from you,” Nick ventured.

Logan nodded, saying, “Yeah, that made me mad at her, too, but I couldn’t tell her—too afraid she’d figure somethin’ out.” A sad sigh escaped as Logan explained, “And it wasn’t just giving up my garage. It was coming up here, too, where there’s always people around. Always watchin’ me, pryin’ and pokin’ at me.” In a choked voice, he said, “The mill was the worst, havin’ to shower with all them guys every day, and they was always throwin’ around words like ‘faggot’ and ‘cocksucker’.”

“Yeah,” Nick snarled. “I remember.”

“That’s right,” Logan exclaimed in surprise. “You know what it’s like. I was so fuckin’ glad to get out of there, but Linda wouldn’t let it go. She was wild for me to get back in and make that good money again. She sure never let me forget how I let the family down losin’ that job—that’s what she was doin’ when I lost it. But I couldn’t go back there. I knew for sure if I did I was ’ventually gonna get found out and....”

“And end up beat up—or worse.”

“Yep.” Logan’s jaw was clenched, and he was back to staring at the blanket.

“I think I understand now. You were like a powder keg, Logan. If only you’d have done something—anything—about it, then you wouldn’t’ve ended up hurting someone who loved you.”

There were unshed tears in Logan’s eyes as he said, “I’d give anything to take it back. *Anything*. But I can’t. For the rest of my life, I gotta live with knowin’ how bad I hurt Linda—and my daughters.”

Nick tried to pull a resistant Logan into his arms. He persevered until the other man relented, though the body he held was still poker-stiff. Nick murmured, “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry you made me tell you?” Logan spat.

“No... I’m glad you told me. I’m sorry you had to go through all of that, all those years.” Logan relaxed against him fractionally, and Nick whispered in his ear, “Are you still mad about bein’ gay? Still afraid?”

Nick’s hands were tracing soothing whorls over Logan’s chest as he waited for an answer. The tension gradually seeped out of Logan, and he settled back firmly against Nick, answering, “Every day less and less.”

“Because of...?”

Logan shook his head as if that was the stupidest question he’d ever heard, though his answer was imbued with keen affection. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe ’cause of you, ya idiot.”

“Good.” Nick turned Logan around until he could kiss him long and deep. “That’s why—that’s why you’re the man who won’t ever do anything like that again. You’re not fighting alone anymore.” Another kiss, and Nick could admit, “And neither am I.”

His heart swelled almost to bursting when Logan pulled back and gave him a shaky smile. “When I’m with you, I ain’t afraid and I ain’t mad. In fact I’m...” He let the words trail off, choosing to tell the rest of his piece by ravishing Nick’s mouth.

Nick was glad to celebrate their successful talk with another bout of lovemaking. This time the sex was slower, sweeter, each man seeming determined to draw it out as long as possible. Before they both drifted off to sleep again, Nick clasped Logan to him and avowed, “I’m happy when I’m with you, too. Happier than I’ve ever been before.”

AS SOON as Nick walked into the North Hills restaurant, Willow, he spotted Trudy at a table near the window. An exuberant young waitress promptly seated him across from her and gave him a menu while efficiently reciting the specials. After she went off to get Nick a Coke, he looked around, saying, "This place is pretty busy for a Monday, huh?"

Trudy sipped her ice water before answering, "There aren't too many nice places to have lunch around here."

Nick turned back to face his boss. At least he hoped she was still his boss. "Any particular reason you wanted it to be a nice place? You're not trying to soften the blow, are you?"

He found her response of rolled eyes oddly reassuring, especially since she followed that up by saying, "If you're asking if you still have a job, the answer is of course you do. I never took your resignation seriously. Not for a second."

Sighing with relief, Nick asked, "Then you're treating me to lunch because...?"

"Because I want to. And if you keep acting so suspicious of my good will, I might be tempted to withdraw the offer."

"Okay, okay," Nick laughed. "Good to know I could still afford it if I had to, though."

They exchanged little more than idle chitchat as the waitress brought Nick's beverage and took their lunch orders. But after he'd asked about the well-being of his clients and Larry, he felt it was high time to get to the root of this meeting. "So, come on, Trudy. What's this all about?"

"I just wanted to see how you were doing. After the funeral, I mean."

"Did you talk to Ciera?"

"No."

"Really?"

In the face of Nick's skepticism, Trudy finally admitted, "She e-mailed me."

"Aha, so that's what triggered this lunch." When Trudy shrugged in response, Nick asked, "You didn't have anything to do with her being there, did you?"

"No," she said, a slow smile creeping across her face. "I guess God really does work in mysterious ways."

Ignoring that salvo, Nick said, "What did her e-mail say that has you buying me lunch?"

"She's worried about you blaming yourself for Norah's death. We both are."

"Maybe you two should worry about Norah, not me."

"Pray for the dead but fight like hell for the living."

"What?" Nick stared open-mouthed at Trudy's apparent non sequitor.

"One of my favorite quotes from Mother Jones." When Nick sighed in frustration, Trudy explained, "I can't do much for Norah anymore, but you, I can help. At least I hope so." They were interrupted by the arrival of their food, but as soon as the waitress left the table, she continued, "I'm more convinced than ever that you need—"

"Counseling," Nick finished for her. He let Trudy glare at him for a second before innocently asking, "Know a good one?"

It was Trudy's turn to be surprised. "What? Do you mean...?"

"Yeah, I'm ready. I want to do it."

"Wow, I should have treated you to a nice lunch a long time ago."

Nick took a bite of his meal, saying, "The chicken's good, but that wasn't what changed my mind. I decided this weekend."

"Well... that's wonderful news. And to answer your question, I know of several good people you could work with. When I get back to the office, I'll send you a list." They ate in silence for a second before Trudy asked, "Can I ask what happened this weekend that brought about this sudden change of mind?"

"I don't know. I guess it was... Ciera."



“What did she say?”

“It wasn’t so much anything she said—though she said some good stuff, surprisingly enough. It was how glad I was to have her there, after telling myself—and everyone else—that I had to face Norah’s funeral alone.” Nick took a sip of Coke in an attempt to dislodge the lump in his throat before admitting, “I guess I realized that maybe I don’t have to do *everything* myself, handle everything myself, face everything alone. In fact I feel kind of stupid about how long it took me to see that.”

“The lessons of childhood are hard to escape.” Nick looked up at his friend and mentor, seeking clarification. With a gentle smile, she explained, “The people you depended on most back then burnt you. Badly. Your father worst of all.”

Nick was tempted to tell Trudy about his recent thoughts around the subject of his dad, but as she went on to say more about some counselors who might be right for Nick, he felt the moment had passed. Besides, as he’d told Logan, he didn’t have to do it all at once. If he was really going to start healing that scared, angry child inside of him, maybe it had to start with baby steps.

He did, however, have something he could offer Trudy in exchange for lunch. At the next break in the conversation, he asked with deceptive airiness, “Guess what I spent the morning doing?”

Trudy raised one eyebrow, answering with a laugh, “If you were with Logan, I really don’t want any details.”

“I wasn’t with Logan,” Nick protested in equal good humor. He sobered slightly as he admitted, “But I was last night.”

“I figured,” she returned, exuding nonchalance.

“Oh, you’re always one jump ahead of me.”

“Not really. I still haven’t guessed what you were doing this morning.”

Nick flicked a slightly sheepish look her way before saying, “I started reading your book.”

“I’ll be damned,” Trudy exhaled.

“I can see you guessed that I never read it before,” Nick said.

“Yeah, I guessed.” She nodded and then tilted her head in a gesture of genuine curiosity. “So, what did you think?”

“It’s good. Well researched and thought out....” Nick put his fork down and leaned forward, his voice earnest as he added, “I don’t agree with everything—”

Trudy smiled wide, retorting, “Of course not.”

“But you make some good points.”

She raised her glass in a gesture of salute, saying, “I’m eager to hear your rebuttals.”

“Good. Because you will,” Nick promised.

“I never had any doubts.”

From the warmth in her tone and eyes, Nick knew that Trudy was offering full confidence in him, personally, as well as his strong opinions. To let her know he understood, he said, “Thanks. *For everything,*” with all the quiet emotion he could muster.

## Chapter 18: Turn on the Light

*Fear grows in darkness; if you think there's a bogeyman around, turn on the light.*

—Dorothy Thompson

AT THREE minutes after six p.m., Nick careened into the asphalt lot in front of the non-descript office building on Duff Street located in the Penn Hills section of Pittsburgh. As he parked his Jeep in one of the back rows, he wished for the umpteenth time that he'd been able to find a counselor closer to work. Nick jammed his hands in his pockets, shielding them from the biting January cold, and sprinted to the front door, all the while figuring chances were good that his lack of punctuality wouldn't be an issue, anyway.

A few seconds later, he pushed through the heavy glass door of the corner suite on the third floor and smiled at the receptionist, Debbie Gill, sitting behind the front desk. "Is Dr. Kochmann running late tonight, by any chance?" Nick asked.

"Of course," came the tired-sounding reply, though her apparent exhaustion didn't keep Debbie from offering kindly, "But only by about ten minutes today."

"Not too bad," Nick murmured.

By the time he'd hung his coat on the rack and checked the messages on his cell phone, Nick heard Dr. Eric Kochmann's office door opening. He watched as the previous client exchanged a few parting words with his therapist, glad for the chance to study the man unobserved. Even after three months of working with Eric, Nick still found him something of an enigma.

Though his academic reputation and credentials were both impeccable and impressive, he looked and acted—to Nick's way of

thinking—more like a high school wrestling coach than a counselor specializing in abuse victims. Eric barely came up to Nick’s shoulder, though he out-weighed him by a good thirty or forty pounds. Not that he was fat, far from it. The man was powerfully built, looking like an oversized fire hydrant. The resemblance was further enhanced by the fact that what hair hadn’t gone white was almost that same color red.

Dr. Kochmann ushered Nick into his office with the usual apologies and asked him about his week. Nick settled into the comfortable leather guest chair and chatted extensively about the latest challenges at ACC. Eric listened attentively as Nick described his latest client—a woman who had moved into the shelter to escape her husband with whom she had a see-saw history of abuse and reconciliation.

The stocky therapist offered a raised eyebrow as he observed, “Sounds like she might be another Norah in the making.”

