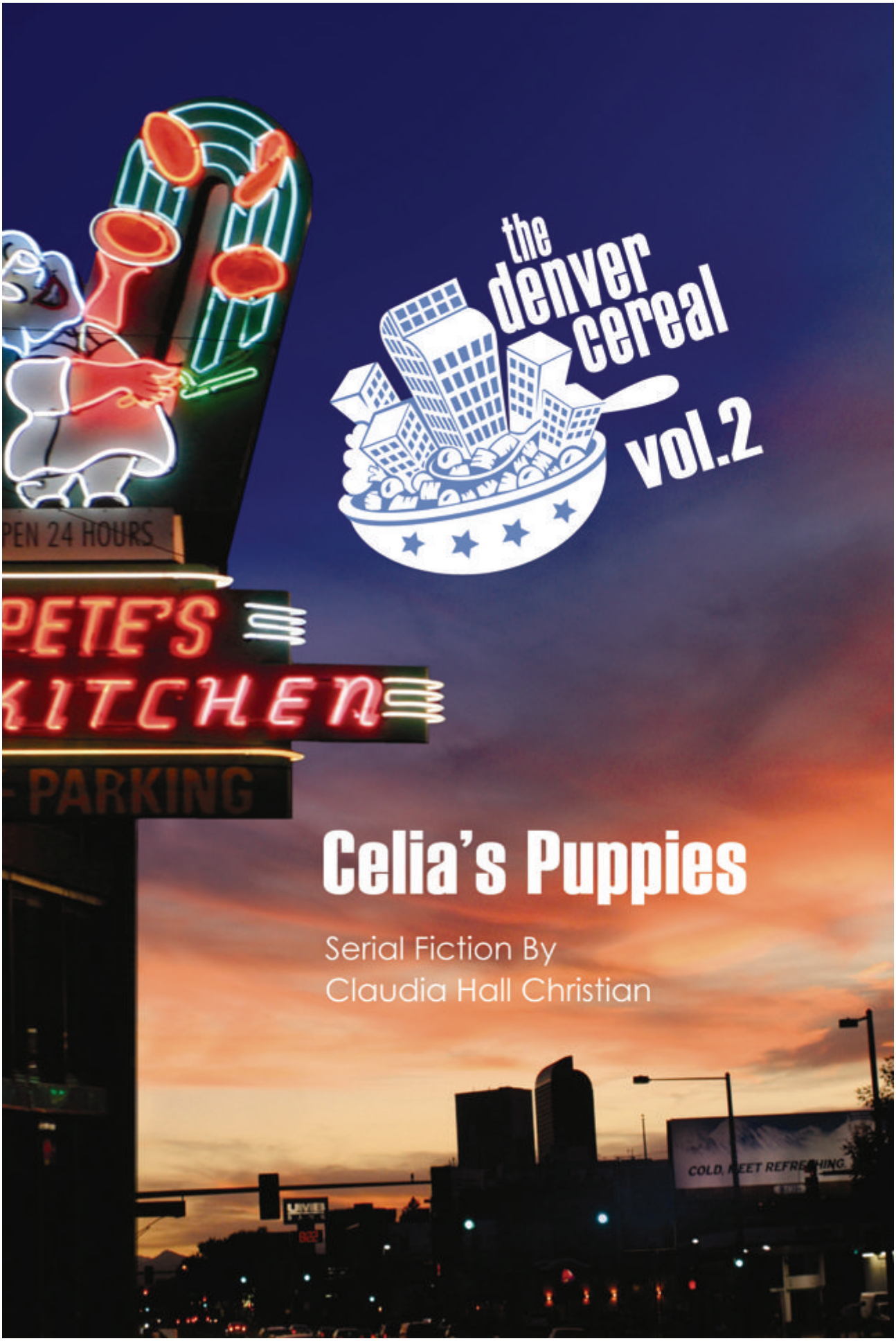

Celia's Puppies

Serial Fiction By
Claudia Hall Christian

Celia's Puppies

Denver Cereal, Volume Two

Also by

Claudia Hall Christian

THE DENVER CEREAL SERIAL FICTION:

The Denver Cereal
Celia's Puppies

ALEX THE FEY THRILLER SERIES:

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Learning to Stand (February, 2010)

Celia's Puppies

Denver Cereal, Volume Two

Claudia Hall Christian

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To Betty, Peggy, Chelly and Heather,
for your amazing support.
I'm bless by your friendship and love.
Just Do It!

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I want to thank everyone who reads daily, weekly and in book form.

Thank you for reading and caring.

What's happened so far?

Denver Cereal begins when Jillian Roper prepared to attend her ex-husband Trevor's engagement party in thigh-high leather boots. At the party, she is rescued from her own panic and insecurity by Jacob Marlowe. With the help of her friends, Jill manages to follow through with her plan and stuns the guest of honor.

A few weeks later, Jill, Jacob, and Katy, Jill's three-year old daughter, go on a non-date at the Denver Zoo. Katy is stung by a bee and goes into anaphylactic shock. Prepared by the psychic Delphie, Jacob manages to save Katy's life and get her to the hospital in time. He shocks Jill by paying the hospital bill.

While Katy is in the hospital, Jacob's actress sister, Valerie Lipson, leaves her wealthy producer fiancé to make the trip home to Denver. Valerie's estranged husband is Jill's older brother Mike Roper. Valerie and Mike decide to give their marriage another try at the same time Jill and Jacob get together as a couple.

When Jill is fired from her day job for taking a sick day to care for Katy, Jacob rescues her again. After crying in his car, she realizes she left Katy's medication inside the office. Jacob goes into the office to get the medication and to confront Jill's boss. In return, Jill's boss attacks Jacob with a 20-pound pipe wrench. Jacob is critically injured

Between life and death, Jacob meets his deceased mother, Celia. While Jacob struggles to survive, Jill is nearly raped by her ex-husband Trevor. Valerie's publicist sets up an interview for Valerie and Mike with Oprah. And Katy asks Jacob if he will be her "Daddy."

While conferring with Jacob in his hospital room, Aden Norsen, Jacob's second in command, reconnects with Jill's best friend, Sandy. Sandy and Aden work through their issues and to begin a relationship.

In the meantime, Mike panics at the idea he might not be good enough for Valerie's Hollywood lifestyle. In asking friends for help, he snares a lucrative modeling contract for Valerie and Jill. He is dressed, waxed and polished in style. The US Army gives Mike some assistance with his interview.

Denver Cereal winds down when Jacob finally returns from the hospital into Jill's arms.

Celia's Puppies begins the next day.

Chapter Twenty-Seven
Going to be a good day

Monday morning — 4:00 A..M.

Sitting on her meditation bolster, Delphie let out a breath and bowed forward. A half hour of prayer would have to do this morning. Not for the first time, Delphie longed for the days when she had the entire Castle to herself. But then, Sam wouldn't be asleep in her bed and the kids wouldn't be home. Things were better now.

She just needed more time to herself.

With care, she put out the candles but left her incense burning for Quan Yin. Smoothing her wild bottle-red hair in the mirror, she realized she was lying to herself.

She didn't need more time to herself.

She missed Celia.

Celia would love how things turned out. She would have teased Mike about his confusion over Valerie. Celia would spoil Katy to no end. Delphie could just see Celia in a corner of the dining room laughing with Jill and Sandy. Celia would revel in Jacob stepping into himself.

And Aden! Who would believe that drunken criminal Aden Norsen would turn into gentleman Aden?

Of course, Celia always believed in Aden, Blane, Jill and the others too. Delphie called them Celia's puppies. The people Celia collected like lost puppies. The ones whose lives really changed with loving support.

Delphie never had that kind of faith in people. Celia was special. She could see into people's souls and see what they could be. Not that she was always right. After all, Tiffanie's oldest daughter gave only misery in return for the resources and love she was given.

Moving toward the bed, Delphie sighed. She'd give up Sam to have Celia back. It would be hard because she cared deeply for Sam. But she'd do almost anything to have Celia back.

Delphie sat down on the bed next to Sam. He opened his eyes and touched her hair.

"It's a little after four," Delphie said. "You should work on getting up."

"I'm sorry our chaos has interrupted your meditation," Sam said. "You have clients today, don't you?"

Delphie gave a slight nod.

"Sad?" he asked. He sat up to hold her.

"Missing Celia."

Sam and Delphie held each other and cried. In each other's arms, neither was afraid or ashamed to express the depth of their loss.

"We need to get moving," Delphie said after a moment. "The kids are here and..."

She moved off the bed but Sam caught her hand.

"Everyone can take care of themselves, Delphie," Sam said. "I know it's exciting. It's exciting for me. But we are all we have now, Delphinium."

Delphie sniffed then sat back down. Sam wrapped himself around her. For a moment, she allowed herself to rest in his strength.

"Why don't you continue meditating?" Sam whispered. "I can make the coffee."

"But..."

"Your coffee is much better. You're right," Sam said. "Your clients take so much from you. I take so much from you. I'd like it if you took care of yourself. For me."

He touched her chin and she looked up at him.

"We've made it to the other side of nine years of garbage. I'd like to spend some years enjoying the peace and you."

“Me too,” Delphie said. “And the kids.”

“And their kids,” Sam said. “Our grandkids and great grandkids.”

"Your kids. Your grandkids. Your great grandkids."

"They've always been our kids. Yours, mine and Celia's kids." Sam kissed her cheek. "You must really miss her today."

Delphie gave another slight nod. She stood so he could get out of bed. He was halfway across the room before he turned.

“I’m deeply grateful for you, Delphinium. Thank you for the gift of this second life, and your love.”

Her eyes welled.

“Go on,” she said. “Delaying the inevitable...”

“Only creates another mess,” they said one of Celia’s sayings together. Laughing, Sam went into the bathroom.

Delphie returned to her bay window meditation nook. Relighting the candles, she noticed the paparazzi arriving for another day of stalking Valerie. A picture of Valerie’s husband was worth at least couple hundred thousand dollars to these scavengers. Not that they were going to get one.

Delphie smiled.

It was going to be a good day.

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Monday morning — 6:30 A.M.
Outside Chicago, IL

A small woman began jogging down the driveway of her estate home with a few of her dogs. No matter what her hectic schedule demanded, she loved the early morning quiet with her dogs. They settled into a steady jog down the driveway. Turning onto the quiet lane in front of her home, she heard a sound behind her.

Boots on the pavement.

Like something out of a movie, she could hear at least five people running in boots behind her. And they were fast.

Turning to look, she saw a group of short haired men wearing green t-shirts, digital fatigue pants and tactical boots running toward her. A man ran in the very middle of this pack.

As they approached, her dog pack skittered uncomfortably. These men were twice her size, fit and muscular. Her mind shifted to the horror stories her guests had told on her own talk show. Glancing around, she realized how alone, how vulnerable, she was.

The men caught up with her then slowed their pace to match hers.

"Would you mind if we take your dogs?" A fresh faced young man asked.

"I..."

"The General would like a private conversation," a second man said. "We won't harm them. Just take them so that you might talk."

Before she could say anything, the young men reached for the leashes. She was about to call her dogs back when she caught sight of the man in the center of the pack. Stunned, she stopped running.

Standing in the middle of the quiet lane, she gawked at the US Army General.

"Shall we continue?" the General asked.

Each young man took a dog. They separated out in to a large circle giving just enough space for a quiet conversation. When the General started running again, she joined his jogging pace.

"I wanted to have a private word with you about Michael Roper," the General said. "It's my understanding that you'll interview him this week."

"Yes, sir," she replied.

She cursed herself for not reviewing her schedule before leaving the house. In her mind, she flipped through her interviews and shows planned for this week.

Who was Michael Roper?

"He's going to tell you a story that… well, could win you a Pulitzer Prize."

"But it's not true?"

"No, ma'am. Michael Roper will tell you a true story and one that needs to be heard, especially at this time. However..."

The General fell silent. He seemed to be choosing his words very carefully.

"Sir?"

"I don't doubt that you'll notice a few details in Roper's story are… fuzzy."

"Fuzzy?"

"Unclear. I'm certain you'll notice he's covering something or possibly diverting your attention. He's not an experienced liar. We expect you might notice areas of ..."

"Sir?"

"Michael Roper is a true hero. He saved the lives of at least seven men and possibly more. He suffered unspeakable things during his service and he has never asked for acclaim or reward. In fact, he says he was just doing his job. His story is absolutely one hundred percent true, even if the details are a little muddy."
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"You're asking me to broadcast untruths?" Her voice betrayed her indignation.

The General stopped running. The group of men and dogs stopped running. A bird's call broke the sudden silence in the lane. He turned to look at her.

"No, I am asking you to treat a true hero with the respect he deserves. He's not a public speaker or even a very good poker player. He's too straight of a guy. His story is true and deserves to be heard."

"And these details?"

"Are sensitive."

"You're saying he's been coached. I'll notice the coaching because he's such a straight forward guy."

The General started running again. They ran in silence while she processed his request.

"I won't throw national security at you. However I would not ask if people's lives were not at stake," he said. "We can pull the interview. There was a suggestion to disrupt the satellite feed during your transmission of the show. A few well placed individuals, including myself, would like the world to hear Roper's story."

"With the details removed?"

"With a few details removed."

"And the satellite feed? I don't want to interview some guy and have it not go out."

"A few high level people have used their authority to allow the interview with…"

"A few details removed." She finished his sentence.

"Exactly. These people will be with Roper when you do the interview. You might notice them, but probably not."

"If I do this, will you come on my show?" she asked. "Talk about the war? The soldiers?"

"You've asked before."

"I've asked for five years," she said.

"Treat Roper with the respect he deserves and I'll seriously consider it."

She nodded.

"I need to get back to the desert," the General said. "Do we have an agreement?"

"Yes, sir," she said.

The General gave a low whistle and the soldiers closed the circle. Within moments, she held the leashes of her dogs. Before they were out of earshot she shouted:

"Sir?"

The General stopped running and turned in her direction.

"Who is Michael Roper?" she yelled.

"He's married to Valerie Lipson," he said. Laughing, he added, "Enjoy your Pulitzer."

The men picked up the pace. Within moments, she was alone on the quiet lane. She ran for another mile then turned for home. Arriving home, her dog trainer took the dogs to feed and water them. She was about to head upstairs when she saw something slip under her front door.

Picking it up, she ripped open the manila envelope to find a single sheet of paper. Near the bottom, scrawled in a man's handwriting, was a note that said: 'For background on Roper'. The sheet contained ten names, home phone numbers and private email addresses of top level people in government or retired military. There was even a curator at the Denver Art Museum. One name was someone she had begged to interview. More than once.

Looks like Valerie Lipson's secret husband was more interesting than she thought.

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Monday morning — 8:12 A.M.

"Ouch! Shit, Blane," Jacob said. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

Blane was inserting acupuncture needles around Jacob's sutures. When he wasn't working as Jacob's assistant, Blane was a student at the Colorado School of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Three years into a Chinese Medical Doctor
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degree, he had spent the last week researching the right herbs, salves and points to accelerate Jacob's healing. Not quite fluent in Chinese, yet, Blane was a star pupil.

"Ya 'cuz," Blane said with the mock Hispanic accent he used to drive Jacob crazy. "Dis guy, he said to try dis thing and I figured..."

"This hurts," Jacob said.

"You could just take your pain medication," Aden said.

"Fuck you too," Jacob said to Aden.

Aden laughed at Jacob. They were sitting in a small office at the Castle. They had spent the morning making sure every site manager had what he or she needed to get the job done today. Lipson Construction was humming like a well oiled engine.

Except for its President, Jacob Marlowe.

Although healing, his week old shoulder injury, and multiple surgeries, left him at half his capacity. Blane thought acupuncture might help accelerate his healing. Or at least ease some of the desperate pain.

"Hi," Jill said. She poked her head in the door. "Am I interrupting?"

"Not if you've heard a few swear words before," Aden said. He opened the door for Jill. "I'm going to check on my kids. I'll be back in a few."

"Katy wanted to say 'good-bye' before she went to school," Jill said. She came into the room carrying three year old, Katy, on her hip. Pointing to the hundreds of needles in Jacob's shoulder and neck, she added, "Oooh, that doesn't look good."

"Mommy? He's touching the white stuff," Katy said.

"The gauze?" Jill asked.

"Uh huh. Uncle Blane? Do you know what you're doing?"

"Good question," Jacob said.

"Hi sweetie," Blane said. He came around the chair to kiss Katy on the cheek. "I'm trying to help your..."

"Daddy," Jacob said.

Blane beamed like the Cheshire Cat. He had been after Jacob about Katy since Trevor abandoned them. He knew what it was like to be abandoned. And he didn't want anything bad to happen to sweet Katy.

"I'm helping your Daddy get better."

"My Daddy needs help," Katy said.

"Yes, he does," Jacob said.

Jacob held his left arm out and Jill set Katy in his lap. Katy gently hugged him. She kissed his cheek.

"I have to go to school," Katy said.

"See you this afternoon," Jacob said.

Holding Jill's hand, Katy was almost to the door when she ran back. She climbed onto Jacob's lap then whispered in his ear. Jacob flushed, held her close then kissed her cheek. She jumped off his lap and ran to Jill. Jill picked her up. Katy waved 'good-bye' before Jill closed the door behind them.

"What was that?" Blane asked. He returned to putting needles into Jacob.

"She said she loved me." Jacob's eyes filled. "It's like a dream."

"I told you. She's a great kid," Blane said. "Ok, one more. That should..."

Jacob felt a whoosh of relief. His pain had all but vanished.

"Wow."

"They're both great girls," Blane said. "You're a lucky son of a bitch."

"I know. I keep thinking I'll wake up and…," Jacob said. "God, Blane, that's great."

"We'll keep them in for twenty minutes or so," Blane said. "Then we'll do it again this afternoon. When we can, we'll start some of the salves on those scars."

"Thanks, Blane. Really."

"Well, shit, Jacob," Blane said. "You've paid for my school, taken care of me when I'm sick... This is the least I can do."

"You're family," Jacob said.

"Speaking of family," Blane said, "your step-sister is waiting to see you. Sorry, I told her it would be a while. Then I forgot her."

"Which step-sister?"

"Honey. The awful one is in Thailand. I made sure she and that tool got on the plane myself," Blane said. His face flushed bright red with rage. "Bitch. Can you believe..."

"Getting angry only makes you sick." Jacob put his hand on Blane's forearm. "Did Dad give you the divorce papers?"

"No, I have them," Aden said coming back into the room. "No anger, Blane."

Blane nodded. He walked to the window to calm down. The Hepatitis C virus had injured his liver so that every time he got enraged, he got very sick.

"Promise me that's going to happen for me," Blane said. "What you have with Jill… what Aden has with Sandy… that's going to happen for me."

"Celia said when you were better, you would find love," Jacob said.

"And you?"

"What would I know?" Jacob shrugged as if he didn't know what Blane was talking about.

"Fuck you Jacob Marlowe," Blane said. "You have this gift and you won't share it?"

"Sorry, force of habit," Jacob said. "I don't know how to describe what I see. I see you with a family that is your family. Children, love, and very happy. But I also see you not sick. No HIV. No Hep C. Nothing."

"So it will happen?" Blane said.

Aden put his hand on Blane's shoulder. Blane turned to look at him.

"He's saying you will find love and more," Aden said. "But first, we have to get you well. No anger."

Blane nodded his head.

"Family problem number one? Honey Lipson. Or family problem number two? Your father's ridiculous divorce papers," Blane asked.

"Is Dad still here?" Jacob asked.

"I'll get him," Blane said. "Should I get Honey?"

"Let's talk to her when Dad's here," Jacob said. "Is she..."

"She's been crying," Blane said. "She seems very upset."

"Family problem number one." Jacob nodded.

"Coming up," Blane said.

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Coming back from dropping Katy off, Jill pressed open the side door. The Castle buzzed with activity and various Lipson employees. She looked longingly at the apartment door, but turned into the Castle living room. She was supposed to...

She stopped walking. She had no idea what she was supposed to do. Time for a mental list.

Laundry first. Move out? She grimaced. She and Jacob had argued about it last night and this morning. She thought she should return to her apartment. Jacob begged her to stay.

Jill sighed.

Groceries? No, they have groceries delivered. Val asked her to... God, rich people live in some foreign land. Who knew that groceries could be delivered?

List of groceries! That's right! Val asked her to make a grocery list.
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She was meeting Sandy at her condo in… Jill glanced at her watch. She was meeting Sandy in three hours for a girl's day of hair styling and...

"Excuse me," a woman wearing inexpensive but professional dress said. "Are you Jill? Jillian Roper?"

"I am," Jill said.

Lawyer? No, Jacob's lawyers were expensive. They'd wear better shoes.

"Oh great. Mr. Marlowe said you were coming back..."

"Here I am," Jill said. Jill smiled at the woman.

The woman's voice was professional but a little rude. Maybe she was a lawyer.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Patti," the woman said. "I work in Human Resources at Lipson Construction? Mr. Marlowe has some papers for you to sign."

"Papers?"

"Insurance papers? For you and Katherine?"

"Insurance?"

The woman blinked, blushed, and then said, "You have no idea what I'm talking about or who I am."

Jill shook her head.

Patti laughed. She put her hand on Jill's arm.

"We had this idea... Mr. Marlowe's never even dated anyone," Patti said. "Then all of a sudden, there's a girl and child and well... When Blane told us to get this together, well, we thought..."

"Gold digger?" Jill asked.

"Please don't tell him. He'll be furious," Patti said. "Is he really adopting your daughter?"

"He wants to," Jill said.

"He's great with kids. He's like an uncle to all the Lipson kids. He stops by the school to read to them at least once a week. Will Katy go to the school?"

"What school?"

"Let's start by getting these papers signed."

"Insurance?"

"Health, dental, life, extended care," Patti said. "For you and Katherine."

Patti looked at Jill's confused face then smiled.

"Do you have a cell phone?"

"A cell phone?"

"Mr. Marlowe has a new phone for you," Patti said. "Come on. I'll explain everything."

~~~~~~~~

Monday morning — 9 A.M.

"You wanted to see me?" Jacob asked.

In an attempt to look like he was working, he sat behind a desk. The acupuncture needles had zonked him out. Aden sat in a chair next to him and Blane stood behind him. Sam Lipson stood to the side of the desk. If Jacob fell over, he was pretty sure one of them would catch him.

"You have NO RIGHT! NO RIGHT at all," Honey said. She stood in front of the desk. "I… I..."

Honey dropped back into a chair to cry. Even though she looked like her mother and older sister, Honey Lipson was a totally different creature. There was no air or pretense about her. She wore blue jeans, work boots and a button down blue shirt with "Lipson Construction" stitched on the pocket. Her white blond hair was pulled back in a simple pony tail.

"What happened?" Sam put his hand on her shoulder. "Honey, we don't have any idea what's going on. Can you tell us?"

"Mom told us last night… the whole thing… about the trusts, I mean." She popped to her feet and loomed over the
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desk. “And I don’t give a CRAP about any trust. I don’t want your money. And just because my father is in prison and my mother is an idiot and my sister is a jerk. None of that has anything to do with me. You can’t FIRE ME because of them!”

“Fire you?” Jacob asked. “Who fired you?”

“YOU DID,” Honey screamed. “And it’s so UNFAIR. I’ve worked really hard and I’m really good on the roads. Everyone likes me. AND I’M NOT GIVING THE NAME BACK.”

She crossed her arms and plopped back down in the chair.

“Dad?” Jacob asked. Sam shook his head.

“Aden?” Jacob asked.

Aden shrugged. Jacob knew Aden was against hiring Honey when she graduated from high school. But Honey had proved to be a great employee. She worked hard, never complained and had become integral part of a road team. Jacob squinted his eyes at Aden to ask if Aden had fired her while Jacob was in the hospital. Aden shook his head.

“Blane?”

Jacob turned to see Blane looking at Honey as if she was insane. Blane had such bad experiences with the step-whore that he refused to speak to Honey.

“Honey, we don’t have any idea what’s going on,” Jacob said. “This is my first day back. Can you slow down and tell us what’s going on?”

“Oh,” Honey said. “You don’t?”

The men shook their heads at her.

“Oh,” Honey said again. “I’m still not giving the name back. Sam’s the only Dad I ever had.”

“Ok, we have that in common,” Jacob said. “He’s the only Dad I’ve ever had too.”

Honey gave Jacob a watery smile.

“What happened today, Honey?” Sam asked. “You started to tell us. Your Mom told you about the trusts last night. And...”

“I was asked to report to Human Resources. I figured I was getting fired, so I just came here.” The young woman stuck her chin out in stubborn defiance. “You want to fire me, you have to do it to my face.”

“OH SHIT!” Blane exclaimed. Flipping through stack of paper, he pulled out a paper clipped set from the stack. He set the packet in front of Jacob. “Sorry Jake. It’s in the stack of papers to sign.”

“We haven’t figured out how to sign the papers yet.” Blane gave Honey a weak smile. “He can’t hold a pen and...”

Jacob looked at the papers.

“You’ve been approved for the scholarship program, Honey.” Jacob flipped through the papers. “Wow, your high school grades are excellent. I had no idea you did so well.”

“Your mom said, ‘Every day, we must work hard, take every opportunity and suck the marrow out of life’,” Honey said. “I do that. Every day. Suck the marrow. But I don’t actually suck marrow out of bones. I tried that? And it was kind of gross.”

“Yeah, it’s gross.” Jacob wrinkled his nose. Aden and Blane nodded as if they also had tried marrow sucking. “You know how this works?”

Honey shook her head.

“I just want to go to college. And I want to pay for it myself. I mean, Mom said Dad would pay for it, but I want to do it myself. But I can’t afford it, so I applied for the scholarship. That’s like doing it yourself, isn’t it?”

“Very much so,” Aden said. “You have to work full time and go to school. I mean, it’s a lot but that’s how I paid for college and my MBA.”

“Me too,” Blane said. “Only Jake had the free ride.”

“You have to pay for the first semester.” Jacob kept talking as a way of ignoring Blane’s comment as the ride never felt very free. “You can take whatever classes you want. If your grades are good, like over a B, we reimburse you.”

“Oh,” Honey said. “I can’t pay for the first semester. I had to replace my car and my apartment...”

"I'll give you the money," Sam said.

"If you give me money, then, you'll have to give money to..."

"I'll do it," Valerie said. She was standing in the doorway. "I'll give you the money. And I'm okay if you keep the name."

Honey jumped to her feet. Valerie had never spoken to her. In fact, she hadn't ever been in the same room as her famous actress step-sister.

"And he's the only Dad I've ever had too." Val nodded. Walking forward, she held her hand out. "I'm Valerie Lipson."

Honey shook Valerie's hand.

"Thanks," Honey said.

"You're a part of the Lipson family," Val said. "I… I'm glad to meet you..."

Honey beamed at Valerie.

"Finally," Sam said.

Chapter Twenty-Eight
A huge find

Monday morning — 9:20 A.M.

In her own bed, Sandy rolled onto her back and stretched. Aden had brought her home before he went to work at five that morning. Sandy climbed the stairs, then crawled into bed with Cleo curled up next to her. She slept like a log until her alarm went off.

Time to get up.

She wandered through her condo apartment to the kitchen. After the last passion filled nights, coffee was definitely in order. She started brewing a pot.

On her way to the bathroom, Sandy pressed the play button on her blinking answering machine. Hearing her mother's voice, she decided to shower. She was meeting Aden at the gym at 10:30 after he dropped his kids off at their therapy appointment. Sandy washed, moisturized, and blew dry her hair. She was slipping on her bathrobe when her mother's voice stopped talking on the answering machine. Sandy flipped the machine off on her way back to the kitchen.

Taking a long drink of coffee, Sandy leaned against the kitchen counter to wait for her mother to call on her ten o'clock break.

"Hi Mom." Sandy answered the call on the first ring.

"Sandy!" Her mother exclaimed as if they hadn't spoken in years. "How are you?"

"I'm good, Mom. How are you?"

"Worried, dear. About you," her mother said. "I tried to call you this weekend..."

"I just got your messages," Sandy said.

"Clogged up your machine again," her mother chuckled.

Sandy let the silence lag. Her mother only called for specific reasons. If she waited, her mother would get around to what she wanted.

"Elsa called." Her mother's voice was breezy, but the phone line echoed a chorus of 'Sandy screwed up.' "She said she saw you with a man at the Avenue Grill on Friday night. Do you have a new boyfriend?"

"Yep."

"Well, Elsa said he was older than you and seemed to have a lot of money – nice watch, fancy car, paid cash. She said she walked by your table three times. She wanted to meet the man but you never even looked up."

"I don't remember her."

Sandy took a drink of coffee. Elsa was her mother's oldest and nosiest friend. Who knows if Elsa actually saw Sandy or if she heard it from someone else who heard it from someone who...

"Elsa said he was holding your hand. Even through dinner! Holding your hand. She thought you were already… intimate with that man. You know, Sandy, a man like that only dates young girls for one thing."

"What's that, Mom?"

"You haven't let him… touch you already have you?"

Sandy didn't respond.

"Oh Sandy." Her mother's voice dripped with disappointment. "A man like that... You have to string him along. You don't want to end up like Jill do you?"

"Jill's a wonderful person. I wouldn't mind being exactly like Jill."

"You know what I mean." Her mother's voice dropped to a whisper. "Alone with a child."

"Oh. You mean like you?"

"Sandra. You are no match for a wealthy older man. He's going to use you and dump you."

"Maybe I'll use him, Mom. I was thinking of spending all his money then dumping him."

"You are not very funny, young lady. What does he do?"

"He helps run a company," Sandy said.

"That man is way out of your league." Her mother's voice was conclusive. "Men like that don't marry girls like you."

"Maybe I don't want to get married."

"Oh Sandy." Her mother's sorrow came through the phone lines. "How will you ever have children?"

"The usual way, I suppose. Sorry, Mom, I've got to go."

"I saw your father last week."

"My father's dead, Mom."

"Your real father, Sandra."

"Why do you interact with him at all, Mother?"

"I can't help that he banks at my branch. Although he doesn't have much money." Her mother sighed.

"How do you know that, Mom?"

"He waited to come up to my teller window. He told me that you won't even speak to him. He said he saw you at King Soopers and you walked the other way."

"And?"

"Sandy… honey, you can't blame a man for being an alcoholic." Her mother gave another exaggerated sigh. "Gosh, your father hurt me more than you and I've moved on. I've forgiven him. You need to..."

"Sorry Mom. I'm going to be late. See you Friday for a color?"

"Yes, honey. I get so worried about you. And with this new man..."

"Remember, I have that party on Friday," Sandy said. "You have to come before work."

"The party at Jacob Marlowe's house. Is Jill still dating that gay boy?"

"Jill is dating Jacob," Sandy said.

"Poor Jill. I guess a girl's got to do what a girl's got to do to feed her child," Sandy's mother said. "I just don't want you to be in that position, Sandy."

"Okay Mom. Love you. See you Friday morning."

"Oh, love you, Sandy."

Sandy hung up the phone. In years past, she might have been angry about the conversation. Today, she just felt sad. Not for herself. No. Outside of the surprised assault of gripping pain, Sandy never felt much of anything for herself. She felt sorry for her mother.

Grateful too.

Her mother taught her independence, gave her siblings to love and more than anything married her step-dad, her only real parent. He loved her, understood her, and protected her from awful, unspeakable things. Before he died, he even bought this condo for her.

When Jill told her that Jacob was adopting Katy, she reminded Jill of what her step-dad used to say. Souls find each other. Trevor never liked Katy much. Maybe Jacob was supposed to be Katy's father. Just like her step-dad believed that he was supposed to be Sandy's father.

Sandy couldn't be too mad at her mother.

Finishing her coffee, she straightened the bed, cleaned Cleo's cat box then got dressed for the gym.

And Aden.

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Monday morning – 9:3O A.M.

"Um, okay. You want to film this?"
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"Yes, Dr. Lerner," the producer said. "We're taping for Oprah. She'd like you to show the painting and tell us how you found it."

"Okay, yeah, I got a call last night," Adam Lerner said. A trim, handsome man, he looked more like a rock climber than a curator of the Lab at the Denver Museum of Art.

"Can you stand next to the painting?" the camera man asked.

"Um, sure." Adam moved next to an oil painting.

"Okay, go ahead," the camera man said.

"It's a funny kind of thing," Adam said. "Museum curators can make their entire careers by finding a great painting. I'm pretty young to be a curator. And I've been a curator for a long time. Finding a great work of art, like this, would solidify my career. Not that I'm unhappy in my career."

"You're doing great," the producer said. "Just tell us the story."

"At the same time, artists want their work to hang in museums. Most artists believe they've created great works of art."

"When they haven't?"

"Mostly? No. You can see there's this collision of forces. The artist and the museum curator act in this kind of dance… of greatness."

Adam took a breath. Over the last five years, he prepared for what he would say when someone finally asked and Mike was ready to tell. He hoped he didn't screw it up.

"Anyway, I received a call from Senator Patrick Hargreaves about a painting. Usually, I don't respond to 'come see my painting' requests because..."

"There are so many?"

"Well, yeah. And we don't have a permanent collection at the Lab. They got my name from someone who knew me or met me. Anyway, the Senator said the painting was a gift from a local artist and he felt it was too important to keep in one collection. He wanted to donate it to the museum. Would I come for dinner? Please bring your wife. Oh, and the artist would like to remain anonymous. Of course, I was suspicious. But can you really say no to a Senator who invites you to his house for dinner? I couldn't."

Adam shook his head.

"Please continue."

"I know they fed me dinner, and I'm certain it was wonderful. My wife went with me. I remember that. But honestly, when I saw this painting... I don't really remember anything else. I wanted to hide it, protect it… like a naked child in the freezing rain..."

"And?"

"No one could believe we had what we had. We did all the tests – paint, x-ray, whatever. Was it a copy of a masterpiece? A fake? No, it was a new painter. This painting is a huge find. A real masterpiece. Then we asked to meet the artist. We had to force their hand as the artist didn't want to talk to us."

"Michael Roper."

"If you say so," Adam said. "All I can tell you is that a really amazing human being painted this piece and gifted it to the museum… through me. It's considered to be one of America's great masterpieces. We've received offers to buy it from major museums – New York, Smithsonian... There's no way we're selling it. This painting belongs to the people of Denver and their Museum."

"Is there anything else you can tell us?"

"He's painted others."

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Monday morning — 10 A.M.

Jacob leaned forward to look at Jill. She was sitting against the back of the couch holding her cup of coffee. She
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hadn't said much since coming to get him for his ten o'clock break. He wondered if she was irritated that he wasn't sleeping as the doctor ordered. She didn't look irritated. Mostly she looked lost in thought.

But how would he know if she looked irritated or not? To him, her every expression was beautiful.

"We weren't always wealthy," Jacob said.

"What?"

"You asked me why I had so much money if I don't care about it at all." He paused. "Listen, I can imagine how strange it must be for you. Everything is different for you, for Katy and for me."

"But not bad," Jill said. "I'm not moving back to the apartment because I'm unhappy or anything's bad. I just feel... I don't know… like I should. I mean, you said it last night, we don't really know each other."

Jacob nodded.

"I'd like you to stay," he said. "Not as my nursemaid. I like your company. I like being in the same room with you, under the same roof. I think everyone does. How can I get to know you better if you're somewhere else?"

Jill opened her mouth to respond then closed it.

"You started to tell me about making the money."

"Right." He noticed her diversion but didn't want to fight it. "We lived in a little apartment until I was about five years old. Two bedrooms. Val and I shared a room. My parents worked. A lot. Val and I spent all our time either at school or with Delphie. I didn't know we were poor. I guess we had each other."

"What happened?" Jill asked.

"A bunch of stuff," Jacob said. "In building DIA, priority bidding was given to women owned businesses. My mother owned a majority share of Lipson Construction because she put up the Marlowe mine as equity to start the company. Lipson got the work. They did such a good job at DIA that when they closed Lowry Air Force base, we got that work too. Then they closed the old airport... Just before she died, my Mom reformulated the company by creating the board of directors, and we got to work on the T-Rex project. By the time she died, the company was worth a lot of money."

"But didn't you live in a big house in Crestmoor before..."

"My Dad had an inheritance from his Dad and his brother. It was hung up in litigation... I don't remember why. Something stupid. He got the money when I was four. He bought the house. He wanted the best for my Mom and he thought Crestmoor was the best. She hated that house, but never told him until last year of her life. That's how they were — kind to a fault to each other. Always doing what they thought the other wanted regardless."

Jill nodded.

"Anyway, my point is that all of a sudden, I had all this money. I didn't know what to do with it," Jacob said. "In fact, I planned to give it all away and only spend what I earned myself. Then my Dad came to Maine and... Well, here I am. Outside of this place, I don't really spend the money."

Tucking her leg under her, Jill turned to look at him.

"We weren't always poor," Jill said. "Only after our parents died. I don't know what they were thinking. I have more life insurance than they did and they had five kids. I guess they thought they'd live forever."

"It must have been a hard transition," Jacob said.

"I think Megan and Mike really suffered. They gave up their dreams for us," Jill said. "If you don't spend any money, how'd you get the car?"

"I bought you the car that Jennifer Garner drives. Or Mike said Jennifer Garner drives that car." Jacob shrugged. "It seemed perfect for you and Katy."

"It is perfect," Jill said. "I love it. So does Katy. But I don't mean that car."

"Which car?"

"The Aston Martin."

"Oh, isn't that funny? It's the car James Bond drives." He laughed. "It's actually Val's. It was a gift from that producer guy, Kapanski. Val was here with Mike. She tells everyone she 'retreats' in Colorado when really she's here with Mike.

Producer boy missed her so much he 'sent a car for her.' Mike went ballistic. I don't think Val's driven it. It had like a hundred miles on it."

"It's totaled?"

"Yep," Jacob said. "I doubt Val will replace it."

"Why did you drive it?"

"I thought I was going to die," Jacob said. "I figured if I was going to die, I should at least drive the stupid expensive car and wear the stupid expensive suit. I'd never worn the suit before either. Val sent it to me so I could go to that premier. The one we missed last Friday night."

"You thought you were going to die? And you still came to get me?"

Jacob nodded.

"Why?"

Jacob took her hand in his.

"I think I said this in the car. You're the very best thing that's ever happened to me. Whether it's one day or a life time, nothing's going to change that fact."

"How can you be so sure?" Jill asked

Jacob shrugged.

"I know my heart," he said. "I never thanked you for saving my life."

Jill blushed.

"Your compression dressing is the reason I didn't die," he said. "Thank you for the chance to sit here on this couch with you... It's wonderful."

"You're welcome. Thank you for the dress contract and the diamonds and adopting my daughter and..."

"Most of that doesn't have anything to do with me," Jacob said. "But I know, it's overwhelming."

"It's overwhelming," Jill said. "I'm caught between taking a break and wanting more."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I miss my things. I know they aren't much but they are mine. My things. My space. My life. I'm surrounded by your life and your things. They're nicer than mine. Well, not this couch, but you know what I mean. And…"

Jill moved so her face was less than an inch from Jacob's.

"I've never felt this way. I want more of you."

She kissed his lips.

"More touching."

She slipped his hand under her blouse then kissed him.

"More holding."

She shivered as his fingers caressed her nipple. She kissed him again.

"More talking."

She gave him another kiss.

"More love."

She flopped back on the couch.

"Then I feel just stupid and crazy."

"Why?" he asked. "I want all of that too."

"Well, you're recovering and should sleep," she said.

"Uh, first one to the bed?" he asked.

He stood up then he fell to his knees. Jill screamed then laughed. He held up a large square cut diamond ring in his left hand. Clearly an antique, the center diamond was surrounded by a hundred light blue aquamarine stones in an ornate setting.

"Will you marry me, Jill?"

Jill's hands cupped his face.

"Oh put it away," a woman's voice came from the stairwell to the Castle. "Shit. I have the worst timing. You're not naked are you?"

Jill looked up to see a gorgeous woman with long auburn hair and large blue eyes come across the apartment. She looked like a model or an actress, but her designer dress and Kenneth Cole shoes were too understated and professional. The woman looked familiar but Jill couldn't place her.

"Get up, lover boy," the woman said. "Hi Jill."

"Samantha, you think I could have a minute?" Jacob's face registered irritation and shock. "Maybe a knock?"

When the woman turned, she winked at Jill. And Jill realized that this was Samantha Hargreaves, Alex and Max's older sister. Max told her yesterday that Samantha had just moved back from Washington DC. She was a criminal defense attorney and Valerie Lipson's best friend.

"The Denver Police are here to see you, Jakey. They don't want to wait a minute."

Chapter Twenty-nine
Mess with one...

"I'm sorry," Jacob said. "I'm not sure what you're saying."

"Mr. Ashforth states that you attacked him in his office. He states…," the Denver Police Detective read from a piece of paper. "He states that you threatened his children and wife. He claims you were out of control, wild eyed, and so violent that he felt he must stop you before you reached your car."

"Or what?" Jacob asked.

Jacob looked over to at his lawyer, Samantha Hargreaves. She shook her head slightly as if this was to be expected.

"It's our understanding that you have a black belt in a martial art and certainly we know you are wealthy. He states that he felt you were a danger to his family and the community."

"In the first place," Samantha said, "a black belt doesn't mean anything. I have a couple myself. Unless you can prove that my client was an immediate danger to specific persons, you have to let this drop. Jacob Marlowe was attacked by Mr. Ashforth, from behind I might add, after he terminated his contract with Ashforth Pipe Supply. You should be prosecuting Mr. Ashforth, not vice versa."

"This has become a major departmental situation, Ms. Hargreaves. Mr. Ashforth was wounded by two Denver Police Officers," the police detective said. "These officers are currently suspended from duty while we investigate. It's important that we pursue every line of inquiry."

"He was shot?"

"Yes, Mr. Marlowe," the detective said.

"I don't remember any of that," Jacob said.

"Let's start with why you went down there," the detective said.

"A woman called to say that my friend, Jill, had been thrown out of a building. I took her card."

Jacob tilted his head as if he was trying to remember what happened to the card. Samantha touched his arm then gave the detective a business card.

"You went to help your fiancé."

"She was just my friend then," Jacob said. "We'd been out once."

"And now she's your fiancée?"

"She hasn't said 'yes'," Jacob smiled. "But I'm hopeful."

"That's fast," the detective said. "It's only been a week."

"I… I think when you almost die, certain things become very clear," Jacob said. "I'm lucky to be alive, Sergeant."

"You went to help your friend..."

"Right. Jill told me what happened. Even though she had sick and vacation time, she was fired for taking a day off to be with her sick daughter."

"Katherine." The detective flipped some pages. "Katherine had a bad reaction to a bee sting?"

"Yes." Jacob said. "Jill was thrown out of the office. She showed me a bruise on her elbow where Mr. Ashforth grabbed her arm."

"What's your relationship with Ashforth?" the detective asked.

"Ashforth was one of our pipe suppliers. We'd been having trouble with them for about six months. Their product quality had deteriorated and their service was awful. Our guys in supply alerted me to possible difficulties. According to my assistant, Blane, they met with Mr. Ashforth a couple of times. I hadn't made the decision yet to terminate our relationship because..."

"Your fiancé worked there," the detective finished his statement. "We've spoken with Blane and your supply team.

They said the same thing. They said they had already found a new supplier but were waiting for you to make the final decision. What was the hold up?"

"Ashforth Pipe Supply started around the time my parents founded Lipson Construction. The two companies kind of grew up together. Mabel Ashforth was a friend of my mother's. I knew what losing our business would mean. I had planned to meet with Mabel… I thought she was still running the company… to discuss the problems."

"Mr. Norsen completed the termination of business with Ashforth Pipe Supply while you were in the hospital," the detective said. "He effectively closed the company."

Jacob nodded his head.

"The employees report that they heard you yell at Mr. Ashforth."

"I was very angry," Jacob said.

"Because your fiancée was mistreated."

"More than that. While I attempted to work with them, went out on a limb for them, they were lying to me."

"About the ownership changes?" the detective asked.

"Yes. I'm sure our guys told you but we really bent over backwards to continue our relationship with them. I personally went way out of my way to keep them in business. So, yes, I was angry. But I never threatened him or his children or Mabel for that matter. I remember getting Katy's medicine then going out to the car. I was excited about spending time with Jill and having a rare, free evening. I wouldn't give up time with Jill to harass some poor family, a friend of my mother's no less."

"Getting a child's medication from the company refrigerator doesn't exactly sound like someone who is out of control or violent, Sergeant," Samantha said.

"They say different things," the detective said. "You're saying he attacked you out of the blue. Completely unprovoked."

"I can't speak to his motivations," Jacob said. "I was walking across the sidewalk and he hit me. I didn't see it coming. My father told me it was a twenty pound pipe wrench but I never saw it."

"That's what the officers say," the detective said. "The attack is corroborated by a video surveillance camera. Your statements differ on the events that happened inside his office. Mr. Ashforth says he was reasonably provoked."

"Listen, the Ashforths lied to my client for almost a year," Samantha said. "They're lying now."

"Is there anything you'd like to add?" the detective looked up from his notepad to Jacob. "Sir? Mr. Marlowe?"

"I'm sorry," Jacob said. "I don't feel well. I had this acupuncture treatment... It seems to have worn off."

"This interview is over, Sergeant," Samantha said. "My client is still very ill."

Standing, Samantha walked to the door of the small sitting room. Opening the door, she found Blane waiting for Jacob. Blane helped Jacob from the room. Samantha watched them move into a nearby bedroom.

"I'll walk you out, Sergeant," Samantha said. "This place is like a maze. You can easily get lost here."

"I remember when it was a burned out crack house. It was a maze then." The detective nodded. "Marlowe? He's not going anywhere."

"He's not."

"Just so you know. The Ashforths have hired attorneys to sue in civil court."

"The Ashforths or just ..."

"They seem to have reconciled their marriage," the detective said. "As Mr. Marlowe said, near death brings clarity."

"Or greed," Samantha said under her breath.

She walked the detective to the side entrance, then watched as he weaved his way through the paparazzi. Shaking her head, she turned into the main Castle living room to check on Jacob.

"Are you coming with us?" Valerie asked Samantha. Valerie Waters smiled at Samantha. "We're going for a run in the mountains."

"I don't have anything to wear," Samantha said. "Plus who knows what other police might show up? I mean I came to

help Aden then..."

"They can wait. Jacob's out cold and Aden's not here," Valerie said.

Samantha smiled at Valerie.

"What?" Valerie asked.

"I'm glad you're here."

Valerie tugged on Samantha's arm. "Wear my clothes. You have shoes in your car – you always have shoes in your car."

Samantha nodded.

"It's really good to be home. Isn't it?" Valerie beamed at her.

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Monday mid-day

"I was SO hoping to see you today." Lexi said to Sandy. Lexi's slim form was balanced in a tree pose behind the counter as she checked IDs at the gym entrance. "Aren't you glad I warned you away from Aden the Awful??"

"I...."

Lexi checked in a couple more gym patrons that were standing behind Sandy.

"I saw in the paper that Aden the Awful was arrested last weekend!" Lexi's eyes lit up with malicious glee. "Here I saved it for you."

Lexi gave the paper to a stunned Sandy. Sandy stood reading a Denver Post article that said Aden's kids were in the custody of social services and Aden was in jail.

"But..." Sandy wasn't sure what to say.

"I heard he's lost his kids for good." Without looking at Sandy, Lexi continued checking in patrons. "About time, I say. Social Services is really behind if Aden the Awful can keep his kids."

"That's not what I heard."

Sandy's head jerked up from the article. Tanesha.

"I heard you were a skanky ho," Heather said. Heather came to stand next to Sandy. Heather's hand touched Sandy's forearm in silent support.

"A skanky trainer-ho who thrives on the troubles of others while making her living doing horizontal aerobics." Tanesha accentuated her words with a thrust of her hips.

Lexi's bright blue eyes became slits of indignation.

"You don't know anything about Aden Norsen. You should mind your own business." Lexi sniffed. "Sandy and I know Aden the Awful is a horrible man and father."

Sandy heard an intake of breath near the door. Her eyes jerked up to see Aden standing next to the door. His face was a wash of betrayal. Clearly he thought she and Lexi were gossiping about him. She shook her head at him but he looked away from her. Her heart dropping, Sandy opened her mouth to say something when Tanesha spoke.

"I hate liars," Tanesha said. "Jill? Did you hear what Miss Thing here said?"

"I did." Jill walked in the door behind Aden. She touched Aden's shoulder as she walked by. "I've known Sandy since she was eight years old and she would never say a bad word about anyone. Especially someone who was her friend. But I know you love to spread evil lies and gossip about people, Lexi."

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Heather said.

"Plus." Finding her voice at last, Sandy said, "I was there. And this article is wrong. Aden wasn't arrested and the kids are home… are home with us."

Sandy went around the counter to stand with Aden. She stretched up on her toes to kiss his lips.

"Hi honey," she said.

Aden looked at Sandy. His shock and insecurity vanished in her warm smile.
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"Ready to work out?" Sandy asked.

"You can be with your friends," Aden said. "Girls day and all."

"Nah," Jill said. "We came to spa."

"And deal with this skank," Tanesha said. "Listen Ms Thing, you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us."

"And we don't like being messed with," Heather said.

"Spray weed killer on love? And the gardeners get pissed," Jill finished.

"That was good," Tanesha said. She and Jill walked around the counter. "Weed killer and gardeners."

"I thought so," Jill smiled.

"Damn, Sandy, I forgot how cute he was." Tanesha nodded then entered the gym.

"He's really cute," Heather said before turning into the gym.

Aden and Sandy stood holding hands at the counter.

"I'm sorry, Lexi," Aden said. "I've tried to make it up to you. You have your career, your car, the life you said you wanted, and I've been happy to help."

Surprised, Sandy's head jerked to look at Aden. She had no idea that Aden had tried to make anything up to Lexi. Certainly, Lexi hadn't mentioned it when she told her all that awful stuff about Aden.

"But we still have this animosity. It's been a long, long time. What's it going to take to let this go?"

"You'll be sorry, Sandy. He's nothing but trouble." Lexi made a sour face.

"I'll take my chances," Sandy said.

Tugging on Aden's hand, she led him around the counter to the aerobic equipment. Aden stopped to say something else to Lexi, but Lexi looked away from him. He shrugged.

"I need to change into my workout clothes," Aden said.

"I'll start warming up on the treadmill."

Aden was half way across the gym when he ran back to Sandy. Picking her up, he held her in a crushing embrace.

"Thanks," he whispered in her ear.

"This is not helping my widening ass," Sandy repeated her work out joke.

"I love your ass." Aden kissed her then went off to change.

"He's really cute," a woman said as she walked by Sandy. "And that woman is a bitch. I've seen you guys workout here. Six years or so, right?"

Sandy nodded.

"You're very cute together."

"Thanks." Sandy blushed then turned on the treadmill.

Aden was cute.

And he loved her.

Yeah.

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Monday evening — 5:20 P.M.

"HOME!!" Katy squealed.

Running through the door, Katy ran straight into her room. Scooter barked and danced behind her. Calling the name of every doll and touching every toy, she squealed and jumped up and down. Scooter barked with glee. Jill looked in to see that Katy had piled all of her toys onto the ancient twin bed where she was telling them all about her adventures. And her new Daddy. Of course, Scooter needed a personal introduction with back story of each toy, doll and stuffed animal. Lying on the floor next to Katy's big girl bed, Scooter seemed to listen to every word.

Katy's happy chatter formed a back beat to Jill's movements.

Jill opened the sliding glass door to let some of the stale heat out of the apartment. At least now that she had a job...
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Was a spokesmodeling a 'gig'? She could afford to run the air conditioner. She turned the air conditioner knob. Nothing.

Does the air conditioner run?

She kicked the side of the box. It made a noise then rattled. Shaking the knob, the ancient air conditioning unit started to work. Jill was instantly sorry it did. The unit pushed a part mold, part cigarette smoke, and part indefinable dead thing smell into the apartment.

She flipped the air conditioner off. She'd rather be hot.

Yep, she could see why she wanted to be away from the clean, beautiful, and cool Castle.

But the dead thing smell didn't go away.

Wandering out onto her minute balcony, Jill saw the destruction. All of her potted plants had been smashed. Her small tomato plant had been yanked from the soil. Pressing her hand to her forehead, Jill reeled from the destruction. She had bought old seeds for 10 cents a packet, then nurtured them in Dixie cups. Sometimes, with love and care, they grew into plants. She even created a little watering system to keep them going when she was working. All of that was wrecked.

Her nose followed the smell. A dead cat. A dead cat on her balcony. Jill went back into the apartment to find a plastic grocery bag to dispose of the animal. Returning to the balcony, she bent to pick up the poor animal when she saw a note melted into the rotting flesh.

"UR NEXT BITCH."

Jill blinked. Without thinking another thought, she wrapped the animal in the bag. Carrying the rotting carcass into her apartment, she wrapped it another grocery bag. Then another bag. She called for Scooter to guard her most precious possession, Katy. With Scooter on guard at the front door, Jill ran down the stairs to the dumpster and threw the dead cat away.

When the animal hit the bottom of the dumpster, she said a prayer. She prayed that the poor cat hadn't suffered. She prayed that she would never get another message like this. And, more than anything, she prayed that Trevor would never, ever come back from Thailand.

Running back up the stairs, Jill double locked the door. She was halfway across the small apartment when she noticed that she'd splashed cat rot on her clothing and hands. After making sure the door was locked, and Katy was safe, she hopped into the shower.

Stepping out of the shower, she realized that the cat wasn't the only message from Trevor. The steam from the shower revealed a message on the mirror.

"U BELONG TO ME"

Jill gasped. Dripping, she ran naked to Katy's room. Scooter looked up from his post. Katy was laughing at something her doll said.

"Mommy? Why are you naked? Silly Mommy." Katy laughed. "Mommy, what happened to your pretty long hair?"

Jill reached for her hair and found it falling off in clumps. Running back to the bathroom she saw her perfect long hair was melting in the mirror. In an effort to stop the melt, she grabbed nail scissors from the drawer and clipped her hair in ragged chunks. It had taken her all of Katy's life to grow her hair out.

And now it was gone.

Sandy will cry when she sees this.

Feeling a burning on her back, she turned to check it in the mirror. Red blistering spots appeared on her back. She ran the shower on her back. The hair burning stuff must have been in her super-expensive-help-your-hair-grow-long-gift-from-your-best-friend special conditioner.

Reaching for towels, she saw that the hanging towels had feces mashed into them. She smiled at herself in the mirror. Outside of 'I need a clean towel,' Trevor never paid attention to the towels. She reached under the cabinet for a clean towel. Wrapped in two fluffy clean towels, she went into her bedroom.

Not trusting the clothes in her closet, Jill dressed in clothes she bought for dating. She was so freaked out about dating that she hid them. The skinny black jeans, thong underwear, pushup bra, and low cut top were clean.

Time to go through the apartment. Her bed had been soiled with blood. Her clothing splattered with bleach. The refrigerator she intentionally emptied was refilled with chicken and milk then unplugged. She slammed the refrigerator door against the smell.

Her television was gone as were Katy's precious cartoon videotapes. Every photo in her albums had nasty Sharpie comments. And...

How was she going to check Katy's room? Sticking her head in the door, she saw Katy playing and laughing.

"Mommy?" Katy looked up from her game.

"Yes, Katy-baby," Jill said. Her eyes scanned Katy's room for any disruption or soiling.

"I'm so glad to be home," Katy said. "Can we stay here tonight?"

Jill opened her mouth, then closed it.

"Of course, Katy-baby. Of course."

Jill went the kitchen where Katy couldn't hear her. The old Jill, the one who belonged to Trevor, would have curled up into a ball and cried. For two days. At least.

But this Jill was pissed. Knowing Jacob was asleep, she called Mike.

"Yeah," Mike said.

"I need help," Jill said. "I'm at the apartment."

"I'm on my way," Mike replied.

"Katy can't know."

"Got it."

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Tuesday early morning — 2:12 A.M.

"Where've you been hiding?" Jacob asked Mike.

Jacob had opened his eyes an hour earlier. He lay in bed aching for Jill until he couldn't stand himself. He wandered to the Castle main kitchen for some cereal. He was right in the middle of some quality self pity when Mike sauntered into the kitchen.

"How did you know I've been hiding?" Mike asked.

"I've hid from this Hollywood crap for years."

Mike nodded his head. Pulling a bowl from the cabinet, he poured some Captain Crunch. He held the box for Jacob. Jacob nodded and Mike filled his bowl. They ate in silence.

"What I don't get..." Mike started then took a bite of cereal.

Jacob looked up at Mike.

"Why didn't you give Jill another room in the attic? I mean, you're just in a small part… like nine hundred square feet or something. The attic is..."

"Twenty-nine hundred square feet," Jacob said. "Listen man, Jill wanted to go home."

"She wanted some space of her own," Mike said. "Everyone likes to have some space to themselves. I need it. Val needs it. And you have rooms and rooms..."

"Jill was here for a week," Jacob said. "She could have moved in to the other space if she wanted to. She told me she wanted to go home… was rather insistent about it."

"I doubt Jill knows there's more space in the attic. She's a very concrete person. If she doesn't see it, it doesn't exist," Mike said. "In fact, she asked me a couple times if I had the key to the bathroom closet. I didn't pay any attention because there ..."

"Isn't a closet in the bathroom," the men said together.

"Oh." Jacob said. He stood from his seat to put his bowl in the kitchen sink.

"Do you have the key to the door?"
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"Sure," Jacob said.

"Let's go show her the rest of the attic," Mike said.

"Jill's here?"

Jacob rushed toward the door. In a breath, he was up the stairs and holding Jill. She nestled her head against his good shoulder.

"Yes," Jill said.

"Yes?" Jacob asked.

"I'll marry you."

Chapter thirty
Sheer brilliance

Tuesday morning — 8 A.M.

Jacob looked across his dining table at Jill. He'd worried that last night's disaster would catch up with her today.

But she seemed happy.

Her matted hair was covered in a yellow bandana which brightened her face. She was beautiful. When he came up the stairs to have breakfast with them, she and Katy cheered. Jill set out bowls for cereal then settled Katy on her booster seat.

"What cereal would you like?" Jacob asked.

"I like the one with the smiley guy on it," Katy said.

"This one?" Jacob pointed to the box. "Captain Crunch."

"Uncle Mike calls it 'The Cap'n.'" Katy clapped her hands together as if she made a joke.

"You have good taste," Jacob said. He poured her a bowl of cereal. "What would you like, Jill?"

Standing next to Katy with the milk in her hand, Jill looked up to smile at him. Her arched eyebrow sent a shiver through him.

"Mommy?"

"Just a second Katy," Jill said. She tapped her top lip as if she was making a difficult decision. "I must decide what to have."

"But Mommy, you have to look."

Jill's head jerked to Katy. After last night disaster, Jill was on alert for any potential danger. Katy pointed to an object in her cereal.

"There's something in my cereal."

Jill took Katy's bowl away from her.

"Is it poison?" Katy giggled. "Paddie says sometimes people get poisoned. He will be so jealous if I get poisoned first!"

"Poison?"

Jill puzzled at Katy's bright face. Paddie was Katy's best friend at Catholic pre-school. Katy and Paddie played together last night when his father, Homeland Security Agent Colin Hargreaves, visited her apartment. Jill shook the bowl to see if she could see what Katy was talking about.

"Maybe it's the prize," Jacob said. Peering inside the cereal box, he said, "There's another one."

Jill snatched the box from him. She shook the cereal from side to side until she saw something. Using her spoon, she dug out the object.

"Mommy! It's a pretty ring!" Katy squealed.

"Look at that," Jacob said. "I wondered what happened to that."

"I've looked for it with the other diamonds." Jill flushed. She hadn't wanted to admit that.

"That ring belongs to me." Jacob held his hand out and Jill dropped it in his left palm. "This diamond is the only diamond found in the Marlowe mine. Or so they say. There's no record of a diamond find in Colorado. So who knows? But that is the legend. These aquamarines are indeed from the Marlowe mine. This ring has adorned the left hands of at least three generations of Marlowe wives. It's called 'The Marlowe beauty'. Of course, there has never been a more beautiful Marlowe bride than you."

"What does it mean, Mommy?"

"It means we're getting married," Jill beamed at Jacob. "But..."

She fished around in Katy's bowl to find a child's size imitation of her ring.

"I know it's stupid, crazy, but we're all getting married," Jacob said. "I had it made. That's why the Beauty wasn't in its box at the hospital."

"You had it made? From the hospital?"

"Technically, Aden had it made," Jacob said. "On my instruction and he works for me and..."

Jill kissed him. He bent on one knee. Holding her hands, he looked up into her eyes.

"Will you marry me, Jill?" Jacob asked.

"Hmm... I'm not sure. Let me consult with Katy," Jill said. "Katy, should we marry Jacob?"

"YES, YES, YES, YES, YES!" Katy bounced in her seat.

"We will marry you, Jacob," Jill said.

Jacob slipped the Marlowe Beauty on her finger then stood to kiss her.

"I can't hold you and..." He whispered.

Jill let go of him. He took the tiny ring and slipped in on Katy's pinky finger.

"That's very pretty, Daddy," Katy said. "I'm glad I picked Captain Crunch. I bet Paddie doesn't have one of these! He's going to be so jealous."

Biting her lip, Jill's eyebrows pinched together with worry.

"What if she loses it? She's just a little girl. Jacob..."

"We'll get her another." He shrugged. "I only plan on getting married once."

Jill gave him her 'rich people are so weird' look and he laughed.

"Well, now that's done." Jacob stood and made his way to the door leaving a stunned Jill. "Back to work."

"DADDY!" Katy said. "You didn't eat your cereal."

Laughing, Jacob turned around and came back to wrap his left arm around Jill.

"Love you Jill," he whispered in her ear.

She kissed his cheek then tidied the sling on his right arm.

"WAIT!" Katy said.

They both turned to her.

"What about the poison!?"

Jacob laughed at Katy's bright smile and face. He bent to kiss her cheek. Sitting back down at the table, he began eating his Captain Crunch. After a few bites, he looked up to see Jill admiring her ring.

"It's really mine?" Jill asked.

"Yes. Will you really marry me?"

"Yes. Oh yes."

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Tuesday afternoon — 1:25 P.M.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" Mike asked Colin Hargreaves. "And what are you wearing?"

Mike came from the back of the small storefront to find Colin wait.

"This, my friend, is a uniform," Colin said. "It's generally worn by people who work for the government particularly military or police. Firemen wear uniforms too."

"That's your Special Forces uniform," Mike said. He pointed to Colin's Green Beret which was tucked under a band on his shoulder. "You're retired."

"Hmm," Colin said.

"Are you going to get your make-up done?" Mike asked. "Michael Moore's a nice guy."

"I'm here to pick up Sergeant Michael Roper," Colin said. "Did you see him in there?"

"Very funny," Mike said.
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Mike pushed open the glass door for Colin. Colin stepped through the door then turned to talk to Mike.

"How's Jill?" Colin asked.

"Ok," Mike said. "Thanks for your help last night. Bringing Paddie was sheer brilliance. With Paddie there, I don't think Katy noticed the police. Did they find anything?"

"Yep. The handwriting on the mirror and the cat match. The cat was strangled. But get this…," Colin said.

Mike stopped walking to hear what Colin had to say. Colin pushed him forward. They walked down Saint Paul Street toward the Cherry Creek Mall.

"Hear that sound. There's a chopper waiting for you. So keep walking."

"A chopper," Mike said. He looked around at the quiet shopping district. "Here?"

"The Jakker," the men said together.

"I don't want to go anywhere, Colin," Mike said. "Especially not with Zack Jakkman flying. That man scares the crap out of me. Always has."

"Hmm," Colin said. He pushed Mike along down the street.

"You were saying something about Jill's apartment?"

"The blushing bride destroyed the photo albums. Her prints are everywhere. They must have thought Jill would never call the police. Idiots. We think they did this Friday before the rehearsal dinner. What kind of a woman helps her almost husband stalk his ex-wife?"

"Who knows?"

"I mean, there's enough evidence in the refrigerator alone to convict them of breaking and entering, harassment, menacing, theft and destruction of property. The cat? Animal cruelty. And that's not to mention the rest of the apartment or the acid in the hair conditioner."

"What happens now?" Mike asked.

Closing in on the Cherry Creek Mall parking lot, Mike saw the Black Hawk. The wind from the helicopter whipped dust and trash from the parking lot. Mini cyclones battered the cars and pedestrians. Cars blew their horns and gestured at two soldiers with machine guns. Yes, the Jakker was a crazy man.

"They'll pick up Trevor and his bride at DIA when they land," Colin said. "This is a particularly nasty piece of work, a real attack on Jill. You sure she's all right?"

"She says they did her a favor by destroying her past. Now she doesn't have to carry it around with her. Or that's what she says. She's pretty upset about her hair."

"Julie would absolutely die if that happened to her," Colin said of his wife.

Mike stopped walking at the traffic light on First Street. He watch a couple other soldiers jump out of the helicopter. One of the men waved at him.

"I think it will catch up to her," Mike said.

"Well, Trevor and his gal would do well to stay out of the country," Colin said.

"We can only hope," Mike said.

The men crossed the street toward the Mall, and the helicopter.

"In you go, my friend," Colin said.

Mike stepped up into the helicopter. While his eyes adjusted from the bright sun to the dark interior of the helicopter, Colin pushed him into an empty seat.

"What's going on? Shit, you're wearing your dress uniform too."

"Yes, Sergeant Roper," Alex Hargreaves said. "We have an appointment at Fort Carson. We picked up your dress uniform at the Castle. I think Mac Clenaghan has it."

She pointed toward her second in command, Captain Mac Clenaghan. He held up Mike's dress uniform.

"Alex..."

"Lieutenant Colonel Hargreaves." The man sitting next to him hit his shoulder. "Have some respect."

"Sir, I am needed at home," Mike said. "You know what happened to Jill and..."

"We would all like to be at home, Sergeant," Alex said. "Frankly, my better-halves are backpacking right now."

"That's right! You, Max and John were going to the Black Canyon. How come..."

"Because someone is being interviewed by Oprah in less than two days."

"Ah crap," Mike asked.

"Command would like to have a word with you," Alex said. "We are on fetch and babysit duty. All week. Buckle up."

The helicopter lifted off from the parking lot and made its way toward Fort Carson, Colorado.

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Tuesday evening — 6:00 P.M.

"How does it look?" Jill asked.

Sandy unwrapped the bandana Jill had tied around her head. Sandy's face went white from shock to red with rage. They were alone at Sandy's station. Jacob had arranged the appointment with Sandy, and since her schedule was always over-booked, she agreed to stay late to work on Jill.

"Trevor did this?" she asked.

"Actually, his new wife," Jill said. "Or at least her finger prints were on the bottle. Trevor used to tease me about the conditioner, so I'm sure it was his idea. He knew how hard it was to grow my hair out."

"What was it? Acid?"

Sandy picked through what was left Jill's hair. Jill had burns on her neck and scalp in places. Sandy had never seen anything this awful.

"Yeah, some kind of acid," Jill said. "It burned my back a little bit too."

Jill pointed to a spot on her back. Sandy pulled Jill's tank top back to look at her back.

"I wondered why you weren't wearing a bra."

"I can't fasten it," Jill said.

"Oh God, Jill," Sandy said. "Why didn't you call me? I was at home."

"I didn't want Katy to know. She's been through so much. She was so excited to be home with her toys."

"Bitch and Trevor didn't do anything to her stuff?"

"Not that we can tell," Jill replied. "She and her little friend Pat played together in her room until late. She fell asleep. I had to wait until the police were done. They finished up about 1:30 AM. I took Katy to the Castle. She seemed happy to be at the Castle in the morning. The police checked her room today. Nothing."

"Why did they leave her stuff alone?" Sandy asked.

"Honestly?" Jill asked. "I think he's going to try to get custody."

"What?"

Sandy was so disturbed by the idea that she began working on Jill's hair. She sprayed abundant conditioner then tried to work her wide tooth comb through the mess.

"He doesn't want her because he loves her or values her or thinks she's an amazing human being or..."

"Jill. Why would Trevor want Katy?"

"Money," they said together.

"Either child support or a pay off. I don't know," Jill said. "They told Mike that he and his bride would be arrested when they come back to Denver so... I'm sure he'll say it wasn't his fault."

"Jill," Sandy stopped working. She held Jill's eyes in the mirror. "You have to have the doctor check out these burns."

"I did. Jacob put me on his insurance plan. I went to see her today." Jill visibly brightened. "I even took Katy to an allergy doctor. Blane thinks acupuncture might help. I was surprised when the doctor thought the acupuncture was a great idea. The doctor suggested..."

"Jill," Sandy interrupted Jill. Jill was chattering to avoid dealing with her own pain, her own injury. "What about the
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burns?"

"Oh." Jill's face dropped with sorrow. "She gave me some ointment for the burns. Blane gave me some Chinese stuff too."

Sandy's face was a mask of pain as she attempted to work with what was left of Jill's hair.

"Birth control?"

"The pill. And about a billion blood tests they do automatically for Lipson Construction," Jill said. "No IUD because I used to get those bad cramps."

"You're going back on the pill?"

"Yep. Trevor always said they made me a depressed bitch but..."

"He just said that to control when you got pregnant," Sandy said. "The IUD was sheer brilliance."

"He never knew."

Jill's eyes caught Sandy's in the mirror. Together, they had solved almost every problem in their lives. Jill knew that Sandy would be able to fix this one too.

"I'm sorry, honey. I'm going to have to shave off most of your hair. All of the back and most of the front. I..."

Jill's eyes welled with tears. Giving Jill a box of Kleenex, Sandy went to work.

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Tuesday evening — 6:35 P.M.

"How are you feeling?"

Delphie poked her head into the room. Sitting in a high backed chair in front of a raging fire, Jacob had been working on his laptop. Sarah, his yellow Labrador, was sleeping in front of the roaring fire in the ornate tile fireplace. Sighing, Jacob set the computer on the marble coffee table in front of him. Delphie came in the sitting room carrying two cups of tea.

"All right," he said. "The acupuncture helps with the pain but I'm so tired and cold."

He pointed to the fire.

"The fire light is nice," Delphie said. "Even in summer."

"That trainer? Valerie Waters? She had me ride the exercise bike, low speed for twenty minutes. I thought I was going to die."

"It's a long way back," Delphie said.

She gave him the cup of tea.

"Thanks," he said. "I can only sleep a few hours at a time. But I sleep like forty times a day."

"What does the doctor say?" Delphie asked.

"Oh." Jacob took a drink of tea. "I think they're so used to seeing really sick people. If you're moderately ill or better at all, you're a miracle."

"It is a miracle how well you've healed," Delphie said. "You're not even wearing your neck brace."

"Only when I lay down," he said. "Blane's acupuncture and herbs are the miracle. Most of my bandages are off. The drains are out."

Delphie gave a slight nod.

"You seem blue, Delphie," Jacob said. "Is all this chaos too much? You've been caring for all these kids. Are we taking too much from you?"

"The children are a joy," Delphie said.

"Clients?" Jacob asked.

Delphie shook her head.

"Come on, Delphinium. It's me. Your Jakey. What's going on?"

"I miss your mother."
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Delphie sat down in a wing back chair next to him. He held out his left hand which she took. They sat for a moment contemplating the fire.

“When you were… on the other side...” Delphie started then stopped. She turned from the fire to look at him.

“Delphie?”

“Your mother missed everything. She wanted so badly for you and Jill to get together. She loved Mike so much. She wanted Val and Mike to live their happily ever after. And Katy? She reminds me so much of Celia. She has her light and her temper.”

“Yeah,” Jacob said. “I don’t see it. When I look at her, I see Trevor’s dark eyes on her happy, bright face. The volunteers at the zoo said she looked just like Mom.”

“Maybe that’s it.” Delphie nodded as if she could see what the zoo volunteers meant. “I love Katy, just love her and I only met her a week ago!”

Delphie wiped her eyes. They watched the fire.

“Your mother would have adored that child. All of the pain, all of the work, all of the worry, and she missed the best part.” Tears dropped from Delphie’s eyes. “She should be here. She made all of this happen.”

“You do her a disservice to think she’s still not making this happen,” Jacob said.

Delphie nodded.

“Did you see her?” Delphie asked.

Jacob nodded.

“Did she...”

“She misses you, Dad, and us,” Jacob said. “She said you, Dad and she belonged together like me and Jill, me and Val, Val and Mike, and Jill and Mike. That’s what I remember. The four of us. The three of you.”

“Does she know...?”

“About you and Dad?” Jacob asked. “She isn’t upset or jealous. I think she loves both of you so completely that your relationship makes more sense to her than to either of you. Mom is… such a great being, so loving, so kind. I think all of that couldn’t be held in by a physical body.”

Delphie cried in earnest at his words. Jacob sat holding her hand and watching the fire. After a few moments, her tears began to slow.

“I usually feel so close to her, but since you were injured... It’s like she’s mad at me that I let you get injured or...”

“She’s been with me,” Jacob said. “I’m... Well, I’m not as well as I look.”

Embarrassed by her display of sadness, Delphie wiped her eyes. She drained her tea cup.

“Why don’t you go and talk to her?” Jacob asked. “She’s right here.”

“Thanks,” Delphie said. “Can I get you more tea?”

“I’d love some, but I can get some myself. Go talk to Mom,” Jacob said. “I didn’t tell you anything you don’t know.”

Delphie gave a slight nod.

“Do you think of me as a kind of parent?”

“You’re my Delphie,” Jacob said.

“Sam said you and Val were always our kids – mine, Celia’s and Sam’s. I...”

“That’s true,” Jacob said.

“So Katy’s mine too? I’m her...”

“Grand-Delphie,” Jacob said.

Delphie smiled.

“Love you, Jakey.”

“Love you too.”

Delphie went to the door of the room. She stopped for a moment at the door. Turning to look back into the room, she was about to ask another question. Deciding against it, she went to her room to ask Celia instead.

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Tuesday night — 7:30 P.M.

"Uncle Mike? When does Mommy come home?" Katy asked.

"You just asked that, sweetie," Mike said.

He and Katy had spent the night playing Legos, laughing and watching cartoons. He was giving her a bath.

"Before I go to sleep," Katy said. "Like always. Except when I stay with Aunt Megan."

"Right," Mike said.

"If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell Mommy?" Katy took the wash cloth from Mike to scrub her face while Mike washed her hair.

"Nope," Mike said. "There's nothing that you should ever keep from your Mom."

"But if I tell her, she will cry and cry and cry," Katy said. "I hate it when Mommy cries."

"Rinse."

Katy closed her eyes so Mike could rinse her with the hand held tub sprayer.

"All done?" Mike asked.

Katy nodded.

After letting the water out of the tub, Mike wrapped Katy in a bath sheet. He carried her out into the sitting area of his and Valerie's apartment. Valerie waited for them with mugs of hot chocolate.

"You can tell us anything. And we will always love you no matter what. But we won't promise not to tell your Mommy," Mike said.

Valerie took Mike's warm bundle of Katy and rubbed her dry. While Katy weighed her options on her fingers, Valerie helped her into her pajamas. Valerie had just finished combing Katy's wet hair when Katy sighed.

"Ok, I'll tell you," Katy said. "You know how I had another Daddy?"

"Uh huh," Mike said.

He lifted Katy onto the couch then gave her a mug of hot chocolate. Valerie smiled when he gave her a mug of cocoa. He winked at Valerie.

"Well, he's going to take me away from Mommy and make me live with him. I won't ever SEE Mommy again."

"Why do you say that, honey?" Mike asked.

"He told me."
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Chapter Thirty-one
No reason to freak out

Tuesday night — 7:30 P.M.

Mike's face registered shock then hardened. His look would terrify an adult let alone a small child. Valerie pushed him away from Katy.

"When did he tell you, honey?" Ever the actress, Valerie kept her voice friendly and almost happy.

"Well, I have a Jill doll," Katy said. She looked over at her beautiful Auntie and smiled. Valerie smiled in return. "You haven't met her. Mommy got me the doll when I was about one year old. She works some nights and I stay with Aunt Megan. Have you met Aunt Megan?"

"I have," Valerie said. She touched Katy's wet hair. "I like your Aunt Megan."

"I like Aunt Megan too. A lot. But she's not Mommy," Katy said. "I was really sad when Mommy wasn't with me. Mommy found a Jill doll. It looks sort of like Mommy and it has her recorded voice. My Jill doll usually says, 'Love you Katy-baby' or 'Sweet Katherine' or this little poem Mommy says before bed or 'Mommy misses you' or... I think that's all. I like the 'Love you Katy-baby' the best. I press past the other ones so I can hear that the most when I'm sad."

Valerie looked to Mike. He nodded. Katy and her Jill doll were almost never apart.

"But I haven't been sad in a long time." Katy stared off into space. "Since before we went to the zoo. My Jill doll was in my old room. When Mommy was in the shower, I found my Jill doll."

"What did the Jill doll have to say?" Valerie asked in her light happy voice.

"It was my old Daddy. He said he was coming to get me and I would live with him forever," Katy said. "Scooter growled and barked when the Jill doll talked like that. Scooter was so mad that I hid the doll. I don't want Scooter to be mad."

"Did the Jill doll say anything else?" Mike growled. Valerie scowled at him over Katy's head. He shrugged.

"I didn't hear, Uncle Mike."

"Because of Scooter?"

"Uh huh." Katy finished her hot chocolate. "He's coming to get me."

Valerie reached around Katy to hold Mike's hand. Mike looked caught somewhere between rage and despair.

"More cocoa?" Valerie asked.

"Yes please," Katy said.

Valerie took Katy and Mike's mug and went into the small apartment kitchen. Katy sighed.

"Are you mad?" Katy asked Mike.

"Worried," Mike said.

"Scares me. More than a little bit," Katy said. "I have a new Daddy. I haven't seen the other Daddy in forever. He didn't want to ever BE my Daddy. Why won't he leave me alone!?"

"I wish I knew, honey," Mike said. His face softened. "But I'll tell you this. No one is going to keep you away from your Mommy. Your old Daddy doesn't know who he's dealing with."

"Oh," Katy's eyes welled with tears. "I don't want to live with him, Uncle Mike."

Mike pulled Katy on his lap. Rocking her back and forth while Katy cried, Mike made a plan. No one was going to steal his Katy and hold her captive.

No one.

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Wednesday morning — 5:11 A.M.
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"What the hell is that?"

A tractor trailer blew its horn again. Jacob, Blane and Aden went to the window of the small office. Indeed, there was a truck at the Castle gate. They heard someone run to the door.

"I'll go," Aden said.

"No," Blane said. "Stay with Jake. You've got to help Mac at Alameda. I'll be right back."

Blane went out into the main Castle living room where a group of people were... giggling?

"May I help you with something?" Blane asked.

"Ooooh who are you?" A slight Hispanic man swished across the living room. "You're not the brother and you're dreamy gorgeous. You're definitely..."

"Not interested," Blane said. "This is a private residence. Should I call the police?"

"No." He dropped the flamboyant act and was all business. "I'm Ramon, Valerie's stylist. I have a team here to set up for Oprah and get ready for the party. Can you show me to the Ballroom? I need..."

"OOOHHHH!!" Valerie squealed. She ran across the Castle living room and into Ramon's open arms. "I was hoping..."

"WAIT!" Blane commanded.

Still hugging, Valerie and Ramon's heads turned to Blane.

"We're not going to be able to work here today?" Blane asked.

"Not unless you want to help us set up," Ramon said.

"Valerie, did you tell Jake?" Blane asked.

"I forgot," Valerie said. "Sorry."

Blane gave Valerie a dark look.

"You know how sick he is."

Blane started a rant, but Valerie looked so upset that he shut his mouth. Valerie would never do anything intentionally to hurt Jacob. She was one of the few people who knew that he was still very ill. He gave her dark look, then returned to the small office.

"No work today," Blane said. "Back to bed for you, Mr. Marlowe."

"I have to go to the sites," Jacob said. "Mac said there's a rumor that I'm dead. He said his crews freaked that the sale's off the table. I have to get out there."

Blane felt his stomach drop.

"You and Aden can go into the office," Jacob said. "Set up a route for me. I'll rest for a while then maybe Dad and I can go around."

"I'll go with you," Jill said. She came in the door in a tank top and sweats. She was carrying a crying Katy. "I'm sorry. Katy had a nightmare. She's very upset. She wanted to see you. You said I should bring her if she was upset. Do you mind?"

Blane took Katy from Jill and hugged her.

"What happened, kiddo?" Blane asked.

Blane carried her over to Jacob. He set Katy in Jacob's lap. Jacob held her tight with his left arm. Katy rested her head on his shoulder.

"I got scared," Katy said. "Can I spend the day with you and Mommy?"

"I think that settles it," Jacob said. "We can take Jill's Lexus. She can drive. If I need to sleep I can sleep in the car between sites."

"Jacob." Sam Lipson came in the room. "I'm sorry but we have a big problem."

"Everyone thinks I'm dead?" Jacob asked.

"Someone sent the original sale plans to the press," Sam said.

"Your plan to sell the company to our competitor?" Jacob asked.

"The one the board approved before you bought majority," Sam said.

"God damn it!" Blane started.

"Child," Jacob said. He looked down at Katy to see that she was sound asleep.

"Who released the documents?" Aden asked.

"Honestly? I think it's Tiffanie's oldest," Sam said.

"The step-whore," Blane snarled.

Ignoring Blane, Sam continued, "The Rocky Mountain News emailed me the fax. It's a copy of what we had agreed to four years ago. They were alert enough to notice the dates. 2004."

"Oh God, Jacob. I'm so sorry," Jill said.

"Would you mind driving me today?" Jacob asked.

"Not at all," Jill said.

"Great. I'm going to rest for an hour or so." He looked from Aden to Blane. "I'll hit as many sites as I can today. But we're going to have to go public tonight. Are we ready?"

Aden's face went ashen. Going public meant telling the world that scumbag, loser, dropout Aden Norsen was going to run Lipson Construction.

"We're ready, Jake," Blane said. "Or we will be. I'll set up a press conference tonight. Say six o'clock?"

Jacob nodded.

"She did this to destroy me," Aden said. "Nuala's still in jail. Social Services is coming at ten. I..."

"As always, she destroyed herself. She's on probation for stealing a set of documents that includes this one. We've been waiting for this one to show up," Jacob said. "This is bad for her."

Aden nodded but didn't look convinced. The phone rang. To avoid thinking, Aden answered the phone.

Jill lifted Katy from Jacob's lap. They were almost out the door when Aden said, "Jake?"

"Did you close the school today?" Aden asked. "An email went out last night that the school is closed today in memoriam for you. It's on the website too."

"She really is an idiot," Blane laughed. He went around to sit at a computer. His fingers flew across the keyboard.

"What?" Aden asked.

"Hacking a website is a federal offense," Blane said.

"Well, the parents are freaked out. The staff is freaked out..."

"How long will it take you to fix the website, Blane?"

"Three minutes," Blane said. "I'll send an email that the site was hacked and the 'in memoriam' was a prank."

"I'll go to the school," Sam said.

"She gets satisfaction in creating misery," Jacob said. "This is stupid bullshit drama. There's no reason for us to freak out about any of this."

Aden blew out a breath then nodded. Jacob was right.

"I'll get to the office," Aden said. "We have sites that need our attention."

"Ok. Website fixed. And..." Blane pressed a few more keys. "Resecured. Email is out. I'll go with Sam."

"I'll talk with Valerie," Jacob said. "Isn't Mike being babysat by those military people?"

"Yep," Jill said. "Alex and her friends."

"We'll need them today," Jacob said.

Every head in the room turned to look at him.

"Why?" Sam asked.

"Because this stuff is designed to get and keep us running around. Someone at the school, someone at the sites, someone at the office. That leaves the house unmonitored."

"But they are in Thailand," Blane said.

"We're having a big party on Friday. There are going to be lots of people in and out of here setting up, getting ready for

Oprah, and every other thing. Anyone could do anything. You heard what they did to Jill's place."

"I'll take care of that first," Aden said.

"Thanks. Let's hope I'm wrong," Jacob said. "I'm going to rest for one hour. Then, we start."

