



# *Save Me*

*Rebecca Abbott Miller*

**The Second Quintessential Book**

Floating around like a feather in the wind  
My heart has been broken; too tired to try and mend  
Trying to get through my life everyday  
Without someone beside me to show me the way

Hoping and waiting ,wanting and praying  
For someone to save me from myself,  
Save me from this place, save me from the fears I have that  
haunt my nights, and steal my dreams away  
Save me from the past save me from this hurt  
I'm going insane; it's time you came  
And saved me from myself

I've been beat down and shut down too many times before  
I've tried and I cried and I can't take this anymore  
I can't do what I need to, what I want to, what I should do  
And it's just foolish pride that keeps me from you.

And I've tried to tell myself that love's not what I need I've  
been hoping and waiting, wanting and praying Hurting and  
crying, wishing and dying

Please

Save me from myself, save me from this place  
Save me from the fears I have that haunt my nights  
And steal my dreams away  
Save me from the past, save me from this hurt  
I'm going insane; it's time you came  
And saved me from myself

Also in the Quintessential Series:

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# Save Me

Rebecca Abbott Miller



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by Rebecca Abbott Miller

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permission of the author. This book must not offered for sale in any form.

For all of those who wanted more.

I want to extend my gratitude to  
photographer Tracy Abelgas.  
As soon as I saw that photograph, I knew it  
was of my Hannah.

## Chapter One

Max Fitzgerald yawned and rubbed his eyes. Driving made him sleepy, especially when he had to do it alone. Being alone wasn't something he was used to. Max was one-fifth of a music group, Quintessential, which was the standout group of a crop of "boy bands" that had sprung up in recent years. For four of the past five years, the group had been touring and performing non-stop. They were currently enjoying a hiatus from touring, and just doing a few shows intermittently.

During the summer, one of his bandmates, Michael, had become a father and another, Reed, had gotten married. And another, David, was getting married in a couple more months. For "teen idols" they were doing very grown-up stuff.

He was more than six hours into the eleven-hour trip from Carolina Beach, NC to his hometown near Nashville. He had been in Carolina Beach visiting Michael and his wife, Casey,



and their two-month-old son, Will. He could have flown, but traveling from his current home in Orlando to North Carolina then to Nashville involved so many layovers and plane changes that it wasn't worth the trouble. And being alone was calming, something else he wasn't used to.

He turned up the radio as new song started. It was a song by a group called Daybreak, which was another "boy band." The members of the two groups were not friends and their rivalry was often fodder for the tabloids. Ordinarily, he would have changed the station, or at least turned the volume down, but this song reminded him of a night and a woman he couldn't seem to shake from his memory. He had danced to this song with Casey's sister, Annie, the night before Mike and Casey's wedding.

Annie, Annie, Annie. His lips curled into a smile. She had come without her husband to Florida to celebrate her sister's wedding, and the night before the ceremony, Max had taken Annie out for a cup of coffee. It had started innocently enough. They had struck up a conversation at Michael and Casey's, and they weren't ready to stop talking when the party broke up.

Over coffee, Annie had confided in him that her sex life with her husband wasn't all that it should be, and Max had become excited. He took her back to his place spent all night showing her the pleasures that she had been denied. She had eagerly returned the favors.

His car losing power brought his thoughts back to the present. He glanced at the gauges on the dashboard. The needle on the tachometer was quickly falling toward zero RPMs, and the lights on the console that would not normally be on while the car was running were lit. His car had shut off. He was still moving at almost sixty miles per hour, and he quickly shifted into neutral and turned the key. The car started again with no trouble. "What was that all about?" he said aloud.

He drove a few more miles down the interstate before it happened again. He shifted into neutral and turned the key. Nothing. He was losing power fast. He managed to steer it off the interstate and onto the exit ramp before the car rolled to a complete stop.

“Damnit!” He banged his hands on the steering wheel. He tried the ignition again with no luck. With an exasperated sigh, he got out of the car and looked around. Well, at least I haven’t broken down in the middle of no-where. He looked at his watch. It was close to eleven, and it looked like the fast food restaurants he could see from his position at the bottom of the exit ramp were open. He locked his car doors and began walking to the top of ramp.

He stood on the side of the highway looking at his food choices. He was always ready for a meal. He didn’t feel like fried chicken or burgers and the pizza delivery place wouldn’t have a dining room, so he headed off in the direction of the Subway sandwich shop. He pulled open the door to the empty restaurant.

“I’ll be right there,” a female voice called from the back room. Max stood there studying the menu board just for a few seconds before the girl showed herself. She smiled at him. “Let me wash my hands.” She came to the counter. “What can I get for you?”

“Umm, let me get a foot-long meatball on white please.”

She began to cut the bread. As he watched her make the sandwich, he studied her. He guessed she was about twenty. She was average in height and weight; she wore glasses and not a stitch of make-up. Her black hair was all one length and it hung in a ponytail to the middle of her back. She was very pretty in a girl-next-door sort of way, but she had the most amazing blue eyes that Max had ever seen, so blue that the

whites of her eyes were even tinted. She didn't seem to recognize him, and that relieved him.

"Anything else with that?" She asked as she moved to the register.

He nodded. "Yeah, I need a drink, large, and some chips, please, Hannah," he said, reading her name off her badge.

She smiled, handed him a cup and pointed him in the direction of the chip rack. "Help yourself." She took his money and made change.

Max took the cup from her and frowned. There was his picture, bright as daylight, along with the other four guys on the side of the cup. They had signed the endorsement deal with Subway a few months earlier. Jared, the guy who had lost two hundred and some odd pounds with his now famous Subway diet, pretty much monopolized the television commercials, but Quintessential was plastered all over the restaurant's print ads, and, as Max noticed, all over the cups and napkins. She had to have recognized him.

Okay, maybe she doesn't care. He fixed his drink, selected a brand of chips and settled himself in a booth.

Hannah came around the counter into the dining room and locked the front door. "We close at eleven," she explained.

Max looked at the clock on the wall: 11:01. "Oh, I'm sorry. Do I need to go?"

She shook her head. "No, no. Stay and eat. Do you mind if I go ahead and start cleaning up?"

He shook his head and watched as she began breaking down the counter where she had fixed his sandwich. "You here all by yourself?"

"Yeah, my help left about a hour ago." She was silent for a moment. "So what brings you to Crossdale?"

"Is that where I am?" He frowned. "My car broke down on the exit ramp."

"Your car? That doesn't sound right." "So you do know who I am."

"Yeah...no. I mean, of course I know you're part of that group Quintessential." She motioned toward his cup. "I mean, how could I not know? But I'm not sure which one you are. I don't know your names, one from another. You're the red-headed one." She shrugged slightly, giving him the impression that she couldn't have cared less.

He smiled, happy that she wasn't a fan. "I'm Max. Max Fitzgerald, and my car did break down. Can I borrow a phone book?"

"Certainly." She left his line of sight for a second, then returned, phone book in hand. "Are you by yourself?"

Max nodded. "Yeah, just me."

"Where are you headed?"

"Back to Nashville. That's where my parents live. I've been down at the coast with some friends." He flipped through the yellow pages. "You know a mechanic?"

"I sure do. My brother has a shop...and a tow-truck. You want me to give him a call?"

"That would be great. There wouldn't happen to be a hotel around, would there?"

"As a matter of fact, there's one on this exit." She pointed out the window. He turned around and saw the neon lights on the sign above the Budget Inn. "Not fancy, but it's the only one in Crossdale," she said.

"It'll do."

"Let me call Jimmy," she said before disappearing again. She left his line of sight for several minutes, and he concentrated on his sandwich.

"Jimmy said he'd go over and pick it up in a little while. It will give you time to get some things out of it if you need to."

Max nodded. "Thanks. I would like to get my bag if I'm going to be spending the night."

"I'll be happy to drive you," Hannah volunteered. "You shouldn't be walking around this time of the night. You'll just have to wait for me to finish up here."

Max accepted her offer and busied himself with reading a copy of the local paper that someone had left on the table while she swept the floor. When she rolled a big yellow mop bucket out into the middle of the dining room, he got up from his seat. "I'll do that," he said. "If you've got something else you need to do. I'll help."

She shook her head. "No, I can't let you do that."

Max took the mop from her. "Do you have something else you could be doing?"

She nodded and looked up at him. She had been handing out those cups for a few weeks now and hadn't really paid that much attention to the guys on them, but she paid attention to Max now. He was about five inches taller than her; she estimated his height at about six feet. His hair was red, and she imagined that when he was younger he had resembled Opie Taylor. His eyes were brown, although for some reason she had expected them to be green. He was quite attractive.

"Then I'll mop," he said, pulling the mop away from her. She was still staring at him. "Is something wrong?"

"I thought your eyes would be green." She immediately clamped her mouth shut. Why did I just say that?

Max smiled. "They're brown."

"I'll be ready in a few minutes," Hannah said, walking away from him. "You are such an idiot," she mumbled to herself as she entered the back room.

She pulled out the closing paperwork, but instead of concentrating on the numbers, she looked up at the security monitor. She could see Max in the dining room. What was he

doing here? And why would a big star like him be standing in the middle of the Subway in Crossdale holding a mop? It was certainly unbelievable. Her heart was palpitating, but she was sure she wasn't letting her excitement show.

"I wish I had a camera," she called out.

"Why?"

"Because no one is going to believe that you were here doing that."

Max laughed. It was a nice, deep, rich laugh that filled the room and warmed Hannah to her toes. It made Max feel good too. It had been a long time since Max "if-there's-a-party-Max-is-there" Fitzgerald had genuinely laughed. Sure, around the other guys he laughed and joked and had a good time, but they were like family. They were family.

But he was so used to putting up a front, being the celebrity that had been portrayed in the media, that it had been a long time since he had been himself. He had almost forgotten who that was. But now here he was in some small mountain town, slinging a mop around in a fast food restaurant. At that moment, he decided that there was no place that he would rather be.

It had been a long time, too, since he had slung a mop around. It was often the punishment for the kids in detention at his high school and Max had become very familiar with the mop. He mopped his way to the door that lead to the back room. He knocked before opening it. "I'm done."

Hannah was sitting on a stool counting money. "Can you just dump the water over there for me?" She pointed to the back corner. Max rolled the bucket in that direction and dumped the water into a concrete "sink" with a drain in the floor. Hannah walked up behind him. "Thank you. You really didn't have to do that."

"No problem. So, are you all ready?"

Hannah nodded. "Yep." She led him back through the

store, stopping to pick up her pocketbook and keys. He followed her to her car. "So what kind of car do you have?"

"It's a Lexus," he said. "2000."

"It's getting a little old, then, isn't it?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

He chuckled. "It's a good car. I like it. Well, it was, and I did."

"How many do you have in your fleet?"

"How many to you think?"

She shrugged. "I dunno. I watched this special on E! the other day about...oh what's his name...in that other group... Ben something-or-other. Anyway, he has like a dozen cars, and a house on each coast and a ranch in the middle somewhere and all this other stuff.

"Ben Conner is a prick," Max replied about the celebrity in question. Ben Conner was a member of Daybreak.

"Well, that was certainly the way that he came off, but what does that have to do with his cars? I thought all you people had lots of stuff like that. So how many do you have?"

"I have the Lexus, and I have a Viper, and I have a Prowler. That's it." He looked at Hannah and could tell by her expression that she thought even the three he had was excessive.

"I hardly ever drive the Prowler," he added.

"It's just a toy?"

He nodded. "Pretty much. I have it in private storage and I hardly ever drive it. Now, the Viper, I drive quite often. That's what I drive around town mostly. The Lexus is mostly for longer trips or if I need a backseat."

Hannah giggled.

"For passengers," Max quickly explained.

"I knew what you meant," Hannah said with a laugh. She pulled her car to a stop behind the stranded Lexus. They both got out, and Max unlocked his car to retrieve a bag from the

trunk.

“What happened to the car? What did it do?”

“It just cut out on me. It did it twice. The first time, it started right back up, but the second time, it just died. Maybe it’s the battery.” He sat his bag on the ground and climbed in behind the wheel and tried to start the car again. It rolled over, but wouldn’t start.

Hannah shook her head. “It’s not the battery.” She caught his “do you know what you’re talking about?” look. “It’s just a guess,” she said with a shrug. “Here comes Jimmy.” She nodded toward a wrecker coming toward them.

Hannah had informed Jimmy of the identity of his newest customer over the phone, but he had seemed unimpressed. “So what’s the problem?” Jimmy asked after the two men shook hands.

Max relayed the car’s symptoms. “Maybe it’s just the battery,” he suggested again.

“Try to start it again,” Jimmy instructed. “Let me hear it.” Max turned the key in the ignition again. The engine rolled over, but didn’t start. “It’s not the battery. It sounds like something in the fuel system to me. I’ll take it back to the shop and I’ll look at it first thing in the morning.”

“Sounds good,” Max said. “Thanks for coming out so late.” He pulled his wallet out of his pocket. “What do I owe you for your trouble?”

Jimmy shook his head. “It’ll all be on your bill when the car is ready. Do you need a lift somewhere?”

“I’m taking him to the motel,” Hannah interjected.

“Okay then,” Jimmy said. “I’m going to get this car loaded up. Do you have a cell number I can reach you at?” He pulled a pad of paper and a pen out of his shirt pocket. Max rattled off his cell number.

“You ready?” Hannah asked, walking back to her car.



Max nodded and followed her. Within a minute they were pulling into the motel parking lot. "Would you like to get some breakfast in the morning? I could come pick you up."

Max smiled. "I would, thank you." He opened the car door. "How's nine?"

"Perfect," Hannah replied, trying to keep her excited breath steady.

He started to get out of the car. "Why don't you come while I get checked in? That way you can come right to my room in the morning."

"Okay." Hannah shut off the engine and accompanied Max to the office.

The old man working in the office was sitting in a chair watching The Tonight Show on a small color television. He stood up when they approached. "What do you need, Hannah?"

Jimmy finally come to his senses and throw you out?" Hannah felt her face burning. "I...I..." she stammered.

"I need a room for the night," Max said. He didn't know what was going on, but he sensed trouble, and he didn't like it.

"Is she staying with you?"

Max shook his head. "Hannah just brought me here. My car broke down on the interstate. I need a room for the night."

"Sure," the old man grunted. He pulled a key from the pegboard behind him. "Cash or credit?"

Max took a credit card out of his wallet. "Credit."

The man took some information from Max and processed his credit card. Finally after several minutes, he handed Max the key. "Room 115. Check out is at eleven-thirty. No smoking, no drugs, no parties."

"No problem," Max mumbled as he took the key.

Hannah followed Max out of the office. She turned and looked back at the old man. He had the phone to his ear. She hadn't heard it ring, and she knew he was calling his wife, who

would call her sister, who would call her cousin, the biggest gossip in the town. By morning everyone in Crossdale would know that she had checked into the motel with a stranger from out-of-town. And, true or not, most of them would believe it.

She sighed, and Max turned around. He saw the sad expression on her face. He wanted to ask what was on her mind and what he could do to make it better, but he didn't.

"Room 115," he said, "let's go check it out."

She followed him to the room. He unlocked the door and swung it open. It wasn't fancy, but it was clean, and it had everything Max would need for the night. He had stayed in many, many hotels in his career and this definitely wasn't the worst on the list.

"I guess I'll see you in the morning," she said. "Have a good night."

"Wait!" Her goodbye triggered something inside him. He didn't want her to leave. "Why don't you stay for a while," he suggested. He really wanted her to stay. He had a reputation of being a playboy and most of the women he encountered knew it. It was easy for him to find a date, easy for him to get laid, but he wasn't thinking about bedding Hannah. He wanted to talk to her. There was something about her that intrigued him.

Hannah was surprised by his offer. She wanted to stay. She was unbelievably attracted to him. She hadn't felt a twinge of attraction toward anyone in years, and he was someone unlike anyone she had ever met before. She wanted to stay and talk to him all night, and do whatever else might come along. After all, he would be out of her life again in less than twenty-four hours. What could it possibly hurt?

She glanced down at her uniform. She knew she had to smell like the restaurant. "Let me go home and get a shower.

I'll be back in a half an hour. Is that okay? Will you still be up?"

"If you're coming back, I'll wait," he said. A thrill zipped

through her and she practically ran back to her car.

Jimmy had already gone to bed when she got home to the apartment above his garage that she shared with him. She went to her room and stripped off her clothes, replacing them with a robe. She hurried into the bathroom. She showered, shaved her legs and washed her hair in record time. Once back in her room, she dressed in a pair of short denim shorts and an orange tank top. She replaced her glasses with contacts and ran a comb through her still-wet hair. She slipped her feet into a pair of sandals and left her room.

Jimmy was standing in the kitchen, holding a glass of milk. "Where on earth are you going at this time of night?"

"Justin called and wanted me to meet him and Christy at the campground. There's a lot of people up there. I thought I would go check it out." She had thought of that lie as she was driving home. It was completely believable. Meeting her best friend, Justin, and his girlfriend at the campground was something she did on a regular basis.

"Okay," Jimmy said, buying her story. "Have fun. No drinking."

"Yeah, yeah," Hannah mumbled as she left the apartment. Twenty-eight minutes after leaving him, she was knocking on the door to Max's motel room.

He swung open the door even before she had finished knocking. He stepped aside so she could enter the room. He had replaced his jeans with a pair of gym shorts and he wasn't wearing a shirt.

Okay, he works out a lot. His hair was wet and he smelled of shaving cream. He had obviously just gotten out of the shower. Hannah took a deep breath as she walked by him. The sexiness of just the way he smelled traveled through her body and almost made her knees buckle.

"I picked up a few snacks," he said. He had found his way

to the gas station next door. The small table in the room was loaded with bags of chips, cookies, candy bars, sodas and beer. "You want a drink?"

She nodded. "I'd love a Coke." She noticed that he was drinking a beer. He filled a cup with ice and poured her a drink from a can. She took the drink and sat down on the edge of the bed.

Max sat across from her on the other bed. He didn't know what to say. He had never been in such an intimate setting before. Usually when he was with a girl in a hotel room they were both half-drunk and fell right into the bed. His mind raced for just the right thing to say. Lucky for him, she spoke first.

"Where at the coast were you?"

"Carolina Beach. Mike owns a house there."

"Mike? He's in the group, too?"

Max nodded. "Yeah. Mike Brooks. He's the tall guy, dark hair." He could tell by Hannah's expression that she couldn't place him. "He was next to me on the cup."

She nodded. "Oh, yeah," she replied although she still wasn't sure. She made a mental note to do some research. "Why Carolina Beach? Why not in LA?"

"His wife, Casey is from North Carolina and she wanted a house there, so that's where they've been staying this summer. As for LA, we go out there when we need to, but it's not home. I wouldn't want to live there." Not that he hadn't tried. He and Jason, another Quintessential member and his best friend and roommate since high school, had rented an apartment there for six weeks earlier that summer. Max had a great time there, but he quickly grew tired of the "fakeness" of it.

"Why not? I thought that's where all the stars lived."

"A lot do, but it's so far away from home, and I like Florida."

"So you have a house there? In Florida?"

Max nodded. "Yeah. That's home." There was a moment of silence. "Have you lived here your whole life?"

Hannah nodded. "As long as I can remember we have, but Jimmy says we lived near the coast when I was a baby. I don't remember that. So as far as I'm concerned this is home."

"How small is this town?"

"We have about 2,000 people. The only reason we have so much out by the interstate is because it's the last exit before the state line. We're not big enough to justify it."

"So this is a place where everyone knows everyone else?" She frowned. "Yeah, everyone knows everyone else's business, and they believe every rumor, true or not. Like for instance, half the town already knows that I'm here with you."

"Did that man see you come back?"

Hannah shrugged. "I don't know. It doesn't matter. He was already on the phone when we left the office. I didn't tell Jimmy where I was going, but he'll know by morning."

Max nodded. He knew full well about rumors. "Why does he hate you? I mean, he didn't sound very fond of you."

She shook her head. "I dated his grandson back in high school." She paused and tried to think of just the right thing to say without revealing too much. "There were rumors that I was a tramp and real easy. Most people here think that about me." And that's just the least of it. "It's not true, but me checking into a hotel with a stranger isn't going to help my reputation any."

Max frowned. "I'm sorry. If I had known, I wouldn't have asked you to go in with me."

"I knew," she said, "and I went in anyway."

Max stood up. "Are you hungry?" He walked over to the table and pulled open a bag of Oreos.

She joined him. "Actually yeah. I usually fix myself a sandwich to take home, but I forgot tonight. I was distracted." She took a cookie.

He smiled. "I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do to make it up to you? To take your mind off of your hunger?" He put his hand on her arm.

She swallowed hard. "I could probably think of a couple of things."

"What did you come back for?" "What did you ask me back for?"

He leaned down and kissed her softly on the lips. "I wanted to do that."

"Do it again," she whispered.

He kissed her again this time backing her up against the bed. He pressed against her until she fell onto the mattress. "Is this what you want?"

She nodded and ran her fingertips across his bare chest. "This is what I came back for."

He quickly helped her out of her clothes and shed his own. She watched as he searched his bag for a condom and deftly put it on. He joined her on the bed. "You've got a great body," he said, sliding next to her.

He propped himself up on one elbow and ran his free hand across her breasts and down her stomach. He stopped just below her waist, teasing her. He lowered his mouth to her breasts and slowly moved his hand.

Hannah thought she was going to explode. The feeling of his warm mouth against her skin and his hand creeping toward her most intimate spot was more than she could handle. She bucked her hips and grasped his hand, forcing it to where she wanted it to go. "Please Max, I can't wait," she whispered.

Max could tell that she hadn't been with a man in a while. He let her guide his hand and he continued kissing her mouth, breasts, and neck while he manually pleased her. When he was sure she had been satisfied, he repositioned himself between her legs and slowly entered her. Hannah bit her lip to

keep from screaming in pleasure.

“Don’t hold back, baby,” he encouraged. “Let me hear it.” “Oh God,” she screamed, sure that if there was someone in the next room she was keeping them from sleeping. “Please don’t stop. Don’t ever stop.”

Max continued thrusting into her until he could hold out no longer. With one final thrust and a loud moan, he climaxed. He flopped onto the bed next to her. Neither spoke for a few moments.

Hannah’s stomach growled loudly. She giggled. “I told you I was hungry.”

Max got up from the bed and went into the bathroom. “There’s plenty of food there,” he called over his shoulder. “Go ahead and pig out. Unless you want to order a pizza or something.”

Hannah laughed as she searched through the bags of food. “Dominos stops delivering at 10:30.” She pulled a pack of cheese crackers out of a bag.

“Really?” Max said in amazement as he joined her at the table. He opened another bottle of beer. “What’s the point of that? What do you do if you need a pizza after 10:30?”

“I guess they figure no one needs a pizza then. You can drive 30 miles into Asheville and get one. The pizza places there stay open until midnight.”

“Well, that’s a pretty big assumption.”

He sat on the bed and turned on the television. “You want to watch some TV?” He patted the bed next to him.

No, I want to be doing what we were just doing. She sat next to him and took some of the chips from the bag he was holding. She watched him for a few seconds before she made her move. She pounced on him and before he knew what was happening, he was on his back on the bed with Hannah straddling his hips.

He smiled up at her. "You're quick." He closed his eyes and enjoyed the feeling of her stimulating both of them by rubbing herself against growing erection. She tugged at his boxer shorts. Max took the hint and shed them. She lifted herself slightly and lowered her body onto him.

"Wait Hannah," he said, causing her to stop moving for a second. "We're not using any protection."

"It's okay," she said, not wanting to stop for anything.

He shook his head. "No." He wiggled out from underneath her and found another condom in his bag. He knew he was taking the chance of hurting her feelings, but he had to protect himself. And it wasn't disease he was so much afraid of, rather than the fear of being used for the daddy of an unwanted baby.

He believes that I'm a whore, too. Of course, why wouldn't he? That's the impression I'm giving him. He has every right to protect himself. He's going to be gone in less than a day and I'll never see him again. Just do it, Hannah. That's what you want.

Max came back to the bed. "Now, we're good."

She forced a smile and pushed him back into a reclining position. "I believe I was up here somewhere." Again, she lowered herself onto him. He put his hands on her hips and held her steady while she rode him until they both reached orgasm.

She toppled off of him and lay on the bed while catching her breath. Once her breathing was steady again, she got up and began retrieving her clothes.

"Where are you going?"

"I guess I should go home now."

"Are you mad?" He pulled on his underwear.

She shook her head. "No. I just thought that you'd like to get some sleep."

He caught her hand. "Stay. It's only a few hours until you're supposed to pick me up. Sleep here with me." Even as



he heard his own voice saying the words, he couldn't believe it. He never asked a one-night stand to spend the night.

She cocked her head to one side. "You really want me to?"

"Yeah, please stay."

## Chapter Two

**M**ax awoke to an empty room. He had gone to sleep with Hannah in his arms and he didn't remember waking any during the night. The other bed in the room hadn't been slept in. He got up and pulled on the gym shorts that had been discarded the night before. He glanced out of the window at the parking lot. Hannah's car was still parked right outside the room. He pulled the door open. She was standing just outside the door smoking a cigarette.

"There you are," he said, relieved.

She smiled and smashed the burning cigarette into the concrete wall. She dropped the butt on the ground at her feet. "Here I am."