Nick still wasn’t used to speaking of Norah so casually and found that his counselor’s relatively mild statement nearly winded him. While he was scrambling for a response, he looked up to find Eric watching him expectantly. “You bastard,” Nick huffed. “You did that on purpose.”

“So you admit she’s still a sore subject?”

It occurred to Nick, not for the first time, how much better he liked this sort of conversation from the other side of the desk. Finally he grumbled, “Yeah, I guess so,” thereby rescinding his claim from last week that he was “pretty much over” Norah’s death.

Eric’s tone softened considerably. “It’s okay, healing can be a slow process. It takes... whatever time it takes. You just have to start owning up to what you’re really feeling and *stop* claiming to be where you wish you already were.”

“That’s what you think I do?”

Rather than flipping the question back at him or extending a noncommittal answer, Eric bit off each word of his bald reply for emphasis. “All—the—goddamn—time.”

Nick couldn’t help but laugh and retort, “You’re not supposed to say shit like that to a patient.”

“And the fact that you know that allows me, hell, compels me, to do otherwise.”

After a second of thought, Nick answered, “No use showing another magician how to pull a rabbit out of a hat.”

“Pre—cisely.” Eric nodded before leaning forward and asking earnestly, “And how’s your mom doing?”

That question, Nick had been prepared for. As evenly as possible, he answered, “Not good. She had a stroke. Well, a mini-stroke.”

“Jesus,” Eric exclaimed. “When did that happen?”

“Probably a few weeks ago, though it just got diagnosed this week. One of her doctors thinks she’s been having these mini-strokes for a while. This just happened to be the worst episode.”

Eric’s face got even graver as he asked, “Did this doctor tell you that having multiple TIAs can be a precursor for a major stroke?”

Nick ran the unfamiliar acronym over in his head a few times before asking, “TIA?”

“Transient Ischemic Attack. It’s the medical term for a mini-stroke,” Eric clarified.

“Yeah, they told me.” Nick swallowed to moisten his dry throat before continuing. “I know she’s in a downward spiral. We’re making arrangements to transfer her to the permanent ‘pavilion.’” He snorted humorlessly. “Pavilion! What a fucking stupid name. They make it sound like I’m sending my mom off to a grand ball, not trying to find someplace where she can die out of everyone’s way.”

Eric shook his head sadly. “I know how rough this is on you—”

“Damn it,” Nick interjected. “I wish everyone would stop saying that!”

“All right, good point,” Eric answered. “We may not know exactly how you’re feel—”

Interrupting again, Nick shot back bitterly, “Good thing you don’t.”

Eric regarded him closely for a second before asking, “Why? Why is it a good thing?”

Nick bit his lip—hard—and raked his hand through his hair. “Because... because if you only knew.” There was no immediate reply forthcoming, and Nick recognized that Eric was using silence as a prod. An old, albeit effective, maneuver since Nick finally continued, “I’m sorry about my mom getting sicker, sure. And I’m miserable knowing she’s coming to the end. But also....” Nick refused to meet Eric’s eyes as he forced out, “Relieved. Yeah, I’m a little bit relieved that she won’t be moving back in with me.”

When Nick did look up, he found Eric shaking his head. “Tsk, ts. You’re *relieved*? That all of the years you’ve spent as her primary caregiver are coming to an end? Do you know what that makes you?”

“What?” Nick sat up straight, bracing himself for some of Eric’s now familiar bluntness.

“Human. It makes you a human being—with all attendant frailties. I know how much you hate the very idea—”

In some ways, Eric’s attempt at validation hit Nick harder than condemnation would have. “Aw, Eric, cut the crap.”

“The only crap is your denial. You’ve spent the last twenty years trying to be goddamn near perfect. As if perfection would protect you from any more pain, or somehow atone for something you *know* wasn’t even your fault.”

“No, not entirely—”

“Not at all!” Eric insisted loudly. “If a client came to you with a similar story of having provoked abuse by ruining one of her husband’s tools, you wouldn’t stand for that bullshit for one second.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” Nick sighed. “You’re right. I’m not responsible in any measure.” Even to Nick’s ears, that sentence came out sounding rather wooden.

“Every time we talk about this, you say that, but I can tell you don’t mean it. What’s it going to take, Nick? What’s it going to take to convince you?”

Nick slumped in the chair, feeling exhausted by the subject but recognizing Eric’s frustration was valid. Still, he had no good answer

for him. “I don’t know.” He couldn’t stop himself from adding sardonically, “If I did, I probably wouldn’t need you.”

Rather than being offended, Eric’s smile seemed to indicate nothing more than gentle amusement. He sipped from the ubiquitous mug of coffee on his desk before saying calmly, “Take a second and divorce yourself from the emotions of this situation. Pretend that a client came to you with a similar story and was being as stubborn as you are. What would you say to her—or him? Yes, him, let’s make it a male client.”

“Eric, I don’t think—”

“Indulge me. Just close your eyes for a second and put yourself behind this desk. Envision this client, a young man about your age. You’re three months in, and there’s no movement on the subject of his culpability in the abuse he’s suffered at the hands of a rather brutal boyfriend. What would your diagnosis be?”

Grudgingly, Nick played along. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, envisioning the scenario exactly as his therapist had suggested. After a minute or so of mental roleplay, Nick was surprised how clear the issue had suddenly become. He looked up at Eric with a start.

“Yes?”

“I’d suggest that he’s clinging to the guilt because it at least gives him some power in the relationship. If he admits he had no blame, then he also has to admit he was pretty much powerless... helpless.”

“Wow.” Eric sounded duly impressed. “You *are* a damn good therapist.”

Nick couldn’t stop a small laugh from escaping as he jibed, “Not therapist, counselor. I’ve only got a Master’s degree.”

“I find those conventions idiotic.” Eric’s dismissive tone sobered. “But getting back to the subject at hand, you’ve just diagnosed yourself beautifully for me, I think. Let’s go with that. Why is admitting that lack of power so frightening for you?”

Nick offered his therapist a noncommittal shrug while he searched for something to re-direct his attention away from the current

line of questioning. When Nick's eyes lit upon the nameplate on the heavy maple desk, he said, "It must've been rough growing up with a name like Kochmann, huh?"

"So you want to talk about my father's legacy rather than your own? As much as I'd love to, *you're* paying *me*. Or rather, your insurance company is."

"We weren't talking about my father."

"Don't I know it. That's all we never talk about."

The scowl Nick shot Eric was fully echoed in his irate answer. "We've talked about him plenty—in excruciating detail."

"Yep, all of the details, but none of the feelings. When you come right down to it, your therapy has revolved around a big black hole called Sam Zales."

"I've told you, it doesn't matter anymore. He's as good as dead to me."

"Is that right?"

Nick ground out, with barely contained fury, "For fuck's sake. You better not start nagging me to go see him like everybody else does."

Eric leaned back in his chair as he assured Nick. "I had no intention of doing so." He tilted his head in slight bewilderment. "Who *is* nagging you to go see your father?"

"Well," Nick drawled, momentarily stumped. "My Aunt Hetty did, when it all first happened. And my mom does—you know, when she thinks she's back in that time."

"Uh huh," Eric answered skeptically. "Who else?"

"Sister Ciera...."

"Really?"

"Yes." Nick paused while he re-ran that conversation through his head. "Sort of. She suggested it—in a roundabout way—when she told me she knew him."

"And she won't drop it?"



“No. She only said it the once, but—”

“Man, if you consider that nagging, then it’s a good thing you’re not *married*,” Eric quipped. “I hope Logan knows how sensitive you are about taking the mildest of suggestions.”

Nick laughed. “I’m sure he’d tell you it doesn’t matter since I’m as stubborn as a mule.”

“Then I tend to agree with him. So what’s your problem with the good sister’s proposal? It seems like she suggested it, you said no, and that was the end of it, right?”

“It’s hard to put into words.” Nick shook his head in frustration. “It’s not just what she said. It’s that... I know she thinks I should—go see the old man, I mean. Everybody thinks that, even if they don’t say it.”

“Fascinating.”

Nick found Eric’s secretive smile infuriating. “What’s so damned fascinating, Mr. Spock?”

“Well, I know you’re smart enough to figure it out, but we’re almost out of time. So I’m going to come right out and tell you. It sounds to me like most of that nagging may be internal.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning, do you want to see your father, Nick?”

“Hell no!” Nick’s visceral, knee-jerk reply was more habitual anger than anything else. When Eric’s only answer was an appraising stare, Nick heard his conscience whispering the truth to him, softly, but still too loudly to ignore. “Aww, shit,” he groaned, putting his head into his hands.

“What?”

A heavy sigh escaped as Nick looked up at Eric, admitting desolately, “I don’t *want* to want to go see him.”

“But you do?”

“Yes,” Nick spit out through gritted teeth. “Why? Why do I want to? Why the fuck should he have—”

“That power over you?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s not fair, is it? It would be nice if you could just wipe him out, erase the influence he’s had on you. But you can’t.”

“No, I can’t. Hell, my job, my life, even... even Logan—it all goes back to him in some way.”

“But your job, your life, Logan—those are all good things, aren’t they? In your own stubborn way, you’ve been able to wrestle that dark angel to the ground and get your blessing from him.”

“How biblical. I didn’t think you were a religious man.”

“I’m not, but I did have a very Lutheran upbringing.” With deliberate emphasis, Eric added, “You never really escape it.”

“No, I guess you don’t—can’t,” Nick confirmed, fully appreciating that his therapist wasn’t speaking solely of his own past.

“So what’re you going to do about this epiphany of yours?”

Nick looked at the clock before answering. “I don’t know, but I’ve got a week to think about it.”

“What you should be thinking about is whether meeting your father face-to-face might actually release the grasp he has on your imagination.”

“I don’t see how letting him—”

“You’re not *letting* him do anything. If you do this, it won’t be for him. It will be for you. I know you’re afraid that by going to see him, you’ll be giving him power he doesn’t deserve. But Nick, the truth is—as you’ve just admitted—he already *has* that power. Maybe this is your chance to take it back.”

LOGAN pulled up in the driveway of Nick’s house later that same night, feeling exhausted but satisfied. He’d just spent the last three hours finishing the replacement of a coworker’s fuel injection system—the end of a week-long task. He wasn’t really bothered by the fact that

the moonlighting had made for some long days. Not only was the extra money welcome, but he'd thoroughly enjoyed the work—unlike the labor he had suffered through at his day job.