~~~~~~~~

Wednesday noon

"I'm sorry," Jill said. "Katy needs to use the restroom. I used the restroom here so I know where it is."

"Oh no problem," Jacob said. They were walking into their fifth job site. "Would you like me to go with you?"

"JAKE!"

"It's Marlowe!"

As with every site they had visited, the Lipson Construction employees dropped what they were doing to greet Jacob. The site manager, an Amazonian woman named Bambi, came running out of the construction office.

"I'll be all right," Jacob said. "Go on."

Jill carried Katy across one of Lipson Construction's largest road sites. An enormous water and sewer project that started at Sand Creek on the Stapleton redevelopment project and ended nearly ten miles south near Centennial, Jill and Katy walked across the nexus point of the water in and water out. Sam told her these permanent looking structures would move south in a week. Like a turtle, this project picked up it's belongings as it inched its way along. Because of the size of the project, they had erected a nicer, still portable, structure for the toilet. According to Sam, 'decent facilities' were on Bambi's mandatory requirements list.

Katy had been tickled, petted, and loved at every site. Someone always had candy or a toy especially for her. The car rides were filled with Katy's songs and stories. Jacob sang along with the songs and laughed at Katy's stories. Listening to Jacob and Katy, Jill felt her heart ache. They were becoming a real family.

Jill set Katy in a stall then went to check her burns. She was standing at the mirror when a woman came in the restroom. Wearing a hard hat and dark glasses, the woman made a beeline for a stall.

"Are you here with Jake?" the woman asked from inside the stall.

"I'm driving him around today."

"Me too!" Katy said from her stall.

"My daughter is here with us," Jill said.

Jill stepped aside so the woman could use the sink and mirror.

"Jeez, what happened to your head?" the woman asked.

"Someone put acid in my conditioner," Jill said.

"My sister did that to me once. Hurt like hell," the woman said. "She got mad at me for something. I don't even remember what. That was her retaliation."

Jill turned to look at the woman and recoiled. She backed to Katy's stall door to block the woman's way into her stall. Noticing Jill's reaction, the woman's brow furrowed with confusion.

"I'm Honey Lipson," the woman said. "I'm sorry. I seem to have..."

"You're not married to Trevor?"

"Trevor?" the confused woman curled her lip at the idea then her eyes went big. "Oh my God. You're Jill. Trevor's Jill. Oh my God. You had... You had long hair! You..."

The women stood face to face. When Honey's eyes welled with tears, Jill's rage and panic dissolved. The small blond woman was crushed by Jill's injury.

"I'm so sorry," Honey said. "My sister did this to you. Didn't she?"

Jill nodded.

"Mom's going to die. Just die. Does Dad know?"

"Sam?"
~~~~~~~~

Honey nodded.

"He knows," Jill said.

"Let me help you with the cream," Honey said. "That's what you were doing when I came in right?"

Jill gave her the burn ointment. Honey dabbed the ointment through Jill's stubble of hair to the burns on her head.

"Mommy?"

Katy came out of the stall. She lifted her hands and Jill picked her up.

"Oh my God. Everyone's been talking about Jake's little girl," Honey said. "Oh my God. That's Katherine."

Jill flushed Katy's toilet. When she turned around, Honey Lipson was gone. She washed Katy's hands and made her way to find Jacob. When she arrived, she saw Honey and Jacob deep in conversation.

"What is it?" Jill asked.

"Honey is going to talk to the police about her sister. She says..." Jacob's eyes scanned Jill's face. "They're planning on fighting the restraining order."

"She called Mom last night to ask for money," Honey said. "They want me to pick them up at the airport Friday morning. She told Mom that she and Trevor are going to Val's party."

"NO! NO! THEY CAN'T COME BACK!" Katy screamed.

Sobbing, Katy turned her face into Jill's chest. Jill pushed past Honey to the Lexus. Getting in the back, she held Katy while she cried. Jacob came around to the open car door to rest his hand on Katy's back.

"What should we do?" Jacob asked.

"She's just a little girl, Jacob. She's really scared."

Jacob nodded. Katy turned her wet face to him.

"I'd eat some French Fries, Daddy."

"With Ketchup?" Jacob asked.

"And a balloon?"

"Of course. Green?" Jacob smiled.

"Can we go to the zoo?" Katy asked.

"I have to work some more, but I had a call from your friend Paddie. He's hoping he could come over this afternoon. You can stay with us or..."

"Paddie? Mommy, can I see Paddie?"

"After French Fries?" Jill asked.

"Ok," Katy said. "Will you stay with me, Mommy?"

"Blane can meet us for lunch then take me to the remaining sites."

"Are you sure?"

Jacob winked at her. She helped Katy back into her car seat. Getting out of the car, Jacob held her.

"It's going to be fine," he whispered.

"I hope so."

~~~~~~~~

Wednesday afternoon — 1:30 P.M.

It had been a long, long time since Jill had laughed so hard. Katy and Paddie were a comedy team. If they weren't chasing each other around, they were pretending to be someone they knew. Right now, Katy was pretending to be her Uncle Mike.

"That's just how it is." Katy lowered her voice, puffed up her chest and put her hands on her hips.

"No, he's more like," Paddie puffed up his chest. "Where's the cereal?"

Paddie and Katy squealed with laughter. Mike picked one up under each arm. They both giggled and squealed. He set them down near Alex Hargreaves. Dressed in a tank top, shorts, and her huge smile, she looked more like someone on
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vacation than a military guard.

"Let's play a new game," Mike said. "Aunt Alex will show you how to play."

Katy ran forward to Aunt Alex. Alex bent down to hug the tiny girl.

"You're going to help me like you help Uncle Mike," Katy said.

"I hope so," Alex said. "See this guy?"

She pointed to a tall, thin man with dark curly hair.

"TROY!!"

Paddie threw himself at the man. He picked him up and twirled the little boy around. Excited, Katy jumped up and down in front of him. A tall man, he knelt down to shake Katy's hand.

"Troy is going to be your 'I-can-do-anything-to-you-guy'"

"Oh wait," Jill said. "What if they hurt him? I don't want..."

"He's tough. Plus he volunteered," Alex said. Leaning into Jill, she said, "We're bored out of our minds babysitting your brother. You've got to help us out here."

Jill nodded.

"Ok, let's start with something easy," Alex said. "Show me how you punch."

Katy and Paddie tapped at Troy.

"Ah come on. You can hit harder than that! Give him a good whack."

~~~~~~~~

Wednesday afternoon — 3:25 P.M.

"This was a very good idea," Valerie said.

She lay naked on a mattress in his artist's studio. The studio's evaporative cooler worked over time but the small space was still hot. Mike was drawing flowers with ice cubes on her sweating body.

"Every actress needs her beauty nap," Mike said.

Valerie giggled.

"You've been very good for me," Valerie said. Rolling over onto her side, she said, "I was wondering..."

"I'm going back to LA with you on Sunday," he said.

Valerie's hand flew to her mouth. Her eyes filled with tears.

"If the house is too small, we'll have to get another. I'll check out the garage to see if I can work there," he continued. "It's time."

"What about Wes? What about…?"

"I don't give a shit about Wes, Valerie. I've only ever, always cared about you."

"What about hockey?"

"Now that's a problem. We talked about it as a team. We used to only play Saturdays at midnight. We moved to Wednesday because the teams are better. But Colin thinks the better teams will move to..."

Valerie kissed him. One pulling kiss led to another. Valerie drew him on top of her. Taking her hands, he stretched her arms above her head while his mouth worked its way from her ear down her neck. She shifted, inviting their union, when he pulled back.

"Wait," Mike said.

He kissed her then moved to the mattress. Concerned with his tone, Valerie sat up to look at him.

"That make-up guy? That Michael Moore? He said… Well, then I talked to Alex and she agreed… And..."

Mike shook his head and looked away from her. Valerie pressed his head back to look at her.

"He asked me what I was hiding from. With the beard. He said the scar's not bad and hardly noticeable. Moore... He said I should..."

"Shave off your beard," Valerie said.
~~~~~~~~

Mike nodded.

“I’ve asked so much of you,” Valerie said. “I... We can cancel Oprah. You don’t have to...”

“I’ve practiced my interview, Val. I’m ready. Plus command wants me to tell my story. It’s important... I just...” Mike’s eyes scanned her face. “I’ve been hiding a long time.”

Valerie put her hand on his chin. Their eyes held for a moment.

“Will you... I bought all the stuff... John told me how to do it. His beard grows really fast and Alex won’t kiss him with a beard. If he’s goes a week without shaving, he has...”

Valerie gave him a lingering kiss.

“I’d love to see your beautiful face again,” Valerie said. “Scar and all. Tell me what to do.”

He gave her a cordless electric razor. She yanked the sheet from the mattress and wound it around his neck to catch the hair. By his instruction, she clipped an inch at a time until only a quarter inch of stubble remained. She took his hand to feel the stubble.

“You’re sure?” Valerie asked.

“I can’t hide forever, Val. They just win that way,” he said. “I’m... It’s over. I want to live in the present with you.”

Holding his face, she leaned forward until their foreheads touched. She breathed in his scent, his warmth, then kissed his forehead. Moving without hesitation, she sprayed the foam into her hand. She worked with slow, gentle, delicate care. The sound of the razor scraping over his skin seemed to bounce off the walls.

Finally, she was done.

Letting out a breath, Valerie sat back. Her hand went to her mouth and her eyes filled with tears. Her gorgeous Mike had returned to her. Finally.

“That bad, huh?”

He hopped up and went to the pedestal sink. Checking himself in the mirror, he washed off the last of the shaving cream. He was rubbing some special ‘no bump’ cream over the place where his beard had been, when Valerie came up behind him. Her head peeked over his shoulder and their eyes held in the mirror.

In one movement, he spun around, lifted her from standing and carried her back to the mattress.

Chapter thirty-two
Who knew?

Wednesday evening — 5:40 P.M.
Washington DC

"I'm sorry," the Undersecretary to the Secretary of State said.

He flew out of his office and she gulped. He was twice as handsome as his photo. Tall and fit, his long legs took him across the waiting room in two steps.

"I know I've kept you waiting out here a long time. But I've been called to the White House."

"Sir, if you don't want to…"

"Talk about Michael Roper?" the Undersecretary said. "I know it looks that way, but nothing could be further from the truth. Would you mind walking with me?"

"Sure," the freelance reporter said.

She had hoped to really nail this interview so that maybe, just maybe, Oprah would give her more work. The money from this assignment was rent and groceries for a month. She wasn't going to give up easily.

He wanted to walk? She would walk.

Looking up at him, she was pretty sure she'd do anything he asked. She bit the inside of her lip to keep from giggling.

"Oh great," the man said.

With the Undersecretary's palpable relief, the reporter felt her confidence return. Smiling, she picked up her handbag, turned on her hand held digital recorder, and followed him out the door. The man glided down the hallway with purpose and speed. The reporter almost ran to keep up with him.

"I was the last one they rescued before they were all killed and Michael..."

"I'm sorry, sir," the reporter asked. "Rescued? Who's they? Killed?"

The Undersecretary came to a complete halt. Taking her elbow, he looked into her eyes.

"The Fey team," he said. "I thought..."

"I'm sorry, sir. I was sent to ask you about Michael Roper," the reporter said. "I..."

"About three years ago, I was held hostage."

"What? Where? There's nothing in your bio…"

The reporter searched her mind. Had she even read his official biography? She had at looked his Wikipedia page on the way here from her job at the grocery store. But his official biography...

"The 'where' isn't a big deal. And I'm certain you're right. There isn't anything in my bio," he said.

He continued striding down the hall.

"I wasn't held long. I mean, I was held long enough to have... Never mind. The Fey team was a Special Ops group that retrieved hostages. They went around the world rescuing people. Americans mostly, but important people from other countries too."

"Wow. Why doesn't everyone know..."

"You can look them up," he interrupted. "They have a Wikipedia page. Have you used Wikipedia?"

"Yes, sir," the reporter said. "But what..."

"Great service, Wikipedia." The Undersecretary flashed his identification at a station in the hallway. Pressing past her question, he continued, "So they rescue me one day, take two days of vacation, then wham, the entire team is killed. Except for one guy. And that's because his wife was having a baby."

The Undersecretary put his hand on the stairwell door. Looking down at the reporter's three inch heels, he asked,

"Stairs OK?"

"Sure," the reporter said.

"Gives us more time. And a little more privacy." Moving into the stairwell, he said, "I won't tell anyone if you want to take the heels off."

The reporter blushed. Her feet were killing her, but these were her only dressy shoes. Looking into the man's face, she saw his sincerity. She nodded.

"Thanks."

"Where was I?" he asked. Seeing her hands were full, he added, "I can hold the recorder."

"Ok, thanks," she said. "You were telling me that the Fey team was killed."

"Right," he said.

"I woke up two days after they were all killed. I can't tell you how… disturbing that was for me. I mean these people had just saved me, rescued me from hell, and now they were dead. I..."

They went down a flight of stairs before the Undersecretary spoke again.

"Anyway, Mike came to see me. He was visiting a friend at Walter Reed and stopped into my room. He told me there were almost four thousand of us."

"Us?" the reporter asked.

"People rescued by the Fey team," he said. "Mike visited me every day. We'd talk about being held hostage and…"

"Michael Roper was held hostage?" the reporter interrupted.

"Uh huh," the Undersecretary said. "He took even took me to get my 'F'."

"Your 'F'?"

The Undersecretary moved his watch to review a script Vivaldi 'F' tattooed on the underside of his left wrist.

"Almost everyone who was rescued by the Fey team has these 'F's. Mike said the Fey..."

"The Fey?"

"Long story. Anyway, the Fey didn't want to keep rescuing the same people over and over again so people got these tattoos. Frankly, it's kind of a status symbol."

"What?"

"They all had them. The team, that is. These same 'F's in a green arm band on their right arms. The guy who's left – Joseph – he has one too."

"So the 'F' is a kind of marker?"

"Sure. Like a badge or a rank. If you look around, you'll see that lots of people have these tattoos. Some guys have them on their arm. Most guys do their wrist because it's noticeable and also subtle."

"You said guys?"

"Or gals," he said. He rounded a corner to the first floor. "Listen, when I open this door the Secret Service is going to whisk me to the White House."

He blushed, stammered a little bit.

"Here's my phone number," the reporter said. She put her card into his hand. "I love dinner, but breakfast is my favorite meal."

He nodded.

"Do you have what you need?" he asked.

"I think so," she said. "I assume dinner is off the record."

"Yes, off the record."

"Then is there anything you'd like to add?" she asked.

"I would not be standing here if it wasn't for Mike Roper. The doctor's cured my body. But Mike cured my mind."

He ran a hand through his short dark hair.

"I mean, I had therapy. A lot of therapy. But knowing there were others and they were doing well? I… I owe my sanity

to Mike Roper. He's a great guy."

He moved to push the door open.

"I'll be done by 8, maybe 9? Would you like to…?"

"I like a late dinner," she said.

"Great! I'm… I'm excited. Mike saved me again."

The Undersecretary pushed the door open and, as predicted, was whisked away by the Secret Service. Just before leaving the building, he turned and waved to her.

Smiling, she went home to finish the piece, and get ready for dinner.

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Wednesday evening — 6:25 P.M.

Denver, CO

"Merde," Frederec said.

A woman's angry voice echoed down the hall.

"What?" Mike asked.

Wearing a tux shirt and his boxer shorts, Mike stood with his arms out so Frederec could make the final adjustments to his new wardrobe. Mike was afraid to move in case he was pricked by a pin or tore something or whatever he might do to such finery.

"Maman has seen Jill's hair," Frederec said.

"Listen, it's not Jill's fault. It's not like she..."

"No, no," Frederec said. "No one blames Jill."

"Is your Mom going to terminate the contract? I know Jill's been really excited..."

The woman's angry voice came down the hall and past the door of the small room they were in. Frederec laughed.

"No, Maman is yelling at my father," Frederec said. "She wants him to..."

Frederec paused trying to come up with the word in English.

"Castrate is probably the closest word… the person who did this to Jill."

"Jill keeps her contract," Mike said.

"Take that off," Frederec said. "Here are your garments for Oprah tomorrow."

Mike began to pull on a pair of Levi's jeans.

"Undergarments?"

"Oh right," Mike said. He pulled off his boxers and took a pair of designer briefs from Frederec. "Jill?"

"Oui. Jill, her Katherine, they are part of the family now." Frederec smirked. "I almost feel sorry for this Trevor."

~~~~~~~~

Wednesday night — 8:10 P.M.

"Would you like to cut the cake?" Sandy asked Noelle.

"Daddy should cut it! It's his 'Happy Day' cake!" Noelle said. Noelle sat on her knees on a chair at Sandy's round dining room table. "Don't you think, Nash?"

"Sure." Nash mumbled from Sandy's computer table.

Sandy had baked a delicate white cake with toasted coconut cream layers to celebrate the public announcement of Aden taking over Lipson Construction. Standing with her hand in Aden's, she had felt Aden shake with anxiety. But when Jacob invited Aden to answer questions, Aden had been every bit the charming, professional leader. She, Noelle and Nash screamed and cheered for him. To avoid the press, the family retreated to Sandy's condo for a sleep over and cake.

"Daddy has to get out of the bathroom," Sandy said.

"Hey!" Aden came out of the bathroom in a bathrobe. "You're the one who told me to wash off my nervous stink."

Sandy laughed. Aden kissed her.

"Let me get dressed." Aden scooted into Sandy's bedroom to change into jeans.

"This week has been really fun," Noelle said. "I'm glad we didn't have to stay at Nuala's house."

"Milk?" Sandy asked.

"Yes please," Noelle said.

"How about you, Nash?" Sandy asked.

"Huh," Nash looked up from Sandy's laptop. "What did you do to this?"

"It just stopped working." Sandy shrugged.

"It's pretty messed up," Nash said. "Think I can fix it. You have wireless?"

"The building does," Sandy said.

"Great. I'll start a virus scan..."

"You're a life saver. Thanks." Sandy kissed the top of his head.

"Ew." Nash bat at her with his hand then leaned back against her.

"What's this about cake?"

Aden was walking by the front door when there was a knock. He looked through the peep hole, made a puzzled face, and then opened the door. Without warming, the Denver Police Officer attacked Aden. His forearm at Aden's throat, the police officer pushed Aden all the way back to the wall. The table knocked over shattering a vase filled with flowers. The men stood face to face.

"We can do this hard or we can do this easy," the Police Officer said. "Your choice."

Noelle screamed and launched herself across the room. Sandy caught her before she reached the men. Nash came up beside Sandy to hold her hand.

"Let him go," Sandy said. She wasn't anxious or angry. She sounded mostly annoyed.

"Sandra," the police officer said. "This man has a criminal record."

"Uh huh," Sandy said. "Your history's not so hot either. You're going to pay for the vase you broke."

The police officer stepped back. He lifted Aden by the shirt and set him away from the wall.

"Aden, I'd like to introduce you to my ridiculous, overbearing, jerk of a Godfather, Seth O'Malley."

"Now Sandy," Seth said. "I had to be sure we could have a conversation. He has a violent record."

"You scared the kids," Sandy said. "Do you feel like a man by terrifying two small kids?"

"Sandra," Seth said. He held his arms out for a hug but Sandy shook her head at him.

"You really overstepped your bounds this time," Sandy said.

"Sandy," Aden walked up to her and the kids. "I'm Ok."

He hugged Noelle and Nash then stroked Sandy's hair.

"We were just about to have some of Sandy's cake," Aden said. "Would you like to join us?"

"But Dad!" Nash said. "That's police brutality. We should..."

"I'm all right," Aden said. "Ever since Sandy told me that her stepdad and Godfather were police officers, I've wondered when I'd get… uh… introduced."

Sandy nodded then went into the kitchen. She returned with a broom and dust pan which she thrust into Seth's hands. He raised his eyebrows and laughed. He set about cleaning up the flowers and broken vase. When he finished, he held his arms out and Sandy hugged him.

"May I introduce my friend Aden Norsen?"

The men shook hands.

"Seth O'Malley."

"Nice to meet you," Aden said.

"Yeah, sorry about that." Seth pulled at his collar. "Sandy's stepdad was my best-friend and the best person I've ever

known. I saw Sandy's name on your police report. Well, naturally, I got a little hot about that. Then I saw you and Sandy and the kids on the television tonight… I'm a little protective."

"She deserves it," Aden replied.

"This is Noelle and Nash," Sandy said. "We're having a celebration for Aden. Is it okay…?"

"Please join us," Aden said.

~~~~~~~~

Thursday early morning — 1:35 A.M.

Because Jacob could only sleep a few hours at a time, he and Jill fell into the habit of hanging out during the times he was awake. While he looked forward to the day he could sleep an entire night, he loved getting to know Jill in the quiet of the morning.

This morning, they were sitting on a feather bed in front of the fireplace. A large fire danced in front of them. While Jacob was cold, Jill was warm. She wore only a white tank top and panties. He would definitely miss that.

A few hours ago, Katy had joined them in bed after another nightmare about Trevor stealing her away. She was now sound asleep in the middle of their bed.

And Jill was talking about her day.

"So Katy's napping on my lap and Paddie was asleep against Colin's shoulder," Jill said. "Well, Alex says, 'I've fought my little brother three times this year. Who do you think won?'"

Jacob smirked.

"Do you know the answer?" Jill asked.

Jacob nodded.

"This man with silver hair and blue eyes walks in the room like he owns it. Alex and Colin bow to him. I guess he's their teacher. Anyway, he makes Colin show me how much bigger he is than Alex. His arms are long and he's like five inches bigger than Alex. He's like fifty or sixty pounds heavier. Anyway, the teacher asks me: 'Who would win if these two fought?' I say, 'Colin, of course'. But..."

"Alex won every time," Jacob said.

"Isn't that amazing? The teacher said if you aren't the biggest, you have to think the fastest to out maneuver your opponent. He said Alex thinks really fast, so she always wins. He said the only way to win against Trevor is to out think him. Go after him head to head, and I will lose like I always have in the past. Then he showed me some simple movements that would keep Trevor off me. When Katy woke up, Alex taught them to Katy."

"Sounds like you were pretty impressed with Miss Alex," Jacob said.

"How do you know them?" she asked.

"I met them through Mike," Jacob said. " I've also rehabbed a couple houses for them. I play hockey with Colin. I think mostly, they're always up for some adventure. We've been fly fishing, backpacking, hunting..."

"Adventure? Yeah. I mean, who knew? Alex showed me her scars and stuff. I..." Jill beamed. "I feel really hopeful, like everything is going to work out."

Jill looked down at her hands. While she talked, she had been playing with an object in her hand. She looked up at Jacob, then smiled.

"Thanks," she said.

"For what?" Jacob asked.

"For not being mad about my hair," Jill said.

"I'm mad about your hair," he said.

"Well, not being mad at me," Jill said. "It feels really good to be here with you and..."

"And?"

"I don't know." Jill looked back down at the object in her hand.
~~~~~~~~

"What is that?" Jacob asked.

"This?" Jill held up a gold button. "It's not anything really. I play with it when I'm having a hard time. I'd forgotten about it. I mean, everything has been so hard this year. Sandy reminded me of it when she did my hair. She got it from my purse when I started crying."

"May I see it?"

Jill set it in his hand. Made out of some kind of metal, the button was gold in color. It was round on the top, flat at the back with a simple metal loop to connect it to a jacket or maybe a shirt.

"I've had the button with me through almost every really hard thing for… Oh, I guess, the last four or five years."

"I can feel the bumps, but I'm not sure what's on it." Jacob set the button in her hand.

"I don't really know. There used to be a pattern but I think I rubbed it off. I run my finger over it when I'm worried."

"What does it mean?" Jacob asked.

"It's a very long story and..." Jill sighed. "You'll be asleep again soon. I'd rather you sleep, and get better, than stay up all night listening to me talk about the past."

"Will you tell me tomorrow?" Jacob stretched his left arm out in a yawn. Jill was right about going back to sleep.

"Let's see what tomorrow brings," Jill said. "Mike asked Megan, Steve, Candy and me to be here with him today. Everyone is coming at eight. Oprah's going to be here all day and..."

"But you'll tell me."

"Of course. I was thinking..."

She raised her eyebrow then smiled.

"Yes, I do want to make love with you."

"I'm so glad," Jill whispered.

~~~~~~~~

Thursday morning — 5:20 A.M.
Fort Logan Cemetery

"Did you bring it?" Mike asked Alex Hargreaves.

Alex set a package of incense in his hands. Her team stood guard in the area. Two men had blocked off the road to the memorial. Alex and Mike walked toward the monument for the Fey Special Forces team. Eleven black granite slabs set in a semi-circle. A tall black granite obelisk marked the middle of the semi-circle. Alex gave him a Zippo lighter

Mike went from stone to stone saying a prayer and setting the incense.

Today was his big day. Today he would tell the world about what happened to him all those years ago. He had to come here this morning. He hoped the guys would be with him in spirit when he told the world about them.

Clicking the lighter, he hoped that he would do his dead saviors justice. He hoped...

"Ten minutes, Roper," one of the men yelled.

Moving from stone to stone, he lit the incense. He stepped back to look at his work when he heard.

"Ah fuck."

Turning, he saw a news van pull up to road block. A reporter and videographer jumped from the van and were arguing with the soldiers. He knew Alex and her team could easily destroy the transmission. Hell, they had equipment that could wreck a camera without ever touching it.

He whirled around to look at Alex. She shrugged.

It was up to him.

Blowing out a breath, he went to talk to the reporter.
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Chapter Thirty-Three
Valerie and Mike

Thursday mid-day
The Castle

"Okay, Mike?" the producer asked. "Can you sit right here?"

Mike sat on the ornate Victorian style sofa.

"Val honey? Can you sit next to him?"

Valerie sat down next to him. As always, the molecular draw to each other took immediate effect. The space between them shrank until they were touching.

"Sit a little apart," the producer said.

Mike scooted over. When he put his arm to the back of the couch, Valerie slipped closer to him.

"Maybe we should get two chairs?"

They were sitting in the sitting room where Ramon had spent the last twenty four hours converting into a studio set. The small room was packed with people, equipment, and wires. Sam, Jacob, Jill, Megan, Candy and Steve sat on the floor along the wall of the room.

The plan was to tape Mike and Valerie's interview at the Castle. While Mike and Valerie made their way to Chicago, the television editing magic would happen. This interview would be interwoven with the variety of video interviews taken in the last few days. Mike and Valerie would arrive for the airing of their interview and answer questions live. That was the plan.

They just needed to get this interview done.

The rehearsal was sheer chaos. They blew fuses. The family talked in the background. The room was so hot that even Valerie was wet with sweat. This take was going to have to do.

"They're fine," the camera man said. "At least they're in the frame."

"Everyone happy? Everyone quiet?" the producer grimaced at the family.

Everyone nodded their heads in unison.

"All right, let's check the lights? We are going to tape..."

When the producer turned to Mike and Valerie, they were kissing.

"We need makeup..."

A flurry of people came forward to touch up their make up. The woman facilitating their interview sat down across from Mike and Valerie.

"We'd better start or we'll never get this done," the producer said.

"Let's start with how you met," the interviewer said.

"Even though we lived only a few blocks from each other, Mike and I had never met. I went to public school and Mike went to Catholic school," Valerie said. "I'd never seen him before. My family went skiing for a weekend at Copper Mountain. I was on the lift when he sat next to me."

"I had this bet with my buddies. The guy who could sit on the lift with the prettiest girl won. Of course, I was a fourteen year old alter boy. Just sitting next to a girl was a thrill. I hadn't seen Valerie's face. I... One of the guys pointed her out and said she would win the day. Well, I couldn't let him win. My friends and I followed Valerie and her family around Copper. I tried get on her chair in three different lifts. But her parents always sat with Valerie and her brother. Finally, I cut her father off to sit next to her."

Valerie and Mike looked at each other.

"And?" the interviewer asked.

"I don't know. It's one of those things," Mike said. "One moment, I was hanging out with my buddies hoping to win the bet. The next moment, my life changed forever."

"What happened?"

"I smiled at him," Valerie said. "He stammered. Jake, my brother, said something silly and we all laughed. It was a long lift ride and when we got to the top..."

"We weren't really apart after that," Mike said. "We spent every moment we could together. Valerie's parents had this rule: as long as we got good grades, participated in school, and worked our jobs, we could hang out at their house. We were 'A' students, star athletes and model employees."

Valerie laughed.

"It sounds wonderful," the interviewer said.

"It is wonderful," Valerie said.

"What happened?" the interviewer asked.

"My parents died," Mike said. "A stupid accident. I have three younger siblings. Megan, my older sister, and I wanted to keep the family together but we don't have any other relatives. Meg went to work and I... I joined the Army."

Mike and Valerie's eyes held for a moment. Like a current, sorrow and regret flowed between them.

"What was that?" the interviewer asked.

"I was intimidated by Val and her family," Mike said. "I joined to Army because I thought I would make something of myself. I wanted to be good enough… for her and myself, I guess. But I left her."

"I think it's one of those things," Valerie said. "You have such an amazing thing when you are so young... I don't think either of us appreciated the preciousness of our relationship. We took our relationship for granted because... I don't know."

"Because it was so easy," Mike said.

"Yeah." Valerie nodded. "We had no idea what it meant to be in the Army. But once he left for basic training, Mike was basically gone."

"What was that like?"

"It sucked." Mike and Valerie said in unison. They laughed.

"I finished high school and Mike worked," Valerie said. "I didn't see him for six months then he was gone for..."

"Two years," Mike said. He reached to hold Valerie's hand. "When I came back, she had graduated high school and was on her way to UCLA. I had been around the country and some of the world."

"And the desire to be together was still there," Valerie said. "I thought he'd finished his two years. He was done. He was home. We'd move to LA together and... But after a few weeks of leave, he was gone."

"That was about a hundred times harder than the horrible first time," Mike said. "And I don't think things really were the same after that. Until Monterey."

"Until Monterey."

"Monterey?" the interviewer asked.

"My team was assigned to Fort Irwin for training. Valerie moved to Barstow to be near me. When she went back to school, we saw each other every weekend."

"We got married on New Year's Eve," Valerie said.

"Val, we've looked for your marriage license and we haven't found one for you," the interviewer said.

"I have both of my parent's last names. I'm Valerie Marlowe Lipson. I was married as Valerie Marlowe and Mike..."

"My family name was Repin. When I entered the Army, I had to dig out my birth certificate. Low and behold, Megan and I are Repins. Our other siblings were born here in Denver. They're Ropers. I was married under my legal name Mikhail Repin."

"But your name is Roper?" the interviewer asked

"Yes, ma'am. We still called ourselves Mike and Val Roper, we married under our official names," Mike said. "Megan sorted our names out after I died."

"What?" the interviewer almost jumped from her chair.

Valerie gave the interviewer a soft smile then continued with their story.

"We lived in Monterey. I finished school early and we played house. It was a truly magical time in my life."

"Mine too." Mike shrugged his shoulders. His sigh spoke volumes. "Then it ended."

"My team was assigned to the Middle East," Mike said. "Val and I had been through this so many, many times that you'd think we'd have gotten used to it. I know people who learn to deal with it. But for us, it was…"

"Horribly sad." Valerie finished his sentence.

"Val made it work for me. She is a great actress. She put on a bright face and helped me every step of the way. She was… a delight on every phone call. She sent me those pictures..."

"Pictures?"

"You know the ones. The poses of me naked? I think the entire world has seen them. Well, I took them for Mike. I was in our bedroom. You can see the ocean in a couple of them."

"I've seen them," the interviewer said. "I'd say they are more seductive photos than nudes."

"That's nice of you to say," Valerie said. "I... I wanted to make him miss me… a lot."

"She's right, Val," Mike said. "They're not like Penthouse or Playboy. No full frontal nudity. They're just you and the camera. They're very seductive."

Valerie gave him a soft smile.

"She sent me a photo a week," Mike said. "And we tried to talk every night. I noticed her body was changing but..."

"I was pregnant," Valerie said.

Mike's eyes filled. When he turned to look at Valerie, she kissed him.

"Mike went on a mission. I was going to tell him when he came back, but I met two Army men instead. They told me Mike was missing and I should assume he was dead," Valerie said. "My mother died the next day and I lost the baby a few days later. In the course of a few days, I lost the three people that mattered most to me. I… barely survived."

"And where were you, Mike?" the interviewer asked.

Mike looked at the woman then looked at Valerie. With the question, his mouth was cotton ball dry. His eyes flicked across his brother and sisters, Valerie's family, and the billion people in that tiny room. Like an oasis in the desert, his eyes landed on Alex Hargreaves. Wearing a ridiculous maid's costume, her green arm band tattoo peaking from the ruffled edges of her sleeve, she winked at him. He let out a breath.

"That's the question. I have no idea. My team was in a transport helicopter out of Turkey and... I was so focused on what we had to do, what I had to do, that the *where* wasn't important. I was rehearsing in my mind what I would do when the pilot came on the headsets to tell us the electric systems were malfunctioning. We strapped in and waited for him to land.

"If you talk to people who have been through this kind of thing, you never expect that something bad is going to happen. You just do what's next – strap in and wait."

Mike rubbed his forehead and looked up. Alex Hargreaves nodded and he continued.

"Then WHAM, everything fell apart. The Army says the helicopter crashed against an object the pilot didn't see. I'll tell you, it felt like a small bomb went off. I dropped forward to avoid… fire, metal, body parts, objects… I don't know… stuff coming at me.

"I don't remember landing. I may have passed out. I injured my head," Mike pointed to a thin scar just under his hair line. "I woke up strapped to my seat. We started with twelve men and four pilots. Ten of us survived the crash.

"I grew up here… in Colorado. I spent most of my youth in the mountains camping or skiing. We landed in the mountains. I wasn't in charge of the group, but I was the only one who knew what to do."

"From growing up in the mountains?" the interviewer asked.

"Exactly. Under my direction, we bandaged people, built fires and looked over our supplies. We separated out the dead men. We were situated just as night fall came. I..." Mike's eyes filled. "We lost a couple men that night."

Valerie slipped her hand into his. He looked into her smile and love filled eyes then gave a soft smile.

"We were perched on this rocky ledge. We couldn't stay there. No way. We only had the water and food we scavenged from the wreckage. We decided to split up. We built a shelter for the men who couldn't travel and gave them most of our food and water."

"Why didn't the Army come for you?" the interviewer asked.

"We think of the world as easily accessible. But the Army wasn't sure where we went down. They sent someone for us immediately but it was eight hours to where we started then another twelve to where we refueled then..."