"I was scared that you left," he admitted.

Hannah could see the sincerity in his eyes. "I wouldn't

leave. I owe you a breakfast. I'm still hungry by the way." He chuckled. "You want me to distract you again?"

Oh yeah. She shook her head. "Let's go eat." She knew that if she got back into bed with him she wouldn't want to ever leave.

She waited while he got dressed. "Can we go by my place and let me freshen up a bit?"

"You're in charge."

Her home was only a mile away from the hotel, and within minutes they were pulling up in front of the garage. "You can check on your car while I get ready."

He watched as she climbed a set of stairs that scaled the outside of the building. After she disappeared into the apartment, Max entered the garage.

Jimmy was bent over his Lexus. He raised his head and gave a quick nod to Max. "Morning," he greeted. "How'd you get here?"

"Hannah's upstairs. We're going to get some breakfast." Jimmy nodded and Max wondered if he had heard that Hannah had spent the night with him. "So what's the diagnosis?"

Jimmy wiped his hands on a red shop rag. "It looks like you need a new fuel pump. It should run you about \$500 plus labor. I'll have to order the part from the parts store in Asheville. If you're lucky, they'll have it in stock. If not, I can call the dealership in Knoxville and maybe they'll have it. Worse case, you won't be ready until late Monday or Tuesday morning. Best case, you'll be on the road this afternoon."

Max nodded. "Sounds good," he said almost wishing that it would take a few more days to get the part.

Hannah entered the garage. "You ready?" She asked Max. She had changed her clothes and put on a little lipstick. "Morning, Jimmy."

"Did you get any sleep last night?" He asked. "You look

tired.”

She shook her head and yawned for effect. “No. You knew that I wouldn’t though. I’ll catch a nap after breakfast.” She grabbed Max’s arm. “Let’s go.”

“Where are you going?” Jimmy asked. “Probably IHOP or Cracker Barrel,” she replied.

“Turn your cell phone on. I might need you to pick up a fuel pump at the parts store.”

“Sure thing,” she called over her shoulder. She and Max climbed into the car.

“Where did he think you were last night?”

“I told him that I was going to hang out at the camp ground with some friends. There’s a lot of people up there since it’s Labor Day Weekend.”

Max nodded. “He wouldn’t suspect that you spent the night with me? I mean, I don’t want to come back and pick up my car later just to have him punch me in the face for messing with his sister.”

Hannah laughed. “I think you’ll be okay.” She nodded toward the glove compartment. “Look and see if my cell phone is in there.”

Max opened the glove box and dug her phone out from underneath a stack of Subway napkins. He turned it on for her. “Is Jimmy married?”

She shook her head. “No. He’s been dating this girl named Amanda for about forever, but they’re not married yet.”

“Does she live there, too?”

“No, she still lives with her parents. So what do you feel like for breakfast?”

He put his hand on her knee. “I feel like getting a biscuit from McDonalds and going back to the motel.”

Hannah couldn’t turn him down again. “Sounds like a plan.” She steered the car in the direction of the fast food

restaurant. Once there, she went through the drive-thru, ordering them both a small breakfast that they inhaled on the way to the hotel.

Max unlocked the door and they rushed to the bed, tearing off clothes as they went. "Oh crap," Max said suddenly. "I don't have any more condoms."

"It's okay," she reassured him. "I don't have anything."

He shook his head. "I can't take the chance of getting you pregnant."

She shook her head. "I'm on the pill, Max. I promise."

Max considered it and decided to take the chance. "I don't normally do it like this."

She smiled. "You just do it like you did it last night and we'll be just fine."

He laughed. "You liked that, did you?" He pushed her back on the bed, putting his full body weight on her as he found her lips with his.

They were lying together on the bed, wrapped up in each other and half-asleep when her cell phone started to ring. She reluctantly untangled herself and reached for it.

"Hello?"

"Hannah, I need you to go by the parts store and pick up a some things for me. I already told Ray my order, so he should have it ready for you."

"Okay, Jimmy. I'll see you in a bit." She glanced at Max through half-closed lids. "We've got to go get some parts for your car."

He sighed. "Yeah, I need to check out anyway." He started pulling his clothes back on.

Hannah accompanied Max back into the office to turn in the

key. The same old man was behind the counter. He smirked. "I see you got her for the whole night. That's what? Twelve hours? How much did that run you? She charges what? Ten dollars an hour? I can't imagine she's worth much more than that."

Infuriated, Max leaned across the counter and grabbed the old man by the shirt collar. "You listen here you old son-of-a-bitch. If I ever hear you say something like that again, I'll shove my foot so far up your ass you'll be able to floss with my shoelaces. You got that?"

The old man was shaking. He nodded. "Tell her you're sorry," Max commanded. "Sorry," he croaked out.

Max released his grip on his shirt. "Come on, Hannah," he said, taking her hand and leading her out into the parking lot. When they got to her car, he turned to face her. She was shaking, too.

He kissed her on the forehead and rubbed his hands against her upper arms trying to soothe her. "He shouldn't talk about you that way. I don't care what you did to his grandson."

Hannah felt a tear roll down her cheek. "No one has ever stood up for me like that."

Max hugged her close and he knew right then that he didn't want to leave town just yet. She pulled away. "We've got to go get the parts for your car. You've got to get back on the road, right?"

No, not really. "Yeah, I guess so," he said.

Hannah climbed in behind the wheel and took a deep breath. "Thanks again for that."

He put his hand on her knee and gave it a small squeeze, but didn't say anything. The silence continued for a few minutes. Finally Max spoke. "So do you work at Subway full time?" he asked, wanting to make small talk in the hopes of finding out

more about her.

Hannah shook her head. "No, just on the weekends. I'll come in sometimes in the evening during the week if they really need me. I'm off today, though."

"Are you in school or something?"

"No, I have another job. I work at a bank downtown. I'm a teller, but I'm planning to work my way up. I've been working there since the middle of June. I graduated from the college in May."

"Really? With a degree in banking?" "No, accounting."

"Oh, so you will move up."

"Or go to work somewhere else entirely. That's the only job I could get here in this town."

"So why are you working at the Subway? Surely the bank pays you enough to live off of."

She nodded. "Yeah, it does, but I've been working there for three years and they're short handed. I didn't want to leave them in a lurch."

"Did you always want to be an accountant? Was that your childhood dream?"

"Not hardly." She shrugged. "I didn't really have any dreams. I was pretty good with numbers and I've been doing Jimmy's books for a while, so it just seemed natural."

"Do you have any dreams now?"

"I don't know. I've always liked to write. I write lots of short stories and things. It would be fun to be the kind of writer that, you know, got paid."

Max laughed. "What about your personal life? Would you like to get married?"

"Okay," Hannah said with a smile, accepting his unintentional proposal. She shook her head. "I don't know if I want to get married. I don't know if I want to take on the

responsibility of a marriage and family.” “So no kids?”

Hannah shook her head. “I’ve never been around kids much, and I just don’t know if I would make a good parent.”

That’s right, banana. You can hardly take care of yourself - a baby wouldn’t stand a chance, a voice in her head teased.

Max nodded. “Me too. I mean, I’ve never really thought that much about getting married. And kids...well, they’re great and all, but I’d just as soon hang out with them for a while and give them back to their parents.”

Hannah smiled. “Are you around many babies?”

Max nodded. “Yeah, I have a one-year-old nephew and Mike has a two-month old baby. I don’t know. Maybe in a few years, I’ll feel different.”

“How old are you?” Hannah asked, thinking it was something she should already know.

“I’m twenty-one; twenty-two in December.”

“Are you the oldest or the youngest, or in the middle somewhere?”

“You mean in my family or in the group or in the general population?”

Hannah smiled and blushed slightly. “I meant in the group, but do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“I have sisters, one older and one younger: Megan and Melody. As far as the group goes, I’m next to youngest.”

“So you hang out with those guys a lot?”

“Yeah, quite a bit. Jason and I still live together. We’ve been roommates since we were freshmen in high school. We went to the same boarding school. We finished a tour in February that was almost nine months long. We took a few months to do our own thing, but we generally hang out together.”



"I'm sorry I don't know more about Quintessential."

"Oh, don't be sorry. It's refreshing to talk to someone who isn't all 'Oh my God! Oh my God'." He waved his hands around his head as he said it.

Hannah laughed. "So does that mean you don't want me asking you questions that might be related to your status as a celebrity?"

"You can ask me anything you want."

"How did you get to be in the group?"

"I went to a boarding school in high school and Jason and I were roommates, like I said before. We both liked to sing and we were in the choir. Reed was in the choir, too, and the three of us sang together a lot. The three of us formed a little group, and we sang in a talent show. Our manager's niece went to school there, too, and her mother saw us in the talent show. She called her brother, Neil, who is now our manager, to come see us, and he did. Neil thought we needed someone else though to round out the group, so he brought in David who had been in another band he was managing in Atlanta. So the four of us signed a contract. We picked up Mike along the way and got our big break down at Disney."

She shook her head. "I don't know anything about you guys. I don't know any songs. If it doesn't come on the country station, then I've never heard it."

Max smiled. "That's okay. So what about you? What about your family?"

She frowned and shook her head. She didn't normally talk about her family, but since Max was practically a stranger and she would more than likely never seem him again, she was a little less reticent.

"My dad died when I was a kid, so it was just me and my mom and Jimmy. When I was eleven, my mom got remarried and a few years later, she and my step-dad took off. I've been

living with Jimmy ever since. He's all I have now; him and Amanda and Justin."

"You don't see your mom?"

Hannah shook her head. "I haven't seen or spoken to her since I was seventeen."

"What about Jimmy?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure. If he talks to her, he doesn't tell me about it. It's just as well, I suppose."

Max frowned. Although he wasn't particularly close to his parents, he spoke to them quite often. He remembered another name she had mentioned. "Who's Justin?" For some reason he felt concerned, and the feeling surprised him. Usually, he didn't care if his latest conquest had a boyfriend.

"Oh, Justin's my friend. We work together at Subway."

"Your boyfriend?"

"Oh, no. Just a friend." "How old are you?"

"Twenty-one, too," she replied. "My birthday was last week."

"Well, happy birthday. Maybe we should go somewhere so I can buy you a present."

"You've given me enough," she said. "Last night and this morning ought to last me for a good long while." She paused. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

Max shook his head. "No. I try not to get tied down."

"Oh, so you're a player?"

He shook his head. "No. I don't hurt people or use women. I just don't want to be in a serious relationship. I like being free to see whomever I want."

She smiled. "You're a playboy." He sighed. "I guess so."

"That's okay, I guess."

"Try telling that to my mom or my sister Megan. They

think I should settle down right now and get married. I'm only twenty-one. I'm not ready to get married."

"Why so much pressure?"

"It's those other guys," Max explained. "You know, we're tight, and we're best friends. Those dudes are family and I love them like brothers, but every single one of them is married or getting married, or might as well be married. My mom and Megan think that I should be more like them."

"Why shouldn't you? Is it working for them?"

He nodded. "It seems to be, but I don't know. I'm not ready to make such a permanent commitment."

"Are you close to your parents?"

Max shrugged. "I don't know. We get along. My dad was always working when I was a kid, and my mom is a career woman. You know, the kind of super-mom who tries to do it all and somehow her kids get pushed to the back burner? I'm not particularly close to them, but we have an okay relationship, I guess."

"What do they do?"

"Well, Super-Mom is an anchor on the local ABC affiliate. She hosts the morning show. My dad is a producer at the local NBC station."

"That's interesting. So your mom is like a local celebrity." He nodded. "I guess so. No one outside of Nashville knows who she is, but she walks around like she's Barbara Walters. Work is her life, and it's all she talks about."

"What about your sisters? Are you close to them?"

"Oh yeah," he replied. "We're really tight. I think when Melody graduates from high school this spring, she's coming down to Orlando to go to college."

"It's nice to have a big brother," Hannah said. "I don't know what I would do without Jimmy."

"Well, it's nice to have a little sister."

“What are you doing next as far as the group goes?”

“We’re going to be doing the talk show circuit soon because we’re releasing a new single next month, I think. We’ll go back on tour in the spring.”

“What’s touring like?”

“It’s fun. I love being on stage and performing. And it’s such a surreal experience to go out every night and see all those people who came out just to see you. But it’s grueling, too. It’s very tiring. Leading up to the tour, we’ll put in hours and hours of rehearsal with a choreographer. It’s like boot camp. The rewards are so worth it, though.”

“Do you travel by bus?”

Max nodded. “Yeah, we do. We almost exclusively travel by bus because Mike is afraid to fly. It’s cool, though. Our buses are top of the line, so except for space issues, we’re not suffering.”

“Do you get your own bus?”

Max shook his head. “No. When we go back out, I’ll be sharing a bus with Jason, which I live with him now, so it won’t be so different, but before Mike and Reed got married, we were all on one bus -- all five of us.”

“Sounds cramped. I’d like to hear some of your music. I mean, I’ve spent all this time with you. I might just like it.”

“Tell you what. You find a music store or a Walmart or something like that, and I’ll set you up.”

“There’s a Walmart right near the parts store,” she said. She pulled the car into the parking lot in front of the auto parts supply store. “Come with me?”

He nodded, and they entered the store. A man of about their age was standing behind the counter tapping the keyboard of a computer. He looked up and smiled fondly. “Hey, Hannah.” He looked at Max like he was trying to place him.

“Hey, Ray,” Hannah returned his smile. “How are you?”

Ray's smile broadened. "I've been good. It's good to see you again. I've been asking Jimmy about you."

She nodded. "I know. He told me."

Max felt the jealousy rising in him. His gut told him that there was more between Hannah and Ray than just a friendship.

"Do you have Jimmy's order?" Hannah asked.

"Yeah, just give me a minute." He disappeared into the back somewhere.

"What's going –" he began, but he was interrupted by Ray's sudden return. Ray handed a large box to Hannah, but Max intercepted the exchange.

"Oh, this is Max," Hannah said to Ray. "It's his Lexus. Max, this my friend Ray."

Max tried not to frown. He didn't like the fondness they had for each other. He stepped closer to Hannah. "Nice to meet you," he said to Ray, shifting the box to under his left arm and extending his right hand.

Ray shook his hand. "Do I know you? You look familiar." Max shook his head. "I'm just passing through. My car broke down and Jimmy and Hannah have been helping me out."

Ray nodded. "You won't find no better people than those two," he said.

"This is going on Jimmy's account, right?" Hannah asked.

"Yeah."

Hannah grabbed Max's free hand and pulled him toward the door. "Thanks Ray. See you later."

"Call me sometime!"

Max pulled the seatbelt around him. "Ray seems nice. He seems to like you a lot."

Hannah smiled and started the car. "He's nice, yeah. Not my type, though."

Whew! "Why not?"

Hannah shook her head. "I don't know. I just...I don't know. So Walmart?"

Max nodded. "Yeah." He half listened to Hannah talk about Walmart as they drove there. He was trying to sort out the feelings he was having and trying to figure out why the hell he cared if she had a boyfriend or any prospects of one. It wasn't like he would ever see her again.

She parked in the closest spot she could find in front of the store. "Do you mind if I pick up a few things while we're here?"

He shook his head. "Not at all." He ran his hand through his hair and looked around. He knew that he was bound to be recognized and he didn't want to draw that kind of attention to himself. He was enjoying not being famous.

Hannah saw his nervous glances and knew exactly what he was thinking. She opened the trunk of her car. "Here, maybe this will help some." She took a brand new Atlanta Braves baseball cap out of a blue plastic bag. She pulled the tag off and handed it to him.

"Whose is this?" He asked. He took the cap from her and bent the brim before putting it on his head.

"It's yours now. I bought it for Justin for Christmas. I can get him another one."

"Christmas? It's just September."

Hannah slammed the trunk shut. "I like to shop early." She gave him a good once over. "I think you'll be okay. If anyone asked if you're Max, just say no. Why would you be here, anyway?"

"I wish it were that simple," he said. He followed her into the store. "What other things do you need?"

"Some deodorant and trash bags and I want to see if the new Nicholas Sparks' book is out yet."

Max followed her to the trash bags then to the books. She

plucked the novel off the shelf. "Do you read much?" He shook his head. "Not really."

She shook the book at him. "You should. Reading is fundamental."

He smiled as if they were sharing a secret joke. "I've heard."

She nodded toward the next aisle. "CDs?"

"Yeah." He led her to the Pop section and right to the Quintessential CDs. He took two different ones off the rack. "This is the first one," he said, holding one up. "From 1998. Really, really early in our career."

He held up a second one. "This is our second one. It came out in 2000." He turned back to the racks and pulled out two more. "This is our Christmas one. It came out last Christmas. This one is our latest; it came out this summer, and we're getting ready to start working on another one for next spring."

"Wow, you've been busy," she said, taking the CD's from him and carefully studying the covers. She laughed at the cover of the first one. "Gosh, you look so young!"

"I know. I was only seventeen then." He walked down the aisle a little farther and pulled out another CD, then another. "We're on these soundtracks, too," he said. "This should give you a pretty good feel for our stuff."

"I'm sure I'll like it." She handed the CDs back to him.

"We should have gotten a cart," he said.

She shook her head. "I just need deodorant," she said. "Unless there's something you need."

"Nope." He followed her across the store to the hygiene products. While she searched for the particular antiperspirant she wanted, his eyes wandered to the display of condoms at the end of the aisle. He grabbed a box. Not using protection that morning had been way out of the norm for him. "Hannah," he said.

“Yeah?” she replied without looking up.

“What time is it?”

She looked at her watch. “Almost noon, why?” She looked at him and raised her eyebrows.

“I was just thinking that I might not go back tonight. I might get another room and just stay another night. Jimmy probably won’t have my car ready until late, and I didn’t get a lot of sleep.”

The fact that he was standing next to the condoms didn’t escape her. He wants to spend the night with me again. “That’s probably a good idea.”

Of course he does, you whore. She shook her head, trying to get rid of the negative voice.

He joined her. “Did you get what you needed?” She nodded. “Did you?”

“Yeah, I think we’re good.”

Hannah stopped the car in front of the motel. “I think I’ll check myself in this time.”

She nodded. “Good idea. I’ll come back for you around seven, okay?”

“See you then.”

She yawned most of the way home. She hadn’t realized how tired she was until just then. “A nap will be a good idea,” she said aloud. She pulled into her spot in Jimmy’s parking lot and unloaded her bag from Walmart. She left the trunk open and entered the garage. Jimmy was hunched over the motor of a small pick-up truck.

“The stuff for Max’s car is in my trunk.”

“It’s about time,” he said. “It’s going to take me the rest of the afternoon.”



"It's okay. He's not in a big hurry. He's staying another night."

"Why?"

Hannah shrugged. "I don't know." Liar, liar, liar.

"It'll be done this evening. Amanda and I are leaving tonight and going to Charlotte."

"For what?"

"Her bother is having a cookout tomorrow afternoon and we're going."

Hannah nodded and yawned. "Have fun. I'm going upstairs to take a nap. What time are you leaving?"

"By six."

"Wake me up before you go if I'm not awake already." "Okay.

What are you doing tonight? Do you have to work?"

She shook her head and yawned again. "I'm going out to dinner with Max."

"Yeah? Be careful. I told Amanda about him. She's familiar with that group he sings with. She says he has a reputation for partying, drinking, sex. Just be careful and don't do anything stupid."

Hannah shook her head. "Don't worry about me. He was nothing but a gentleman this morning."

"I'm just telling you what I heard," he said.

"Okay," she said. It ought to work out fine then. You're a whore and he's a player.

She left the garage and headed upstairs to her room. I'm just tired. That's why this voice is back. If I get some sleep it will go away. Once upstairs she stopped in the bathroom and popped two small pink pills in her mouth. She thought about taking a third for good measure, but decided against it. She went into her room and sat on her bed. She tore into the CDs. She loaded three of them, including the Christmas one, into her

stereo and pushed PLAY before lying down on her bed with the CD covers spread out in front of her. The first song had barely finished before she was fast asleep.

Max had just gotten settled on the bed when his cell phone started ringing. The sound surprised him. He realized that it hadn't rung since he had gotten to Crossdale, and his was a phone that rang at an alarming rate.

He glanced at the display before pushing the TALK button to make sure it was someone he wouldn't mind talking to. It was David, one of his bandmates.

"What's up, man?" Max said. "Just wondering about you." "What about?"

"Cliff is here and he was just on the phone with Melody and she mentioned that you weren't there yet. Mike said you left his place yesterday. Where are you?"

Max frowned. He wasn't crazy about the relationship between his baby sister and David's little brother. He shook the thought out of his head and tried to focus on the reason for David's call. "I'm stuck in Crossdale, North Carolina. The Lexus crapped out."

"Why didn't you just rent a car and go on home?"

Max chuckled. "I'm not even sure this little town has a place to rent cars. It's tiny."

"Then what are you doing there?"

Max smiled. "I'm having a really good time." "A girl."

"Yeah. My car should be ready tomorrow and I'll head on back, but for right now, I'm going to stick around here and have a good time."

"Alright, dude. Be careful."

"Always. Bye, D." Max clicked off the phone. I suppose I should call home and let them know where I am. He dialed his parents' home number.

"Hello, Max dear," his mother answered.

"Hey, Mom. What's up?"

"Oh, Fred from the station just called and asked me to come in and fill in for the weekend girl. Can you believe that? Me? On the weekend news?"

Her snotty tone turned Max's stomach. "The weekend girl, that's Tina Matthews, right?"

"Yes, I suppose that's her name, but what on earth does that have to do with me doing the news? Unless the reason she can't come in is because she's with you."

Max shook his head, already sorry that he had even called. "I've only met her the one time."

"Like that makes a difference."

"Damn, Mom. I haven't even made it out of North Carolina yet. I'm not there hiding from you and bailing the weekend girl just so your weekend gets screwed up."

"You will not talk to your mother like that."

"Then let me talk to Melody."

"She's not here. When are you coming home? I was counting on you to do the telethon Monday."

"No, Mom. I can't do that. I told you. You never ran it through with Neil."

"I don't need to ask Neil. I'm your mother."

"He's my manager, and if you want me to sing on TV, then you have to ask him."

"I can't believe you, Max. I thought..."

He clicked off the phone in the middle of her sentence. He didn't want to hear her lecture. Right now, he wanted to catch a nap and gear up for another date with Hannah.

“Hannah,” Jimmy called, rapping on the door frame around the open bedroom door. “It’s six o’clock.” He stepped into the room and picked up one of the Quintessential CDs. “Where’d you get this?”

Hannah sat up on the bed and rubbed her eyes. “Max bought them for me.”

“I see. Hey, Justin called while you were asleep.”

Hannah froze. She hadn’t asked Justin to cover for her the night before. “Yeah?”

“He said you weren’t there last night. Where were you?”

“Where do you think I was?”

“My guess is that you were at the motel with that Max.”

Hannah nodded. “I was, and I’m going back tonight.”

“You slept with him?”

“Yes, Jimmy, I did, and I’m hoping to do it one or two more times tonight.”

“I just don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Why not? I’m already damaged goods.”

Jimmy shook his head. “Don’t talk about yourself like that. You don’t even know him, and you’ll probably never see him again.”

“I’m just living up to the reputation everyone already has of me.”

“Not everyone. Ray thinks the world of you.”

Hannah sighed. “I’m seeing Max again.”

Jimmy shook his head again, but didn’t speak. He turned and left the room.

Hannah got up from the bed. Her knees felt wobbly. She held her hand in front of her face and noticed it shaking. “Damn,” she said under her breath. She reached for her

cigarettes on the nightstand suddenly realizing how desperately she needed one. She had only had one smoke since meeting Max, way below her pack-a-day habit. She sat back down on the bed and concentrated on smoking. She felt better as the nicotine entered her system.

After burning through two cigarettes, she gathered her things for a quick shower. She didn't want to be late.

Max was waiting outside his hotel room door when Hannah pulled up in his Lexus. She rolled down the passenger's side window and he leaned inside. "This is a nice ride you've got here."

She smiled and lowered her sunglasses on her nose. "Would you like a ride?"

He opened the door and hopped in. He leaned over the middle console and kissed her. "Hey."

"Hey yourself," she replied.

They quickly decided on a restaurant, but changed their mind when they saw the over-crowded parking lot. Instead they placed a to-go order and carried the food back to the hotel.

"This is more like it anyway," Max said as Hannah set the food out on the table in the hotel room. He found some soft music on the radio and dimmed the lights.

"What's Max short for? Maxwell? Maximillian?"

"Would you believe that it isn't short for anything?" He lightly ran his fingertip down the bridge of her nose and across her cheek.

Hannah shook her head. "Nope."

"I'm not sure I can trust you with the information."

"I'm sure I can get it off the Internet."

He sighed in mock resignation. "It's actually an acronym."

“For what? Most Awesome... Nevermind, I can’t even think of anything. What’s it stand for?”

“It’s my initials,” he confessed. “Martin Andrew Xaiver Fitzgerald.”

“You’re joking, right?”

Max shook his head. “I’m serious as a heart attack. He reached for his wallet that was lying on the nightstand. He withdrew his driver’s license. “See?”

“Wow,” Hannah said, taking it and studying it before handing it back. “That’s some name. You seem more like a Max though.”

“Thanks, but I’ve only been going by Max since I was 14. Before high school I was Marty.”