Though it was a few weeks into the New Year, the after-Christmas bargain hunters were still scouring the garden center, and Logan had recently spent the greater part of his days restocking shelves and fixing displays that looked like they'd been under siege from an enraged battalion.

As content as his exertions at Acken's shop had left him, Logan ambled to the front door nagged by concern over the discussion he'd had with Dave when he'd gotten to the shop. He shook his head as if trying to physically dislodge the dilemma, resolving that he'd figure out later what to do about Dave's announcement. Logan couldn't help but notice he still had a tendency to shelve problems rather than confront them immediately. A prime example being that, for weeks, he'd been studiously ignoring the fact that he had a key to Nick's house, spent five or six nights out of every week there, and was, for all intents and purposes, living with Nick.

Though his days of therapy had come to an end, the habit of self-examination remained strong enough for Logan to admit that he and Nick *should* have a talk about their living arrangements. Unfortunately, his six months with Trudy hadn't given him the mettle to really force the issue. And it did seem like it might be Logan's job to do so, since other than handing over the key and accepting Logan's regular offers to pay for groceries and help with chores, Nick hadn't broached the subject either.

Logan laughed to himself, thinking that if he had hooked up with a woman this same way, they would have had a serious talk a long time ago. *Oh, yeah, you could bet on that.* He did suddenly wonder how anything significant got settled between two guys. Would they be sharing this house for the next couple years, both pretending that a casual encounter had somehow stretched into a two-year-long date?

Whatever the answer to that question was, Logan had no intention of resolving the matter that night. Between hectic work schedules for both men and a weekend with his girls, Logan hadn't spent any quality time with Nick in almost a week. And that was too goddamn long. His

libido had been simmering the entire ride home, and the sight that greeted him in the front room turned the heat up even more.

Nick was stretched out on the couch, perusing a dusty-looking textbook. As soon as he caught sight of Logan, he dropped his book on the coffee table and smiled broadly. “Hey! You’re earlier than I expected.”

“Yeah, managed to finish up tonight,” Logan answered, crossing the room in three quick strides. He bent down and kissed Nick, catching him as he was sitting up. Logan slid in next to the welcoming warmth and, without further preamble, attacked Nick’s neck, alternating hot, wet kisses with teasing bites.

“I was gonna ask if you were hungry,” Nick gasped. “But—”

“Hungry for a piece of you,” Logan rumbled, his nimble fingers busily undoing buttons and exposing more skin to his assault. “Ain’t seen you in way too long.”

“You saw me this morning.”

Logan pushed his lover down on the couch while wrenching his mouth away long enough to complain. “All I saw was you running out the door.”

Nick’s answering chuckle was positively pornographic. “Why don’t you just say we ain’t fucked in days and you’re horny?”

Though he was now almost fully occupied with unzipping his jeans with one hand while the other stroked Nick’s rapidly stiffening cock, Logan managed to breathe in his ear, “I’d rather show you.”

“Good thing I closed those curtains,” was all the permission Logan needed from Nick to start full-scale removal of clothing.

Moments later the sensation of complete skin-on-skin contact was so heady that Logan almost forgot his plans for the evening, but after a few seconds of rutting against Nick, he found the willpower to come to a full stop. Logan took a second to drink in the sight of Nick in the dim light—pale skin glowing with a light sheen of sweat despite the freezing temperatures outside and eyes gone black with urgent desire—before swiftly moving into position and sinking down until they were fully joined.

Nick's look of surprise was everything Logan could have hoped for. "What...? When did you—"

"Slicked myself up at the garage before I headed home. Almost came just thinking of what I was gonna do to you."

"Don't tell me you used motor oil—"

"Vaseline, asshole."

"That pretty much sums it up."

Logan reached down and grasped the base of Nick's throbbing prick. "Keep it up and I ain't gonna let you come."

"But if I don't keep it up—"

There was one sure way of shutting his man up, and Logan knew it. He swiftly pistoned up and down while moving his hand to the entrance of Nick's body, satisfied when he saw those dark eyes roll into the back of his head. Logan's last rational thought before he gave himself over to the tide of pleasure was an inchoate yearning to somehow take more of Nick inside him—and keep him there forever.

NICK stroked his hand up and down Logan's flank, enjoying the peace of the moment and the feel of the strong body on top of his every bit as much as the release of orgasm. "Wish it could just stay like this."

"I think your legs would 'ventually go to sleep," Logan quipped, though his sarcastic reply was belied by the soft light in his eyes as he looked up at Nick.

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do. When it's just you and me, there ain't no questions or problems buzzing round. Everything's easy."

There was more urgency in Logan's tone than Nick would have expected had he simply been voicing agreement with Nick's statement. "Sounds like you got something on your mind. What's up?"

Indecision flitted across Logan's face, as if he was struggling with giving a fully honest answer. "Give me a minute," he mumbled before

untangling his legs from Nick's and standing up to slip into his jeans. "I could use a beer, how 'bout you?"

"Sounds good."

Shortly, they were seated on the couch, bare-chested, drinking beer in silence so thick that Nick had begun to worry that something truly serious was in the offing.

Finally Logan said, "Had a talk with Dave today."

"Dave Acken?" When Logan nodded confirmation, Nick continued, "About what?"

"He's putting his shop on the market, and he wants me to buy it."

Elation, composed of half relief, half excitement, coursed through Nick. "That's a great idea. You had me worried. Thought it was something bad."

"It is bad!" Logan jumped up and started pacing the room, pausing only to scowl at Nick. "Great, huh? Are you crazy? I ain't got that kind of money. And what do you think—the guy who does buy it, is he gonna give me the run of the place like Dave does? Hell no, he ain't, so now I'm not gonna have any place to work on cars. I'll be back to what I can get done in driveways and—"

Nick stood up and stepped into Logan's path, placing his hand on his shoulders to halt his restless wandering. "Hold on there, Mr. Doom and Gloom. How much money are we talking about, to buy Acken's shop?"

Logan looked at Nick like he was explaining gravity to a four-year-old wanting to fly. "Plenty. Beat up as it is, with all his tools and stuff, Dave'll want at least a hundred and fifty grand."

"Well you don't need the whole thing up front, only a down payment."

"You think I don't know that?" Logan snapped. "Well, let me it make it clear to you then, Zales. I ain't even got that. 'Specially since I can't seem to unload my old shop in Elco."

A near-veteran of interpreting Logan's moods, Nick recognized his peevishness as more fear and insecurity than anger. Since he

remembered from college and graduate school how it felt not having the money other people took for granted, he didn't take the show of irritation personally. Fortunately, over the years, Nick had developed a knack for dealing with this very issue in creative ways. "Logan, how much could we get for the Thunderbird now?"

"What's that got to do with—"

"Just answer the question."

Logan scratched his chin, obviously giving the matter some thought. "The shape it's in now, you could get \$25,000 easy, \$10,000 more if it goes to auction."

"There we go," Nick exalted. "There's your down payment."

"How you figure? That's *your* car. You already gave me the money you owed me."

"I can get back my original investment, and there's enough left over for your down payment. Besides, I think of it as *our* car. We did that together—turned a pile of junk into something beautiful."

"That's real nice, but it doesn't really change the fact that you're giving me charity."

"Jesus!" Nick threw up his hands in frustration before offering, "Then call it a loan. You can pay me back after you start making money—which, as good a mechanic as you are, won't take long." Nick watched anxiously as Logan chewed at his hangnails—always a sign that he was mulling something over.

"I don't know," he drawled. When Nick couldn't suppress an audible huff of irritation, Logan hastened to explain, "I've seen money come between people, and I'd sure hate.... I'd hate to mess up... us."

Touched more than he wanted to admit by that sincere declaration, Nick grasped Logan's arm firmly, promising, "It won't."

"Besides, you love that car. I can't let you sell it for me."

"Not as much as I—" Nick's throat dried up, and he couldn't force out the rest of that sentence. He took a deep breath as he thought to himself, *If not now, when?* One swallow, two, and then he said it. "Nowhere near as much as I love you."

To Nick's eternal shock, in a barely audible tone, Logan answered, "I love you, too." Louder and more resolute, he added, "That's why I can't let you do this."

"If you love me like I love you, then you should know that selling the T-bird won't bother me!" Nick insisted. "Don't you see? This is *your chance*, and I'd give anything to help you take it. You *hate* that job at the garden center, and you love fixin' cars. If you buy Dave's place, you can do that full time, and you'll be living closer to ho—to here."

Logan's laugh rang out, brightening the dim room considerably. He was evidently anything but offended by Nick's Freudian slip. "And I'll be living closer to home—you can say it. I know I'm pretty much livin' here."

"Yeah, I guess you are." Nick suddenly found it easy to admit the truth, though he was starting to feel overwhelmed by the swell of emotion and sought some breathing room by grabbing his shirt off the floor and shrugging into it.

From over his shoulder, he heard Logan say, "So... while you're figuring what I owe for my half of the mortgage, you might as well add in what I need to pay you on that loan every month."

Nick whipped around, gazing at Logan, who was retrieving his own shirt as calmly as he'd made that last momentous statement. "So you're gonna—that means you'll do it?"

"Sure." Logan smiled sheepishly as he stepped close and pulled Nick to him. "You're one persuasive man." He punctuated his pronouncement with a quick kiss.

Though he returned Logan's embrace wholeheartedly, Nick couldn't stop himself from murmuring, "To everyone but myself."

Logan held Nick out at arm's length and studied him carefully. "What's that mean?"

"Nothing."

"The hell it don't." Logan dragged him over to the couch and pushed Nick into a seated position while he parked himself nearby. "Come on, you're always making me spill my guts. It's your turn."



Nick reclaimed his beer from where it had been abandoned on the coffee table and took a few sips before starting. “Tonight Eric and I talked about me going to.... You see, it turns out that maybe I want—that maybe I should... go see my father.”

The shock was plain on Logan’s face. “What? Why?”

“A lot of reasons,” Nick answered pensively, then paused, trying to remember them himself. “So I can see for myself that he’s not really some fire-breathin’ dragon, that he’s just a weak old man. So I can tell him what he did to my mom is really why she’s dyin’ now and that’s on him. So I can hear what it is he’s had to say all these years and prove to myself that it doesn’t mean anything—whatever it is. And that he doesn’t mean anything to me, like I’ve always said.”

Logan squinted at Nick thoughtfully. “Okay... then if you have to, do it.”