Mike shrugged.

"We've talked to a couple of the men who were left behind," the interviewer said. "They said the Army arrived three days after you left."

"Three days," Mike said. "The guys had food and water for a day, maybe two."

"But they survived. Every one of them said they survived because of you. You made a fire from a stick?"

"Well, yeah, that's what you're supposed to do. You settle in and wait." Mike shrugged.

"The Army searched for you," the interviewer said. "They never found you. What happened?"

"We set off to find water and food. That meant we had to head down off the mountain. We weren't in the greatest shape so the going was slow. But we were Army hardened. We stumbled, fell, walked for as long as we could stay on our feet. We made camp the first night."

"What about your GPS and equipment?"

"Most of our equipment was destroyed in the crash. And you can ask anybody about GPS in the mountains. When it works, it's inaccurate about 60% of the time. We couldn't get a signal and the map was wrong.

"That first night, we dropped most of our possessions. I kept food, water and Valerie's pictures. I had the pictures in this pouch right next to my heart. I knew exactly where I was going. I was hiking home… to Valerie.

"It never occurred to us that someone was tracking us. In all my years in the Rockies, I never saw anyone. But no one lives in caves in the Rockies.

"We were picked up about two days into our hike."

Mike stopped talking. For a moment, his mind flooded with images.

"I've thought a lot about this," Mike said. "We invaded their land, their country. I've thought about how I'd feel if I found three foreign soldiers in the middle of the Rockies or walking down the street… We… Anyway, they took us back to their camp.

"There was a lot of yelling, hitting, and all the stuff you can imagine. They wanted to know why we were there and we wouldn't tell them. Truth was that we weren't supposed to be there. But why would they believe us? By the time they hiked to the crash site, the Army had been there and gone. The Army took everything – men, chopper, everything. The Army even cleaned up the char marks from the crash and the fire. When they got back? The shit hit the fan.

Mike shrugged.

"They sent someone to get the head guy in their region. After the initial drama, things fell into a normal pattern. It was hard for us Americans. We were used to doing what we wanted when we wanted, even in the Army. We were captives. We did what we were told.

"The guys and I were strong and capable. We knew someone would come for us eventually. As long as we were of value to them, they fed us. So we worked and worked and worked and worked.

"I told you I had the photos next to my heart. I didn't know Val was pregnant. She was my life, my heart, my soul. I... I just focused on the pictures. When I was alone, I would take them out. She has this smile in those pictures. A kind of, 'I have a secret' smile. I'd imagine we were talking or laughing. Those pictures and Val saved me."

"The photos we just talked about?" the interviewer asked.

Mike nodded.

"What was it like for you, Val?"

"I went numb for a while," she said. "Then I got mad. I told the Army that I wanted Mike's body. I insisted, in fact. I hired lawyers, talked to Senators and banged on any door I could bang on. When we just got bullshit back, we started to look for Mike."

"We?"

"My brother and I," Valerie said. "We hired ex-military or ex-CIA guys to search for him. We compiled stacks of paper, spent… lots of money, but never found Mike. We were able to convince the Army there was a possibility Mike was alive."

"So Val's looking for Mike. And Mike you're waiting for the head guy to determine your fate?"

"Yeah. We were there about six months before that guy showed up. And wanted information. They... I don't remember most of it. Then they found the photos. Pornography. Evil. I fought for them, which made things worse for me. They pinned me down and cut my face." Mike pointed to a scar on his jaw. "I thought they were going to cut my face off. I wouldn't give up the photos. So they… Anyway, I lost the photos."

The room was silent. Every face held round, shocked eyes. Even the interviewer was at a loss for words. The cameraman wiped a renegade tear. When Alex cleared her throat, the interviewer startled then came back to herself.

"What was that like?" the interviewer asked.

"I lost my mind. Days passed. One guy tried to kill himself."

"He said you kept him from bleeding to death," the interviewer said.

"Yeah, I guess I did. I wanted to kill myself but..."

He looked at Valerie then stroked her face with his hand. She smiled.

"In my insanity, I would draw Val's picture in the dirt. I wasn't an artist or a painter or anything. I thought I'd go to medical school when I got out."

"What happened to the photos?"

"I thought they destroyed the photos. Pornography, you know," Mike said. "But they needed money. Bad. They put the photos up for sale. Val's Dad found them in like two hours and paid a lot of money for them."

"Do you know how much?" the interviewer asked.

"Two or three million I think," Mike said. "He won't say."

"My Dad and I weren't in contact then," Valerie said. "I didn't know he bought the photos. He took the photos and my brother's file on Mike to our Colorado Senator, Patrick Hargreaves. The Senator took the photos and file from my Dad and said he'd take care of it."

"Did you know that?" the interviewer asked.

"No," Valerie said. "I was already an actress. I had put this shell around me… so I couldn't get hurt, I guess. By then, I wasn't speaking to my brother or my father."

Mike pulled her closer to him then kissed her head.

"Those photos? That's how they found me," Mike said. "Senator Hargreaves sent them through the channels and the Fey team was notified within forty-eight hours. They were in the air within a week."

"The Fey team?" the interviewer asked.

"Special Forces. They used to get hostages. That's what they did. Retrieved hostages. They were killed a couple years ago."

Mike looked across at Alex. She gave him a 'good job' smile.

"What happened when they rescued you?"

"I'll tell you what I remember. At night, they chained me up in this area with the other guys. I mean, I wasn't really sane. I'd sleep a couple hours then draw Val's photos. The guys helped me get more charcoal or chalky rocks for the photos. I guess these pictures, so full of beauty and love, bolstered us. Well, they found them and it was not good.

"They figured that I drew them, so they isolated me from the rest. I was sure they were going to kill me. I just knew it.

After one particularly bad… evening, I fell flat on the floor. My arms were out in front of me. I wanted to die. I wanted to just disappear. That's how I was when the Fey team found me.

"I'm laying there, mostly crazy, and I hear this: 'Damn, Michael, I didn't know you even WANTED to be a priest.'"

"What?" the interviewer asked.

"Priests lay like that before the alter when they are ordained. Guess you're not Catholic."

"No," she said.

"Makes it less funny then." Mike smiled.

"What happened next?"

"I tried to roll over but I was in pretty bad shape. Their medic put me out. That's all I remember until waking up on the plane home. They knocked me out in the hospital. I had a couple surgeries. The moment I could move, I was out of the hospital and caught a plane to LA."

"Did you know he was alive, Val?"

"No," Valerie said. "I had alienated a lot of people with my… insistence on searching for Mike. I think they wanted to have him… in hand and healthy before they told me."

"I flew to LA and watched Entertainment tonight. I waited outside the Ivy and…" Mike shrugged.

"I fainted when I saw him," Valerie said. "We spent a month together. I tried..."

"I was insane," Mike said. "God, poor Val. I was still in bandages from the surgeries, bruised up, AWOL and a complete mess."

"I wasn't much better," Valerie said. "He left about a month later. Checked himself into the VA. By the time he came back, I was publically engaged to Sean."

"We have an interview with Sean where he says that he's gay," the interviewer said. "His mother had terminal cancer."

"Sean thought his mother would die at peace if she knew he was 'over' his gayness. He told her it was a phase and we were getting married. She died a couple days later," Valerie said. "It's not the most politically correct thing to do, so Sean and I hid it."

"That's what he said," the interviewer said. "He also said you did the same thing for his partner a few years later."

Valerie nodded.

"But Mike saw those engagements as a betrayal..." Valerie said. "Of course."

"We had a lot of push, pull," Mike said. "I didn't have a job or a life. I camped out in the garage of this place."

"Your studio," the interviewer said.

"Not then. It was a garage. No running water, no heat. I camped there, went to therapy. Delphie, the woman who lived here, in the Castle, had no idea I was in the garage. Valerie and I saw each other probably twice a month. Valerie would come see me or I would go there," Mike said. "Val was like an obsession. When she was gone, I thought of her constantly. When she was here, I couldn't stand myself."

"It was the same for me," Valerie said.

"Then Val's brother, Jake, moved back to Colorado," Mike said.

"Jake's a spark." Valerie beamed. "He gets fires going. He got Mike working on the Castle and playing hockey again. The studio was covered in these drawings of me. Jake bought paints and left them for Mike. After a few missteps, Mike picked up oil painting like he was born to it. The first completed canvass is the one that's in the museum."

"I'd drawn the image so many times, it was like just getting it down," Mike said. "Once I started, I didn't stop."

"What about Wes?"

"Mike and I fell into a rhythm of seeing each other a week a month and some weekends," Valerie said. "But we struggled. I became enamored with Wes. Wes is so normal, so slick. Mike and I had a fight about him, then Wes sent a car for me."

"A car?"

"An Aston Martin," Valerie said. "Mike was furious. He threw me out of the house, told me never ever to come back."

"I'm a real asshole," Mike said. "You don't have to wonder why she left."

"I deserved it," Valerie said. "I walked the edge, never committing to Mike or anyone for a long time. I couldn't stand losing him again. It would kill me. Just kill me. I couldn't have Mike and I couldn't be away from him. I went back to LA and started a relationship with Wes."

Valerie fell silent. She closed and opened her eyes then let out a breath.

"This man lay on the floor while men kicked him, broke his bones and refused to give up photos of me. They cut his face with some tribal knife and he wouldn't give them up." Tears streamed down Valerie's face. "And when he came back, I was too afraid to love him.

"Everyone's said all this stuff about my lowlife husband. I mean, Wes said that I preferred a stable animal to a thoroughbred champion. But Mike's the hero who fought for me.

"This time I'm going to fight for him. For us."

When Valerie broke down, Mike pulled her onto his lap. There was not a dry eye in the room. For at least a minute, the only sound in the room was sniffing.

"That's a wrap," the producer choked out.

Chapter Thirty-Four
Slaying a Tiger

Mike nodded his good-bye then walked off the stage. Deeply embarrassed at the standing ovation, he craved the quiet dark of backstage. He reached behind him for Valerie's hand and felt the immediate pulse of her. Spinning in place, he wrapped himself around her. In each other's tight embrace, they regained some sense of balance.

"I'm sorry," Alex Hargreaves said. "We have to keep moving. There's a crowd outside and we understand one growing around the Castle. You still want to go home?"

"I need to go home," Mike said over Valerie's shoulder. "Can I have…?"

"We'll head out. Two minutes?" Alex asked.

Mike nodded. Alex and her team went down the hall way to the stage door. Dressed in digital fatigues, dark glasses, hats and exposed side arms, the team had held Valerie's fans at bay when they arrived by limousine. Judging by the sound, there was a Black Hawk waiting for them somewhere close. When Alex opened the door to the street, they heard people, a lot of people, cheer.

"I love you," Valerie said. "I never, ever thought you would do this."

"I do anything for you, Val," Mike said. "I'm sorry about Wes."

"You mean when he told Oprah I was a selfish bitch? Or the part about how I betrayed him and stole from him?"

"The whole thing," Mike said. He pulled her even closer.

"He's said much worse. They must have edited," Valerie said.

"How did you know?"

"Jill's friend Tanisha brought me a couple of magazines. She wanted me to know exactly what a 'bitch-ass' he was being. She didn't want me to go back to him and destroy my life."

"But you're Ok..."

"Mikhail, my love and hero, has just slayed a tiger for me. Why should I care what the jester says?"

"A tiger?" Mike put his hands around her face then kissed her.

She nodded. He laughed. She kissed him.

"Time to go," Captain Mac Clenaghan, Alex's second in command, said. "We want you at the center of a diamond formation. There are a lot of people out here. Wave to the crowd like the prom king and queen then we'll surround you. Got it."

"Yes, sir," Mike said.

He looked at Valerie and she nodded. They followed the Captain to the door.

"Stand here. Go out only on my say so."

Mike took Valerie's hand. They nodded. The Captain pushed open the door. A call went through the crowd for Valerie, and Mike.

"Ok go ahead," the Captain said.

Mike stepped through the door first then laughed. Parting the sea of people, a hundred soldiers, active and veterans, stood guard in their dress uniform. They created a tight corridor for Valerie and Mike to walk through. Valerie stepped next to him.

"Guess you have some friends," Valerie said.

Mike looked down at Valerie then smiled.

"Prom king and queen," the Captain said.

Still holding hands, Mike and Valerie raised their hands to wave at the crowd. As they walked down the corridor, the

soldiers popped to salute.

"That's for you," Valerie said into Mike's ear.

He puzzled at her then smiled. Waving they went down the corridor to the helicopter. One of Alex's team bent down to help Valerie through the doors and into her seat. The team helped Valerie strap in and Mike sat next to her. Within moments, they were flying west-southwest over the city of Chicago a straight line for Denver.

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Thursday afternoon

"What exactly are you saying?" Aden asked the Social Services investigator.

"We've interviewed the children, spoken with their therapist, reviewed your employment files and had a detailed conversation with your ex-wife. At this point, it's our belief that it is not in your children's best interest to interact with their mother."

"And that means?"

Aden was so freaked out about having any kind of conversation with Social Services that he couldn't grasp what the woman was saying.

"We are requesting that you work with a Special Advocate to determine the conditions of Nuala's return to your children's life."

"But don't they need contact with their mother?" Aden asked. "What about the custody arrangement?"

"Sir, we went over this a moment ago," the Social Services representative said. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I'm sorry. I'm too anxious to think straight.. Would you mind if I get someone to help? I mean, I know you didn't want..."

"Please," the woman said. Her impatient look spoke volumes.

Aden opened the door to the hall where Blane and Jacob waited for him.

"She's saying something but I..." Aden started.

Jacob smiled at Aden. He and Blane followed Aden into the office.

"I apologize for my friend, ma'am," Jacob said. "His kids are everything to him. He's been upset about this entire situation. I'm Jacob Marlowe and this is Blane Lipson."

Jacob and Blane sat on either side of Aden.

"We are recommending Noelle and Nash Norsen no longer have contact with their mother, Nuala Norsen."

The woman raised her eyebrows at Jacob and Blane after she repeated what she had said to Aden.

"That's what I don't understand," Aden said. He leaned back against his chair.

"I understand that you are recommending no contact between Noelle, Nash and their mother," Jacob said.

"That's correct."

"I think what's confusing is that after this incident, which includes an attempt to prostitute her ten year old daughter for drugs, Nuala retains her parental rights." Jacob raised his eyebrows with indignation.

"Right. That's exactly right," Aden said. "So we'll go through this again in a year? Two years?"

"Sir, Nuala Norsen has told our investigator that she's entering rehab to give up drugs." The investigator read her report, curled her lip at the information, and then nodded. "That's what it says. She's already talking to the district attorney to make a plea bargain for her case."

"But she'll come back. As soon as she's out of jail, she'll come..."

Aden's pressured voice revealed his panic. Blane put his hand on Aden's shoulder to silence his anxious sputter.

"Ma'am," Blane said. "If Aden wanted to eliminate this threat from his children's lives, what would he need to do?"

The woman smiled as if finally they were getting somewhere.

"I'm not an attorney, Mr. Lipson. But I would suggest that Mr. Norsen speak with an attorney. We will be happy to support the best interest of the children."
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"And the best interest of the children right now is…?" Jacob asked.

"They have no contact with their mother at this time," the woman said.

"And their father will become their sole custodian? Is that correct?" Jacob asked.

"Yes, sir," the woman said. "I cannot speak to the legalities but our recommendations are that the children live with their father in his home."

Jacob laughed and clapped Aden on the back. Aden looked at Jacob then shook his head.

"That's not all of it," Aden said.

"It's our understanding that the Denver Police are not pursuing a case against Mr. Norsen," the woman said. "In order to support his sole custody, Social Services has a few requirements."

"See," Aden said.

The woman glared Aden into silence.

"Ma'am, what are the requirements?" Jacob asked.

"We require Mr. Norsen's sobriety. We require that the children remain in therapy. We require that their father maintain a stable residence, school and social life," the woman said.

"What documentation will be required?" Blane asked.

"Random drug testing and regular reports from the therapist," the investigator said.

"Oh," Aden stammered. "Oh. Well that's…"

"Outside of the drug testing, you are saying he must keep everything the same as it is right now. Is that correct?" Jacob asked.

"Yes Mr. Marlowe, that's correct." Smiling, the woman nodded. "Is he always like this?"

"Just as far as his kids are concerned," Jacob replied.

"May I have a copy of the report?" Blane asked. "Would you mind helping me find the forms Aden will need..."

"Of course, if you will come with me..."

The woman stood. She held her hand out to Aden. Aden looked at her hand then, jumping to his feet, he impulsively hugged her. The woman laughed.

"Thanks," Aden said.

"The man you should thank is Detective O'Malley down at DPD. He's did most of the criminal investigation on you. Usually we wait for months for these things, but he completed it in less than a week. He recommended not pursuing a case against you. That's was your last hold up for sole custody."

"Well, thank you for all your work," Aden said.

"You're welcome. You need to speak with an attorney. We'll be happy to provide our reports to assist you."

"Thank you. I... Thanks," Aden said.

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Thursday afternoon

"Hi Molly," Sam said. Stepping aside, he let the young woman into the Castle. "Jacob's not here. He, Aden and Blane went to Social Services."

"Shit," Molly said. Tugging on her curly brown hair, she bit her lip. "Crap."

"I'm sure you can get him on his Blackberry. Do you have his number?" Sam asked.

"I'm his assistant, Mr. Lipson. I mean for his home rehab business. I mean, I'm really an accountant, well bookkeeper, but I also help him with customers and other stuff... And… I mean, I know he's the President of Lipson Construction but..."

Nodding, Sam waited for the flood of words to end.

"I mean I saw him on television last night. Well, that's part of the problem. And I tried his phone and even texted him. And, I mean, I know he's super busy and when he doesn't answer his text he's usually asleep or sick or unable to
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answer or... I don't know. It's only been a week or so since he got injured but it seems like forever. And… Why are you home, Mr. Lipson?"

Sam continued nodding for a minute until he realized she had asked him a question.

"We've had an unusual day."

"Oh," Molly said. "How did the interview go? Mike and Val right?"

"It was painful for everyone who loves them. Did you watch it on television?"

"Uh huh," Molly said. "I was surprised because she's never done a live show or not in a long time or maybe never, I haven't checked. She said the story was too compelling to hold onto, even for a week. Was it compelling to you? I was compelled. I cried a couple of times. Gosh that Wes is a real jerk. I hope..."

"Molly," Sam said. "I was getting a change of clothing to go out to a site. You were looking for Jake?"

"Oh right." Molly blushed. "Sorry. I don't know what to do, Mr. Lipson."

"Maybe I can help." Sam led Molly into the main Castle living room.

"Wow, it's really fixed up. Is this for the party?" Molly asked.

"Yep. You and Pete are coming, right?"

Molly nodded. She bit her lip again and pulled at her hair.

"Molly?"

"Just before Jake got hurt, like hours before, he pulled some windows from a house we are almost done with. I mean, the owners changed their minds and added the windows, so it's really their fault. They've been really nice. The owners, I mean. They haven't pressed at all but they want to move in. I mean, the house is really done but there are these gaping holes where the windows were. I asked the guy who does some of our extra carpentry work. He said he could help but Jake does it differently than everyone else. Well the owners? They want Jake. Period. I mean..."

"I can put windows in, Molly," Sam said.

"Oh, that's sweet of you, Mr. Lipson, but Jake puts them in a special way. He puts them in so you can't..."

"See the nails or seams. Sure."

"How did you know that?"

"Where do you think Jake learned it? It's been a while but I bet with a little help, I could do it," Sam said. "I'm supposed to help Jake starting next year."

"When you retire?" Molly asked.

"Yes."

"Why didn't Jake tell me that?" Molly bit her lip.

"Because he doesn't believe I'll stop working at Lipson," Sam said. "You know what Molly? I'd love to work on some windows. It's exactly what I need right now."

"There's a piece that is rotten. Can you…?"

"Of course," Sam said. "Where are the windows?"

"At the workshop. I picked them up earlier this week. I mean, I know it's stupid but I kept hoping Jake would... He's really sick still."

"He's mending," Sam said. "What's the deadline?"

"Well, the owners decided to paint. Colors. But they need a color consultant. We've used a woman who's really good, I don't know her name. She works at Belcaro Paints. Has an Irish last name I never remember. She's fast too. But, she's not available for a while. Or at least that's what Belcaro said. They have a couple people but she's really good so I want to wait for her. The owners..."

"I have someone who might help." Sam smiled. "You know Jill, right? I bet she's your Belcaro expert."

"Wow, Jill. That's right. Her last name was McGuinsey. I always forget that. Great. I can have painters through in a day. Oh. Gosh, that's just great."

"When do you need the windows?"

"Tonight? No, if we paint then... How about by Sunday? The owners could move in next week after the painters finish."

Sam nodded. "I'll take a look at them tonight and let you know if there are any complications."

"Thanks Mr. Lipson." Molly beamed at Sam. "See you tomorrow night?"

"I'll look for you," Sam said then walked her to the door.

Molly smiled, waved, and then went across the lawn and into the growing crowd.

"We were right," Delphie said. She had watched the entire interaction from the kitchen entrance. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"When you first brought it up, I thought it was crazy. I can't go back to carpentry! I'm an underground man."

"I remember," she said.

"But you're right, Delphie. I need movement, something to look forward to other than fishing and lying around."

"You've never been that man," Delphie said.

"What's Jacob going to say?"

"I'm sure he already knows. Don't worry about Jake."

"He was so angry when I went to see him in Maine. Furious. And I can't blame him. He's not even thirty yet. I don't..."

"Don't worry," Delphie said. "Do you need to get to a site right away?"

"No."

"Would you like to help me with my beehives? I want to do a split so we have a few extra hives going into winter. I need help lifting a few boxes. Mike usually helps me but he's in Chicago."

Sam beamed. He hadn't realized how worried he'd been about his future. As relatively young man, what was he going to do with himself when he stepped away from Lipson Construction? The worry ate at his peace of mind. He hadn't slept well.

Hearing Delphie talk about beehives, and the joy of carpentry, he saw his life continuing. Yes, bees, his hammer, a few projects and fishing and love and...

"Come on, old man," Delphie laughed. "Help me then get on your way."

"Yes, ma'am."

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Thursday evening — 8 P.M.

Blushing, Jill twirled her glass of Merlot then looked up at Jacob. He had arranged their first real date for them. Everything was perfect. He even picked out her outfit from her new Claire Martin's clothing then presented her with matching Louboutin heels. In her size! She stretched out her toes in the shoes. They didn't even hurt too much.

Sitting at a small table in Twelve Restaurant, she felt like a princess in a story book.

"Say something," Jacob said.

"I'm not sure what to say," Jill said. "I've never… any of this. I don't even know what to order."

"I ordered for us when I made the reservation," Jacob said. "They serve an amazing lobster here. I haven't had anything like it since leaving Maine."

"I've never had lobster." Jill smiled.

"You look good enough to eat," he said.

Jill's blush deepened. She leaned back for the waiter to set their salads in front of them. When she leaned forward, Jacob took her hand.

"You said you wanted to talk about the fall," he said.

"I've decided what I want to do this fall," Jill said. "I mean, if it's okay with you and ..."

Jacob winked at her. Jill often asked Jacob's permission for what she wanted to do. He didn't like it, but couldn't seem to convince her otherwise. She nodded.. Clenching her teeth, she gathered her courage.

"I'd like to go to college in the fall. Full time." She took a drink of her wine for courage. "And I want to work at Pete's a
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couple nights."

She nodded. Jacob waited for her to finish.

"I know I have the money from the diamonds and the modeling thing, but I really loved working at Pete's."

Jacob opened his mouth to say something.

"Pete's is like a family to me. I'll need help with Katy."

"Ok, that's easy. We can plan around it," Jacob said.

"You're all right with it?"

"Of course," he said. "I think it's a great idea. I bet you'll love going to college. I don't know if you can get in this late but we can sort that out."

"I checked," Jill said. "I can take classes at Metro or the community college and transfer when I get into UC Denver. What about Pete's?"

"If you want to work there, you want to work there." Jacob shrugged. "Katy and I will survive."

"She can stay with Megan," Jill said. "I need help with school and..."

"If I'm going to be Katy's father, then I can take care of her a few nights on my own."

"What do you mean?"

"We agreed that I'm adopting Katy, right?" Jacob asked.

"We signed the papers and submitted them to the courts," Jill said. "My lawyer said it would be six months until we were sure."

"Fathers take care of their children sometimes. Look at Aden, he has his kids all the time. That's what fathers do."

"Oh." Jill blushed again. "Really?"

"My Dad used to take us all day Sunday. It gave Mom a break and gave us some time to be together. It was fun. He still takes care of Briana and Becky."

"Oh."

"You're Dad didn't ..."

"I don't really remember. I don't think so. Tim takes care of their kids. He said he would take care of them if Meg went to college. I've been trying to talk Megan into going to school with me. I think she might. I just… I mean..."

"Yes?"

Jill almost said 'Trevor didn't ever take are of Katy'. She promised herself she wasn't going to talk about him anymore.

"That would be great," Jill said.

"So we'll work it out together?"

"Right," Jill said. "Together. Right."

Hoping Jacob would forget the other thing she was supposed to tell him about, the button, she focused her attention on her salad.

"You were going to tell me about the button," he said.

"I..."

Her cell phone rang. Pulling the phone from her bag, she saw that it was Megan.

"I'm sorry. I have to answer," she said. "It's Meg. Katy's..."

"Go ahead," he said.

"Meg?" Jill asked.

"Jill! Katy's having some kind of a seizure. Steve and Leslie are here for dinner. Steve said she's not having a seizure, because he's seen them at work… you know in the NICU. He says it's more like a fit. Her temperature spiked and her eyes rolled back. She was like that for a while then woke up. She seems okay. We called the nurse on call and she agreed with Steve. The nurse said to watch her. But..."

"I'll be right there," Jill hung up her phone. "I'm sorry Jacob, but Katy's sick."

Jacob popped to his feet. Within moments, they were on the sidewalk stepping into a cab.

“She spiked a fever and her eyes rolled back,” Jill said. “I guess she seems okay but...”

“What?” Jacob stunned face unnerved Jill. “What do you mean?”

“She spiked a fever and her eyes rolled back,” Jill repeated.

“Jill.” Jacob’s intense look caught Jill of guard. “Was she responsive?”

“I don’t think so,” Jill said. “Why?”

Jacob shook his head and looked out the window. Jill put her hand on his sling.

“You’re scaring me, Jacob. What are you thinking?”

Jacob turned back to her. His eyes reviewed her face.

“I’ve thought and thought… I’ve gone over everything I can think of...”

“Jacob! What is it?”

“How is it possible that Katy is my child?”

Chapter Thirty-Five
Things are changing

Friday morning — 6 A.M.

"Where's Mommy?" Katy asked the moment she opened her eyes.

"Mommy has a very big day today," Jacob said. He lowered the gate to Katy 's crib.

"But Mommy always helps me wake up. Always. Always. Unless I'm at Aunt Megan's house. Mommy wakes me up."

As if hoping Jacob would turn into her mother, Katy didn't move to get up.

"I know," Jacob said. "Your Mom was very upset when she realized she wouldn't be able to help you get started this morning. She thought you'd be at Aunt Megan's."

"Oh." Katy sat up. "Where's Mommy?"

Jacob sighed. How to explain to a three year old something he didn't quite understand?

"She's getting beautified. All day."

"That's silly." Katy laughed. "But Mommy's already beautiful.

"That's exactly what I said but she went anyway." Jacob gave an exaggerated sigh. "You're stuck with me. Your Mommy was very worried but I assured her that I could do this. It's a trial run at being a Daddy."

"I'll help you, Daddy," Katy said. "First, you tell me how much you love me. Then you ask me how my sleep was. When I won't get up, you tickle me and kiss my face."

Katy flopped back onto the mattress and pulled her covers up to her nose.

"Go ahead," Katy said. She made fake snoring sounds.

Laughing, Jacob recited his part. By the time he got to 'How was your sleep?," Katy was giggling. He tickled her and kissed her face.

"How was that?" Jacob asked. He helped her out of the crib.

"Good," Katy said.

"We need to get you into your big girl bed," he said.

"I know," Katy said. She took his hand and they walked across the apartment to the bathroom. "But Mommy hasn't decided if I should have zoo animals or states or angels on my walls. It's a big decision. Uncle Mike is waiting for her to decide."

"Can you do the bathroom yourself? Or do you need help?"

"I can do it," Katy said. "I do it at school."

"Okay, I'll pick out something for you to wear."

"NO! That's WRONG, Daddy. I pick out my OWN clothes."

Katy crossed her arms and glared at him. Jacob laughed.

"Yes, ma'am. How about if I wait right here?"

Katy nodded her head then primly closed the bathroom door.

Shaking his head, Jacob waited by the bathroom.

By now, he should know to expect almost anything. Last night, after what he was sure was a psychic vision, Katy was fine. Healthy and giggly. But when he asked Katy what happened, she said, "Naomi says I shouldn't tell you now." The little girl laughed at his shocked face.

And there was no doubt that Trevor was Katy's father. Jill was absolutely certain. Everyone else must just be wrong. Wishful thinking, that's what she said.

Today, with a little help from Delphie, Jacob was going to find out what was going on with Katy. Or so he promised a

weeping, anxious Jill last night.

"All done?" Jacob asked.

"I didn't brush my hair," Katy said. "I wanted to keep my Mommy braid."

"Good plan," Jacob said. "She's going to get you ready for your nap. She'll do your hair then. Remember we have a big party tonight."

Katy nodded. "Lots of kids are coming to our house while their parents dance and stuff."

"Yep," Jacob said. "Mommy and I will take care of you most of the time."

"Except when Uncle Mike or Uncle Steve are there. Paddie's coming after nap." Katy jumped up and down with glee. "Can I wear my pretty dress now?"

"Let's save it for later," Jacob said. "Mommy is excited to help you get ready. We don't want to spoil it for her. Do we?"

Katy shook her head. She ran across the apartment to the big closet and opened the door. Jill and Katy's few clothes filled only half of the left side of Jacob's walk in closet. Katy picked her favorite 'orangey gauzy' dress and pink 'flippy floppies' for today. She was almost dressed when Delphie tapped on the door then stuck her head in. Trailing Jacob, Katy threw herself into Delphie's arms. Jacob finished buttoning Katy's dress while she hugged Delphie.

"Naomi said you'd come today." Katy beamed.

Jacob and Delphie shared a look over Katy's head.

"Who's Naomi, honey?" Delphie asked.

"My Grandmommy!" Katy grabbed Delphie's hand and pulled her into the apartment. "Are you going to help Daddy take care of me?"

"I wanted to ask you about Naomi," Delphie said. "Would you like some cereal for breakfast?"

"I want the smiley guy," Katy said. "But Daddy can't have any cereal."

"It's a sad day," Jacob said.

"Daddy is working to get well," Delphie said. "He's off the cereal for a while."

"I'll eat DOUBLE."

Katy laughed at her own joke. She held her arms up and Delphie lifted her to her booster seat. Within moments, Katy was devouring her Captain Crunch. Delphie sedately ate a bowl of Kashi Go Lean. And poor Jacob sipped his protein berry smoothie with 'this and that' added to build his 'blood and chi.' Taking a bite, Delphie nodded to Jacob.

"Katy, I was wondering if you could tell us what happened last night?" Jacob asked.

"You mean going to Aunt Megan's or eating spaghetti or playing light saber with my cousin Ryan or when I had the dream or when Daddy and Mommy came or…?"

"The dream," Delphie said.

"Oh." Katy blushed. She furrowed her brow then returned to eating her cereal.

"Katy?" Jacob asked.

"I'm deciding."

"Deciding what?" Jacob asked.

"Well, I don't talk about my dreams because people get upset," Katy said.

"We won't get upset, honey," Delphie said. "We understand what it's like."

"You do?" Katy's dark eyes blinked at Delphie. Delphie nodded. Katy looked at Jacob.

"I started having them when I was a little younger than you," Jacob said. "How long have you had them?"

"I had my first one the day I met Naomi," Katy said. "My old Daddy hit my Mommy with his fist. He was drunk and mad. So Mommy hid me in the closet. Naomi came to visit me. She told me he wasn't my REAL Daddy and I shouldn't be afraid. Then I had a dream."

Jacob opened his mouth to say something but words didn't come out. Somewhere between 'hit with fist' and 'drunk and mad', his mind went blank with anger. Delphie put her hand over his for comfort.

"What did you dream?" Delphie asked.

"I dreamed that I would meet you and Daddy would be my Daddy," Katy said. "That's why I asked him in that hospital place."

"Do your dreams always come true?" Jacob asked.

"Not all of them. Just the ones that happen when I'm awake."

"What do you mean?" Delphie asked.

"You know, I'm awake then I have a dream."

Jacob and Delphie nodded their heads.

"My mother used to have them," Jacob said.

"Naomi," Katy said. "She's your Mommy."

"Yes, that was one on her names," Jacob said. "You know that she's d… not real, right?"

"She's real, Daddy. She's just not here," Katy said. "She told me last night that Grand-Delphie would help me. She said you should practice too Daddy."

"Only your mother can scold from the grave." Delphie laughed.

Jacob laughed.

"I'm ready," Katy said. She pushed her bowl away. "But... Daddy will you do it with me? I'm scared I'll have the bad one again."

"The bad one?" Jacob was half way to the sink with Katy's bowl when he turned.

"The one where my old Daddy steals me away."

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Friday morning — 11 A.M.

Sam stepped back from the window to admire his work. He'd forgotten how much he enjoyed carpentry. With Aden and Blane at the helm of Lipson Construction, he was able to spend the afternoon installing windows. Hearing a sound, he turned to see Jacob come up behind him.

"The master returns," Jacob said.

"We'll see. I have three more to go," Sam said.

"Looks like you're doing a great job," Jacob said. He moved to the second window. "Oh, thanks for fixing the rotten piece on this frame."

Nodding, Sam picked up the next window.

"I heard to oddest thing," Jacob said.

"Uh huh." Sam slid a window into place. "These are nice. Double paned, low e. I didn't know this was even possible."

"It's relatively new. Most people can't do it because..."

"They jack up the frames taking them out," Sam finished Jacob's sentence.

"Exactly." Jacob gave Sam a can of spray insulation to fill the gaps around the window.

"This insulation is great too," Sam said. "Why didn't you replace the windows at home?"

"I love the wavy lead windows at the Castle. They're especially beautiful in your room," Jacob said. "It's a heat loss, but we've done a great job filling the gaps, double insulating and using Delphie's insulated shades. New windows would only give us a minor difference."

Sam nodded then moved to the next window.

"I hear I picked up a new business partner."

Jacob used his left hand to help Sam lift the largest, heaviest window. Sam installed the window rather than respond to Jacob.

"What do you think about that?" Sam asked.

"It's about time," Jacob said. "Do you want part of the business? You could..."
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"Nah," Sam said. "I worked for your mother for most of my life. I've worked for you for the rest. I'd rather work for you. If that's Ok."

"Sure," Jacob said. "Compensation?"

Sam laughed.

"Son, let's sell one company first," Sam said.

"Let's get through a Valerie party first." Jacob countered.

Sam laughed. Turning, he hugged Jacob. Jacob groaned in pain.

"I never tell you enough," Sam said. "I'm so grateful that you're my son."

"Love you, Dad," Jacob said.

"Did you ever figure out how Katy is your child?"

"God, not you too," Jacob said.

"You never met your mother's father, Delbert. Katy looks just like him. Especially when she laughs."

"Yeah, okay, Dad. We'll get you a grandchild as soon as possible."

"Eh, I already have one," Sam said. "You should do the DNA."

"Okay, whatever. Katy is my daughter no matter who her biological father happens to be," Jacob said. "You can finish this?"

"Uh huh. You heard that Jill's going to help with color. Did you know she was your color gal?"

"No," Jacob said.

"The universe offers many chances at love," Sam said.

"I think you've spent waaaaay to much time with Delphie."

Sam laughed.

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Friday afternoon — 2:45 P.M.

"Now is your rest time, Val." Ramon trailed after Valerie down the hall to her apartment. "No hanky panky and no food. Just water. Sleep for at least an hour then we'll do the wrap and... Where is the farm boy?"

Valerie turned in place to give Ramon a menacing look. Flipping around, she continued down the hall.

"Fine. Where is Michael?"

"He's in his studio. A couple museums came today to see his work," Valerie said.

She opened the door to her apartment. Seeing Mike standing naked holding chocolate covered strawberries and champagne, Valerie spun in place.

"Thank you for your help, Ramon. I promise that I'll rest," Valerie said. "You'll be the first person I see when I get up. We'll do the seaweed wrap; meet with Cindy from Sol for lingerie; then hang out with the Martins crowd. I'll be picture perfect by six."

She moved to close the door in his face.

"Oh, I thought you'd want to play cards."

"I need to rest. I'm exhausted and I didn't get much sleep last night. I was out dancing with you until three and up at six to start getting dressed."

Valerie smiled. Ramon nodded.

"He's in there, isn't he?" Ramon asked.

Valerie kissed Ramon's cheek then closed the door.

"You are a sight for sore eyes," Valerie said. "What's your plan, Mr. Roper?"

"You," he said.

She moved across the room into his arms.

"How did it go this morning?" he asked.
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"Boring," Valerie said. "It's fun to get all the treatments with Jill and her friends. They're so refreshing for me. I'm grateful they let me hang out with them. That Tanesha could have her own comedy show."

"Samantha couldn't make it?" he asked.

"She's in trial," Valerie said. "Plus you know Sami."

"Beauty requires regular maintenance," they said together.

"She gets these treatments at least once a week. Even while she was in the Navy." Valerie shook her head. "How was your morning?"

"The Met and the Smithsonian... They both want a piece. If Adam Lerner wasn't there? I would have passed out. He did the negotiating. And you should hear the money they're talking. I... William Morris called and they want to represent me. Frederec said they want me in their print ads."

"And you?" Valerie asked. "What do you want?"

"You."

"Hmm, what did you have in mind?"

"I am drawing your bath," he said. "I made your favorite no-carb snack. And I thought we'd sneak a little champagne."

Valerie shook her head.

"Bubbles," they said in unison.

"Vodka?" Mike asked. "It's low carb and I promise to work the calories..."

Valerie jumped into his arms. Laughing, he carried her into the bathroom where the tub was filling. One piece of clothing at a time, he undressed her then set her into the tub. Stepping in behind her, he grabbed the sponge.

"I'm scared," Valerie said.

"You? I've never known you to be scared," he said.

"Things are changing very fast," she said. "My agent called to say that her phone has been ringing off the hook… with great parts… for me... Like I'm an 'A' lister. That's what she said. 'A' lister. I..."

"I'm right here," he said.

"For now! You'll have openings around the world. You..."

"I'm right here. I have a choice. And I'll never leave you again. Never by choice."

"You say that, but what if..."

He kissed the top of her head.

"'If' has already happened and I'm still right here. We're very lucky."

Valerie nodded.

"How can I ease your mind?"

"I am kind of tense..."

Mike popped out the tub. Valerie chased him to the bed.

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Friday afternoon — 3:30 P.M.

Jill crept across Jacob's apartment. After being sent off to rest, Sandy, Heather, Tanisha and Jill giggled and played with Katy. When Katy began to sag, the women settled in to nap. It was going to be a late night and a little sleep would go a long way. Right now, Katy and her friends were sound asleep. Feeling like Scarlet O'Hara at the ball, Jill couldn't sleep.

She had to know.

She opened the closet door slowly.

The closet door squeaked!

But didn't wake anyone.

She let out a breath.
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Going to the back of the closet, she dug through Jacob's old clothing. He told her he meant to get rid of it, but hadn't gotten around to it. Clothing from when he lived in Maine. Clothing from four years ago.

Frustrated that she hadn't found it, she flipped one of the last hangers to quickly.

The hanger scraped!

She leaned back to see if anyone woke up.

Everyone was still asleep.

She let out another breath.

Turning back, she saw what her hand was touching. She bit her lip to keep from fainting.

She had to know.

She touched the lipstick stain on the collar. Her thumb ran over the makeup on the lapel. Leaning forward, she took a deep breath and smelled… lavender.

Oh. My. God.

Blue wool and… buttons?

Taking her button out of her pocket, she looked at the left sleeve of the jacket. It was missing one button.

Her button.

Clutching the jacket, she dropped to her knees.

"Jill!" Jacob whispered. He rushed forward to kneel beside her. "Are you all right? Honey, what happened?"

"You had a tattoo."

Chapter Thirty-Six
Oh no you don't!

"I..."

"JILL!" Sandy pushed past Jacob to Jill's side. Seeing the jacket in Jill's hands, she said, "Come on, honey, let's get out of the closet."

She touched the jacket, but Jill hung on tight to the fabric.

"Jacob, get her other arm," Sandy said.

Jacob and Sandy helped a sagging Jill into the other room.

"I think we need to talk..." Jacob started.

"Oh no you don't. If this has to do with our girl, Jill, you can talk right here." Tanesha put her hands on her hips. Looking at Jill, she saw the jacket for the first time. "Especially if that's what I think it is."

"Really, I think..." Jacob started.

"Not. A. Chance." Heather's hands went to her hips as well. "If that's *the* jacket as in *the button* jacket, then this is about all of us. You can talk right here."

"What about Katy?" Jacob asked. "It's not really..."

Heather raced across the apartment to answer a tap on the door. Opening the door, she found Delphie on the other side.

"I wanted to see if anyone needed some ironing done. I'm doing it, so I thought I'd ask," Delphie said to Heather. Looking from face to face, she said, "Oh."

Delphie made her girlie smile at Jacob.

"Would you mind watching Katy?" Jacob asked. "We're having a little..."

"Epiphany?" Delphie twirled back and forth with glee.

Jacob glared at her. Delphie cleared her throat.

"Why don't you show the girls what you've done with the rest of the attic?" Delphie asked. "I'll stay with Katy."

Jacob looked down at Jill. Still clutching the jacket, Jill's eyes were hollow and blank. He looked over her head to Sandy. Sandy nodded. With Jill between them, they went into the bathroom.

"Heather, there's a key to this door on a hook in the medicine cabinet. Can you get that, please?"

Heather found the key and opened the door.

And the women stood in awe.

The dusty, old attic space had been converted into a stunning home. Gleaming hardwood floors gave way to sedate groupings of furniture. A gorgeous sitting area with a couple couches and chairs rested on a beautiful oriental rug next to a gas fireplace. A formal dining table was set in an alcove by the windows. The brand new full kitchen formed a 'U' out from the outer wall of the loft. Along the garden side of the wide open space, four rooms lay ready to be occupied. Twin bathrooms occupied the corners of the back wall.

"I have her, Sandy," Jacob said. "We're almost done. We hoped to surprise Jill with this but... Please go on in."

Heather, Sandy and Tanisha went into the open space. A plumber poked his head out of the bathroom.

"It's all right, Fred," Jacob said.

The plumber nodded to Jacob and went back into the bathroom. With Jill tucked against him, he made his way to a couch.

"Delphie and Val have been supplying the kitchen in secret. I don't know what's there. Would you mind making some tea, Sandy? Heather? Can you turn on the gas fireplace? I'm sorry. I get very cold."

"This is gorgeous," Tanisha said. "This was a surprise? Just an 'It's Saturday' surprise?"

"I was thinking of it as more a two week anniversary of the non-date," Jacob said.

"Jacob? What happened?" Jill stirred next to him. She looked at the blue men's jacket in her hand. "Oh. Is this yours?"

"Yes," Jacob said. "It's my school jacket. The buttons are imprinted with the polar bear. Polar Bears are Bowdoin's mascot."

"Polar bear with a hockey stick. That was your tattoo."

"On my pec," he said. "Aden got mercury poisoning from the red dragon tattoos on his back and shoulder. Blane and I had our tattoos removed so he wouldn't have to go through it alone. You had a belly ring."

"I had to take it out when I got pregnant."

"You didn't have a soul mate tattoo."

"Yeah." Jill's hand ran over the tattoo on her wrist. Sighing, she noticed for the first time that her friends were standing around. "Where are we?"

"Our new home," Jacob said.

Jill looked at him then turned to look around the loft space.

"Wow," she said. "You did this?"

"Me, Val, Mike, Delphie and Dad," Jacob said. "We knew you couldn't really go home, so we wanted you to have a place that would be your home. At least I hope it will be your home."

Jill tipped her head up to kiss him.

"This is very touching but we need to sort out a few things," Tanesha said.

"Like what the hell?" Heather asked.

"And other things." Sandy set two cups of green tea on the end table then went into the kitchen for more. "Jill, this kitchen is perfect. I'm going to love cooking here."

"Do I get a tour?" Jill asked.

"When we're finished here! Who's going to start?" Heather looked from person to person. "Fine, I'll start.

"Trevor took a week's vacation every year on his spring break. Now you know he went on Jill's money and never offered to take her AND..."

"I was mostly glad he was gone," Jill said. "We would have the funnest week. Sandy would start planning the moment we knew when he was leaving. We'd dance, stay up late, there was always at least one pajama party."

"He would go with a group of his guy friends including this guy, MJ. MJ's a guy we went to high school with." Heather said.

"You've seen him," Jill said. "He's been here all week. He works with Alex. He has a limp and stutters some times."

"Red hair? Tall?" Jacob asked.

Jill nodded.

"Hey! I'm telling a story here," Heather said.

Everyone laughed.

"Please continue," Jacob said.

"MJ joined the service. So one year, Trevor and his jerk friends decided to fly to spend leave with MJ. FLY!" Heather's face went red at the cost and imposition. "Well, Jill couldn't afford to send him. So he recruited my brother to go with them. My cousin throws baggage for Frontier Airlines. He's a good guy, just an idiot."

"Heather's brother agreed to get stand by seats for everyone and they were off to... " Sandy looked at Heather. "Anyone remember where?"

"Thailand," Jill said.

"That's right. Jill's dream vacation," Sandy said.

"Is that your dream vacation?" Jacob asked.

Jill nodded.

"Let's plan a trip," he said.

She smiled.

"We are in the *middle* here," Heather said.

"I'm sorry," Jacob said. "Trevor's a jerk and went on vacation with your brother."

"Exactly," Heather said. "Well, my cousin came back early. He was upset and wouldn't tell me why. Of course, Trevor came home like nothing happened. Five days later, Jill was sick. She had Chlamydia."

"Among other things," Jill said. "I was lucky I didn't get AIDS."

"Or Herpes," Sandy said.

"But, of course, Trevor spent all their money, so she couldn't pay for a doctor," Heather said. "We took care of the bill and helped her get better. Jill was at my house when my cousin had a layover. He saw her and kind of freaked out. He told me Trevor and his buddies spent their vacations picking up women and buying hookers."

"I heard him tell her. He didn't want me to hear, but I heard it anyway," Jill said. "I guess I knew that's what happened. I left Heather's to confront Trevor."

"The bitch-ass says…" Tanesha started.

"He said there was nothing wrong with what he did. He was sure I did the same thing when he was gone. Cat's away and stuff like that," Jill said. "I was shocked. I mean I... I hadn't. Not until… Well, you know."

"He told Jill that he wasn't sick," Sandy said. "She must have caught all those diseases from someone here in Denver."

"Nothing's ever Trevor's fault," Jill said. She sighed. "I think things started to get really bad then."

"They were bad from the beginning," Tanesha said.

"I got really depressed. I couldn't leave him."

"Or didn't. Too loyal," Sandy said.

"But I DID make him use condoms," Jill said. "And I told him if he did it again, I would leave him."

"Why are we talking about this?" Jacob asked. "I want to know about Jill's life but ..."

"Because it's all a part of it," Tanesha said. "This happened the year before. Well, of course, there was that depression bullshit. Jill was depressed because she was trapped by douche bag and he says..."

"He told me that the birth control pills were making me depressed," Jill said. "I came home from Pete's one morning and he had an appointment scheduled with a doctor. For me. Trevor did all the talking. I was depressed. He said it was the birth control pills. So the doctor told me to stop taking them and take these antidepressant pills."

"The doctor never even asked Jill why she was depressed," Heather said. "What did he care? Just wrote the prescription, took her money and canceled her prescription!"

"I didn't have the energy to fight Trevor, and we were using condoms anyway. I took the antidepressant pills and stopped taking the birth control pills. I should have known that he..."

"He did that to trick Jill into getting pregnant," Heather said. "He..."

"Put a pin through all the condoms so she'd get pregnant," Sandy said.

"That was like a month before he..."

"Left for a guys' week again," Jill said. "This time, he didn't tell me he was going until the day he left. He said he 'forgot' I told him I would leave him if he went on another trip. I had to go to work so I..."

"She moved out. Well." Sandy and Jill shared a long look. "With our help, she moved out."

"Sandy let me live with her," Jill said. "She had just moved into her condo. It has three bedrooms. She said I could stay there as long as I wanted. But mostly I just worked and laid in bed and cried. Those stupid pills didn't help. They made me impulsive AND depressed."

"We drank lots of hot chocolate," Heather said. "Tanesha and I moved in to be with Jill. We were really worried she would kill herself or… something."

"I was pretty messed up," Jill said. "I think that's why I was so screwed up when he left. We got through all of this, had Katy, then he leaves… ME... After I..."

"Moving on," Tanesha said. "Sandy has a client who works on the Simpson's. There's a huge mask party for Mardi Gras in Santa Monica, California. Sandy got tickets for all of us."

"My cousin got us real plane tickets to LA," Heather said. "Said it was to make up for the Thailand thing."

"So we dragged Jill to LA," Sandy said.

"Now it's your turn," Tanesha said.

"My turn?" Jacob asked. "I don't know anything about your trip to LA."

"You know a little," Jill said.

"I'm still processing that." Jacob saw the stern looks on the women's faces and acquiesced. "I'd been out of college a year or so and mostly finished with my college girlfriend. She thought I was haunted by the stuff that happened here."

"Stuff?" Heather asked.

"My mother's death. My father's infidelity. Owning half of a stupid company that had nothing to do with me. My sister's complete shut down. Mike's disappearance. Stuff."

"Oh, I thought you meant girl stuff," Heather said. "Because we heard you were quite the ladies man in high school."

"I was promiscuous."

Figuring the best offense was silence, Jacob stopped talking. He had no intention of going over his sexual history with Jill's friends.

"How did you get to Santa Monica?" Jill asked.

"Lipson construction was looking at a project in the Marina. Because out of state work is outside of Lipson's standard procedure, Dad needed everyone's approval. Val and I went to review the project. I hadn't seen Val in a while. She had tickets to the party. That's why I wore the jacket. It's all I had with me. I went to spend time with Val. I didn't think it would be the best night of my life… well, up to that point."

Jill blushed through her big smile.

"I flew in on a red-eye on Friday then planned to leave Saturday night. Val convinced me to change my reservation until Sunday. I was in the middle of a complicated rehab in Maine so I couldn't really be gone long."

"And had a girlfriend," Sandy said.

"Actually, we weren't seeing each other," Jacob said. "In fact, she married a guy about a month later. I wasn't really on her relationship radar."

"But you were still sleeping with her," Heather said.

Jacob raised his eyebrows. He would never get used to female information highway. How could Heather possibly know he had ex-sex an hour before he left for LA? He kept his mouth shut.

"It was really you?" Jill asked.

Jacob raised his shoulders and shook his head. He couldn't believe it either.

"Jill wore a sheer tulle nighty," Sandy said. "It covered about half her butt. And some..."

"Incredibly hot five inch white pumps," Jacob said.

The women stared at him in silence. Even though they knew he had to be the 'button' guy, his knowledge of this tiny detail stunned them.

"I made her mask out of some tulle," Sandy said.

"Val made my mask out of a black bandana. It covered the top of my face and head. You could only see my eyes. May I?" Jacob took the jacket from Jill. He pulled the two masks out of the inner pocket of the jacket. "I knew the moment you entered the party. It was like a..."

"Pulse that went through me," Jill finished his statement.

"I've never seen Jill like that. She walked across the room to you. You guys disappeared like ten minutes later," Sandy said. "I was worried but Jill texted me to tell me she was all right."

"Actually, that was Jacob," Jill said. "You know I could never figure out how that phone worked."

"So what happened?" Tanesha said.

Jacob shrugged his shoulders. Jill blushed.

"Everything. Nothing. We ate pancakes."

"Chocolate chip pancakes," he said.

"We talked and laughed," Jill said.

"We drank champagne and played."

"Played?" Jill giggled. "Yeah. Raspberries. Oh my God, I've never had anything like that. And the lavender bubble bath. Wow."

"Oh fuck," Jacob said. Turning to look at Jill, he said, "You had the condoms. Remember, I went out later to get more..."

"More condoms!" Tanesha, Heather and Sandy said in unison.

"You had six or seven!" Sandy said. "You joked about having one for every guy."

"We used them." Embarrassed, Jill shrugged. "But you're right. I got them from the apartment. They probably had..."

"A hole in them," Jacob said. "Trevor's sterile."

"WHAT?" Tanesha's voice resonated over the women.

"I thought Miss Thing was pregnant," Heather said.

"They just said that so Val and I would give them the trust," Jacob said. "Honey said they have been doing fertility treatments. I guess Trevor had something bad enough or long enough to make him sterile. That's why we think he wants Katy. He can't have his own kids."

"You mean something like Chlamydia?" Sandy asked. She laughed.

"Actually, exactly Chlamydia," Jacob said.

The women laughed.

"At least that's what Honey said. He denies ever having anything, but the doctor told them that was why he was sterile."

"This is what I don't get," Tanesha said. "You have this incredible night, but don't exchange names or phone numbers or anything."

"It's what Jill wanted," Jacob said. "We wore our masks the whole time. She left before I woke. I didn't realize she took the button until I saw her in the closet with the jacket."

"I didn't have the space inside me to… deal with a relationship." Jill's eyes filled with tears. "It never occurred to me that..."

"What happened, Jill? How did you end up back with Trevor?" Jacob asked. "You were confident that your marriage was over."

Jill shrugged her shoulders.

"She was… different. After Santa Monica, Jill was strong and happy," Sandy said.

"Yeah, she was all about ridding the Trevor from her life," Heather said. "We thought..."

"I went to tell him that it was over," Jill said. "He cried and begged me. At least, one more time of togetherness."

Jill sighed. Tanesha sat on the arm of the couch and put her arm around Jill.

"I wanted him to let me go," Jill said. "I went back to Sandy's but like two days later, I started feeling sick in the mornings. We waited a week but..."

"Trevor hounded her," Heather said. "He waited outside the condo, outside work. He followed her around begging her to come back. He noticed she was sick to her stomach and told her about the holes in the condoms. He bought the pregnancy test."

"Which as positive, of course," Tanesha said.

"That's where this whole soul mate thing came from," Sandy said. "He said only soul mates can get pregnant like that. They were meant to be and she was meant to have his baby. How could she leave? She was sure it was Trevor's baby. She went back to him for the baby. They got the tattoos right after that."

"It never occurred to me that you and I..." Jill's sorrow was palpable. "We were so careful. I don't know what I would have done anyway."

"I am so sorry, Jill. You've really suffered because of me," Jacob said. "I need to make this up to you."

Looking around the loft, Jill said, "I think you have."

"As soon at the tattoos were done, he went back to his usual bullshit," Tanesha said. "And Jill was stuck. Then he walks out taking everything he valued – all Jill's money, her car, everything. So you bet you have some making up to do."

"Yes ma'am," Jacob said.

"Can we see the loft first?" Heather asked.

Across the loft, a door opened. A burly member of Alex Hargreaves's team leaned in.

"Mr. Marlowe?" he said. "There's a woman here who insists on speaking to you. She says she's your step-sister. We are on alert for a step-sister. This one is Honey?"

Jacob nodded.

"You can let her in. Thanks."

Jacob walked across the loft to meet Honey as she flew in the door. They spoke back and forth for a moment. Honey nodded. She asked Jacob a question and he laughed. She smiled.

"Tonight?" Honey asked.

"See you later," Jacob said. "Can you put Honey on the guest list? She should be on there. Thanks."

Turning back to the sitting area, Jacob saw that every woman had her hands on her hips.

"What?"

"What did SHE want?" Tanesha said.

"Listen, she's not responsible for what her sister is or did," Jacob said. "She's trying to help. Do you want her help? Or do you just want to judge her because of her sister?"

Tanesha crossed her arms across her chest and shook her head.

"I can like or dislike anyone I please," Tanesha said.

Heather knocked Tanesha's shoulder and Tanesha laughed.

"She does look like her sister," Jill said. "Just smaller."

"It's a little creepy," Jacob said.

"What did she want?" Sandy asked.

"She was supposed to pick up her sister and the… what was it? 'Bitch-ass'?" Jacob laughed.

"Needledick," Jill said.

The girls howled with laughter.

"Ok, okay, this actually isn't so funny," Jacob said. "Honey was supposed to pick them up so we would know when they got here. But their plane got in early. She was heading into the airport when she saw MJ, her sister and the needledick leaving. She followed them. She said they were laughing and talking."

"So what?" Heather asked. "Why do we care?"

"Because MJ? MJ, who has been here all week? MJ, who played with Katy almost every day?" Jacob looked to the ground. "MJ is definitely a part of their plan."

"Their plan?" Sandy asked. "What plan?"

"They're going to try to steal Katy tonight."

Chapter Thirty-Seven
Time to shine?

Friday afternoon — 4:30 P.M.

"God damn it!"

Valerie heard Ramon scream then the crash of his cell phone against the wall. She jogged the remaining steps to the sitting area where she, Jill and Jill's friends were supposed to meet for their afternoon beauty treatments. From the doorway, she saw Sandy, Tanesha and Heather standing stunned in the opposite doorway. Ramon's shoulders vibrated as he sobbed into his hands.

"What is it?" Valerie placed her hand on his arm. "What's happened?"

"Oh Val," Ramon said. "No one's coming. Wes called the hair stylist, your makeup girl and the spa girl. He told them they would never work in Hollywood again if they came."

"Really. He said that? What a windbag."

"Val! They aren't coming!" Ramon continued sobbing into his hands. "You'll never get ready without your specialists. Oh Val... And the lingerie woman? She's a total no show. She must have had a call from Wes."

"What happened?" Samantha Hargreaves walked into the room as if she owned the place.

"No makeup artist. No hair stylist. No wrap," Valerie said.

"You're going to lose your Martin's contract." Ramon wailed.

"That's not going to happen." Samantha laughed at Ramon.

"You don't understand." Ramon flashed with anger. "This is Val's moment and she must shine. And Wes has destroyed everything."

"Sandy does my hair," Samantha said.

"I'm not a professional makeup artist, but I work at MAC," Heather said. "I've won a couple awards. I don't have..."

"Between Val and me, we have enough make up to put blush on every person within the city limits," Samantha said. "Sounds like problem solved."

"Valerie needs her wrap. She's..."

"What did you say about the lingerie person? I assume you mean Cindy from SOL, right?"

"She must have had a call from Wes." Ramon's words were emphasized by his quivering lower lip.

"We've known Cindy a long time. I can't imagine she gives a shit what that little man has to say," Samantha said. "I'll call her."

While Samantha dialed SOL Lingerie on her cell phone, Valerie crossed the room to Sandy.

"I wanted this to be your fun day, not your work day," Val said. "I could really use your help. Would you mind?"

"I'd love to do your hair," Sandy said. "Ever since you came back, I've been trying to think of a way to ask or suggest. I'll do Heather and Tanesha while you and Jill get your wraps."