Hannah giggled. “No way.”

He nodded and frowned. “Yeah, and I’m not sure that information is on the Internet, so don’t go spreading it around.”

“Whatever you say, Marty,” she said, still giggling.

He pulled the pillow out from under his head and playfully covered her face with it. She started squealing and kicking her legs. He uncovered her face. “You promise?”

She nodded. “I promise.”

They lay there in silence for a few moments. He picked up her hand and intertwined their fingers. “I have to leave in the morning.”

She nodded. “I understand. You’re a busy man. This weekend has been wonderful. I’ll never forget you.”

“Hey, you make it sound like we’re never going to see each other again.”

“Are we?” Hannah didn’t want to sound too hopeful.

“I’ve got your number. I’ll call you.”

## Chapter Three

Her story had started as all do, in the beginning. Therapy had taught her that the things that had happened long before she had memory of it shaped who she would become. No, it hadn't caused her disease, but it certainly hadn't helped it. Actually, the doctors had never been able to get a straight answer about that, not that it mattered anyway. What was, was, and of course, it couldn't be changed.

She had come into the world too soon, born seven weeks early after spending a torturous thirty-three weeks engulfed by amniotic fluid that was most likely spiked with vodka, her mother Joan's drink of choice. Her first month was spent in the hospital fighting pneumonia. The doctor there had given her a forty percent chance of survival.

It would be nice to say that she beat the odds because a

devoted mother and father sat by the bedside day and night, praying that she would get better. The truth was that her father walked out two days after she was born, unable to deal with the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. It was easy for him to leave, he wasn't married to her mother and he wasn't the father of the other kid.

Her mom made an appearance at the hospital about once every three days, and she usually showed up smelling of alcohol and dragging a sad little six-year-old behind her. The nurses called Child Protective Services, but according to the investigating social worker, there was no problem in the home, except, of course, the stress that came with a single mother trying to hold down a job, take care of a small son and having a sick newborn in the NICU. Joan had a steady job, the house was adequate and clean, and Jimmy was in school everyday.

Hannah had gone home after four weeks, and for the first few months she spent her days with a kindly neighbor, Mrs. Smart, the mother of three teenagers. Mrs. Smart and her husband had fallen in love with the baby and Jimmy, and often offered to keep them overnight for Joan. When Hannah was a year old, Joan had left her children with the Smarts for two weeks without calling, and Mr. and Mrs. Smart attempted to have her rights as a parent terminated. Joan took the children and moved across the state to the smallest mountain town she could find, and Crossdale became their home.

They knew no one. Joan found them a room in a boarding house and found herself a job as a waitress at Pacey's Grill. She worked the day shift, while Jimmy was in school and Hannah was in daycare. Not long after moving there, Joan met Howard Doherty, a mechanic who owned his own shop. Howard, who was in his mid-forties, had never been married, and he quickly fell for the twenty-six-year-old Joan and her two children.

Although Joan didn't share Howard's romantic feelings, she



could see the financial potential of a relationship, and within six months the couple was married. Howard moved out of his apartment above his shop and bought a house in town for his new family. His first order of business was to formally adopt Jimmy and Hannah, children that he adored. Being married to Howard afforded Joan the luxury of quitting her job, but instead of using her days to raise her children, she used her time to raise a bottle to her lips.

Howard knew his marriage was a sham, but he loved his children and he didn't want to take the chance of losing them if he asked Joan to leave. For the next nine years, he endured the humiliation of having a wife who was known as the town drunk and tramp and thought nothing of taking off for weekends at a time with no word.

Hannah and Jimmy, on the other hand, thrived under Howard's love and supervision. He took them to church, taught them to swim, and enrolled them in scouts and Little League sports. He was a great father. When Hannah was ten and Jimmy sixteen, Howard left the house to help out a customer whose car was stuck in a snowdrift. The curvy steep mountain roads are barely suitable for driving in the summer, but on that icy day, Howard was unable to stop his truck as it spun out of control.

Hannah and Jimmy were devastated. Joan was devastated upon the reading of the will when it came to light that Howard had left his estate to his two adopted children. Joan got nothing. Within a few weeks, a man by the name of Pepper was Joan's new live-in boyfriend. Less than a year later, Pepper became Hannah and Jimmy's stepfather.

Hannah hated him. He took tremendous joy in teasing Hannah. He called her "Hannah-banana" and would chase her around the house, pretending like he was trying to kiss her. He would hide in closets and the shower, and jump out when

Hannah was unsuspecting. Neither he nor Joan worked, and they spend their days sleeping and their nights drinking. They lived off the Social Security check Joan received every month, and some sort of disability that the government had decided Pepper was entitled to. That money all went to support the habits of Joan and Pepper.

Jimmy had two jobs, one at Pacey's Grill as a dishwasher, and another at the Walmart in nearby Asheville as a third-shift stockman. His money went to pay the utilities and buy the groceries and what few personal items he and Hannah needed.

Howard's death and the entrance of Pepper into Joan's life had a traumatic effect on Hannah. She secluded herself in her room. Most days she would go to school, but she would return to her room as soon as she returned home. Jimmy brought her meals to her. She stopped caring about her appearance, and would go weeks without bathing or washing her hair. She would wear the same jeans and sweatshirt for days, even in the summer months. She could go for weeks hardly eating, and even longer without speaking to anyone.

Then there was the flip side to her. After spending weeks in solitude, she would emerge and be violently angry. She would cuss and scream for no reason. She seemed to take pleasure in destroying her mother's property, especially her clothes. She slashed the tires on Joan's car and used a knife to scratch the words "bitch" and "whore" into the paint. But as bad as Hannah could be, she was never that way with Jimmy.

Jimmy knew that she was depressed and still suffering from Howard's death. He knew that she didn't get along well with Pepper, but his hands were tied. In addition to working two jobs, he was taking auto mechanics classes at the community college. It was his plan to re-open Howard's shop. He wanted to take Hannah to the doctor and get her some help, but she refused to go. He surmised that it was just puberty, and prayed

that she would grow out of it.

When Hannah turned sixteen, she changed. Jimmy thought that his prayers had been answered. She seemed to be on a more stable equilibrium and once again took pride in her appearance. She took a job as a waitress at Pacey's and starting dating a football player, Frankie. Things seemed to be going well.

Hannah had known for some time that her classmates thought of her as "weird." It didn't bother her. Nothing bothered her much except watching Jimmy wear himself down by working so hard. Taking the job at Pacey's was her way of helping ease his burden. She wanted a paycheck. She had no intention of getting a boyfriend.

Frankie was a dishwasher at Pacey's, just like Jimmy had been at his age. He was a popular student in the high school, and Hannah was confused why he wanted anything to do with her. For weeks, she tried to ignore him, but he was persistent in his pursuit of her.

One night after work, Frankie cornered Hannah at her car and kept her there talking. He was stalling until all of the other employees had left. Once they were alone, he made his move.

"Hannah, come on," he said, pressing his body against hers and pushing her up against the door of her car. "I know you want to get with me."

She shook her head. "No, I don't." She tried to push him away.

He grabbed her wrist. "Hannah, don't be stupid. No one else is ever going to give it to you. You're so fucking weird."

He's right. You're so fucking weird.

"I don't care," Hannah said. "Leave me alone."

Frankie laughed. "You don't really mean that, baby. Everyone in town knows your mother is a whore. I'm sure you are, too."

"I'm not!"

Frankie twisted her wrist. "Oh, but I know you are." In a flash, he twisted her arm around her back and pinned her to the car. He smashed his mouth into hers. Hannah felt the bile rise in her throat. Frankie pulled away and eased up on his grip.

"Are you ready?" he asked. "Where do you want to do this?"

"Ready for what?" Hannah mumbled.

Frankie pressed his free hand between her legs. "Ready for me. We can go back to my place." He pulled her hand down and pressed it to his own crotch. "See how ready I am for you," he whispered. "I know you want this."

Do it, Hannah. I'm telling you to do it. You're worthless and you're lucky to get this offer. Do it and don't resist. Do it!

Hannah closed her eyes and then opened them again.

"Okay, Frankie. I'll have sex with you. We can go to your place."

Frankie seemed surprised at her sudden turnaround, but he didn't question it. He had driven her back to his empty house and she lost her virginity.

From that point on, Frankie knew that he could have full control of her. For the next several months, Frankie treated her as his personal sex slave, calling her his girlfriend in public, but being far less than honorable to her in private. Hannah gave in to his every wish, because the voice in her head told her to.

Things just got worse for her. One Friday night, she and Frankie were hanging out in his basement when a few of his friends stopped by. She thought it was a coincidence. She didn't know that Frankie had arranged the whole thing. He had been telling his friends how easy she was and how she would do anything he asked her to. It was true, and by the end of the night, Hannah had been passed around to seven of Frankie's friends.

In the weeks that followed that night, Hannah went downhill fast. She again resorted to hiding in her room. She would come out only when she was sure everyone was asleep. Early one morning, she misjudged and walked into the living room and in on her mother and Pepper having sex.

Look at your mother the whore. See what you're going to turn out like.

Embarrassed, confused and angry, Hannah ran to the kitchen and grabbed a knife from the counter. She ran out of the back door and slashed the tires on Pepper's fully restored 1963 El Camino. She used the tip of the knife to scratch the glossy black paint.

Pepper ran into the back yard behind her just in time to see her putting the finishing touches on her work. He grabbed her by her long hair and slammed her to the concrete patio. "I'm going to kill you, bitch!" He lifted his booted foot above her head. She rolled away and jumped up. She was so pumped up on adrenaline that she didn't feel the pain searing through her head.

She waved the knife at him. "Try it," she said. He came at her, and she lunged at him, cutting his arm. Pepper grabbed his arm, screaming expletives at her. Joan ran out the back door with a dishtowel. She wrapped it around his arm and pulled him toward his pick-up truck.

"Let's go," Joan said. "Let's get out of here and get Jimmy. She's crazy." Hannah watched as the truck disappeared down the road. She turned back to the car and smiled at her handiwork. She was pleased, but not completely satisfied.

She looked around the yard. Her eyes found the perfect target. Her eyes curled into another smile. She found a gasoline can and dumped the contents onto Pepper's "garden." She threw a lit match into the air above the plants.

She squealed and literally jumped up and down when she heard the "whoosh" and saw Pepper's marijuana plants go up in flames. She watched it burn for a few seconds before returning to the house. Once inside her bedroom, she couldn't see the flames anymore but she could still smell it. An image of the fire flashed in her eyes.

Fire, fire! The voice screamed, filling her ears.

Hannah ran to her bedroom door. It felt hot to her touch. She saw the smoke coming into the room from under the door. She flung open her window and jumped.

She spent a week in the hospital. She thought she was there just mending a broken arm and leg, but the doctors wanted to keep her there to try and figure out why she would jump from a second story window of a house that wasn't on fire. And why Hannah would insist that it was.

She went home to live with Jimmy in his tiny apartment above the garage. Joan and Pepper came in the middle of the night to clear out their belongings, never to be heard from again. Jimmy fixed the tires on the El Camino, had a buddy fix the paint, applied for a new title and sold it to a collector for thousands of dollars. The doctors released Hannah from the hospital with an incorrect diagnosis of depression and a prescription for an anti-depressant.

Hannah never returned to school or to her job. She stayed in the apartment in a daze, not willing to be a part of society. She would hardly talk to Jimmy and the only conversations she had were with the voice in her head. Jimmy was afraid to leave her alone, scared of what she might do. Because of this, he hardly left the house or garage. His girlfriend, Amanda, took care of all the shopping and errand running. On a rare occasion, she would come and sit with Hannah if Jimmy absolutely had to go somewhere.

One day, while Jimmy was out on a business call, Amanda talked Hannah into going with her to WalMart. She thought it would be good for Hannah to get out and see people. The trip was going well until she made a wrong turn down the aisle of Halloween costumes. Just like a scene from a bad horror movie, the costumes came alive and real monsters started chasing Hannah. At least that's how Hannah saw it.

She ran from one side of the aisle to the other, smashing into costumes and knocking things off the shelves. Amanda tried to grab her, to hold her, to calm her down, but it was impossible. Hannah pushed small children down trying to get away. Her screams were deafening. Security was called and three strong security guards held her down until the paramedics got there and administered a sedative.

She was only in the hospital two days before the doctor came up with the correct diagnosis: schizophrenia.

## Chapter Four

“Hey, Meg,” Max said stepping over the threshold into his older sister’s kitchen.

“Good morning, Max.” She sat a bowl of oatmeal in front of one-year-old Tyson. “Can I interest you in a bowl of oatmeal?”

“No thanks.” He poured himself a cup of coffee. “Where’s Jeremy?”

“Playing golf. You just getting in?”

“Yeah, and I’m trying to avoid the wrath of Mom.”

Megan smiled. “She called here already looking for you.” She spooned some of the cereal into Tyson’s mouth. “So what did you do last night? Or should I say who did you do last night?”

Max smiled. “I ran into April Durham last night at Junior’s.”



Megan frowned. "You mean that old roadhouse down by the highway? I don't like that place. It's a rough crowd that hangs out there." She paused for a second. "Did you say April Durham?"

Max nodded. "Yeah."

"That I went to high school with? That April Durham?"

"Yeah, what's wrong with that?"

"Max!" Megan squealed. "She's married."

Max shook his head. "No. She didn't say anything about being married and she wasn't wearing a ring. Maybe she's separated."

"No, she's not. Jeremy's sister is married to April's husband's brother. She's married to a man named Bobby Monk."

"Bobby Monk?"

"You better stay away from her, Max. That Bobby Monk is bad news. He just got out of jail." She studied his expression. "Do you know him?"

"Yeah, we have a history and not a good one. What was he in jail for?"

"A bar fight. He beat a guy senseless with a table leg. He served the better part of a year. It would have been longer, but the other guy started it. So what's your history with him?"

"We were both on the baseball team in middle school. We were never friends and the girl he liked, liked me. It was all pretty stupid. Anyway, one summer when I was home from school, I went to this party at Steve Alvin's house and I got to talking to this girl--Veronica, I think her name was. She was his girlfriend, and of course, she didn't happen to mention that to me. So we were outside making out and Bobby comes up. He was drunk and we got into a fight and I had to kick his ass." He glanced at the baby. "Sorry. Anyway, I think this girl set it up because she knew he hated me."

"Stay away from her, Max," Megan advised.

"I didn't know. I wasn't looking for a married woman."

Another married woman.

"Maybe you should slow down a little. I know you're a young guy, and you've got all this opportunity, but, it's dangerous. I worry about you."

"I play it safe. I'm just having fun."

"Doesn't it bother you that most of these girls just want to sleep with you because you're famous?"

He shook his head. "Should it? I've never led any girl to believe that she would be my girlfriend."

"Do you want a girlfriend? Do you want a wife and kids and all the things that the other guys have?"

He shrugged. "Not now. I've got plenty of time for all that." He yawned. "Can I crash here for a while?"

"Sure."

Max left the kitchen and walked down the hall to the guest room. He kicked off his shoes and removed his jeans. He stripped off his shirt and climbed in between the cool sheets.

Damn, why did she have to be married? Why did he have to be married to Bobby Monk of all people? He was an asshole then and I can't imagine that he's any different now. By Megan's description, he's worse. Well, I'll just have to stay far, far away from April Durham - April Monk - whatever the hell her name is. He willed himself to think about more pleasant things and he wasn't surprised when Hannah's face flashed in his mind.

The next morning, after spending the previous evening with his parents, Melody, Megan, Jeremy and Tyson, Max jumped in the Lexus to head back to Orlando, but instead of driving south toward Florida, he found himself heading east into the mountains of North Carolina.

Hannah glanced at the clock. It was three-thirty and the place had been empty since one. The lunch rush had been pitiful. She was sure the owners were losing money by having two employees there. She grabbed a couple of sleeves of cups out of the storeroom and carried them to the front. She smiled at Max's picture as she shoved the cups into the dispensers.

"What are you doing tonight?" Her co-worker, Justin asked.

Hannah shook her head. "Nothing. Probably doing Jimmy's books."

"Jeez, Hannah, it's a Saturday night. You should go out."

Hannah-banana can't get a date, the voice sang. Hannah-banana will be an old maid. Hannah-banana, quiet as a mouse, will spend her life in the nut house.

"Hannah, are you okay?" Justin asked.

"Yeah, I just got a headache all of a sudden." She put her fingers to her temple. "I'm going to go to the bathroom." She stood in front of the sink and stared at herself in the mirror. "It's not true," she said. "I can get a man. I got Max."

That was just sex, banana-brain. He doesn't care about you.

"Go away!" Hannah demanded. "I don't need you."

Yes, you do. I'm your only friend.

She splashed some cold water on her face. She looked at her watch: only fifteen more minutes until she was off. She took a deep breath and left the bathroom. She joined Justin in the back room, and together they sliced tomatoes. The door buzzer sounded and Hannah wiped her hands on a towel.

"I'll get it," she said.

She walked to the front of the store. Her heart jumped into her throat. It was Max. He was standing in front of the door, the afternoon sun hitting his back. She squinted against the

sunlight. "Max?"

He smiled at her. "I was hoping you'd be here."

"I am." She bit her bottom lip to keep from smiling too broadly.

He approached the counter. "When do you get off?" "In ten minutes, or whenever the other girl comes in."

"Good. I'll wait." He sat down in a booth.

"You want something to drink?" She offered him a large cup. He got back up and took the cup. "Are you on your way back down to the beach?"

He shook his head. "Actually, I'm on my way back to Orlando."

"Did you miss a turn somewhere?" He smiled. "I don't think so."

Hannah's heart was beating a million times a minute. She glanced at the clock. Surely, Justin would let her slip out a few minutes early. "I'll be right back," she said to Max. She found Justin in the back room talking on the phone. "Justin, do you mind if I leave a few minutes early?"

"Why?" He held his hand over the mouthpiece. "You said you didn't have any plans. I was going to ask you to work for me until eight and let me go home now."

"Well, now I have plans."

"What kind of plans?"

"I've got a date. A customer just asked me out." She took off her apron and hat. "So I'm leaving." She walked back into the dining room, knowing Justin was following her. "Let's go," she said to Max.

Max took her hand and led her out into the parking lot. They stopped at her car. "You feel like going out?" He backed her against the driver's door and leaned down to kiss her.

She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of his lips on hers. "Jimmy's gone for the weekend. I'll be home all alone."

He shook his head. "No, you won't." He kissed her again. "So what do you want to do tonight?"

"What do you want to do?"

"I thought maybe we could go get something to eat and maybe go see that new Mel Gibson movie."

"That sounds good to me, but we'll have to drive into Asheville to see a movie."

"Why don't I follow you back to your place so you can get changed. We'll take my car."

Hannah looked down at her uniform. "You don't like this? It's the new fall colors."

"You're beautiful."

"You're sweet."

Max got into his own car and shook his head. What is going on here? What am I doing here? He couldn't even remember making the decision to come to see her. This had somehow turned into more than a one-night stand. He knew how it must look to her, and for some reason it didn't bother him that he may be giving her the wrong impression. "I don't want a girlfriend," he said aloud.

Hannah glanced in her rear-view mirror. She couldn't believe that Max was there. Sure, he had asked for her number when he had left last weekend, but she had been certain that she would never hear from him again.

He's just here for the sex, banana-brain. You're so stupid to think anything different. You gave it out so freely the first time; of course, he came back for more. Tell him about me. See how long he sticks around then.

"No! Damnit, why don't you just go away? Why did you come back?"

You love me, Hannah-banana and you know I'm your only friend.

"That's not true. I have Justin and Amanda and Jimmy."

She pulled into her driveway. Max stopped his car behind hers and followed her up the stairs to the apartment she shared with Jimmy. Hannah was apprehensive as she unlocked the door. He had waited downstairs in the shop when he had been there last weekend and he had never seen the inside of her home. She was sure that he was accustomed to much nicer accommodations.

Max entered the apartment behind Hannah. It was smaller than he expected, only taking up about half square footage of the shop downstairs. It was clean and homey, though, and rooms were furnished with just the basics, except for the living room, which was overwhelmed with one of the biggest televisions Max had ever seen in someone's home.

"Seventy inches," Hannah said. "Absurd, and he's going to be paying out the butt for it for the rest of his life."

"He must really like his TV," Max commented.

She shook her head. "He doesn't even watch that much TV. He likes his video games. Boys will be boys, I guess. I'm going to go jump in the shower real quick. The remote's on the coffee table."

She went into her room and stripped out of her clothes. She put on her robe and slipped quietly into the bathroom. Max was sitting on the couch watching MTV. She showered and washed her hair. It was naturally oily and although she had washed it that morning, she knew that by the end of the evening it would look terrible.

After her shower, she found her medication in the medicine cabinet and took two of the pills. It was earlier than she usually took them, but she was afraid of forgetting them later. She put her robe back on and left the bathroom. Max was no longer sitting on the couch. He was lying on her twin-sized bed in her closet-sized bedroom.

"Hi, there," she said, smiling.

He smiled back. "Hi." He patted the bed next to him. She sat down and he pulled her into a lying position next to him on the narrow bed. He began to kiss her. She responded to each of his kisses and didn't object when he untied her robe and exposed her. She closed her eyes and concentrated on what he was doing to her. His lips had just traveled below her waist when the phone began to ring.

"Oh no," she moaned. "I have to get that. It's probably Jimmy."

"So get it," Max mumbled, but didn't stop what he was doing. Hannah reached for the phone by her bed. "Hello?" "Hannah, are you okay?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah." She reached down and pushed Max away. He moved away from her and stood up to begin removing his clothes.

"What are you doing tonight?"

She sucked in her breath as she watched Max take off his underwear. "Umm, I thought about going to Asheville, to the mall, maybe rent a movie later." Jimmy hadn't been exactly thrilled about her spending the night with Max before, and she didn't want to ruin her evening by telling him that Max was back.

"Are you sure you're okay? You sound funny."

"I'm fine, Jimmy."

"Don't forget to take your meds."

"I already have."

"Okay, then. We should be back late tomorrow afternoon."

"Okay, Jimmy. Bye." She hung up the phone and Max joined her on the bed. "Where were we?"

"I think I was down here somewhere," he said, resuming his position.

See, it's just sex, Hannah. He's gonna leave as soon as it's over. He probably won't even take you to eat.

She sat up. "Let's stop."

"Did I do something wrong?"

She shook her head. "We've got all night for this. Let's wait."

Max saw right through her fear and insecurity. "Okay. I'm getting hungry anyway."

Hannah pulled her robe back on and Max got himself dressed. He sat on her bed and watched her pick out a pair of jeans and a blouse from her closet. She pulled a pair of white cotton panties and a white bra from her top drawer. She dressed and picked up her hairbrush.

"Leave it down," Max said as she brushed it.

Make-up. I should wear make-up. Amanda had helped her pick out some basics at the drug store when she had started her job at the bank and had taught her how to apply it. When she was satisfied with the result, she turned to Max. "Okay, I'm ready."

Max swept his eyes up and down her body. "You look great."

They went back downstairs and climbed into the Lexus. "She still running alright?" Hannah asked, digging in her purse for her cigarettes.

"Like new."

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

He shook his head and pressed a button to open her window a crack. "Let's go to the best restaurant in town," Max suggested. "What's it called?"

"There's a real fancy place called Gulliver's Inn. I hear it's expensive, and that means nice, right?"

Max shrugged. "We'll find out." He turned the volume down on the radio. "Did you get a chance to listen to the CDs?"

Hannah nodded. "Oh yeah. Pretty much non-stop." "So you like our music?"



“It’s good. Very upbeat. I like the ballads. Very romantic. Y’all sound awesome.”

“Thanks. That means a lot coming from someone who never gave us much thought before.”

“Well, I’m giving you a lot of thought now. I can’t get away from you all, you know – with the cups and all.”

Max laughed. He put his hand on her knee. “I’ve been thinking about you a lot this week, too.” She smiled. “Really?”

He nodded. “I can’t quit thinking about you. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw you.”

“Me, too. I thought I would never see you again.” He squeezed her knee. “Here I am.”

“How long are you staying?” She asked over dinner.

“I have to be back tomorrow night, so I have to leave first thing in the morning.”

Hannah nodded her understanding. “What do you do? I mean, I know you’re not on tour.”

“We’re working a lot in the studio on stuff for our new album. We’ll officially start recording that next month. Right now, it’s kind of a down time because we don’t have anything new to promote, but we’re still pretty busy. I have to go next week to LA to record a duet with Samantha Sparks.”

Hannah wrinkled her nose. “I’m not sure I like her. She seems kinda wild.”

Max shrugged. “She’s okay. I’ve known her for a while. She’s okay in small doses.”

“What’s the song called?”

“Anything You Want.”

“Is it a love song?”

Max shook his head. "It's not a slow song. It's fast paced and a little racy."

"Well, I can't wait to hear it. Have you got anything coming up where you're going to be on TV?"

"Actually, yeah. We're going to be singing the National Anthem at the first game of the World Series this year. That will be on TV."

"When is that?"

Max bit his bottom lip while he thought about it. "I think it's October nineteenth. I'm not one hundred percent sure, but I know it's a Friday. Of course, we won't know where until the teams are set."

"I'll have to be sure I watch."

"Why don't you come with me?" The question was out of his mouth before he could stop it.