“Easy for you to say,” Nick laughed bitterly.

“Hey, Bud,” Logan drawled as he put an arm around Nick’s shoulder. “I know what it is to be scared.”

“I’m not scared of him!” Nick protested vehemently, jerking away from the arm encircling him.

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Logan assured him, refusing to let Nick shrug away. “But I think something about seeing him bothers the hell out of you. I don’t know what it is....”

Nick ceased his struggles and leaned back into Logan, whispering, “I’ll be giving him what he wants.”

“And?” When Nick didn’t answer, Logan prodded, “I don’t get it.”

“Growing up, all I ever wanted was to hurt him like he hurt my mom.” Nick clenched his fists in reflexive anger, unwanted memories assaulting him from all sides. “To make him pay,” he bit off. “But I couldn’t.” Nick sighed before continuing in a deceptively calm voice. “One time I tried to get between ’em, and he threw me ’cross the room like a rag doll. Later my mom begged me to never interfere again.”

“So you’ve been tryin’ to punish him by not going to see him all these years?”

“Yeah.” Another bitter laugh escaped from Nick as he admitted, “It sounds almost stupid when you say it out loud.”

“Nah, it’s not stupid. I get it now.” Logan took the beer from his hand and put it on the end table before drawing Nick fully into his arms and then easing them both down into a reclining position. Nick snuggled gratefully into Logan’s embrace, and then he heard him ask, his breath puffing softly into Nick’s hair, “So what’re you gonna do?”

Safe in his lover’s arms, Nick was finally able to say, firmly and unequivocally, “I’m going to go see the son of a bitch.”

## Chapter 19: And the Truth Will Set You Free

*...And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*

— John 8:32

EVERY day since that fateful session with his therapist, Nick had planned to call up Fayette County Prison and investigate the arrangements for visiting a prisoner. Yet the last weeks of January and every single day of February had slipped by without him doing it. Yes, Nick had many legitimate reasons for the delay—the pace at ACC was as hectic as ever, his mom’s condition continued to worsen to the point where every day might be her last, and there was the bustle and excitement of Logan buying Dave Acken’s shop and starting his own business. However, Nick was self-aware enough to know, deep down, that all of those things were mere excuses. Even though he hadn’t faltered in his resolve to visit his father at last, he still hadn’t managed to convert that resolution into the reality of seeing Sam Zales in person.

Eric was now at the point of true exasperation, and in their next therapy session, he instructed Nick to pick a cut-off date. “Set a fucking deadline or admit you’re never going to do it,” were his precise words.

“All right,” Nick snapped, his ire matching Eric’s. “I’ll do it next week. I’ll call tomorrow and—oh, shit,” he exclaimed.

“What?”

“Next week Logan’s sister is coming to visit, and he’s going to—we’re going to tell her.” When Eric continued to regard him with a somewhat jaundiced expression, Nick explained, “About us. You know, being together.”

“How long is she staying?”

“One night.”

“And this grand one-night visit leaves you no time in an entire week for a ninety-minute round trip to Fayette County?” Eric asked archly.

“It isn’t that, it’s.... Well, coming out to your boyfriend’s family is enough excitement for one week, don’t you think?”

“For Logan, yes,” Eric sighed. “For you? I’m not so sure.” He sipped his coffee before asking, “Nick, what’re you *really* waiting for?” As Nick frowned and ran a hand through his hair, Eric prodded, “Don’t think, just answer. What is it you’re waiting for?”

When he complied with the psychiatrist’s instructions, to his surprise, Nick heard himself blurting, “I’m waiting for my mom to die.” A near-gasp escaped after his candid utterance. “Wow,” he said softly.

“Wow, indeed.” Eric leaned forward, demanding eagerly, “Expound on that immediately—don’t take any time to put your rather impressive defenses back up. Why do you want to wait?”

“I don’t know,” Nick answered honestly.

“Yes, you do. You just don’t know that you do.” When Nick rolled his eyes in response, Eric suggested, “You’re waiting so you can accuse him of her murder—is that it?”

“Maybe.”

“That didn’t sound very convincing. It seems that you might have to give this some thought after all.”

Neither man said anything as a few minutes ticked by. At last, his mind working furiously, Nick drawled, “I guess.... I guess it would be like... like tying up all of the loose ends. Closing the book on that whole chapter of my life, for once and for all, you know?”

“I do know,” Eric agreed. “You like things clearly delineated, all boxed up, neatly squared away. That’s probably one of the reasons that you’re such a master of compartmentalization. But life can’t always work that way.”

Somewhat stung by that observation, Nick protested, “I know that!”

Eric's wistful smile was almost fatherly as he agreed, "Yes, you know that in the abstract, and I'm sure you recognize it about your clients' lives. But in your own life, it's what you always strive for."

Nick couldn't find it in him to refute that observation. "Okay, so? So what does that mean for me?"

"It means you need to get past this inclination. Medical school may be a long time behind me, but I can tell you that your mom could die tomorrow, or next month, or the month after that. This delay is blocking you from progressing in your therapy. In this instance, you cannot wait. You need to pick a firm date, pick it now, and stick with it."

The truth of Eric's firm pronouncement left Nick with no wriggle room. He gave it some thought, and though his idea was initially nothing but pure sarcasm, the date held a twisted appeal. A wry smile bloomed on his face as Nick proposed, "How about the Ides of March? That's a nice, auspicious day."

Eric cocked an eyebrow at Nick and gave a short laugh. "Okay, as long as you promise me no daggers will be involved."

"No worries, Doc. I'm sure they have metal detectors there."

A FEW days after Nick's decision, Logan heard a car pull into the driveway of the house in Observatory Hill. When a quick glance out the front window confirmed that it was indeed his sister's Nissan Pathfinder, he took a deep breath to settle his nerves and went out onto the porch, trotting down the steps with a show of eagerness he didn't actually feel. Logan greeted first Daisy and then his niece with a peck on the cheek. He transferred his sister's overnight bag from her possession to his own, asking, "Did you'ins have any trouble findin' the place?"

"None at all," Daisy answered, craning her neck to take in the neighborhood before following her brother up the porch steps. "Your directions were real easy to follow." She then turned around and addressed her daughter. "You could take that damn iPod thing outta

your ears and say hello to your uncle, Lisa. Thank him for putting us up.”

Lisa deigned to remove one earbud and protested, “I *did* say hi, and he’s not putting *me* up.” With the merest suggestion of smugness, she added, “I’m spending the night at Carlow.”

“Well, it’s thanks to him that *I* don’t have to pay for a hotel while you’re doing this slumber party thing at that college.”

“Mo—ther!” Lisa huffed. “It’s an overnight in the dorms, not a ‘slumber party’.” The teenager looked at her uncle, explaining, “It’s to give us an idea of what it will be like next year. You know, living on campus and that.”

“Oh, God,” Daisy addressed her brother. “If she’s this impossible now, I can’t wait to see what a swelled head she’ll have when she’s actually going to college.”

Logan ushered his family into the house, staying determinedly silent as the two women continued to bicker.

“I think your head’s swelled worse than mine,” Lisa accused. “Wasn’t me that told every last person in Elco, Roscoe, *and* Stockdale about me getting into Carlow.”

“Well, ’scuse me for bein’ proud of my daught—” Daisy suddenly seemed to notice her surroundings and interrupted herself with a startled, “Oh. This is real nice and homey, Logan. When you said you had moved in with your friend, I have to admit I was picturin’ some bare, ugly bachelor pad.”

“Nice, Mom,” Lisa intoned sarcastically. “Why don’t you tell us how you really feel.”

“Oh, you hush. I can say what I want to my little brother, can’t I, Logan?”

As Logan gave his sister a wan smile and answered, “Sure can,” he couldn’t help but wonder if the reverse were true.

Twenty-five minutes later, they had dropped a very happy Lisa off at Carlow University, and Logan directed his sister on how to get through the maze of streets onto the Penn Lincoln Parkway so they

could head to the Southside and see his new shop before meeting Nick for an early dinner at The Liberty Grill.

“Good Lord, Logan,” Daisy exclaimed. “Do you fight this kind of traffic every day?”

Logan shrugged off her concern. “Nah. As early in the morning as I head to the shop, it ain’t so bad.”

“Never took you for a city boy. What possessed you to buy this place, anyway?”

“It seemed like—” Logan stopped himself short and amended, “It *was* the right opportunity. I like the place, it’s the right size, and... and I think I can see my way clear to turning a profit real soon.”

Logan recognized that Daisy had offered him an opening into the matter at hand—the real reason Logan was now living in Pittsburgh—but his plan had been to speak to Daisy in the quiet of his shop, not while his sister was navigating unfamiliar roads. To distract her, he said, “Besides, with Lisa at that city college next fall, ain’t you glad I’m livin’ not too far away?”

“Guess so.” Daisy snorted in apparent amusement. “Maybe she’ll even treat you better ’an she’s been treatin’ me and Chuck.”

“Aw, she seems like a pretty good kid,” Logan demurred.

Daisy’s lips were set in a hard line as she concentrated on the bridge traffic. As soon as they crossed over the Monongahela, she relaxed slightly and explained, “Well, she’s gotten awful mouthy lately. As I’m sure you noticed.”

“That seems to be the way of a lotta kids these days.”

“Not your two.”

“Not usually. But I see signs of Krista headin’ that way. Meghan, too, sometimes.”

“Are they takin’ the separation hard?”

“Yeah, kind of,” Logan admitted, wiping his sweaty palms off on his denim-clad knees, his anxiety ratcheting up with each passing mile.

“Logan,” Daisy ventured, in a hesitant yet hopeful tone that let her brother know exactly what was coming next. “Ain’t there no chance that maybe you and Linda could work things—”

“No,” Logan interrupted firmly, wanting to cut this conversation short—for the time being.

“I never would’ve thought Linda was the kind to hold such a grudge.”

“It ain’t her—make a right here, on South 18<sup>th</sup> street,” Logan directed, deciding he could hold off any further explanation until the frank talk he had planned. By the time the Pathfinder was heading up the steep driveway of his shop, his dread had grown until he felt it as a choking cloud, filling the car and fouling the air until Logan felt lightheaded from the effect. He strove mightily to appear nonchalant as he jumped out to open the garage door and let his sister pull into one of the shop bays.