"Where's Jillian?" Unwilling to give up his emotional out pouring, Ramon moved onto the next perceived problem. "Did she get a call from Wes?"

Sandy, Tanesha and Heather laughed at Ramon.

"She's attending to some personal business," Sandy said.

"Cindy's stuck outside with the paparazzi," Samantha said. "She's been trying to get in for forty-five minutes. We need to get her in here."

"Let's get set up." The expert in all things beauty, Sandy took over the situation with confidence. "Does anyone know someone who can do wraps? I can do them or the hair but I can't do both."

"My partner, Art, does them. His mother used to give beauty treatments in her home to make a little extra money. He helped her as a kid. He's really good."

"Oh Sami, he's just returned to the country," Valerie said. "You don't want him to..."

"He's good. I'm sure he wouldn't mind," Samantha said. "He has to be here because he works for Alex. When he and Alex are bored, you never know what chaos they'll cause. This will keep him out of trouble."

Ramon gasped dramatically as a tall, muscular caramel-skinned man came up behind Samantha. Placing his hands on Samantha's tiny waist, the man's gray eyes took in little Ramon. The women shifted back and forth in response to the striking man.

"What's going on?" Arthur Rasmussen asked.

"Val needs a wrap. Would you mind?" Samantha said.

"I don't remember how to make the..." Art's eyes shifted from Samantha to Ramon. "Is he all right?"

"I'm fine. Just fine," Ramon said.

Valerie wrinkled her nose at Ramon. Samantha looked up at Art. Smiling at her, he pulled tugged her closer to him.

"Sandy? Can you make the stuff that goes in a wrap?" Samantha asked. "He's just used a kit when he's done wraps on me."

"Sure," Sandy said. "I need to get my scissors and tools anyway. I have some here in Aiden's apartment. Will you let Heather do your make up? She's very talented. She's always wanted to be a makeup artist, but she's never been able to afford formal training."

"Sure." Valerie nodded. "How about a Valium, Ramon?"

"Valium?" Reaching into his handbag, Ramon flopped onto a couch. "That's a great idea."

"Then it's settled," Samantha said. "I'll go get Cindy and we'll meet back here."

"What am I going to do?" Tanesha asked.

"Make drinks," Heather said. "We'll need them."

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Jacob looked across the couch to Jill. Sandy, Heather and Tanesha took the ease and comfort with them when they left. Jill had withdrawn into herself the moment the door closed. He'd made a joke and a small comment, but Jill hadn't responded. Clearing his throat, he decided to jump in with both feet.

"Would you like to see our room?"

Jill's head jerked up from the blue blazer and her button to look at him. She stared straight at him, then slowly nodded her head.

"I saved this to show you in private," Jacob said. He stood, then held his hand out. "Please."

Jill took his hand and followed him into their new bedroom. In the middle of the room sat a King sized bed with a feather bed topper. The comforter and sheets had creamy butter yellow flowers that matched the walls. The bed rested on a cream colored rug similar to her favorite rug from her apartment. She could see the tips of the mountains through the two double hung windows. She had sketched this exact room in her sketch book.

"Mike had your sketch book," Jacob said. "We tried to match everything you had."

Jacob opened one of the two walk-in closets. A Nordstrom's gift card hung on the single hanger in the closet.

"That's a gift from all of us," he said. "Maybe this weekend we can replace your damaged clothing."

"I... "

Jill was gawking. Unsure of what to look at first, she walked in small circles. The room seemed to have jumped right out of her imagination. Here it was. For her. To live in. Every single day!

"We have our own bathroom. Would you like...?"

Jill threw herself into his arms. She cried and laughed at the same time. Jacob held on tight through the roller coaster of emotion.
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"I also noticed that you don't wear the Marlowe Beauty," he said.

"It's so beautiful. And so big. I'm afraid I'll break it or lose it. I..."

Stepping back, he slipped a three carat diamond eternity band on her left finger. Her mouth fell open.

"What? I?"

"I thought you'd like to have something you can wear at Pete's," he said.

Jill threw herself at him again.

"I wanted so bad for you to be Katy's father. From the moment I saw you at Trevor's party. I thought, 'Why isn't that guy Katy's father?' But I could never hope. I would never have dreamed it even possible and then..."

"I knew the moment you entered Trevor's party," he said. "I felt that same pulse. But when I saw you, I realized you were the 'Jill' in Trevor's bullshit 'I have a child from a one night stand' story. I never guessed that *I* was the one who had the child from the single best night of my life."

"I've never felt as valuable as I did that night. It stayed with me. I mean it's stupid," Jill said. "One night stand and all. But after that night, I felt alive and..."

"Free," he said. "Me too."

"I've prayed that my wizard – that's what I called you – was happy somewhere. I pray for my wizard every day. Because you healed my heart. No matter what Trevor did… no matter what, I could handle it."

He smiled.

"And this ring is perfect." Jill spun in place. "Every little thing is perfect. I keep thinking things will get hard. I mean, I know you're still healing. And my apartment's a mess. Hell, my life's a mess. But I'm afraid it will get really hard. Because life can't always be a fairy tale but... I don't care. If I can be this happy, I'm okay to deal with whatever life has to offer. As long as I can do it with you."

"Together. Yes, I feel like I can do anything when you're around. Whole."

She kissed his lips.

"We talked about me, you know, after that night," Jill said. "What happened to you?"

"I stayed in the room… thinking… until I had to check out," he said. "I felt that for the first time ever, my entire life opened before me. I flew back to Maine ready to resign from the stupid rehab, close my business, packing my house and get off the fence with my girlfriend. I bought a ticket to fly around the world at LAX. As long as I kept going in one direction, I could travel for two years. I planned to leave in three months."

"Travel the world. That was your dream," she said. "What happened?"

"My father arrived about two weeks later," he said. "I hadn't seen him in a year… or more, probably. He was a wreck. It took him a day to get around to what he wanted. And…"

He shrugged.

"I had always done what I was supposed to do. Always," Jacob said. "For those two weeks? The 'supposed to-s' disappeared and I was free. Because of you. It was the greatest feeling."

"Your father took it away from you," she said.

Jacob was silent for a moment.

"Come see the bathroom."

He led her into a large spa bathroom. A modern claw foot tub, large enough for two, took up one side of the room. A two-person spa shower filled a corner. The toilet was tucked away in a vented closet. Jacob pressed open the French doors to a small balcony over looking the garden.

"Wow," she said.

Coming out onto the balcony, she slipped her arm around him. They looked out over Delphie's bountiful vegetable gardens and dwarf fruit trees heavy with ripening fruit. Delphie's bees happily danced near the back privacy fence. The balcony had a small metal table, two chairs and a small metal bench.

"I guess these tiny balconies are popular in Paris," Jacob said. "Alex told me about them and helped me get the

furniture. Just enough space to sit and watch our world."

"This is gorgeous. Even with the paparazzi, it's gorgeous," she said.

They sat watching the world for a few moments.

"My father didn't take away my sense of freedom," he said. "I think I realized that love isn't enough. I was raised with the idea that love was enough. But with love comes great responsibility. Love takes real work. My father and I fought for three days. I was furious that he was doing this to me, just when I was almost free."

Jacob chuckled.

"I couldn't understand why he didn't sell the stupid company," Jacob said. "But..."

He sighed.

"With love comes great responsibility and work," he said. "I asked Delphie to come and help. Delphie helped me convince my father to let me do the work. He was… crazy. Work, I can do. Responsibility, I can handle.

"And now, I have love."

Jill snuggled against him.

"You're a good man."

"Mike picked me up at the airport. We went to Pete's and you were there," he said. "You were pregnant and the *hottest* girl I have ever seen. Ever. God."

He blew out a breath. She laughed at what she was sure was his exaggeration.

"You think I'm kidding?" he laughed. "Wait 'til I badger you mercilessly when you get pregnant again."

She chuckled.

"When are you dressing Katy?"

"After I get this wrap," Jill said. "She was going to spend some time with Alex and Delphie."

"Mike and I have to take care of something at a site. Will you have time to talk later?"

"Yes. Oh yes." Jill smiled at him.

Following him through her new home, she couldn't help but beam. Everything was truly perfect. He stopped at the door for one last kiss.

"When you're better?" Jill asked. "Can we book a trip to Santa Monica and stay in that hotel?"

Jacob laughed.

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Delphie had braced herself for the moment Paddie and his Dad, Colin Hargreaves, came into the room. And still, she was overwhelmed by the sight, sensation and delight generated by Paddie and Katy's greeting.

First, they squealed with excitement at the sight of each other. The dogs barked at the sound. Paddie squirmed until Colin set him down. The moment he was on the ground, Paddie chased Katy while she giggled. Barking, Scooter and Sarah ran in circles around the children. Reaching the edge of the attic apartment, Katy chased Paddie around while he giggled. In a crash, they landed together in a pile where they squirmed while Scooter and Sarah licked their faces.

"Wow," Alex Hargreaves said. "That was loud."

"Happens every time," Colin said.

"I haven't gotten used to it. It's like a bubble of joy." Delphie laughed as Paddie ran over to hug her 'hello.' "I hope they stay like that."

"Friends?" Colin asked.

Delphie nodded.

"I'm friends with my Catholic school friends," Colin said.

"So am I. We didn't go to kindergarten or preschool here. Erin did..." Alex bent to hug Katy 'hello.' "She's still friends with her preschool friends. I'm sure..."

"I had another dream about tonight," Katy whispered to Alex.
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"Oh great! I want to hear every detail," Alex said. "But first, I thought we could play our wrestle game. And, I have a present for you."

"Auntie Alex! What about me!" Paddie said. Sticking out his chest, he pointed to himself with his thumb, "I'm your Paddie!"

"You are my Paddie. Of course, I have a present for you," Alex said. "What would you like to do first? Wrestle or presents or dreams?"

Katy and Paddie seemed to have to move in order to make a decision. The dogs barked and danced around at their movements. While the adults laughed, the children and dogs danced around, jumped up and down, and chewed on various body parts (thumbs for the children and tails for the dogs). When the chaos seemed to peak, the children screamed in unison, said, "PRESENTS." Scooter and Sarah gave happy barks in agreement.

Laughing, Alex nodded to the soldier standing near the door. He brought her two boxes.

"This pretty necklace is for you, Miss Katy," Alex said. "My friend Claire made your dress. She said this would match."

Alex lifted a gold chain with a ruby cut in the shape of a heart from the box. Katy squealed and clapped her hand.

"It's so pretty! And it's mine! Forever?!?" Katy said. "But Mommy's not here..."

"Your Mommy helped pick it out, honey," Delphie said.

"It's your birthstone," Alex said.

"Can I wear it now?"

"I don't see why not," Alex said.

While Delphie held Katy's hair, Alex put the necklace around Katy's neck. Katy showed Paddie her necklace. They both squealed causing another round of happy barking from Scooter and Sarah. Turning back to Alex with expectant eyes, they watched her take a gold cross necklace from a box.

"That's MY birthstone!" Paddie squealed.

"Moonstone," Alex said. "Exactly."

She placed the necklace around his neck. Delphie's eyes flicked to the movement by the door. The soldier's head tilted as if he was listening to something. Delphie watched Alex's eyes shift to the soldier. Alex smiled when the soldier nodded. Alex and Colin seemed to share a look.

"I need you guys to do something for me," Alex said.

Katy and Paddie's heads bobbed up and down.

"Will you promise to not take your presents off today? Not for anything?" Alex asked. "You can get even get them wet."

"I promise," Katy said.

"Daddy, Katy promised? Can I promise too?" Paddie asked.

"I'd like it very much if you did," Colin said.

"I promise too!!"

Paddie's promise promoted another round of squealing, laughing, chasing, and barking. Somehow, over the mayhem, Delphie thought she heard the soldier say, "GPS in place" as he made his way down the stairwell to the Castle.

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"Damn, you guys have worked," Jacob said.

He, Mike and Colin Hargreaves had just entered the coal tunnels under the Castle.

"It was the City of Denver," Colin said. "They weren't all that excited that you could get into the entire tunnel. They fixed the lights and put up the wood barriers. One phone call and it was done."

"Who called?" Jacob asked.

"My big sister," Colin said.

The men laughed at the great Alex Hargreaves diminished to 'my big sister.'
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"Where are we going?" Mike asked.

"I need to check something out," Jacob said.

"Today? Uh huh, sure," Mike said.

"Why did we sneak out?" Colin asked.

"Who's sneaking? I'm just getting past the paparazzi and the news vans."

Jacob punched in the security codes at the panel near the workshop. Mike opened the door to the workshop.

"We don't need the car," Jacob said as Mike reached for his Bronco keys.

"So we're not going to a site," Mike said. "Fuck Jacob, what are we doing?"

Jacob shook his head and opened the door to Detroit Street. The men walked in silence to Colfax then turned east. They had walked a block before Mike started laughing.

"What am I supposed to do?" Jacob asked. "Val, her trainer, and Jill either got RID of the cereal in the house OR they watch over me like a hawk! Blane? He's supposed to be MY assistant. Even Katy says, 'Daddy can't have cereal.'"

"Blane tossed all the cereal at Lipson," Mike said. "He told me you almost hit him."

"I haven't had a bowl of Crunch Berries in a week!" Jacob shook his head as if he couldn't believe it. "I ate more cereal while I was in the hospital."

"A man needs his cereal," Colin said.

Mike was laughing too hard to respond.

Colin went into The Shoppe to assess any threat or danger. With a nod, the men entered the cupcake and cereal joint. After a laughing conversation with the clerk, they sat down on a couch to eat their cereal as God intended – watching Tom and Jerry cartoons on a wide screen television.

Chapter Thirty-Eight
Into the Garden

Friday evening — 6:30 P.M.

Jacob slipped in the back door with Mike and Colin just in time for a quick shower. Jill was still being beautified when he returned and Katy was playing with Paddie. High on Crunch Berries, he ran up the stairs to shower. Assuming Jill and Katy were still gone, he flew out of the bathroom only to stop short.

Jill stood like a vision from God.

Her red strapless dress hung tight to her round breasts and flat stomach. The dress was specifically fitted to enhance her full behind exaggerated by her matching stiletto heels. Her skin looked sun drenched and seemed to shine. Even her short hair sparkled. She wore one of her diamond necklaces, matching diamonds on her ears and the Marlowe beauty on her finger.

His heart seized in his chest. He was sure he was having a heart attack. Dripping water on the floor, clutching his chest, he struggled to even form the word hello.

Jill laughed. Raising a single eyebrow, her eyes flicked to his interest expressed in a stiff spasm. And he laughed.

She was everything he'd ever wanted. And she was so beautiful.

He stepped toward her but she shook her head.

"I spent all day getting gussied up. Let's meet the celebrities, dance for a while, then we'll see what's next," she said.

He nodded. Jill chatted. He wasn't exactly sure what she said, just that she was talking. Her voice lilted across the apartment while he dried off and dressed in his tux. She helped his limp right arm into his shirt and tux jacket. She adjusted his sling.

"You haven't heard a word I've said."

"I'm hallucinating," he said.

"That's why you're not supposed to eat Captain Crunch," she said.

"Who ate Captain Crunch?"

She laughed then helped him tie his bow tie.

"You're gorgeous," he said. "You look every inch a model."

"That's good because we took photos tonight for some magazine. Tonight is my first work night."

He smiled. Leaning into her, he moved to kiss her.

"No kissing," she said. "Mess up my makeup."

"But I get to unwrap this present."

"You better!" She exclaimed.

"There is a God."

She laughed.

"And Katy?" Jacob asked.

"She's playing with Paddie and hanging out with Uncle Steve. Val's special guests are arriving with their kids. The kids are all playing together. It's cute."

Jacob smiled.

"So how long?"

"Before what?"

"Unwrapping," he said.

Jill laughed. Taking his hand for stability, they went down the long stairwell to the door where some of the world's

more famous stars were arriving.

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Friday night — 11:30 P.M.

Jill took one last look at her sleeping baby. Katy and Paddie were sound asleep in one of the second floor apartments. Scooter and Sarah lay on the floor near the bed. She heard the dogs jump on the bed when she pulled the door closed.

The kids had been with a family member the entire time they were awake. As soon as they started to lag, Jill and Colin settled them in this apartment. Jill knew Jacob was asleep upstairs, so she stayed as long as she could. The paparazzi had to leave at eleven due to Denver's curfew laws. Valerie thought the guests would clear out around midnight. She asked Jill to help say 'good-bye' if Jacob wasn't up to the task.

The party was a huge success. They laughed, danced, ate and drank. Valerie's famous friends were so nice. Jill was amazed. Valerie introduced Tanesha to a nice man who worked as a grip on Valerie's soap opera. He was tall, dark and 'fine,' according to Tanesha. Between fixing the stars' makeup, Heather danced, laughed and, so far, hadn't settled on one man. Jill had never seen Sandy as happy as she was tonight. She said a silent prayer that Sandy and Aden remained as happy as they were right now.

Closing the door to the apartment, Jill was sure she had never had a nicer night. She and Jacob floated through the evening in their own bubble of love. They danced and danced until he had to rest.

Jill smiled. She had enough time to wake Jacob, and share some fast love, before they needed to be downstairs. She nodded to the soldier who moved to stand in front of the apartment door.

Her heels made a happy tap dance across the hardwood floors of the hall. Clinging onto the banister for 'don't fall in my stilettos' help, she made the quick trip through the Castle main kitchen where she picked up a bottle of champagne and some chocolate strawberries. Humming to herself, she started up the back stairwell to the apartment.

The moment her foot hit the landing, she saw him. She felt his fist against her cheekbone a split second later.

"Slut." Trevor slapped the strawberries out of her hand. "You'll fuck the rich boy but you're too good for me?!"

She moved to hit him with the open champagne bottle. He stepped aside easily and yanked the bottle from her hands. At that moment, as if she was standing right next to her, Jill heard Alex Hargreaves's voice.

"Remember, he's strongest when you first meet. He's spent hours getting pumped up for this action. Go against him then and you'll only get hurt. Give in. Make him think he's winning. Make your move at the transition. He's weakest at any transition."

Jill blinked. Trevor was drinking the champagne from the bottle. His eyes were glassy, as if he was high on something. She forced her lips into a smile.

"I didn't know you were here," she said. "Do you like my new dress?"

Taking a cue from Delphie, Jill smiled coyly while she twirled back and forth. The dress's movement allowed her to press the panic button in the hidden pocket. Alex's team would be alerted that she was in trouble.

"You look amazing." Trevor's eyebrows shot up.

As she had for so many years, Jill faked a seductive smile. He scooped her up and began devouring her lips.

"Good girl." She heard the Alex in her head encourage her on.

"The kitchen's clear and MJ has the kids," a woman's voice said from the landing below. "Come on. You can have her later."

Trevor stepped back from Jill. Jill smiled in such a way as to make him believe she was excited to be had by him. His face flushed with longing. She gave another coy smile.

"Come on!" His bride growled. "Bring the bitch."

Trevor grabbed Jill's elbow. He forced her back down the stairwell. Just as Trevor pushed her into the kitchen in front of him, Honey ran in from the house.

"OH MY GOD! JILL! NO! NO!" Honey screamed. Turning quickly, she moved to toward the door to the party. "HELP!
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HELP!"

And her sister was on her.

Jill and Trevor stood in shocked silence as the sisters fought. Trevor's bride was bigger but Honey was stronger. The step-whore's fierce cruelty was no match for Honey Lipson.

"GO NOW!" The enraged woman screamed at her husband.

"KNIFE!" Jill screamed when she saw the flash of a knife in the woman's hand. She heard Honey scream and what could only be the sound of a sharp knife penetrating delicate flesh.

"Go." Trevor pushed her forward. Made wild by his wife's actions, Trevor spoke in rapid tones. "That bitch betrayed us all along. She told the cops everything we planned. Every step of the way. She deserves what she gets. She KNEW better than to get involved. We WARNED her. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid."

He yanked Jill through the kitchen. Jill was too horrified to say anything. They were almost to the back porch when MJ met up with them. He was carrying Katy and Paddie. The toddlers seemed sound asleep against him.

"You have to take them," MJ said.

"You're backing out NOW?" Trevor asked.

"Your crazy wife just killed her sister. There's blood everywhere and she's off cleaning up. I'm not getting involved in any murder. No way. No way," MJ said. He thrust the toddlers into Trevor's hands. "You want to do this? Do it yourself."

MJ stalked off toward the upstairs apartments leaving Trevor holding the children. Out of instinct, Jill reached for her baby, her Katy, but Trevor thrust Paddie into her arms. With Katy in one arm, and holding Jill with the other hand, they started across the back porch.

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"They're out of the house," Arthur Rasmussen said into the team's ear bud receiver. He was sitting in a room above Mike's studio with two other soldiers watching a bay of video monitors. "Trevor has package A, B and C."

"It's on," Alex Hargreaves voice cut in the feed. "I repeat. We are live. Game is on."

"In motion," six men's voices reported.

"In place." Came the report from three other men.

"The wife is with them now," Rasmussen said. "She's trying to get Package A from Roper. Roper isn't giving him up. They are arguing. Looks like it's time to move. Damn Roper's good. We should hire her."

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Delphie rushed toward the tall red-haired man standing at the doorway to the back porch. He was so intent on what was going on in the backyard that he hadn't noticed her.

"Michael, there's nothing more you can do now," Delphie said.

MJ's head jerked down to look at Delphie. His blue eyes searched her face.

"We have to let it play out," she said. "Will you help me?"

"Yes ma'am," MJ said.

"Sam's putting pressure on the wounds like you told us," Delphie said. "She needs a medic."

MJ nodded. With one last wistful look toward the backyard, he followed Delphie to where Honey lay fighting for her life. Without hesitation, the medic in him took over.

"Sir, press right here." He pointed to specific spot on Honey's back. Crumpled, Honey landed on her right hip with her facedown on the wood floor. She seeped blood from at least six deep knife wounds. "The wounds are too deep for the coagulant. We need to get this bleeding stopped."

"But her spine!" Sam exclaimed. "It's..."

"Severed, yes," MJ said. "She won't make it if we don't get this bleeding stopped. Mike!"

Mike walked into the landing.

"Grab her legs. Very carefully. 1, 2, 3." MJ guided the men to straighten Honey's broken body. "Great. Mike, I need the med pack I gave you."

"It's right here." Mike reached into a lower cupboard in the kitchen. He gave MJ the pack.

"I'm offline but we're on camera here." MJ nodded his head toward the ceiling. Looking up, he said, "I need a MedEvac."

While Sam, Delphie and Mike stood around him, MJ dug in the pack until he found packet of saline. With quick efficient movement, he began setting up an IV. Glancing at Mike, he said, "You know what to do."

Mike nodded. Taking the stairs two at a time, he found Jacob waiting on the other side of the door. The two men ran down the stairs and out into the backyard.

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Paddie stirred in her arms but didn't open his eyes. Jill sighed. It was all she could do to keep that woman from taking the precious boy. Who knows what she would do to this baby boy? Thank God they were pressed for time. Jill refused to allow herself to wonder about what was going to happen next.

Instead she focused on the warm bundle in her arms and keeping her footing in these stupid stilettos. Trevor led the way with Jill following. His wife pushed her forward from behind. She chuckled cruelly whenever Jill's heels caught on the flagstone path.

Passing through the gardens, Jill looked longingly at the ripening fruit on the trees and the tall corn. Delphie had promised to let her help in the garden. But Jill had been too busy for gardening. She took a deep breath of the garden fragrance – moist dirt, flowering potatoes, ripening fruit. She wished she had taken more time.

Across the garden, she saw a couple making love. The man's back was to Jill and his face was buried in his conquest's neck. His conquest's hands gripped the man's moving behind. They were pressed against the privacy fence near the bees.

Jill sighed. She couldn't imagine anything more wonderful than making love among the intoxicating garden smells and warm night air. She about to say something to the couple when Trevor's wife stuck her knife against her back.

"I'd kill you now, but I already got a good price for you in Bangkok," the woman said in a soft terse voice. "If I lose money on you, I'll take it out on your child. I can make top dollar on a three year old virgin."

Horrified, Jill snuggled Paddie closer. The Alex Hargreaves in her mind said, 'Watch for your opportunity, Jill. You'll know it when you see it. You'll know what to do.'

"Thanks for wearing the rocks. I'm going to look great in them," Trevor's wife said.

Jill kept her eyes on the couple to silently implore them to notice what was happening. The couple was too caught up in their own fervor. Hopelessness, rising from her very core, threatened to send her into the black oblivion.

Paddie shifted in her arms.

Not today.

The strength she had only recently found within herself pushed away the helpless dark. Jill gritted her teeth. She was ready. She would do everything in her power to protect her child and this boy. Even if it took her very last breath.

Her opportunity would come.

And she would act.

Trevor and his wife had taken down a panel in the back privacy fence. A dark SUV sat running in the alley. They were almost there.

They had just reached Mike's artist studio when, out of no where, a man dressed in black swung down from the balcony to lift Katy from Trevor's arms. In a heart beat, the man was up on the balcony with Katy in his arms.

Jill's head jerked to her right as a man slid past her on a wire. He held his arms out and she placed Paddie in them. Whoosh! Paddie and the man were also on the balcony of the artist's studio.

Jill smiled when Katy and Paddie waved from the balcony. She was pretty sure Paddie wasn't asleep against her. They
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must have been pretending like Alex told them to.

Trevor grabbed Jill by one arm and his wife grabbed her by the other. Jill felt the knife nick her flesh and blood begin to seep into her beautiful new dress. Feeling movement behind them, Trevor jerked them around.

Mike and Jacob came running from the house. Seeing Jill trapped between Trevor and his wife, they slid to a stop.

At that moment, Jill felt more than saw the step-whore kicked in the face. Her head followed the foot that kick her attacker to see Alex Hargreaves. Before she could say anything, the woman attacked Alex. With practiced ease, Alex removed the knife then flipped the women over her hip. The step-whore landed flat on her back at the feet of Arthur Rasmussen. Art lifted the tiny woman to her feet and cuffed her hands behind her back.

"Go ahead, Jill," Alex said. Alex's husband, John Drayson, the man from the love making couple, came up to give Alex her heels.

Jill lifted her foot and smashed her stiletto heel into the top of Trevor's athletic shoe. He jerked giving her the space to smack him in the nose with her elbow. His nose broke with a satisfying crunch. Stepping away, she kneed him in the groin for good measure.

"Easy girl," Jacob said.

Breathing hard, Jill jerked toward Jacob's voice then threw herself into his arms.

"You belong to ME!"

Trevor grabbed her from behind and threw her on the ground. Trevor swung his foot to kick Jill. Mike stepped in-between Trevor and Jill. Jacob smashed Trevor's standing leg from behind and crushed his knee. Trevor fell forward to the ground.

"Thanks Jake. We've got this," Alex said. She nodded and a man lifted Trevor and cuffed his hands behind his back. Trevor glared at Jill with a mixture of hatred and longing.

Jacob reached down to help Jill up. Her dress was torn, there was dirt in her hair and a bruise forming on her jaw. But her smile shined brighter than the moon.

As Alex's team began to assemble, Art Rasmussen started reading Trevor and his wife their Miranda rights. A tiny girl ran out from the house. Not even five feet, she was dressed in the latest tween fashion. Jill thought she was a child of one of the guests.

"Sir, Sergeant Scully has stabilized Ms. Lipson," the girl said. "The MedEvac will be here in two minutes. We'll need to get a stretcher in."

With a nod of Alex's head, a soldier went to move the idling SUV.

"Thank you Sergeant Peaches," Alex said. "Please return to your station."

The girl saluted Alex then ran back to the house.

"Marine," Mike said into Jill's ear. "Hard to believe, eh?"

Jill nodded.

The two men who rescued Katy and Paddie brought them down to Jill and Colin. With Katy on her hip, and Jacob's arm around her, Jill was beaming. Katy began the blow by blow of everything that happened to her AND Paddie AND Scooter AND Sarah.

Colin saluted Alex. She dismissed him to bring Paddie to his anxious mother, Julie. They heard a helicopter land in a nearby parking lot. Two MedEvac paramedics came running through the privacy fence with a stretcher.

"You guys have anything you want to say before we let Denver Police take over," Alex said.

Everyone stepped back as the paramedics, MJ and Sergeant Peaches ran by with Honey Lipson. Sam and Delphie ran behind the stretcher.

"You should die, bitch," the step-whore screamed. Lunging at the stretcher, she spit toward her sister. The soldier holding her arms yanked her back to standing. "I'll kill you when I get the chance. Die, bitch, die."

"Enough," Alex said. "Take her away."

The soldier pushed the tiny woman out into the alley where the Denver Police Cruisers were pulling up.

“This will never be over.” Speaking in an eerily quiet voice, Trevor’s eyes never left Jill. “You will ALWAYS belong to...”

At that moment, a red blossom appeared on Trevor’s forehead. His face went blank. Blood oozed over his right eyes. He slumped forward. The soldiers and police officers dropped to the ground.

Shrieking, Jill collapsed into the garden.

Chapter Thirty-Nine
All that matters

"Details remain spotty in an incident that has both Denver Police and Homeland Security working through the night." Adele Arakawa's brown eyes and solemn voice reflected the severity of the situation. "This is a 9 News special report."

"What started as a star filled celebrity party turned deadly in what appears to be a botched kidnapping attempt."

A video of the stars entering the Castle played on the screen. The worlds famous waved and signed autographs on the Castle lawn.

"Valerie Lipson and her husband, Michael Roper, made big Denver news this week with their appearance on local and national talk shows. Tonight was to be a celebration complete with friends, fine wine and great food."

The video feed shifted to the Chef's staff preparing trays of hors d'oeuvres and servers with open bottles of wine. The video panned the Castle ballroom where the stars were dancing, laughing and drinking.

"It appears that around midnight kidnappers snatched Senator Hargreaves's grandson and his best friend. In their attempt to flee, a young woman was brutally attacked and one of the kidnappers was killed," Adele said. "We go now to TaRhonda Thomas live on Race Street in Denver."

The camera went to a young woman standing under a stop light near the Castle's metal gate.

"Denver Police are not releasing details on this one, Adele. We've been able to ascertain that Senator Hargreaves's grandson has been rescued. The child is now at home with his parents. The other child also appears to be uninjured and is in the care of her parents. Denver Police Chief will hold a press conference tomorrow morning to answer any questions. But tonight, the mystery remains."

"Thank you, TaRhonda. Do you know identity of the woman who was assaulted?"

"No," the reporter said. "No details have been released. I only know that her condition is touch and go."

"And the person killed?" Adele asked. "We understand that was a man?"

"Yes, a white male was shot after midnight tonight," TaRhonda said. "He is believed at this time to have been one of the kidnappers. Denver Police have not released his name or the nature of the shooting. As you know, our news helicopters have not been allowed within ten miles of this location."

"Do you have any idea why the details of this case are so few and hard to come by, TaRhonda?" Adele asked.

"National security. That's what the Denver Police spokesperson says."

"Thank you TaRhonda." Adele swung in her chair to speak with her co-anchor. "Kidnapping a Senator's grandson? Here. In Denver. It's hard to fathom."

"We live in dangerous times," Mark Koebrich said. "This has been a 9 News special report."

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Jacob helped Katy into the warm bubble bath then began undressing Jill. Jill hadn't said a word since Trevor had been shot. It was almost as if she couldn't speak. When Mike tried to take Katy, she shook her head and clung to her child. She sobbed when John Drayson suggested she spend the night at the hospital. She leaned into Jacob and held on to Katy. With gentle care, Jacob helped her up into their new loft apartment, where security locks had been installed that afternoon.

This was not the way he hoped to unwrap Jill.

But, he was grateful she was here with him – alive and mostly well. He set the Marlowe diamonds on the counter. Pulling off her dress, he helped her out of a gorgeous lace bra and some kind of a girdle thing. He smiled at her tiny slip of panties and thigh high stockings. They would have had fun tonight.

Through all of this, Jill's eyes stared at Katy while her child played among the bubbles in the bath.
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Under the girdle there was a small, deep cut, probably from tip of the knife. Jacob cleaned the wound and covered it with a Scooby Doo bandage over it. He rolled the stockings from her legs then helped her to stand. She shifted into him when he slipped off the panties. Pulling back to look at her face, her eyes took him in for the first time.

Somewhere behind those big eyes, his Jill was telling him she wished things were different too. He smiled then helped her step into the lavender bubbles. Jill leaned against the back of the tub and sighed.

"She's having a flashback," Mike had said. "Just hold her."

"She needs a bath," Alex had said. "That will relax her. Then maybe some chocolate. I like chocolate after I have a flashback."

"She's going to want… physical relief," Dr. John Drayson had said in his prim British accent. His eyes and eyebrows told a more lurid story. "As your doctor, I cannot recommend it in your condition. But as your friend? I'd encourage you to get some assistance."

"Assistance?" Jacob had asked.

"Sildenafil citrate," John had said.

"Viagra?" Jacob couldn't fathom what John was saying. Jill was traumatized not horny.

"I'll see if one of the medics has some. You'd be amazed at what these boys have in their kits."

Kneeling next to their new large tub, he wondered what Jill needed. When Katy splashed Jill with bubbles, Jill smiled. It was the first real facial expression she had made since she stopped crying.

Leaning forward to cup Katy's face with her hands, Jill sighed.

"I love you, Katy-baby," she said.

"MOMMY! You came back!" Katy was so excited she splashed water everywhere. Laughing, Jacob grabbed a few towels from the cabinet to contain the joyful mess. "Oh Mommy, I missed you! Do you know what happened tonight?"

Jill's eyes welled. She gulped back her sorrow.

"What happened, Katy-baby?"

"A girl kissed Paddie! On the lips! He screamed. The lady Marine that was pretending to be an older kid thought he was hurt. When she found out that Paddie had been kissed, she laughed and laughed. Paddie was upset because she didn't take him serious but that just made the lady laugh even harder. Then I laughed and finally Paddie laughed too."

Jill smiled through Katy's story. Katy's giggles brought out Jill's laugh. When Jacob set a few yellow ducks in the water, Katy began an elaborate story of Mommy ducks and Daddy ducks and baby ducks. Under Katy's instruction, Jill, and Jacob from beside the tub, played roles in her game.

Maybe Katy was all Jill needed. That would be all right too.

"Daddy?" Katy asked when her story reached some random stopping point.

"Yes honey," Jacob said.

"I wanna go to bed now. It's waaaay past my bedtime," Katy yawned. "And I'm tired."

Jacob helped Katy out of the tub. He let some of the water out of the tub then turned the hot water on to warm the bath. Resting against the tub, Jill smiled at him. He dried Katy in a fluffy bath sheet then helped her into her new pajamas and her new big girl bed. He stayed with Katy until she was asleep. Taking a receiver to her baby monitor with him, he returned to the bathroom.

Only Jill's eyes peeked above the bubbles. Seeing him, she moved to sit.

"Would you like to join me?" she asked.

"I'd like you to feel all right," he said. "What do you need?"

"Hmmm...." She slipped all the way under the bubbles. Popping up, she said, "Did Delphie make brownies? Or did I imagine that?"

"Delphie's at the hospital. Val made the brownies. They're actually pretty good. I have them," Jacob said. "She made

them for you."

"Where's Sandy? I remember Sandy being with me," Jill said.

"Sandy stayed with you while you talked to the police," Jacob said. "She wanted to stay tonight but you just seemed to want Katy. She's with Aden in their apartment. Would you like me to get her?"

Jill shook her head. She moved to get out of the tub. He held a large green bath sheet and she wrapped herself in it. She refused clothing, even a bathrobe. Instead, wrapped in a bath sheet, she padded across their new home to the kitchen. Standing over the plate of brownies, she started eating. Jacob laughed at her fervor.

"I haven't eaten since breakfast," Jill said. "Only water after that. I'm starving and these are perfect."

Getting the milk from the refrigerator, he poured them each a glass. When he reached for a brownie, she slapped his hand away. They laughed.

"How are you?" he asked.

Jill nodded her head as she swallowed a bite of brownie.

"Hungry... For everything – food, wine, life," she said. "I… I want to feel alive."

"I want you to know how sorry I am about Trevor," Jacob said. "I cannot imagine how you feel."

Still chewing, Jill shook her head.

"I can't do that." Jill covered her mouth to keep from spitting brownie all over Jacob.

He nodded.

"Can you help me?" he asked. "I can't get out of this monkey suit myself."

Jill nodded. Taking another bite of brownie, she untied his bow tie, then helped him out of his sling, the jacket and his shirt. Leaving his white undershirt, Jill returned to her brownies.

"Thanks," he said. He stretched his arms. "That's much better."

"You can move your arm," Jill said.

"Just a tiny bit. I've been working on it. It hurts, but..." Jacob puzzled at the odd look on Jill's face. "What?"

Jill shook her head then looked away from him. He stepped around the kitchen bar to her. His finger tips caressed her face and their eyes held.

"I love you," he said. "I'm here. Right here."

She stepped into his embrace.

"Every room," she whispered.

"Every room?"

Stepping back she bit her lip and nodded her head.

"Jill, what's going..."

She pulled off his t-shirt. And their spark ignited. Heat and passion erupted in a burst of haste. They fell to the kitchen floor. She pulled at him, ripping his tux pants from him. Pulling on his naked flesh, she shifted for them to join.

"Wait," he said. "I'll be right..."

"I need to feel you," she said.

"Jill." He kissed her face, her nose, and caught her mouth. "You wanted to wait."

"I don't care. I don't care." Jill's eyes dropped tears. "I've never felt you. Please Jacob, please. Just tonight. Please. Let me feel you."

"Ok, okay, shhh..." He kissed her eyes.

In a rush of sensation, they joined. As if a switch ignited in Jill, she was wild. And Jacob tried to keep up.

They moved from the kitchen floor to on top the kitchen table. From under the dining room table to the open space. They shifted location with each climax. Her heat expanded and their passion grew. Anytime he shifted away, she pulled him back to her.

Leaning against a couch in the sitting area, close to another blissful release, Jill's sadness, panic and rage caught up to her. Her passion turned to tears and tears became sobs. She battered Jacob's chest until he flipped her under him.

He pinned her down while she writhed with unspeakable pain. Unsure of what to do, he whispered over and over again that he loved her.

In the middle of a sob, she jerked, let out a breath, and closed her eyes. Certain she was having a seizure or possibly losing consciousness, Jacob shook her shoulder. Taking advantage of his movement, Jill moved on top of him.

"YOU!" She slapped at him. "YOU! I stayed with him because of YOU!"

"I would have married you in a second. Raised any child as my own. I love you only you. I've loved since the moment I laid eyes on you all those years ago," he said. "You stayed with him because of you."

"How DARE you! I was absolutely, completely and totally alone. And pregnant. What choice did I have?"

"I understand." With his hands around her face, his thumbs wiped her tears.

"How can YOU understand? You have all of this and I have NOTHING. I am NOTHING. And you are the GREAT Marlowe. What can YOU understand? Oh God..."

Overwhelmed, she fell against him. Jacob held her tight through her heaving sobs. When her breath slowed, he realized she was asleep. Unable to carry her to the bed, he pulled a down comforter from the wood chest near the fireplace. Turning on the fire, he wrapped them in the blanket. When he lay next to Jill, she moved to sleep on his chest. He caressed her fuzzy head and she looked up at him.

"I love you and only you, Jacob Marlowe. I've loved you since the moment I laid eyes on you all those years ago."

"I'm so glad," he said to her sleeping form.

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"You were marvelous tonight," Valerie said.

They were sitting in a full bathtub. Mike was brushing her hair. He kissed her head. After the 'event,' Mike and Valerie had worked to manage their guests. The worlds famous were professionals. With smiles all around, they left the Castle with their children as if nothing had happened. Valerie made Jill's brownies between organizing the clean up crew and dealing with the police. When they were finally on their own, Mike and Valerie migrated to the warm safety of their bathtub. They'd been soaking for at least an hour.

"I think four men asked me about your 'country suit'," she said.

"Frederec thought I should look like a 1940s country western star," he said. "I love the boots and the cool ribbons down the leg of the pants. I thought I looked more like bull-fighter with the short jacket, but he said it was perfect for my shoulders."

"You were gorgeous, and so fun to be around," she said. "Thank you."

"For?"

"Being my one and only," she said. "Putting up with me and all my bullshit. I see poor Jill and I... I feel very lucky."

"Jill will be all right," Mike said. "Ropers are made of tough stuff."

She leaned back and they kissed.

"Do you have any idea who killed Trevor?"

"No," Mike said. "Alex's team was all accounted for. It had to be someone else. But who? And why? Trevor's wife stopped talking as soon as she knew he was dead. I think she's working on a story that makes him solely responsible for everything."

Valerie sighed.

"I can't believe I waited so long to be here with you. I... If that happened to you? Oh my God. I... Oh Michael, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"For what?"

"For everything," she said.

He chuckled and continued brushing her hair.

"Say something," she said.
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"You take responsibility for things that are just life," he said. "We have this time, this place. Don't waste it on regret."

"I have six more months on my contract," she said.

"And?"

"I think we should try and have a baby," she said. "When my contract expires, I mean."

He smiled.

"Let's see where you are in December. By then, you may be 'A' listed and..." He mock squealed. "Everything will be perfect!"

Laughing, Valerie slapped at him. He laughed. Valerie settled against him again.

"Let's just stay here," she said.

"In Denver? I thought you had to work on Monday," he said.

"No in this bathtub. Let's just stay here forever," she said.

He kissed her head.

"It'll be dawn soon. Do you want to sleep?"

"Oh tomorrow. I'd rather not have tomorrow come. I'm sick of police and hospitals and violence and drama. And I work on a soap opera! I just want..."

"To stay in the bathtub?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

He pulled her between his knees, then wrapped her tight in his arms. No matter what happened tomorrow, they would be together.

And that's all that mattered.

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Saturday morning — 4:00 A.M.
Denver Police Department

"And who are you?" the Chief of Police asked.

"Major Joseph Walter, sir. It's my understanding that you have questions about the involvement of Homeland Security and Army Special Ops on Race Street tonight. I have been dispatched to answer your questions."

"I requested the head of the team to speak to me prior to this press conference. I'm not going to let the Army or Homeland Security leave us hanging out there like country bumpkins. Where is the Lieutenant Colonel?"

"The Lieutenant Colonel was unable to make it. I was dispatched instead. Of course, whatever I say must stay in this room. And, I promise that if it doesn't, we'll know."

The Police Chief's brow rose at the insinuation. Was this man threatening him?

"And who are you?"

Joseph smiled at the Police Chief's repeated question. In his exhaustion, the Chief hadn't realized he repeated himself until Joseph smiled. The Chief nodded his head.

"I'm someone who can answer your questions," Joseph said. "Have you completed an autopsy on Trevor Mc Guinsey?"

The Chief put his hand over the autopsy report. His eyes reviewed the man in front of him. Walter was in his forties, cropped brown hair with a dusting of gray, brown eyes, medium height. He had an air about him as if he was someone you could trust, someone who was used to being trusted, but someone not to be messed with. The Chief nodded his head. He pushed the autopsy report across the desk. Walter didn't reach to pick it up.

"I'm particularly interested in the bullet," Joseph said. "I understand your men found the bullet in the roof of the SUV."

The Chief nodded.

"We expect the bullet is hand made, no finger prints or DNA but is stamped with a series of characters."

"Characters?"
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Joseph took a pen from his pocket and drew a series of characters on the autopsy report.

Πέρσης

“How would you know something like that? We haven’t entered that information into any computer or...”

Joseph nodded his head.

“May I see it?”

The Chief of Police gave Joseph a small Ziploc bag with a bullet in it.

“I’ve only heard about these,” Joseph said. “I’ve never seen one before. Wow. Frankly, I thought the whole thing was bullshit.”

“Major, what are you talking about?”

“I’d like to tell you a little story about a Russian family on the run and a little girl who was rescued by a contract killer, but we don’t have time. You have a press conference and I need to get back the team.”

“Can you tell me about the US Army’s involvement in last night’s events?”

“I’m authorized to answer your questions.”

“My questions?” the Chief of Police was too tired to play games. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Good question,” Joseph said. He smiled his trustworthy smile. “It all started when Valerie Lipson’s publicist scheduled her and Michael Roper’s appearance on Oprah.”

Chapter Forty
Hanging out there

Saturday morning — 4:30 A.M.

Denver's Police Chief closed the door after Major Walter. Leaning back in his chair, he wondered what he needed to do. When he signed on as a police officer, he never thought he would be at the center of people trafficking, the Russian mafia, and international assassins.

The domestic abuse? The cruelty inflicted one person to another? He was used to that.

And so much of this case was normal. Possessive guy dumps wife to marry a rich woman but still feels like he owns first wife. Typical. Even possessive guy stealing his only child. Typical.

But stealing a Senator's grandson to hold for ransom? New wife selling old wife into prostitution while new wife is on her honeymoon? New wife stabs her own sister ten times and screams 'die bitch' as the stretcher goes by? Guy shot in the head from fifteen hundred yards by a professional contract killer called Perses? Of course that's AFTER the Russian mafia agrees to leave some retired Sergeant and his family alone.

Propping his head in his hands, the Police Chief rubbed his aching head.

What the hell was he going to tell the press?

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Saturday morning — 4:30 A.M.

Jacob woke to the sound of his blackberry buzzing. As he had every morning for most of the last week, he gently shifted from under Jill's head. Today, Jill grabbed him before he could leave her. He smiled.

"It's Blane," Jacob said. "I need to let him know I won't make it this morning."

The ache in Jill's eyes was almost more than he could stand.

"My blackberry is in my tux," he said.

Jill's head moved in a nod. Getting up, he went to the kitchen area where his abandoned tux lay on the floor. When he turned to look at Jill, she was walking toward their bedroom. He heard the bathroom door close.

"Hey," Jacob said after dialing Blane.

"Updates. Do you want business first or family?"

"Family," Jacob replied.

"Honey is still in critical condition. Sam says it's touch and go. Her mom and Delphie are by her side in ICU."

"Jill said she'd never seen anything as brutal as the way Honey was attacked."

"Yes," Blane said. "It was vicious and cruel. I don't think she would have lived if MJ hadn't been there. And honestly? No one's sure she'll make it. Her spine is cut. They did surgery to reattach it, but she'll probably never walk again. She might have use of her hands but who knows? And that's if she survives. They removed her spleen, one kidney, part of her liver, and some of her intestine."

"God, poor Honey," Jacob said.

"Sam said her mother is hysterical. With one daughter in jail and the other on death's doorway, I guess old Tiffanie is contemplating the error of her ways," Blane said. "They had to medicate her last night. That's why Sam and Delphie are still at the hospital."

"Who's with Becky and Briana?" Jacob asked.

"Their nanny," Blane said. "Sam hired her last week when they officially split up."

"Delphie?" Jacob watched Jill come from their bedroom in a bathrobe. She went to stand in the doorway to Katy's
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room.

"She suggested it," Blane said. "On the business front, Bambi wants to know if she can close the site today. That's Honey's team. She says everyone is upset and..."

"Of course," Jacob said. "I assume they're doing the Lipson employee hospital vigil."

"Like always," Blane said. "The call went out last night. They've been there in shifts all night. Honey's worked at every site, so every site has at least one person at the hospital. Bambi wants to make sure everyone will get paid."

"Of course," Jacob said. "Listen, we had a rough night. Can you and Aden start the sites?"

"Sure," Blane said. "They haven't found anyone to identify the Trevor. His wife won't do it. I guess his mother has Alzheimer's and his Dad is in a wheelchair. Diabetes I think. I fielded a call from Denver Police wondering if Jill was willing to do the identification."

"I was going to stay close to home this morning," Jacob said.

"I don't think there are funds to bury..."

"I assumed," Jacob said.

"The Rocky is reporting one of the children was the daughter of the man who was killed," Blane said. "This poor child watched her father die. She's okay though right?"

"Katy? We'll take her to see Aden's kids' therapist. But she seems fine." Jacob looked up to see Jill walking toward him. He held out his arm to her and she tucked herself into him.

"Well, the press wants photos of the poor child," Blane said.

"Sounds like it's going to be an interesting day. You'll keep me in the loop for Honey?"

"Yep," Blane said. "Call me if you can meet us at noon."

"I will."

Jacob hung up the phone. Setting the phone on the counter, he held Jill to him.

"How's Katy?"

"She's still out," Jill said.

"How are you?" Jacob said.

Jill shook her head and moved away from him. He pulled her back to him. Looking into her eyes, he saw her sorrow.

"I'm sorry I said all those things last night," she said.

"You have a right to say and feel what you feel," he said.

"You're right. I stayed with Trevor because of me." Jill shrugged. "Now he's gone. And I..."

She shook her head. Turning away from him, she wandered to the front windows.

Jacob let out a breath as a wave of insecurity came over him. Had he lost her to Trevor? He'd loved Trevor's wife for so long that he couldn't keep the bone crushing defeat out of his mind. Hoping the feeling would pass, he rubbed his forehead.

When he looked up, Jill was standing in front of him.

"I know what you're thinking," Jill said. "You've been… so positive, and so wonderful. And I... I have compartments… inside. It's hard to explain."

"I'm listening," Jacob said.

"You and I met when we were in high school," Jill said. "You don't remember. But I do. You ran track and played football. Right?"

Jacob nodded.

"I ran track too," Jill said. "I mean until I married Trevor and all that stuff. Trevor didn't like me to associate with other guys… well, people really. You ran the four hundred at state."

"My sophomore and junior year," Jacob said. "I blew out my knee my senior year and couldn't run."

"I ran hurdles. I sat behind you on the bus to State my sophomore year. We didn't have a lot of people going so..."

"Machebeuf came with us," Jacob said. "I..."

"You had a girl on your arm, were flirting with a girl in front of you and talking to the guys around you. I don't think you even looked at me," Jill said.

"I was quite an asshole when I was in high school," Jacob said. "Val hated me."

"Actually, I thought you were amazing." Jill blushed. "I got stuck in the press of big guys. You yelled at some guy to stop trampling me. I was small, like Katy is small. The guy..."

"Picked you up and set you in front of me." Jacob chuckled. "That was you?"

Jill nodded. "He made us kiss."

"I remember, the tiny dancer and her prince," Jacob said. "I... Wow. You won that day."

"So did you," Jill said.

"I looked for you..." Jacob and Jill said in unison then beamed at each other.

"My family was there," Jill said. "I went home with Meg."

He stroked her cheek.

"I recognized you when I saw you with your mom at Pete's that day. But... I..." Jill shook her head. Her eyes welled with tear. "I was married… holy sacrament… I... I made myself forget you… put you away in a little compartment..."

"Like the wizard?"

"I didn't remember you when you asked me to dance at Trevor's party," Jill said. "I… I know you think I want Trevor. I don't. I didn't. I… I can't believe he's gone. He's been the one constant in my life since I was fourteen years old.

"I am going to have to take care of all of this mess," Jill said. "Trevor's parents aren't… well. I've paid for their care… forever. They think Trevor pays for it, but… I always have. They believe Katy is his only child.

"I am going to have to take care of his estate, have a funeral, make sure his parents are all right and bury him. I have to do it alone. I'm sure Meg will help me with Katy, but other than that... His parents hate my family and my 'slutty friends.' They believe Trevor and I split up because of me."

"You could tell them the truth," Jacob said.

"How? Tell an insane woman and a sick old man that their beloved child was a monster? I… I can't do that."

"He is married to someone else now," Jacob said.

"Was," Jill said. "She's in jail. Anyway, you know what she's like? She'll divorce him the moment she's sure no money is coming her way. Plus, Trevor doesn't… I mean, *didn't* do paperwork. I'm sure I'm still on his life insurance and in charge of his estate."

"Jill, you should do what's best for you. You don't owe Trevor or anyone else anything," he said.

"I know." Jill held her hands up over her head. "I need to finish this thing with him. For me, I need to. I would love to have you with me every step of the way, but you or Sandy or Meg would make it harder. I can't deal with the level of crap that would come with having anyone with me."

"How can I help?" he asked.

"Will you be my constant?" Jill asked.

Jacob's face flushed. He pulled her into his arms.

"I won't be able to wear your beautiful jewels. I don't know if I'll be able to stay here. I'll just spend your money… on him, and them. I probably won't see you, maybe days at a time. I'll have to take him back to their family plot in Ohio. I... When I come back, will you be here for me? For Katy?"

"Oh Jill," he whispered. "Do you have to ask?"

Jill's eyes filled with tears. She kissed him.

"Val gave me money for the diamond sets and I have money from the modeling. But the checks were so big, and my credit isn't great. The bank held the money."

"I've set up joint accounts for us..."

Jill shook her head. "It has to look like my money or I'll pay hell for it. I just want to get this done, over with. I..."

"I'll take care of it," Jacob said. "What ever you need, I'm here for you. I'd like to be your constant."

"Will you make love to me one more time before I have to go?" Jill asked.

Jacob took her hand and led her to the bedroom. Very slowly, very carefully, he touched, caressed, kissed and loved her body. He wanted to taste every inch of her beautiful skin. Jill responded in kind. Opposite of last night's haste, they languished in the touch of each other. Dancing in sensation, they rose to climax. In a toe curling flash, the world stopped and the lovers held on until, in a breath, the world began again.

The rest of the morning was a blur.

At some point, Jill got up to bring Katy back to bed. The little family lay snuggled together on the safe big bed. The world invaded in the form of a telephone call from the Denver Police. While Jill showered, Jacob helped Katy get dressed. Together, Jill and Jacob packed Jill and Katy's few possessions in an old backpack so she could move back into her apartment. Going down to the Castle, Jill and Katy said a tearful good-bye to Mike and Val. Sandy and Jill sobbed and clung to each other until Jill had to go. Jacob helped them through the tunnels. Because her Lexus was too fancy for what she had to do, and she couldn't drive his Jeep, he gave her Mike's Bronco.

Katy cried when she said 'good-bye'. He held her close. They had dreamed of this when they practiced dreams with Delphie. But knowing what was going to happen was of no comfort for the little girl and her father.

Standing on Detroit Street, Jacob watched everything he'd ever wanted, everything he loved, drive away from him. His eyesight blurred, he turned to make his way back to the Castle. When he opened the Castle door, his father stood on the other side.

Jacob broke down.

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Jill sat with her victim's advocate in the lobby of the Denver Police station. They were waiting to view Trevor's body. Jill had already arranged for Trevor's parents travel to Denver and found a place for them to stay. She was grateful Megan was willing to take care of Katy today.

Even with the kind advocate sitting next to her, Jill felt alone. Completely and totally alone.

She was completely and totally alone. She had lived with this aloneness every single day prior to the non-date. She was sure that every day between now and when she returned to the Castle, she would be alone.

Hearing a familiar voice, Jill looked up. Samantha Hargreaves was arguing with a police detective. Jill watched the two argue back and forth. When Samantha smiled, Jill knew Samantha had won. Samantha nodded to the police detective then came out into the lobby.

Jill was sure that this gorgeous woman, a Hargreaves no less, wouldn't even remember her. She was surprised when Samantha sat down next to her.

"I guess you're working a case," Jill said. "Sucks to work on a Saturday."

"I don't mind," Samantha said.

"I have to identify Trevor's body," Jill said. "I've been waiting for about forty minutes. I don't know what the hold up is. How long do you usually have to wait?"

Samantha's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Her pretty blue eyes scanned Jill's face.

"I'm here with you," Samantha said.

"But..."

"Did you honestly think you'd have to do this alone?" Samantha laughed. "I'll be with you every step of the way, Jill. We'll deal with the police together. I've done estate work. I will help you with his estate… everything. I've cleared my schedule. You are my case."

"Why? I mean, how? I..."

"You're part of the family now, Jill."

"The Hargreaves?"

"My family," Samantha said. "Val means everything to me. She, and those she loves, are a part of my family."
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"Because of Jacob?"

"Because of you," Samantha said. "We don't leave people hanging out there, Jill."

Jill nodded.

"Now," Samantha's voice dropped to an almost whisper, "they want to ask you who killed Trevor. They're fairly confident they can get it out of you. But you have no idea."

"I..."

"You have no idea. You're not sure why they would even ask you." Samantha stood up. Turning to look at Jill, she said, "Here we go."

Jill stood as two policemen came to take her to see Trevor's body.

Chapter Forty-One
Never give up

Two weeks later

Honey Lipson opened her eyes slowly. Having just moved here, she wasn't used to the quiet busyness of Craig Hospital. Lying in her bed, the shuffling hospital sounds reminded her of rats scurrying around the house in the middle of the night. Her earliest childhood memory.

She took sniff. When they didn't stink of rot, the flowers on her bedside table yielded a distinctive fresh odor. Nope just fresh flowers. Today.

She liked Swedish Hospital. She had floated on a wave of blissful medications.

Here at Craig, someone woke her, took her vitals, chatted with irritating cheer, then cruelly made her move. The movement was awful, painful, and more than anything, humiliating. She wanted the blissful, drug induced dark. Today, the cheerful bitch told her she had evaluations and physical therapy and occupational therapy and tests and...

She was grateful for her private room. She would never admit it but she cried. A lot. Especially at night.

Her mother came every afternoon at two. She loved her mother. She was enjoying watching her mother blossom as a person, not someone's wife, mother or girlfriend.

But her mother's desperate guilt had to go. She wanted to tell her mother to just get over it, but she never did. On some level, she understood Tiffanie. At least her mother came to see her. She knew her mother refused to even speak to her sister.

What woke her? Whatever.

Honey closed her eyes intent on slipping away while she could.

"I saw your eyes open. You're awake," a male voice said. "Don't you're pretend you're not."

"Michael Scully Junior, are you holding my hand?" Honey asked.

"I am," MJ said. "And I'm not going to let go."

"What happened to 'I hope I never ever see you again ever in my whole life'?" Honey asked.

"Changed my mind," MJ said.

"Maybe I haven't," Honey said. "Just because I'm stuck in this bed doesn't mean you can sneak in here and hold my hand."

"I… I… I..."

Stuttering, MJ blew out a frustrated breath. Honey was the most infuriating person he had ever met. She moved her fingers and he looked up at her face. She winked at him. He let out a breath.

"My brain gets messed up when I get frustrated or anxious," MJ said.

She nodded.

"I understand you saved my life," Honey said. "Thanks. I guess."

"It's hard. The first weeks are so hard that you feel like you'll always be like this. But you won't."

"How would you know?" Honey's whole body blazed with indignation brought about by weeks of desperate pain.

"I was in an accident in Iraq. Our truck ran over an IED... a bomb. I survived. Almost unhurt. I was a medic. I went from man to man on our team. I think I got to everyone. I hope I got to everyone before..."

MJ shook his head. Looking up, he saw Honey's pale blue eyes watching him. She nodded to encourage him.

"I guess the bomb wasn't fully discharged, or there was another one... I don't know. There was another blast. I lost my right leg below the knee and my brain got scrambled."

"I'm sorry, MJ. I didn't know."

"I was in Walter Reed for a long time," he said. "So I know how hard it is. You want to die. Every day. And you can't figure out why you're not dead."

Honey made a kind of 'humft' noise.

"I love you Honey," MJ said. "Always have."

"You have a very funny way of showing it," Honey said. "The last words you said to me were, 'Fuck you, you stupid bitch.'"

"Oh Honey," MJ said. "We had a huge fight. You weren't stellar yourself. You told me I wasn't 'EVEN a man' and a whole bunch of other stuff that I was mad about for years but don't remember now. Brain damage has some privileges."