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "Yeah." He wanted it. He wanted her to go. He wanted it more than anything.

"I don't know, Max. That's a month away."

"So? What? You think you'll have found someone else by then?"

She shook her head. "I was thinking more like you would have found someone else."

He frowned. "I don't think that's going to happen. I haven't been able to think about anybody else but you for the past week. Well, everyone except April Monk. He quickly pushed her out of his head.

She fiddled with her glass, avoiding his eyes. She was both nervous and afraid and a little embarrassed. "What are you saying, Max?" She lifted her chin. "Where are we going with this?"

He shook his head. "I don't know, Hannah. All I know is I'm supposed to be on my way to Florida right now and I came

to see you. And I do want you to come with me to the World Series.”

“Okay, when the time comes, if you still want me too, I’ll go with you. But I have to warn you, I’ve never flown before.”

Max raised his eyebrows. “Never?” She shook her head. “Do you think you would be scared?” He asked.

“I don’t see why. I’ve just never had anywhere to go. Is it scary?”

“Nah,” he scoffed. “Not unless it crashes.”

“That’s comforting.”

After the meal, Hannah left Max waiting in the lobby of the restaurant while she excused herself to the restroom. She reapplied her lipstick and took a good hard look in the mirror. Can you believe this? He wants to take me to the World Series. He came back to Crossdale for me. He couldn’t stop thinking about me! She wanted to splash cold water on her face, but she knew it would mess up her make-up.

You know he’s just back for the sex. He doesn’t care anything about you, stupid. You’ve got to be the stupidest person that ever lived.

Hannah slammed her hands against the counter. “Just go away,” she said aloud, drawing the attention of another woman in the bathroom. “Sorry,” she muttered. I just need to go back and see the doctor. I need to tweak my meds. Then this will go away. She took a deep breath and left the restroom. She mustered a smile for Max.

“Movie?” he suggested.

“You know, we could just go rent something,” Hannah said. We could take it back to the apartment and watch it on Jimmy’s big TV.”

“Now, that’s a plan.” They drove to the video store and browsed casually through the new releases. After making a decision, they went back to the apartment.

Hannah loaded the movie into the DVD player and settled next to Max on the couch. “Will I be able to see you again before the baseball game?” She asked as the previews played.

He shrugged slightly. “I don’t know. I’ll try to get back here if I can, but I can’t promise anything.”

“I know, I know. I just...it’s just that it’s so far away.”

Max sighed and kissed the top of her head. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Don’t. I should be happy I’ll see you then. If you still want met to come.”

Max shook his head. He grabbed her chin and turned her face toward his. “I will still want you to come.”

The phone rang before Hannah could respond. She reached for it. “Hello.”

“Hannah, what is going on?”

“Oh, hey, Justin. I told you what was going on.”

“Who was that you left with?”

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow, okay? Call me tomorrow afternoon.”

“Is he there with you now?”

“Yes. Call me tomorrow.” She clicked off the phone. “He’s nosy.”

“I understand.” Max nodded toward the TV. “The movie’s getting ready to start.”

Hannah settled back into the crook of his arm. She tried to concentrate on the movie, but her thoughts were preoccupied with how she could see him again sooner than planned.

Max moved his arm so that his hand was settled on her breast. She wasn’t sure if it was intentional or not, but she was acutely aware of it’s presence. She rested her hand high on his

thigh and slowly moved it inward. She saw him close his eyes in anticipation as in inched closer and closer to the bulge in his pants. She stopped as soon as she got directly on top of the mound. He moaned softly. She slowly rubbed it, adding pressure until she felt it pushing back against her hand.

They quickly shed their clothes. "Here?" Max asked. Hannah shook her head. "We should go to my room."

They rushed to the room and fell onto the bed.

"I didn't bring any condoms," he said. "Is it okay?"

"Yeah, I told you I was on the pill."

Max kissed her on the neck and moved slowly down her body. She threw her head back, closed her eyes and concentrated on what he was doing. "Max, please," she moaned.

He moved back to eye level and kissed her mouth. "Do you need something?" "I need you."

"Then come and get me," he said, rolling onto his back.

She spent several minutes repaying his favors before climbing onto him. He grabbed her by the hips and flipped her over. "Nuh-uh, missy. Tonight we're doing it my way – nice and slow."

She eased into the living room while Max was sleeping in her bed. She couldn't believe how loud his snoring was. She sat down at the computer desk that she and Jimmy had squeezed into the room and turned the machine on.

"You've got mail," the computer announced. She opened her mailbox. The only email was from Justin.

Who is this guy? You went out with a

customer? Did you know him? Do I know him?  
What is going on? I don't like to not know. I've  
got to work tomorrow. Come by about 3pm.

She closed the email and opened a search engine. She typed "Max Fitzgerald" into the search box. In a fraction of a second, she was presented with 226,200 results. The first link was Quintessential's home page. She clicked on the second link, which appeared to be a personal site made by an overzealous fan. She clicked on a link called, "Max's Women." She waited a full minute for the page to load, slow to load because of the amount of pictures on the page. There were pictures of Max with dozens of different women.

Another link on the page was called "Groupies Tell All." She hesitated, but clicked on the link. There were two pages of names of girls who claimed to have had some sort of sexual encounter with Max.

See, you can't trust this guy.

She held her hand against her forehead as she read some of the stories. "Maybe I can't," she said aloud.

"Maybe you can't what?"

Hannah jumped. She hadn't heard him come into the room. "Nothing," she said, clicking the X that closed the window.

"What are you doing?" He leaned against the wall next to the computer desk.

She shook her head. "Nothing. I couldn't sleep so I thought I would check my email."

"Anything good?"

"No, just Justin. Do you have email?"

Max nodded. "Oh yeah." He leaned over and scribbled his email address on a notepad on the desk. "So are you going to tell me what you can't do?" He paused. "I saw my picture on

the screen.”

Hannah chewed on her bottom lip. “It was nothing. Just a crazy website about you and groupies.” She tried to play it off like she wasn’t worried about it.

Max ran his hand through his hair. “Oh, I see, and now you’re wondering if I’m a nice guy.”

“No, not a nice guy, a...” She shrugged. “How do I know you’re not here just for the sex?”

He knelt in front of her. “I guess you just have to trust me.”

“How can I do that when I see all that stuff on the Internet?”

“What does your heart tell you to do?” He grabbed her hand and put it to her own heart.

Hannah sighed. “It tells me to trust you. I want to trust you.”

He brought her fingertips to his lips and kissed them. “Trust me.” He pulled her out of the chair and led her back to the bedroom. They curled up on the bed.

Max, Max, Max. What is going on with you, dude? He pulled Hannah a little tighter to him, and rubbed his nose in her hair getting a big whiff of her shampoo. I don’t know, but I’m loving it.

“Max,” Hannah said, her voice barely above a whisper. “There’s something really important I have to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“Do you believe in God?” “Of course I do.”

“That’s good.” She pushed her body into him and quickly fell asleep.

“Listen,” Max said, taking her hand. It was the next morning and they were standing in the driveway. He leaned

against the door of his car, and pulled her to him, so that she was standing between his legs. "I really would like it if you wouldn't see anyone else until we saw each other again."

Hannah laughed inside herself. Like that's going to be an issue. "Are you?"

Max shook his head. "No." He couldn't believe what he was saying. Everything he had been fighting against was happening to him. It felt like he was watching a movie and he had no control over what the characters were doing. "I'd like to be able to call you...everyday."

She smiled. "You can, Max. Call me anytime. I gave you my work numbers and my cell number and my home number. I want you to call me."

"And you can call me, too, Hannah. I always have my phone with me. If I'm working, I can't answer, but I always check my messages."

Hannah took a deep breath. "Am I your girlfriend?" She felt her face flush. It made her feel stupid to be asking such a question, like she was an immature high-schooler again, but she didn't know any other way to ask it.

Max didn't laugh at her the way she thought he would. He pulled her close to him and wrapped his arms around her. He kissed the top of her head. "Yeah, you're my girlfriend."

Without pulling back she posed a second question. "Am I your only girlfriend?" She thought back to the stories she had read on the Internet.

Max held her tighter. "Yeah. I promise, Hannah. There is no one else but you." He pushed her away from him so he could see in her eyes. "All that stuff you read, it's not going to be that way. I promise."

Hannah nodded. "I believe you."

Max leaned down and kissed her. "I have to go. I've got a long drive ahead of me. I'll probably call you in a couple of



hours.” He opened the car door and got inside. “I’ll talk to you later, baby girl.”

Hannah leaned in the car and kissed him again. “Have a safe trip, Max.”

## Chapter Five

Hannah pushed open the door to the sandwich shop. Justin was standing at the register finishing up a sale. He glanced up at her. “Hey, Hannah.”

“Hey.” She nodded politely at the departing customers and waited until they left the building before leaning against the counter. “I got your e-mail.”

“What is going on? Are you okay? You’re not...?” “Crazy?”

Hannah finished the sentence for him. She shook her head. “I’m not crazy.”

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

Hannah shrugged. “I guess so. It’s not complicated, really. Last Friday night while I was here by myself this guy came in right at eleven. He was traveling through to Nashville and his car broke down on the interstate. He came up here to get a

sandwich and a number for a tow truck. Jimmy came and picked up his car and I drove him over to the motel.” She paused and debated on whether to tell him she had spent the night.

“Christy heard a rumor that you had spent the night with him. I wasn’t going to say anything unless you brought it up.”

Hannah scowled. “See, that’s all just crap. That rumor got started before I even went back.”

Justin raised his eyebrows. “Went back?”

She nodded. “I took him to the hotel, he checked in, I walked him to his room and he asked me to stay a while. I went home and showered and went back.”

Justin shook his head. “Why? I mean it’s one thing to go out and have sex with Ray, but this dude is a stranger.”

“Because Justin, he was amazing. Not like Ray, who’s just someone to... This guy was different. It was just an instant attraction, great chemistry, you know? I wanted to spend more time with him.”

“So he came back yesterday?”

Hannah nodded. “Yeah, he came back just to see me.” “What’s his name? Are you going to see him again?” Hannah bit her lip. Should I tell him? Can he keep this secret? Is it a secret? Would Max want me telling anyone? Is he telling anyone about me? “His name is Max.”

“Do you know his last name?”

Hannah rolled her eyes. “Yes, I know his last name. Fitzgerald. Max Fitzgerald.”

“That sounds familiar. Is he from around here?”

She shook her head. “No. He’s from Nashville and lives in Orlando now.”

“Are you going to see him again?”

Hannah nodded. “I’m going to see him again on October nineteenth, I think.”

“He’s coming here?” “No,  
I’m going there.”

“What does Jimmy think about all this?”

“What does it matter what Jimmy thinks?” Hannah asked, offended. “I am an adult.”

Justin pulled a cup out of the dispenser. As he lifted it to the drink machine, Hannah saw the realization on his face. He shook his head. “Hannah. Not this guy?”

“What’s wrong with that guy?”

He shook his head. “There’s nothing wrong with him. It’s just a little unbelievable, that’s all.”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

Justin held up his hands in defense. “I’m not calling you a liar, Hannah. I’m sorry.” Although his words sounded sincere, his disbelief was obvious.

He doesn’t believe you, stupid. Ha! You’re screwing one of the most famous celebrities in the world and can’t even brag about it. No one will believe you and it just makes you look crazier.

“I’m not bragging about it,” Hannah blurted out. “I didn’t say you were,” Justin argued.

Hannah’s heart was full of rage. “Just leave me alone and don’t talk to me. You’re supposed to be my friend.” She turned and ran out of the restaurant.

When she arrived back home, Jimmy was unpacking his truck. “Hey.”

“Hey,” she grunted. She walked right by him and ran up the stairs to the apartment. The phone was ringing. She glanced at the caller ID as she picked it up. It was Subway’s number.

“Justin I don’t want to talk to you!” She slammed the phone down.

“What’s that all about?” Jimmy asked from the doorway.

Hannah shook her head. “He’s supposed to be my friend

and he doesn't believe me."

"Believe you about what?"

"Max." Hannah started to sob as she said his name.

"Max? The singer-dude with the Lexus?"

Hannah nodded. "He was here again this weekend. He stayed right here in this apartment. He came to see me."

"He was?" Jimmy sounded surprised.

"Yes. He showed up yesterday afternoon. We went to Gulliver's Inn. We rented a movie. We slept together in my bed."

Tension set in Jimmy's jaw. "What did I tell you about him, Hannah?"

Hannah eyes widened. "You believe me?"

"Yeah. It's true, right?"

She nodded. "It's true."

He sighed. "I don't like you messing around with him, Hannah. You're going to get hurt."

"He told me I was his girlfriend."

Jimmy shook his head. "Of how many? How many girlfriends do you think he has?"

Hannah straightened her back and squared her shoulders. "Just one. Me. That's it."

"I hope you're right."

Hannah's cell phone rang. "That's probably him," she said. She dug it out of her jacket pocket and carried it to her room.

"Hello?"

"Hey, baby girl."

"Oh Max, you're timing is perfect. I really needed to hear from you right now."

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

She shook her head. "Nothing really. I had a fight with Justin."

"About me?"

“Yeah. He didn’t believe me.” “Did you set him straight?”

“Not really. I don’t care. I know it’s true.” She cleared her throat. “So how far are you?”

“Oh, I’m about halfway. You know, I don’t mind driving, but this trip just gets so lonely. I should have made you come with me. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. How often do you make these long trips?”

“Only a few times a year. It’s a good chance to clear my head and think about things.”

“What have you been thinking about?”

“You.”

Hannah swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. “Really?”

“Oh yeah. I can’t quit thinking about you. I wish you were closer to where I have to be, so I could see you whenever I wanted.”

“That would be nice. I counted it up today, and it’s thirty- two more days until we see each other again.”

“That’s a long time. Hey, there’s a birthday party for Mike on the fifth. Why don’t you come for that? It would give you a chance to meet everyone and I’d get to see you again.”

“I don’t think I can. That’s a Friday. I have to work. I don’t have any more vacation to take. I’ll have to use it all for the baseball game.”

“Quit your job. Just run away with me.”

Hannah sighed. “I wish I could.”

“How was church this morning?” Max asked. When he was getting ready to leave that morning, Hannah had mentioned something about going to church.

“I didn’t go. I went back to bed for a while.”

“Oh, you didn’t get much sleep last night?”

She smiled. “No, not much. I’ll go to the evening service

tonight. Jimmy's home. I'll go with him and Amanda."

"I'm just going to go home and crash. I'm beat."

"What? You didn't sleep much last night?"

"Not really." She could tell from his voice that he was smiling. "Listen Hannah, I really want you to think about coming down for that party. I know you said something about work and all, but maybe you could take a sick day or something. If it's the money, I'll reimburse you."

"Wouldn't that make me a prostitute?" she joked. Prostitute, whore, really what's the difference? She shook her head, but the voice didn't go away. Even as Max was speaking, she could hear it mumbling from somewhere inside her head.

"What did you say?" she asked Max, trying hard to concentrate on only him.

"I said that I wouldn't tell if you didn't. It was a joke. Can you hear me? Is my connection bad?"

"Yeah, you're breaking up." No, you are, crazy.

"Okay then," he said. "I'll call you back later. Bye."

"Bye." In the bathroom, she opened the medicine cabinet and took two of her pills.

"Was it him?" Jimmy asked.

She nodded and smiled. "It was him."

"Is it serious? Or is it just sex? I mean, I can understand your attraction to him and your wanting to have sex. I can, and I do."

"Then what difference does it make? What if it is just for sex? Maybe we've both just found someone who we have amazing sex with and we don't have to make any commitments. What would be wrong with that?"

Jimmy frowned. "I try real hard not to pry in your life, I do, but I thought you were seeing Ray from time to time."

She sighed. "Ray wants more from me that I'm willing to give him. I'm really tired of using him."

"So you're just doing it for the sex?"

“The sex is good.”

Jimmy shook his head and shifted from one foot to the other. “I just don't want you thinking you have to live up to your reputation. That was so long ago. You're not that person anymore. You told me that you and Eli were going to wait...”

“Eli's dead!” Hannah interrupted. Eli died, Eli died, Eli died, you're a loser.

Jimmy cocked his head to one side. “But wait. It's not about just sex, though. You said you were his girlfriend.”

Hannah nodded. “Yeah. He was on his way from Nashville to Orlando. That's an eleven or twelve hour trip. And he drove two hours out of his way to come and see me again.” She shook her head. “It can't be just about sex. He could get that anywhere.”

“Were you safe?”

She nodded. “Of course” “Are you seeing him again?”

“I'm going with him to the first game of the World Series. They're singing.”

Jimmy's eyes widened. “Wow.” He exhaled loudly, his way of changing the subject. “Go get ready for church.”

Max let himself in the back door of the house he shared with Jason and Jason's girlfriend, Carmen. They were sitting at the table with an open pizza box between them.

“Hey Max,” they both greeted.

“Pizza?” Carmen offered, waving toward the box.

Max flopped down in the nearest chair. “Thanks, I'm starving.” He picked up a piece of pizza. “It's so good to be home.”

“I don't know how you keep making that trip,” Jason said.



“Especially alone. I’d just have to fly.”

“It’s not so bad. And sometimes it’s good to be alone. Plus, I had to get the Lexus back here.”

“You going to keep it?” Jason asked. “Or you figure it’s about time to trade it in on a new one?”

“I haven’t really thought about it. It’s running fine now.” He scarfed down two pieces of pizza without speaking. He phone started ringing as he finished the second slice. He wiped his mouth on a napkin and flipped open phone. “Hey Hannah.”

“Hey. Did you make it back yet?”

“I did. I’m home. I’m going to be hitting the sack pretty soon.”

“It’s only 8:30.”

Max yawned. “I know, but I’m exhausted.”

“I won’t keep you. I just wanted to make sure you made it back okay.”

“Thanks. I did.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, baby girl.” He clicked off the phone and looked up to the stares of Jason and Carmen.

“New girlfriend?” Carmen asked.

Jason shook his head. “You gave a girl your cell number?” It had been Max’s practice to always be the one doing the calling. It prevented him from getting unwanted calls from girls he’d rather not talk to again, and it also kept him from having to change his cell phone number every few weeks.

Max nodded. “Yeah.”

“Someone from home?” Jason asked. He and Max were from the same hometown.

“No, actually it’s someone I met while I was stranded.” He yawned again. “What time do we have to be where tomorrow?”

“Nine, at the studio with Brian.”

Max gave a small nod. “Okay, good night.”

“Goodnight, Max,” Jason and Carmen said in unison.

Max went to his bedroom. Thirty-two days. Am I going to be able to do this? I want to do it. Why didn’t I tell Jason and Carmen about her? I just really don’t really understand any of this.

He could go the thirty-two days without sex. That was easy, even for him. He wasn’t person with a lot of patience, and he knew he would get frustrated with the situation quickly. He hoped his frustration didn’t turn to boredom. He laid his phone on top of his dresser and fought an overwhelming urge to call her back right then.

“Crazy,” he said aloud as he sprawled out across his bed.

Three weeks later, Max followed Casey up her driveway to the house. He joined her in the garage to help her carry in the shopping bags. “Where’s Mike?” He asked as he followed her into the kitchen. He sat the bags of groceries on the counter.

“He’s at the studio with Niki.” She sat her infant, Will, in the baby swing. “He should be home any minute.” Max smiled. “Oh, Niki.” He raised his eyebrows.

Michael and Reed had co-written most of the songs and Michael was producing a couple of tracks on the debut album for the eighteen-year-old newcomer. Niki had very serious and obvious case of the “hots” for Michael.

“That doesn’t worry you?”

Casey smirked and shook her head. “Not in the least. Why should it?”

He’s got a hell of a lot more self-control than I do. If some barely legal hottie were making plays for me, I’d have to go for it. “You know she’s after him, don’t you?”

Casey nodded. “I know.”

Max sat down at the bar. "Can I wait here for him? I need to talk to him about something."

"Sure. I haven't seen you in a while. Where have you been keeping yourself?"

Max shook his head. "Hanging out at home mostly."

"Jason said you hadn't been going out any."

"Nope," Max said. "I haven't been out, except with Jason and Carmen or David and Shannon for a couple of weeks."

"Why?" Casey asked.

Max shrugged. "I don't know. Just tired of it all, you know? So what are you fixing for supper? I'm hungry."

Casey shook her head. "You never come over not hungry."

Max laughed. "I miss having you cook for me everyday." Casey had been the traveling chef for the group during their last tour. He watched as she put away the groceries.

"Is Annie coming down for Mike's party tomorrow night?" He knew he was skating on very thin ice by asking Casey about her sister.

Casey frowned. "Yes, she is. And Matt. They'll be here in the morning."

"Are they bringing the kids?"

"No." She eyed him suspiciously. "Why do you want to know? Don't you think you've meddled in that family enough?"

Max sighed. "I was just curious." He drummed his fingers on the countertop. He had come over to talk to Michael, who was like the "big brother" of the group, but he couldn't contain himself. "I'm bringing a girl to the World Series."

"Who?"

"It's not anyone you know," he said. He saw that he had her attention.

"Who is it?"

"Her name's Hannah Doherty. I met her that weekend

when my car broke down in the mountains. Her brother was the mechanic.”

Casey sat a glass of tea down in front of Max. “She wasn’t just a one-night stand?”

Max shook his head. “No. It started out that way, I guess, but I ended up spending two nights with her, and then I went back the next weekend. I’ve talked to her on the phone two or three times a day since then and we email almost everyday. It’s different with her. Anyway, last time I was there, I asked her if she wanted to come, and she said she would.”

Casey opened her mouth to speak, but she was interrupted by Michael entering the kitchen through the back door.

“Hey honey,” he said, kissing his wife quickly. He moved to the baby and scooped him up out of the swing. “How’s my little man?”

He turned to Max. “What’s up, man?” “Can we talk?”

Michael nodded and handed baby Will to Casey who was already reaching for him. “We’ll be upstairs.” He lead Max upstairs to the large room he had converted into a small recording studio. Michael flopped down on one of the two overstuffed couches in the room. “What’s going on?”

Max sighed and sat down on the other couch. “I don’t know what’s going on with me, man.”

“What do you mean? Are you okay?”

“Well, it’s this girl, Mike. Hannah. You know the one I met a few weeks ago when my car broke down.”

Michael shook his head, like he wasn’t familiar with her. That didn’t surprise Max. Although he was looked upon as being the big brother of the group and the other four often came to him for advice, he made it a point not to butt into their personal lives.

“When I was on my way back from the beach, my car

broke down in the mountains, and to make a long story short, I met a girl and ended up spending the whole weekend with her. I went on back to Nashville and spent the week. Well, when it was time to come back here, I found myself driving hours out of the way to see her again.”

“And that’s a problem?”

“I spent the night with her again, and I asked her to come with us to the World Series.”

“Did you mean it?”

“Oh, that’s not all. I told her that she was my girlfriend.”

“Did you mean that?”

“That’s the bothersome thing, Mike. I did mean it. I meant every single word of it.”

“So what’s the problem?” He was smiling and obviously amused.

“Hell, I don’t know. It’s just not me, you know?”

Michael cocked his head to one side. “Maybe it is. Why are you telling me all this?”

Max shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I just wanted to get your take on it. About bringing her, I mean.”

Michael stood up and walked over to the filing cabinets where he kept his music. “I guess if you want to bring her with us, great.”

He pulled a few sheets of music out of the cabinet. “Hey, while you’re here, do you want to try this song? Carrie O’Keefe faxed it to me the other night. She wrote it specifically for us. It’s called ‘Save Me’.”

Max stood up and took the papers from him. He glanced over them. “Who did she have in mind for lead?”

Michael shrugged. “She didn’t specify. It’s written kind of low, so I was thinking you and me. You can take the first verse, and me the second.”

Max nodded as he considered it. “Have the other guys

looked at it?"

"No." He loaded a CD into the CD player. "Casey and I recorded the music last night. It's rough, but you can sing along. You want to give it a try?"

"Yeah, sure."

Michael hit the play button and Max counted the beats until it was time to start singing.

Floating around like a feather in the wind  
My heart has been broken; too tired to try and mend  
Trying to get through my life everyday  
Without someone beside me to show me the way

Michael came in for the chorus:

Hoping and waiting  
Wanting and praying For  
someone to  
Save me from myself  
Save me from this place  
Save me from the fears I have that haunt my nights  
And steal my dreams away  
Save me from the past  
Save me from this hurt  
I'm going insane; it's time you came  
And saved me from myself

Max read along as Mike sang the second verse.

I've been beat down and shut down too many times before  
I've tried and I cried and I can't take this anymore  
I just can't do what I need to, what I want to, what I should do  
And it's just foolish pride that keeps me from you. And  
I'm...

Max came in again on the chorus, then Michael dropped out again, leaving Max singing solo.

And I've tried to tell myself That  
love's not what I need I've been  
hoping and waiting Wanting and  
praying  
Hurting and crying  
Wishing and Dying  
Please

The chorus repeated, but Max stopped singing and just listened to Michael. "Wow," he said when the music stopped.

"I thought it was pretty good," Michael said. "It fits your voice really well, too. What do you think the other guys will think?"

Max nodded. "I think it'll rock with a five-part harmony. You didn't write any of it?"

"No, not really. I came up with that little riff before the bridge, but everything else is hers."