Fortunately, Daisy seemed so occupied by her inspection of the recently renamed “Crane’s Auto Clinic” that she was oblivious to his display of nerves. After twenty minutes of idle chitchat mainly composed of verbal comparisons of the present place to his shop in Elco, Daisy finally said, “It seems real nice, Lo.” She looked at her brother, who was perched on the edge of the ancient desk he’d inherited from Dave. “Though the location ain’t too convenient. I mean, you sure can’t park any cars on that driveway, can you?”

“Nope,” was the only answer Logan managed, as his mouth had gone dry as dust as soon as he had entered the shop with his sister. Indeed, all of his contributions to the conversation thus far had been mostly monosyllabic.

“Still, it looks like the old owner at least put a new coat of paint on the place for you.”

“Actually,” Logan started, the word barely recognizable since his voice had cracked and wheezed with anxiety. He stood up straight, took a deep breath, and tried again. “Actually, it was me, me and Nick, that painted the place just two weeks ago.”

Still wandering the small space, Daisy laughed brightly, observing, “You and this Nick sure have become thick as thieves,



haven't ya?" Not pausing for a response, she went on, "You haven't had a friend like that since—"

Logan knew Daisy had stopped abruptly rather than give the obvious name, it still being a sore point between them, but he was having none of it. "Since Jerry Sievers," he finished for her.

"Yeah, well..." Daisy trailed off, looking decidedly uncomfortable. "Did you get all these tools—"

He would have gladly let Daisy redirect the conversation, but their visit had already run double the time Logan had allotted for it and it was entirely possible that Nick was waiting at the diner for them by now. With a monumental effort, Logan walked over to stand beside his sister and forced himself to interrupt her by observing, "You know... they're kind of... you might say, they're kind of... similar."

Daisy's mind had obviously skipped on ahead, since she turned to Logan with a puzzled frown. "Who's similar?"

"Nick and Jerry."

"Yeah, I guess. You restored a car with both of them, right? Though with this Nick guy, you actually got to finish—"

"I meant that... that.... You know how everyone always thought Jerry was gay?"

Daisy had gone very still. Almost timidly, she said, "Yeah?"

"Well, Nick is," Logan stated, in the firmest voice he'd managed in almost an hour.

"Oh." Daisy nervously straightened the straps of her handbag on her arm before saying, "I guess you're gonna run into that kind of thing—I mean here in Pittsburgh they probably feel that it's—or they're more, you know—" It was obvious that she was fumbling for something inoffensive to say—and failing badly. "I mean, I guess as long as he doesn't bother you none about *that*, I guess there's nothing wrong with it."

"It don't bother me—"

Suddenly Daisy stepped even closer to her brother and put both hands on his arm. "Logan, *please* don't take this the wrong way. I *am* glad you got such a good friend, but... but you two livin' together,

well, it strikes me as kind of a bad idea. Him bein' gay and all, if someone were to find out about him, folks might get the wrong idea. About you, I mean." She licked her lips nervously and added, "You know?"

Logan looked down at his earnest, beseeching sibling and smiled sadly. "They won't."

"How can you be so sure?" Daisy took her hand off Logan's arm and drew an unsteady hand through her hair. "I know what I'd think," she muttered darkly.

"Then you'd be right," Logan said with quiet determination. Then he watched as the color drained out of Daisy's shocked face. He took advantage of her speechless state to clarify, "I'm gay, Daisy. That's why I'm livin' with Nick. We're together now—"

"Oh my *Gawd*," Daisy screeched, a hand flying to her mouth. "How could this happen? How could this happen, Logan? What did this guy do to you?"

"He didn't do noth—I been this way a long time—all my life as far I can tel—"

"That ain't true! You're *married*. You got Linda pregnant—twice!" Daisy whirled away from Logan, her chest heaving with gasping breaths.

"It doesn't matter." Logan moved towards his sister and turned her around to face him. He kept his hands—gentle but steady—on her shoulders. "Believe me, none of that was ever what I wanted."

"Then why'd you do it?" Daisy asked petulantly.

"Because what Jim did to Jerry all those years ago scared the shit out of me. 'Cause I couldn't accept who I was—thought it was better to hide and pretend." It was Logan's turn to be beseeching. He looked down into his sister's tear-stained face, saying, "I can't live that way anymore. It nearly killed me—nearly killed Linda, too. And I don't just mean from when I hit her."

"Logan, I just don't...." Daisy paused to wipe her damp eyes. "You got any water 'round here?"

“Sure thing.” Logan bounded over to the water cooler in the corner by the desk and brought back a cup for his sister.

After she’d drained the whole thing in one gulp, she whispered, “It’s gonna take some getting used to. This idea is sure gonna take some getting used to.”

“I can see that. And I’ll give ya all the time you need.” Logan pulled her to him and gave her a quick hug, relieved that there was no apparent resistance. After he released her, he asked, “You ready to meet Nick?”

Daisy gave a shaky laugh. “Guess I better be.”

The meal was kind of a penance for Logan, even though he glowed with pride at how Nick managed to charm Daisy into, if not comfort, at least a semblance of it. His boyfriend definitely shouldered the burden of the conversation, peppering Daisy with questions about Logan’s childhood, her children back in Elco, and Lisa’s plans to study nursing. He augmented her answers with stories about his own college days and so many anecdotes about The Liberty Grill that Daisy seriously asked him if he had a financial interest in the place.

Nick smiled broadly as he looked around at the restaurant. “Well, as many meals as I’ve had here over the years, I’m sure I paid for that new section they put in.” He paused and pointed towards the back of the diner. “But they didn’t even have the courtesy to name it after me.”

Suddenly a booming voice interrupted the conversation. “Maybe not, but I am thinking of calling an order of a loaded cheeseburger, mac and cheese, with a double-thick chocolate shake ‘The Zales Special’.”

Nick’s laugh rang out, and even Daisy smiled at the infectious sound. “Larry, who the hell is ever gonna order that? Besides *me*.”

“Take your homage where you can get it, son,” Larry answered as he slid into the booth next to Nick and introduced himself to Daisy. Logan relaxed even further when Larry picked up the conversational baton. He and Daisy ended up sharing stories about the joys and sorrows of raising “mouthy” children and the horrors of college tuition.

Logan offered to drive Daisy’s Pathfinder back to Observatory Hill so she wouldn’t be navigating city streets in the dark. On the ride home, he was slightly buoyed by her apparent change from sorrow and

confusion to quiet thoughtfulness. “Are you gonna want to tell the rest of the family any time soon?” she asked anxiously. “I mean, do you want me to tell Chuck and—”

“No. You’re it for a while.”

“Does Linda know?”

“Yeah. I told her. Figured I owed her that much. But I don’t want anyone else knowin’ ’til I tell Krista and Meghan.”

“When’re you gonna do that?”

“Probably late this year or early next year sometime. Nick says we should see how well they adjust to the trauma of the divorce first.” When Daisy simply nodded, he couldn’t help but venture, “What did you think of him? Nick.”

Daisy sighed and shook her head. “I gotta admit, I’d be—well, it’d be a whole lot easier if he *was* just your friend, but....”

“But?”

“But he does seem like a... a good guy. Real friendly and what Mama used to call ‘personable’.”

“For real,” Logan agreed.

“He sure ain’t what I was expecting, though.” Logan tensed a bit, waiting for Daisy to continue. “I sure didn’t expect him to be sooo—” As she drew the word out, Logan mentally supplied several possible options: masculine, educated, talkative.... He was shocked to hear her finally finish, “...damn *good—looking*.”

“What the hell does that mean? You didn’t think I could get—” Logan stopped himself since they were veering into decidedly uncomfortable territory.

Daisy reached over and patted his leg. “Honey, I didn’t mean that. I mean, if you can get past the gay part—and I guess I’m gonna have to—you done good. Real good.”

Logan felt a crooked smile form on his face. “Yeah, I did.” As he steered the car towards the expressway, he murmured, “It took long enough, but I did.”

LATER that night, lying together in the quiet of their darkened bedroom, Nick pulled Logan to him and whispered, "All in all, that went pretty well, huh? As well as we could've expected?"

"We'll see. I think she's still in shock."

"Shock *is* the best we could have expected."

"Well, then it went *great*," Logan offered sarcastically.

"You're never happy."

"That ain't true, and you know it. Not anymore." Nick took the way Logan settled more firmly against him as an illustration of his point.

After drinking in the peace he always felt with Logan's body pressed against his own, Nick's mind drifted from the relative success of the evening to the task that still lay before him. "Wish I had any hope that my thing could..." He let the thought trail off, immediately regretting that he'd raised the subject at all.

"Could go that well?"

"Yeah."

"If you're so sure it won't, then why do you even wanta—"

"I have to. I can't really explain it, Logan, but I have to do this."

"Okay." Nick felt Logan's strong, comforting hand run up and down his side. "So, next week, huh?"

"Yep. It's all arranged."

"Sure you don't want me to go with you?"

"No. Hell no."

"You don't have to do everything yourself anymore. You said you realized that now."

"I know, you're right. But this I do."

Nick heard a frustrated sigh followed by a resigned, "Okay."

The bedroom was silent for a while, and Nick wondered if his lover had fallen asleep. "Logan?" he whispered.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for offering.”

Logan pulled one of Nick’s hands to his mouth and kissed it.  
“Any time.”

Nick responded by pressing soft kisses into the back of Logan’s neck. He had meant it to be a quick thing but then found it hard to stop.

“Nick,” Logan whispered, “I don’t wanta—”

“I know, you don’t wanta do anything while your sister’s in the house. I got that; I’m just cuddling. Okay?”

“Okay. I’m sorry, it just makes me nervous knowin’ she’s right down the hall.”

Nick snorted quietly. “Imagine how she feels.”

“No, thanks.”

“Well, you could always move into the other bedroom like you’re gonna do when your daughters visit.”

Logan turned quietly in Nick’s arms, and in the dim light from the street lamp outside, Nick could just make out his smiling face. “Are you tryin’ to get rid of me?”

“Oh, you’re too smart for me. You guessed my nefarious plan.” When Logan shook his head in mock disgust and flopped back over, Nick pulled him back into a spoon position. After a few moments, a mischievous devil prompted him to whisper in Logan’s ear, “Of course, it is kinda torturous having you this close and knowing I can’t do anything. Maybe we could just—”

“One night ain’t gonna kill us,” Logan murmured.

“That which doth not kill us makes us strong.”