"Do you remember why we fought?" Honey asked.

"No," MJ said. "You?"

"No."

"We fought a lot."

Honey nodded.

"Why did we fight so much?" MJ asked. "I can't for the life of me remember."

"Because you can't keep your zipper up," Honey said.

"Yeah," MJ said. "I did like the girls. I never understood why you stayed with me."

"Low self-esteem," Honey said. She winked at him and he laughed.

"You weren't exactly the most faithful either, missy," MJ said.

Honey made her best shocked face. They laughed.

"I was in high school. You were a grown up Army man," Honey said.

"Grown Army boy," MJ said.

"Why are you here?" she asked. "I am grateful you saved my life. I wish... I mean, just a couple weeks ago I was fine, normal but now..."

"Boy, I know how that feels." MJ's eyes scanned her face. "And I don't know why I'm here. Ever since that night... I mean, before you were attacked. You were so beautiful in that blue dress… dancing with all those men. I haven't stopped thinking about you. I was driving home from working out and I… wound up in the Craig Hospital parking lot.

"That didn't sound very good," MJ said.

"I know what you mean," Honey said. "I saw you at the airport that day. I guess you were working. I... Yeah, I know what you mean."

"What would you say to trying it again?" MJ asked.

"I don't know, MJ. I don't think I'll ever walk again. I can move my fingers some but who knows what I'll be able to do. Most days I wish I'd died. Every thing else is a blur of pain and meds. My brother, Jake, comes to see me every day. I don't remember his visits. Mom says we talk but...

"I… I'm not even sure what you're asking. I can't go on dates or dance or fool around or..."

MJ smiled.

"What?" Honey asked.

"I remember that feeling. That's all," MJ said. "You've never given up on anything, Honey. You never gave up on me. You never gave up on your horrible sister or your ridiculous mother. You don't give up. So why would you give up now?"

"Look where not giving up on my sister got me? I should have turned her in a decade ago. Mom had no idea what she was up to in high school or..."

"Some things just happen, Honey," MJ said. "It wasn't your fault."

Honey closed her eyes to keep him from seeing the tears seeping into her hair. He touched her cheek to catch a tear.

"I am stationed here in Colorado now. I travel about seventy percent of the time, but I have time off every five weeks and at least six weeks in the summer. So far, we've been home every weekend. The LC likes to be home for the weekends."

"What do you do?" she asked.

"Can't tell you. Sorry," he said. "I'd like to see you when I'm home. Would you like that?"

"At this moment, I don't know what I would like," she said. "I'm not great company. My mom comes every afternoon to help me bathe and eat. She usually leaves around seven."

"Why don't we have a date tonight? I'll come about seven-thirty. I can bring a movie and some snacks," he said. "You still like Milk Duds and Captain Crunch mixed together?"

Honey moved her head slightly to nod. "What about the other girls?"

"No other girls. I have to be one hundred percent honest and faithful in every area of my life to keep my new job. You don't have to worry about me cheating. What about other guys?"

"Look where I am, MJ!"

"I saw an orderly looking in here," MJ laughed.

"You're very funny," Honey said. "I… Yeah. As long as you don't expect too much, I'd like it if you came tonight."

"GREAT!" MJ beamed. "Wanna see my fake leg?"

"Maybe on the second date," she said.

He laughed.

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"Oh, thank God," Megan Roper said as she opened the door to find Jacob on the other side.

"I came as soon as I got your message. My team's in a hockey tournament so my phone was off," Jacob said. He stepped over the threshold to Jill's oldest sister's house. "What's going on?"

"I don't have any idea," Megan said. Megan's eyes conveyed her worry and her voice pressed on in a fast whisper. "Jill's been staying here a couple nights a week. She usually gets here about six. We have dinner, all of us, then she stays. She hasn't been eating so I've been trying to get her to eat more. Well, she missed dinner tonight then showed up about eight. Katy was already here. I brought her home with my boys. Jill stepped into the house and started crying. She won't eat. She hasn't said anything. She just cries."

"You don't have any idea..."

"None. I mean, other than her ex-in-laws are awful. Trevor's friends have been harassing her for money. They say Trevor borrowed money or promised money or just owed them money. They've been really cruel saying that Jill is stealing all Trevor's money. His wife is furious. She hounds Jill for any money from Trevor's estate. Jill was supposed to start cleaning out their apartment next week but the landlord called and said he needs the apartment clear by the end of the week."

Jacob nodded and waited for Megan to finish.

"I've never seen her this upset," Megan said. "Never. You know Jill, she can be so detached, kind of eerie calm when she should be upset. But..."

Megan hugged him.

"Thank you for coming. I didn't know what else to do."

"I haven't seen her in two weeks, Megan," Jacob said. "We text every day but that's about it. Samantha tells me what's going on when she remembers to… or feels like it. I don't have any idea..."

"But you love Jill?"

"Absolutely," he said.

"That's what she needs," Megan said. "She's in here. Quietly, everyone's asleep."

Jacob followed Megan through the dark, quiet east Aurora home to a door near the back.

"This is our family room. She won't stay in the guest bedroom. Says she likes it in here. I think she likes it because Katy is right across the hall."

Megan opened the door to the room.
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"Jilly, I thought you might..."

"Oh God."

Jill ran across the room to Jacob. She tucked herself into his arms. Megan pulled the door closed.

Jill was crying so hard that he couldn't imagine she could see. He led her to a soft armchair then pulled her on his lap. Nestled on Jacob's lap, Jill cried into his chest while he caressed her hair.

"What happened?" he whispered.

"I… I… I got my period," Jill said. "I know it's dumb but I was hoping so much..."

Jacob chuckled.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"I'm laughing at me," he said. "I was hoping too."

Jill laughed through her tears. "I've missed you."

"Ah Jill, I've missed you too… desperately," he said. "Remind me why we have to do this?"

"Because everything would be worse if they knew..."

Jill's tears overwhelmed her. He pulled her into his chest again. Rocking her like a child, he let her cry.

"It's so horrible… so horrible. Everyone's mad at me. Every time I turn around someone wants something else from me. If I spend a dime, Trevor's parents say I'm wasting his money." Jill took a handkerchief from Jacob. "Thank you for sending Rosa. She's a Godsend. I don't think the apartment has ever been that clean. She makes the best food too. And the flowers are so beautiful."

"Rosa took care of my mother's house, then Val's and my living areas. She asked if she could help," Jacob said. "I'm glad she's able to help. Are you eating what she makes?"

Jill nodded. "She comes on Mondays and Thursdays. And leaves us dinner for two days. Katy loves her enchiladas. And her sheets are so soft. It's like a tiny oasis in the middle of this awfulness. I dread the moment my in-laws find out. They will freak out. Did you know people have been coming by the apartment looking for Trevor's money? It's crazy. What money did Trevor ever have? I never knew him to have anything. If you hadn't fixed the security, I think they would have broken into the apartment."

"What do you need tonight?" Jacob asked.

"I don't know," Jill said. "I've tried to hold it together but when my period started, I lost it. I yelled at Trevor's father when he called me 'stupid bitch' for the eleventy billionth time. I didn't know what to do so I came over here."

"Let's start with food," Jacob said. "I bet Megan has some Captain Crunch."

"Nope, all healthy at this house," Jill said.

"Why don't I go out and get some supplies?"

"Don't leave me." She cuddled deeper into his arms. "Please."

"You have to eat," Jacob said. "And sleep."

There was a tap at the door. Megan poked her head in. She was carrying two bowls.

"I brought some spaghetti. I mean, it's nothing fancy, just noodles and jar sauce, but..."

"Oh God, that sounds wonderful," Jacob said. "It smells delicious. Thank you so much."

Megan blushed to her hair line.

"Like I said, it's not much… just left overs really." She set the bowls down on the pool table in the middle of the room. "There's a water cooler over there with cups. And..."

Megan realized Jill was nestled on Jacob's lap. Megan beamed at her sister, shrugged her shoulders, and then went toward the door. Jill intercepted her for a hug.

"Thanks sis," Jill said.

"Love you, Jilly," Megan said. Looking over at Jacob, she said, "You'll let me know what I can do?"

"We need to meet tomorrow morning," Jacob said. "Could you contact the rest of the..."

"They'll be here. Do seven work?"

Jacob nodded. Megan waved as she left the room.

"What was that?"

Jill picked up the bowls of spaghetti and brought them over. He took a bowl from her.

"Oh God, I love spaghetti and jar sauce," he said. "It's perfect comfort food. I'm starving."

"Jacob."

"You need help. And messes are my specialty," he said.

"No. No. You can't help. No one can help. I have to do it myself."

"Give me a little credit, Jill," Jacob said. "No one will know you're receiving help."

"No way. Plus..." Jill bit her lip as her eyes became vague.

"What?"

"I don't want you to know about what stupid bitch I am," Jill whispered.

Jacob laughed.

"I was serious," she said.

"I know," Jacob said. "Have you ever been to the art museum and see a painting that you thought was beautiful and someone else thought was ugly?"

"Sure. But I still have to do this myself."

"Some people don't know how to appreciate the beauty in other people. They are too caught up in themselves," Jacob said. "Even if I knew every little detail of what they thought, I'd still see your magnificence."

"I don't know. Why did Meg already know?"

"I called Candy to ask if she would either cater or help find caterers for Trevor's funerals."

"But they haven't released the body."

"That's all right," Jacob said. "We'll have a funeral anyway. When his body is released, you can take it to Ohio."

"Oh," Jill said. "That's a good plan. Trevor's friends will be so focused on what they get to do, they won't bug me anymore."

"I will deal with his wife," Jacob said. "She's more my problem than yours. As for Trevor's friends, I will hire a security service for the building. Mrs. Robinson told me there were people lurking around. I didn't want to interfere."

Jill nodded.

"My father has a particular gift for dealing with difficult people. He thinks they're funny," he said. "That's why we kept Ashforth around for so long. He will enjoy taking care of your in-laws so you won't have to deal with them all the time. He's Trevor's father-in-law after all."

"But..."

"Don't worry," he said. "He loves you. He won't care what they say either."

"I don't know."

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Of course," she said. "But..."

"Then tonight, we'll eat and rest. Tomorrow, I'll sort out this Trevor inflicted mess. And..."

He took a bite of spaghetti and purred with happiness.

"And?"

"And we can get to down the real work of making a babies," he said.

"Work, work, work," Jill said. "You are a workaholic."

"Indeed."

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Saturday evening — 6:30 P.M. PDT

Hollywood, California
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"Can I kick her if she says, 'I mean it's just like you know' again?" Mike finished tying his neck tie.

"I will." Valerie straightened the knot. She looked into his face. "You're mad because you missed the hockey tournament."

"With Jake out, our team sucks anyway," Mike said. "I'm okay to miss one. But just one."

"You hate this."

"I… love you," Mike said. "This is your work. I can hang. It's just that these people are so..."

"Pretentious?"

"Stupid," he said. "All they talk is how *hard* they've worked as if to justify the ridiculous amount of money they have. Most of them work a two days a week!"

"If that," Valerie said. "Listen..."

"I'm all right," Mike said.

"I told you we should have stayed in the bathtub," she said.

Shaking his head, he lifted the keys to her Mercedes sedan from the key hook.

"It's just a moment in time, Val," he said. "Let's make it an early night."

"Are you tired?" she asked.

"Something like that."

He scooped her up and kissed her breathless. Setting her down, he opened the front door to their Hollywood Hills home. Valerie opened her cell phone.

"Hack, hack," Valerie coughed into the phone. "I'm getting sick and I have an early call. We're going to have to miss tonight. I know. I'm disappointed too. Yes, I will. Besos to you."

"That's my girl."

Shutting the door with a foot, he lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom.

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Saturday night — 9:30 P.M.

"I think you should move in," Aden repeated.

"I love my condo," Sandy said. "Why would I give it up?"

"To live with me and the kids," he said. He nipped her bare nipple. "To be with me."

"Aden, I..." Sandy shifted away from him. Rotating her feet to the side of the bed, she sat up and began gathering her clothing.

"Too soon?" Aden asked.

Sandy dressed. Standing at his bedroom door, her eyes wells of sorrow, Sandy shook her head. Aden jumped out of bed.

"Say something," he said.

"I can't," she said. "I'm sorry. I can't."

He nodded.

"So I guess this is it," she said. "I'll get my things and..."

"Whoa. Wait. This is not it. No, no, no, no, no." Aden shook his head back and forth. "No way."

"What other choice do we have?"

"We continue doing what we're doing," Aden said. "Some day, the time will be right or maybe never. Some couples live in different houses. I guess I..."

"But you need a wife and your children need a mother," Sandy said. "And I… I can't… I..."

Smiling, Aden clutched her to him.