"My vote is yes. Can we do it again?"

Michael nodded and started the CD again. They sang through the entire song again, this time each adding a little more inflection and feeling in their voices.

"Y'all have got to record that," a voice from the doorway said. Max looked behind him at Casey who was entering the room. "It's really good."

Mike nodded. "I agree."

"Me too," Max said. His cell phone rang. "Sorry," he said to Mike and Casey as he pulled it from his hip. He checked the caller ID before flipping open the phone. "Hey, baby girl," he said as he walked toward the door.

"Hey Max, is this a bad time?" Hannah asked.

"No, Hannah. Quit asking me that. If it were a bad time I

wouldn't have answered. What's going on?"

"Nothing. What are you up to?"

"I'm over at Mike's house. We were just going over some new music. I told him and Casey that I was bringing you to the World Series with me."

"What did they say?" Her voice quavered. He knew she had been apprehensive about meeting his friends.

"They're looking forward to meeting you. Listen sweetie, you have nothing to worry about. Everyone is going to like you."

"But I'm such an outsider." "It's cool, Hannah."

"It's only two more weeks until we see each other again, you know."

"I know. The offer to come down for this party tomorrow night is still open. I'd really like for you to come down. I'll get your ticket and everything."

"I can't, Max. I have to work tomorrow and this weekend. I can't take any more time off without losing my job."

Oh, quit your stupid jobs. "I know," he said. "I just want to see you so bad."

"Two more weeks."

"Two more weeks," he repeated. His phone beeped and he checked the caller ID to see who it was. "Hey Hannah, that's Melody on the other line. Can I call you back?"

"Yeah, no problem. Talk to you later."

"Bye, baby." Max clicked over to the other line. "Hello?"

"Hey, Max."

"Melody, where've you been? I've been trying to call you for three days."

"Around. I'm so sorry that I can't be at your beckon call."

"What's the attitude about? You're starting to sound a lot like Mom."



“Sorry. What do you need?”

Max shook his head. “I don’t need anything. I was just wondering if you were still planning on coming this weekend.”

“I’m coming, yes. Cliff is coming, too.” Cliff Jacobs, David’s brother, and Melody had been flirting around a courtship for several months. Max thought Cliff was a nice enough guy, but he was not supportive of the budding romance. Max, like most big brothers, was protective of his little sister, and he was not excited about her getting involved with someone with an incurable, life altering illness, especially HIV.

Max sighed. “You’re coming down to see him?”

“Yes, and I’m really looking forward to it.”

Max shook his head for his own benefit. “Are you staying at the house with me and Jason?”

“I’m not sure. David and Shannon said I could stay there, but Mom is giving me major grief over that.”

“You can stay at the house, Mel. Cliff will be only ten minutes away.”

“Yeah, I’ll think about it. Well, I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later.” Click.

Max stared at his phone and shook his head. “Errr,” he growled. He walked back into the room, joining Michael and Casey.

“Was that her?” Casey asked. “Max, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything is fine. It was Hannah. I’ve been trying to get her to come down this weekend, but she won’t. She’s afraid of losing her job.”

“Well, that’s a good sign,” Casey said. “At least she’s not after your money.”

“Without a doubt,” Max agreed. “Hannah’s not like that at all.”

“So what was the growling about?” Mike asked.

Max shook his head. “Melody beeped in. She’s coming

down this weekend to see Cliff.”

“She’s a big girl, Max.” Casey reminded him. He rubbed his forehead. “I know.”

Max arrived at Michael and Casey’s an hour late to the party. He had been talking to Hannah on the phone part of that time, but the majority of the time had been spent trying to come up with a believable excuse to get him out of going altogether. But he couldn’t miss. Michael was one of his bandmates, one of his brothers. He couldn’t just blow off this birthday party.

Dozens of cars lined the road, several more were parked in the driveway and some were even parked in the yard. The guest list included Michael’s family and friends, the guys in the group and their band, and members of there touring crew. Upon entering, Max guesstimated that there were about two hundred people there.

“Where you been, man?” David asked offering his hand. “We thought you weren’t coming.”

Max shook his hand. “I made it. I was on the phone.”

“The girl?” Reed asked.

“Hannah,” Max corrected. “Where’s Melody and Cliff?” David shook his head and looked around. “I don’t know.

They’re around somewhere. Did they come by the house?”

Max shook his head. “She called and told me not to meet her at the airport because Cliff was going to meet her. I haven’t seen or heard from her since.”

David shrugged. “Well, they’ve been at the house. She’s around here somewhere.”

Max frowned and looked around, but he didn’t see her in that part of the house. “So where’s the birthday boy?”

Reed looked around. “I think he’s out by the pool.”

Max nodded and made his way through the crowd. He found Mike standing by the pool, beer in hand talking to his mother and her boyfriend, Ted. He approached them.

"Birdie," he said to Mike's mother, "when are you going to dump this old guy and marry me?"

Birdie turned around and laughed. "Oh, Max," she said playfully slapping his arm.

Max shook hands with Ted and then with Mike. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks. Where's my gift?"

"What? You mean my presence isn't present enough?"

Everyone laughed. Mike's mother and Ted left, leaving Mike and Max relatively alone. "I'm glad you made it," Mike said.

"You knew I would. I'm sorry I was late." He looked around, still seeing no sign of Melody or Cliff. "Have you seen my sister?"

Michael nodded. "She was around earlier. You want a drink or something?"

"I think I'll go grab me a beer," he said. "If you see her, will you tell her to find me please?"

"I will, and if you see my wife, will you tell her to find me?" Max agreed and he walked to the house. He entered the kitchen, and was surprised that there was only one other person in there. Annie was standing by the counter.

"Annie."

She turned around and smiled slightly, pushing a lock of hair out of her face. "Max. I was wondering when you would show up."

She moved from behind the counter, and he noticed her swollen belly. In that instant he remembered Casey saying something about Annie being pregnant again, but he hadn't given it much thought. Now, though, seeing that she was just a

matter of weeks from delivering her ninth child, he became nervous. "Uh, when are you due?"

"November fifth," she said, putting her hand on her stomach. "And this is going to be the last one."

He tried to do the math quickly in his head. What was November minus nine months...damn Max, think!

She must have sensed what he was doing. "It's not yours."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

He shook his head, knowing that she wouldn't have told him the truth had she suspected that it was his baby. She wouldn't have risked her marriage. "So have you been doing okay?" He asked. He moved around the counter and opened the refrigerator in search of the beer that had brought him into the kitchen.

She nodded. "I'm doing good. No better, no worse than last time we talked."

"So, is it a boy or girl?" Max asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know. We couldn't tell on the ultrasound."

Max, still feeling uneasy, opened the bottle of beer and took a long gulp. Annie put her hand on his arm. "I just want you to know, that everything has been fine since...you know. He doesn't know." "That's good."

They both turned as a man entered the kitchen. Max didn't even need to be introduced to know that it was Matt, Annie's husband. Annie beamed at him. "Matt! I want you to meet Max."

Matt extended his hand. "Oh, finally. I've met everyone else."

Max shook his hand. "Nice to meet you," he said. I slept with your wife! He quickly finished the first bottle of beer and reached in the refrigerator for a second.

"There's a bar downstairs," Annie said.

"Yeah, thanks." He left the room and made his way to the basement where a hired bartender was serving up drinks. Max slid onto a barstool. "Tequila," Max said. The bartender placed a shot glass in front of him and poured the drink. Max downed it and chased it with another swig from the beer bottle.

What is wrong with me? I should be enjoying myself. I love parties. I haven't even been here an hour yet and I want to go home. He pushed the shot glass toward the bartender signaling that he wanted a refill.

"Give me your keys," a voice over his shoulder said.

He turned to look at the speaker. He smiled at Casey. "Yes ma'am." He dutifully dug in his pocket and handed her his keys. "Mike's looking for you."

"Thanks." She sat on the stool next to him. "Are you having a good time?"

He nodded and lied. "Yeah. I ran into Annie and Matt."

Casey raised her eyebrows. "It was okay?"

"Of course, Case. What do you think, we were going to start making out in the kitchen in front of him? He doesn't know, you know."

"I know." She patted his arm. "Have a good time." She hopped up and was gone again.

Max threw back the next drink and got up from the bar, carrying a fresh bottle of beer. He was already feeling the effects of the drinks. He was not a stranger to alcohol by any means, but four drinks in a span of about thirty minutes was a lot, especially since it had been hours since he had eaten. He made his way back outside and found Jason and Carmen sitting at a patio table with Niki McGuire, the singer Mike had been working closely with. He sat down with them.

"Is something wrong, Max?" Carmen asked. "You don't look like you're having a good time."

Max shook his head. "I'm fine. Have you seen Melody?"

Carmen nodded. "I think they left already."

Max scowled. "I haven't seen her since she got here. I think she's trying to avoid me."

"Well, if you didn't hassle her all the time about Cliff, then maybe she wouldn't avoid you," Carmen said.

Max mumbled a nasty reply to her under his breath. He knew she was right, though.

"Get yourself something to eat," Jason suggested, probably hoping to keep an argument from starting. "The food is good."

Max glanced over to the part of the yard where several buffet tables were set out under screen tents. He nodded. "I'll be right back." When he came back with his food, Jason, Carmen, and Niki were talking about the music business. Max ate and barely participated in the conversation. Soon, a cake was brought out and a big deal was made about Michael blowing out the twenty-five candles.

Max sighed. "I'm ready to go home," he said aloud although he didn't think anyone was paying attention to him.

"Then go," Niki said.

He shook his head. "I can't. Casey confiscated my keys." "I'll drive you," Niki suggested. "I haven't been drinking." Max considered it. He really wanted to go home. "Okay. Let me go get my house keys." He found Casey in the kitchen. "I need my house keys."

"How are you getting home?" she asked.

"I'm getting a ride from Niki."

Casey raised her eyebrows, but didn't say what she was obviously thinking. She opened a kitchen drawer and pulled out his keys. She handed them to him and he slipped them in his pocket.

He rejoined Niki at her car. "Let's go."

The conversation on the way to his house ranged from her upcoming CD to his and the possibility of a tour, from Jason and Carmen and her thoughts on their “lameness” for not drinking and waiting to have sex, to how free she felt to be away from her parents.

“Well, thanks for the ride,” he said when they arrived at the house. He opened the car door.

Niki shut off the car. “You’re not going to invite me in?”

“Uhhh,” Max stammered, caught off-guard. “Sure, come on in.”

Niki followed him through the back door. “Nice place,” she said, looking around. “This is the house the record company set you up in, right?”

“Yeah,” Max said. He wanted her to leave.

“Can I take a tour?”

Max nodded warily and reminded himself that she was just a kid. He showed her around the main areas of the house.

She stepped closer to him. “Aren’t you going to show me your bedroom, Max?”

He clenched his jaw. “There’s really no point.”

She ran her hand down his chest and stopped it on his belt buckle. “No? Are you sure?”

Max cleared his throat tried to clear his head. The alcohol was making it hard. “I...uhhh...have a girlfriend,” he managed to get out.

Niki pushed her body close to his and moved her hand down. Max gasped. “She’s not here,” she said, pressing her hand against him.

Max shook his head and tried to will away the erection that was growing under her hand. “I can’t.”

“No one will know, Max. I’ve been hearing about how you weren’t going out anymore. I know you must be ready to explode.” She leaned into him and nipped at his earlobe. “Show

me your room,” she whispered.

Max looked at the girl. Hannah would never know. He led her down the hall to his room. “This is it,” he said. He turned around to face her. She was already disrobing.

He sucked in his breath at her body, a small waist, big breasts, flat stomach, and piercings in places he had never seen before.

She smiled at him. “You like?” He nodded, but didn’t move. “What are you waiting for, Max? I’m ready.” She slithered across his bed.

Max reached for his belt buckle. Hannah will never know, he told himself again. He undid the buckle and unzipped his jeans. Hannah won’t know, but I will.

He shook his head. “Put your clothes on, Niki, and get out of here.”



## Chapter Six

Hannah sighed when she opened the door to Subway Saturday morning. Justin was wiping down the counter. She hadn't had to work with him since their fight, and she was sure he was behind the scheduling. Since she only worked there a few hours on the weekends, it would have been easy for him to find a way to be scheduled opposite shifts as her.

"Hey, Hannah," he said as she approached.

She frowned. "I guess you got stuck with me this time, huh? No one to trade shifts with?"

He shook his head. "I haven't been trading shifts. I'm not avoiding you. You're avoiding me."

She didn't respond. It was true. He had called everyday for the first few days following their fight. That slacked off to every other day, and now just every three or four days. When she

knew it was Justin calling, she let the phone ring; and when she did answer it, she hung up as soon as he said hello. Jimmy had had no better luck trying to get her to talk to Justin either.

"Why are you avoiding me?" He followed her as she went into the back room.

"Because you didn't believe me."

He sighed. "I'm sorry. I believe you now."

"Why because Jimmy said it was true? You believe him, is what you mean."

Justin looked down and shook his head. He looked back up at her. "I guess you're right. I'm sorry, Hannah, but it's still kinda unbelievable."

Hannah stared at her friend. Justin wasn't a native of Crossdale. He had moved into a rooming house there to avoid living in the dorms at the nearby university. He knew her history, because she had told him, and because he had heard it from everyone in town. But he had never bought into the idea that Hannah was replacing her mother as the town tramp. She was his co-worker and his friend, and he chose to judge her on real-life instead of rumors.

She smiled. "It is, even for me."

"Does that smile mean you forgive me and we're friends again?" He asked.

She nodded. "Yeah." Her cell phone rang and she dug it out of her jacket pocket. "It's him," she said. "Hello?" She walked a few steps away from Justin, and he took her hint that she wanted some privacy.

"Hey Hannah." Max said, not sounding like his usual cheerful self.

"What's wrong?" She asked.

"Nothing. I think I may have had too much to drink last night."

"Oh." She was never quite sure how to respond to his

stories about drinking. She wasn't supposed to drink while taking her medication, and as a Christian she felt a moral conviction not to overindulge. "So the party must have been pretty good."

"Not really. I mean, it was a good party, but I just wasn't into it."

"Why not?"

"Because you weren't there. That would have made things a whole lot better."

Hannah frowned. She would have given her eyeteeth to have been able to go to that party, but with her work schedule it was impossible. Too many people depended on her, and she couldn't risk losing her job. She needed the money. The insurance she had through the bank refused to cover her illness, claiming it was a pre-existing condition. She needed her job to pay for her meds.

"Have you gotten to spend a lot of time with your sister?"

"Ugh," Max moaned. "I haven't even seen her yet. I know she's here because everyone else has seen her, but she's giving me the big brush off."

"Why?"

"Carmen says it's because I hassle her about Cliff."

"Do you?" Hannah had heard Max's concerns before. Unlike her, he was talkative and didn't keep many secrets.

"Probably. I'm just scared, Hannah. I don't want her to get sick."

"You think it's gotten that far? You think they're sleeping together?"

"I would hope that she would be smarter than that. I don't know, though. She must have spent the night with him."

"Would David and Shannon have let that happen?" Hannah asked.

"Well, I don't think they would have put them up in the

same room; she's only seventeen, but they can't watch them all night."

Justin stepped into the back room and signaled that he needed her help.

"Listen Max," she said. "I've got to go. I'm at work, you know."

"Oh yeah, I'm sorry. I'll talk to you later."

"Bye." She clicked off the phone and hurried to the front to help Justin with the line of customers.

Max put down the phone then picked it right back up. He dialed David's number. Shannon picked up. "Hey, Shan," he said. "What's going on?"

"Oh, hey Max. Nothing much."

"Are y'all going to be around today? I was thinking that I might come by there." "Can

you play nice?" Max

sighed. "Yes."

"Yeah, we'll be here all day. When are you coming?"

"As soon as I get dressed."

"Okay, sugar. See you in a bit."

Max jumped out of the bed, rubbing the back of his neck trying to work out the kink. He must have slept the entire night in one position to feel so stiff. He quickly dressed and left for David's house.

"Melody and Cliff are by the pool," Shannon said when Max entered the den. David was sitting on the couch playing a video game and Shannon, an architect, was sitting at her drafting table.

"Max!" David said, pushing a controller toward him. "Play some football?"

"Sure," Max agreed, sitting on the couch and taking the controller. "What are you working on, Shannon?"

"Mr. Lloyd took on these new clients this week who want to see something by Monday for their kitchen. They are closing in their carport and it's just a big mess. Anyway, they need it done right away, and he gave the whole account to me."

"So what happened with you and Niki last night?" David asked.

Max shook his head. "Nothing. She just drove me home."

David laughed. "Right."

"That's right. She just drove me home."

David shook his head. "Well, you should have heard her talking last night. That girl has got one filthy mouth on her. She was definitely looking for some last night."

Max frowned and thought about the previous night. "Well, she didn't get it from me."

"Okay, let's play," David said. The conversation fell to the wayside as the football game progressed.

"Well, you still suck," David said almost an hour later when the game was over. He turned off the machine. "I guess Mel's probably still out by the pool."

Max nodded, taking the hint. "Okay." He exited the house through the second story back door and looked over the balcony to the pool. Melody and Cliff were sitting at a patio table playing cards. "Hey guys," he called to them. He bounded down the stairs and approached the table.

"Hey Max," Melody said, looking up at him and shielding her eyes from the sun. "What's up?"

"Nothing." He sat down. "Hey, Cliff, how are you?"

Cliff nodded a greeting. "Good."

Max clenched his jaw. He hated the tension. He and Melody had always had a good relationship, but the more serious her relationship with Cliff grew, the more strained the

sibling relationship became. As for Cliff, Max had considered him a friend until recently. What he hated more than the tension was knowing that he was the reason for it all. He would have never stood for someone telling him whom he could and couldn't love, and he knew he shouldn't be doing it to his sister.

"You think maybe we could get together later?" Max asked, implying that he wanted it to be just he and Melody.

Melody glanced across the table at Cliff. "I guess so. What did you have in mind?"

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter to me. I'll take you to dinner later."

Melody nodded. "Okay, can I pick the place?" Max smiled. "Of course."

That evening, Max waited until the conversation between he and Melody was easy and comfortable before broaching the subject of Cliff. "Mel, I want to talk about Cliff."

She rolled her eyes. "Jeez, Max. We almost made it through the whole meal."

He held up his hand to stop her. "I don't want to fight. I just want to talk."

"About what?"

"I'm worried about you, and your future if you stay with him."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know y'all are getting serious. It's becoming pretty obvious to me that you aren't coming to Orlando for college because you miss me. I know he's moving here, too. I think it's great that you've found someone."

"I love him, Max." "And he loves you?"

She nodded and smiled. "Oh yeah."

“There’s no cure for AIDS.”

“He doesn’t have AIDS. He’s HIV-positive. That’s a big difference. And his viral load count is undetectable and has been for a long time.”

“Does that mean he’s cured?” Max asked. He knew the answer was no. “Does that mean he’ll never get sick?” He didn’t wait for Melody to answer. “I’ve known Cliff for a long time, and I like him, but it scares me to death that you are going to get sick. If you catch this from him, there’s no guarantee that you will respond the way he has to the meds. You might get AIDS.”

Melody shook her head, but she didn’t speak. Max knew she had no argument. “I just wanted you to think about things like that.”

“I have, Max. Cliff knows a lot about his disease. We’re careful.” She bit her lip as soon as she said it, as if she wished she could take it back.

Max’s heart fell into his stomach. His seventeen-year old sister was making the conscious decision to have sex with a man she knew had deadly virus. Don’t start an argument. He was afraid he might start crying.

“Besides,” Melody continued, “I’m probably safer than you are.”

“I don’t do that anymore.”

“What? You’ve taken a vow of celibacy?”

“No, not celibacy. I have a girlfriend, and she’s the only one I’m seeing.”

Melody raised her eyebrows. “Just one?” “Just one.”

“What’s her name? How come I haven’t met her?”

“Her name is Hannah. She lives in this little town in the mountains. You know, where my car broke down.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“Do you love her?”

Max shrugged. “I care for her, a lot, and I think about her twenty-four hours a day, and want nothing more than to see her again, but I’ve never been in love. I don’t know what that is.”

“Never?”

He shook his head. “How do you know?”

“Well, you care for someone a lot and you think about them twenty-four hours a day and want nothing more than to see them again.”

Max smiled. “I like her a lot and I want to spend time with her and get to know her better.”

“When are you seeing her again?”

“She’s coming with me to the World Series.”

Hannah was one of the last ones off the plane, and she thought the line couldn’t move any slower. Finally, she made it into the airport. As promised, Max was waiting for her at the gate. She ran to him.

Max held Hannah as tight as he could. It felt good to have her in his arms again. He breathed in the smell of her shampoo. He had missed that smell so much, he found himself in the grocery store smelling shampoos trying to match the scent.

Hannah buried her nose in Max’s chest. She thought this day would never get here, and she had almost convinced herself that he wouldn’t be here when she arrived. She pulled back from him. “It’s so good to see you.”

He hugged her again. “Oh baby, it’s been too long!” He leaned down to kiss her.

She kissed him and looked over his shoulder at a large muscular man standing alone with his arms folded across his



chest. "Is he with you?"

Max frowned. "I'm sorry. I had to bring him." He turned to the bodyguard. "Hannah, this is Al. Al, this is Hannah."

The two shook hands. Al took Hannah's carry-on bag. "Do you have more luggage?"

Hannah nodded. "I have a suitcase."

Al led them to the baggage claim. Hannah picked her bag off the conveyor belt and Al lugged it out to the car, which was waiting by the curb with the driver, Jake.

"A limo?"

"Why not?" Max opened the door for her, then climbed in after her.

"That's Jake driving," Max said nodding toward the front of the car. "They'll be with us on the plane and at the game. They're pretty much everywhere."

"So I should get used to seeing them around, then, right?"

"Yeah."

"How do you have a personal life with bodyguards watching all the time?"

Max put his arm around her and pulled her closer. "Well, they're not everywhere." He kissed her again.

She responded eagerly and didn't object when Max laid her back in the seat. She didn't know if the occupants of the front seat could see them, and at that moment, she didn't care. Max worked his hand underneath her T-shirt and slipped his hand inside her bra. She gasped at his touch.

"How far to your house?" Her words came between pants.

"Too far." He pulled her shirt up and replaced his hand with his mouth. He pressed himself against her body and she could feel his excitement. She reached for him and he helped her unfasten his jeans. She freed him from the fabric that constrained him. He moaned at the feeling of her hand around him.

He moved back to kissing her mouth. After a few minutes, he pulled back. "I want to wait. I don't want to do it here. I didn't mean for it to get this far." He sat up and stuffed himself back into his pants.

She nodded. "Yeah, good idea." She sat up and readjusted her clothes.

"We're getting close," he said.

Hannah pawed through her pocketbook. "Can I smoke? It's been hours since I had one."

Max nodded and flipped open an ashtray. "Go ahead."

"The smoke doesn't bother you?"

He shook his head. "Not really. I'm used to it. My parents smoke."

"Will I be able to smoke in the house?"

"In my room. I don't know how Jason and Carmen will feel about it. I didn't even think about it when I told them you were coming."

"It's okay. I'm used to having to go outside."

They chatted for a few more minutes, careful to keep the subject to something that wouldn't make them rip their clothes off. The limo pulled into Max's driveway.

"We're here," he said, opening the car door.

Hannah climbed out after him. She was surprised when she saw his house. She was expecting some sort of high-class mansion, but the house was really no different than something she could find in one of the nicer neighborhoods in Crossdale.

"Surprised, aren't you?" Max said, reading her mind.

She nodded. "A little, yeah."

Max took her bags from Al, who had retrieved them from the trunk. He spoke a few words to Al and Jake and the two men drove away in the limo. "This is the house the record company put us in when we first came to Orlando. All five of us lived here. Everyone else has moved out, except me and

Jason. Carmen doesn't live here, but she's here about fifty percent of the time."

Hannah followed him up the front steps and waited while he unlocked the door. The first room they entered was the formal living room. "We hardly ever use this room," he said. He led her into the spotless kitchen. "Mrs. Potts comes on Thursdays."

"The maid?"

Max nodded. "Yeah. She does the deep down cleaning, but we still have to pick up the big chunks. She gets real pissy if we don't."

Hannah giggled. "I'll try not to make a big mess."

He led her past the den and down the hallway, pointing out Jason's room, the guest room, the bathrooms and his own bedroom.

"It's dark." He sat her suitcase and overnight bag by the bed.

She nodded, noting that windows had tinted windows. "It is pretty dark."

He gently put his hands on her shoulders. "I really am glad that you are here." He pulled her to him and gently kissed her lips.

"Do we have time before we have to be at Mike's?" Hannah asked. Casey was cooking a big dinner for the ten of them. It was usual occurrence, but normally Max went by himself.

Max looked at his watch. "I think so. It doesn't matter; I plan on spending a little time making love to you. They can just wait." He pulled off his shirt.

She started to take off her jeans, but he stopped her. "Let me do it. I want to undress you."

Just the words made Hannah shiver. She had never had a partner that cared about whether or not she was even enjoying herself, much less spending time trying to please her. She stood

still while Max pulled her shirt over her head. He kissed her shoulder blades and pulled her bra straps down with his teeth. He ran his tongue down her throat to the space between her breasts. He reached around her and unclasped her bra, letting it fall to the floor. He cupped each mound in his hands and lifted them to his mouth.