A sleepy “What?” came drifting over Logan’s shoulder.

“Nietzsche,” Nick explained, obliquely.

“Gesundheit.” Nick shook with silent laughter, prompting Logan to add, “Go to sleep.”

AS NICK walked up to the surprisingly innocuous-looking prison building, he found that he could remember nothing of the drive there—always a sign that his nerves were running high. He responded by silently repeating to himself the litany Trudy had offered as her parting advice. *What's the worst that can happen? He's already done his worst, and I survived.*

Repeating that over and over kept him calm throughout the tedious check-in procedure, and in a much shorter time than Nick could have expected, he found himself sitting in what appeared to be the world's ugliest high-school cafeteria. It was certainly nothing like he'd seen in the movies. No Plexiglas, no booths, no phones, just a series of long tables and blue-gray plastic chairs. Several people were already huddled in conferences at some of the other tables, the inmates recognizable by their drab garb but generally otherwise unremarkable. If it weren't for the armed guard at the entrance, Nick could almost convince himself he wasn't sitting in a prison visiting room.

When, after a few minutes' wait, a pot-bellied, gray-haired man of medium stature and build sat across from him, Nick initially stared at the stranger uncomprehendingly. He was waiting for the man to explain what the delay was when he spoke. "Look at you. Finally grew into them ears." That voice, at least, hadn't changed a bit. "Hey, Nick."

"Oh. It's you." Nick was at a loss for how to address Sam Zales, so he simply said, "Hello... there." He looked him up and down and wondered if the man had shrunk in fact or simply due to a child's distorted memory. "You've changed, too."

Sam sprawled out in what Nick immediately recognized as false bravado. "Yeah, time in the joint'll do that to you." His father continued with patently fake heartiness. "Took you twenty years to find the place, huh?"

"I knew where to find you, I just never wanted to."

"So why now?"

Since the truth still seemed complicated and nebulous even to him, Nick replied, "I just came to tell you that you're about to officially become a murderer." When Sam only nodded in response, he felt compelled to add, with icy emphasis, "My mother is dying."

There was absolutely no emotion audible in the reply that was lobbed back from across the battered table. “I heard. That nun told me.” When Nick immediately rose to leave, Sam asked, “You come all the way for that? You ain’t got anything else to say?”

Nick sank back down into the hard chair, asking, “Like what? ‘I forgive you’?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I never did nothin’ to you.”

“What?” Nick’s raised, angry voice drew a frown from the guard; with great effort, he modulated his tone before continuing. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“All that stuff that went on, that was between me and my wife. No one else.”

“You and your wife—and me, the neighbors, the cops, the DA, a Grand Jury—”

“Kid, you don’t have to remind me of all that stuff. I get enough of that every day. How ’bout we talk about something else.”

“Like what?”

“Like what you been up to all these years.”

Since the answer that came immediately to mind, *Trying to avoid this day*, was nothing Nick wanted to say out loud, he shrugged and said, “Taking care of Mom and working. Before that... school.” Nick was almost appalled to realize that his two-phrase answer had neatly and truthfully summed up most of his life.

Sam nodded almost eagerly, saying, “Yeah, I heard. That nun, she says you went to college, and even past that.”

“She has a name, you know. Sister Ciera.”

“Whatever. So, all that schoolin’—is that why you ain’t had time to get married or have kids or nothin’?” When Nick didn’t immediately answer, Sam added, “Or are ya gonna tell me that’s ’cause of me and your mom?”

Nick hesitated only a second more before answering firmly, “No, it’s because I’m gay.”



The surprise was plain on Sam's ruddy, unshaven face. "No shit!" Almost to himself, he muttered, "Guess I get the blame for that, then."

"It doesn't work that way," Nick snapped. "Not that I care if you don't understand—or approve."

To Nick's surprise, Sam simply shrugged. "Guess I got no room to talk."

"What does that mean?"

"Nick," Sam drawled, leaning forward conspiratorially, "what the hell do you think I've been doin' for sex these last twenty years?"

"I never gave it any thought." Nick rubbed his forehead in disgust, adding, "And I wish to God it had stayed that way."

"Yeah, well, fuck you, your highness. When'd you get so snotty and full of yourself? Guess it's all them fancy degrees you got makes you think you're better 'an everybody else."

"I never needed a degree to think I was better than you, Dad!" Nick didn't even discern the raised eyebrows and stares from the room's other occupants, so stunned was he that he'd let that title slip out, unbidden but unavoidable.

"Bet it don't hurt though, right? Especially when that *Sister Ciera*," Sam imbued the term with bitter sarcasm that Nick barely noticed since his father went on to add, "told ya she was teachin' me to read."

Nick was shocked into near incoherence by his dad's confession. "She never—why would she need to—what are you *talking* about?"

Sam pulled a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his worn denim work shirt and lit one with fumbling fingers, berating himself with a quiet oath. "Fuck." After a long drag, he seemed to regain his composure and squinted at Nick, saying, "Nothing. Forget about it."

"Dad, you can... you could *read*... I remember..." Nick faltered as he tried to confirm his supposition by searching his memories for an image of his father reading something—anything. Finally he said, "You used to sign contracts. I'm sure I remember—"

Assiduously avoiding eye contact by studying the smoking cigarette in his hand, Sam muttered, “I could sign my name, yeah, but your ma, she always had to read them contracts for me.”

As Nick struggled to assimilate this new information into his worldview, one thought predominated. “You’d think you would’ve been grateful to her—”

“For what?” Sam spat. “For holdin’ that over my head?”

“Mom wasn’t like tha—”

Sam either hadn’t heard or didn’t care for Nick’s response as he bulled ahead, snarling, “So what if she gave me that little bit of help? It was still *me* doin’ the work—*me* puttin’ food on the table and a roof over both your heads.”

“What you put over ‘both our heads’ was violence and fear,” Nick insisted bitterly.

“So truth comes out,” Sam sneered. “That’s what you came here for. You waited twenty years so you could sit there and tell me how I *ruined your life*.”

The last few words had been spoken with a sarcastic whine that wormed its way under Nick’s skin. He leaned forward and glared into his father’s bloodshot eyes. “No. Not anymore.” Suddenly the truth crystallized for Nick. “I came to tell you I’m not going to let you do that anymore.” He stabbed an accusing finger across the table. “It was your decision, your doing, and your fault. You did ruin *her life*—and yours. Over a fucking stupid hammer that probably cost less than the carton of cigarettes you’ve got back in your cell.”

The mocking, arctic laugh that erupted out of Sam was one of the ugliest sounds Nick had ever heard. “Jesus Christ, is that what you think? You still believe that fucking hammer story? Now how ’bout some blame for your mom,” Sam jibed. “Never once in all these years tellin’ you the truth.”

Nick swallowed hard and stared at his father, desperately trying to figure out the old man’s game. Whatever it was, he decided not to play. He offered coolly, “If there’s any *truth* about that day that I don’t already know, it’s thanks to your handiwork that Mom wasn’t... isn’t capable of telling me.”

Sam leaned back, taking an indolent drag off his cigarette before saying, "It wasn't the hammer, kid. It was the suitcase."

"What? What suitcase?"

"I caught her. Packin'. She was gonna leave me—*and you*." Sam shrugged and looked over Nick's shoulder, eyes slightly unfocused. He appeared to be fighting a losing battle to seem untouched by the memory, since each word he offered was laced with more poisonous anger than the last. "I made 'er unpack it all; stood there and watched to make sure she done it. But she said she'd do it again soon's my back was turned. Said I couldn't watch her all the time." Suddenly Sam leaned forward and coldly confessed, "That's when I done it, you know. That hammer I'd picked up outta the yard just happened to be handy."

The anger that boiled up in Nick was more for that nonchalant admission than the realization that he'd been living under the strain of a malicious lie for most of his life. "Why the fuck did you say—"

"That story me an' my lawyer cooked up? He said it'd look less 'premeditated' that way." Sam snorted bitterly. "Lotta good it done me."

Venomously, Nick shot back, "I can tell how sorry you are about what you did to my mother."

"I never said I was sorry. What kind of man lets his wife leave 'im?"

"The kind of man who... is a man..." Nick shook his head. "There's no use even trying to explain it to you." He rose to leave and looked down at his still seated father. "So... goodbye, Sam. Oh, and when you get out? Don't look me up."

Sam stood up and put his hands on his hips. "Thanks for nothin', kid."

Nick turned to leave without another word, feeling freer with every step he took out of that room and away from the man who had been, on the merest biological technicality, his father. On the drive home, he veered off the road that led to his house and turned the Jeep towards the nursing facility where his mother lay slowly dying.

Visiting hours were almost over, but the receptionist buzzed him through without comment.

He walked softly into the room where only the shallow rising and falling of his mother's chest told him that he wasn't too late. Nick sat down by her bed and took the cold, bony hand that lay on top of the blanket into his own strong, warm grasp. As he started to methodically rub her fingers, he saw his mom's eyes drift open. "Nick," she croaked.

"Hey, Mom. How're you doing?" When Agnes's only response was a fretful shake of her head, Nick brought the frail hand to his cheek and whispered, "I came to tell you how proud—" His voice cracked as he felt tears well up. Slowly and with great effort, he tried again. "How *proud* I am of you—for leaving that son of a bitch."

Nick's statement seemed to rouse his mom, and she turned her watery, unfocused eyes on him. "I was gonna go back for you, Nicky. I wasn't gonna leave you—"

"I know, Mom. You did—you *did* come back for me—don't you remember? That's why I'm here now."

Agnes's brow crinkled in confusion. "I did?" When Nick nodded at her, she managed a weak smile as she whispered to herself, "I did... of course, I did. I wouldn't leave my boy... not for long...." She smiled again at Nick and managed to brush away one of his tears. "Don't cry, son. We're both safe. We're gonna be all right, now."

"Yeah... we sure are." Her eyes closed again, and Nick's whispered "Mom" failed to wake her. He stood up and leaned down to kiss her, saying softly, "Good night. I love you, Mom."

By the time Nick parked in front of his house, he was able to calmly think back on his conversation with his father and feel some gratitude that at least one of the Zales men had gotten something out of the visit.