"It's not all or nothing, Sandy,. You weren't put on this planet to make my every wish come true. You don't have to give into every thing I want when I want it."
~~~~~~~~

"Oh."

"What do you want, Sandy?"

"I like the way things are," Sandy said.

"Ok. Then come back to bed. Let's start over."

When Sandy shook her head, Aden let out a breath.

He knew that look.

Sandy had retreated to someplace far in the back of her head. Helping her out of her clothing, he led her back to the bed. He spooned around her until the storm he'd come to expect arrived. He pulled her onto his chest while she cried.

He had no idea why he loved her so much. He just did.

If he ever found the bastard responsible for scarring her so deeply, he would kill him.

Chapter Forty-Two
No shoot!

Six weeks later

With Katy perched on her lap, Jill sat on a plastic chair in the Cleveland Airport. Katy was sucking her thumb. The thumb sucking was new for Katy. She started it in earnest to defy Trevor's father.

Sweet, charming Katy did nothing more than glare when Trevor's parents were around. Outside of responding to direct questions like, 'Are you hungry?', Katy had stopped talking more than a week ago. When they were alone, Katy wanted to cuddle, nuzzle and hug. But when Trevor's family was around, Katy was absent.

Jill had forgotten about this Katy. Trevor's Katy. Trevor never met the Katy that Jill knew. Trevor's Katy was silent, obedient and bland. She never broke anything. She never had giggle fits or squealed or got angry or danced around or hopped in place or ...

Jill caressed Katy's head. Her eyes shifted to look at Jill. Katy smiled around her thumb.

At least they were finally done with Trevor. All of Trevor's funerals, two memorials and burial, were over. Watching Trevor's body descend into the ground, Jill felt a wave of relief. She had fooled herself into thinking that once Trevor was in the ground, his parents would back off.

She was wrong.

She'd wanted to push them out of the moving rental car. But instead, good girl Jill returned them to their assisted living facility.

The last thing they said?

Trevor's asswipe father: "Only a horrible mother would let her child suck her thumb like that."

Trevor's psycho mother: "I can't believe Trevor chose to breed with that woman."

Good girl Jill kept her mouth shut, waved at the ex-in-laws, then made a bee line for the airport. She and Katy giggled at the entrance. They skipped to the counter where they discovered that...

Jill's ticket was messed up and...

Her credit card was refused and...

A load of other stuff that didn't make any sense.

Jill wanted to launch herself over the counter and beat the woman senseless. Didn't the airport counter woman realize Jill had been alone!? With her evil ex-husband's body!? And his terrible parents!? For...

Ok, she wasn't sure how long. But a very long time. She had to get home.

Instead, good girl Jill just smiled. She thanked the woman for her help then sat down in the nearest chair. She wasn't sure how long she had been sitting here, or how long she would sit here.

At the very least, she would sit here until: Jacob answered her forty phone messages or she thought of a plan or she could figure out how to use her Frontier Airlines standby passes to get home or Sandy got off work or hell froze over.

Yes. She was grateful for Jacob's help.

Yes. She would never be rid of Trevor or his parents if Jacob hadn't stepped in to fix this mess.

Yes. Jacob's father was a genius at dealing with the asshole ex-in-laws.

Yes. She was the one who insisted on taking Trevor's body back to Ohio.

YES! ALONE! Well, with Katy, her old Katy, not this Katy zombie. Still. She HAD to do it.

Yes. Jacob had paid for everything, expected nothing – which was good because he got nothing – and was a fabulous friend.

But where was he?

Of course, her phone battery died hours ago. Every time she tried to charge it in the rental car, Trevor's father removed the charger. She didn't have a wall plug charger.

There was always the white courtesy telephone. He could have called her there. But no. No. Calls. From. Jacob.

"Mommy, I'm hungry," Katy said. "Can we go to the clowny place?"

"McDonald's?"

"Uh huh. Paddie says they have food for kids there," Katy said.

"Ok, Katy-baby. Let's get something to eat."

Jill mentally counted the money in her wallet. She had hidden a Jacob-gifted fifty dollar bill and thought she had at least four singles tucked in her change pocket. Just enough for a room and McDonald's.

Finally, a plan.

Jill carried Katy to the McDonald's counter then ordered. Reaching into her wallet, she noticed the change compartment was open. Not worried, she went to the secret pocket and…

It was empty.

God damn thieving parents of that cretin Trevor! Clearly, the apple didn't fall far from that putrid tree. She could hear her miserable ex-father-in-law. 'It's my son's money anyway.'

Turning back to the McDonald's clerk, Jill opened her mouth and the entire story fell out. Ex-husband shot to death, jerk off father-in-law, crazy mother-in-law, missing boyfriend, freaked out child.

Jill vomited the entire story.

"Listen, lady. If you can't pay, you don't eat." The clerk's face reflected his disgust. "It's as simple as that."

"I've got it," Sandy said. She sneered at the clerk. "And wipe that look off your face."

"SANDY!!" Jill screamed. Hugging Sandy, she squished Katy between them. Katy giggled.

"Get busy," Tanesha said to the clerk. "Because we want some food too. And you best not spit in any of our food because I WILL find out where you live."

"TANESHA! Oh my God!" Jill hugged Tanesha in another Katy sandwich. "Where's Heather?"

"She's with Noelle in the bathroom," Sandy said. "They're trying some makeup. She'll be here by the time we get our food."

"Oh God, Sandy. I don't have any money! And my ticket was canceled and there's something wrong with Katy's name and... Why are you here?"

"Why isn't your expensively perfect cell phone working?" Tanesha asked. "I texted you at least three times. I do not like it when I don't hear from my girl."

"It ran out of juice," Jill said. "I tried to charge it. Every time I plugged it in, Trevor's dad disconnected it, saying I was wasting Trevor's money with these fancy gadgets. Oh God. Oh God."

Jill hiccupped her emotions from anger to sadness to sheer joy.

"It's over, Jill," Sandy said.

"How did you get here, Auntie Sandy?" Katy asked.

"We're a surprise," Sandy said. "When was the last time you saw Jacob?"

"I was there for his shoulder surgery a few weeks ago," Jill said. "I've been in Ohio since then."

"But you've talked to him?" Sandy asked.

"I think so," Jill said. "I don't really remember. Every time I tried to take a call, I was interrupted. We've texted."

"That's what he said," Sandy said. "What was the last text you received?"

"Um, I don't remember."

Tanesha laughed.

"I've called and texted about forty times and he doesn't answer." Jill defended her irritation and frustration. "You know, there is the white courtesy telephone."

"Jacob is at the Lipson Construction retreat," Sandy said.

"No, Sandy." Jill's voice carried her exasperation. "The retreat is at the end of August."

Sandy and Tanesha laughed. Seeing Heather walking toward them, Sandy asked, "What's the date today?"

"August Thirtieth. Why?"

"Oh God," Jill said. "I lost track of the days. No wonder our tickets are screwed up. What about Katy's name?"

"Jill!" Sandy looked like she could shake Jill. "The DNA tests came through. Jacob is Katy's father."

Sandy tickled Katy, who giggled.

"But you knew that, Katy didn't you?"

Katy nodded.

"Katy's name changed."

"What? Why?" Jill asked.

"Katy is Katherine Anjelika Roper Marlowe now. I brought her new birth certificate with me." Sandy shook her head at Jill. "You filed all of the paperwork! Where's your head?"

"I'm not doing very well."

"No shit," Heather said. Realizing Noelle was there, she said, "No shoot."

"It's okay, Heather," Noelle said. "Daddy swears too."

"Do I know why you're here?" Jill asked.

"We're all going to Maine, girlie." Tanesha was carrying a tray of McDonald's food. "Let's eat. Then we'll catch our exclusive corporate jet."

"Why are we going to Maine?" Jill asked.

"God Jill, you are out of it," Sandy said. Sandy gave Jill an open hug. "The Lipson retreat started early. The board wanted to meet to go over how Lipson was going to respond to the economic down turn. The entire sale to the employees is on the table again. The whole management team left right after Jacob's surgery."

"Nash left last week with Delphie to drive to Maine. He says the place is really neat. They went fishing and had real boy time. Whatever that means," Noelle said. "I got to stay with Sandy."

"We've had fun," Sandy smiled. "I've missed my Jill."

"I've missed my Jill," Jill said under her breath.

"We're flying to Maine for some..." Sandy started.

"Shopping!" Tanesha said.

"Play time!" Heather said.

"We're all booked into at least one full spa day," Sandy said. "It's all Jill recovery time. We're along as a sacrifice for our girl, Jill."

"I get to go too!" Noelle said.

"Oh." Jill looked at Katy then at her friends. "Oh."

"There's our ride," Heather said.

Jill turned to see Jacob running toward them.

"Oh my God, I was so worried," he said. He took Katy from Jill.

"Your arm!"

"Works." Grimacing, he shifted Katy to his left arm. "Sort of."

Life stopped as Jill and Jacob stood, staring at the walls, only a step away from each other. Then Jill threw her arms around his neck.

And life returned.

"It's over, Jill," Jacob said.

"What about the estate and all of that?" Jill asked.

"We'll let the lawyers work out the rest."

Stepping back, Jill nodded.

"Mommy, can we eat now?" Katy asked.

Jill looked at Katy and laughed.

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Honey's physical therapist lowered the pull up bar so she could grab on. After wrapping her wrist straps around the bar, Honey hooked her not-so-working ring and little fingers on. She held the bar with her mostly working fingers and thumb. The physical therapist turned on the mechanical pulley that lifted the bar and pulled Honey from her wheelchair.

"Ten pull ups," her physical therapist said. "Get going."

With his help, Honey squeezed out ten pull ups. She'd always been able to do pull ups. As soon as her scars healed, she wanted back in the gym and back on the pull up bar. Sweaty from her workout, she went slowly today to warm down.

"Ok, let's finish up with hanging sit ups again," the physical therapist said. "You were almost there yesterday. Just five."

Using her stomach muscles, Honey lifted her legs. With the physical therapist's assistance, she was able to do five hanging sit ups. She could almost do the entire range of motion. Everything, except for the part that required her leg and hip muscles to work. Together. Like they used to. But didn't now.

"The muscles are receiving signals, just very softly," MJ had said. "Like a low voice on the telephone."

Honey wasn't convinced the muscles were listening at all.

"Let's stretch it out." The physical therapist moved behind Honey. While Honey hung on the bar, the therapist stretched her right leg. "Hey, how's your boyfriend?"

"What boyfriend is that?" Honey asked.

"The red-haired guy," the therapist said.

"That guy? He's out of town most of my life."

"He's not your boyfriend?" the therapist moved to stretch her left leg.

"How can you have a boyfriend that's never around? Sheez, I haven't seen him in..."

"Twenty days, two hours, and forty-eight minutes," MJ said from behind her. "Can I do that?"

"Sure," the therapist said. "I'll leave you here. You'll make sure she gets back to her room?"

"You bet," MJ said.

MJ's hands stroked her body. Slowly, he took her through stretches for her legs, hips, and waist. Lifting her slightly, he stretched her shoulders and arms. His fingers found her sorest spots and worked to relieve the knots. Honey had to focus all of her attention on the bar to keep from melting to the ground. In this moment, she was sure she'd never felt as cherished, as loved, for exactly who, what and where she was.

She had been angry with him for his little secret missions that kept him away. She knew she was being unreasonable, but she missed him. Especially when Jake was out of town. Even though she'd made friends with a few other patients here, being in the hospital sucked.

"You can drop," he said.

Honey unwrapped her straps then let go of the bar. She dropped into his arms.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she replied.

"Would you like to be carried back to your room?"

"I won't be able to show you my cool wheeling skills," she said.

"How about a kiss?"

Turning away from him, Honey's limited mobility in her arms hadn't stopped her from practicing crossing her arms. She crossed her arms across her chest. He laughed at her stubborn look.

"In that case," MJ said.
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He tossed the tiny Honey over his shoulder. While Honey giggled, he carried her back to her room.

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Jill sat down next to Sandy in one of the Learjet's comfy chairs. She held her hand out to Sandy. Sandy took her hand.

"I'm sorry I've been so absent," Jill said. "I can't really describe what's been going on with me. Will you forgive me?"

"I understand. Some things we have to do ourselves," Sandy said. "I've missed you terribly."

"I've missed you," Jill said. "Can we catch up this week?"

"Of course," Sandy said. "We're not that far behind. Mostly I've worked and hung out with Aden and the kids. Summer in Denver, you know. Movies at Red Rocks, Jazz in the Park, camping on a weekends, stuff like that."

"You guys are doing well?" Jill beamed.

"Weird, huh!?" Sandy smiled. "I like him."

"I like him too." Jill hugged Sandy. "I'm so happy for you."

"Me too. Um, Jill?" Sandy moved back from the hug. "Can you do something for me?"

"Anything," Jill said.

Sandy reached into her purse and pulled out a stack of white business envelopes held together with a rubber band. Each envelope seemed to have something in it.

"For the last six or seven weeks, my fucktard sperm donor has been leaving these with the receptionist at work. She says he comes in, gives her the envelope then leaves. He doesn't say anything. The envelopes all have my name on them. Would you?"

Jill took the envelopes from Sandy. Taking the rubber band off, she saw that Sandy's biological father wrote, "YOUR SHARE" under Sandy's name on each of the envelopes. Jill's brow creased with concern.

"They are in order of when I got them. The first one's on the bottom," Sandy said. "Ok, I'm going to close my eyes."

Sandy covered her eyes with her hands. Jill opened the first envelope. Inside was a stack of hundred dollar bills and a note that said:

"Your grown now. You shud get the money the courts forced me to give your mom. Your father don't cheat nobody."

Jill ripped the rest of the envelopes open to find more hundred dollar bills. The envelopes held many thousands of dollars.

"What is it?" Sandy asked from behind her hands.

"Money," Jill said. "Thousands of dollars. Cash."

Sandy dropped her hands to take a look. Jill gave her the stack of money.

"Mom said he doesn't have any money," Sandy said. "What is all of this?"

"Maybe he feels guilty," Jill said. "He's trying to make it up to you."

The women looked at each other then both said, "Nah."

"There's a note in the first one. Your father don't cheat nobody," Jill read.

Sandy's warm face turned a shade of gray.

"I'm sure it doesn't mean that," Jill said.

"That's what he's doing for money."

"Oh God, Sandy. We have to tell your Godfather Seth," Jill said.

"No."

"Aden? Jacob?"

"No. God, Jill, please don't tell them either. Please."

Sandy's eyes pleaded for Jill to come up with a solution.

"How about this? Why don't we spend the money in Maine? We'll have a great time, buy all kinds of ridiculous things, then when we get back to Denver, we'll decide what we want to do."

Sandy's head shook back and forth.
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"No," Sandy's voice was quiet but firm. "Then I'll benefit from his… stuff. Like he used to say."

"I'm doing this for you," Jill and Sandy said together.

"I'll keep it for you. How's that?" Jill asked. "When we decide what to do, we'll have it all. Like evidence."

Sandy nodded.

"We'll do this together." Jill hugged Sandy.

"Just when everything's perfect," Sandy whispered.

"Together. We'll take care of this."

Jill's voice was confident, but her heart broke for Sandy. This was very, very bad. But no matter what, she would stand by what Sandy wanted. That was all that mattered.

"Here's one thing I know," Jill said with absolute clarity. "He didn't destroy you before. He won't destroy you now."

"Oh God Jill, I hope so."

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Saturday afternoon — 1:40 P.M. PDT
Santa Monica Mountains, California

"There's no way around it, Michael," Mike said out loud while he ran. Wearing only exercise shorts, he was trail running in the Santa Monica Hills. "You hate it here."

"And what's not to hate?" Mike continued talking to himself. He ran down a thin dusty trail toward the ocean. "There's the lovely smog, the traffic, the heat, the stupid people, the noise, and..."

He ran a few miles along the dusty path through the dry sage bushes.

"No hockey."

Running up a steep embankment, he reached a cliff overlooking the mountains. He had been running fast with the hope of taking the edge off his frustration. Breathing hard, he jogged along the top of the cliff.

"The ocean is beautiful. Valerie is beautiful. God, I love Val."

Turning back around, he went back to his fast pace. He ran another few miles.

"I can't paint here. I don't fit in with the people or the place. I'm not me here."

Heading down another steep embankment, he slowed to pass a woman and her trainer out for a fitness run. The women leered at him. He waited another few miles before talking to himself again.

"I hate the 'Come fuck me now and no one will know.' All the fucking time. Phone numbers in my jacket pockets. Women follow me to the bathroom. Friends of Val's. Fuck."

He sped up to try to release some of the tension.

"I get to touch Val every single day. Sometimes more. Why would I want anything else?"

As if to emphasize his point, he ran for a mile straight uphill. Turning a corner, he slowed to a jog.

"I miss Jake. I miss Jill. I miss my art. I miss a bowl of Crunch Berries. I miss Monday nights at Alex's house. I miss Megan's family pot lucks. I miss Delphie and her stupid bees. And, God damn it! I miss me!"

Mike's voice echoed on the canyon as he ran through. He ran the rest of the way to his leased-by-the-studio-for-the-vet-husband black Humvee. Every time he was close to the black monstrosity, he thought, "What the fuck? When did Michael Roper want a Humvee?"

Toweling off, he pulled on his shirt. Nodding to another set of leering women, he got in the car. With the air conditioner and the radio blasting, he made his way toward his new 'home'. Pulling up in front of the house, he sighed.

"What am I going to do?"
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Chapter Forty-Three
I CHOOSE!

Three days later

"Do you mind if I join you?" Delphie asked Jill.

Jill looked up from her cup of coffee and smiled. She was sitting on a quiet balcony overlooking the lake. The house in Maine was set back off the lake among the tall evergreen trees. She was watching their nearest neighbor from across the lake teach Katy, Noelle and Nash to fish.

"Please," Jill said.

"I've missed you, Jill," Delphie said.

"I've missed you, Delphie. I... Yeah."

"You don't seem like you're doing very well," Delphie said. "When I look at you, I see a kind of darkness hanging over you. It doesn't seem to belong to you or be a part of you, just connected in some way."

"Is it Trevor's ghost?" Jill asked.

"No, honey," Delphie said. "He's gone."

Jill felt a wave of relief. She hadn't realized how much she had worried about Trevor haunting her. Smiling, she nodded to Delphie.

"Would you like a cup?" Jill asked. She held up a thermos of coffee.

"I have some green tea." Delphie shook her head.

"It's so beautiful here," Jill said. "Have you been here often?"

"No, I don't like to travel much," Delphie said. "I guess we come here once a year or so. Of course, I was here when Sam bought this place."

"You were?"

"Jacob was rehabilitating this property for some difficult people," Delphie said. "He didn't know what to do with Sam, so he brought him along. Sam took one look at the place and had to own it."

She shrugged.

"When they weren't arguing, Sam and Jacob worked on this place together. I sometimes think this house is part of the magic that brought Jacob back to Denver."

"Complicated rehab. That's what he said. This is it?"

"This is it," Delphie said. "They've worked on it off and on over the years. It's rented out most of the year by a fishing and hunting outfit. They do most of the upkeep."

"Jacob makes beautiful spaces. I forgot. I..."

Jill shook her head. Her eyes drifted back to the children and their fishing rods. She dreaded the moment they actually caught a fish. She had warned the neighbor that Katy would not like it if the fish died. He assured her they would release it into the pond. Still, Jill was alert to a Katy meltdown.

"I know you feel guilty about Honey," Delphie said. "Honey and her sister have fought since her birth. It was always in their path that this would happen at some point. Celia helped Honey get prepared."

"Celia?"

"Honey was one of Celia's favorite people. Like you. Blane. Aden. And a few others."

"It's my fault though! Trevor came for me! For Katy! He brought his monster of a wife with him. If he..."

"No Jill," Delphie said. "I understand what you're saying. But you're wrong. Honey's sister was always going to hurt her, possibly kill her. Honey has a long road ahead, but she'll do just fine. Especially now that she has MJ."

Jill's eyebrows rose. She opened her mouth then shook her head.

"You know them?"

"They were like nitroglycerine. They were either screaming at each other or screwing. Always a flash of heat. You never knew what you'd get," Jill said. "I was on the outskirts of one of their incidents. After that, I wouldn't have anything to do with either of them. I didn't realize Honey was MJ's 'sweet little honeybee.'"

"They've grown up a little bit," Delphie said.

"The hospital hasn't burned down yet," Jill said. "That's very good."

Delphie laughed.

"Why didn't you go into town with your friends today?" Delphie asked.

"I feel like I need to sit in one place for a while," Jill said. "It's hard to explain."

"Try me. I'm not doing anything, Jill."

"Thanks," Jill said.

Jill's eyes drifted to the lake again. Katy was giggling at something Nash said. Nash and Noelle had been such good friends to Katy. After the last horrible months, Jill worried Katy would be scarred in some way. She seemed like her same old Katy self. Jill startled when Delphie touched her arm.

"You can talk to me," Delphie said.

Jill's eyes took in the woman next to her. Her wise eyes and crazy red hair gave her an air of weird old lady. But Delphie's open acceptance of Jill radiated from the woman's very being. Jill sighed.

"I lived as this person – a girl with parents. Then WHAM! I didn't have parents. For longer than I had parents, I lived as Trevor's woman. Then WHAM! Trevor divorced me. My parents… Trevor... I had no choice and my life was turned upside down. Just happened."

Jill was silent for a few moments.

"When Trevor left, it was awful and a huge relief. I fought my way out of that hole. Of course Trevor sent me an invitation to his engagement party. He never thought I would actually go. I think Tanesha came up with the plan of going and presenting our history at Trevor's engagement party. It was terrifying… exhilarating. That whole night – meeting Jacob, giving my little presentation, and people clapping? For me? It was like… I AM WOMAN!"

Jill smiled.

"Meeting Jacob," Jill sighed. "I was so excited. I told everyone about the hunky guy at the party. He started showing up at work and I… "

"Ignored him," Delphie said. "I'd have done the same thing."

Jill laughed.

"Everything was so wonderful, like a fairy tale."

"For a day," Delphie said.

"Yes, it was awful when Jacob was hurt. And he was there because of me, but again… that was something someone else did to ruin everything," Jill said. A huge smile lit up her entire face. "We got through it. I know Trevor burned my hair and all of that later, but I had Jacob. Katy was so happy. I've never spent a whole weekday with Katy – and we spent day after day together."

"Sounds like a dream," Delphie said.

"That became a nightmare," Jill said. "I don't know why I did it."

"Did what?"

"Took care of Trevor and his parents and all of that crap," Jill said. "I became helpless Jill who has to be rescued over and over again. All the strength and power and hope I felt had… evaporated. At the airport, I couldn't even pay for my own hamburger. How pathetic is that!"

"Why didn't you pay your bill, Jill?" Delphie asked.

"Trevor's parents stole my cash!"

"But, Jill, you had a Platinum American Express card, debit card to your own accounts, the joint account with Jacob..."

Jill opened her mouth to say something then shook her head.

"What?"

"I forgot," Jill said. "I just forgot. Katy and I sat in that airport for hours because I forgot, lost track of time, everything, and had to be rescued. AGAIN!"

"You're angry with yourself."

"Furious," Jill said. "And..."

"You need to speak about him some day," Delphie said.

"Who?"

"I don't know what you call him, your protector," Delphie said. "Have you ever talked to anyone about him?"

"Never." Jill shifted her body to look at Delphie. Jill reassessed Delphie. She knew this woman was a psychic, a powerful psychic. "How did you know…?"

"I saw you talking to him at the party," Delphie said. "He's very loving, like a fatherly angel to you. I wanted to meet him but he just disappeared."

"He's skilled that way," Jill said.

"What did he say?"

"That I looked beautiful. He liked Jacob," Jill said. "We chatted. Since he brought me back from Costa Rica, he shows up maybe once or twice a year. We chat, have lunch or whatever. I didn't think... I..."

"There's no way you could have known he would kill, Trevor," Delphie said.

"Trevor beat me up once, really bad. Katy had just turned two. Trevor was so out of control that I hid Katy in my closet. I don't know how he found out about it. It's not like anyone knew. I mean, Sandy knew. I stayed home from work until I wasn't so bruised."

Jill stopped talking. Squinting her eyes, she saw Katy laughing at something Noelle said.

"About a week after it happened, Trevor went out for something. I don't remember what. Clove cigarettes, I think. Trevor was gone for two days. I thought he had left me. When he came back, he was completely freaked out. Begged me to forgive him, swore he would never, ever, ever hit me again. And he didn't. Well, not until after we were divorced."

"That doesn't sound like Trevor," Delphie said. "What changed?"

"Later, maybe six months before he left, Trevor was really drunk. He told me he was picked up by this scary man. He wouldn't tell me what exactly happened but he was terrified. He told me that every time he wanted to hit me, he remembered that he would get a bullet in the head.

"So you see, it is my fault Trevor's dead."

"I understand what you're saying," Delphie said. "But it sounds like Trevor knew what would happen if he hurt you again."

Jill's eyes slid over to Delphie from the lake. It had never occurred to her Trevor held any responsibility. Like always, Jill was certain it was her fault. She raised her eyebrows at the new thought.

"You know I believe that soul mates are in our lives to teach us something."

"And when we've learned the lesson, we have a choice to either keep them in our lives or end the relationship," Jill said. "You told me that when you gave me the reading. Remember? Just before I married Trevor."

"That's right," Delphie said. "I'm glad you were paying attention."

The women sat for a moment watching the lake, the trees, and the laughing children.

"And?" Jill asked.

"I used to think you needed to learn how strong you really are," Delphie said. "But you've had to be pretty strong to deal with Trevor. And even after he's dead, you're still burdened by him. What do you think you need to learn?"

Jill looked at Delphie. Delphie was watching something very intently. Following her gaze, Jill saw an eagle hunting over the water. The eagle made several low runs over the water before it struck. Within a few feet from the boat, the eagle

lifted a fish from the lake. The neighbor and the children cheered for the eagle.

"I choose," Jill said. "I chose to stay with Trevor. I chose to take up this burden again."

"And you can choose to set it down," Delphie said.

"Will I be… penalized for setting it down?"

"You're only penalized if you hold on too long to what doesn't belong to you," Delphie said. "Sometimes that's an idea of yourself or a person."

"Like being Trevor's woman," Jill said. "I could choose be Jill or Jill's woman"

"Yes, dear. That's it exactly."

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"Ok Honey, you aren't making any sense," Jacob said. He and Honey were video conferencing over the internet. Since going to Maine, he called her once a day to chat. They were working on getting to know each other, slowly. He actually enjoyed her black sense of humor and take no prisoners attitude. Today, she was so upset that he had to get Sam to interpret. "Can you slow it down a little bit?"

Honey took a piece of paper. Between palms, she held the paper to the webcam.

$1.35 million dollars a year

"For your care," Jacob said. "I know. Remember we talked about this at the family conference. Your insurance will cover some and we'll get the rest."

"But Jake, I can't live like that," Honey said. "I can't live as a burden to you all of my life. I should have died."

"But you didn't," Jacob said. "And I'm glad you didn't."

"That doesn't include all new living facilities, new showers, new cabinets, every fucking thing. I'll kill myself if I have to move in with Mom and the girls. I can't go back to my apartment. Jake, what am I going to do? They want to release me in a couple weeks!"

"I promised you we would take care of you," Jacob said. "We will work this out."

"Honey." Sam leaned over Jacob to be on camera. "Let us get back to Denver. We have a couple of options we think you'll like."

"I'm not your child!"

"No, you're not," Sam said. "But I am your father. And you are my friend. I won't leave you hanging, Honey. You know that. What do you need today that's going to make any of this better?"

"Hope," Honey said. "I want to live my life like a person and not someone's pathetic PUPPY or PROJECT."

"I hope I can live my life like that too," Jacob said. "Trust me?"

Honey nodded.

"We'll be home in two days," Jacob said.

"We'll talk about this as soon as we land," Sam said. "How is the infection?"

Honey screwed up her face in disgust. While her scars had healed, she hadn't been able to kick an infection, probably brought by the knife slicing through her intestines.

"Another antibiotic," Honey said.

"And surgery?" Jacob asked.

"Maybe. They won't tell me. I'm just a screaming infant here. God damn it."

Honey's anger and sadness were almost too much for the men to watch. She had been so brave and strong. But now that the topic of discharge was on the table, she had melt down after melt down.

"What would help?" Jacob asked.

"Make this all go away, Jake," Honey said through her tears. "Make me whole again."

"I wish I could," Jacob said. "You know I would. Should I call MJ?"

"He's gone again," Honey said. "Just as well. I'm a wreck. Promise me Jake, you'll help me find me something I can
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do with my life."

"I promise you we will build a fulfilling life for you. Together," Sam said.

"Jake?"

"I promise," Jacob said.

"Ok, I have to go to therapy," Honey said. "Good time for that. Bye."

Sam turned to Jacob when the screen went dark.

"Do you have a plan?" Sam asked Jacob.

"Right here."

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Tuesday night – 8:23 P.M. PDT

Malibu, California

"The worst thing about living with you is..." Valerie said.

Lying on the hood of her Mercedes sedan, they were watching the stars and listening to the pounding Malibu surf from a spot in a beach parking lot.

"You make it sound like there are a lot of problems living with me," Mike said.

"Oh, no. Well just one," she replied.

"What's that?"

"I don't get to look forward to seeing you," Valerie said. "About five weeks into being here, I'd get this little flutter in my chest. 'I get to see Mike in three weeks' I'd think."

He leaned over and kissed her. They lay in silence watching the stars for a while.

"I hate it here," Valerie said.

Mike laughed.
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Chapter Forty-Four
Marbles

Two days later
Thursday morning — 5:30 A.M.

"Good morning."

Jacob leaned over to kiss Jill awake.

"Mmmm…"

Jill rolled onto her back. He slid into her arms to nuzzle her neck.

"Did you come to bed last night?" she asked.

"No."

He pulled at her white t-shirt. She leaned up so he could take it off.

"Wow, third night in a row. Should I worry?"

His response was muffled by a mouth full of her left breast. She lifted her head to look at him. Feeling her movement, his eyes moved to her face. Her concerned eyes caused him to let go. He rolled to the bed.

"What would you worry about?"

"Out all night with your buddies again?"

"Oh God, Jill. First, we're in the middle of nowhere. Second, the board members are hardly my buddies. Fuck. I think they hate me. Where did Dad find these stupid old stodgy assholes?"

Jill shifted on top of him.

"So I should only worry when we aren't in the middle of nowhere and you ARE with your buddies?"

She kissed him.

"You, my dear." He slid her panties off. His hands clamped her behind. "Should never worry about my fidelity. I am yours – mind, body and soul. Just not my money."

"Are you saving that for another?"

"I'm not sure I have any," he said. "I am glad I have a wealthy model for a wife."

"You're married?"

He flipped her under him.

"I love you," he said. He kissed her. His lips began an easy trip down her neck and back to her beloved breasts. "I've neglected this side."

"What happened to your wealth, rich guy?"

"You're naked," he said.

"You spent your wealth on my nakedness?"

"If I tell you, will you undress me?" he asked.

"I have. Every morning, every evening and sometimes at lunch," she said. "You've been naked almost every child free moment."

"It's been a great week. I think I'll cry when we get on the plane tonight." Rolling to back to the bed, he continued, "As you know, we've been arguing over the sale of the Lipson Albatross to its employees."

"The Board is against even the idea of it," Jill said.

"Yes, the BOARD wants to keep all the marbles to their rich entitled selves," Jacob spit out. "Fuckers."

Jill rolled over to stroke his face. He smiled at her.

"My father and I agreed to forgo salaries for this year, and refund the salaries we have already taken, in order to give

Lipson additional resources to meet its projections this quarter. If Lipson meets its projections the last quarter of 2008, the Board will allow the sale to begin. But if Lipson does not meet its projections, the Board wants to hold off the sale 'until things straighten out with the economy, especially if that man,' meaning that black man, 'wins the Presidency.'"

"You'll have to add bigots to your list." Jill snorted.

"You know who they want me to sell it to?"

"Them," she said.

"Oh, you heard that last night?" Jacob asked. "I can't believe the chairman disrupted our dinner to tell me that if I 'wanted out so badly the board would buy it.'"

"I thought you were going to hit him."

"When I was a kid? If someone interrupted dinner for work, my Dad would have hit them." Jacob shook his head. "Did you see him get up and start to come over?"

"Sam? Yeah, he did look pissed."

"No business at dinner. We work enough," Jacob said. "I must have heard that a thousand times growing up. And they did work enough."

"Will you sell to the board?"

"No way. It's my Albatross. I'll keep it. God, they piss me off," Jacob said.

"Listen mister, you have a child to support," Jill said in her mock stern voice.

"I also have another job," he said.

"Won't the rehab business slow down?" she asked.

"Probably," he said. "We'll live on love."

"I'm serious," she said.

"You are?"

"Sort of."

His sigh bounced off her naked skin.

"We grow most of the food we eat," he said. "We own the Castle out right. Mom bought if for like twelve dollars. The Castle is solar powered and has wet solar heat. Outside of maintenance, our daily expenses are very low. I also have a number of stable investments, including your old apartment building. And, I do well in the rehab business. I have at least two fully funded projects for next year and two funded projects which you will help me finish this year. Val and I also had ten million dollars returned to us from our step-sisters. In case you forgot, you're under contract with an established French designer that's just starting to gain exposure in the States."

"What about Honey?"

"Is that what worries you?" he asked.

"Well everything, I guess. The girls and I were watching the news and... It's just a scary time."

"You've always done it alone," he said. "This one, we'll do together."

"And if the sky falls?" she asked.

"We'll run out of Captain Crunch. We'll still eat what we grow, have heat, and power. We'll throw the doors open and invite everyone to come live with us like a big commune."

"Jacob?" Jill asked.

"Yes, my love."

"Is the sky going to fall?"

"No, but things will change. The process of the change may be painfully hard, but it's necessary too."

"And..."

"What will ease your mind, Jill?"

"I don't know," she said.

She got up. Pulling on her t-shirt and panties, she stood with her back to him looking out at the trees. He came up

behind her to hold her in a hug.

"I love you," he whispered in her ear.

She smiled.

"Look at me," he said.

She turned around but did not look up into his eyes.

"I will always take care of you. Even if we have nothing, I will be here, every day, to work at your side to meet our goals. I like to work. I've always worked. I will work for you, for our children and our family, every day of my life."

Her head jerked up to meet his eyes.

"You're not alone any more," he said.

"Oh Jacob," she whispered.

He started taking his clothing off.

"Taking your own clothes off?" she asked.

"I'm doing the work," he said. "Come back to bed."

Smiling, she went back to bed to let him work.

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"Oh come on," Honey said through her rough breath. She was practicing her wheelchair skills by 'going for a walk' around the neighborhood of Craig Hospital. MJ was angry with her so they were moving at a steady clip. "You know you want to."

"That's not the point," MJ said. Taking the hand rests of her wheelchair, he helped her over the curb.

"I watched you with the sex doctor. When she talked about all the sexy stuff we could still do, you were turned on."

"That's not the point, either," MJ said.

Using her palms, Honey stopped short and turned slightly in front of him.

"Hey, that's pretty good," MJ said.

"I've been practicing," Honey said. "What is the point?"

"You KNOW what the point is," MJ said.

"We were always sneaking around when we were together before. Even when you were pissed off, you couldn't keep your hands off me," Honey said. "You say I taste the same..."

"You do."

"And you don't care about how fucked up I am now." Honey grinned her sweet seductive smile.

"You're still incredibly hot even though you're paralyzed, have scars and all of that."

"I'm getting a complex."

"You are giving yourself a complex," MJ said.

"I clearly missed some point," she said. "Humor me. What was the point I missed?"

"Why won't you marry me?"

"Oh, that." Honey started wheeling again.

"I almost died, Honey. You almost died. I don't want to fool around, mess around, or even get laid. I want to marry you. I want to spend whatever time I have left with you. I want to be the father of your children, have a home, raise a family and love you every single day for the rest of our lives."

Honey wheeled faster until he had to jog to keep up.

"Stop," he said.

Groaning to himself, he grabbed Honey's handgrips and pulled her to a stop.

"That's very rude," she said.

"Speak to me," he said. "You won't talk to me about this. You either pretend the connection is bad on the phone or the video went out or you run away. I know you love me. Why won't you marry me?"
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Even with limited mobility in her arms, Honey crossed her arms in such a way that made her seem completely inaccessible. She looked away from him.

"Talk. To. Me."

"I don't run away. I wheel."

"Talk. To. Me."

"I have an infection that they can't seem to get."

"All the more reason to marry me. Today even," MJ said.

"You're being crazy."

"Plus, I already knew about the surgery and the infection. You're going in for exploratory surgery on Monday, right? Our whole team's scheduled to be here all week so I can be here when you have the surgery. The infection is not the reason you won't marry me."

She shook her head.

"Talk. To. Me."

"I don't have any idea what my life will be like, MJ. I don't know where I'll live or how I'll get around or even what I'll do all day. I need someone to care for me at least three hours in the morning and at night. You're the only person I've ever been able to stand in the morning. This person has to touch me! For seven or eight hours a day! I need to be tilted so I don't get sores. And that's if I survive the surgery and manage to beat the infection."

"And? What's the problem, Honey? We will work this out together."

Honey tried to start wheeling again. He held her chair in place.

"Talk to me."

Honey's eyes filled. She shook her head and looked away again. He kneeled down to her.

"What is it? Honey, we've been to hell and back and everywhere in between. Talk to me."

"It's all new, MJ. New everything. I can't be your wife because I'm not me. Or I don't know who I am… except for some drooling cripple who can't even wipe her own ass."

He clutched her to him to stop her rage filled words against herself.

"You are the most beautiful person I have ever known," he said. "Inside and out. You are the light of my every moment. The corner of every smile. The first and last thing I think about before I go to sleep. You have been since I was seventeen years old and you were just a scrap of a kid trying to survive."

"I'm totally fucked up, MJ."

"Fine. Ms Totally Fucked Up, will you marry me?"

"Why do you want to marry someone as broken and fucked up as me?"

"Because I want to be a part of your next rebirth. Because I want you to be the mother of my children. Because I want to die in your arms. Because I don't want to live without you."

"Oh God, MJ," Honey said.

"Do you feel any of that for me?"

Honey nodded.

"Then let's at least talk to a priest," MJ said.

"You don't think you have Florence Nightingale syndrome?"

MJ laughed.

"I'm serious."

"No. I love you. I've loved you most of my life. I was just too stupid and vain to realize it. It took a bomb to even make me notice how I feel and your sister's insanity to make it real. And for that, I'm very sorry.

"I'm sorry I was such an asshole. I'm sorry for all the wasted time. I'm sorry we fought so much. I'm sorry I had such a huge ass chip on my shoulder."

MJ shifted back to look into Honey's pale blue eyes.

"My father died and I never really knew him. After he was murdered, I learned how much he loved and sacrificed for my sister, brother and me. He used to say that we were his whole life. I just never believed him. I wasted a lot of time being mad at him. More than anything, I missed my chance to have him as my father and my friend. I don't want to miss my chance with the person who matters the very most to me in the whole world – you.

"Please Honey. Will you marry me?"

Honey nodded.

"I'm taking that as a yes, Please say it."

"Yes, Michael Scully, Jr. I will marry you."

"Today?"

"You'll have to change your name."

"To what?"

"Mr. Totally Fucked Up."

"Sergeant Totally Fucked Up. But okay, how about tomorrow?"

"Don't push it."

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Thursday evening — 6:45 P.M. EDT
Over the United States

"How far along are you?" Jill whispered into Heather's ear.

They were seated in together in the Lipson Company jet. Jacob, Sam, Aden, Blane and the Board members were wrapping up details in the meeting area. Sandy and Nash were locked in a competitive game of Grand Theft Auto. Delphie, Noelle and Katy were baking cookies in the plane's little kitchen. Tanesha hated to fly so she took a sleeping pill and was fast asleep next to Heather.

Heather's face registered shock. She yanked her shirt down to cover her expanded belly.

"I know the signs," Jill said. To keep other's from hearing her, she continued talking in Heather's ear. "Don't worry. No one knows."

Heather nodded.

"This is from the party?" Jill asked.

Heather nodded.

"And the father?" Jill asked.

Heather looked at Jill. She shook her head, then dissolved into tears. Leaning over, she spoke in Jill's ear.

"I found out, you know, about the baby. I didn't want to tell him on the phone. I called him and he was like 'Come out! Come out! Come out!' He paid for my ticket, picked me up at the airport, wined, dined, danced, amazing sex, the whole nine. He had plans for the whole weekend. Said I was the best thing that ever happened to him. I told him the next morning at breakfast?"

Heather had been speaking so quickly that she had to gulp for breath.

"He looked at me, said, 'Excuse me,' stood up and left. The restaurant. He left me sitting there thinking he was in the bathroom. He didn't even pay for lunch. I sat there like a fool for an hour. When I tried to call him? Number changed. I took a cab back to his building, you know? The doorman gave me my overnight bag and told me to 'vacate the premises' or he would 'call the cops'. I... I thought I found my prince, like you found Jacob. But... Heather doesn't get a prince. I spent all the money I had at the restaurant. I had to sleep at the airport."

Jill hugged Heather.

"When I got home, I told Mom about what happened and stuff. She told me I got what I deserved. She told me to have an abortion and grow up." Heather pushed back from Jill. "She took me to the clinic. I kept thinking about Katy and I couldn't go through with the abortion. Mom kicked me out. I've paid rent since I was sixteen years old and she kicked
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me out! She won't speak to me. I've been couch surfing ever since. I thought I could stay with Sandy but she has Aden's kids once a week. Of course, she's happy to have me stay but I don't want to get in the way. Especially with a baby."

"Do you have insurance?"

Heather shook her head. Jill looked up to see Jacob, Blane, Aden and Sam coming toward them.

"The state eliminated the program you had, Jill. I haven't been to the doctor."

"Heather, you have to go!"

"I've been taking the vitamins and eating well. I'm not drinking alcohol or caffeine. What will they tell me?"

"Oh Heather!" Jill said. Jacob leaned over to kiss Jill. "Jacob, Heather needs a place to live. Can she stay at the Castle?"

"Of course," Jacob said. "A couple of apartments are ready."

"She can stay with me," Blane blurted out. He blushed bright red. To avoid looking at Heather, he picked up Katy who came running toward them holding cookies. "Sorry, it's none of my business."

Blane helped Katy pass out the cookies.

"Are you moving in with my Uncle Blane, Auntie Heather?" Katy beamed as she gave Heather a cookie.

"I don't know why not," Jacob said. "It's a good idea, really. Heather can help you with your upcoming meds round. You wouldn't have to move in with us."

Blane nodded. "I mean, you haven't known me since I was ten or whatever, so I would understand if it seemed weird... But I thought we got along great this week. Can you cook?"

"Spaghetti," she said.

"Ok, I'll cook. How about clean?"

"Fastidious," Heather and Jill said together.

"Great. You can clean. I know I'm gay and all, but I'm not at all fastidious," Blane said. "Would you mind helping me?"

"I took the classes to be a Nurse's Assistant but I hated touching people I didn't know," Heather said. "Are you going to do Ribavirin? Sorry, I heard you and Jacob talk about having Hep C and AIDS."

"I'm healthy enough to try to kick the Hep C," Blane said.

"I've done that before," she said. "I'd be happy to help you, even if I don't stay with you."

"Wow," Blane said. "Do you care if I'm gay?"

"No," Heather said. "Do you care if I'm pregnant?"

At that moment, it seemed like every ear and eye turned to look at Heather. Standing, Sandy touched Nash and set her game controller down. She came over to where Heather was sitting. The women hugged.

"I wondered when you'd tell us," Sandy said. "Did your Mom kick you out?"

Heather nodded.

"You and the baby always have a room at my house."

"I love babies," Blane said. "I don't think I'd ever get the chance to be around an infant again. When I was in foster care, they would leave me with the babies because I loved them so much. I mean, I'm not a perv or anything. Sam loves babies too."

Jacob laughed at Blane. Blane's head turned from Heather to Jacob. He smiled at Jacob's open mocking of him.

"Heather doesn't have insurance," Jill said. "Can you fix that Jacob?"

"She can go on my plan. We have partner benefits at Lipson," Blane said. "Sorry, I'm not usually this impulsive. I don't know what's gotten into me. Don't tell my boss. Ok? Or the board."

Jacob patted him on the back. Blane's eyes scanned Jacob's beaming face. They laughed.

"This is what you meant, isn't it? Family."

"Yes, this is what I meant. Loving will come."

"Love is coming in male form, right? You didn't make me straight, did you?"

"I'm not God," Jacob laughed.

Puzzled, the women watched the men talking.

"I'll pay rent. I have a good job," Heather said. "I work hard and can take a second job. I also like to garden – vegetables and flowers. I'm no freeloader."

"We'll all chip in for the baby," Sandy said. "Tanesha will be all over this when she wakes up."

"Sam and Jacob bought the house for me," Blane said. "I don't have a mortgage. It's not huge, maybe fifteen hundred square feet. There are three small bedrooms upstairs. We, meaning Jacob, haven't finished the basement, so there's that. It's a couple blocks from the Castle. If you can help with the utilities, which is just gas for the kitchen, because we have solar. But you could... "

"What?" Heather asked.

"Well, make it nice," he said. "I kind of camp out there. It's like base camp. I go to work, come home. Go to school, come home. The gym, hockey… you know camp out there. I like to cook so the kitchen's all right but it's not nice."

"I'll get colors and fix it up. I'm working on a couple of Jacob's rehabs so I can do your house at the same time," Jill said. "That will be fun."

Heather looked at Jill, then Sandy. The women looked at Blane together. Blane was looking at Katy.

"You're going to be the baby's Daddy," Katy said. "Do you mind if it's a boy?"

Shushing Katy, Jill stood to take Katy from Blane.

"It's all right, Jill. I'm used to the psychic thing," Blane said. "What do you say, Heather?"

"Let's try it. If it doesn't work, I can do something else but..." Her eyes welled with tears. "This is the happiest I've felt since he left me at the restaurant."

"And who was that?" Sam's face was set in anger.

Heather shook her head.

"Looks like it doesn't matter, Dad," Jacob said. "Blane's going to be a Dad."

Katy clapped her hands. Sandy hugged Heather again. Standing to give Blane her seat, Jill leaned to kiss Jacob.

"You're a psychic too. Aren't you?" she asked him.

"Like my mother and my daughter," he said. "That's what Katy and I have been doing mid-morning. Meditating together."

"I knew you were meditating. I mean, I've seen you but..." Jill fumbled for words. "What do you see for us?"

"Babies!" Katy exclaimed.

Jill looked at Katy then at Jacob. He laughed.

"You'll get used to it, Jill," Sam said. "Now, I heard there were cookies? I need to wash the bitter pill taste from my mouth."

"From Heather?" Jill asked. "Heather's one of the best people I've ever known... I..."

"He means the board," Jacob said.

"Cookie?" Delphie asked.

"Just in time," Sam said. "See Jill, you'll get used to it."

As Jill and Katy moved past Sam to the bathroom, Sam said in her ear, "You never get used to it."

Delphie slapped at him and he laughed.

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Friday early morning — 3:35 A.M. PDT
Hollywood, CA

"Should we call Jacob? Delphie?" Mike asked.

He set a cup of tea down for her. They were sitting at the small kitchen table in her Hollywood Hills home.

"Nah," Valerie laughed. "They like surprises. Plus we won't be home for another week."

Mike's eyes scanned her face. His big hand covered hers and she looked up into his eyes.
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"Are you doing this for me?" he asked.

"Having you with me every day highlights how my life doesn't work. For me." Valerie looked down at her tea. "Did you know I still own the house in Monterey?"

"WHAT?!? Let's go there!"

"It's managed by a company up there. They rent it out. It's rented now by someone who works at the Aquarium. I haven't been back since..."

He stroked her face. She nodded to her tea, then looked up into his eyes.

"I want to sell this house and be done with it," she said.

"I thought we..."

"I can live anywhere I want now," she said. "If I want to come back to LA, to the soap, I'll rent."

"Or WE'LL buy another home."

She smiled.

"Love you, Mike."

"When does the movie start?" he asked.

"Next January," she said. "Why?"

"Hockey season," they said together.

She laughed.

Chapter Forty-Five
A Solution or Three

Friday evening

"Jill lived in this building for a long time," Jacob said. He entered the building followed by Honey, in her lightweight wheelchair, and MJ. "Her apartment is on the second floor. There are a couple of empty apartments together on the third floor. We can combine them into a suite."

Jacob pointed in the direction of the elevator. They made their way down the hall.

"Why did Jill live here?" Honey asked.

"It's very affordable," Jacob said. "She and Trevor lived here for six years I think."

"Oh, I forgot," Honey said. "Seeing you and Jill together? It's like you've always been together."

MJ pressed the elevator call button and the ancient doors opened.

"I think everyone would rather forget Trevor," Jacob said. He punched the button for the third floor.

"I would," MJ said.

"I heard you were buddies," Jacob said.

The elevator lurched a couple times before it crept upward.

"He thought we were," MJ said.

Honey looked up at MJ. She reached for his hand. Taking hold her hand, MJ smiled.

"Thailand?" Jacob asked.

"I was in Special Forces training that entire year. And the one before that," MJ said. "I don't remember but my LC checked. Leave Special Forces training for vacation? You're out. I graduated. That, I remember."

"MJ was more friends with Jill and Tanesha because they ran track," Honey said. "MJ was a jock. I never met Trevor until my sister brought him to meet Mom."

After jerking, the elevator came to a complete stop. The doors slid open.

"The elevator's not too great," Jacob said. "I've looked at replacing it but I'd have to evacuate the building. Asbestos. The residents say it's okay, so I keep it running. I'll probably do something about it in the next year or so. I didn't think I'd keep this building but..."

"Why do you own it, Jake?" Honey asked.

"That's a very long story," he said. "The benefit to this building is that it's accessible right away. You can get in the front door, there's an elevator and the doors are wide enough for your wheelchair. We gutted these apartments last month, so they are ready to be converted to wheelchair accessible."

He opened the door to one of the apartments. Honey rolled in first followed by MJ. Jacob closed the door.

"Jake, please don't take this the wrong way," Honey said. "But this place is a shit hole."

Jacob laughed.

"I'm serious. We lived in better places when I was a kid," Honey said.

"It's pretty bad," Jacob said. "I've made improvements, but people who live here don't like a lot of change."

"A wrecking ball would do it," MJ said.

"That's what Jill says," Jacob said. "People need safe places to live."

"Nice places. Clean places," Honey said. "Why did you gut this apartment?"

"I'm hoping to eventually redo all of the apartments," Jacob said. "When they become available, I gut them. If I need one, I put in new material. The building is awful, but you'd be surprised what a little work can do. There aren't rats or roaches any more. I was able to get all the appliances to work."

He shrugged.

"Would you like to at least see it?" he asked.

"Sure," MJ said. "It's nice of you to take the time to show us around. We don't want to seem ungrateful, Jake."

"It's a shit hole. Now," Jacob said. "But we can make the apartments what we want. Eventually, the building will convert."

Jacob escorted them through what once was a two bedroom apartment.

"There's a vacant one next door. If you need more space, we can combine them," Jacob said.

"You said there was another option," MJ said. "I'd worry about Honey being here by herself. Even with a nurse's help, she'll be alone here a lot of the time."

"Until I find work," Honey said.

"Until she finds work," MJ said.

"I wanted to show you this first. I know how independent Honey has always been. This apartment would offer real independence. You could come and go as you please. Once you're ready for a van, you can park in the lot."

"Jake, I know you're trying to be positive and helpful," Honey said. "But... I don't think I can live here. Just the smell..."

"Ok, moving on," Jacob said.

They retreated to the elevator.

"I make good money, Jake," MJ said.

"MJ helps support his brother and sister too," Honey said.

"But I make enough for us to live on," MJ said.

"Plus, I'll find a job," Honey said.

Jacob smiled at Honey's insistence on working.

"We've looked at a couple of other apartment buildings that might work," MJ said. "So don't worry if we can't make this work."

"I'm glad you looked." Jacob nodded. "Let's take a look at the other place before you decide. The other place isn't wheelchair accessible right now."

"Where is it?" Honey asked.

"The Castle," Jacob said. "Would you be okay going back..."

"The Castle is gorgeous," Honey said. "I mean, it's your family home. You wouldn't want..."

"You are family, Honey," Jacob said. "You guys wanna get a bite to eat before we look at the Castle? I was thinking..."

"Cereal?" Honey asked.

"If you insist," Jacob said. "The Shoppe?"

The elevator slammed to the bottom, jerked up, bounced, and the doors creaked opened. They returned to MJ's SUV. MJ lifted Honey from her chair and gently placed her in the passenger seat. Jacob folded the wheel chair and stuck it next to him.

"If it's all right with you, Jake, I'd like to see what's available at the Castle," MJ said. "I don't want to get in the way of your cereal consumption. Is the cereal ban still in effect?"

"What cereal ban?" Jacob's smirk indicated his lack of compliance with the 'No-Captain-Crunch' health program.

Honey laughed.

"What's available at the Castle, Jake?" MJ asked.

MJ turned left at Colfax Boulevard then took an immediate right onto Race Street.

"We've finished a couple apartments. There are a couple others that rotate uses. Aden and his kids like one. Blane stays in the studio when he's sick. Jill and I moved into part of the attic so where I lived is vacant."

"How big is the Castle?" MJ asked.

"You can just go up to the gate." Jake pointed to the metal gate. "How big is the Castle? Honestly? I don't know. The building was originally about eight thousand square feet but there've been additions. Last year, we found a bunch of

underground rooms. We found the ball room about six months ago."

"Why are things hidden?"

MJ turned left into the Castle driveway. Jumping out, Jacob punched in the code for the gate.

"Lots of reasons," Jacob said. "One area was converted to a speakeasy and shut off from the rest of the house. Also, in the bust years in Denver, people would break into these old mansions and steal stained glass, doors … anything they could sell. We found the original owner's diary. He mentions sealing off rooms to protect original details of the house but there are few specifics and no plans that show all the additions and changes. We found crazy stuff, like a room filled with the original doors. I keep hoping I'll find the original chandelier."

MJ parked the SUV on the wide concrete in front of the garage. They looked out onto the vegetable gardens and fruit trees. The Indian summer had extended the growing season at the Castle. Fruit hung on the trees. Tall corn lifted toward the sky. Burdened tomato plants gave a back drop to blooming rose bushes, purple cornflowers, and bright yellow yarrow. Brilliant colored asters and mums lined the driveway.

"The gardens are beautiful," Honey said. "I don't think I've seen them before."

"Delphie designed and maintains the gardens. We help, but only on her instruction."

MJ moved to get Honey's wheelchair.

"I am sorry but right now it's probably easier if you're carried," Jacob said. "We can easily fix the access but today may be tricky."

MJ lifted Honey from the passenger seat of his SUV.

"I don't mind having a man servant," Honey said.

MJ flushed. He opened his mouth then shut it. Jacob grinned when they kissed.

"I hope you don't mind," Jacob said. He nodded toward Delphie, Jill and Katy. Sarah and Scooter bound toward them with a happy, body-wagging greeting. "They wanted to see what we were thinking of doing with your space."

"Where's Dad?" Honey asked.

"He's opening the rooms," Jacob said.

While Jill kissed Jacob, Delphie said her hellos. Jacob picked up Katy.

"Rooms?" MJ asked.

"We have three garden level rooms. They're next to Dad's area. They've been used for storage. The original plans show they were interconnected by doors. We've cleared out one of the rooms and made some progress on the second.

"There's Dad." Jacob pointed to his father. Sam was standing near an outside door to the area they hoped would work for MJ and Honey. The group continued to move toward the Castle. "If you decide to move in, we have a number of options for the outside space. We can create a small private patio for you, pour a sidewalk to connect you to the driveway, or whatever you think makes sense."

"When is the wedding?" Delphie said.

Honey blushed. MJ kissed her nose.

"We're not sure," MJ said. "We'd like to get married before Honey's surgery, but it doesn't seem quite possible."

"Why not?" Jill asked.

"You know," Honey said.

"The Catholic thing," MJ and Honey said together.

Jill nodded.

"What does that mean?" Jacob asked.

"Catholics have to take classes before they get married," Jill said. "Didn't help me much, but... I wonder if we could find someone who would perform the ceremony anyway."

"I can marry people," Delphie said. "I could marry you now and you could get remarried in the church."

"See, I knew we'd find a solution," MJ said. "Whoa..."

They were standing in front of an open door. Even with battered wood floors and dusty plaster walls, the room was

beautiful. A tile fireplace stood on one side of the room while built-in book shelves lined the other.

"Pretty, isn't it?" Delphie put her hand on MJ's arm. "Maple floors, shelves and moldings in this room. Sam's rooms are all birch. The room next door is... I don't remember. What is it, Jake?"

"Oak," Jacob said. "The diary says this level was designed to celebrate the American forest. I would guess the last room is pine or cherry. I thought there was another room on this level, on the other side of Dad's room, but we haven't found a way in yet."

MJ and Honey wandered around the room. Jacob opened a door leading to the adjoining room. Even partially full of boxes, the room's inherent beauty was apparent. A fireplace made of similar tile stood on the opposite side of the wall. Jacob opened the next door and they could see stacks of boxes, doors, and other household items.

"Dad and I worked on plans to combine these rooms into a living area, a couple bedrooms, a small office and a nice sized bathroom. We can also add a small kitchen if you'd like one."

"In total, it's a little more than a thousand square feet." Sam opened the exterior door of the second room. There were a number of overgrown trees just outside the door. "With a little outside space, there's room to live here."

"It's gorgeous," MJ said. "What do you think?"

"Wow," Honey said. "Can you really convert it? I mean, you don't mind me living here?"

"We'd be happy to have you," Jill said.

"It'll take a bit of time to do the conversion, Honey," Jacob said. "We'll work to get it done by the time you need it. If it's not ready, Dad said you can stay in his room until your area is done."

"Can I see that?" Honey asked.

"Sure," Sam said.

They followed Sam through a hallway into his rooms. He opened the door to his birch paneled room. Outside the tall leaded windows was a small patio with a couple of chairs.

"God, that's gorgeous," MJ said.

"You'll have access to most of the first floor," Jacob said. "Everyone uses the main kitchen and the common rooms downstairs. There's a gym in the basement, so we'll have to figure out how to get you down there. We keep private spaces private, so you'll have to respect that. But it's pretty easy."

"Wow," Honey said. "What do you think?"

"Wow," MJ said. "This is really gorgeous. What would you rent it for?"

"The building's paid off," Jacob said. Gesturing to everyone, he said, "We split the grocery bill, cleaning, maintenance and help out to keep things going."

"Keep things going?" MJ asked.

"Everyone will help harvest and bottle honey from my beehives this weekend," Delphie said.

"Val will go through the boxes in these rooms. Jill will pick colors; Mike will paint; I'll check the mechanical," Jacob made a list on his fingers. "Stuff like that."

"We'd want you to participate in the household," Delphie said. "We take care of each other."

"What happens if we can't?" MJ asked. "I travel a lot and Honey's just starting to figure out what she can and can't do."

"Why don't we cross that bridge if the cows get out?" Sam asked.

Shaking his head at Sam, Jacob asked, "Would you like to see the plans?"

MJ looked at Honey and she nodded.

"Hey." A male voice said from the doorway.

"Steve!" Jill ran over to hug her brother.

"You're home, sis?" Steve asked. Kissing her cheek, he said softly, "How did it go?"

Jill shook her head.

Knowing everyone was watching them, Steve said, "We'll catch up?"

Jill nodded.

"Hi everyone. Hey Honey."

"Hey Steve," Honey said from her perch in MJ's arms. "Did you ever meet MJ?"

"I don't think so," Steve said. "I've heard a lot about you. It's nice to finally meet you."

"How do you know them?" Jill asked Steve.

"Remember I used to tutor people when I was in high school? Honey was one of the people I tutored," Steve said. "I saw her after I graduated too."

"He bullied me through most of high school," Honey said.

"Nice to meet you, man," MJ said.

"I'm so sorry to hear about what happened," Steve said. "I've been heart sick about it."

Honey nodded.

"We were about to look at plans for Honey's new home," Jacob said.

"Oh sorry, I don't want to interrupt. I pass by on my way home from the hospital, but no one's been here," Steve said. "I was hoping to catch Mike."

"He's in LA," Jill said.

Steve sighed.

"What's up?" Jill asked.

"Leslie's pregnant."

"Oh Steve, that's wonderful!"

While Delphie hugged him, everyone beamed. Sam patted his back.

"We're absolutely to the moon thrilled. But the doctor thinks Leslie will have to stop teaching. High risk pregnancy and all," Steve said. "I'll need to find another job. I thought I could get more hours at the hospital, but with the economy, they don't have the extra hours for new nurses."

"What kind of job you going to look for?" Jill asked.

"I was thinking I'd try to find a private job. You know, work for a service checking on homebound people. I could work around my hospital schedule."

Jacob laughed. Delphie hugged Steve again.

"Why is that funny?" Steve whispered to Jill.

"Honey needs someone to help her in the mornings and at night," MJ said.

"No way." Steve's head jerked to Honey.

Honey nodded.

"Would you be all right with Steve?" MJ asked.

Honey's eyes welled with tears.

"Next thing you're going to tell me that we can get married this weekend," Honey said.

"Even the slightest chance is still a chance," Delphie said.

"We didn't want to overwhelm you," Jacob said.

Honey turned her face into MJ's chest. He kissed the top of her head.

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Saturday morning — 4:30 A.M.

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Colin Hargreaves whispered.

They were standing at the side entrance to the Castle. When Jill held out her arms, he passed a dirty, sound asleep Paddie to her.

"Not at all," Jill whispered. "I was planning on taking care of the kids today anyway. I know Katy wants to see Paddie."

"Even after their big fight?" Colin asked.
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"Katy misses Paddie," Jill nodded.

"Paddie kept saying over and over again that he 'gots to see Katy 'cuz Paddie hurts her feelings. Bad.' He made me promise I'd bring him here after he got out of the hospital," Colin whispered. "He's had an awful summer."

"I think we all have," Jill whispered.

"I'll tell you, Jill. Katy saved the day. Paddie did everything Katy told him to do from what she saw in her…uh… dream."

"Is Julie going to be all right?" Jill whispered.

"The doctors think so," Colin said. "She needs rest, quiet and safety. She'll be in the hospital at least for today."

"Losing a baby is really hard," Jill said.

"She was four months along. It's a miracle she survived," Colin said.

Jill hugged him.

"I feel like I'm dumping my precious son on you. Our team's been gone. With the wedding, I need to fill in at the bakery, and Julie..."

"Paddie's welcome here," Jill said. "He can stay as long as you need."

"I'll come to get him as soon as I can," Colin said. "I packed everything I thought he might need in the backpack. If you need to get something, we'll pay..."

"Take the time you need," Jill said. "Really. He's perfectly safe and welcome here. It sounds like you and Julie could use some time, too."

"Yes," Colin said. "Thanks, Jill. If he gets to be too much, Alex and Max will be here today to take care of the bees. They can..."

"Don't worry, Colin. I have your number," Jill said.

"Well, thanks." Colin leaned in to kiss Paddie's head. "Love you, Paddie."

Wiping his eyes, he nodded to Jill and walked back to his car. Jill turned to carry Paddie up the long stairwell to the attic. Rather than waking Jacob and Katy, she filled the apartment bathtub to give Paddie a quick bath. In the way of very young children, Paddie let Jill go through the motions of bathing him without actually walking up. Jill dressed him in a clean cotton footie from the backpack and carried him into the apartment.

Of course, Jacob was waiting for her on the other side of the door. He went with her into Katy's room. Katy opened her eyes when Jill set Paddie in her bed.

"Paddie!"

"I sorry, Katy," Paddie said. "I so sorry. I hurted your heart."

"I'm sorry for hurting you too."

"I love Katy." The toddler's blue eyes welled with tears.

"Don't cry!" Katy said sniffling at her own tears. "I love you, Paddie."

Paddie snuggled into Katy. Within moments, the toddlers were asleep.

"Are you all right?" Jacob asked when they snuggled back in their bed.

"I'm relieved," Jill said.

"Relieved?"

"Katy and Paddie had this huge fight last summer," Jill said. "Just before we left for Ohio. Katy had a dream that Paddie's Mom would start bleeding and Paddie would have to save her. She told Paddie and he got really mad at her. Katy was heartbroken."

"Where was I?" Jacob asked.

"You were getting your shoulder surgery," Jill said. "Poor Katy. I've never seen her so upset. I don't really know what happened but it sounds like it all went down in the last couple days."

Jacob held out his arm so Jill could snuggle up against his chest.

"We need to do this marriage thing," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"When do we go off the pill?" he asked.

"I should get my period next week," she said.

"Let's wait to go off the pill until we're married," he said.

"Such a traditionalist."

"Want to get married this weekend?" he asked.

She laughed.

"I'm serious."

"I know," she said. She kissed his lips. "I love you for that."

"But?"

"I want Honey to have a really wonderful day that's about her and MJ," Jill said. "She deserves her moment."

"And you? What do you deserve?"

"My own perfect wedding," she said. "You deserve that too."

"Would you like to practice?"

"Practice?"

"Baby making," he said. "You know, for when we're off the pill and married."

"Oh yes," she said.

Chapter Forty-Six
Who A listed you?

Saturday afternoon — 1 P.M. PDT
Santa Monica, CA

"Val! Mike!"

A tan, good looking man with a bright smile leaned over to hug Valerie and kiss her cheek. Mike stood to shake hands with him. They were sitting on the patio table at the Hidden Restaurant, one of Santa Monica's best and most eclectic restaurants.

"My better half is going to be a little late. She said we should start without her."

"She called to let me know," Valerie said. "We are waiting for our... Oh there he is. Max!"

Valerie waved Max Hargreaves over to the table.

"This is our friend, Max Hargreaves," Mike said.

"Wow, you look familiar to me," the man said.

"I'm an identical twin," Max said.

"I must have met him," the man said.

"I believe you have." Looking at Val, Max asked, "Have you ordered?"

"Not yet," Valerie said.

"The menu has a little bit of everything on it," Mike said. "What looks good?"

"I was going to wait for my wife," the man said.

"She's calling in her order," Valerie said. "Producer's prerogative, you know."

"She has more irons in the fire than anyone I know."

The man smiled, but shifted uncomfortably in his chair. His eyes gravitated to Max. Max smiled. The waiter took their order before the man realized who Max was.

"Your identical twin is a woman."

"In fact, she is."

"I thought that wasn't possible."

"People think lots of things are impossible," Max said.

"How are the bees?" Valerie asked.

"All right," Max said. "Delphie will probably only lose one hive, maybe two. That's pretty good for this year."

"CCD?" Mike asked.

"We've been hit hard the last couple of years."

"What's that?" the man asked.

"Colony Collapse Disorder," Max said. "It kills honeybee hives during the winter. You never know what will happen until you visit the hives in the early spring."

"You're a beekeeper?" the man asked.

"My sister and I keep a few hives at our house. Val's referring to the hives at her home in Denver," Max said. "My twin and I helped with their hives this morning. I had to cut out early to get here."

"What did you do about medications?" Mike asked. "Delphie and I researched that last spring. Did she decide to transition away from them?"

"Yep," Max said. "Both of our apiaries are chemical free this year. It's a crap shoot but worth the risk. We'll see next spring. Alex wants to raise queens next year."

"Gosh, beekeeping is fascinating," the man said. His eyes drifted around the restaurant looking to see if his adoring public had noticed him yet.

"I think so. I have something for you," Max said. Opening his briefcase, Max gave the man an ultrasound photo. "I'd like introduce you to your son."

"Whoa. You've made some mistake. I'm not the father of any baby."

"What pisses me off the most is that you thought you could come to MY home! MY party! And treat MY friends like garbage." Valerie's face was all smiles but her voice was pure rage. "Did you know that after paying for *your* lunch, Heather slept at the airport? Carrying YOUR child! She was kicked out of her home. She has no where to live."

"Of course, some girl lies and Valerie is on the case," the man said.

"My FATHER told me," Valerie said. "Heather had too much class to say a word."

The man looked from Valerie to Mike then at Max. Calculating his next move, he raised his eyebrows at his possible out.

"DNA results?"

"It was tough to get them so quickly," Max said. "But my sister has a lab that processes DNA within twenty-four hours. Government connections, you know?"

"I never gave a sample," the man said.

"Your DNA is on file," Max said.

Max smiled his big 'imitating Alex' smile. The man's face registered surprise. Still trying to work another angle, his eyes shifted to look at Valerie.

"Val, please. You know I'd never do anything to upset or offend you… OR your friends. You've got to believe me. I was out of my mind! Freaked out!" The man's voice rose. Realizing his adoring public might hear him, he dropped his voice. "One moment, I'm thinking I had found my ticket out of the platinum handcuffs and the next I realized I'd lose everything. Not just the money and status, but my wife produces the soap opera we're on. I had a panic attack in the restroom. I could barely make it home."

"You managed to pack up her belongings and dump them with your doorman," Mike said.

"I was out of my mind!" The man drained his wine.

As if on cue, the waiter brought their meal. They went through a round of 'Would you like fresh pepper?' and 'How about some fresh parmesan?' before anyone looked at each other.

"I assume she kept the baby?" the man broke the silence at the table.

"I bet you didn't know my twin had the same security installed at the Castle as they installed in your home." Max smiled.

"I'm not sure what that means," the man said.

One at a time, Max laid four photographs in front of their guest. Taken of the videotape from the night of the party, the images showed this man and Heather in a variety of delicate positions.

"We have the video." Max held up a DVD with the video on it.

"In fact," Valerie pointed to someone behind the man. The man turned to look. "See that guy"

Valerie waved. The guy waved back with a picture in his hand.

"That's PEREZ HILTON!"

"Is it?" Valerie asked. "He looks very busy with his laptop."

"But... Valerie, please," the man said.

"Shut up," Max said. "You fucked up. Here's what you're going to do about it."

"I'm not doing anything..."

Valerie raised her hand to wave Perez over to their table.

"Ok. okay, what do you want?" the man asked.

"First you're going to wire one million dollars from your 'secret' off shore bank account," Mike said.

"How did you..."

"Alex would be here to explain," Max said. "But she's otherwise detained. Remember, beehives?"

"Oh," the man said.

"My computer is set up for the transfer," Max said. "We have the codes, of course, but I'd like you to pretend you are a decent chap. Make this right by typing in the codes."

The man typed in a series of codes. Turning the laptop back to Max, he gave a smug grin.

"I set it up for the money to be deposited then returned."

"Yeah, that only works if you leave the money sitting in one location for more than a second," Max said. "Look! All that money magically disappears."

"How did...?"

"Sister? Government?" Max pulled a stack of papers from his briefcase. "You will sign this document. This document relieves you of your parental rights, responsibilities and duties."

The man smiled. Letting out a breath, he picked up Max's pen and signed the form.

"That's it. A million dollars and a signature?" the man beamed. Looking from face to face, he laughed. "You've saved my ass! You have no idea how freaked out I've been. Thank you so much!"

Valerie opened her mouth to say something then shut it. She set her fork down.

"I'm sorry," Valerie said. "I feel sick to my stomach. I don't think I can eat any more."

Mike put his arm around her. They shared a look.

"We need to get to Denver anyway," Mike said.

"I thought you had another week on the soap?" the man asked. "I was looking forward to your dramatic exit. Car crash isn't it? I narrowly escape to spend months in the hospital mourning your death?"

"My sister is getting married tomorrow," Valerie said. "I need to be there tonight to help. I'll be back on Monday."

"Great! I'll catch up with you then," the man said. "And don't worry about Perez. I've dealt with him before."

While Max packed his belongings, Mike stood then helped Valerie with her chair. They were almost to the door when Valerie could not resist her urge to return to the gloating man.

"Your wife phoned me last night," Valerie said. "She's seen the video from your apartment and wanted to know what I knew. I didn't hesitate to tell her everything."

Turning in place, Valerie moved away from the man. He lunged at her, but ran into Mike's muscular chest instead. Mike pushed the man back into his chair. Turning away, Mike placed his arm around Valerie. They made their way through the dining room. Near the front, they met the man's wife.

"Did he send the money?" the woman asked.

"It's done," Valerie said.

"If she needs anything..." The woman said.

"She'll be all right," Valerie said. "Thank you. For everything."

"I feel awful. Poor child. And to think? I'm the one who supported and protected that jerk," the woman said. "You'll send me pictures and..."

"I will," Valerie said.

The woman hugged Valerie. Squaring her shoulders, the woman gestured to three men in business suits. The men followed the producer into the patio where her show down with her soon to be ex-husband was documented for the world on the celebrity blog.

"Don't you dare feel bad for him," Mike said to Valerie as they pulled out from the restaurant.

"I don't," Valerie said. "I keep telling myself people get what they deserve. I'm just never sure what I deserve."

"Wedding cake?" Max asked.

Valerie laughed.

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Saturday afternoon — 3 P.M.

Standing in the small basement room that held 'her' diamonds, Jill wondered what to do. Celia's Marlowe diamond collection included ten loose diamonds. Jill's heart told her to give MJ a diamond for Honey. MJ couldn't afford a diamond for Honey and Jill had so many.

But there was that restriction: "The Marlowe diamonds cannot leave the Marlowe family."

When Jill accepted the diamond bequeath, she never thought she would be in such a position. If she gave MJ the diamond this afternoon, he could have a ring made. The ring would be ready by the time Honey got out of surgery on Monday. In her mind's eye, Jill saw Honey's excited face as she woke up from surgery.

But Celia's love for Honey did not make Honey a Marlowe.

Jill plucked a one and a half carat diamond from the group. Setting the stone in the palm of her hand, she admired its beauty.

But... Crap! What should she do?

She was about to set the diamond down when the baby monitor in her pocket squawked. Katy screamed that she hated Paddie. Paddie returned the insult. Jill sighed. The toddlers had been fighting all day.

Jill slammed and locked the door to the diamond room. She took the basement stairs two at a time. Hoping to avert all out war, Jill left the napping toddlers with Delphie. Over the baby monitor, she heard Delphie's kind intervention between the screeching children.

In her heart of hearts, Jill knew Katy was acting out this summer's pain and anger with the person she loved and trusted the most. Seeing Paddie response, she was sure he was doing the same. Just a few hours ago, Jill spent an hour rocking them while they cried. Turning up the stairwell, Jill ran all the way up to her new attic home. She yanked open the door and stopped short.

Jacob sat in the middle of the apartment holding Katy and Paddie. Covered by what looked like applesauce, the toddlers where crying into his shoulders. Delphie stood nearby with a mop cleaning up the worst of an angry food fight. Breathing hard, Jill wanted both to intervene and to watch.

If any part of Jill hadn't loved Jacob, if some part of her held out in mistrust or uncertainty, in this moment, Jill's entire being loved this man. Dressed in an expensive business suit, starched shirt, and silk tie, Jacob sat cross legged in a pool of applesauce with a weeping child on each shoulder. Sensing her gaze, he looked up and applesauce dripped from his hair onto his face. He smiled his bright "I'm an idiot" Jacob smile.

Jill shifted to move forward, but Delphie touched her shoulder.

"Let him do this," Delphie said softly. "The babies need him."

"What about his big meeting?"

"He's been late before," Delphie said.

"But..."

"Celia would like you to give the stone to MJ," Delphie said.

Jill had forgotten about the diamond. She opened her hand to see the diamond still tucked into her palm.

"I promised..."

"She was much more rule oriented in life," Delphie said. "Honey will be delighted. Especially knowing the diamond belonged to Celia. MJ will only accept the gift from you. Go now before he leaves."

"What about the children?"

"It's important for Jacob to do this," Delphie said. "Don't worry. They'll need a bath soon enough."

"Third today," Jill said.

Delphie hugged Jill.

"You're a great mother, Jill," Delphie whispered in her ear. "Katy and Paddie are getting through this. Go on."

Jill took one last look at Jacob. He winked at her. Beaming from ear to ear, she set off to bring a sparkly gem to the

excited groom.

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Saturday evening — 6 P.M.

Lifting a strand of Honey's hair, Sandy furrowed her forehead. She took a comb to look at the edges of the hair.

"Nail clippers?" Sandy asked.

Honey blushed. Sandy put her face right next to the back of Honey's head.

"Pinking sheers?"

"Pruning snips," Honey said.

Sandy nodded as if she understood why Honey cut her hair with something designed to trim plants.

"I've never been very good at… this." Honey gestured around the hair salon. "I could never sit still long enough. I guess the joke's on me."

"Sandy's the best," Heather said. She held up another color of makeup to Honey's face. Heather was having a tough time matching Honey's fair hair, eyes and skin. "We all hate to sit still but Sandy makes it fun."

"I've never been very good at that, either." Honey gestured to Heather's makeup kit.

"I'll be there tomorrow so you won't have to worry about it," Heather said. "Then we'll practice. If you want..."

Honey nodded.

"What would you like your hair to look like?" Sandy asked.

"Hair?" Honey replied as if the answer was obvious.

Sandy returned to looking at Honey's hair.

"Would you use a blow dryer?"

Honey shook her head 'no'.

"Brush?"

"Just after I shower," Honey said. "I mean I used to. Now, the nurse brushes it after I shower then puts it up in the ponytail."

"You have beautiful hair," Sandy said. "It's a gorgeous color of blonde, very soft. I bet it breaks off easily."

Honey nodded.

"I need to think for a minute," Sandy said. "Is there anything special you want for your wedding?"

"I haven't thought about it," Honey said. "I'm still not sure what I'm wearing. I think Mom has something. I don't know."

"Do you want to do your own hair?" Sandy asked.

Honey fell silent. She'd never focused on her hair, makeup or even looking anyway other than clean. She left all of that to her pretentious mother and evil sister. But having spent the last day with Sandy, Tanesha and Heather, Honey could see that a few simple things made a difference. Tanesha smelled like Vanilla and Cocoa Butter. Heather had sparkly lip gloss. Their hair was beautiful, practical and, according to Jill, easy. Honey felt like she had entered a whole new world.

"Here's what I'm thinking," Sandy said.

"Ok." Honey's voice betrayed her nervousness.

"I think we cut it all off in a kind of modern Mary Lou Retton page boy," Sandy said.

"But…"

"But it won't lie well if we leave it," Sandy said. "Your hair is too soft."

"Exactly," Honey said.

"We need to add a little color to it to give it some structure – maybe a dark honey color."

"Dark honey!" Heather said. "That's the color I need."

Honey laughed.

"Ignore her. Colors make her very excited," Sandy said. "I have a product that lies on the hair so it gives fine hair a little
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more body. I don't know if you'd want it but I was thinking for the wedding we could match some of MJ's crazy red in the back. We'll cut it out as it grows. I bet your hair grows fast."

"It did," Honey said. "I don't know what it will do now."

Sandy shrugged.

"But what will I do..."

"You'll either come back here," Sandy said. "Or I'll come to you. When MJ's gone or you're feeling lazy, you can just comb it after a shower. Or blow it dry when you want fancy."

"I don't know how to blow dry..."

"I'll show you. What do you say?"

Honey nodded.

Over the course of the next hour, Honey's hair was washed, colored and cut to the sound of Sandy and Heather's chatter. Honey was under a dryer when Tanesha arrived. Before her injury, Honey had a lot of friends. But with the focus required to survive, she had lost touch with almost everyone. She had friends at Craig, but, outside of a few nurses, they were men. She missed the easy company of girlfriends.

"I brought something for you." Tanesha pushed the dryer off Honey's head. She opened her backpack and took out two packages. "Jill had these framed for you."

Tanesha helped Honey remove the paper covering the frames.

"We know you'll have pictures of tomorrow, but Jill thought..."

"We thought you might want Jill's drawing from when you and MJ talked about the wedding with her this morning," Heather sat down on the edge of Honey's seat. "They are beautiful. Aren't they?"

"It was like magic. Jill took our feeble words and created this dream," Honey gazed at the color pencil drawing of her wedding. "It's gorgeous. Dad and Jake were going to make everything look..."

"They're almost done," Valerie said as she walked in the salon from the back. "Is she ready?"

"Just need to wash it out," Sandy said.

Honey moved from the drying station to her ultralight wheelchair then followed Sandy to the washing station.

"Are you guys going out tonight?" Honey asked.

Laughing, Sandy washed Honey's hair. Honey closed her eyes to enjoy the warm water and great smells. When she opened them, Valerie was holding a glass of champagne for her.

"When you're done, we're going to get you something to wear," Valerie said. "Then it's girl's night out!"

"Mom has something for me," Honey said. "You guys can just..."

Valerie laughed.

"What?"

"This is your party, Honey. We know you have a lot of friends, but during this transition we hoped you might let us be your friends," Sandy said. "Jill would totally be here but given the Katy and Paddie war, she thought she better stay home."

"I have her card!" Tanesha held up the Platinum American Express card.

"I thought every place closed," Honey said. "Mom said I had to choose between my hair or my clothes."

"For the little people," Valerie said in a fake sophisticated accent. "I called a bunch of stores. They were delighted to stay open to help a STAR!"

"Who A-listed you?" Heather said. Her hand covered her mouth as if she could not believe she said that.

"Oh I know," Valerie laughed. "They didn't seem to know I was a D-lister wanna be!"

Sandy finished styling Honey's hair. With everyone standing around, Honey saw her new hair and make-up for the first time.

"I'm… I'm… pretty," Honey said.

"You're beautiful. Come on! Mike's driving the limo. We thought shopping, dinner, then maybe dancing?" Valerie

leaned close to Honey. Speaking softly, she said, “We can leave at any time. Just let me know what you’re up for.”

“Sounds fun,” Honey said.

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Saturday night — 8 P.M.

“Oh come on, Jerry! You know me. You know my father. Hell, you knew my mother,” Jacob said. “When have we ever cheated you?”

“Could happen,” Jerry the site manager said. “Economy this bad, I gotta look after my own.”

“The bottom line is this: we have three months to make our projections,” Aden said.

“Every site manager will hire an assistant of their own choosing to help them stay on target,” Jacob said. “Big Sam will be available to any site that might need the help.”

“We can choose anyone?” Bambi, Honey’s old site manager, asked.

“They have to fit Lipson requirements,” Aden said.

“But after that?” Bambi asked.

“Anyone,” Sam said.

“Aden needs the experience of running the company. We can give him that experience. Now. While Dad’s still available to help,” Jacob said. “By January, we’ll meet all the board’s requirements and begin the sale.”

“What if we don’t?” Jerry asked. “I heard you were going to sell to the Board.”

“It’s my company!” Jacob said. “If I say I’m selling to the employees, I’m selling Lipson Construction to its employees.”

The room fell very silent. The site managers looked at each other.

“Isn’t it Val’s company too?” a woman’s voice yelled from the back.

“Valerie owns a little more than ten percent of the company on paper,” Sam said. “She’s given the rights and control to her shares to Jacob. He’s effectively owned the entire company for the last four years.”

“I’ve said before and I will say again. My sister and I will fulfill our parents’ dream of selling their company to its employees or we won’t sell it,” Jacob said. “Period.”

“We have the best site managers in the city,” Aden said. “Jake and Big Sam are foregoing salaries so you can have the help you’ve asked for. We can do this.”

Somewhere near the back of the room, someone began to clap. Standing next to Aden, Blane began clapping. The room broke into clapping and cheering. The site managers stopped to shake Jacob and Sam’s hands on their way out of the room. When everyone was gone, Bambi came forward to talk to Jacob.

“You said anyone. Right?” Bambi said.

“Anyone who meets our standards,” Jacob said. “Why? Who did you have in mind?”

“I want Honey.” Bambi shifted her shoulders back to enlarge her entire six foot frame. “Honey knows everyone at my site and everyone likes her. She’s really good with numbers and I trust her. Completely.”

When Jacob didn’t say anything, Bambi added, “Plus I have great bathrooms.”

“I don’t know Bambi,” Jacob said. “Honey has surgery on Monday and...”

“You said I could have anyone, Marlowe. I want Honey Lipson. Make it work.” Bambi flipped her hair and walked toward the door. Turning as she reached the door, she said. “Please.”

“We’ll see what we can do,” Sam said.

“Thanks!” Bambi wiggled her fingers in a flirty good-bye.

“Fuck,” Jacob said. Blane patted his back.

“When are the flowers delivered?” Aden asked.

“In a half hour,” Sam said. “We have quite a bit to finish tonight. Wanna join us?”

“Noelle would kill me if we didn’t help,” Aden said.

“Are you going to be all right, Jake?” Sam asked.
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Jacob nodded.

“Then it’s back to work, boys,” Sam said. “We have a wedding to create.”

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Sunday early morning — 3 A.M.

“Sexy panties and sexy, sexy stuff under the very sexy dress AND...”

Honey giggled when MJ kissed her. He was carrying her up to a second floor apartment.

“You are very drunk,” he said.

“Yep!” Honey giggled. “My last night of freedom!”

“And?” he asked.

She kissed him with such fervor that he had to set her down. Pressing her against the wall of the second floor hallway, he devoured her mouth with unbridled passion. Honey’s ardor ignited him.

Unwilling to continue in the hall, he jerked her back into his arms to carry her to the apartment. They kissed all the way though the apartment and into the bedroom where he ripped off her clothing. He helped her under the covers then he took his clothing off while he went around to the other side of the bed. Slipping under the covers, he moved to kiss her again.

Honey was sound asleep.

MJ laughed at himself. Pulling her tiny form toward him, he wrapped himself around her.

Tomorrow.

She would be his wife.

He fell asleep with a smile on his face.
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Chapter Forty-Seven
Even the slightest chance...

Monday morning — 5:45 A.M.

"Did we get married yesterday?"

MJ touched the gold band on Honey's finger then tugged on his matching gold band. They were sitting in the back of a limousine on their way to Craig Hospital. They had been so caught up in each other that this was their first moment to talk.

"We did." Honey knew MJ's Traumatic Brain Injury would prevent him from remembering their wedding. "Your team took a video. One of the guys said they captured the satellite for you."

"Great!" MJ clapped his hands at the news. "I feel like we had a great time last night."

"Oh yeah." Honey leaned over to kiss his lips. "You were on fire, amazing."

"Did we sleep at all?" MJ asked.

"Not yet," Honey said. "You kept saying we have..."

"Plenty of time to sleep today," he said. "I remember saying that, just not if we slept or not."

"Do you remember saying that I was incredible?" Honey asked.

He shook his head.

"Since you don't remember our wedding night..."

"Some, not much."

"…you'll have to see how incredible I actually am when this surgery is over."

"Why wait?" MJ moved to test out the works in the back of the limo.

"We're almost there," Honey said.

He flopped back against the limo backseat like a frustrated teenager. Honey laughed.

"Just as well, I feel kind of sore and spent." MJ joined her laughter.

"Me too," Honey said.

"What was the best part of our wedding?"

"For me?" she asked.

He nodded.

"When you fell to your knees to say your vows while looking into my eyes," Honey said. "You took my hands before you repeated the priest's words. You didn't get up until after you kissed me and we were pronounced husband and wife."

"I'm so romantic." MJ kissed her. "Did you say a priest?"

"Your Lieutenant Colonel asked their family priest to marry us," Honey said. "We agreed to go to classes then get married inside the church in a full mass."

"Was yesterday legal?"

"Yep," Honey said.

"We got the license on Saturday." MJ's smile seemed to radiate from his very being. "I remember that."

Honey laughed. The limo slowed at the entrance to Craig Hospital.

"Carry me in?" Honey asked.

"Of course," MJ said. "I'll be here to carry you home too."

MJ slipped out of the limousine. Reaching into the backseat, he lifted Honey into his arms.

"You can watch our wedding while you wait," Honey said. "Jake said he'd bring a laptop so you can watch it."

"I'm more interested in a video from last night," he said in her ear to avoid the nurses hearing.

"No video from last night," Honey laughed.

"Too bad."

With much fuss and celebration, the nurses and doctors greeted Honey and MJ. MJ's team set up a web broadcast so Honey's friends at the hospital could watch the wedding. Staff and patients in every corridor had congratulations or applause for them. MJ set Honey into a wheelchair then dropped to his knees.

"You'll come back to me?" he whispered.

She kissed him.

"We'll just be a half hour or so," the nurse said. "If you'd like to wait here, we'll come and get you. You may walk with us to the hospital where she'll have her surgery."

MJ nodded. Honey turned in her chair to wave good-bye. Back in her hospital room, the nurses helped her clean up and change into a hospital gown. The nurses pressed her for details of the wedding, her new haircut, her dress and of course their wedding night. Honey laughed, told little stories, but kept the big details close to her heart. They were almost done when her psychotherapist arrived. The nurses left her for a few minutes while she talked to her therapist.

"Did you tell him?" her therapist asked.

"No," she said. "Even the slightest chance is still a chance."

"Celia's advice," her therapist said.

"It's gotten me this far." Honey smiled to assure her therapist.

"The wedding was gorgeous. And the night?"

"Best night of my entire life."

"Let's get your husband and go over to Swedish. Are you sure you don't want him to know?"

"Please don't tell him. Not until there's no chance at all."

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"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO," Katy screamed.

When Jill picked her up, the toddler thumped on Jill's chest with her fists. They were standing in the early morning dark waving good-bye to an equally screaming and crying Paddie.

"Paddie's Mommy and Daddy want to spend some time with him," Jill said. "They miss him like we missed him all summer."

"But he'll be at school. Right?"

"Not today. He's going to spend the day with his Mommy," Jacob said. "You start at the new school today."

"Paddie will be there, right?" Katy's dark eyes were pools of sorrow.

"I'm not sure, Katy-baby," Jill said. "He's younger than you and in a different grade. Plus, you don't go to Catholic school anymore."

Katy dissolved into uncontrolled tears. With Jacob's help, Jill was able to get her back inside. Sitting in Celia's old rocking chair near the front windows of the Castle, Jill rocked Katy on her lap. Katy cried as if a lifetime of sorrow and pain needed to be expressed in this one moment.

Having never witnessed a full Katy melt down, Jacob was at a complete loss of how to help. When he attempted to intervene, Katy screeched and cried harder. His heart told him that his family needed him, but the clock ticked toward the new day at Lipson Construction. He had never felt the ripping pain of wanting to be with those he loved and having to be at work.

"There's nothing you can do," Jill said. "She has to get through this."

"I'll meet you at the school?"

"Why don't I call you?" Jill asked. Over Katy's head, Jill mouthed, "What about Paddie?"

Jacob lifted his shoulders in a shrug. The Marlowe school was only for Lipson Construction employees. Jill smiled in
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an attempt to wipe the panicked and overwhelmed look from his face.

"Daddy has to go, Katy-baby," Jill said.

Jacob leaned in to kiss Katy's cheek. Katy jerked away so he kissed her hair.

"Can you say goodbye and I love you?" Jill asked.

"Bye Daddy," Katy said into Jill's chest.

"I love you?"

Katy began weeping again. Jill mouthed that she was sorry over Katy's head. Jacob tried for nonchalant, but he was a little wounded by Katy's outburst. They kissed over Katy's head and he went into the Castle.

"Katy?" Sam asked as Jacob entered the main Castle kitchen

Jacob nodded. He followed Sam through the Castle.

"Feel like you were punched in the chest?"

Jacob nodded. They went through the side door to Sam's Lipson Construction truck.

"Ask Aden about daughters. They slay you every single time. Except, of course, your sister. She was perfect in every way."

Jacob burst out laughing.

"Your mother used to say that it's a test to see if you're strong enough to handle their pain and rage." Starting his truck, Sam added, "It's a hard part of being a father."

Jacob nodded.

"LaMar's?" Sam asked.

"Donuts make this feeling of futile helplessness go away?" Jacob asked.

"Not at all," Sam said. "But the crash from the sugar high is a good excuse for feeling like you've been hit by a truck."

Jacob laughed.

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"What was the best part of last night?" MJ asked Honey.

She was nestled on his lap while they waited for the surgical team to call them. Honey's mother, friends and family had agreed to let MJ and Honey have this time together. The Craig Hospital nurses were talking with the surgical team. They had already talked to an anesthesiologist and signed the forms. Without thinking, MJ witnessed Honey's 'Do Not Resuscitate' form.

"For me?"

MJ nodded.

"Your mouth," Honey said in his ear. He flushed. "You said the most wonderful things to me. Kind things. Loving things. You gave me an inside peek to your self and your life. I haven't had that before. It was… wonderful. Then you told me you wanted to give me my body back."

"And did I?"

"Oh yeah," Honey said. "You said because I was paralyzed now my body was brand new, virginal, and we had to break it in."

"Did we?"

"Oh yeah," Honey said. "And what you can do with that glorious mouth of yours?"

MJ laughed at her dramatic shiver. They kissed.

"You've learned a few things," Honey said.

MJ blushed. Seeing the surgical team coming toward them, Honey turned MJ's head to look at her.

"I hope you remember this. I want to thank you for everything. You've made life worth living. You're the very best thing that's ever happened to me. You make me grateful all of this happened. You make my entire being long to see you, touch you, and kiss you one more time."
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"Ready Honey?" her surgeon said. He shook MJ's hand.

Honey nodded. MJ stood to place Honey on a stretcher. Holding her hand, he walked with her to the painted line where he had to stay. She signaled him to her.

"I love you," she said.

Before he could respond, she was gone.

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Monday afternoon — 12:30 P.M.

"I'm sorry," Jill said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Trevor's wife would like to take the plea today," Samantha Hargreaves said.

They were whispering back and forth to each other in the lobby of the District Attorney's office.

"Everyone told me she was going to trial. 'Get ready for a long trial, Jill.' That's what everyone, including you, has said since day one."

"She seems to have changed her mind," Samantha said.

"I have to rush around, find emergency child care, and race down here because the special one 'changed her mind?' Why does she get the power to ruin my life again!?!"

Jill's anger was apparent. Samantha squeezed Jill's hand.

"My daughter is having a very difficult day. Who cares about that? The priority is that Trevor's wife has changed her mind."

"You and Katy were the victims in most of the charges against her. What you say matters, Jill. They're going to tell you what they've offered and you have a chance to say 'yes' or 'no.' If you say yes, they will recommend sentencing to the judge. If you say no, then they go back to negotiations."

"What about Honey?" Jill asked. "Honey is the one who's paralyzed."

"I'm not sure," Samantha said. "They've tried to get in touch with Honey but she's unavailable. You may have to decide without her."

"Honey's having surgery today," Jill said.

"I'm not supposed to know this, but Tiffanie went to see her oldest daughter this morning. The District Attorney received a call from her attorney about five minutes after Tiffanie left," Samantha said. "It's a complete reversal. The DA wanted to wait a day to see if she'd change her mind, but she's adamant. Trevor's wife wants to sign the papers today."

"What happens if Honey dies?" Jill asked.

"Her sister is charged with aggravated assault, reduced from attempted murder," Samantha said. Shifting her long auburn curls over her shoulder, she leaned closer to Jill. "If Honey dies? All pleas are off. She'll go down for murder. There's a tape of the entire assault, including her 'die bitch die' rant. No question about it. With the assaults against you, the kidnapping charges, extortion… she'll get the death penalty."

"No." Jill stood up from her seat. "That's my answer. You can tell them I won't accept the plea today. Not today. Not until Honey is out of surgery and..."

Jill dropped to her seat. Her eyes were huge and filled with tears.

"Honey was so beautiful yesterday, so happy. Is she going to die?"

"I think we can assume Tiffanie told her oldest daughter that Honey was going to die today," Samantha said. "Have you heard anything from the hospital?"

Jill shook her head.

"Oh God, how awful," Samantha said.

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Monday afternoon — 12:30 P.M.

"I'm sorry, sir," the surgeon said. "There was always a small chance we would be able to do anything."

"What do you mean?" MJ asked.

MJ heard this weird ringing in his ears as if bombs were going off all round him. He could see the surgeon's lips move and hear the words but nothing the man said made any sense.

"I apologize for making you go through this again," MJ's teammate Sergeant Margaret Peaches said. The small woman moved between MJ and the surgeon. "We had the impression this was a routine surgery."

"No," the surgeon said. "Honey has a deep infection. We've been attempting to fight it with antibiotics, but her entire abdominal wall is… for lack of a better word, mush. The infection has spread to her remaining organs. We cleaned up what we could but anything more would be cruel. We've done our best to make her comfortable."

"I think what is confusing to us, sir, is that she seemed fine yesterday and the day before."

"I'm not sure how she's made it this long," the surgeon said. "She must have been incredibly driven."

"Was Mrs. Scully aware of her risks?" Sergeant Peaches asked.

"Honey knew what was going on with her. She knew there was a only small chance she would survive the surgery today."

"Even the smallest chance is a chance," MJ mumbled.

"That's what she said." The surgeon gave MJ a puzzled look. "Listen, I'll let you know when you can see her. As I said, we've done our best to make her comfortable. We must expect she will slip away in the next twenty-four hours."

MJ choked, coughed, then nodded. Like a man in a trance, he walked past Honey's Lipson Construction friends, her mother and little sisters, his sister and Honey's father Sam to an empty chair in a quiet corner. Sergeant Peaches followed him then sat down next to him.

"Honey's going to die," MJ said. "She..."

"What would Honey say, Scully?" Sergeant Peaches asked.

"She would say that even the smallest chance is still a chance. Her entire life has been built on the smallest chance: she had a tiny chance of graduating from high school; a sliver of a chance to not be a criminal like her sister and father; the itsy-bitsy chance to live a decent life like regular people. She created an amazing life out of the smallest chance," MJ said into his hands. His sister sat next to him. Putting her arms over his neck, she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Then we have to be strong for Honey," Sergeant Peaches said.

"I've never been as strong as Honey," MJ said. "She's a pillar."

"You will be today," Sergeant Peaches said.

Sergeant Peaches stood and walked toward the nurse's station. While she was gone, Tiffanie came over to hug MJ. Sam stood next to MJ in silent support. When Sergeant Peaches returned, everyone in the waiting room had heard the news. The small woman moved through the crowd of stunned people to MJ.

"Get up. We've got thirty minutes until we can visit Honey," Sergeant Peaches held up her wristwatch. The stopwatch was counting down thirty minutes. "We're going running."

Lost inside his head, MJ nodded at his teammate. Sergeant Peaches helped him to his feet then led him through the hospital. Together, they began jogging.

"I don't have my running leg on," MJ said.

"Welcome back, Sergeant Scully," his friend and team partner Margaret said. "You've run plenty on that leg. Let's go another ten minutes before we head back."

"Why are we running?"

"Honey needs you to be present," Margaret said. "You were completely checked out. I know you haven't slept, and this is awful news, but..."

"WHY DIDN'T SHE TELL ME!?!" Flooded with rage, MJ screamed at the top of his lungs. "FUCK!"

Saying nothing, Margaret kept running by his side. A Navajo, Margaret never understood her mercurial partner. For a beligaana, he was only a little crazy, which she thought was pretty good. In this moment, she knew she had to keep him

running. They ran another ten minutes then turned back toward the hospital.

"What am I going to do?" MJ said when the hospital came into view.

"You're going to go in there and give her every chance. You must stay present," Margaret said. "What do you need to do?"

"Take breaks every couple hours to eat, run, and drink water," MJ said.

"That's great because a lot of people want to see her," Margaret said. "What else?"

"Make sure someone supportive to me is with me at all times," MJ said. "The LC set up a schedule. You'll be here for another hour then Raz comes."

"The team is scheduled around the clock all week," Margaret said. "Your sister? Brother?"

"They will want to be with me too," MJ said. "Maybe I'll ask them to help with food and stuff."

"Good plan," Margaret said. "Anything else?"

"Pray," MJ said. "Ask everyone to pray. Can you have one of those healing things done?"

"I can ask," Margaret said in a tone that made him laugh. "Yeah, can you do this beligaana a traditional four day sing?"

MJ laughed. Nearing the hospital entrance, he slowed to a walk.

"Thanks," MJ said.

"Let's do this thing," Margaret said. "When Honey's better? We should get that tattooed."

"What?"

"Even the smallest chance is still a chance," Margaret said.

MJ nodded. Walking into the hospital, he felt ready to deal with whatever happened today. Refusing to look at the sorrow-filled waiting room, he went up to the counter to ask for Honey. The nurses escorted him and Sergeant Peaches back to where Honey waited for him.

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Monday evening — 6:30 P.M.

"How did it go?" Sandy asked Aden as he walked into her condo. As she had every Monday all summer, she had picked up Noel and Nash from school then spent the afternoon helping with homework and making dinner.

Aden fell onto the living room floor. Laughing, Nash and Noelle fell on him to squish and hug him.

"I can't remember why I wanted to run Lipson Construction," Aden said.

Sandy laughed.

"Well, Mr. President, we have roasted chicken for dinner."

"And a PIE for our special GUY!" Noelle said somewhere between a screech and a scream.

"We made it together," Nash said.

Sitting up, Aden put on arm around each child. He kissed each of their cheeks and laughed.

"What?" Sandy asked.

"I'm happy," Aden said.

He held out his hands for Sandy to pull him up. When she took his hands, he pulled her down to the floor. While Sandy laughed, Noel and Nash piled on top of her. Aden kissed Sandy's forehead.

"Wow, that chicken smells great," he said. "I'm starving and I can't get up."

The kids and Sandy helped an over dramatic Aden to his feet. He hugged all of them together.

"Go get washed for dinner," Aden said.

Sandy lifted her arms around his neck when he pulled her toward him.

"God, you smell great," he said.

"Congratulations on your first day as boss," she said.

"I never could have done all of this without you, Sandy," Aden said. "Thank you."

They kissed.
~~~~~~~~

"Ok, ew," Nash said coming from the bathroom. "I think I'm going to throw up."

Laughing, Aden went to wash up. The little family settled around Sandy's dining room table.

"Do you have to work tonight?" Sandy asked.

Aden nodded.

"We still have homework, Daddy," Noelle said. "We'll keep you company."

Aden's face broke into a smile.

"What?" Sandy asked.

"Just a man who has everything he ever wanted," Aden said.

"Sandy? Can you take us to school tomorrow?" Nash asked.

"Why?" Aden asked.

"Sandy's a MILF," Nash said. "All the guys said so when she picked me up."

Sandy blushed.

"What's that?" Noelle asked.

"I had to Google it too. It means…"

"Nash!" Aden interrupted.

"Dad, I'm twelve years old. I'm supposed to be obsessed with computers, video games and..."

"Nash," Aden said. "Sandy, you don't have to..."

"Pleeeeeeeeezzzzzzeee," Nash asked.

Laughing, Sandy said, "Sure."

~~~~~~~~

Monday night — 11:30 P.M.

"Hey," Jill said.

She'd woken when he got up. Thinking he was using the bathroom, she fell back asleep. An hour later, she realized he hadn't come back to bed. Taking Katy's baby monitor with her, she wandered through their home, then through most of the Castle, until she found him in the rooms they hoped Honey would live in.

"Sorry." He came over to give her a kiss. "I didn't mean to wake you. I was feeling restless and figured I needed to..."

"Sort out a mess," they said together.

"It feels really good that you know that about me," he said.

"Why are you here? I thought they were pretty sure Honey wouldn't survive the night," Jill said.

"They are." He scratched his head. "I can't make up my mind whether we should put the smaller room here or put the master bedroom here. What would you do?"

"Jacob, Honey is dying."

Jacob wrapped her in his arms.

"Even the slightest chance is still a chance," he said.
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Chapter Forty-Eight
...is still a chance.

Tuesday morning — Midnight

MJ woke with a start when someone touched his shoulder. He had been sitting in a chair beside Honey's bed. Raising his head, he saw a man move along the opposite side of her bed. Because Honey's wasn't supposed to survive the night, Sam had forced the crowd of friends and family, even Honey's mother, to give MJ this time alone with her. Bleary eyed from sorrow and lack of sleep, MJ squinted to make out the man's face.

"Jake?"

"Blane."

"Sorry, you guys look a lot a like," MJ said.

"We do. Especially in the middle of the night to a heart broken person," Blane said. He picked up Honey's wrist. "I'm sorry I startled you."

"What are you doing?" MJ asked.

"Taking her pulses," Blane said. "Honey is my patient. I've been treating her with acupuncture since she arrived at Craig Hospital. They were awesome at Craig, very open to having me help, but they aren't as excited about acupuncture here in the Swedish ICU. My roommate is distracting the nurse."

"You were treating Honey?" MJ asked.

"I helped her get some mobility back in her fingers. We worked on this infection and all of her inflammation. I think the acupuncture helped strengthen her, but..." Blane said. "Pardon me."

He moved in front of MJ to take a pulse from the hand MJ had been holding. MJ leaned back into his chair.

"I had some acupuncture when I was recovering," MJ said.

"Honey told me," Blane said. "I'd be happy to work with you, if you'd like. I see other people on your team."

MJ nodded. His teammates talked about seeing an acupuncturist. Particularly the LC and a few of the guys who'd been hostages. It never occurred to him that he could get acupuncture too.

"How is she?"

"What do the doctors say?"

"She won't make the night." MJ coughed to cover his out of control emotions. "She's dying."

Blane nodded.

"She's very weak," Blane said. "I'll do what I can. Why aren't you in bed with her?"

"In bed with her?" MJ asked.

"She's tiny. She barely fills up a quarter of the bed," Blane said. "She needs love."

"Love?" MJ parroted.

"Love is the most powerful force on this planet," Blane said. "She needs your love. It just might make a difference."

Not sure how to respond, MJ nodded.

"How about this? I'll treat you and Honey while I'm here. I can help you get in bed with her before I go."

"Help Honey," MJ said. "I can wait."

"Honey needs your strength," Blane said. "Let's make sure she has it."

MJ nodded.

Humming, Blane put acupuncture needles into Honey. He took MJ's pulses, then placed a few needles into him.

"You're exhausted," Blane said to MJ.

"I didn't sleep much Saturday. Nerves. We didn't sleep last night. Wedding night." MJ shrugged. "Then all of this. I… I

don't want to lose her."

"I never tolerate a doctor's hex," Blane said.

"Baring a miracle," MJ said. "That's what they said."

Blane pulled the needles from Honey, then MJ. He helped MJ out of his prosthesis, then into the bed next to Honey.

"Put your hand over her heart," Blane said.

MJ curled on his side around Honey's form. He put his left hand over her heart.

"I gave you a calming treatment so you should be very mellow," Blane said. "Some people see things after this treatment, especially if they've seen death before."

"Things?"

"Spirits, stuff like that."

"Good to know," MJ said. "What do I do now?"

"Love her," Blane said. "Just love her."

"I always have."