His hands and mouth traveled down her stomach to her hips, where the denim of her jeans stopped him. He slowly unfastened her pants, making her grown impatient. Finally, he loosened them and pulled them down. She helped him remove them and he tossed them aside along with her socks and shoes. He put one hand on each hip and leaned in to tug at her panties with his teeth. He pulled them down some and used his tongue to tease the skin underneath.

She couldn't hold still any longer. "Please, Max," she begged. He continued teasing her with his tongue for another moment before picking her up and laying her on the bed. He stripped off his clothes and picking up where he left off. She bucked her hips against him, and tightened her muscles, trying not to climax.

"Let it go, baby," he whispered.

She relaxed and the orgasm came quickly. He moved up eye level with her and kissed her on the mouth. "You taste so good," he murmured. He deepened the kiss almost as if he was trying to devour her. Finally, he positioned himself between her legs and entered her.

They both gasped at the feeling. "Oh, baby girl, I'm not going to last very long," he said, slowly moving his hips.

She met each movement with one of her own. It wasn't long before she felt his warmth inside her. He collapsed on top of her. "I hope that was good for you," he said, rolling off her.

She nodded. "Very good."

He sat up. "I guess we should get moving," he said.

Hannah sat up, too. "Do I have time to take a shower? I don't want to go smelling like sex." "I like the smell of sex," he said. "Do I have time?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I want to take one, too. I'll go to Jason's bathroom and get one while you're in here."

"You don't think we can take one together?"

"You'll never get the smell off of you then. Cause every time I see you naked, I'm going to want to do what we just did."

"Every time?"

He moved so that she could see that he was getting excited again. "Every time." He stood up and pulled on his underwear. He got a clean pair out of his drawer. "I'm going upstairs."

Hannah quickly showered. Max returned while she was blow-drying her hair. They dressed and left for Mike and Casey's. Hannah had been studying up on Quintessential, so she was confident she would have no trouble remembering who was who, even when it came to Casey, Shannon, Carmen, and Dana.

During dinner, Max's friends went out of their way to make Hannah feel comfortable. By the time Casey served dessert, Hannah was relaxed enough to participate in the conversation without feeling like an outsider.

As Casey was serving the dessert, the telephone rang. She practically dropped Dana's chocolate cake on her lap. "Sorry," she muttered as she ran to the phone.

"Annie went into labor today," Mike explained.

"I didn't think she was due for another couple of weeks," Dana said.

Mike shook his head. "She's not. She's ready though. Did you see her at my party? She's huge!"

Max thought back to the party and his conversation with Annie. She had promised that the baby wasn't his. He did the

math again. October 19<sup>th</sup> minus January 21<sup>st</sup> equaled almost nine months exactly. His stomach turned upside down.

"You're joking!" They all heard Casey exclaim from across the room. So what were they? Aww... No, I guess we're still coming up in a couple of weeks. Do you think that will be okay? They have to get this album together by December first. Okay, Mom. Talk to you later." She returned to the table.

"Guess what? Annie had twins! They didn't even know there were going to be twins until the doctor pulled the second one out. Isn't that amazing? The second one was hiding all this time."

"What are they?" Dana asked. "Boys? Girls?"

"One of each," Casey said. "That brings her total up to six boys and four girls."

Hannah almost choked on the ice in her drink. "Ten kids?"

Casey nodded excitedly. "Yeah, ten."

Shannon shook her head. "I still say that is way to many children for one woman."

"You mean once you and David are married, you're not going to start popping out kids left and right?" Reed asked playfully.

Shannon shook her head. "I don't think so. Besides, I don't see you and Dana popping out kids."

"We've only been married four months," Reed argued.

"That's enough time to get a bun in the oven," David said.

Reed shook his head and frowned. "Well, there's not."

"Well, I for one, can't wait to have another," Michael said. He nodded toward Casey. "I just have to talk that one into it."

She shook her head. "Will is only three months old."

"Yeah, and by the time another baby got here, he'd be a year."

"Yeah, and your point?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "You're not getting any younger." Casey was twenty-seven and older than Mike by almost three years.

She picked up a roll and threw it at him. Hannah listened to the friendly argument that soon involved everyone at the table except her. The opponents were neatly divided among gender lines, and Hannah guessed that was purposeful and common. There was a comfortableness and intimacy between them that was only found in families.

"I don't want to go back to Crossdale," Hannah whined as she threw a handful of underclothes into her suitcase. It was Sunday. They had come back to Orlando from the World Series the day before. Her plane back home to North Carolina was scheduled to leave just a couple of hours later..

Max picked up the bag and turned it upside down, emptying it onto the bed. "Then stay."

"I can't stay, Max. I've got to be at work in the morning."

He shook his head. "No, you don't. Stay here."

She smiled and scooped up her clothes. "I'd love to stay here."

"I'm serious, Hannah. Stay, move in. I'm sure Carmen would love to have some female company here."

Hannah dropped the clothes. "I don't know, Max. It's pretty soon. Live together?"

He nodded, understanding her apprehension. They had only known each other for a few weeks. It is sudden. Why am I so drawn to this girl? He shook the thought out of his head. It didn't matter why he wanted her to stay; he just did and that's all that mattered to him. "You don't have to stay in here with me if you're not ready. There's an extra room. Please."

“You’re making it hard to say no.”

“Then don’t say no. Say yes.”

She chewed her bottom lip and stared at him. What do I have to lose? And I would have my own room. It would be a chance to leave Crossdale and all those memories behind. “Really?”

He nodded and once again dumped out her suitcase. “Really. Stay. Please.”

“What about Jason ? Don’t you have to ask him?” “I already have,” he lied.

“No, you haven’t.”

“He won’t care, Hannah. He likes you. Carmen will love for you to be here when she comes to town.”

“It just seems so soon.”

“Whose side are you on?” Max argued. “Do you want to or not?”

“I want to. I want to a lot. I’d like to live here with the three of you.”

“Then it’s settled.” He kicked her suitcase off the bed.

She frowned. “It’s not that simple. I have to go home and quit my jobs and tell Jimmy and all that. I can’t just not go back. Besides, you should still clear it with Jason.”

“Hold on.” He left the room.

Carmen flung open the door and rushed into Max’s room. She threw her arms around Hannah. “Of course we don’t mind! Oh please move in! It’s going to great having another girl here.” Jason and Max followed her in the room. “I told you,” Max said.

Hannah smiled. “Okay, okay. I’ll move in.”

“How soon?” Max asked.

“Well, I have to give my job two weeks notice, and I have to teach Jimmy how to do his own books, so...”

“A couple of weeks then,” Max finished. He was amazed at how loyal she was to her job.



She shook her head. "I don't know if I can do it that soon."

"How about when she comes down for the wedding?"

Jason suggested. "When she comes down then, she'll just stay."

"That's almost a month away," Max complained.

Hannah went to him and laid her head against her chest. "You'll just have to come and see me." She looked at Jason. "I think that's a good idea."

"Yeah, he has one every now and again," Max joked, playfully knocking Jason in the head.

"Did you enjoy your trip, Hannah?" Amanda asked as she sat the platter of fried chicken on the table.

Hannah smiled. "Oh, I did."

"Did you stay in California the whole weekend?" Jimmy asked.

Hannah shook her head. "No. You know I flew down to Orlando Friday afternoon and then we flew to Anaheim Saturday afternoon - on a private jet, no less - and flew back to Orlando yesterday morning. Oh, you guys should have seen this jet we flew on. It was incredible. I didn't even know they made that kind of plane."

"Wow," Amanda said, "four flights in four days. That's pretty impressive for someone who's never flown before."

"Were the flights okay?" Jimmy asked. "Did you handle it okay?"

Hannah rolled her eyes. "You mean, did I freak out and cause a big scene? No." She took a bite of her potatoes. "So, did you see the game?"

Jimmy and Amanda both nodded. "Yeah," Amanda said. "They sounded really good. It must have been so exciting."

Hannah nodded. "It was."

“Was it just you and the five of them?” Jimmy asked. Hannah shook her head. “No, no. There were ten of us. It was me and Max and the other four guys and their wives and girlfriends, so ten of us.”

“So what are they like?” Amanda asked. “I can’t believe that you’re jetting around with Quintessential.”

“Oh, they’re all really nice. They’re really close, like a family, and they couldn’t have been nicer to me.”

“What did you do besides flying around and going to baseball games?”

Hannah shrugged. “We went out to eat, went to the movies; hung out mostly.”

“Did you drink?” Jimmy asked.

Hannah frowned. “No, I know I’m not supposed to.”

“Did you remember your medication? Everyday?” “Yes, Jimmy.”

“When are you going to see him again?” Amanda asked. She was obviously excited for Hannah.

“One of the guys, David is getting married on November sixteenth and I’m going back down then. I don’t know if I’ll see him again before that.” She looked from Amanda to Jimmy. “And when I go down there, I’m not coming back.

“What?” Jimmy said, dropping his fork. “What do you mean you’re not coming back?”

“He asked me to move in with him and I’m going to.”

“No, you’re not,” Jimmy argued. “You’ve only known this guy for a few weeks. You can’t go moving in with him.”

Hannah had expected this opposition from him. “I am, Jimmy,” she said calmly.

“But Hannah,” Jimmy protested.

“But Jimmy,” Hannah interrupted. “I am twenty-one years old. I have a job -- two jobs. I graduated from college. I’m old enough and responsible enough to make my own decisions.”

"I know you are, Hannah, and I understand that you want your own place; I do, but why don't you just move out of here." Hannah shook her head. "I have to get out of Crossdale. Everyone here knows about me and I'm tired of all the stares and whispers."

"Then move to Asheville." Jimmy suggested. "Why do you want to move all the way to Florida with some guy you hardly know?"

"I like him, Jimmy, and he likes me. He could have his pick of women and he chose me."

"Has he even told you that he loves you?"

"No, but..."

Jimmy cut her off. "But! He hasn't told you that he loved you? What is his reason for having you move in then? So you'll be more accessible?"

"When are you going to believe that it's not like that? I've told you that it's not about sex. If I wanted sex, I could do that here."

"Maybe you don't understand what he's thinking."

Hannah gritted her teeth. "Are you calling me stupid? I'm not a stupid little girl!"

"Do you love him?"

She nodded. "I think I do. We just want to be together to see where this is going. He can't always be here, but I can be there. I can get a job there."

"But you're talking about living with him, playing house. It just seems so soon."

"It's not like that. I'd have my own room. Carmen Montgomery stays there, too, sometimes."

"Carmen Montgomery, the singer?" Amanda interrupted to ask. Hannah looked at her and nodded. "Yeah. She's Jason's girlfriend." She looked back at Jimmy. "See, it's not just me and him. It's not 'playing house'."

"What if you go down there and he just ends up breaking your

heart?”

“Then I’ll come back home. Listen Jimmy, I know you’re worried about me, but I’ve done more than anyone ever thought I would.”

He nodded, agreeing with her. “I know, but what if you go down there and get sick? You know the doctors have said a big change in your life could trigger an episode.”

“So what am I supposed to do? Stay in these mountains my whole life? Stay here and be an old maid because everyone here thinks I’m crazy?”

“Have you told Max?” Jimmy asked. “Have you told him that you were a schizo?”

“Jimmy!” Amanda exclaimed.

Hannah pushed away from the table and went to her room. She had a good mind to pack up her things and drive down to Orlando that night.

After a few minutes, there was a soft knock on her door and Amanda opened it. “Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

Amanda sat down on the bed next to her. “I’m sorry Jimmy said that.”

Hannah shrugged. “Why? It’s true.”

“He still shouldn’t have said it like that.” She paused. “Did you tell Max?”

Hannah shook her head. “No. How do you say that?” “You’ll have to tell him, honey,” Amanda said. “If you go down there to live, he’ll have to know. Just in case.”

“I know, but if I tell him, he might change his mind.”

“Then you shouldn’t be moving in with him anyway. He should accept you for who you are.”

“I just wanted to give him a chance to see that I’m normal...”

that I'm not sick."

Amanda sighed. "I can't tell you what to do, and neither can Jimmy, but we both want what's best for you."

"I know."

Amanda stood up and pulled Hannah by the arm. "Come on, let's go eat."

Jimmy looked at her as she sat at the table. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." They were silent for a few moments. "So if I move out, you two can get married."

Jimmy and Amanda looked at each other and smiled. "What makes you think we want to get married?" he asked.

"Oh, come on. I'm not an idiot. I know you've been waiting around for me to get well enough to take care of myself. I'm well enough guys, and it's time for me to go."

Jimmy frowned and Hannah thought she could see tears in his eyes. "But why do you have to be going so far away?" He looked down at his plate.

Amanda cleared her throat. "So what's his house like?" Hannah shook her head. "It's nice, but it isn't what you would expect. I mean, you'd expect that he would live in some mansion, but he doesn't. None of them do, really. But the house has three bedrooms, a big kitchen, living room, den, three and a half baths, big yard, swimming pool."

"Sounds nice," Amanda said. "We'll have to come visit y'all this winter when it's freezing here."

"Thank you," Hannah said. "Thank you for being so supportive."

"You said it yourself, Hannah," Jimmy said. "You've accomplished more these past three years than anyone ever thought you would. I'm really proud of you."

Hannah smiled at Justin who was the next customer in line. "Can I help you?"

He handed her his paycheck. "I want to keep out fifty bucks," he said. He pulled an envelope from his back pocket. "I brought yours."

"Thanks," she said, taking the envelope from him. She processed his transaction and handed him the cash.

"When do you take your lunch?"

She looked at her watch. "In ten minutes. Why?"

"I'm going to take you out to lunch. I want to hear about your weekend."

"Okay."

"I'll be back in ten minutes."

Ten minutes later, Hannah was already standing outside when Justin pulled up. She climbed in his car. "I've got an hour."

"Pacey's okay?" Justin asked.

Pacey's Grill was probably the most popular establishment in Crossdale. Even with the openings of several fast food restaurants in recent years, the Grill was still packed everyday at lunchtime. It was a family owned business that had been serving Crossdale for over fifty years.

"That's fine," Hannah said, lighting a cigarette.

"So?" Justin said, "How was your weekend?"

"It was good -- very, very good."

"Christy can't wait to hear about it. She'll probably call you tonight. We were watching the other night when they were singing the National Anthem and she was like, 'I can't believe Hannah is seeing that guy'."

Hannah smiled. She had never had anyone remotely jealous of her.

Justin pulled into a spot in front of Pacey's Grill, which was just down the block from the bank. They got out of the car and

stood outside while Hannah finished her cigarette. He opened the door for her.

"Hello Justin," a waitress said cheerfully as they entered. "Hannah," she added blankly. Everyone in Crossdale knew each other and Hannah was used to not being greeted as warmly as whomever she was with.

They seated themselves at a booth in the corner. The waitress followed them, already carrying two tall glasses of tea. "What'll be today? Your usuals?"

"Yeah," Justin and Hannah answered in unison.

"So," Justin asked. "Is it love?"

Hannah smiled. "I wouldn't go that far. I like him a lot, and I'm pretty sure he likes me, but I wouldn't say love."

Justin shook his head. "I don't even know what to say, Hannah. I am so happy for you. I've known you for what -- three years? I've never seen you have any kind of a social life. I guess when you decide to get one, you go whole hog."

Hannah laughed. "I didn't exactly decide, Justin. It just happened. I've never had anything good happen to me. This is like a dream. Sometimes I worry that I'm delusional and this isn't real."

"You're not delusional, and it's for real." The waitress approached the table with Justin's fried chicken sandwich and Hannah's barbecue platter. "So when are you seeing him again?"

"I don't know. Definitely in November. I'm going down for David's wedding, and I'm staying there. I'm moving in with him."

Justin raised his eyebrows. "What?"

"He asked me if I wanted to come and live there. I'd have my own room, you know."

"Of course, you would. Are you sure about this?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Why wouldn't I be? How many

people get this opportunity? Plus, I could use a change of environment. And no one here is going to miss me.”

Justin frowned. “That’s not true. You’re my best friend. I’m going to miss you. But hey, I can always come visit, right?”

Hannah nodded. “Yeah.” She pushed the food around on her plate for a few moments before speaking again. “What did you think when I told you that I was sick?”

“You haven’t told him?”

Hannah shook her head.

Justin sighed. “At first, I guess I was a little wierded out by it. I didn’t know what it meant, other than that you were somehow crazy. But then I realized that you were just as normal as me and if you hadn’t have told me, I would probably still never know.”

“So what should I do about Max?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s different. You’re going to be living with him. You’re sleeping with him. He might deserve to know up front.”

“It’ll scare him off,” Hannah said.

“Maybe. I don’t know, Hannah. I do know that you’ve been well for a long time, so maybe you’ll never have to tell him.”

Hannah frowned. “That’s a nice thought, but I don’t think it’s going to work out that way. I’ve been having some symptoms since September.” She frowned. “As a matter of fact, that voice started back the same weekend I met him for the very first time. I guess it’s the excitement or stress or something.”

Justin looked her dead in the eyes. “Go to the doctor, Hannah. Have you told Jimmy?”

“I can’t tell Jimmy. If I do, he won’t let me go. I’ll go to the doctor and get my meds straight. I promise. Please don’t tell Jimmy.”



Justin shook his head and bit his lip and looked like he wanted to disagree. Finally, he nodded slightly. “Okay.”

## Chapter Seven

Carmen looked up from her book when one of the four phones on the patio table began to ring. She didn't recognize the ring tone as being her cell phone or Jason's or the cordless phone from inside the house. She picked up Max's cell phone. "Max's phone, Carmen speaking."

"Oh, Carmen." Michael said. "Is Max around?"

"Yeah, hold on." She put her hand over the mouthpiece. "Max!" Max looked up from the basketball court. She waved the phone at him. He trotted across the yard and took the phone from her.

"Hello?" He wiped his brow with the hem of his shirt and took a swig from the bottle of water he had left on the table. He hoped it was Hannah saying that she was coming back to Florida early. He would have left that second to go get her.

“Hey Max.” It wasn’t Hannah.

“Hey, dude. What’s up? I thought you guys were in Utah.”

“Yeah, we are.” Max strained to hear Michael’s lowered voice.

“Listen, Max. I wanted to call you before Casey does. She’s not happy.” “What’s wrong?”

“We just got back from seeing the babies.”

“Yeah?” Max felt the uneasiness eating at his stomach lining.

“The boy’s got red hair.”

“So?” He was feeling nauseated.

“So, you’ve seen Casey’s family. Not a red-head in the bunch.”

Max glanced at Carmen and Jason, who had joined them at the table. Carmen was reading again, and Jason was flipping through a magazine. They didn’t appear to be listening to his conversation. Still, though, he got up from the table and went inside the house. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to say, really. It is what it is, and it’s your business how you deal with it. I just wanted to call you before Casey rips you a new one.”

“Well, thanks for the information.” He clicked off the phone. “Shit!” He slammed his hands down on the counter.

“Something wrong, man?” Jason asked, coming in the kitchen through the back door. He opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water.

Max looked at Jason and shook his head. Nice, virgin Jason. What would he know about this? But Jason was his buddy, his friend, his brother. He sighed and shook his head. “That was Mike. He was warning me that Casey’s on the warpath.”

“Why? What did you do?”

Max looked at his hands and shook his head. He lifted his

head and met Jason's eyes. "I might be the father of Annie's babies."

Jason's eyes grew wide. "How? I mean, why does she think they might be yours?"

"Mike says one of them has red hair."

"Didn't you use condoms?" Jason asked. "I thought you always did."

"I did."

"So what are you going to do?"

Max shrugged. "I don't know, but until I figure something out, I'd like to keep this just between us." His phone started ringing again. "God, I don't want to talk to her."

"It's Casey, man," Jason said. "She's not going to go away."

Max clicked on the phone. "Hello, Casey." He didn't even try to sound cheerful.

"Max, I know Mike just called. I'm not mad." Max half-laughed. "Yeah, right."

"I just think that we should figure this out."

"Why? And why is this any of your business anyway?" "Max, please don't try to start an argument. There is no doubt in my mind that your DNA is in this mix. This baby, Tommy, looks just like you."

"What does Annie say? Does she want to know for sure?"

"It's in everyone's best interest, Max."

"Yeah? Does Matt think so?" Casey was silent. "He doesn't suspect, does he, Casey?"

"Not that I know of. Annie doesn't want to tell him until she knows for sure."

Max sighed. "This is not good for me."

"Would you not worry about your image for one second?" Casey sounded annoyed. "No one will ever know."

"I'm not worried about my image." He shook his head. "What do we need to do?"

"I'm having Alan overnight me a kit. I'll swab the babies and Annie, and I'll swab you when I get back. Alan will have the test run anonymously."

"There's no way you could have left Dr. Klein out of this?"

"You can trust him more than anyone, Max. You know that."

"How long is this going to take?"

"We're coming home Sunday. You should know the results by Tuesday afternoon."

"Then what? What if I am? What if I am the father of those twins?"

"I guess that's between you and Annie," Casey said.

"Okay guys," Brian, the record producer said. "That's good. Take five."

The five guys slipped off their headphones and filed out of the sound booth. Casey came into the room. "Max." She was holding an envelope. She held the door open and he followed her into the hallway.

"Is that the results?"

She nodded.

"Have you seen them?"

Again, she nodded. "I've already called Annie."

He took a deep breath and took the envelope from her. "Well, here goes nothing." He opened the envelope and took out two folded sheets of paper. He unfolded the first paper and scanned past the numbers to the conclusion. The alleged father, John Doe, is excluded as the biological father of the child, Anna Morris, because they share no genetic markers.

He let out his breath, and unfolded the second paper, expecting the results to be the same. The alleged father, John Doe, cannot be excluded as the biological father of the child,

Thomas Morris, because they share genetic markers. The probability of paternity is 99.8%.

He let the information sink in. He looked up at Casey. "Is this saying that I'm Thomas' father and not Anna's?"

Casey nodded. "Yeah."

Max leaned against the wall. "How?"

Casey shrugged. "It's just a matter of timing. Annie must have had sex with Matt as soon as she got back home."

"What did Annie say?" "Not much."

"Does she want me to call her? Where do we go from here?"

"I don't know." She looked at her watch. "I've got to get back to work. I haven't told Mike, just you and Annie."

"Thanks, Casey." He watched her leave then he folded the papers and stuffed them in his back pocket.

Jason stuck his head into the hallway. "Ready? We're waiting on you."

"Casey was just here."

Jason looked around and came out into the hallway. "Did she want Mike?"

"She dropped off the paternity test results."

Jason raised his eyebrows. "And?"

"I'm a daddy," Max said. His jaw started to tremble and he bit his lip trying not to cry.

"Oh," Jason said. He went to his friend and put his arms around him while he cried.

Max shook his head and pulled away. "Just one of them, though – the boy, not the girl."

"Just one?"

"Yeah, if you can believe that." He walked back to the studio. "Come on, we've got a record to make."

"Max," Brian said, handing a sheet of music. "We're going to do Save Me now. Just a rough cut. I know you and Mike

have been playing around with it some, but I want to him to take the first verse and you the second. It's more suited for your voice and I think you can really bring it home."

Max nodded and followed the other guys into the booth. He worked hard to concentrate on the music and not on the envelope in his pocket. When it was his turn to sing, Hannah's face flashed in his mind as he sang the words.

Hoping and waiting,  
Wanting and praying For  
someone to  
Save me from myself  
Save me from this place  
Save me from the fears I have that haunt my nights  
And steal my dreams away  
Save me from the past  
Save me from this hurt  
I'm going insane; it's time you came  
And saved me from myself

"I'm sorry, Brian, guys," he said when they finished singing. "I've got to go."

How am I going to tell Hannah this? I have been so good, and tried so hard to be faithful to her. I don't want to ruin this. Why did that test have to come back positive? Why? What is she going to think of me?

Once home, he holed himself up in his room, lying on his bed and crying. Hannah called twice, and both times he let the phone ring, knowing that he would be unable to keep his composure when he talked to her.

"Max, are you here?" Jason's voice called down the stairs.

"No." Max yelled back.

Jason came into Max's room. "Are you okay, man?"

Max shook his head. "No, I'm not okay. How can I be okay? What am I supposed to do about this?"

"There's nothing to do. It's done. Now, you just have to deal with it."

Max frowned. "You're no help."

Jason sighed. "What do you want me to say? The tests don't lie."

"Don't you understand? It's not the tests that I'm worried about. I get that. I am that baby's father. How am I going to tell Hannah?"

"Your having gotten some girl pregnant is not an impossibility. She knows that right?"

"Well, she knows that I've been with lots of girls. But Annie is married. I slept with a married woman and got her pregnant. She might just decide that she's done with me."

"And she might not. You can't hide it from her."

"Did you need anything?"

"Yeah, me and Carmen are going to throw a couple of steaks on the grill. Do you want one?"

Max shook his head. "No thanks." Jason left and Max closed the bedroom door. "Please baby, don't hate me." He picked up his phone and dialed Hannah's number.

"Hey," she answered, sounding happy to hear from him

"Hey. How are you?"

"I'm fine. You don't sound so good. What's wrong?"

"Are you busy?"

"Nope. I'm just walking in the door from work. What's wrong?"

Max took a deep breath. "I need to tell you something really important, so I need you to be able to listen to me."