## Epilogue: One River

*And see the confluence of dreams  
That clashed together in our night  
One river born of many streams  
Roll in one blaze of blinding light.*

—George William Russell

NICK was reviewing his schedule for the day when he heard a soft knock on the doorframe of his office. He looked up to find Trudy standing there. Her normally sunny expression was clouded by serious brown eyes, and her head was cocked as she studied him in an obvious display of concern. Though he knew it was a slightly irrational response, Nick was irked. He was thoroughly sick of concern and sympathy, so he attempted to derail Trudy by extending an airily cheerful greeting. “Hey, boss lady, what’s up?”

Trudy entered the room and seated herself across from Nick, answering, “I didn’t expect to see you here so early today.”

His first impulse was to feign ignorance, but he immediately discarded that idea as futile. Finally resigned to the inevitable discussion, he said, “I guess you never been to one of those interments?”

“No, no one in my family has ever been cremated.”

“It takes all of twenty minutes. Including the trip to the cemetery.”

“I thought there would be some sort of service—”

Nick leaned forward in his chair and interrupted, “We had the memorial on Monday, remember? I know you do. With all the food you and Larry brought, Logan and I will be eating leftovers for weeks.”

“Still, for all intents and purposes, Nick, you buried your mother today. There’s no reason to rush back—”

No longer able to contain his growing frustration, Nick snapped, “I didn’t—” He managed to stop himself and took a cleansing breath before starting over. “Look, I buried my mother a long time ago. Today was just a formality.”

“I understand.” Trudy reached over the desk and put a gentle hand on his arm. “I just don’t want you to feel like you have to block out your grief.” Her gaze grew more searching as she continued, “We both know you have a habit of acting more okay than you really are.”

The exasperation Nick felt was swamped by Trudy’s genuine anxiety for his well-being. Besides, it was impossible for him to argue against her last point. “You’re right, but... for one thing, I’m getting better about that, and for another, I really don’t think that’s what’s going on with me. I’m actually okay.”

Though Trudy was nodding in apparent agreement, she asked, “And why is that?”

In order to give an honest answer, Nick was forced to give her question some thought. As difficult as it was to articulate his multi-layered feelings about his mother’s passing, he finally said, “I guess because it ended better... better than I could have hoped.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She died in peace, Trudy.”

“Because of what you found out at Fayette County Prison?”

“Yes.” Nick’s eyes shifted to his desktop as he briefly recalled his mother’s final days. “I think that was a lot of it, what I told her after I saw my father.”

“So you’re glad you went to see him?”

“Some good came of it,” he acknowledged reluctantly. “Yeah, I’m glad.” Nick looked up and caught Trudy’s fleeting smile. “And if you’re waiting for me to admit that I put it off for way too long—”

“I wasn’t going to say that!”

“Oh, you were thinking it.”

Though she shook her head in a silent rebuke, Trudy said, “I’m not going to argue about this with you, but I *am* glad you finally learned the truth.”

“Yeah, me too. There’s still a part of me that can hardly believe it. I never would have thought she had it in her to—well, you know.”

“It’s a hazard of our business, I think. We learn so much about reading people and about patterns of behavior that we sometimes forget that people can still surprise us.”

A sheepish smile crept across Nick’s face as he offered, “Meaning we can’t know *everything*—about anyone.”

“Exactly. You didn’t know the truth about your mother, I couldn’t hear the truth about Logan... and neither of us will ever really know what happened to Norah.”

Though seven months had passed, that memory was still too raw and bitter for Nick to accept any comfort on that score. “Oh, come on! I think we know *exactly* what happened to Norah.”

“Some. We know she met up with Alex, we know he killed her. But we sure don’t know what went on between those two events. Like why she met him—was she attempting to re-ignite the relationship, or was she perhaps seeking closure?” When Nick shook his head in vigorous disagreement, Trudy raised a placating hand. “Think about it. The most dangerous time for any victim is when they try to leave. It was true for your mom; maybe it was true for Norah.”

Nick forced himself to consider Trudy’s words and once again found himself unable to argue the point. “Maybe. At the very least, I guess you’re right. We’ll never know for sure.” Seeing Trudy’s triumphant smile, he joked, “If you’re done spreading your irrefutable wisdom, I really do have work to catch up on.”

Rather than budging, Trudy leaned back, insinuating herself more comfortably into his guest chair. She regarded him silently with a raised eyebrow for a second before saying in her more familiar, commanding tone, “Actually, since you’re so ready to get back to work—”

“I don’t like the sound of this already.”

Trudy completely ignored his interruption as she continued smoothly, “I have an assignment I’d like you to take on.”

Nick found it impossible to keep the wince off his face as he protested, “Not *another* client?”

“Nope. A summer intern. A green kid from the psych program at Pitt.”

“Sounds familiar,” Nick answered with a smirk. “Also sounds like a major pain in the ass.”

“They usually are,” Trudy agreed. “You’ll do it?”

“Ummm....”

While Nick was still furiously attempting to come up with a deflection, Trudy rose gracefully to her feet, saying, “Good. She starts Monday.”

“Monday!”

“What? That gives you three days, plus the weekend if you need it, to prepare.”

Nick laughed resignedly. “Plenty of time.”

“I knew you’d see it my way.”

As his boss reached the doorway, Nick called, “Trudy?” When she turned back towards him, he asked, “Some of these interns—they work out, don’t they?”

Her smile softened as Trudy answered firmly, “Yeah, one in particular did. He worked out pretty damn well.”

THAT Friday afternoon found Logan humming tunelessly as he searched for a spot in the downtown parking lot located on Commonwealth Place. Fully aware that it was after six p.m. and Nick was probably cooling his heels at their appointed meeting spot, Logan quickly pulled into the first vacant slot he found. He remembered to snag the heavy brown paper bag off the passenger’s seat before hopping out of the truck and making a beeline for his destination: the main entrance of Pittsburgh’s famous Point State Park.



Logan's general contentment was slowly building to elation at the thought of the evening he had planned for Nick, though a slight sense of foolishness marred his happiness. He couldn't quite shake the feeling that this was a lot of trouble for one guy to go to for another—not only closing up the shop early but spending thirteen dollars for parking and twenty-five more for the food and drinks lurking in his bag. Especially since Nick always seemed perfectly content with their usual Friday night plans: delivery pizza and Iron City beer wolfed down in front of ESPN.

*Sure never went to this kind of trouble for Linda*, Logan mused. As quickly as that reflection had come, Logan attempted to discard it. In their last few weeks of counseling, Trudy had told him several times that unless it was possible to channel his remorse into some positive action, feeling guilty about what he'd been unable to give Linda during their marriage didn't do her any good.

*'Sides, Linda sure seems to be movin' on with her life, taking up with that Bill fellow an' that*. With that thought, Logan managed to dodge the negativity trying to weigh him down as he darted around yet another construction barrier. He'd been warned that most of the park was still under renovation as part of a massive multi-year project to spruce the place up. The news hadn't deterred him, since Point State Park was a place that Nick had spoken of with wistful fondness several times. Logan hoped a visit to the park might do his uncharacteristically somber boyfriend some good.

The park was located at the very tip of Pittsburgh's so-called "Golden Triangle" and marked the spot where the Allegheny River joined with the Monongahela to form the Ohio River. In sight of this confluence, there was an iconic fountain, and Logan had initially suggested it as an obvious place to rendezvous. However, Nick had assured him that there would be an inevitable crush of people around that desirable spot on a balmy Friday night in May, and he'd proposed the reflecting pool as a better option.

There was still a decent-sized group of people in evidence when Logan arrived at the pool, but he quickly spotted Nick's dark head bent over his cell phone. He crept up on his man as quietly as possible before startling him from behind with a booming, "Can't leave that damn thing alone for a second, can you?"

Nick whirled around and bestowed a sparkling laugh and brilliant smile on Logan while retorting, “Just reading a text from Adam. What else have I got to do since my date was so damn late?”

“Twelve minutes ain’t so late,” Logan mumbled as Nick offered him a super-quick hug. When they broke apart, he heroically quelled the desperate urge to glance around at the neighboring strangers, but it turned out to be a wasted effort. As usual, his man read his mind when Logan least wanted him to.

“No one noticed.”

“Who cares if they did?”

“You do.” Before Logan could turn away, Nick continued, his voice warm and firm, “And it’s okay.”

Logan bit his lip as he looked into Nick’s guileless eyes. “You know, I don’t *wanna* care.”

“I know. And someday, you won’t—but these things take time.”

Dredging up a mock scowl, Logan growled, “This ain’t workin’ out at all.” He could barely disguise the need to smile at Nick’s sudden consternation.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I’m supposed to be comforting you.”

Nick shook his head as he landed a soft, retaliatory punch on Logan’s arm. “Is that what this is all about?” When Logan merely shrugged in reply, Nick demanded, “What’s in the bag?”

“You’ll find out,” Logan demurred. “Come on, show me around.” Without waiting for Nick’s response, he started for the interior of the park.

As Nick caught up with him, Logan proved he, too, could read his lover’s mind; he adroitly lifted the bag away just as Nick made a sudden lunge for it. “Stop bein’ so impatient,” he chided. Using an obvious distraction technique, he asked, “What’d Adam want?”

“He wants to know if we’re available for a softball game tomorrow afternoon.”

“Again? This so-called pick-up league of his sure picks up a lotta games.”

“Adam managed to arrange a game with some team from the pizza league. He says he’s sorry it’s so last minute, but it took him most of the day to work out the logistics.”

Since Logan had thoroughly enjoyed the few games he’d already played on the team, the news wasn’t actually unwelcome, but he couldn’t help but be amazed at the amount of time Adam spent arranging outings for his large group of friends, a group which had recently expanded to include Logan. “Geez, does that kid ever work? You know, the kind he gets paid for?”

“Oh, you know Adam....” Nick laughed ruefully, as though he’d suddenly realized that wasn’t quite true. “Well, you will. He works just enough to get by. Is that a no?”

Logan quickly weighed the possibilities before answering, “Guess we can fit in a game. That team will lose for sure without your pitching.” He was gratified at the obvious grin of pleasure his sincere compliment had elicited from Nick.

“And your hitting,” Nick drawled in return.

“Yep.” Logan felt no need to deny it. “But there’s a radiator job I gotta get done on a Jeep tomorrow morning.”

When they drew near an aging brick building, Nick interrupted their conversation to point out the Fort Pitt museum. While Logan was reading the historical marker at the front entrance, Nick asked, “You sure you got time for the Jeep *and* the game tomorrow?”

Logan peeped at Nick from under the brim of his Pirates cap, answering archly, “Sure—if I can get some help on the Jeep.”