~~~~~~~~

Midnight

"It's time," Delphie said.

Having just finishing a bowl of Captain Crunch at the Castle's main kitchen table, Jacob's head jerked from Jill to Delphie. . His face flushed. The psychic stood at the door of the room.

"What happened?" Jill asked.

"Honey is transitioning, Jill," Delphie said. "We're going to assist her if we can."

"What does that mean?" Jill asked.

"When someone is near death, their essence moves into a transitional space," Delphie said. "By focusing on that person or that soul, we can help to ease the transition."

"But you said she had a chance!"

Jill's voice was full of indignation but her eyes filled with sorrow. As a way of channeling her sadness, she picked up their empty cereal bowls.

"When a person is in transition, Jill, they haven't left yet," Jacob said. He took the bowls from her and set them in the kitchen sink. "By focusing on the person, we can also give them the strength they need to stay or to leave in peace. Delphie and Val did this for me when I was… in between."

"If Val can help, then I can help." Her sadness turning to defiance, Jill's jaw set firm. "Val's not a psychic or whatever."

"Val's trained," Delphie said.

"I can do this." Jill hands went to her hips. "Katy may get some psychic whatever from Jacob, but everything else comes from me."

"I'm not prepared for an amateur," Delphie said.

"Get prepared."

Jacob laughed. Jill looked from a laughing Jacob to a beaming Delphie.

"I was testing your desire," Delphie said. "It's hard work, harder than it looks, and not very glamorous."

"I like waiting tables! How glamorous is that!"

"We're wasting time," Jacob said. "Did you set up the room?"

Delphie nodded.

"Jill, would you mind if Katy joined us?" Jacob asked. "Even asleep, she can help."

"I'll get her." Jill's defiance never waning, she added, "But I'm still helping!"

"Where's Dad?" Jacob asked.

"He's waiting for us in the room," Delphie said. "I hope I didn't offend you, Jill, or..."
~~~~~~~~

"You'd really offend me if you didn't let me help."

"Good." Delphie hugged Jill. "Go with her, Jacob, so she doesn't get lost."

"Lost?" Jill said.

"We do this in a room off the tunnels," Jacob said. "It's a part of the Castle. We get there through the tunnels."

"I'll meet you there," Delphie said.

"Mommy!" Jill's baby monitor squawked. In a sing-song calling voice, Katy called, "Mommy."

Jill and Jacob ran the stairs to their attic apartment. They found Katy waiting for them on the other side of the door. She held her arms up for Jill to pick her up.

"I wanna help," Katy said.

A quick potty stop and they were off through the Castle to the tunnels.

~~~~~~~~

With his hand over Honey's heart, MJ poured all of his love into her. He didn't notice Blane leaving or the nurse returning to check on Honey. His sole focus was Honey and his love for her. Unbidden, his mind drifted to the day he met her.

She was nine years old, a mere child to his mature fifteen years. His sister and Honey had been planting strawberries in his mother's backyard. They were covered in dirt, and giddy with the idea of fresh warm strawberries. There was a smudge of dirt under her pale blue left eye like eye black on a football player. She was adorable.

MJ smiled. He was in charge that day and his sister had not asked permission to have a guest. In his mind, his ears filled with his sister's rapid excuses:

"But Honey has just started going to school with me. Today. And don't tell Mom. And her new step-dad bought the strawberries. And don't tell Mom. And they are going to grow. And we'll share with you. And don't tell Mom. And..."

His eyes focused on this tiny elfin creature. This Honey.

Honey couldn't read. She could barely sign her name. She didn't know anything about math or science. All she had was this idea that she had a chance at a decent life.

A tiny chance, but a chance none the less.

In this moment, lying next to his beloved, MJ realized that his whole world revolved around her.

Overcome with sorrow, MJ wept.

Why had he waited so very long? His very soul begged her to hang on. Yet under his hand, he felt her drifting away.

~~~~~~~~

As they worked their way through the Castle, Jill tried to prepare herself for Delphie's chambers. Her mind filled with images of the torch-lit catacombs from Charmed. Delphie's chambers must be dark, with a black light, candles with wax dipping on the floor, and pagan or devil symbols chalked all over the room. Following Jacob into a hallway off the tunnels, she pressed Katy's head into her shoulder to protect her against anything scary. Jacob held two wooden swinging doors open and…

Jill stood in on the edge of a light and airy chapel. There was an enormous bouquet of purple and yellow spring flowers on the alter. A cross hung on the wall as well as other religious and spiritual symbols. She didn't know all of them, but she made out a statue of Buddha and one of the multi-armed Shiva. Behind a few statues, she saw Saint Brigid, Jill's confirmation saint. There was a Star of David beside a Wiccan Pentagram. There was something that looked like a moon and a star next to a kind of druidical obelisk. Each symbol, including the cross, had a lit white pillar candle in front of it. The Stations of the Cross were represented in rectangle stained glass near the ceiling.

Stepping into the room, Jill felt a rush of joy. She stifled her urge to giggle.

"It's nice. Isn't it?" Jacob asked. "It was the original Castle chapel."

"Are we underground?" Jill asked.

"About half," Sam said. "From the garden, the stained glass is about a foot off the ground. We haven't figured a way in from the house."

"It's gorgeous," Jill said. "Where do we go?"

Delphie pointed to an area where padded floor chairs and mediation pillows where set in a circle. Jacob took a sleepy Katy from her arms so Jill could sit down on a meditation pillow. He passed Katy back into her arms. Katy snuggled into Jill shoulder and fell asleep again.

While the others picked a chair or a pad, Jill felt a wave of panic. What if she couldn't help? What if she screwed the whole thing up? She almost said something when Sam said:

"Valerie? Are you there?"

"Mike and I are here, Dad." Valerie's voice came in over the speaker of Sam's cell phone. "We're ready when you are."

Just knowing her brother was there helped Jill relax. Even over the phone, Mike would make everything all right.

"Delphie? Would you mind giving Jill and Mike instructions?"

"The instructions are easy. In practice, it can be much harder," Delphie said. "You just think about Honey."

"Think about Honey?" Jill asked.

"Prayers are thoughts," Delphie said. "Right?"

"Then what?" Mike asked through the speaker.

"You try to keep your attention on Honey. It can be a memory of her or the essence of her or..." Delphie scanned Jill's confused face. "Or just send her your love."

"Can I pray the rosary for her?" Jill asked.

"The rosary! Of course," Delphie said. "Sam, can you get...?"

Sam gave Jill a rosary set made from beautiful blue stones.

"Are we ready?" Delphie asked.

"Jill?" Mike's voice came over the phone. "It's twenty mysteries, one Our Father, three Hail Mary's and what?"

"One Glory be to the Father," Jill said.

"Got it."

"Let's begin," Delphie said.

Closing her eyes, Jill began to pray the rosary for Honey Lipson with all her heart and soul.

~~~~~~~~

Honey was slipping away.

And there was nothing MJ could do about it.

In despair, he looked over Honey's shoulder. And saw a familiar woman. Her sandy hair and creamy skin gave her the look of an angel. She stood near the chair he had vacated. Noticing his attention, she smiled at him.

"I know you," MJ said.

"Yes," the woman replied.

"You were in Iraq," he said. "You told me to tourniquet my leg. I never believed I did that myself. I always figured someone else did it. But you ordered me to do it. You made me do it."

"For Honey," the woman said. "Honey loves you."

"Are you taking her from me?"

"She was supposed to transition tonight," the woman said. "But someone has intervened on your behalf."

"On my behalf?" MJ asked. "What do you mean?"

"Honey has been given a chance. However, Honey's chance depends on your choice and commitment."

"Anything," MJ said.

"Before you say that, you must understand the choice. If you decide to make this choice, you and Honey's souls will be linked. What will be good for you, will be good for her. What will be bad for you, will be bad for her. You will no longer
~~~~~~~~

be separate individuals, but two souls joined possibly forever."

"I..."

"You'll give up your independence and your freedom. Honey's well-being will bring your well-being." The woman smiled a familiar smile. She definitely looked like someone he knew. "We're not sure you're willing to make this kind of sacrifice. You have to choose. Honey must also choose."

"Choose?"

"Keep your separateness or join your soul with Honey."

"What did Honey say?" MJ asked.

"Honey has to make her choice regardless of what you choose or do not choose. You must choose regardless of Honey's choice."

MJ's mind whirled.

Honey didn't want to even marry him. There was no way she'd give up her independence for anyone or anything. Why would she choose to live in her paralyzed form? No way. She hated what she'd become. She'd never choose to stay with him over her independence. Death would give her freedom from the broken body she hated. A wave of futility overcame him.

"Don't choose based on what Honey may or may not do, MJ," the woman said. "You decide based on what you, and only you, want. No ego. This must be a free choice. Choose to join or remain separate."

"I've never thought about it before. Can I have a minute?"

"No, Honey is out of time," the woman said. "You're out of minutes, moments and seconds. If you won't choose, you're choosing to stay separate. You're simply afraid to make the commitment."

MJ nodded. He cuddled back around Honey. He pressed his nose into her hair. He had washed her hair just a few hours ago. Her beautiful blonde hair with its new haircut still smelled like the honeymoon suite's shampoo.

"I choose...."

Chapter Forty-Nine
Warm

One hour later

Her first sensation was radiating warmth. Lazy, easy, happy, drenching warmth. She had no sense of herself as separate, no sense of her own body. Just warmth.

Then searing pain. She tried to scream but there was something in her throat. Jerking, her eyes opened to blinding light. She tried to move.

"She's awake," a woman's voice said.

"Good," another woman's voice said. "Nurse?"

She felt the tube move from her throat.

"Honey?" the second woman asked. "If you can hear me, blink."

Honey blinked the light from her eyes.

"Good," the woman said. "We're almost done here. Do we need to put you out? Blink once for no, twice for yes."

She blinked the light from her eyes.

"Good," the woman's voice said. "Sir, you may take her hand again."

The warmth returned. Calm spread through her body. Closing her eyes, she slipped into the safety of his warmth.

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Tuesday morning — 5: 00 A.M.

Jacob and Sarah, his Labrador, waited for a break in the traffic on Seventeenth before making their way into City Park. Starting their usual route, they ran past a silent Thatcher fountain toward the Martin Luther King monument. They were running past the early morning empty soccer fields when they caught up with a medium sized woman with salt and pepper hair and a gray standard poodle. Jacob slowed his pace to match the woman.

"Thanks for meeting me, Helen," he said. "I know how crazy the Marlowe School is this time of year."

"Thanks for making time for me today," Helen Seigle said. "I've been at a loss since the Senator's son dropped off a check for double full tuition."

"Sorry about that. I should have known he would do that."

"You can't know everything, Jacob," the director of the Marlowe school said. "But first, how is Honey?"

"She seems to have turned a corner," Jacob said. "We won't know for sure for a couple days but we're hopeful."

"Thank God," the woman said. "Last I heard, the doctors didn't think she would make the night. What happened?"

"It's one of those funny things." Jacob pointed to the path along Ferril Lake. They continued a slow jog east toward the Museum of Nature and Science. "In our efforts to ensure Honey felt like family, no one mentioned the fact that she wasn't my Dad's biological child. And with all the trauma, the surgeons never noticed it."

"Noticed what?"

"Honey has Crohn's disease," Jacob said. "We'll find out today from her doctor whether she's ever been diagnosed but I doubt it."

"I'm not sure what that means."

"We assumed Honey's infection was from her injury. But it's more likely that it's related to her Crohn's disease. Untreated, undiagnosed. She's right at the age to have her first flare up. We feel kind of foolish because she has all the symptoms – she's so tiny, has always had some kind of digestive issues, and this infection. Anyway, they put her on a massive dose of steroids. Low and behold, she turned the corner. Her body couldn't fight the Crohn's and the infection
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and the injuries at the same time."

"How did they figure it out?"

"Came to Delphie in a vision. You would have laughed. Dad stormed into the hospital and went all rich guy. The poor intern was so freaked out by Dad that she went over all the test results looking for Crohn's. Took like the doctor like five minutes to find an ulceration and the inflammation. Bam, everything changed. She came running through the ICU yelling at the nurses. MJ was asleep next to Honey. She kicked him out of bed and began treatment."

"Sounds dramatic."

"Unbelievable drama. Turns out, the intern has an aunt with Crohn's. She knew exactly what to look for. By the time the attending got to the ED, Honey's fever was coming down, her vitals were improving and she was getting better. It was a miracle."

"God, Jacob, how wonderful."

"Honey's biological father has Crohn's. That was the missing piece. No one thought to mention it because we were all so sure the infection was from her injury. Poor kid had it before the injury along with a few ulcerations in her colon."

"Honey's so tough," the woman said. "Even as a little kid, she was tough as nails. It doesn't surprise me that she could have ulcers or whatever and not know about it."

"Looks like she'll be home soon," Jacob said. "Another project I need to get done."

"What do you want to do about your daughter's friend?" the woman asked.

"Paddie Hargreaves? Ah fuck, I don't know," Jacob said. "If I let Paddie go to the school, even if they pay double, people will say it's favoritism. Especially now with all this crap going on in the company. I can't risk looking like I'm favoring a non-Lipson child."

"But Jacob, you pay to keep the school open," she said. "If you and Val didn't pitch in half the working budget, we wouldn't have a school. That should entitle to you something."

"I also own Lipson Construction. That should count for something," he said. "According to our board, it means exactly diddley squat."

They jogged in silence for a while.

"I was hoping you might have a great solution," he said.

"You know what I think," she said.

"If we opened the school to full pay non-Lipson kids, we could pay our bills and then some. We'd make enough money to expand," Jacob said. "Our employees need real care for their kids. Rich kids can go anywhere."

"Even Paddie?"

"It's a lose–lose situation. If Paddie doesn't go to the Marlowe school, Katy won't go. Then I support a school that my own daughter doesn't attend."

"You could send Katy without Paddie."

"Yeah, I'll let you tell Katy that," Jacob said. "You could start by telling her mother."

The woman laughed.

"It warms my heart to see you in love, Jacob. Your mother would be so very happy," she said. "When is your wedding?"

"Another good question," Jacob said. "How long have you and Jerry been married?"

"Twenty-eight years," she said. "He's pretty nervous about the company."

"I am too," Jacob said.

"Why don't we do this? Let ten non-Lipson students attend the school. Eight full pay and two kids like Honey."

"From the motels?"

"Exactly. Those kids don't go to school," she said. "Let's see how our staff does. If they start to favor the full pay kids, we'll change something. If it works, we'll talk about adding other kids."

"How about half and half?"

"Then you're going to have to cover the scholarship kids."

"Three and seven," he said.

"Fine, three scholarship students and seven full pay," she said. "Colin Hargreaves came in with another man. He wants his kids to go to the Marlowe school. In fact, I bet the Hargreaves and their friends might take all of your seven spaces."

They ran in silence around the rest of the lake then down toward the duck lake. Turning toward the Martin Luther King monument, they ran past the purple castle playground. The Marlowe School director slowed at the large field to finish their conversation. Jacob let Sarah off her leash and Helen let her dog run as well. The dogs romped after the ball Jacob tossed onto the field.

"You've wanted to do this for a long time," Jacob said.

"I have. I think it's time we became a real school. We're the best Montessori school in the city. Best day care for infants. We win those awards every single year. Why shouldn't we let people pay for it?"

Jacob shrugged.

"What are you afraid of?" she asked. "I'm sorry, if I over stepped..."

"I don't know," Jacob said. "My Mom started the school. I wish I knew what she wanted. Aden would love it if we expanded to have middle school..."

"Which we should do. Our kids are resilient but public middle school is a real adjustment for them."

"I guess," Jacob said. "I just don't want to dilute the mission of the school."

"When does Valerie come home?"

"Next week," Jacob said.

"What does she want?"

"To expand, to make it profitable," he said.

"Maybe it's time to let her take over your shares of the school," HElen said. "You've got enough on your plate with the company. Let your sister do this for a while."

Jacob threw the ball for Sarah then glanced at the woman. He knew Valerie would expand the school and add paying kids. Why was he being so stubborn?

"I just wish I knew what Mom wanted," he said.

"Your mother was one of my best friends, " Helen said. "I loved her dearly. But Jacob, she's been gone for almost ten years. Maybe it's time to think about what you want."

Jacob scowled and threw the ball again.

"I've overstepped my bounds."

"Not at all," Jacob said. "You're right. I don't have any idea what I want."

"I'll tell you this, Jacob Marlowe. Your mother would want you to be happy. What would make you happy with the school? With the company?"

"Another good question."

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Tuesday morning — 8:30 A.M.

Sitting at the kitchen counter, Jill set her pen down and closed her journal. She'd never been a housewife. She'd never wanted to be one either. Yet here she was.

A housewife.

'Bye honey, have a nice day!' 'What would you like for dinner?' 'Can I pick something up for you?' 'See you tonight!' Ugh.

Yet, day two of housewifery, what surprised her the most was that she didn't hate it.

All the Trevor crap kept her from enrolling in school this fall. She's have to wait until next year to start college at Metro or UC Denver. She was pretty sure she couldn't sit at this counter until then. Spinning her coffee cup, she wondered
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what to do with her life.

"Jill?" Delphie stuck her head into the attic apartment.

"Hi," Jill whispered. "Katy's still sleeping. Those visions seem to take so much out of her. She's just exhausted."

"She saved a life last night," Delphie said. "You don't mind that they are saying it was my vision?"

"Not at all. Katy doesn't care either. She's doing so many big and important things, but she's a little girl first," Jill said.

"I admire you for letting Katy be a little girl first. A lot of mothers wouldn't do that," Delphie said.

"What do you mean?"

"Katy's a powerful psychic. More than myself or Celia. Maybe stronger than Jake."

"Maybe?"

"Jake always wanted to be normal." Delphie shrugged. "He had powerful visions as a child, like Katy does. As he grew older, he learned to tone it down. Celia and I never knew if the visions went away or he just covered them better. Do you have psychics in your family Jill?"

"I don't really know. My parents moved here from Russia then they died when I was so little." Smiling, Jill changed the subject by asking, "How is Honey?"

"She's well on her way to recovering," Delphie said.

"Can I get you some tea?"

"No, I wondered if you'd like to help me in the garden today?" Delphie asked. "But I don't want to get in the way of your plans. I heard you talk about going shopping."

"I never replaced my clothing from… the Trevor acid incident." Jill brightened at the idea of helping in the garden. "I have the kids today. Paddie's Mom has a doctor's appointment around ten. She was going to drop him in about an hour. He'll be here most of the day."

"Oh great, so you would be available," Delphie said.

"I'd love to help you, but like I said, I have the kids."

"Kids love harvesting food," Delphie said. "In fact, Jake will be jealous when he finds out Paddie and Katy got to help. Especially with the potatoes."

"It's worth a try. Those two have so much energy. It will be good to channel it somewhere," Jill said. "What do we do?"

"Come down when Katy's up," Delphie said. "We'll get started. I can use your help all week. I think it's going to snow soon and we need to get everything harvested. Do you mind helping?"

"I love to garden," Jill said. "I always dreamed of owning my own home where I'd have vegetable gardens."

Delphie smiled.

"I think our gardens dreamed of you," Delphie said. "You'll be the lady of the house someday."

"Whoa," Jill's hands went up. "This is your home."

"I'm glad you're here." Delphie smiled.

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Tuesday noon

Downtown Denver

"You don't have to do this," Blane said. "Really. You're welcome to stay with me."

"I'm no freeloader," Heather replied. She stopped walking so Blane could open the door of the title company for her. "Val got this money for me and the baby. I want to own my home. Plus, with me buying half, we'll have lots of money to remodel."

"Blane Lipson," he said to the receptionist. "We're here for a signing."

"You may take a seat," the receptionist said. "They will be right with you."

"You might want a condo or a house at Stapleton or..."

"I love our house," Heather said. "Love it. It's absolutely everything I've ever wanted. Well, it will be when Jill's done.
~~~~~~~~

Are you saying you don't want me there?"

"No, no, no." Blane shrugged. "I guess I want this so much, I want you to be sure."

"Want what?"

"Whatever this is?" Blane motioned to Heather then to himself. "I don't know how to explain it. I'm not in love with you."

"I'm not in love with you, either."

"But I'm really excited about our family." Blane blushed.

"Me too," Heather said.

"What if you… you know, find someone?"

"What if you do?"

Blane shrugged. His face clouded and he looked away from Heather. When Heather touched his arm, Blane turned to look at her.

"My Dad left my Mom and me when I was about eight years old. Just walked out. I never saw him again," Heather said. "I always wanted a big noisy family. Brothers and sisters and … well family. Sandy, Tanesha and Jill are like sisters but just like sisters."

"Jake's like a brother to me, but just like a brother. I know what you mean." Blane looked away from her again. "I never even had a Mom. I mean, Celia was like an angel and Sam's really my Dad. But… I know what you mean."

"When I sit in our house, I feel like its home."

Blane nodded.

"I'd like it if we could build a family," Heather said.

Blane's head jerked to look at her. She nodded her practical sincerity to him.

"I was thinking the same thing," he said.

"I've had a lot of encounters and near misses at love, Blane," Heather said.

"Yeah? Me too," Blane said. "I'm completely off the market until I find… what I'm looking for."

"Oh! I'll do that too," Heather said. "We'll wait for the real deal together AND have our family while we wait."

Blane beamed at Heather as she smiled at her plan.

"It's a deal," he said.

"Deal."

"I bought..."

"Sir? If you'd like to come this way," the receptionist said.

Blane and Heather followed the receptionist down the hall to a conference room. Blane held a seat for Heather then sat down next to her. They both shook their heads at the receptionist's offer of water or tea.

When the receptionist closed the door, Blane pulled a ring box from his pocket. He pushed it at Heather. Heather opened to box to see a three stone diamond engagement ring. Puzzled, she looked at him.

"I went with MJ on Saturday to order Honey's ring. I saw that and bought it for you," Blane said. "I know how vicious people can be about unwed mothers. Even now in modern times. I didn't want you to..."

Weeping, Heather clutched him to her. He laughed.

"We talked about getting married so you would have legal custody of the baby," she said through her tears. "I never thought... I..."

"Let's try it on," Blane said. She took the ring out of the box and slipped it on her left finger. "It's big."

"That's all right. I'm growing bigger, and my hands will swell" she said. She hugged him again. "It's perfect."

"You know I'm not going to be your real husband."

"I won't be your real wife. Someday we'll find love and have real husbands. We'll be a family first," Heather said. "Besides, every girl needs a gay husband."

Overwhelmed by her simple statement, he hugged her.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the title clerk said as she walked into the room. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"We just got engaged," Heather said. She held her left hand out like the starlets did when they were showing off their big rings. "See!"

He'd worried he was being anti-gay. Since buying the ring, he'd confronted himself over again. Was he playing a straight guy? Was he like all those scumbag married guys that used to pay him for blowjobs when he was on the streets? Would he destroy her world like all the lying closet cases of the world? When Heather turned to look at him, she winked.

Nah, he was going to be her gay husband.

And she was going to be his straight wife.

Until they found love AND real husbands.

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Tuesday evening — 6 P.M.

Swedish Hospital, Denver, CO

"MJ!" Breaking the silence of her private room, Honey screamed again, "MJ!"

"I'm here." Jumping from the chair he'd been sitting in, he leaned over her bed. "I'm right here."

"I had the worst dream." Tears dropped from her eyes. "I dreamed that I would never, ever see you again."

Climbing over her to the empty side of the bed, he scootched close to her. He held out his arm and she nestled her head against his shoulder. He caressed her hair while she cried.

"I kept asking why? Why can't I see him again? Why? And no one would tell me."

"No one could tell you because I'm right here," MJ said.

"Will you stop traveling and stay with me?"

"I'd drive you crazy in three seconds flat," he said. "You'll get better and have a whole big life like you've always had. I'll be a part of that big life. Do you remember Bambi offering you a job?"

She nodded.

"Do you remember Jake saying he was able to get the contractors scheduled to make our home?"

She nodded.

"Do you remember Steve helping you before the wedding and how well that went?"

She nodded.

"A whole big life is waiting for you to leave this bed."

Silent, she stared at the ceiling. After a few minutes, she said:

"Let's not leave the bed for a while."

"Okay."
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Chapter Fifty
Happy

Six weeks later
Thursday, October 30 – 3:40 A.M.

Jacob stood near the cash register at Pete's restaurant while he waited for Jill to appear from the back. When he arrived, she was arguing with a male customer. She slapped at his hand while he fondled and rubbed her butt. Then, she stopped cold at something he said. She was so upset that the enormous Greek cook intervened. Crying, Jill ran to the back of the restaurant. After the manager threw him out of the restaurant, the customer paced back and forth outside the front door.

The top of Jill's head and eyes appeared in the window of the doorway to the back. Seeing Jacob waiting, her face lit up. She skipped across the restaurant to kiss him 'hello'.

"How was hockey?" she asked. "I figured you were still playing because your team didn't come in."

"Long game but we won in over time. The guys needed to go home," he said. "I picked up something for us."

Jill beamed at him. Seeing the man pacing outside, her entire being shifted. She chewed her lip and looked down at the ground.

"What's going on, Jill?" Jacob asked.

"Remember I told you that Trevor's friend said Trevor owes him money?" Jill asked. Leaning to whisper in his ear, she said, "He said he's going to take it in trade. From me."

"How long has this been going on?"

"He showed up here about a week ago. Every night, it's a little worse," Jill said. "I guess he talked to the attorneys. There's no record of Trevor owing him money, so he's not a part of the estate settlement."

Jacob nodded.

"Stay here," Jacob said. He looked up to see the manager of Pete's coming toward them. "Can you keep her here for a minute?"

"Sure," the manager said. "Come on Jill. Let's get a cinnamon roll for Katy."

Leaving the restaurant, Jacob assessed the customer. The man's eyes shifted away from Jacob. He was paper thin and his fingers were picked to the bone. Methamphetamine addict.

"I understand Trevor McGuinsey owes you money," Jacob said.

"What's it to you?"

"Jill Roper. That's what it is to me," Jacob said. "Right at this moment, you and I don't have any problems. You keep harassing Jill? You and I are going to have problems."

"What do I care?"

"You know how Trevor died?"

"He was shot or something."

"Assassin's bullet through the forehead," Jacob said. "You know why?"

The man shook his head.

"Because he was harassing Jill," Jacob said. "The same Jill you are harassing."

Jacob made the crazy look he usually reserved for hockey. The man backed away to the corner then ran down Race Street. Laughing, Jacob went back into Pete's. Jill was so happy to see him that she jumped into his arms.

"I don't think he'll bother you any more," Jacob said. "If he does, we'll figure something out."

"He's banned from the restaurant," the manager said. "We don't allow people to harass our girls."

"Good." Jacob held out his hand to Jill. "Come on, let's go home."

Hand in hand, they walked across Colfax and down the half block to the Castle. With Jacob leading the way, they wound through the Castle to the ballroom. At one end of the ballroom, Jacob had set a red and white checked tablecloth, a bucket of fried chicken and a couple of cold sodas.

"I thought we could picnic," Jacob said. He turned on ballroom music. "I thought you might enjoy practicing our dancing."

Jill laughed. They settled cross legged on the tablecloth. She picked up a chicken breast, wrinkled her nose, and then set it down. She took off her work shoes and stretched her feet with her hands.

"No chicken?"

"I have to fit into my gown," she said. "It's tight."

"In all of the right places," he said. "Plus, I'll work it off you."

"Promise?"

He raised his eyebrows at her seductive statement. Of course, Jill wanted him to promise to dance with her. Smiling, he nodded.

She dove into the fried chicken. She hadn't been eating much in preparation for the upcoming charity fundraiser season. With Valerie home, they had been invited to events almost every weekend day in November and December. Saturday night would be her first appearance among Denver's elite in a Martins gown. She wanted everything to be perfect.

"Did you check on Katy?"

"I called Megan around eight. Katy fell asleep about seven-thirty." He set his chicken down to watch her lick her fingers.

"How come you're not eating?" she asked.

"No reason."

"I was hoping she would pick something to wear for Halloween. She's excited to trick or treat, but she can't seem to decide."

"Val was like that," he said.

While she ate, and he ogled her, he regaled her with exaggerated stories from his hockey game.

"We're child free with an entire ballroom to ourselves. How would you like to work off those calories?"

"Dance," she said.

Standing, he held his hand out to her. She took his hand and rose from the tablecloth.

"Your shoes, madam."

Jacob held out a pair of black stiletto Christian Louboutins. He held her stable while she slipped into the shoes. He raised an eyebrow.

"You sure you want to dance?"

She laughed off his lust. Holding out his arms, she fit comfortably into his dancer's embrace.

"One, two, three, four," he said.

And they were off. Feeling more than seeing each other, they moved in happy unison around the room. The music pulsed through their veins. Time evaporated. When the sun peeked over the horizon, they made their way upstairs to continue their work out.

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Thursday afternoon – 3 P.M.

"Fairy princess," Katy said. Trailing Paddie, she ran from the main Castle kitchen into the main living room.

"Witch." Paddie ran after Katy with Honey wheeling close on his tail.

"I'm no witch, Paddie Hargreaves. Take that back."
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"You see the future. You live in a Castle. That's what witches do."

"I do not have green skin, Paddie Hargreaves."

"Green skin?" Paddie cocked his head to the side as if he had no idea what Katy was talking about.

"You have to pick something." Honey pointed to the stack of dresses on the couch. She held up the dress that her sisters had chosen. "Briana's wearing this pink one and Becky is wearing this purple one."

"I don't want to wear what they're wearing!" Katy's face pinched and her eyes welled with tears.

"What if you wear this?"

Valerie came in from a small room off the living room holding four antique lace girl's dresses. Katy gasped.

"SO PRETTY!!" Katy squealed.

"They are gorgeous, Val," Honey said.

"I've been going through the boxes that were stored in your rooms." Valerie made her 'I've been chastised' face, then imitated her father's voice, "It's your job, Val. Got to get it done."

Honey laughed.

"You found Daddy's fancy sparkly light," Katy said. "We looked but we did not touch."

"We didn't ever touch," Paddie shook his head with sincerity.

"Exactly. I found the ballroom chandelier. You were smart to not touch it," Valerie said. She held up her hands. "I cut my fingers."

Katy and Paddie mimicked her gesture to show their uncut fingers. Valerie laughed.

"Let's see what might work," Valerie said.

While Katy bounced up and down with excitement, Valerie held the dresses up to her. They were all too big.

"I'm so sorry, Katy. They're too big," Valerie said.

"Oh."

Katy's eyes filled with tears. With Paddie following close behind, she ran through the kitchen and up the stairwell to her attic home. The toddlers ran across the open space to the small office toward the end of the loft. Jill looked up the drafting table where she had been drawing. She leaned back so Katy and Paddie could climb onto her lap. With her arms around Jill's neck, Katy pressed her tear stained face into Jill's neck. Paddie hung onto the other side.

"What is it, Katy-baby? What happened?" Jill set down her drawing pencil to hold the children close. "I thought you were playing with Honey this afternoon so I could finish these nice people's house design."

"I wanna go back to our apartment," Katy said. "I don't wanna live here anymore."

In empathy for Katy, Paddie began crying. Jill rubbed the children's backs while they cried.

"Oh Katy-baby, you hated that apartment," Jill said. "Remember it was stinky and hot and not as beautiful as our new home. Plus Delphie doesn't live there. Daddy doesn't live there. Auntie Valerie and Uncle Mike don't live there. Auntie Honey doesn't even live there."

"I don't wanna live with them anymore. I want it to be us again."

"If we move back, we won't be able to host the haunted house tomorrow," Jill said. "Remember how excited your cousins were? Your friends at school? Paddie? You and Daddy and Uncle Blane and your Granddaddy made special scary stuff."

Jill felt Katy's wet face rub against her neck when the little girl nodded.

"What's wrong, Katy-baby?" Jill whispered. She kissed Katy's face. Paddie shifted to hug Katy.

"Everybody's going to be a fairy princess." Between her sobs, Katy added, "Even the perfect Bree and Becky."

"Whoa, how did Bree and Becky get to be perfect?"

"They are blonde and… and… everybody likes them better. I liked it better when it was just you and me."

Jill did her best to not laugh out loud. Katy did not like it better when it was just Jill and Katy. In the last few months, Katy had blossomed in every way.

"Precious baby-girl," Jill said. "Precious baby-boy."

"You don' haf to be a princess," Paddie said to Katy. "You could be a knight like me!"

"You think I'm a witch," Katy said.

"The witch costume matches mine." Paddie shrugged.

"Oh."

Katy's tears evaporated but she did not move to get up.

"What happened, Katy-baby?" Jill asked.

"Everyone loves Bree and Becky more than me," Katy said. "Granddaddy is their Daddy. My first Daddy is dead. And my second Daddy is their Daddy's son. I'm not blonde. I'm not as pretty as them. I'm not..."

"Hmmm," Jill said. She tickled Katy's side. "That doesn't sound true."

"It's true." Katy nodded her sincerity. "Everybody loves them more than me."

"I don't," Paddie said.

"See, Paddie doesn't." Jill kissed Katy's head. "You spend a lot of time with your Granddaddy. He's teaching you how to fish. He's toured you around all Daddy's work sites. He doesn't do that with Briana and Becky."

"Bree is big enough for the fancy dresses." Pulling away from her mother's neck, Katy nodded. "I don't have a fancy dress. You have a fancy dress. Auntie Valerie has a fancy dress. Delphie has a scary fancy dress."

"My mommy has a fancy dress too." Paddie nodded at Katy's logic.

"Even Auntie Honey has a fancy dress," Katy said.

"Auntie Honey's welcome home party is tonight," Jill said. "Her dress is for that. Have you seen her costume for tomorrow?"

Katy and Paddie shook their heads.

"She's a pretty scary Mistress of the haunted Castle," Jill said. "Do you remember what's also happening tonight?"

"Uncle MJ is coming home."

"And what else?"

"Auntie Honey gets her pretty ring that I helped pick up," Katy said. She buried her face in Jill's neck.

"If we move back to the apartment, we'll miss Honey's coming home party, and our Halloween haunted house party, and most of all we'd miss your Daddy," Jill said.

"He can come with us," Katy said.

"How come you can't wear the dresses Mrs. Valerie found for you?" Paddie asked.

Jill pulled Katy away so she could look at her face.

"I'm too little," Katy said. "Bree will look perfect in those fancy dresses."

Jill laughed.

"Your Auntie Megan can sew anything. We might ask her to fix it," Jill said. "You know she could."

"Auntie Megan doesn't live here."

"We can call her on the phone," Jill said. "I know she'd love to help her special Katy girl."

Jill took her phone from the desk.

"See I press 'M'," Jill said. Megan's picture came up on her phone.

"Look Paddie! That's Auntie Megan!"

"I press this green button and..."

Megan picked up the phone.

"Heya Jilly," Megan said. Megan sounded like she was washing dishes.

"We have a major problem, Meg," Jill said.

"What happened?" Jill could hear the water turn off. "What can I do?"

"We have a very special girl who needs some special Auntie help with her costume," Jill said. "We have some fancy dresses that are too big."

"You never learned how to sew," Megan laughed.

"With you around, I never needed to," Jill said. "Would you have time to...?"

"Of course," Megan said. "We're coming for Honey's party. The boys are excited to see what you've set up for the haunted house. I'll have plenty of time. Why don't I bring my portable? We can make the adjustments and she'll be all ready for tomorrow."

"Bless you," Jill said.

Megan laughed.

"What?"

"That child is your daughter," Megan said. "Hey, I have to run and finish dinner. Love you, sis."

"Love you, too."

Jill set the phone down on her table.

"Do you still want to move if you can wear one of the pretty dresses?" Jill asked.

Katy shook her head.

"Why don't we go see what Valerie found for us?" Jill asked.

The toddlers climbed off her lap. Standing, Jill held out her hands. The children took her hands.

"Before we go? Can we have an ice cream?" Katy asked.

"Another good reason not to be at the apartment," Jill said.

"ICE CREAM!" Katy squealed.

Laughing, Jill retrieved ice cream sandwiches from the freezer. They were almost to the door when a worried Valerie stuck her head in.

"Oh God, Jill, I'm so sorry," Valerie said.

"Would you like an ice cream sandwich?" Jill asked.

In this moment, the movie-thin actress was the Aunt first. She dropped to her knees to hug Katy and Paddie. When she looked up, Jill gave her an ice cream sandwich.

"I haven't had one of these in twenty years. At least." Valerie said.

"Are those the dresses?"

Valerie gave Jill the dresses before tearing open her ice cream. Jill held up one dress after the other.

"I like this one," Jill said.

"I do too," Katy said.

"Me too," Paddie said.

"Then we agree," Jill said. "Our fairy princess will wear this dress for Halloween."

When the children cheered, and Valerie laughed, Jill felt an overwhelming sense of joy.

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Friday early morning – 12:03 A.M.

Naked and entwined, Sandy sat on Aden's lap with her thighs to either side of him. His hands grasped her behind. They rose slowly, playfully, until, like a flash of light, her head fell back, her face flushed red, and she sighed her release. Without warning, she pounced upon his lips and tongue. She kissed him through his climax and onto the aftermath.

Of all the things Aden loved about Sandy, he loved her tiger kisses the most. He craved them during his day. Looked forward to them every time they were together. Every moment of every day was a tease for the moment of release, climax and kisses. He wrapped his arms around her to hold her tight.

"Happy Birthday," he whispered in her ear.

Surprised, she pulled back to look at him.

"How did you...?"

"Your Godfather called last week," Aden said. Imitating the Denver Police Detective's brusque manner, he said, "Norsen? Sandra's birthday is the thirty-first. Get her something nice."
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"So did I?" Aden laughed.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Wasn't that nice?"

Sandy laughed. Pulling on her short sheer bathrobe, she went into his master bathroom for a glass of water. She took a long drink, then refilled the glass for him.

"The kids made you some small things," he said.

"I hate my birthday, Aden. Really. Can we just ignore it?"

"After the breakfast party," he said. "Your mother's coming over."

"Oh great. Don't you have to work?"

"I'm off until Tuesday," he said.

Opening the drawer to his bedside table, he took out two packages. One looked like an envelope, the other looked like a ring box.

"Happy Birthday, my darling Sandy. I'm so very glad you were born."

Sandy hugged him.

"Will you open them?"

"No engagement ring," Sandy said.

"Nope. Even though we've been friends for more than six years, we are not going to talk about marriage until we've DATED at least a year," Aden said. "I respect you too much to try to force you into something you're not comfortable with. And if you don't want to get married? That's fine with me."

Sandy smiled a little girl smile he had only seen once or twice when she was eating something gooey and chocolaty. She ripped off the Happy Birthday wrapping on the ring looking box. Opening the cover, she gasped when she saw the floating ruby heart with three diamonds near the tip on a gold snake chain.

"Is this one of Jill's?"

"No, ma'am," Aden said. "The kids and I purchased the necklace together. Well, Nash figured out how the website worked. Noelle insisted on the heart. I picked the size and added the diamond. One for each of us."

Sandy hugged him.

"You have one more," he said.

"Help me put this on," she said.

Standing in front of his full length mirror, he helped her with the clasp. As if to check its strength, she pulled on the ruby necklace. Spinning in place, she kissed him.

"Thank you. It's... I've always wanted..."

"You have one more." He gave her the envelope.

She tore off the wrapping paper to find plane tickets to Cancun.

"A couple years ago, you said that you'd always wanted to go to Chichen Itza. We're staying on the beach just outside the jungle."

"We?"

"You and I," Aden said. "We leave Saturday morning so we don't miss Halloween. Is that all right?"

"We get to trick or treat? Go to the big Castle haunted house? And go to Mexico?" Sandy's smile lit up the room. "What about the kids?"

"They're staying with Delphie and Sam. They're pretty excited about it because they get to go to one of those fundraising dinners."

"Fancy party," Sandy said.

"We have a number of those to attend this season, too," Aden said. "They're taking our place this time."

"All of this – you, the kids, everything. It's all what I'd always hoped and dreamed about," Sandy said. "Thank you doesn't seem like enough."

"This jewel, and the trip, pale in comparison to how much I love you, how much the kids love you. To the joy you bring us."

Sandy hugged him.

"Happy birthday."

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Friday afternoon – 1:07 P.M.

Jill stalked the Castle side door waiting for the mailman. Aden's surprise trip to Cancun had put a crimp in their girls' day at the spa for Sandy's birthday. Jill had ordered a perfect-for-Sandy yellow bikini. It was supposed to be here Wednesday. Denver's Postal Service never missed a chance to prove reaffirm its status at the slowest in the country.

Jill looked through the metal gate. A few photographers lingered across the street but the pressing hoard had been cleared off by the city. American Disabilities Act. Honey needed free and easy access to her home.

The mailman waved from the gate. He laughed when she squealed over the bikini package. He also gave her the stack of letters, magazines, and other Castle junk. Thanking him profusely, she waved as he walked away.

"Anything for us?" MJ met her at the door.

"I think Honey has a stack for you, MJ. Did you see it?"

"I was kinda busy last night, Miss Jill. Had to work off a trip and a diamond ring!" MJ impulsively kissed Jill's cheek. "I know I've said this, but thank you for the diamond. She's so happy. I never would have thought..."

"Girls like bling, MJ," Jill laughed.

"I love this place." MJ leaned close to her. "Do you ever get used to the whole thing?"

"I haven't," Jill said.

MJ touched her arm then wandered down the hall toward their apartment.

Jill laughed. Flipping through mail, she shook her head to MJ. With her package under her arm, she was about to set the envelopes down when she saw a postcard sticking out of one of Valerie's magazines.

Her pulse quickened at the picture.

Costa Rica.

Turning it over, she saw that it was addressed to Jillian Roper. Sweating, she glanced around to see if anyone was watching her. Looking back at the card, she read:

Your mother would like to see you marry Jacob Marlowe.

Jill fainted.
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Chapter Fifty-One
A Very Bad Day

Friday, November 14 – 4:30 A.M.

"I'm sorry, Jill. I want to understand, but I don't," Jacob said.

"Maybe you should try harder." Jill turned her back on him to look out the window.

"Ok," Jacob said. He went to her side so he could see her face. "We picked up our wedding license the morning of Halloween. We were going to surprise everyone at the Halloween party. That's why we were having such a big party! Then WHAM! All of a sudden, you can't do it."

"Well, I can't," Jill said.

"There are fifty billion people around so we can't talk about it and you haven't been able to talk about it since!"

Jill shook her head at him.

"Did you change your mind? Do you not want to get married?" Jacob asked. "Or is it that you don't want to marry me?"

Jill turned to look at him. Her arms crossed over her heart. Her face was closed to him. He'd never seen her so shut down. Her entire manner was one hundred and eighty degrees from where she had been two weeks ago. Not sure what to do, he returned to the facts.

"Claire Martins sent, by your words, your amazing wedding dress. She even made, again by your words, an unbelievable dress for Katy. We worked with Delphie for a month to finalize our vows."

"And?"

Jacob clenched his jaw to keep from screaming at her. Letting out a breath, he attempted another tack.

"Do you want to marry me?" he asked.

Jill's face flushed. Her eyes echoed with longing. She nodded.

"Then..." His eyes asked the question.

She turned away from him again.

"Why was it so easy to marry Trevor?" Jacob immediately regretted the words. Incapable of stopping himself, he added, "Would you marry me if I beat you? Belittled you? Cheated on you? Stole your money?"

Jill's shoulders vibrated with sobs. Unable to contain his anger, Jacob stalked toward the loft door. Jill ran after him. He stopped in place when she grabbed his shoulders. Turning, he saw her exhausted face streaming with tears. His rage and jealousy vanished in the face of her sorrow.

"You have to trust me. Please," Jill said. "It's not you. It's not you. It's not you."

He scooped her up to hold her close.

"You say all those things… and I deserve them," she said between her sobs. "It's complicated. I..."

"You ask me to trust you. But, Jill, you aren't trusting me," he said. "Trust me. Tell me what's going on. If you don't tell me, my mind goes..."

"But you're a psychic! Why don't you ..."

"It doesn't work like that, Jill," Jacob said. "No real psychic is any good at predicting their own future. I'm too invested to be impartial. I want you to be my wife. I want to grow our family. Any feedback I get is muddled by my own desires and emotions."

Jill cried into his shoulder.

"Jake, we've got to go," Sam yelled from the door. "It's snowing."

"I'll be right there," Jacob said to Sam. Turning back to Jill, he added, "We'll talk tonight?"

Jill nodded. Almost as an after thought, she pressed something into his hands.

"I love you, Jacob," Jill said.

He kissed her then hurried after Sam. He stuck the card into his back jeans pocket, grabbed his jacket and ran to Sam's idling truck.

"We have to figure out whether to close sites or leave them open," Sam said.

He took off out of the Castle driveway. Turning right on Colfax, he drove as fast as the traffic would allow.

"We have a few sites ahead of schedule," Jacob said. "Don't worry, Dad. We'll make up the time."

"Time is money, son. Every day we're behind is another financial projection we haven't met."

"It's like this every fall," Jacob said.

"We account for that," Sam said. "We have to meet our projections this fall or..."

Jacob scowled at the snow. Sam's 'or' was that the board wouldn't allow him to do what he had spent the last four years working toward. He shook his head.

"I have this funny feeling about today," Sam said. "Delphie wished me 'Good luck' this morning when I left. THEN she said, 'This just has to happen.' Scared the crap out of me. You don't have any..."

"Sorry Dad, I've been a little distracted."

"Jill?"

"Ah fuck Dad, I don't know."

Jacob's irritation made Sam laugh. Jacob turned on the radio to listen to the weather forecast. They drove in silence toward the Lipson construction corporate office off of Kalamath and Third Ave. At the office, they were greeted at the door by a sweating, pale Blane.

"I have the weather projections for every site," Blane said. "We'll need to close these three at least – County Line, Golden, and Louisville."

"We can't close Golden," Sam said. "We're four days behind there."

"No choice," Blane said. "It's dumping snow."

"Fuck," Sam said.

Jacob touched Sam's shoulder. They continued their way into Jacob's office for their morning check-in.

"Just a second," Blane said. He ran into the single toilet restroom.

"How long has he been like that?" Jacob asked Aden.

"All morning. He's in the middle of the ribiviron treatment. Heather says it's expected. But..."

Blane looked even worse when he came out of the bathroom.

"You have to go home," Jacob said.

"You need me here," Blane said. "We have to keep this company on target or we won't be able to sell! We're already behind and..."

Blane's anxious words reflected the mood of the entire office. Jacob noticed that the lights were on in every office. The doom laden snow brought every corporate employee to work early this morning.

"Go home," Jacob said.

Blane sagged. Jacob grabbed him before he hit the floor. Aden took his other arm. Together they negotiated him into an arm chair in Jacob's office.

"I'll call Heather," Aden said as left the office.

"Don't call her!" Blane protested. "I'll be fine!"

"Just rest," Jacob said. "We really need you well."

"Hey Jake!" Jacob's company phone squawked. "It's Honey. I've got some bad news."

"What's up?" Jacob picked up the phone.

"I don't have any idea what happened."

"What do you mean?" Jacob asked.

"Our trench shoring's slipped over night," Honey said. "Bambi's in the trench now trying to assess the damage."

"How does trench shoring slip?" Jacob's voice rose with frustration.

"Don't yell at me, Jacob Marlowe. I am just the messenger," Honey said. "You need to take a few breaths there, bro."

Jacob let out a breath. His loud question drew the corporate employees from their office. They were gathering outside his office. He closed his door in their faces. Aden came in the door as soon as he closed it. Jacob nodded to Aden then turned his back to the door.

"Ok, I'm calm," Jacob said. "How did that happen?"

"We don't know," Honey said. "We're sending the overnight tape in to you now. We've been trying to make up the week we're behind. Everyone's been working fast and long hours. I think it's some combination of the trenches not set right and the snow."

"How long will it take to fix them?" Jacob asked.

"We'll need a couple days, Jake. Do you want to talk to Bambi?"

"That's all right. Did it crush any pipe?"

"No," Honey said. "We dug the trench and set the shoring last night. We haven't laid pipe in this section yet."

"No one was hurt?" Sam said.

Surprised, Jake looked up at his father's voice. Sam had let himself into Jacob's office.

"Was anyone hurt?" Jacob asked.

"No. It was like this when we got here," Honey said. "Just so you know, our guys think it's sabotage."

"Paranoia always reins supreme," Jacob said. "Thanks Honey. You'll let me know?"

"I will," Honey said.

Turning back to the office, he shook his head at Aden, Sam and Blane.

"Did you close the sites for snow?" Jacob asked Sam.

"I did," Sam said.

"This is number four," Jacob said. "We can catch up tomorrow or the next day. But this site's out for a week. They think it's sabotage."

"Fuck," Blane said. His forehead rested on his hand. "I can review the tapes."

"After you rest," Sam said.

"Hey Jake," the box on Jacob's desk squawked again. A man's voice repeated, "Jake? Are you there?"

"Yeah, Jerry, I'm here," Jacob said. "What's up?"

"Our guys uncovered some remains yesterday afternoon," Jerry said. "They didn't tell me because they didn't want to delay the site."

"HOLY FUCK, Jerry!"

"I know," he said. "It looks to me like it's an entire dwelling. Either early settler but probably some kind of Native thing. I saw it this morning when I walked the site."

"Have they laid pipe over it?" Jacob asked.

"Yes," Jerry said. "But not much. We can pull it. Easy."

"What happened?" Sam asked.

"Native dwelling at the sewer site out East," Jacob said.

"Holy fuck is right," Aden said. "What the hell is going on?"

Jacob held up his hand for the men to be silent.

"Did you make the call, Jerry?" Jacob asked.

"No, the men wanted me to call you first," Jerry said. "Now I know that we're real concerned about meeting our goals, but Jacob Marlowe, Lipson's never ever constructed over a grave. Your mother would have a fit. You cannot ask me to..."

"Okay, Jerry. Okay," Jacob said. "You're right. We're not going to become something we're not."

"I don't want to buy a company..."

"OKAY," Jacob said.

"Okay?"

"Close the site. Call the local cops and we'll call the museum. I'll contact the owner."

"Fine. That's fine."

Jerry ended the call.

"How many is that?" Sam asked.

"Three closed for snow. Honey's site closed because of the trench shoring. Now this," Aden said. "That's five."

"We're never going to..." Blane said.

Blane clutched his stomach. Sam got Jacob's trash can under him seconds before he threw up. Blane missed the trash can.

"My office?" Aden asked.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry. Oh my God," Blane threw up into the trash can.

"Listen, I know this seems really tough," Sam said. "But we've been through tough times before. We can't let this get us down."

"Hey Jake," Jacob's phone squawked. Jacob looked at the phone debating whether to answer. Sam grabbed the phone from him.

"Hey Georgia, I'm going to leave you on speaker," Sam said. "What's up?"

"Remember how we turned the water on at Steele Street yesterday?"

"Yeah," Jacob said.

"Well, we blew a clay pipe in Country Club."

"Where?" Jacob asked.

"Circle Drive," Georgia said.

"Oh fuck," Aden said.

"These rich folks are pissed off, Jake," Georgia said. "Tony'd be here to tell you but they are screaming at him. Here..."

The sound of a homeowner screaming at Tony, the site manager, came through the phone.

"Pissed off," Georgia said. "What assholes."

"Did you turn off the water?" Sam asked.

"Yep," Georgia said. "Just made them madder. At least one homeowner is talking about suing. But it's not our fault their pipes are ancient. Like a hundred years old."

"Thanks Georgia," Jacob said.

"Tony'd like it if Sam came out," Georgia said.

"We're not quite sure what we're going to do today," Jacob said. "But we'll get back with you."

"Thanks Jake," Georgia said. "You know Tony's just sick about this. We were on time and on budget. If we have to fix this? And for free? We're going to take the whole company down."

"Let's cross that bridge when we need to," Jacob said. His hand rubbed at the tightness growing in his chest. "Thanks for letting us know."

"What's next?" Aden asked. "It can't possibly get…"

"DO NOT SAY THAT," Jacob screamed.

"Jake?" the intercom to Jacob's office phone squawked with Sam's administrative assistant's voice.

"Fuck, always. Things can ALWAYS get worse."

"Okay, Jacob, okay," Sam said. "You can't let this get to you."

"Yeah?" Jacob said. He pressed his office phone to speaker.

"I'm sorry to bug you," she said. "But Sam asked me to take your calls since Blane's sick. There's a call from your

lawyer, Max Hargreaves. He says it's urgent."

"Thanks. Can you put him through?"

"Jake?" Max Hargreaves voice asked.

"I put you on speaker because if it's urgent Aden and Sam need to hear."

"Hey Sam, Aden. Blane?"

"He's here," Jacob said. "What's up?"

"I had a call from a contact at your bank last night," Max said. "The bank's calling your debt."

"WHAT?!?" Jacob screamed. "We have two years operating expenses in that bank! We've an excellent credit rating!"

"That's what I said," Max said. "I wanted to check everything out before I called you. Your contracts specify a week's notice. But given the 'national banking crisis', the bank says that your contract is null and void. They are giving you twenty-four hours to fulfill your debt or, get this, secure it with a tangible property."

"What the hell does that mean?" Jacob asked.

"They want the Castle," Max said.

"WHAT?!"

"Listen, Jake, a few of the board members sit on the board at your bank," Max said. "They're orchestrating this entire thing."

"Why would they do that?" Jacob asked.

"Hostile takeover, Jake," Max said.

Without saying another word, Jacob stormed through the crowd of employees outside his office and into the executive restroom. He flipped the lock. He made it to the plastic chair near the sink before falling down. The pain in his chest was unbelievable.

Gasping for breath, he opened the towel rack where he had stashed his nitroglycerine spray. He sprayed the nitroglycerine in his mouth and worked to catch his breath.

"Jake?" Sam's voice said at the door.

"Just a second, Dad," Jacob said.

"You all right?"

"I just need a moment, Dad," Jacob said.

He had these episodes off and on since the assault in June. Angina. That's what the doctor called it. Daily exercise had reduced his angina to the point where he thought he'd kicked it.

He'd never had an episode this bad. He sprayed the nitroglycerine into his mouth one last time before he passed out.

~~~~~~~~

"What's going on, Sam?" asked Tres Sierra, their CFO.

"We've six sites down," Sam said. "And the bank's called our debt. They want to take the Castle."

The corporate employees gasped.

"I'm sorry," Sam said. "If Celia was here, she'd be angry that I told you."

"Thanks, Sam," the head of estimating hugged Sam. She added, "We appreciate your trust."

Sam nodded then returned to Jacob's office.

"Well, that's it," the head of estimating said.

"What are you doing?" Tres asked.

"I don't know about you, but I started this company in my jeans. My team is changing into our jeans. We're going to the sites. If we're going to be owners, we're going to start acting like them."

The CFO and controller shared a look.

"I'll find funding," Tres said. "I'm the senior corporate officer if Jake, Aden and Sam are gone. I'll need to stay anyway."

"I can..."
~~~~~~~~

"I'll get it done," Tres said. "Go change. Get the rest of the department. You need to be ready when Jake needs us."

The rest of the employees nodded.

"One admin stays," Tres said. "Blane's ill."

"I'll stay," the receptionist said. "I'll stay until tomorrow if I have to."

"Great," Tres said.

Looking around, he realized everyone was changing their clothing. He went to do the same. If the company was going down, they would go down with their jeans on.

~~~~~~~~

"Mommy, you have to help me."

Face down on the floor of the executive bathroom, Jacob begged his mother to appear.

"Please. I really need you."

"I debate with myself whether I should just let you beg," Celia said. "You know that I'm right here."

She helped him roll onto his back.

"Mommy." Jacob wept at the sight of her.

She lifted his head onto her lap. He felt her stroke his hair and face.

"I wish I knew what you want me to do," he said.

Celia smiled.

"Everything's wrong. Everything I tried is wrong."

Celia continued to stroke his hair.

"Tell me, Mommy. What do you want?"

"I want you to be happy, Jacob Marlowe."

"For your company. What do I do with your company? I've tried so hard to make your dream come true. But the board..."

"It's not my company, Jake," Celia said.

"What do you mean?"

"My company was run out of our basement. Sure, it grew into an actual office. But you've built it into a million dollar company. This isn't my company, Jake. It's yours."

"I've been doing all of this for you and Dad."

"That may be true." Celia smiled at her only son. "Maybe it's time you started doing all of this for you."

"I don't want this company," Jacob said.

"Are you sure?" Celia asked. "You seem to work awfully hard at something you don't want."

"I love carpentry," Jacob said.

"Why does it have to be one or the other?" Celia asked. "For that matter, why is 'normal' the opposite of psychic?"

"God Mom," Jacob said. "You know why!"

"Normal for you is being what you are." Celia stroked his hair. "Why do you have this chest pain?"

"My heart is injured," Jacob said. "The doctors say it doesn't work right."

"Humor me. Ask your heart."

Jacob closed his eyes. Stretching out his being, he asked his heart as if it was something separate from him.

"I don't want to give up the company," Jacob said.

"Yes, it's your company," Celia said.

"But I've worked so hard to..."

"You don't have to give up the whole thing, Jake. It's not all or nothing." Celia touched his face. "The rest of this… drama? Tell me Jacob Marlowe, why is this happening to your company?"

"So the employees can act like owners and..."
~~~~~~~~

"And?"

"So I can sort out what I want," Jacob smiled.

Celia began to fade.

"Don't go, Mommy! Please don't go."

"I'm the voice in your ear if you want listen," Celia said.

The door of the restroom opened.

"Oh my God," Sam said. "Get his arm. Blane just told us about the angina."

Sam and an accountant helped Jacob into the chair.

"Call 911."

"NO!" Jacob exclaimed. "I'm really all right. I just need a moment."

"When you're ready," the controller said. "We're ready."

Jacob looked up.

"What?"

"If this is our company, we're going to fight for it," the head of estimating said. "We've changed into our jeans, called our families. We're working until we've set things right."

Standing, Jacob looked from face to face at the crowd of Lipson construction corporate employees. His face broke out in a smile. He weaved, then found his balance.

"Call all the employees from the snowed out sites..."

"They're waiting in the parking lot, Jake, "Aden said. "They showed up here to help."

"We need to find alternative..."

"The CFO is looking for alternative funding, Jake," the controller said.

Jacob stopped short when Celia appeared in front of him.

"Son, look in your back pocket," she said.

Jacob pulled the postcard from his back pocket. Reading the words, he groaned and laughed. He gave the card to Blane, who laughed.

"Let's get to work."