"Okay, you're scaring me, though."

"I have something to tell you. Are you ready? Can you listen to me?"

"Yeah, Max go ahead."

"Back in January, on the night before Casey and Mike's



wedding, I went out with Annie, Casey's sister."

"The one that just had the twins?"

"Yeah."

"I thought she was married."

"She is. I just took her out for a cup of coffee, at least that's what it started out as. We ended up having sex."

"Oh." She paused. "Oh, Max. Are you getting ready to tell me those twins are yours?"

"We used protection, I swear. She swore to me that it wasn't mine, but the boy has red hair, and he looks just like me. I saw a picture of him. We did a paternity test. He's mine. The little girl's not."

"How is that possible?"

"I guess she had to have had sex with her husband within a couple of days of being with me. Do you hate me?"

"I can't hate you for something you did nine months ago."

"Don't be easy on me. I won't believe you. I'll just think that you're lying to me and deep down you really hate me."

Hannah sighed. "I don't hate you, Max. I don't know what it is I feel. Why did you have sex with her?" "I don't know. I'm a dog, a scumbag." "That's not true."

"It just happened. I mean, we were talking and the conversation led there, and she really wanted it. I just... I made a horrible mistake."

"Do you have feelings for her?"

"No. I don't have feelings for anyone but you. I promise you, Hannah. I love you."

"What?"

"I said I love you. I love you. I am so scared that I am going to lose you over this. I don't want to lose you." He began to sob.

"You're not going to lose me. I love you too, Max."

"You do?"

"Yes. I love you."

"Will you come sooner? I need you here. Please come down."

"I don't know."

"Please. I'll hire someone to pack your things. Just grab a bag and come now. I'll get a plane to come and get you. Just please come right now. Tonight."

Hannah sighed. She wanted to go. She had already quit her job at Subway and her replacement at the bank had already been hired. It would be no big deal to just go ahead and quit. Amanda had already taken over Jimmy's finances. She wasn't needed there anymore. "Okay, Max. I'll come. I'll come right now."

"Let me see what I can work out about a plane. I'll call you as soon as I can. Is there an airport in Asheville?"

"Yeah, but it's not real big."

"Big enough for the jet like we took to Anaheim?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. I'll give you a call back." "I'll pack."

"Thank you, God," he breathed when he clicked off the phone. He immediately dialed the number of Neil Black, his manager.

"Hey Max, what's up?"

"I need you to do me a favor, Neil. I need the plane tonight."

"Max, it's not like asking to borrow my car. This is a plane. It's expensive. We have to get pilots and a flight plan."

"Then get it. I don't care the cost. If I don't get your plane, I'm just going to charter one."

"No, no. That's what we bought that plane for. How soon do you need it?"

"ASAP."

"Where are you going?"

"Asheville, North Carolina. There's a small airport there."

"Do you need a bodyguard?"

"No."

"How long are you going to be gone?"

"Just there and back tonight. I'm picking up a friend. She'll be waiting for me there."

"Okay, Max. Let me make a couple of phone calls. I'll call you back."

Hannah packed as many clothes in her suitcase in as she could then stuffed her carry-on bag full. This is crazy.

No, you're just crazy, banana-brain. It's starting already. He says jump and you ask how high. You're a crazy fool to get involved with someone like him. He's got a kid, he screwed a married woman. You're just nuts to think that he's not screwing around on you. But you really don't deserve any better. You're just worthless trash. He'll find out soon enough how bad you are.

Hannah closed her eyes and put her fingers to her temples. "Go away, go away, go away," she murmured. She had yet to go to the doctor to get her medicine adjusted.

"Hannah, what's going on?" Jimmy asked, stepping into her room.

"Oh, I've decided to leave tonight. Max is sending a plane."

"For good?"

"Yeah, I mean, I'll have to come back and get more of my stuff, but I'm going ahead and moving in now."

"Why so sudden?"

She shrugged. "Why not? I'm not needed here anymore." "I wish you wouldn't say it like that."

“Well, it’s true.”

“It’s not.” He shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. “So when is this plane getting here?”

“I don’t know. He’s supposed to call me back. Can you drive me to the airport in Asheville? That’s where the plane is landing.”

“Yeah, of course I will. I just don’t like this spur of the moment stuff. I need more time to plan.”

Hannah frowned. “I’m sorry, Jimmy, but I’ve got to do this. It’s what’s right for me. He told me he loved me.”

Jimmy smiled. “He did?”

She nodded. “He loves me, Jimmy. Finally, after all the crap I have been through, finally I found someone who loves me.”

Jimmy pulled her to him for a hug. “I know you have, Hannah. I’m happy for you. I really am. Just don’t go down there and forget about me.” He kissed the top of her head.

She hugged him tighter. “Jimmy, don’t be sorry. I couldn’t have made it this far without you.” She pulled away from him to look him in the eyes. “You have sacrificed so much for me.” He shook his head and wiped the tears from his face.

Hannah could tell there was so much he wanted to say, but nothing he could put into words. “I’m going to call Amanda so she can come over and say good-bye. Don’t you want to call Justin?”

Hannah nodded. “I should.” Jimmy left the room, and she picked up her cell phone to dial Justin’s number.

“Hey Justin.”

“What’s up?”

“I called to say good-bye.”

“Where are you going?”

“To Orlando. I’m leaving tonight.” “And you’re not coming back?”

"I'll be back for visits."

"So he took it okay when you told him about your schizophrenia?"

"Yeah, he's good."

"And you went to the doctor and got your meds fixed?"

"Oh yeah. I'm good." She shook her head. She hated to lie to him, but she didn't want an argument.

"Okay then. I'll miss you, girl. I love you." "I love you, too, Justin. Be good. Bye" "Bye."

She clicked off the phone and it rang in her hand. "Hello?"

"Hey babe," Max said. "I got the details."

"Okay, what time?"

"The plane will be there in about two hours. It's a hour flight, but the pilot needs time to get ready."

"Okay, I'll be waiting for it."

"I'm coming, too. I'm coming to get you. I'll be on the plane."

"I was hoping you would."

"Where's the paper? And the phone book?" Hannah poured herself a cup of coffee and sat at the table with Jason and Carmen who were eating breakfast.

"The paper is still in the yard," Jason said, "and the phone book is in the first drawer over there." He pointed towards the kitchen cabinets.

"What are you up to?" Carmen asked. "I'm going to find a job."

She had been there a week and was itching to get a job. She liked working and making money, saving it and watching it grow in her bank account. She didn't like feeling dependent on

someone else, the way she had been all week as she watched Max dole out money for every little thing she needed.

She stood up from the table and disappeared from the room. She came back a few seconds later with the paper. She retrieved that phone book from the drawer. She sat back down at the table and opened the paper.

“What kind of job are you looking for?” Carmen asked.

“I don’t know. I was working at a bank before as a teller, but Orlando is a whole lot bigger than Crossdale. I might try to get a job in an accounting department somewhere. That’s what my degree is in.”

She glanced through the paper for a few more minutes before folding it and laying it down. She opened the yellow pages to the employment agencies. “This is where I should start.”

She handed the phone book to Jason. “Find me a place that’s close to here.”

Jason scanned the pages. “This one is close. Applebaum Employment. It’s on Elmhurst Street, which is just across the bridge.”

Hannah nodded, knowing which bridge he was talking about. “Then that’s where I’m going.”

“Where are you going?” Max asked, entering the room.

“To Applebaum Employment Agency. I’m getting a job. Can I borrow your car?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Today?”

“Yes, today.” She stood up and walked over to Max. She kissed him. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” he replied with a smile. “You want me to drive you?”

She shook her head. “Y’all have to be at the studio by ten.” She looked at the clock. It was already nine. “I need to get a shower and get going before all the good jobs get gone.”

She went back to her room and into bathroom. She started the shower and stripped off all her clothes. She looked at herself in the mirror and smiled. She was happy.

What are you so happy about? You're not good enough to be happy. It's just a matter of time before Max does you just like Frankie and makes you have sex with all of his friends. He knows what a whore you are.

"I am not a whore!" Hannah told her reflection.

Sure you are. You had sex with Max when he was practically a stranger. And you kept going back for more with Frankie's buddies. No one was making you.

"You were making me."

Hannah you're such a loser. Only an idiot would think that Max really loved you.

"He does love me."

Eli ran away from you. He finally saw you for who you were.

"No," she cried, giving into the voice.

Eli was scared of living the rest of his life with you. He wasn't killed. He killed himself. He'd rather die than have to live with you.

Hannah sank to the floor and wrapped her arms around her legs. "No, it's not true."

Even your own mother didn't love you enough to stick around. If you had been a better kid, she wouldn't have run away. You make everyone run away. Jimmy is glad to see you go. You make everyone sick. Stupid, stupid whore.

Hannah continued crying and rocking herself on the floor until there was a knock on the door. "Hannah, are you still in there?" Max called. He jiggled the handle of the locked door.

She jerked her head up and the episode stopped as quickly as it had started. "Yeah, just a few more minutes."

"I have to go," he said. "The keys to the Lexus are on your

bed.”

“Okay. See you later.” She heard him leave. She stuck her hand in the shower and tested the water. It was cold. “Damn.”

She stepped in anyway and washed quickly in the frigid shower. When she got out, she looked at herself in the mirror again. “I’ve got to find a doctor.”

In her room, she removed her medication from her top dresser drawer and took three of the pills, more than her usual dosage. She only had a few left and there was only one refill left on the prescription.

She dropped down on her knees and began to pray. “Dear Lord, please help me. Please make this voice go away. I know you have it in your almighty power God, to make this disease disappear. Please help me heal. I don’t want to lose Max. Heal me, I know you can, Lord. Amen.”

Max and Jason were watching television in the den when Hannah arrived home that evening. She flopped down next to Max and kicked off her shoes.

“How’d it go?” Max asked, putting an arm around her shoulders.

“Pretty good. The agency put me in their computers before lunch, and after lunch I went on three interviews. That’s why I haven’t had my phone on. I should know something in a couple of days.”

“Where were the interviews?” Jason asked.

“One was at the hospital in accounting, one was at the telephone company, and one was at accounting firm that handles money for people who have more money than sense and can’t do it themselves.”

“Oh, like us,” Max said.



Hannah smiled. She hadn't thought about Max and the other members of the group having their massive fortunes controlled by professionals. "Yeah, kinda like you. Hey, are you looking for a new accountant?"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't hire some snot-nosed young'un right out of college to take care of my money."

She knew he was teasing. She wiped at her nose and sniffed. "I'm not a young'un!"

They all laughed. "Seriously, though," she said, once the laughter had faded away. "Do either of you know how to cook, because I'm, like, starving."

Jason shook his head. "Carmen does the cooking," he said. "When she's gone, we eat out."

Hannah elbowed Max playfully in the ribs. "That's why you moved me in here, so you would have someone to cook for you when Carmen's not here."

"You don't have to cook," Max said. "We can go out."

"Don't y'all get tired of eating out?"

"Yeah," Jason said, "and when we do, we call Casey and she makes us something."

Hannah shook her head. "Y'all are just pitiful. I'll cook. Let me change my clothes, and I'll cook something."

A week later, Hannah was sitting behind her desk at her new job at the hospital when the phone rang. "Yes?" She answered.

"Hannah," her boss, Mr. Briggs said. "Michelle's got a problem up front with a account holder. Can you go straighten it out please? It's one of your files. Account number JP24511. They need the hard copy."

"Yeah, I'll be right there." She hung up the phone and

sighed. She had been at her job for three days and most of that time had been spent trying to organize files. Twice already today she had had to settle a dispute between an account holder and the billing department. She searched through the piles of files on her floor before finding the right one. She carried it through the maze of offices to the counter where people came to pay their bills.

She approached Michelle and her waiting customer. "What seems to be the..." her words faded away as she looked into the eyes of JP24511. It was Joan Pepperdine, her mother.

## Chapter Eight

“Hannah?” Joan said. She shook her head. “I’m sorry. You look like someone I know.”

It didn't surprise Hannah that her mother didn't recognize her. The last time they had seen each other, Hannah had been sixteen and insane. Her disease had been at its worst and she had had no control of her actions because the voice in her head controlled her every move. She had been disheveled and unkempt and mean. Now, five years later, she was a professional, and she dressed and carried herself in that manner. She debated on whether or not to tell her mother that her first instinct was right. “Mrs. Pepperdine,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. “Would you step in my office please?”

She opened a door and Joan followed her down the hall to her office. Hannah sat behind her desk. Joan to the chair across from her. Hannah immediately reached for the picture of

Jimmy and Amanda and turned it face down even though from her vantage point, Joan couldn't see it. She pulled up Joan's file on the computer and opened the file in front of her.

"What seems to be the problem?"

Joan handed Hannah an envelope. "I got this letter from the hospital saying they are going to take me to court. We've been paying on this bill. How come it says we haven't been paying?"

Hannah took the letter out of the envelope and scanned it. It was a basic form letter that stated that the hospital would pursue legal actions to collect the debt if the entire balance was not paid in full. The entire balance was \$2,435. Hannah checked her file. The last payment had been three months ago by a check that had been returned. She flipped the pages. Three more payments had also bounced, and the collections department was requiring that the payments be made by cash or money order.

"You haven't made a payment in three months," Hannah said. "This letter is just standard procedure."

"I gave my husband the money, cash to pay on it. Fifty dollars a month."

Hannah frowned. Good ol' Pepper. "It didn't get paid. I'm sorry." She handed the letter back to her mother. "You're in default now. It's being sent to a collection agency. Unless you can pay the whole thing, I really can't help you."

Joan took the letter with trembling hands. "I don't know what to do. I can't pay this. I work as a waitress. My husband has run off on me now."

Hannah hardened her heart. This woman hates you. She chose Pepper over you. Her reputation ruined yours. She flipped through the file again. You have to take this chance to forgive her, Hannah. There is a reason she is here. She rubbed her temples, indecision confusing her.

"What can I do?" Joan asked. "You know, you have a remarkable resemblance to someone I know. What was your

name again?"

Hannah realized that she had not formally introduced herself to her mother, and she hadn't worked there long enough to have her name on her door or a nameplate for her desk.

She cleared her throat. "It's me, Mom."

Joan leaned forward. "Hannah? How is that you?"

Hannah shook her head. "It just is. It's me."

"I thought you were...the last time I talked to Jimmy you were in the hospital."

"Good grief, Mom, that was three years ago at least. People get better."

"How did you get here? Where are you living?"

She wasn't about to share the information about Max. "I came down to live some friends."

"You look good," Joan observed. "You must be doing okay for yourself."

Hannah nodded. "I am."

"So are you going to take care of this bill for me? Can't you just hit a button over there and make it all disappear?"

Hannah shook her head. "No, I can't do that." "Then how about letting me borrow about \$2500?" "No."

"How come? I know you have it. Or you can borrow it from your brother. Come on, Hannah, I'm your mother."

Hannah stood up. "There's nothing I can do for you. Call a lawyer, file bankruptcy, I don't care what you do."

Joan stood, too. "Fine. You were always good for nothing." She left the office, slamming the door behind her.

Hannah gripped the edge of her desk. Her mother's words echoed in her head. It quickly changed to another voice. See, Hannah. You're worthless. She sank into her desk chair and took a couple of deep breaths. See what you're going to end up like? She banged her head on the desk, trying to knock the

voice out. She kept banging, not caring about the noise she was making or the damage she was doing to her skin. You were always good for nothing.

“No,” she moaned. “Hannah,”  
a voice said.

She stopped banging her head and looked up. It was her boss, Mr. Briggs. “Are you okay?”

She shook her head. “I have a headache.” She rubbed her forehead.

“Maybe you should take the rest of the day off,” he suggested. “Go see a doctor.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I will. Thanks.” She gathered her pocketbook and left her office. I am going to have to go to the doctor. I need to find someone to refill my meds. And the prescription's just not right.

She stepped outside. It was raining. She liked the rain, it made her feel like no one was looking at her. She glanced at her watch. It was just after two in the afternoon. She knew if she went home, she would be alone. Max and Jason were in the studio and Carmen was supposed to be in meetings that afternoon with her manager discussing her upcoming spring tour.

She drove to the house. She took the phone book from the kitchen drawer and went to her room. Although she was alone, she closed and locked the door. She opened the yellow pages to the physicians' section and scanned the ads until she got to the Psychiatrists. She called the first two numbers just to be told that she would need a referral from her primary doctor. But I'm crazy! She gave up cold-calling doctors when the next two tries resulted in being told the waiting lists were months long.

She found the number to her doctor in Asheville in her top dresser drawer. She dialed the number. “Dr. Rick Stanley's office,” the receptionist answered. “Can I help you?”

"This is Hannah Doherty," Hannah said. "I need to speak to Dr. Stanley."

"Okay, Hannah, honey," she said. "Let me transfer you to his office." Dr. Stanley had been the doctor who made the official diagnosis. She trusted him fully and knew he wouldn't tell Jimmy. That he was bound by law not to wasn't an issue.

"Hey Hannah, what can I do for you? Is it time for a refill?" She was required to meet with him once every six months to get a prescription of her meds.

"Almost. I'm sorry to be doing this over the phone, but I need help."

"What's wrong?" He sounded alarmed.

"I'm having a relapse." Her voice came out in a whisper.

"Can you come in and see me?"

"No. I moved to Orlando. Can you get me in to see a doctor here?"

He paused and she could tell he was thinking. "I'm not sure I know anyone in that area. I can do some calling around. I'll call you back with a name, okay? Until then, tell me what's going on."

"It's the voice. It's back. It's been back for a couple of months now. I can't shake it."

"Have you tried adjusting your meds?" She was given a little leeway with her medication in stressful situations. "Are you under a lot of stress? You did say you moved. When did that happen?"

"I've been here a couple of weeks. I moved in with my boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?"

"Yeah, I've met a man. I'm in love. His name is Max. I'm really happy."

"That's good, Hannah, but it's still a lot of stress. Even good stress can trigger a relapse. How much of your medicines

do you have?"

"I have one more refill. I'll have to get that this week." "Okay, listen, Hannah. Call me back with a name and a phone number to a local pharmacy, and I'll call you in a refill. I also want to add another drug, too, that may help." He filled her in on the details. "I'll make you an appointment with a doctor there, but you have to promise me that you'll go."

"I promise. I'll go."

"Okay, Hannah. Call me back with that number so you can get those meds."

"Okay, thanks Dr. Stanley." She hung up the phone and looked up the number for the pharmacy that she passed everyday on her way to work. She called Dr. Stanley back and left the number with his receptionist.

She went into the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Her forehead was bruised. She hadn't been aware she was hitting herself that hard. "Oh well, crap," she said touching it gingerly. She applied some makeup over it. It helped, but not much.

Max was surprised to see the Lexus parked in the driveway. It was five o'clock but Hannah wasn't usually getting home until closer to six. He entered the house and went directly to her room, but she wasn't there. The clothes she had worn to work were in a pile in beside her bed. He looked in the bathroom, but it was empty.

He found her in his bed, sound asleep. He slid into the bed with her, wrapping his arms around her as he lined up his body with hers. She mumbled something incoherent and pressed her body into his.

"You're home early," he said.

"Yeah. I wasn't feeling well."



“How are you feeling now?” “A little better.”

He put his hand against her forehead to feel for a fever. She flinched when he touched the bruise. “You don’t feel hot,” he said.

“I’m feeling better.” She sat up. “You want to go get something to eat?”

“You know I’m always ready to get something to eat,” he said. He got up from the bed and flipped on the light. “Hannah! What happened to your head?”

“Oh, crap,” she said, rubbing it again. “I ran into the door. I’m such an idiot. I tried to cover it with make-up.”

He shook his head. “It didn’t work.”

“Then I’m just going to have a bruised head.”

“Well, at least it will match your purple dress.”

Hannah fell back on the bed. “Crap, I didn’t even think about the wedding. I hope no one wants to take your picture with me.” David and Shannon’s wedding was in two days.

“I hope so, too,” he said, joking.

“So which one is Max?” Hannah asked. It was the next afternoon, and she was at Casey’s house for a bridal luncheon for Shannon. The other guest had already left, leaving her alone with Casey, Shannon, Dana and Carmen. As always, the conversation between the five women had turned to the men in their lives.

“What do you mean?” Casey replied.

“You know,” Hannah said. “In these groups there’s always a cute one, and a wild one, and a funny one. Which one is Max?”

The other three glanced around at each other. “Well, he’s

not the virgin,” Dana said, joking. Everyone laughed, and even Hannah managed a smile. She was used to the cracks about Max’s past behavior, but it still made her a little uncomfortable.

Will started crying and Casey’s phone rang at the same time. “I’ll get Will,” Dana offered. Casey took her phone into the next room to answer it.

Shannon took her glasses off and laid them down on the coffee table. “Listen Hannah, I know that we don’t know each other that well and all, but I just want to tell you that I try to tell it like it is. I generally don’t hold back much.”

“Yeah? Is there something you want to say?” She squirmed and glanced at Carmen, who also shifted uncomfortably.

“Max is a player, honey. I love him to death, but he’s more into quantity than quality. Tell her Carmen.”

“Well, he has been with a lot of women.”

“Are you saying that he’s seeing other girls?” Hannah asked.

Shannon shrugged. “I don’t know. I can’t say for sure. It would surprise me if he hasn’t.”

“I don’t know,” Carmen said, with a shake of her head. “I haven’t seen him with anyone.”

Shannon frowned at Carmen and waved her off. “She won’t say anything bad; she’s too nice.”

“I haven’t,” Carmen argued. “I don’t see the point in this.”

Shannon ignored her. “I’ve never seen him go this long just seeing one person. Even David said that it was unbelievable. And when something appears to be unbelievable it usually is. He did go home with Niki McGuire after Mike’s party.”

Carmen stood up. “This is stupid,” she said. “You don’t know, Shannon. He said he nothing happened.” She stomped off in the direction Dana had gone.

Hannah sank back in the overstuffed chair and thought about what Shannon had said. “So do you think I’m a fool? Do

you think he's going to make a fool of me?"

"I don't know. But to tell you the truth, I wouldn't get my hopes up."

Casey came back into the room. "That was Annie."

"See," Shannon said, "there's my point. He had sex with a married woman just for the thrill of it."

"What are you talking about?" Casey said. Dana and Carmen came back in the room.

"She's telling Hannah all this bad stuff about Max," Carmen said. "Now she wants to bring up Annie?"

"I'm not saying bad stuff. I'm telling the truth. Isn't it true that he was sleeping with several different women on the road crew while they were on tour? Not to mention all the groupies." She shook her head. "I just don't buy that he's being faithful now." She looked at Hannah. "It's not you. Max probably doesn't even realize he's doing anything wrong."

"He's not doing anything wrong," Casey argued. "Why are you saying all this?" She shot a glance at Dana who had been Shannon's best friend since childhood.

"Shannon, stop," Dana said.

Hannah stood up. "I think I'm going home now."

"Don't go," Casey said. "Max loves you." She sent a nasty glance in Shannon's direction. "Don't go."

Hannah glanced at Shannon and shook her head. "I just need to go. I'll see you all tomorrow." She hurried out to her car. See stupid, Max doesn't care anything about you. He's just using you for sex, but he was smart enough to move you in so he could get it any time he wants it. His friends even say so.

By the time she got home, the voice had convinced her that everything Shannon had said was true. She pulled her suitcase out of her closet and began packing.

“What are you doing?” Max asked, coming into the room. Hannah was zipping her suitcase. “Where are you going?”

Hannah looked at him, her eyes red and swollen. She had obviously been crying for a while. “I’m going home, back to Crossdale.”

“What? Why? Did something happen? Do you need me to go with you?” He assumed her sudden departure would have to be because of some sort of emergency.

“No, I don’t need you to go with me,” she snapped, her eyes suddenly filled with rage. “And if you really need to know what’s going on, why don’t you ask your friend Shannon.” A car horn blew outside. “That’s my taxi.” She pushed past Max.

He grabbed her arm, causing her to drop the suitcase. “What the hell is going on here?”

“It’s just not working, Max.” She pulled away from him. “I’ll send for the rest of my things.” She left the house, leaving him standing dumbfounded in the hallway.

He ran to the living room and watched the taxi pull away. He ran out the door and jumped into his car and followed the taxi. He dialed Shannon’s number. David answered.

“Let me talk to Shannon,” Max commanded.

“Why? She’s not here. She had to go into work for a little while to finish up something before the honeymoon.”

Max clicked off the phone without speaking another word. He followed the taxi up to the curb at the airport. He jumped out of the car to confront Hannah again. He grabbed her by the elbow, making a nearby police officer take notice.

“Let go of me, Max, or so help me I’ll have you arrested.” He let go. “Hannah, what happened? Have you gone crazy? What’s this all about?”

He called you crazy! Max knows you’re crazy. You’re

done now, banana-brain.

“Just let me go, Max. I need some time.”

He stepped back and held his hands up. “Okay. I love you, you know that.”

She clenched her jaw to stop the tears. “Just go back home.” A helpless feeling gnawed at his stomach as he watched her disappear into the crowd. He jumped back in his car and drove to the office building where Shannon worked.

He didn’t knock before entering her office. She was standing at a table looking over some plans with her boss. Max didn’t say a word and he stood near the door with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Can you excuse us for a minute, Mr. Lloyd?” Shannon said, obvious confusion on her face.