Nick rubbed his hand across his lightly-stubbled jaw, giving the appearance that he was considering his options. “Sounds like you’re looking for some more free labor outta yours truly.”

Hearing no real heat in his boyfriend’s mild jab, Logan continued the good-natured repartee. “Ain’t that what you get outta me with them mechanic’s classes I’m doin’ for ACC?”

“Hey, now, ACC is a *charitable* institution.”

Logan's first response was a snicker as he easily retorted, "So? So is Crane's Auto Clinic."

Nick's voice got suddenly earnest when he asked, "But not for long, right?"

Happy to allay that concern, Logan answered quickly and honestly, "Nope, not for long."

"Good." Nick gestured towards the museum. "You wanta go in?"

"Nah, I wanta see this famous fountain of yours. It's over that way, ain't it?"

"It's not *my* fountain," Nick objected. He seemed to be struggling for words as he and Logan walked along the Monongahela River pathway towards the renowned feature. "Back when I first saw it, it seemed... I just liked the way... the idea..." Nick let his deeper thoughts trail off as he simply finished, "It's pretty impressive."

"You started coming here in college, right?" Logan confirmed, more to get Nick talking again than for information, since he'd heard the story several times.

"Those first few months, I came here a lot, yeah. And then whenever I was feeling down." Suddenly Nick stopped short and gave Logan a knowing glance. "Oh, like I am now. That's the point of all of this, huh?"

"Yeah." When Nick said nothing, Logan was worried that he'd made some sort of blunder. "Is that okay?" He breathed a sigh of relief when Nick smiled and clasped him on the arm.

"The park's always good, but bein' here with you is—well, it's great. Thanks."

"Ain't no big deal. I been wantin' to see this place, too, you know?" The next statement took some effort to force out of his mouth, not because it wasn't true, but because it was. "It's the symbol of my... my new hometown, ain't it?"

Logan's exertion was rewarded when Nick's smile turned into a blinding grin. "You bet. Looks a lot better when it ain't so torn up, though. I wonder if they'll still have the fireworks on the Fourth of July?"

“They have ’em here?”

“Yeah, a huge production every year.” Nick’s voice grew even more animated as he suggested, “We should bring the girls. They’ll go wild.”

The “we” in that statement loomed large for Logan, and he couldn’t let it go unremarked. “We? You’d wanta come, too?”

It was Nick’s turn to look uncertain. “Umm... yeah, if that’s okay. I know we haven’t done anything with ’em together, but I thought that might be a good way to... ease into things. What do you think?”

Logan thought that whenever the subject edged anywhere near telling his girls about him and Nick, his gut still dropped like a stone. However, he could see the sense in Krista and Meghan getting to know his boyfriend before that crucial moment arrived. After all, who could really resist Nick once they knew him? “Not a bad idea. I’ll have to see if I can get ’em then. Maybe Linda will be so busy plannin’ her wedding that she’ll be glad to have a weekend free.”

“Planning her wedding!” Nick exclaimed. “She just got engaged last week.”

“Linda don’t mess around. Krista says the wedding’s gonna be in November, right after the divorce is final.”

“Didn’t she just start dating this guy in *February*?”

Logan shrugged. “Like I said, that’s Linda’s way. ’Sides, she’s been workin’ with Bill for over a year.”

“You met him yet?”

“Nope. The girls say he’s a nice guy. That’s good enough for me.”

“So they’re okay with all of this?”

“Too soon to tell. That’s why I don’t wanta rush—”

“I know. I don’t wanta do that either. They’ve been through enough. I’d just like to get to know the most important people in your life.”

“Besides you, you mean?”

“Who are you and what have you done with my boyfriend?”

“Keep that shit up and you ain’t gonna get one of these sandwiches.”

“Ahh, so that’s what’s in that bag. What kind?”

“Black Angus steak and cheese.”

“Holy shit! From Primanti Brother’s?” When Logan nodded, Nick exclaimed, “You went to the Strip District on a Friday night? No wonder you were late.”

“Nah, I went to the one at Market Square, but it was still packed.”

“I’ll bet. Gotta say, though, a Primanti Brothers sandwich is worth the wait.” Nick grinned and nodded at the bag. “What else you got in there?”

“Some cold pop, brownies, and a blanket.”

“Why, Logan Crane, sounds like you got the makings of a picnic there.”

“Always knew you were a smart man.” Nothing more was said, as they had reached the fountain at last. Though the structure was just as impressive as he’d heard, Logan was more taken with the way his man looked as they examined it. Nick was not only smiling but seemed more relaxed than he’d been since his mom had died ten days earlier. They walked around the complete circumference of the fountain and then wandered over to the river walk.

Nick came to a halt and leaned on the railing, seeming transfixed by the sight of the rivers. Finally he turned to Logan and waved his hand towards the Allegheny. “I used to come here and think about how that is the same river that’s in Kittanning and Freeport where I grew up. When I felt scared and lost in this big city, I’d feel better thinking—” Abruptly he stopped, and when Logan looked at him inquiringly, Nick said, rather sheepishly, “Never mind, it’s stupid.”

“I don’t believe that. Come on, tell me.”

“I don’t know. It’s like it sort of followed me here... and was kind of....” Nick’s voice dropped to a near whisper. “Watching over me.”

Logan could see that Nick was anxiously awaiting his reaction. In truth he was slightly choked up thinking about how alone Nick had been back then and was glad he'd found comfort where he could. With no trace of humor, he said, "I like that. I like that idea a whole lot." Logan considered telling Nick that he understood the feeling, that he'd felt just as alone when he'd first started making those trips to Pittsburgh so many months ago. Instead he nodded at the Monongahela and said, "So that one must've followed me here from Elco and was watching over me."

The warm sparkle in Nick's eyes let Logan know he'd been heard—completely—even though Nick's only answer was, "Sure did."

Unconcerned with prying eyes, Logan moved close enough that he was shoulder-to-shoulder with Nick. As the two men stood at the railing together, facing out, Logan pointed at the westward-flowing Ohio River. "And how 'bout the Ohio? What's that one been doin'?"

"It ain't doin' anything, Logan. That's us."

This time Logan couldn't help but cock his head and give his man a quizzical stare. "The Ohio River is us?"

"Yep."

With a shrug and a shake of his head, Logan acquiesced. "If you say so." If Nick wanted them to be the goddamned Ohio River, it was fine with him. He gestured towards a grassy area not too far away. "Come on, I think you need some food."

As they neared the spot Logan had indicated, Nick bumped him with his shoulder and demanded, "You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

Logan put the bag down and tossed the blanket to Nick, answering, "You must be. You took up with me, didn't you?"

When they were comfortably settled and had started unwrapping their sandwiches, Nick said, "Smartest thing I ever did." Logan was slightly puzzled until Nick clarified, "Taking up with you—smartest thing I ever did."

"Son of a bitch, you did it again!"

"What?"

"Stole my line."

Nick's smile glowed white against the darkening sky. "I'll make it up to you tonight."

Logan shot him a wolfish grin as he whispered huskily, "Now you're *readin'* my mind again."

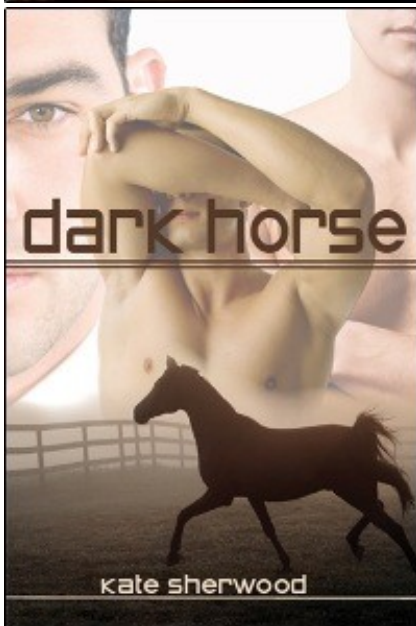
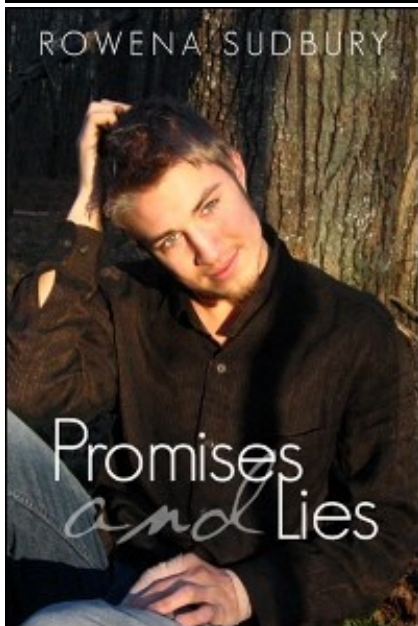
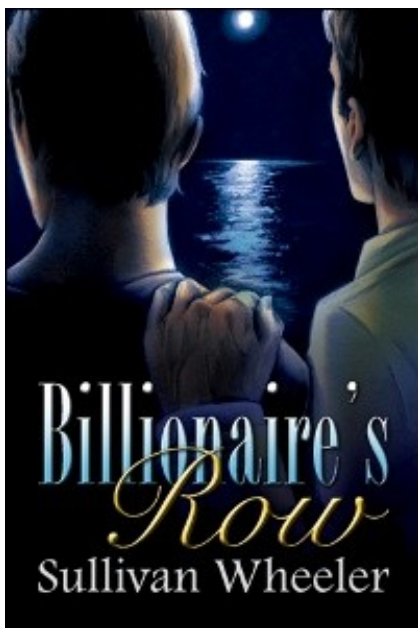
The talk turned to inconsequential matters: how big a job the Jeep would be tomorrow, Nick's plans for his summer intern, and the prospects of winning their upcoming softball game. Throughout their companionable chatter, there hovered in the back of Logan's mind the conviction that his plans for this night hadn't been foolish at all, and that any trouble he'd gone to had been rewarded many times over.

Maybe they were the goddamned Ohio River after all.



When not writing about compelling men falling in lust and love, FELICIA WATSON spends her time chasing after her brilliant, darling, and beloved dogs, is chased by her brilliant, darling, and beloved husband, bakes pastries that would put Martha Stewart to shame, and still finds time for her day job that isn't actually a day job—since she's one of the many unappreciated off-shift workers in the healthcare industry.

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