Chapter Fifty-Two
How this goes

One hour later

"I'm not sure what this fuss is about." Sam put his hand on the homeowner's arm. "From what you told my site manager, Tony, you knew about the waterline problem. Sounds like you and your neighbors have already spoken with the city about it."

The man shook his head at Sam.

"Listen, it's snowing," Sam said. "You've had a difficult morning. Why don't you head back in? I'll let you know what we find out."

Mumbling under his breath, the man nodded and turned back to the house. Sam jogged to catch him.

"I heard you say you need help with the kids?"

"The Nanny quit. My wife's on bed rest. Twins due any day. My two year old would drive a saint insane. And I have to get to work."

"I'm sorry about your wife," Sam said. "Christy thought your wife was pregnant."

"Who the fuck is Christy?"

"She's one of our road girls," Sam said. "Blonde? Pretty? She worked your corner this week."

The man nodded.

"Why don't I send Christy in to watch your two year old? She'd be happy to help. You can get to work and not worry."

"My son's a pain in the ass," the man said.

"So's mine," Sam laughed.

"You have a toddler?

"He's twenty-six," Sam said.

The man laughed.

"I'll send Christy to your house. She'll appreciate getting out of the cold today," Sam said. "Can you find help today?"

The man nodded.

"Great," Sam said. "See! That was easy. And don't worry. If your son's too much for Christy, we'll teach him how to fix a broken water line. That's what I did with my son, and now he owns the company."

The man laughed. Holding out his hand, he said, "Thanks."

"Easy."

~~~~~~~~

Two hours later

"When you called, I was like no way," the field director for the Museum of Nature and Science said. "But, hot damn, Jacob Marlowe, that's an entire village. I bet we've got ten, maybe fifteen homes here."

"Settlers?" Jacob asked.

"Ancient. Jake, I think it's Clovis."

"What does that mean?" Jerry Siegle, the site manager, asked. "This is not Clovis, New Mexico."

"Ancient civilization. Thirteen thousand years ancient. We've got an expert at the museum. Steve Holden. He's going to ..." The man beamed at Jacob. "You've made our careers."

Jerry groaned.

"Yeah, glad we could help," Jacob said.
~~~~~~~~

The man laughed at Jacob's sardonic tone.

"You're saying we have to close the site?" Jerry asked.

"I'm saying you can't work here," the man said.

"Ah fuck," Jerry stomped back toward the trailer.

"Ever?" Jacob asked.

"Probably," the man said. "If this is what I think it is? The government will take over this site. In five years' time, they'll sell tickets for the good people to see."

Jacob frowned.

"I guess you probably didn't want to hear that," the man from the Museum of Nature and Science said.

"It's not you," Jacob said. "I need to talk to my guys."

"Yeah," the man said. As Jacob walked away, he said, "Hey Jake!"

Jacob turned to look at him.

"Thanks. Really. A lot of people would have just kept working. This is a big assed deal."

Jacob nodded then continued to the trailer. As he approached he heard someone yelling. When he opened the door, everyone was silent. Only the whir of the heaters broke the sterile silence. The men stared at him.

"What's the word, Jake?" Jerry asked.

"This entire job is cancelled," Jacob said. "Off our books."

Jerry's assistant threw his coffee cup against the trailer's wall.

"I KNEW we shouldn't have called," an assistant site manager said. "Fuck, my one chance... God damn it."

The other two assistant site managers shook their heads.

"That's it, isn't it? God damn it, Marlowe." Jerry's angry face was inches from Jacob's. His index finger tapped on Jacob's chest. "I've worked at this company all my God damn life. And why?"

Jerry spun away from Jacob. His employees watched their site manager in stunned silence. Spinning in place, Jerry turned back to Jacob.

"Because some rich asshole set unachievable conditions. In almost thirty years, Lipson construction's met our fall projections three times! Three times in thirty years! Now we have to pull off some fucking miracle. God damn it."

Jacob opened his mouth to respond, but Jerry wasn't finished.

"This is on YOU, Marlowe. You should never have let those fuckers set ANY condition on our company. When it comes down, YOU better say that YOU fucked up because we're not taking the blame."

Jerry crossed his arms in defiance. Jacob opened his mouth again to speak.

"You can fire me if you want," Jerry said. "I'm not going to work over some lost civilizations remains. I'm not going to take the blame for the employees losing the company. And I'm not going to put up with bullshit."

Jacob raised his eyebrows with the question – was Jerry done?

"Yeah, I'm done. Your Mom made the same face when I went on a rant." Jerry bowed his large body slightly. "I'm sorry."

Jacob laughed at his apology.

"You don't have to humiliate me, Marlowe. God damn it. I'm trying to be humble."

"I think he wants to say something, Jer," Jerry's assistant said.

"Oh," Jerry said. "Go ahead. I'll listen."

Jacob opened his mouth to speak.

"But just so you know, I meant every word. Even though I'm sorry I go on and on."

Jacob started laughing so hard that the men in the small trailer began to laugh.

"Ok, I get it," Jerry laughed. "Go ahead."

Jacob's face shifted to stone.

"The bank has called our credit. We have twenty-four hours to secure new funding."

The silence in the trailer was deafening.

"The only thing they will take as capital is the Castle. They know there's no way I will put my child, my family… hell anyone who needs a place to stay… in the position of not having a home."

"What about the school?" Jerry asked.

"We rent," Jacob said.

"What are you going to do?" Jerry's assistant asked.

"I don't know," Jacob said. "We'll do something. But as of this moment, the only way to secure our debt is to either put my mother's home up as equity or ..."

"Let the board buy the company," Jerry said. "Mother fuckers..."

"Exactly," Jacob said. "I want you to hear this from me. You and your men did exactly the right thing. I need you to clean up the site and get back into town. We have a couple of other situations that could use your guys and, Jerry, your experience. How long will it take to tear this site down?"

"Three days," Jerry said. "But if we're needed in town, then we can go there now. We can tear this site down this weekend."

"I was hoping you'd say that. Can you guys get out to Golden? They shut down due to snow. They're having trouble with the melt off. They could really use you. I need your men at County Line. They can restart but their guys moved to Steele Street to help."

"We'll go right now," Jerry said. "You're going to sort this financing out?"

"Have to," Jacob said. "Construction companies run on credit. We have to have credit to buy the supplies we need to complete jobs and pay employees. Without it, we close the doors."

"What are you going to do when you get the financing worked out, Jake?" one of the assistant site managers asked.

"I'm going to get rid of the board."

Unintentionally, Jacob smiled his evil hockey smile. The men shifted uncomfortably. Noticing their discomfort, Jacob let out a breath.

"Let's just get through today," Jacob said.

~~~~~~~~

"One, two, three."

Aden yelled over the wind, snow and machinery. He waved his hand down and the loader buckets of two backhoes moved in unison. Tap, tap, tap. The trench shoring moved off the bottom of the trench.

"STOP" Aden yelled over the machinery and the wind.

The backhoe operators lifted the buckets. Aden climbed into the trench. Shaking his head, he dug a handful of dirt from the steel shoring plate. He stuck the dirt in his pocket then climbed out.

"What is it, boss?" Bambi yelled.

"I don't know," Aden said. Pulling the dirt from his pocket, he showed held it out for Bambi to see. "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

The dirt was a mixture of red Denver clay soil and some kind of gray matter.

"I thought these were rocks, you know." Aden pointed to a gray chunk. "But..."

"Throw me a shovel," Bambi said.

Bambi climbed into the trench. Honey passed her a shovel. She dug around where the steel shoring had been. Mimicking Aden, she put a handful of dirt in her pocket and climbed out. She showed Aden her dirt.

"That's concrete," Honey said.

"That's what I thought," Aden said.

"Concrete," Bambi said. "What do we do?"

"We call the police," Honey said.
~~~~~~~~

"I don't want to be the site that..."

"Don't worry, Bambi," Aden said. "Jake's going to work everything out today."

"How do you know? Jerry said the financing's been pulled and..."

"I know the man," Aden said. "He'll work it out."

"Police?" Honey asked.

"Police," Aden said. "And thank God, no one was hurt. If we hadn't had this snow storm, someone could have been crushed."

Honey wheeled to the trailer to make the call.

"And the tapes?" Bambi asked.

"Heather and Blane are reviewing them," Aden said. "When Jake said we had to buy those video cameras for the lights, I thought he was nuts. So expensive! But man, I'm glad we have them."

"Me too," Bambi said. "Me too."

~~~~~~~~

Two hours later

"This is how this goes," Mike said.

Standing in the middle of Megan's living room, he paced back and forth in front of Steve, Candy and Megan. He opened his mouth to speak, then shook his head.

"Why are we here, Mike?" Megan asked. "You said it was an emergency."

"And where's Jill?" Candy asked. "If we're getting yelled at, she should be here too."

"Yeah," Steve said. "Why does Jill get to miss out on this yelling?"

"Jill. Yes, this is about Jill," Mike said. "Jill is not here because it's about her. Jill won't marry Jacob because she thinks you guys can't to deal with the truth."

"What truth?" Megan asked.

Mike let out a breath. He looked from face to face. He closed his eyes to their faces then said:

"Our mother is alive."

He didn't open his eyes until they stopped talking.

"SHUT UP," Megan yelled.

Steve and Candy stopped talking.

"Start at the beginning Mike," Megan said. "You saw the bodies."

"I saw a body, our father's body and a charred… I don't know what it was," Mike said. "The state police said Mom's body was burned beyond recognition in the fire. Dad was thrown from the wreckage. Most of his head was destroyed. I recognized what he was wearing and his watch."

Mike pointed to the watch Steve was wearing. Steve wore his father's watch every day.

"Why would Mom abandon us?" Candy's voice echoed her loss.

"Why do you think?" Mike asked.

"Because she had to," Megan said.

"My mother loved me. Fiercely," Candy said. "She knew about me. She told me that I was perfect in every way. Every day. Even though I'm gay. That's the only reason my mother would leave me. She was forced."

"But Mike why would she have to?" Steve asked.

"You want to hear this?" Mike asked. "Jill tried to tell you. Each of you. But you didn't want to know."

"Oh Mike, we were just… crazy. I remember her saying something but… I wanted Mom to be alive so badly. I thought she was... imagining I guess." Megan shrugged. "Is she angry?"

"Jill?" Mike chuckled. "No. This is something she has carried for a lot of years. For us."

Steve nodded.
~~~~~~~~

"I want to know," Steve said. "I want to know."

"Me too," Candy said.

She held out her hands to Steve and to Megan. They took her hands for support.

"Meg and I have a different father than you guys do," Mike said. "Our mother was married to him before she married your father. She thought he died."

"That's why there's four years between me and you," Steve said.

"Right."

"And why Dad hated you," Candy said.

"Right. I look like my father," Mike said.

"I remember," Megan's voice was vague. "When you say those words, I know that's true. My Daddy was… funny, used to make faces, loved me… a lot."

"He does," Mike said. "He loves us – Steve, Candy and Jill included. He's intervened in all of our lives when we really needed it. Money mostly. Steve, remember how the bill for your car was twenty dollars when the estimate was six hundred? Or your school, Candy? Remember how you got the scholarship to pay for knives and stuff? This house? Meg, how did you get that low interest rate?"

"How does he know about us?" Steve asked.

"Ever notice how Jill writes everything down in her journal? Every detail," Mike said.

Steve, Candy and Megan nodded.

"Ever notice how she doesn't have shelves and shelves and shelves of them?"

Like a light bulb flashing over their heads, their faces lit up.

"She sends them to Mom," Megan whispers. "She used to ask for money sometimes... She sends them to Mom."

"Right."

"Mom and her husband live together in Costa Rica. He's retired. Mostly."

"Why did Mom think your father was dead?" Candy asked.

"He traveled for work a lot. He was gone for years and Mom was told he died. She married Dad. I call him Dad because..." Mike shrugged. "There's more..."

"What?" Megan asked.

"Our Mother is the daughter of one of the head of the Bratva," Mike said. "The Russian Mob. Dad worked as an accountant for the Mob. He got in some kind of trouble, I don't exactly know what. They had to leave the country. Mom was pregnant with Steve. She left with him but, according to Jill, she didn't know what going on until they were here. She never had a chance to say good-bye to her family."

"I remember that too," Megan said. "Long plane fight. Mom was very fidgety and Dad was stone. Mike and I tried to be extra good so we wouldn't get in trouble."

"He stole some amount of money," Mike said. "I've heard the term 'billions'."

Candy and Steve gasped. Megan jerked to the present.

"Did Mom...?"

"She knew nothing," Mike said. "Knows nothing. I don't either. Do you?"

He looked from sibling to sibling. They each shook their heads 'no'.

"Jill?"

"Jill doesn't have a clue," Mike said.

"So the money just..."

"Vanished," Mike said. "Or he spent it or gambled it or it never existed. My father thinks the whole thing might have been a way to get Dad out of the country. He was killed for stealing the money. Remember those surveyors that came right after Mom and Dad died?"

"They surveyed the house and the lot. They said it was for the new loan but..." Megan rubbed her forehead. "We didn't

have to do that for our house."

"Right," Mike said. "They were looking for the money. Found nothing."

"Mike?" Megan asked. "What does this have to do with Jill?"

"Mom wants to see her get married," Mike said. "Jill doesn't want to upset you or put Mom at risk. She's not going to marry Jacob."

Lost in their own thoughts, Steve, Candy and Megan fell silent.

"Mom works at the Marlowe School," Mike said.

They all began talking again.

"SHUT UP!" Megan yelled. "God!"

Steve nodded. Candy stood.

"Where are you going?" Mike asked.

"I want my mom," Candy said. "You said she was at the Marlowe school. I'm going to see my Mom."

"Actually, she's outside. Waiting. For us."

"She works at the Marlowe school?" Megan asked.

"Jake hired her when they needed more people. She started right after Katy and your kids started going there. She speaks five languages and kids love her," Mike said. "She came because she wanted to know her grandchildren. Ryan knows who she is. He's kept her secret."

"Why is it safe for her now?" Steve asked.

"Because of me and Val," Mike said. "There was a conversation, and an agreement to leave us alone."

"Us?" Megan asked.

"You, me, Candy, Steve, Jill and our kids," Mike said. "We don't know anything about any money. Do we?"

Everyone shook their heads. Candy walked to the door.

"Wait," Mike said. "Mom's had some work done. You might not recognize…"

Candy ran out the door and into her mother's arms. Crying, laughing, kissing and hugging, Steve, Megan and Candy met their mother for the first time in fifteen years.

Chapter Fifty-Three
Don't mess with the master

An hour later

Blane lay on the bed with his head in Heather's lap. He liked communing with the baby. Now that he was so sick, he liked her warm comfort. Plus, he hadn't thrown up in almost two hours. A major accomplishment, he thought.

"Ok," Heather said. She had been reviewing the site tapes on his laptop. "Here's the part I think you should look at. We looked at last night, right?"

"Yeah," Blane said. "Nothing."

"What's weird is that Aden and Bambi found concrete under the shoring," Heather said. "I reviewed all of yesterday."

"When did you do that?" Blane asked. He rolled on his side to look at the computer.

"While you were asleep," Heather said.

"I wasn't sleeping," Blane said.

"Uh huh," Heather said. "You forgot what you're SUPPOSED to say."

"Yes, wifey," Blane said.

They laughed.

"Watch the timestamp," Heather said.

"You're going too fast."

"Ok, slow boy," Heather slowed down the fast forward. "Right here. See this guy?"

They watched the left head light of a rusted out Jeep Cherokee pull up. The bright white work lights created a line of light and shadow. At four-fifty, it was pitch dark except directly under the blazing lights.

A man wearing coveralls and a battered coat came into view. He looked one way, then the other. Moving fast, he ran out of view. He returned with open cans of paint, which he poured into the trench. He ran out of sight and returned with two more rusted cans.

"That's weird," Blane said. "What time was that?"

"Four fifty-three. He's using the site to dump some kind of industrial waste," Heather said. "Probably figures it's safe."

"Where are our guys?"

"I doubt they could see him in the dark with just the spotlights," Heather said.

"They shouldn't have been working when it was so dark."

"Trying to catch up," Heather said. "Check out this camera."

The black and white video showed a man running up to the trench with three or four half filled bags of concrete. He looked up as if he saw something. An excavator roared in the background. The man ran to his Cherokee and took off.

The entire thing lasted less than two minutes.

"Look here," Heather said.

Blane sat up to see what she was pointing at. Her finger showed the concrete falling in a neat pile along the edge of the trench. Heather clicked to another camera and they saw a cloud of white powder drop against another edge of the trench.

"Is that enough to do it?" Heather asked.

"Not in normal circumstances," Blane said. "I mean, we'll have to have Jake and Sam look at this. You've got two piles of concrete in two areas. Our guys are working fast and in the dark. Yeah, that might do it."

"What do you do?"

"Beside worship the wifey?" Blane laughed.

"That's a given," Heather said.

"We call Jake and Sam," Blane said. "After they see this, we call the police."

"Do you think someone did it on purpose?"

"It's certainly intentional. This guy didn't accidentally spill all of this junk into the trench," Blane said. "But it's not sabotage."

"That's good news," Heather said.

"Very good news," Blane said. "Thanks. You're awesome."

"Eh, what's a wife for?"

"Screwing?"

"Yeah? You don't know many married men."

"Hey, if I was married to Ashton Kutcher, I'd screw him regularly!"

"But would you call him 'wifey'?" Heather laughed.

"Good point," Blane said. "Thanks Heather. This is fabulous. We've got the license plate number and everything. We can give it all to the police."

"I'm glad I could help."

Blane lay back down on her lap.

"I'd screw Ashton Kutcher regularly too," Heather said.

Blane laughed.

~~~~~~~~

Tres Sierra, the CFO, rubbed his face to keep from crying. He had contacted every bank and banker in Denver. All he learned was that their bank was well within their rights to call the debt. In fact, he heard banks were doing it to everyone, then charging huge fees to keep what little available credit flowing.

Fuckers. His mind flashed through images of firebombing their bank.

"Hey," a man stuck his head in the controller's office. "I came to see Jake, but... Where is everyone?"

"Working," Tres's firebombing rage spilled over into his demeanor.

"Don't want to interrupt work," the man said. "I wanted to drop off the Avs tickets for Jake. Does he really have a girlfriend?"

"Avs tickets?"

"We share season tickets for the Avalanche. Hockey? He takes half. I think he goes with Mike, but I heard he has a girlfriend."

"He shares tickets with a venture capitalist friend of his Mom's?" Tres said.

"Celia was more than a friend to me. She saved my life," the man said.

"You probably feel like you're in her debt," the CFO said.

"In her debt? I owe her everything. She even gave me the loan to start my business."

"Venture capitalists loan money to companies."

"Sort of," the man said. "Listen, maybe I should..."

"I have a crazy question," Tres said. "Would you secure some debt for us?"

"Us?"

"Lipson Construction."

"What are you talking about?"

Tres laughed.

~~~~~~~~

Friday afternoon — 3:30 P.M.

Smiley Middle School

"Who's that?" the new boy pushed Nash Norsen's shoulder.

"My friend, Sandy," Nash said. He waved to Sandy, who waved back.

"She looks like a hooker."

"Yeah, like you know what a hooker looks like. I think she's beautiful," Nash's best friend Tommy said. "Hey Sandy"

Sandy waved to Tommy.

"Shut up, she's my Dad's girlfriend," Nash said.

He ran down the steps to where Sandy and Noelle waited for him. He hugged Sandy. She put her arm around his shoulder as they walked to Aden's car.

"Where's Dad?" Nash asked.

"There's been a MAJOR problem at work, Nash," Noelle said. "We're going with Sandy to her work."

"What happened?" Nash asked.

"I think it's more like what didn't happen," Sandy said. "Are you okay to come with me? I was going to cut your hair in between. You can stay with me tonight."

"Did your shop ever fix their website?"

"No," Sandy said. "Could you…?"

"Not a problem." Nash stood a little taller with the idea that he might actually be able to help.

"Are you hungry? Your Dad packed some snacks for you, but I thought we could order a pizza."

"PIZZA!" Noelle said.

"Front seat!" Nash yelled then ran to the car.

"You always get the front seat..." Noelle ran after him.

Shaking her head, Sandy walked past a man coming to pick up his son. He looked at Sandy, then did a double take. Embarrassed, Sandy put on her sunglasses and ran to catch up with the kids.

~~~~~~~~

Friday afternoon — 4:30 P.M.

Bambi's water and sewer site

"Don't mess with the master!" Valerie yelled from on top of an excavator.

The crowd of Lipson employees cheered as she set the last steel shoring in place. After the police collected what they needed, Valerie had helped the team pull all the shoring out. She instructed the team to dig the junk out of the trench.

When they were ready, she insisted on setting the trench shoring herself. Sitting on top of an excavator, covered in mud, Valerie was every bit her mother's daughter. She worked with practiced efficiency.

"Damn, I forgot how fun this is!"

"You want a job?" Bambi asked.

"She has one," Honey pointed to the rows of photographers.

"When did they get here?" Valerie turned the excavator around and drove back to their storage area.

Jumping out of the excavator, she was surrounded by Lipson employees. The employees formed a wall of bodies in front of the photographers. Valerie looked from face to face.

"Thanks," Valerie said. "After my initial panic, I... I'm a Lipson girl. Fuck it if the world knows."

The employees laughed. Bambi ran up to Valerie.

"We can ..."

"Let's walk the site, Bambi," Valerie said. "If they want to take photos, that's got to be all right."

Bambi laughed and hugged Valerie. With a bevy of paparazzi on their tail, Valerie, Bambi, Honey and the assistant site managers walked the entire site. She found Mike waiting for her at the construction trailer. Like magic, she disappeared to Mike's old Bronco.
~~~~~~~~

"I had the greatest afternoon," Valerie said.

She climbed into his lap. With the steering wheel pressed against her back, she kissed his lips. He sighed in her embrace.

"Jake was right," Valerie said. She brushed the dirt she'd transferred from his face.

Mike shook his head to clear it.

"About what?" he managed.

"We're not one thing or the other," Valerie said. "I'm not a Lipson girl or an actress. I'm just me. And just me had the BEST time this afternoon. What did you work out?"

"We're on," Mike said.

"We're going to have so much fun!"

Valerie clapped her hands then climbed back into the passenger seat. Mike started the car. Before he put the car in gear, Valerie climbed back into his lap.

"I love you Mike," she said.

She was about to kiss him again when they heard feet against the pavement. The paparazzi had caught up with them. She moved back to her seat and Mike took off toward the Castle.

"Home?" she asked.

"Uh huh."

"To work?"

"Something like that," he said.

"Drive fast." She clipped her seat belt.

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The next day — 2:59 A.M.

Pete's Kitchen

After crying all day, Jill stumbled through her shift at Pete's. She was certain her relationship with Jacob was over. She'd never endanger her mother by having her come to Denver. So that was that.

As if she hadn't had a hard enough day, everyone at Pete's avoided her. She felt like she had a giant X on her forehead. What did she care? She was a model now. She didn't have to work here.

Even Meg was weird when she called to check on Katy. Meg was so strange on the phone she decided her sister was angry with her.

And Tanesha hadn't come in today. Tanesha worked four jobs to keep her grandma's house out of foreclosure. The only time Jill saw her friend was in the wee hours of the mornings at Pete's. Jill looked for Tanesha's shoulder to cry on. But tonight, she never came.

No matter.

If she was done with Pete's, done with Jacob, done with her stupid siblings, she'd just move. Maybe she'd move to Paris where Claire Martins lived; or Costa Rica to see Mama; or London; or Istanbul.

"Do you know what language they speak in Turkey, Joe?" She set down Joe's regular breakfast.

"Turkish?"

Jill scowled. She didn't speak Turkish.

Lost in thought, she scrubbed the counter. After all, it was her last night in Denver. She'd need a good reference in...

Dubai! She'd heard there were a lot of jobs in Dubai. Someone said they even speak English there. She could probably get an office job in Dubai. Yeah, Dubai. Jill smiled to herself. She'd move to Dubai.

She just wasn't sure where Dubai was.

Looking up, she saw Jacob through the windows. He's probably walking home from some OTHER girl's house. She scrubbed the counter with all her might.
~~~~~~~~

"Hi," Jacob said. "You look very busy."

"God, Jacob, you smell," Jill said.

"Sorry," he said. "I haven't had a chance to shower. It's been an awful day."

"Yeah?" Jill tried for cold. He had emailed her, called six times and sent her about fifty texts. She paid no attention. If he wanted to break up with her, he was going to have to do it in person. "Excuse me."

She went to refill coffee at her tables. When she got back to the counter, he was nowhere in sight.

Chicken.

"He's in the bathroom cleaning up," another server said as she walked by. "He said you should wait for him."

She went to the back to clock out. She had packed a small bag of her possessions so she could go to Sandy's house after her shift. She would move the rest of her things tomorrow, when she didn't have to work. Coming from the back, she saw Jacob waiting for her.

"Carry your bag, Miss?" he asked.

"Listen, you don't have to be so nice to me," she said. "I know what's going on."

"What's going on?"

"You're breaking up with me because I can't marry you."

"I am?"

"Well, I saved you the trouble. I'm moving in with Sandy. In fact, I'm staying there tonight." Seeing his amused face, she pressed on. "I'll move Katy and my things tomorrow. You won't ever have to worry about me or Katy again. You can go to your fancy parties with your new girlfriend."

"My new girlfriend?"

"Right," Jill nodded at her own logic. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a bus to catch."

Jacob grabbed her arms and kissed her lips. Shocked, Jill sputtered.

"Do you want to marry me?" he asked. "Or do you want to move to Dubai?"

"How did you...?"

"Psychic." He pointed at his chest.

"That's very rude."

"You're right. It's very rude," he said. "Is it as rude as not answering your boyfriend's pages or phone calls?"

"I'm not going to make this easy for you," Jill said. Sticking her defiant chin out, she added, "If you want to break up with me, you have to do it in person."

He looked away from her then shook his head.

"You're the most impossible person I've ever met," he said.

"Well, you're..."

He kissed her again.

"Do you want to marry me?"

Her eyes searched his face. She nodded. He stepped back. Holding out his hand, he said:

"Come with me."

Chapter Fifty-Four
To us?

Saturday early morning – 3:15 A..M.
Pete's Kitchen

Without thinking, Jill took his hand. Jacob picked up her overnight bag. They were near the door when the manager touched Jacob's arm.

"See you in an hour?" the manager asked. He held the door open for them.

"Hour and a half will work," Jacob said.

"See you then."

Jill jerked to a stop outside the door.

"Didn't you read the postcard? I can't marry you! I can't. I can't. I can't I can't." Jill's voice rose with each 'I can't'. "I'm not some prize or trophy that you win. You can't just decide something is going to happen, then..."

Jacob dropped her bag to hold her close to him. She batted at him with her fists but he held on. When her storm of anger had passed, he let go, stepped back, picked up the bag and held out his hand to her.

"Come with me."

Flushed from her anger, she looked him up and down. She shook her head, crossed her arms and looked away from him.

"Come with me. I'll explain everything. But not here. Not on Colfax with an audience. I'd rather not be after-hours entertainment for the hookers and drunks."

Her head turned to look at him. She let out a breath and took his hand. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the fleshy part between her thumb and index finger. They walked to the corner, then Jacob turned right. Jill stopped walking.

"Where are we going?" Jill asked. "Aren't we going home?"

"I came straight from work," Jacob said. "I have a Lipson truck in the parking lot. Plus, I'd like a chance to talk to you before we get to the Castle."

He opened the passenger side door of the truck then helped her into the big truck. Going around the bed of the truck, he allowed himself a moment of 'What the fuck does a guy have to do?' When he reached the cab, he was calm again. He started the truck. Leaving the parking lot, he turned right on Colfax.

"Where are we going?"

"We're going to the workshop," Jacob said. "I want a chance to talk to you without being interrupted."

Jill leaned back against the seat. Jacob was the most thoughtful person she knew. She should have assumed he'd want to talk to her alone and in quiet, but... Her mind was so paranoid, so frightened, so fragile. Pressing her head against the side window, she wondered if she wanted Jacob to leave so she could go back to her familiar world of suffering and loneliness.

"Hey." Jacob's voice broke her spinning thoughts. "We just take life one moment at a time."

He stopped the truck at the stoplight at York and held his hand out to her. She smiled at him.

"I'm sorry I get so crazy," she said.

"I think we are all crazy sometimes. I wasn't exactly sane this morning. I'm grateful you didn't give up."

She leaned over for a quick kiss before they went through the light, only to stop at Josephine, the very next street, and the very next stoplight. He leaned over to kiss her. They became so caught up in each other that he didn't notice the green light until the car behind them beeped their horn.

Jill giggled.

Holding hands, they drove past East High School to turn left on Detroit Street. He turned into the workshop driveway then drove into an open spot in the garage.

"Where's Mike's Bronco?" Jill asked.

"He likes to drive it. The paparazzi don't recognize it when he's in town," Jacob said. "It's at the Castle."

Jacob hopped out of the cab and went around to help Jill climb from the truck. They walked hand in hand through the stacks of wood and machinery to the small office in the back. Jacob situated Jill on the couch, then took a bottle of vintage Dom Perignon from a tiny refrigerator. He opened the bottle and poured two glasses.

"To us?"

"To us," she said. Taking a sip of her champagne, she said, "It's important to me that you understand why I can't marry you."

"Ok," Jacob said.

"My Mama's life is in danger. People want to kill her. And now she wants to come to my wedding," Jill said. "She knows all about you because I tell her everything in my journals. Well, that, and her husband was at the big party. You know where Trevor..."

Jacob watched Jill's face. As she spoke, she seemed to age in front of him. Her hands rubbed at her face as if to rub out her youth and beauty in order to confront the ugliness that burdened her.

"Well, I say her husband because I was really raised by my Dad. But I don't know if he was my Dad," Jill said. "I asked Mom once, but she never said. You should see them together – Mama and her husband – they are perfect, so in love, even now all these decades later. You can just tell. Like your Mom and Sam. I guess I want that but..."

"I think you have that," Jacob said.

"I hope so."

Smiling, Jill took a drink of her champagne for courage.

"My Dad wasn't a very nice man," Jill said. "He was angry. A lot. He'd yell and hit us. He'd just get mad. Soon he'd scream and hit us. He was meanest to Mike. If Mama got in the way, he'd hit her. That was too horrible for any of us to tolerate. We'd make it so he hit us and not her.

"Our Mama was one hundred percent for us... Is one hundred percent for us. But he… acted like he hated all of us. Or… I don't know. Mike wants me to talk to some friend of his about Dad and Mama and her husband but… I feel ashamed even speaking any of this out loud. Even to you. Even here where it's so safe and quiet.

"I feel like I'm betraying my Mama."

Jill shook her head. She got up from the couch and went to the water cooler. She poured two Dixie cups full of water and brought them back. Jacob thanked her when she handed him a cup.

"I've always thought your mother must have been wonderful. You're so amazing with Katy. And Katy's not easy."

"No, Katy's not," Jill said. "Dad used to say Mama allowed us to be difficult. Mama allowed us to be… us. I get letters from her… every month or so. After I send her a journal. Did I say that? I send my journals to Mama."

Jill fell silent. For all of her words, all of her thoughts, it was in her deep sigh that Jacob heard the weight of her pain and loss.

"So, you see, I can't marry you."

Jacob nodded.

"Do you remember Delphie making me meet some new teacher they wanted to hire?"

"You were pissed," Jill nodded. "You'd been working sixteen, seventeen hour days and Delphie wanted you to meet some teacher. But you never say 'no' to Delphie."

"Uh, I do too."

"You don't," Jill said. "It's just how you are with her."

"Anyway, the teacher was your mother, Anjelika Katherine," Jacob said.

"WHAT?" Jill's eyes welled with tears. "But it's not safe. Oh Jacob, she *will* get herself killed! You must have said no.

Please tell me you sent her home."

Jacob picked up Jill's hands and kissed them.

"Let me finish, please?"

Jill nodded. He poured her more champagne. In her nervousness, she drank down her full glass.

"You remember Samantha Hargreaves, right?"

"She's my lawyer for the Trevor crap," Jill said.

"You remember her boyfriend, life partner, whatever? She calls him Art but everyone else calls him..."

"Raz," Jill said. "He's gorgeous. They make a beautiful couple. Together, they're like living, breathing, moving art."

"Right," Jacob said. "He works for the government. He went to Russia to speak to your grandfather when Mike and Val were going to be on Oprah. He was able to come to an arrangement with the Bratva… the Russian Mob. They agreed to leave you and your family alone. While Raz was there, he found out that your grandfather had been offered a woman who looked very much like his daughter. Anyway, that's how they found out what my step-sister was up to."

"She was going to sell me to the Russian Mob," Jill said. "Wow, I thought that was just a… story. And Katy?"

"Same thing," Jacob said.

"But why would he want us when he rejected Mama?"

"He's old and lonely, mostly," Jacob said. "Your mother was his favorite child. After Raz left, and Mike and Val were on Oprah, your Grandfather went to visit with your mother. They had a kind of reunion… painful, but good. Your mother's no longer in danger."

"Why didn't she tell me?" Jill asked.

"She had an idea that you were mad at her, that all of her children were angry with her. She wanted to meet her grandchildren before her children told her she couldn't. Are you angry with her?"

"No," Jill said. "I'm not mad. I've told her that we aren't angry. I think she's angry with herself."

"That's what I thought," Jacob said. "I hired her to work at the Marlowe school."

"WHAT?"

"Remember Katy talking about the pretty lady who has her exact name?" Jacob asked.

"She even knew Katy's bedtime song." Jill nodded. "Little Grey Wolf. It's a common Russian lullaby so..."

"Katy was talking about your mother," Jacob said. "Delphie's tried to tell you or get you to talk about your mother."

"She's brought up my mother about ten times in the last few months," Jill said. "I always change the subject. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Your mother didn't want me to," Jacob said. "I would have told you eventually. She wasn't sure how she'd do in 'the real world.' She's been in Costa Rica for a long time. But the Marlowe school kids adore her. Especially the children from the motels. She speaks their language on so many levels. Everyone at the Marlowe school loves her."

"Of course," Jill said.

"I want to show you the postcard and ask you if you notice something," he said. He gave her the postcard. "I assume you got this on Halloween?"

Looking over the postcard, Jill nodded.

"What am I supposed to notice?" Jill asked.

"There's no address, no stamp."

"But the mailman gave it to me," she said.

"The mailman gave you some mail," he said. "This was in the box. He must have stuck it in with the mail so you'd get it."

"Oh," Jill said. "It just has my name. There's no mark on it at all."

"Your mother thought you would notice that and realize she was in town," Jacob said. "She assumed you would show me the card and I would tell you."

"That's pretty different from what happened."

Jacob nodded.

"Where's Mama now?"

"She's waiting for you at the Castle," Jacob said. "She is waiting to help you get dressed."

"Get dressed?"

"I thought we'd get married this morning," Jacob said.

"But my family. I want my Katy..."

"They're waiting for us at home. Mike told Megan, Steven, and Candy about your mother today. They've spent the day with her."

"Oh," Jill said. "Candy called about noon, but I've been so upset."

"Everyone we know is waiting for us. Val set it up."

Jacob's hand cupped her face.

"Marry me this morning."

Jill stood from the couch. She held out her champagne glass to Jacob, which he filled. She made a gesture with her hands and he stood.

"Let's get married this morning."

He hooked his elbow in hers and they drank. Giggling, Jill threw her arms around him.

"This is the most romantic thing I've ever heard of," Jill said.

"You know Alex and John got married thirteen hours after they met."

Jacob took her hand and they made their way through the workshop.

"I said romantic not insane. Alex and John are a little nuts, you know," Jill said.

Jacob laughed. He punched the numbers into the security lock and they made their way down the stairs to the coal tunnel.

"I do have some bad news," Jacob said. "I'd planned to whisk you away on a honeymoon, but I can't do that now."

"Because of the financing?" Jill asked.

"I knew you read my texts," Jacob said.

Blushing, Jill nodded.

"Yes, and everything else," Jacob said. "All of Lipson Construction is closed today, Saturday, but we have to work tomorrow."

"At least we have today," Jill said.

"I was hoping you would say that," Jacob said. "I also didn't get you a wedding present. You can ask me for anything and I'll get it."

"I didn't get you one," Jill said.

"You are the present," Jacob said.

"Oh. I can ask for anything?"

"Anything."

"I want to know why you don't want to be a psychic," Jill said.

"When we have more time, I'll tell you the whole story. But that doesn't count as a wedding gift. Any thing. The key being 'thing.'"

Jill fell silent as they walked the rest of the tunnel to the bottom of the stairs to the Castle.

"There is one thing," Jill said. "Tanesha's grandmother is going to lose her house. Tanesha was supposed to start med school this fall but she deferred school to save her grandmother's house. Could you buy it for me?"

"I meant some thing for you."

Jill raised an eyebrow at him. He laughed.

"You're amazing. Consider it done," Jacob said.

They climbed the wooden stairs to the Castle.

"I won't see you until we are at the alter."

Jill beamed at him.

"I'll be there waiting for you," he said.

She threw herself into his arms. He held her tight.

"Don't change your mind," he said.

"I won't," she said. "I love you."

They were kissing when the door to the Castle opened. Within moments, Jill was rushed off to their attic loft. Jacob followed Mike to his apartment. He was under the shower jets before he realized what was truly happening.

His dream was coming true.

He would marry Jill today.

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Between Sandy's blow dryer and Heather's makeup brush, Jill couldn't hear or see anything. As if it was every day life, her mother had chatted with her through a fast shower. While they both cried, she helped Jill dry off. In the next half hour, Jill went through some version every beauty treatment known to human kind – nails, hair treatments, pedicure, waxing, facial, you name it.

Samantha had even arranged for her boyfriend to give Jill a wrap but Jill declined. One gorgeous man with all these women? That was bound to be a mess.

Tanesha kept Jill's champagne glass full while her mother and Megan kept her giggling with funny stories. Candy popped her head in to say 'hi,' then ran off to take care of the cake. Valerie arrived with Jill's dress and Claire Martins! Like old friends, Claire and her mother hugged then went to work getting Jill into her wedding dress. Thigh high cream silk hose with a seam up the back, Spanish lace cream colored boy shorts, and a from-Paris French bustier under a magnificent cream colored strapless dress with cream lace roses. Her toes were adorned in cream colored Paris-purchased Christian Louboutins to match.

More than once, Jill was ordered not to cry.

But the moment Katy ran across the apartment wearing her matches-Mommy dress, Jill burst into tears. Looking from face to face of the women who loved her, took care of her, stood beside her in joy and pain, she saw how blessed she had always been.

Before she knew what was happening, the women had slipped out of the loft taking Katy with them. Jill and Sandy stood alone in the middle of the loft.

"I'll help you down the stairs," Sandy said.

"Can you believe this is really happening?" Jill hugged Sandy.

"Yes, I can," Sandy said. "You deserve it."

"So do you," Jill said.

"I know. Someday I'm going to have my own perfect wedding."

"To Aden?"

"I hope so," Sandy said. "He's asked me a bunch of times but..."

"You have to get used to the idea?"

"Let's say, I'm warming to the idea." Sandy laughed at how well Jill knew her. "Take off those stilettos so you don't fall. I'll hold the dress. Do you need to pee?"

"I'm all right," Jill said.

They walked toward the door to the long stairway to begin the journey toward the Chapel. Before they got to the door, Jill stopped.

"Sandy?"

"Yes, hon."
~~~~~~~

“Thank you for being my forever friend.”

Sandy clutched Jill to her.

“Thank you for being my forever friend. Let’s do this. There’s cake waiting for us.”

“God, I love wedding cake,” Jill said.

“Me too. Especially for breakfast!”

Sandy opened the loft door.

Chapter Fifty-Five
At last

They thread their way through Jacob's old apartment to the long stairwell. Sandy held up the bottom of her dress, and Jill began her descent. Reaching the landing, she slipped on her Louboutins and turned left into the main Castle living room.

Jill stopped so fast that Sandy ran into her. All of her friends, Jacob's friends and their friends stood to create the borders of a small pathway. Each person held a cream colored long stem rose.

Sandy nudged Jill forward between the people. She walked past her friends from Pete's Kitchen. As she passed, they gave her their well wishes, congratulations and hugs. Each friend gave her a cream colored rose. Risto, the beefy cook who broke up Jacob and Jill's second kiss, had tears streaming down his face. He gave Jill a bear hug which caused the crowd to cheer and clap.

Rosa, the housekeeper who took care of Jill and Katy last summer, stood with Sarah and Scooter. The dogs had cream colored roses in their collars. The dogs barked and wagged at Jill when Rosa gave her a hug. Rosa's sons stood in their Lipson Construction shirts behind their mother. The men waved to Jill as she continued on.

Valerie's publicist, Jennifer, and, her designer friend, Ramon, hugged Jill. Ramon whispered that he set up the chapel just for her. Jennifer added that the flowers were Ramon's idea. Thanking them both, Jill took her roses and continued walking to the chapel.

Continuing through the tunnel of people, Jill passed her old work friends from Ashforth construction. Darla, Ashforth's office manager, whispered that she would start working in Lipson Construction's acquisitions department tomorrow. Jill laughed. When her hands filled with cream colored roses, Sandy took them from her.

Jill moved toward Alex Hargreaves, standing between her husband, John Drayson, and her twin brother. Alex winked at Jill while the men kissed her hand. Paddie, his father, Colin, and his mother, Julie, stood across from Alex and John. Paddie leapt from his father's arms into Jill's. The little boy rubbed his face against Jill's neck. When Colin pulled the child away, Julie gave Jill their three roses with their congratulations.

She saw the Denver Zoo volunteers who helped them when Katy was stung by the bee. Shirley, Edward and Mary gave Jill their roses. Their lined, wrinkled faces beamed with joy.

Molly, who managed Jacob's rehabilitation business along with Jill's budding decorating business, her husband, Pete, and their three children stood next to the zoo volunteers. Flustered, Molly wasn't sure if she could or should hug Jill. Jill hugged her. Molly kissed Jill's cheek. Pete gave Jill their five roses.

As she crossed into the Castle kitchen, she saw a bunch of people from Lipson construction standing in rows, two deep. Many of them she'd seen before but didn't know. Each person gave her a rose.

For protection from the coal dust in the tunnels, Sandy helped Jill into a long overcoat. Together, they went down the stairs where Lipson Construction employees filled the entire coal tunnels. They screamed, clapped, and hooted for Jill. Dozens of roses were passed forward for her.

Turning toward the Castle's Chapel entrance, she saw MJ with Honey riding piggyback. Honey's small head peeked over his broad shoulders. He held her legs with his arms.

"You're not coming in?" Jill asked.

"Got to keep the natives quiet. This riff raff..." Honey pointed to the Lipson Construction employees who cheered. "Need a little management."

Jill laughed.

"Go on," MJ said.

MJ's partner, Sergeant Margaret Peaches, and the rest of MJ's team stood near the hallway to the chapel. Every team

member brought their wife or partner. These military people said the nicest things with their congratulations.

Samantha Hargreaves and her boyfriend, Art Rasmussen, stood near the entrance to the Chapel hallway. More than most of the people here, Samantha knew Jill's long journey to marry Jacob. Samantha kissed Jill's cheek. Jill gave her a teary hug, then entered the hallway.

Senator Patrick Hargreaves and his wife stood near the entrance talking to Valerie, Megan, and Jill's mother. When they saw Jill, the Senator and his wife 'ooh-ed' and 'ah-ed' over Jill and her gorgeous dress. After Sandy helped Jill out of her overcoat, Valerie and Megan collected the roses and took them into the chapel. The Senator and his wife left the hallway to give Jill, her mother and Sandy a moment of privacy.

"Mikheil will come to get you," Jill's mother, Anjelika, said into Jill's ear as she held her close. "Bless you Jilly. You've always been the very heart of me."

"I love you, Mama," Jill whispered.

"Your Papa is inside with Claire and Ben. He won't be able to stay long, but wouldn't miss this for the world."

Jill sniffed.

"No tears, my dear." Anjelika let go of Jill. "Sandra? Will you work your magic?"

Sandy pulled out her supplies from her fanny pack. While Anjelika straightened Jill's dress, Sandy put the finishing touches to Jill's short hair with a comb and a portable curling iron. Anjelika checked Jill's makeup, then gave her a lace handkerchief.

"My mother gave me this when I married your Papa," Jill's mother said.

Jill moved to hug her, but her mother stepped back.

"No mussing," Anjelika said. "It's time."

Anjelika kissed Jill's cheek, wiped the lipstick off with her thumb then turned into the Chapel. Jill and Sandy stood together.

"Bend down," Sandy said.

Jill bent over so Sandy could a fluff of tulle with cream roses attached to the comb in her hair.

"Nervous?" Sandy asked.

Jill nodded.

"I'll be right there. I love you, Jill."

"I love you, Sandy," Jill said.

Sandy touched one last curl, then went into the Chapel. MJ, with Honey on his back, were the last guests through the door.

Jill stood alone in the little hallway. Staring at the door, Jill's mind flashed to standing at the top of the escalators waiting for the Seawell Ballroom security to notice her. She met Jacob again that day. Her life, her really good life, started the moment she stepped off that escalator.

At the time, she only saw the part of her life that was ending – her soul mate marrying some other girl. Jill stroked the script 'Soul Mates' tattoo on her wrist. She'd asked Jacob if he'd like her to have the tattoo removed. Of course, Jacob had just laughed. He said that, like Trevor, the 'Soul Mates' tattoo was a part of her. He loved every part of her.

Jacob.

Jill smiled. She touched the button that had been her friend, life force, and constant companion since she stole it from Jacob the wizard's jacket. Jacob had it made into a bracelet so she could always have it with her. Her finger traced the barely visible bumps.

Jacob is waiting for me. Her entire face lit up in a smile.

Mike came through the door with a bouquet of six cream colored roses wrapped in cream ribbon.

"You look happy," Mike said.

Jill nodded.

"Ready?" Mike asked.

Jill nodded.

“I wondered if you might want this as well,” Mike said.

He held up the ribbon he’d wrapped around the rose he’d given her for Trevor’s engagement party. Jill laughed.

“Guess not,” Mike said. He stuffed the ribbon into his pocket. “Here we go.”

Jill placed her hand on his elbow and they stepped into the Chapel. In the dim early morning light, the chapel glowed with in the warmth of hundreds of cream colored pillar candles. On the front table sat an enormous vase filled with the dozens of cream colored roses Jill had collected in her journey to the Chapel. Each pew had a large cream colored bow with two cream colored roses in the center. Standing at the front, Delphie wore a gorgeous lavender colored dress.

“Please rise to welcome our bride,” Delphie said.

The room was filled with everyone she loved. Her brother and sisters, their partners and children, her precious mother and her husband, Claire Martins, her husband and all of their children, Blane, Valerie, Sam and in a row, her best forever friends – Tanesha, Heather, and Sandy. Sandy was tucked under Aden’s arm. Noelle and Nash waved to her from beside Aden. Jill’s eyes went from smiling face to smiling face.

Until she saw him.

Wearing the black tux and tails she’d purchased for him, Jacob’s entire being radiated with his happiness. Their eyes caught, and Jill all but floated the rest of the way to him. She felt the brush across her cheek from Mike’s kiss, but her mind and soul were focused on the beautiful man in front of her. Jacob took the bouquet from her and gave it to Valerie. He took her hands into his own.

“You may sit down,” Delphie said. “Who brings this man into this marriage?”

“We do,” Valerie, Sam, Blane and Aden said.

“His mother and I as well,” Delphie said. “Who brings this woman into this marriage?”

“We do,” Megan, Tim, Steve, Candy, and Mike said in unison. Megan’s kids joined in with giggles.

“Her parents do,” Anjelika and her husband followed her siblings call.

“Me too!” Katy jumped up and down in her seat beside Mike.

The crowd chuckled at Katy’s exuberance.

“Before we begin, who here is against this marriage?”

Her question was met by silence.

“Who here is for this marriage?”

“We are.” The chapel resonated with their voices.

“Yes, it’s about time,” Delphie laughed. “You may begin Jacob.”

The crowd fell silent. Jill’s entire attention was held by Jacob’s deep hazel eyes.

“I dreamed of you,” Jacob said.

“When I was a child,” Jill said.

“But life had other plans,” he said.

“For me” they said in unison.

“And I forgot my perfect dream.” he said.

Jill’s eyes welled with happy tears. Without letting go of her hand, his finger tips stroked her cheek. He nodded to her.

“I saw you at,” Jill said.

“The very moment that,” Jacob said

“I was ready,” they said together.

“To remember,” she said.

“My dream,” he said.

“Of you.”

“And our.”

“Life together.” They said at the same time.

"Now that I'm here," he said.

"I won't ever," she said.

"Ever."

"Forget you," they said in unison.

"Again."

There was not a dry eye in the Chapel when Jill finished their poem.

"Jill, do you come to this marriage of your own free will?" Delphie asked.

"I do," Jill said.

"Jacob, do you come to this marriage of your own free will?"

"I do," Jacob said.

"Will your love survive the harsh fires of change?" Delphie asked.

"It will," Jill and Jacob said.

"May your home be filled with warmth," Delphie led their audience in saying.

"Will you love survive the ebb and flow of feeling?" Delphie asked,

"It will," Jill and Jacob said.

"May your life together be filled with love." Delphie led their audience in saying.

"Will your love survive the times of stillness and restriction?" Delphie asked.

"It will," Jill and Jacob said.

"May your union be strong," the audience said with Delphie.

"Will your love survive the clear light of day?"

"It will," Jill and Jacob said.

"May your marriage be blessed by the light of every new dawn."

"Katy? You may come forward now," Delphie asked. Instructing the audience, she said, "Please take each other's hands."

Katy ran to Jill and Jacob and held out her hands for them to take. Without letting go of each other, they reached out one hand to form a circle with Katy. Their friends and family held hands. When Katy jumped up and down and Jill picked her up. Jacob retook Katy's hand.

"The Rings of Marriage serve many purposes," Delphie said. "As rings are never-ending circles, they are a symbol of the never-ending commitment of marriage. As permanent fixtures on your left hand, they are a reminder of the one person to which you have sworn your devotion. And as jewelry, they enhance the hand, just as one life, through the joining of marriage, enhances another. Jill, Jacob and Katy, did you bring rings?"

"We did," Jill and Jacob said.

When Jill bounced Katy on her hip, Katy said, "Oh, me too."

"Jill and Katy, will you repeat after me?" Delphie said, "We give you this ring as a symbol of our love for you. As it circles your finger, let it always remind you of our eternal love, surrounding and enfolding you day and night."

Katy dug around the pocket in her dress until she found Jacob's ring. She gave the ring to Jill. While her eyes held his, Jill slipped a satin finished titanium wedding band onto Jacob's finger.

"Jacob, please repeat after me," Delphie said. "I give you this ring as a symbol of my love for you. As it circles your finger, let it always remind you of our eternal love, surrounding and enfolding you day and night."

Jacob slipped a band onto Katy's right middle finger. With tears in his eyes, he slipped a thin gold band on Jill's ring finger. The wedding band set perfectly against the Marlow beauty.

"These rings are circles," Delphie said. "Each represents the full circle of a life, as one is given into the care of the other."

Jacob took Jill's hand and Katy's hand again.

"Friends and family," Delphie continued. "You represent the community that will surround and support this marriage

with love and friendship. No partnership exists in a vacuum. It is beholden upon each of you to honor and respect this union. Will you support this union?"

"We will," the chapel echoed with their voices.

"Anjelika? Sam?"

Jill's mother and Jacob's father came to the front of the room. With Delphie's help, Anjelika and Sam lit cream colored taper candles.

"Jill? Jacob?"

Delphie motioned for Jill, with Katy on her hip, to stand on her left side. She motioned for Jacob to stand on her right.

"Anjelika?"

Anjelika gave Jill her taper candle.

"Sam?"

Sam gave Jacob his taper candle.

"Jill?"

"I bring you the warmth of my heart," Jill said.

"And mine too," Katy said. Whispering to Jill, she added , "I forgot what I was 'sposed to say."

Jill kissed her cheek.

"I bring the light of my love," Jacob said.

Jill and Jacob lit a large cream colored pillar candle set in front of the roses on the table. While they lit the candle, Delphie said:

"Above you is the vast universe, below you is the deep soil and stones. Remember always, like the universe, your love should be vast and constant. Like the Earth, your love should be solid and deep. Be understanding and patient, for storms may come and go. Be free always in giving affection and warmth, for it is the currency of a happy marriage."

Jill, Katy and Jacob returned to their positions in front of Delphie.

"May the warmth and light of your union be blessed. May you know the best of fortune, and your life together be one of joy and prosperity. Do you swear to keep sacred your vows?"

"We do," Jill, Katy and Jacob said.

"Please seal your promise with a kiss," Delphie said.

Jill set Katy down. While they had promised no grand gestures and no tongue, Jacob took her breath away by leaning her back into his arms. His kiss was hard, insistent and left her lips tingling. Jill and Jacob bent to kiss either side of Katy's cheeks.

"I now pronounce you – husband, wife and family."

At that moment, the sun flashed through the stained glass windows. The Chapel lit up in the morning sun.

Their friends and family cheers and hooted. With Katy between them, Jill and Jacob ran out of the Chapel. They were pelted with rice from the Lipson employees waiting for them in the tunnel. Jacob picked up Katy and they ran up the stairs into the Castle. They were pelted with more rice by everyone waiting in the kitchen. Jacob continued toward a hallway off the main Castle living room. Leaning against a panel, he clicked the hidden sliding door and they were in a private sitting room. There was a bottle of champagne, roses, chocolates and candles.

Katy bounced up and down for him to let her get the chocolates. He set Katy down and she ran to the table. Turning to Jill, he encircled her in his arms.

"This is the best day of my entire life," he said.

"I love you." They whispered at the same time.

"Any regrets?" Jacob asked.

"Only that we didn't do this sooner."

Jacob laughed.

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Jill and Jacob

I dreamed of you,
When I was a child,
But life had other plans,
For me.

And I forgot my perfect dream.

I saw you at,
The very moment that,
I was ready,
To remember,
My dream,
Of you.

And our life together.

Now that I'm here,
I won't ever,
Ever.
Forget you,
Again.

Glossary of Characters

Aden Norsen:	COO at Lipson construction; single father of Nash and Noelle; boyfriend of Sandy.
Alex Hargreaves:	Identical twin to Max Hargreaves; 'The Fey;' the leader of the Fey Team; wife of Dr. John Drayson; sister to Colin and Samantha Hargreaves.
Anjelika:	Megan, Mike, Steve, Candy and Jill's mother; grandmother to Katy; wife of Perses.
Art Rasmussen:	Member of the Fey team; boyfriend of Samantha Hargreaves.
Blane Lipson:	Jacob's 'cousin;' raised in foster care; either the child of Sam Lipson's father or brother; assistant to Jacob Marlowe at Lipson Construction.
Bree or Briana Lipson:	Step-child of Sam Lipson.
Becky Lipson:	Step-child of Sam Lipson.
Candace or Candy Roper:	Daughter of Anjelika; sister to Jill; partner to Jazmyne.
Celia Marlowe:	Wife of Sam Lipson; mother to Valerie Lipson and Jacob Marlowe; died of cancer nine years before Denver Cereal begins.
Cleo:	Cat belonging to Sandy.
Colin Hargreaves:	Brother of Alex, Max and Samantha Hargreaves; Homeland Security Agent; Fey Team member; father of Paddie Hargreaves.
Delphinium or Delphie:	Psychic; best friend of Celia Marlowe; girlfriend to Sam Lipson.
Heather:	Jill's childhood friend; one of Jillian Roper's group of best friends.
Honey Lipson:	Second daughter of Tiffanie; step-daughter of Sam Lipson; wife of Sgt MJ Scully.
Jacob Marlowe:	Son of Sam Lipson and Celia Marlowe; boyfriend of Jillian Roper; brother of Valerie Lipson; president of Lipson Construction; owns his own rehabilitation business; carpenter; hockey player.
Jazmyne:	Wife of Candy Roper.
Jillian or Jill Roper:	Daughter of Anjelika; mother of Katy Roper; girlfriend of Jacob Marlowe; ex-wife of Trevor Mc Guinsey.
John Drayson, MD:	Vascular surgeons; husband of Alex Hargreaves.
Julie Hargreaves:	Mother of Paddie Hargreaves; wife of Colin Hargreaves.
Katy or Katherine Roper:	Daughter of Jillian Roper.
Leslie Roper:	Wife of Steve Roper.
Margaret Peaches or Sgt Margaret Peaches:	Fey team member; partner of Sgt MJ Scully.
Max Hargreaves:	Identical twin to Alex Hargreaves; brother to Colin and Samantha Hargreaves.
Megan Roper:	Daughter of Anjelika; partner of Tim; mother to Ryan and two other boys.
Mike Roper:	Son of Anjelika; husband of Valerie Lipson; hockey goalie; artist.
MJ or Sgt Michael Scully Jr.:	Fey team member; partner of Sgt Margaret Peaches; husband of Honey Lipson

Molly:	Bookkeeper for Jacob Marlowe's rehabilitation business.
Nash Norsen:	Son of Aden and Nuala Norsen.
Noelle Norsen:	Daughter of Aden and Nuala Norsen.
Nuala Norsen :	Ex-wife of Aden Norsen; mother of Nash and Noelle Norsen.
Paddie Hargreaves:	Best friend of Katy Roper; nephew of Alex and Max Hargreaves; son of Colin Hargreaves.
Perses:	Paid assassin; rescuer of Jillian Roper.
Ryan:	Oldest son of Megan Roper and Tim.
Sam Lipson:	Husband to Celia Marlowe; married to Tiffanie Lipson; boyfriend of Delphinium; father to Valerie and Jacob Marlowe-Lipson; step-father to Brianna, Becky, Honey and the 'step-whore.'
Samantha Hargreaves:	Sister to Alex, Max and Colin Hargreaves; girlfriend of Art Rasmussen; best friend of Valerie Lipson.
Sandy:	Best friend of Jillian Roper; one of Jill's group of best friends; girlfriend of Aden Norsen; hairdresser.
Sarah:	Yellow Labrador belonging to Jacob Marlowe.
Scooter:	Gift from Celia and Delphie to Jillian on her marriage to Trevor McGuinsey; taken care of for last 4 years by Delphie after Trevor put him up for adoption; Katy's constant companion.
Seth O'Malley:	Godfather to Sandy; best friend of Sandy's step father.
Step-sister or Step-whore:	Eldest daughter of Tiffanie Lipson; sister to Honey, Briana, and Becky Lipson; step-daughter of Sam Lipson; fiancé of Trevor Mc Guinsey.
Steve or Stephen Roper:	Son of Anjelika; middle child of Roper family.
Tanesha:	Childhood friend of Jillian Roper; one of Jill's group of best friends.
Tiffanie Lipson:	Second wife to Sam Lipson; mother of Briana, Becky, and Honey Lipson and the step-whore.
Tim:	Partner to Megan Roper; father of Ryan and two other children.
Trevor Mc Guinsey:	Ex-husband of Jillian Roper; assumed father of Katy Roper; fiancé to the step-whore.
Valerie Lipson:	Daughter of Sam and Celia Marlowe; wife to Mike Roper; soap opera and movie actress.
Wes or Wesley Kapanski:	Hollywood producer; Was engaged to Valerie Lipson at the beginning of Denver Cereal.

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