“Sure,” the older man said. “It’s about time for a smoke break.”

Shannon waited until Mr. Lloyd had left the room. “What are you doing here, Max?”

“What did you say to Hannah?”

“What do you...”

Max held up his hand, cutting her off. “Don’t act like you don’t know what I’m talking about. What did you say to her about me.”

“I didn’t tell her anything that wasn’t true. Why? Is she mad? Did y’all fight about it?”

“I don’t know if she’s mad or not, Shannon. She’s gone. She left. She packed her stuff and she left me. I just watched her get on a fucking airplane. What are you trying to do to me?” “I’m not doing anything to you, Max. I just think she needed to be warned. She’s a nice girl. She’s naïve and innocent and inexperienced. I just don’t want her to get hurt.”

“What about me? You don’t care if I get hurt? Besides,

I’m not going to hurt her. I love her. Don’t you get that? Now

I'm going to lose her because you could keep your big fat mouth shut. Dammit, Shannon, what am I supposed to do now?"

Shannon shook her head. "So you haven't been sleeping with anyone else?"

"No! Jeez, no! Not since...." He paused. "Not since September. Way before I even asked her to move in. I haven't even thought about it."

"Not even with Niki McGuire? After Mike's party? Or Samantha Sparks when you went to LA with her?"

"No!" Max shook his head. "You know, Hannah and I were doing just fine. What the hell were you trying to fix? You should have never butted in."

"I know, Max. I'm sorry." She rubbed her forehead. "I'm sorry," she said again.

"Your being sorry is not going to fix this. I just wanted you to know." He left the building and got into his car. He dialed Carmen's cell phone number. Hannah would talk to Carmen before anyone else.

"Hello?"

"Carmen, Hannah's on her way back to Crossdale. She's at the airport. You have to stop her."

"What? Why? Is it because of Shannon?"

"You know about that?"

"I was there, Max. I don't know what Shannon was thinking. I tried to stop her."

"Can you call her please, Carmen? Just tell her that I want her to come back. Tell her I love her."

"Sure, Max. I'll call you back."

Max drove back to the house. His cell phone rang as he was letting himself into back door.

"I called her, Max," Carmen said. "She's acted like she didn't want to talk to me. She's already on the plane and she

said she's not coming back." "Did she say why?"

"She said that you know why."

"I don't understand. What did Shannon say?"

"She implied that you were probably still sleeping around, and then Annie called and, oh, it was bad. Poor Hannah was just blindsided."

"What the hell am I supposed to do?" Max cried. "I can't change the past."

"I don't know, Max. I'll try talking to her again."

"Thanks."

He clicked off the phone and sat down on the couch. The house already seemed so empty. He wanted to chase her, but something kept him in his seat. He threw his head back on the couch. "Oh Lord," he prayed aloud. "Please help me."

His cell phone rang again. The caller ID alerted him that it was Michael. "Hey, man. What's up?"

"Nothing good, man. Hannah's gone."

"What do you mean, she's gone?"

"She went back to North Carolina. She got mad and left."

"Mad at what?"

"Shannon told her that I was probably cheating on her. I guess she believed her." Max shook his head. "It's crap, man."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, Mike. Should I go after her?"

"What exactly happened?"

"Hannah was with at your house with the girls. Anyway, Shannon told her that I was more than likely cheating on her because that's the kind of guy I am. She wouldn't really say for sure what was said, but she mentioned Annie and Tommy somewhere in there. Then, she started packing her stuff and left."

"Have you been cheating on her?"

Max rolled his eyes, not that Michael could see it. “Damn, is that the impression you all have of me?” It was a rhetorical question. He knew what other people thought of him. He saw himself in the tabloids, and he was well aware of what his past said about him.

“No, Mike. I haven’t. I met her that weekend on my way to my parents’ house, and then I slept with a girl back home. I didn’t even know I would even see Hannah again. The next weekend, I drove back to North Carolina to see her. And that’s been it. Nothing else. No one else. Just her. Not Niki, not Samantha Sparks, no one.”

“Did you tell her that?”

“She knows that. I just don’t know what to do, Mike. I can’t change what happened in the past. What can I do?”

Mike chuckled. “You know, this happened to me and Casey once. Except, it was me running from her past.”

“What did she do to fix it?” Max asked.

“She chased me.”

Max inhaled deeply. “Thanks, Mike. I gotta go.”

“Good luck.”

Max ended the call and dialed his manager’s number again. “Neil, I need that plane again.”

“It’s not here. Samantha Sparks is using it. You’ll have to charter this time. Or fly commercial.”

“I don’t have time for that.” He hung up. Again, he headed for the airport, where he knew there were pilots waiting with their own jets to fly anywhere you wanted to go.

Hannah eased quietly into Jimmy’s apartment. She hadn’t been home since she left. It was early evening, and the apartment was empty. She assumed Jimmy had gone out to



dinner or was test-driving a car that he was working on. She could see from the feminine touches around the apartment that Amanda had moved in, and Hannah wasn't even sure if she still had a bedroom.

She moved through the apartment toward her bedroom. The door was open and her room was just as she had left it. She sat on the bed and began to take off her shoes. She saw movement at the door and jumped when she made eye contact with Jimmy.

"What's the point of your even having a cell phone if you're not going to ever have it turned on?" he asked.

"Have you been trying to call?" she said blankly, kicking her shoes across the room.

"As a matter of fact I have." He paused. "Max called here. He told me to be expecting you. Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"Did he say what happened?"

Jimmy shook his head. "He said that you had decided to come home for a visit and you didn't have your cell phone on and he wanted to make sure you got here okay."

"It sounds like you know it all then. What's there to say?" She stood up from the bed and walked to the door. "I saw mom yesterday," she said casually, as if it happened everyday.

"Our mother? Where?"

"She came into my office to settle a debt. She asked me for the money. I kicked her out."

"Is that why you're here?" Jimmy asked.

"Not really. Now, if you'll excuse me, I want to get some sleep." She tried to push the door shut.

Jimmy stepped out of the way. "We're gonna talk about this in the morning."

Hannah closed the door and locked it. Max hadn't told Jimmy that they had had a fight. She wondered what that meant. Was he trying to protect himself or her?

It has to be himself, stupid. He doesn't care anything about you. You're just a worthless piece of trash he keeps around to get sex from. Why you thought someone like Max Fitzgerald would be interested in someone like you for anything more than a quick lay is beyond delusional. You're crazier than you thought.

Hannah curled up on the bed and cried. She didn't want to believe Shannon, but she couldn't bring herself to believe that she was worthy enough to make someone change. How could she expect that Max would give up his playboy lifestyle just for her? It didn't make sense. Except for Eli, no one had ever cared for her. And Eli hadn't been real. He had just been an angel there to help her get well.

Sometime later, there was a knock at Hannah's door. Amanda let herself in. "Hannah, you've got company downstairs."

Hannah sat up. "Who is it?" "It's Max. He's here for you."

Her heart skipped a beat. "He's here?"

Amanda nodded. "Yeah."

"I'll be right down." She went into the bathroom and washed her face, but she couldn't get rid of the bloodshot eyes or the ugly bruise.

"Have you told him?" Amanda asked, watching her. "Yeah,"

Hannah lied. "Of course." She left the bathroom and went downstairs into the shop.

Max was leaning against the Jeep Jimmy was working on deep in conversation with him. He straightened when he saw Hannah. "Hey." He shoved his hands into his front jeans pockets.

"I didn't think you would come," she said.

"I had to. I couldn't let you go like that." He kept his eyes dead on her, knowing they had an audience. "I wasn't sure that

you'd see me."

She went to him and pounded her fist on his chest. "Dammit, Max, why did you come here? It would be so much easier to believe Shannon."

"Amanda," Jimmy said curtly with a nod of his head toward the door. They left.

Max grabbed Hannah's wrist. "Believe me, Hannah. I love you. I am not cheating on you. I haven't cheated on you."

She laid her head against his chest. "I'm sorry. It's just that sometimes I get confused. I don't understand things."

Max didn't know what she was talking about. She seemed to him to be of above average intelligence. "Well, understand this, I couldn't let you leave like that. I love you, and I want to be with you and only you. Are you confused about that?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"I have a plane waiting at the airport. We have a wedding to get to."

She shook her head. "I don't want to go to that."

Max frowned. "David is my friend, Hannah. I can't blow off his wedding. I'm in it. You can stay home, of course, but please come home with me now."

She nodded. "Okay. I'm sorry, Max."

He kissed her. "It's all going to be okay, baby girl. I promise."

## Chapter Nine

In the week that followed the wedding, Carmen made it a point to spend as much time with Hannah as she could. The women had bonded, not just as roommates and girlfriends of Quintessential members, but also over their shared faith.

On the Friday before Thanksgiving, Carmen suggested a trip, just she and Hannah, to Atlanta to do some Christmas shopping. Hannah readily agreed. She had never had a close female friend and she was enjoying the companionship.

“What did you and Carmen do today?” Max asked. He had just come home from the studio. Hannah was sitting at the kitchen table balancing her checkbook.

Hannah shook her head. “We didn’t do anything. She had somewhere she had to go. She was pretty secretive about the whole thing, but we’re having supper with them tonight.”

“What are we having?” Max asked, looking toward the

stove. Nothing was cooking.

She shrugged. "Don't know. We're meeting over at Casey's."

Max smiled. "Good, I like going to Casey's."

"Are you saying she's a better cook than me?" Hannah narrowed her eyes in mock anger.

He nodded. "Yep."

"Carmen call me today, though," Hannah said. "She asked if I wanted to go to Atlanta with her for a few days. I said I would."

"When?"

"She wants to leave tomorrow afternoon." Max's eyes widened. "And come back when?"

"Thursday morning. We'd meet you and Jason in Nashville."

"It's kind of short notice, don't you think?" He cocked his head to one side. "Did you just say you'd meet me in Nashville on Thanksgiving?"

She nodded. "Is that a problem?"

"No. It makes me really happy, actually. Now let's get back to this shopping trip thing. I'm not sure how I feel about it."

Hannah was shocked. She was sure he would be happy that she was getting along so well with his friends. "Why?"

"I don't want you leaving me." He walked over to her and draped his arms over her shoulders and rested his chin on her head.

"I just got you back. I don't want you leaving me again." She sighed. "I'm not leaving you, Max. I'm going shopping. I might buy you something."

He frowned. "I don't need anything." He sat in the chair next to her. "I just don't want to be alone. I don't want to fly home alone."

"You'll be with Jason."

He shook his head, but didn't say anything.

"Are you not going to let me go?" "I can't stop you from going."

She winced. "That's not exactly what I wanted to hear."

Her disappointment was like a punch in the stomach. "I'm sorry, baby girl. Go and have a good time."

"I don't think you mean that."

"I mean it. Have a great time with Carmen. Buy me something nice."

"Is your mom going to be okay with me coming for Thanksgiving?" She had heard Max talk on the phone with his mother, and she knew that they didn't have the best relationship.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I think I'll book us a hotel, just in case." He paused. "Jimmy doesn't want you to come home?"

She shook her head. "He and Amanda are going skiing for Thanksgiving."

He yawned and rubbed his stomach. "What time are we supposed to go over? I'm hungry."

"In about an hour. Can I get you a snack?" She stood up and started toward the refrigerator.

Max jumped up and grabbed her, picking her up like he was cradling a baby. "Nah, I found something." He laughed and carried her toward her room.

"Okay, we're all here," Dana said. She looked around the large oval table until her eyes rested on Carmen, then Jason. "What's the big announcement?"

"Y'all are getting married," Casey guessed. That wouldn't have been a big announcement. Everyone knew it was just a matter of time.

"Y'all are already married?" Reed said.

“No,” Jason said, shaking his head and smiling.

“You’re pregnant,” Michael blurted out.

Carmen playfully shoved him. “No.” She looked around the table. “You know that house next door? The one for sale?”

Everyone nodded. The log-cabin style house was on the land that adjoined Mike and Casey’s. It was hidden from the road, but the views from the lakeside were spectacular. They had all talked about wanting to get a look inside.

“We bought it,” Carmen said. “We signed the papers today. We’re moving in right after Christmas.”

The chatter started right way with everyone trying to talk over each other. Hannah was filled with mixed emotions. She was happy for her friends, but she was going to miss her roommates. And Jason and Carmen moving out meant she and Max would be alone. She felt Max’s hand reach out and grab her knee under the table. He ran his hand up her thigh.

He leaned over to whisper in her ear. “You know what this means? Anywhere you want it, baby: in the kitchen, the hallway, and the den. Hell, I’ll do it on the front lawn if you want.”

Hannah smiled and blushed. “You wouldn’t have before?” He gave her upper thigh a squeeze, exciting every nerve ending below her waist. “Probably.”

“Can we go see it?” someone asked. Max wasn’t even sure who it was. He was too busy concentrating on the warmth he could feel radiating from Hannah. He knew his hand was strategically placed and he wanted nothing more than to move it a couple of more inches and feel the warmth first hand. He felt himself getting excited. It hadn’t even been two hours since they had left the bed, and he could think of nothing else than getting her right back there.

Hannah picked up his hand and moved it, breaking his trance. He shook his head slightly to rid his brain of the residual

sexual thoughts. He tried to catch up with the conversation. From what he could gather, after supper they were all gong over to tour Jason and Carmen's new house.

"So why don't y'all get married, already?" Max asked.

"When the time is right, we will," Jason said.

Max had heard it all before. They were waiting until one or the other of them was done touring for a while and their schedules could be more in sync. The way things were going now; it would be years before that happened. He didn't understand their choices, but he respected them, and he knew Jason was a much stronger man than him when it came to restraint. He glanced at Hannah. He was beginning to understand, though, how loving and being loved by someone could take away the desire to stray.

The house was beautiful. It wasn't as large as the houses Mike, Reed, and David owned, but there was plenty of room for Jason and Carmen and the houseful of kids they were sure to have one day.

"I want one of these," Hannah whispered to Max as they walked through the house holding hands.

I'll buy you one, he wanted to say. "Yeah, it's nice." He pulled her to him. "We need to go home."

"What has gotten into you?"

"You," he said. "Let's go."

A few days later, the day before Thanksgiving, Max was busy packing a bag for his trip home to Nashville when the doorbell rang. He didn't even bother looking through the peephole before slinging the door open. He jumped back in shock of who was standing in front of him.

"Matt."



“Hello, Max,” Matt said cordially. The two men had met just once before, but Matt greeted him like they were friends. “Can I come in?”

Max nodded slightly and stepped aside. “Yeah, I guess so.” He glanced around the room. “Sorry about the mess.”

Matt entered the house and moved toward the couch. “It’s okay.” He sat down.

“Can I get you anything to drink?” Max asked. “I’ve got bottled water.”

“That would be great.”

Max left the room and snagged a bottle of water out of the refrigerator. He handed it to Matt and sat in a chair across from the couch. He didn’t know what to say. I’m sorry just didn’t seem to be enough.

Matt cleared his throat. “I think we should talk about what you want to do about this situation.”

Max shook his head. “What do you mean?”

“Are you going to try and take him? Do you want visitation?”

Max was shocked. The idea of getting custody wasn’t something that had ever crossed his mind. He didn’t even want to be a father right now. He wanted to forget this whole thing had ever happened. And he wanted Annie and Matt to do the same thing.

“No! He belongs with his mother, and his sister, all of his brothers and sisters. I don’t want to take him. I don’t want custody. I want you all to be a family.”

Tears brimmed Matt’s eyes. “Thank you. I know that he’s not mine biologically, but he’s just as much my baby as Anna is. I don’t care what science says.”

Max reached forward and put his hand on Matt’s shoulder. “I’m sorry for what has happened. I never meant to disrupt your family.”

"It's not all your fault. Annie was looking for something. If it hadn't been you, it would have been someone. But it's not entirely her fault either. It's mine. I have some responsibility in this. If I had been a better and more attentive husband, then she wouldn't have gone somewhere else." He shook his head. "I don't know what you believe, but I believe that everything happens for a reason, and this is all a big divine plan that we're not supposed to understand."

"I'm still real sorry."

Matt shook his head again and held up his hand. "It's okay. I don't blame you."

"How can you...? Dude, I slept with your wife. I got her pregnant."

"I know, and believe it or not, I think you might have saved our marriage. Annie was so unhappy. We're going to be okay. God-willing, we're going to make it." Tears were unabashedly running down his cheeks. Max could tell that they were tears of joy and relief. He could feel the power of them from where he sat.

I wish Hannah were here. She would appreciate this so much. "That's great," Max said. He was at a loss for any other words. He was sitting in his living room all but embracing the man whose wife he had gotten pregnant. God certainly did work in mysterious ways.

He felt something tickle his cheek. He lifted his hand to wipe it away and was surprised when he felt the moisture of a tear. He cleared his throat. "I gotta tell you, man. When I saw you at the door, I thought you were here to kick my ass. There's no way I could handle this the way you're handling it."

"Would you feel better if I kicked your ass?" Matt asked. Max smiled slightly and gave a small nod. "I think actually I would."

"Sorry," Matt said. He bit his lip. "I would like to know

why, though, from your side. Why did you do it?"

Max shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I mean we were just talking and we had kind of separated ourselves from the rest of the group. All the rest of them were couples, you know. We were just talking and I made some joke about sex and she said she wouldn't know anything about that. I told her that she must know something about it because she had eight kids, and she just laughed. Then she told me that...well, she just told me that she wasn't completely satisfied. One thing led to another, and I know it sounds so cliché, but it just kinda happened. I think we just both knew after a certain point that it was going to and neither of us fought it."

"That's what she said." He nodded and stood up. "Thanks again, Max. I'm going to take you at your word about Tommy. I don't want to fight for him." He extended his hand.

Max shook his hand. "You don't have to worry about that. I meant what I said." He walked Matt to the door.

"Have a great Thanksgiving."

"You, too, man."

Matt walked out the door and Max closed it behind him. He leaned against the back of the door and closed his eyes. Thank you God, he silently prayed.

He headed back to his bedroom, cutting through the dining room on the way to the kitchen. Jason, Carmen and Hannah had been studying a passage in the Bible the morning before the women left. Max had been there, listening in, but he never had much input on that kind of conversation. True, he was a Christian; he had come to know the Lord not long after meeting Jason in high school, but he had strayed far from a Christian life since then. His parents, as far as he knew, didn't know the first thing about Jesus. Max, had never been a church-goer, but since Hannah had moved in, he had been a regular there. If she was going to be there, so was he.

Hannah had left her Bible on the table and he picked it up and carried it to her room. He opened her door. The smell of her drifted out. In the month that she had lived there, he had never been in her room alone. He laid her Bible on her bed and looked around. Out of curiosity, he pulled open her top dresser drawer, and then feeling guilty, closed it again.

She wouldn't keep secrets from me.

Once getting into Nashville, Max rented a car at the airport and drove to the nearby Gaylord Opryland Hotel where he had already booked a room for them. He checked into the room and dropped off his things before driving to Megan's house.

"Hi, Max," she greeted. She put a finger to her lips. "Shh, Tyson's asleep."

He nodded as he entered the house. He gave his sister a small hug. "How have you been?"

"Good. How about you? You never call, you know." She led him to the kitchen table and poured him a glass of iced tea.

"Neither do you," he argued. "You know my numbers."

"I know. So Mel tells me you have a girlfriend. Still true?" He nodded. "Yep. Still true."

"Tell me about her."

Max spent the next fifteen minutes telling Megan about Hannah. When he finally stopped, she shook her head and smiled. "I can't believe it. Max Fitzgerald has fallen in love."

"Oh, yeah. I'm in deep."

"Well, you're welcome," she said.

He raised his eyebrows. "For what?"

"Last time you were here, I told you to quit fooling around and get yourself a girlfriend."

"I think it might be just coincidence, Megan."

“And she’s coming here?”

Max nodded. “She and Carmen are flying in, in the morning,” he said.

“Are y’all staying with Mom and Dad?”

He shook his head. “I got us a hotel room.”

Megan frowned. “You didn’t have to do that. You two could have stayed here with us.”

“It’s okay,” he said with a wink. “I think we’ll be okay in the hotel.” He paused. “Is Melody going to be here, or is she visiting Cliff?”

Megan frowned. “They’re going to be here. She’s going down to his place for Christmas.”

“What do you think of all that?” Max asked, shaking his head. “I’ve let her know how I feel, but what do you think?”

“She won’t listen to me. I worry about her so much. She’s only seventeen. I just pray that she won’t start sleeping with him.”

“It’s too late.”

“No,” Megan protested. “She told you that?”

“Pretty much. What do Mom and Dad say about this whole thing?”

“Not much. You know I’m not real sure that they even know he’s HIV-positive.”

“How could they not know? I’m sure I’ve told them when we’ve done things for the Pediatric Aids Foundation.”

Megan nodded. “I remember David standing right in their living room and talking about Cliff, but they never say anything.”

“Do you think they don’t care?”

Megan shrugged. “They never butt into my life, either. Maybe they’re just done raising us.”

“Maybe,” Max said, rubbing his chin. “Well, I guess I should go by there for a little while and break the news that I’m

not staying at home. Are you coming over later?" "Probably not. I have to be there all day tomorrow." "For what?"

"She wants me to come over in the morning and help her cook. She wants me there at six o'clock."

Max raised his eyebrows. "Damn, it sucks to be you."

"Tell me about it." They heard the sound of crying coming from the baby monitor on the counter. "I've got to get him. Are you leaving now?"

Max nodded. "I'll see you later, Meg." He left her house and drove to his parent's house, dreading the trip the entire way. His stomach knotted up. It would have been so much easier to just stay in Orlando.

He let himself into the house. His mother and father, Isabella and Arthur, were both sitting in the dining room, reading the paper. "Don't you get enough of the news?" Max asked, sitting down in an empty chair.

His parents barely glanced up at him. "Hello, son," his father said. His mother didn't speak.

"Did I do something wrong?" Max asked cautiously. Isabella looked up and put down her paper. "We're sorry, Max, that we didn't jump for joy when you walked in the room. We're so glad that you are here." The sarcasm was thick.

Oh boy. This is not going to be a fun visit home. He quickly thought through his options. He and Hannah could just stay holed up in the hotel until they returned to Orlando; they could go back to Florida early; they could really infuriate Max's family by spending Thanksgiving with Jason and his family; or he could smile and make nice and hope for the best. The first three choices sounded like winners, but for some reason he forced a smile on his face.

"You look beautiful, Mom. Have you lost weight?"

She frowned at him and picked her paper. "No," she said,

trying not to smile. He had always been able to charm her out of being mad at him by complementing her. It wouldn't have been that easy if she hadn't been so self-absorbed.

"I had Clara get your room ready," she said. "I had her make up both beds. Cliff will bunk with you."

He shook his head. "Cliff can have the room to himself. I'm staying at the Gaylord."

She threw down the paper, offended. Even Mr. Fitzgerald lowered his newspaper. "What did you just say?" she asked. "You had better be joking."

He shook his head. "I'm not joking, Mom. I don't know if you've heard or not, but I'm living with a girl now. Her name is Hannah Doherty and she's coming tomorrow to spend Thanksgiving with us. I wanted her to meet my family." What the hell was I thinking?

"I hadn't heard," Isabella said. "You can stay here. You don't have to stay in a hotel." She rolled her eyes as if she already knew what his argument was going to be. "I'll let you sleep in the same room."

"It's not that, Mom. I just thought it would be easier on you if we weren't staying here. You wouldn't have to worry about entertaining us. I'm just looking out for you, Mom. I know you work so hard and you're going to be so busy tomorrow. We just don't want to get in your way."

"It's getting deep in here," Arthur muttered. He put his paper down and left the room.

Isabella didn't seem to notice. "Well, I am going to be busy, but please come by early so I can spend some time with this young lady of yours."

"I will." He stood up from the table. "I'm going to get a drink." He went into the kitchen, where Clara, the long-time, live-in housekeeper was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee. She jumped up when she saw the kitchen door swing open.

"It's just me, Clara," Max said.

She laid her hand on her chest. "I thought you were the barracuda," she said. "I'm taking an unauthorized break."

Max laughed and walked over to the refrigerator. He opened it and pulled out a bottle of beer. "She'd shit if she heard you call her that."

Clara sat back down at the table and Max joined her. He really liked this woman. She had been hired when he was seven and had lived with his parents ever since. She was warm and caring, thoughtful and nurturing, everything his mother was not. She was native of Mexico, and a distant cousin of Max's on his mother's side. She had been only twenty-one when she was hired. Max had had a huge crush on her, never mind that they were related, and she was the subject of many of his prepubescent dreams. In recent years, they had flirted quite a bit, not because either was interested in a romance, but because it made Mrs. Fitzgerald fume.

"What's new?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "Not much. Your mother isn't letting me have the day off tomorrow. I think she wants me to serve you all dinner."

"Good grief. How many of us are there going to be?"

Clara counted on her fingers. "Your mom and dad, Megan, Jeremy and Tyson, Melody and Cliff, you, your grandparents. So that's ten."

"Eleven," Max corrected. "I'm bringing a date."

"Yeah?" She looked up at the kitchen door when she heard Isabella's voice on the other side. She stood up. "I'd love to hear about her, but I've got to get back to work."

"You'll meet her tomorrow." Max took his beer and pushed through the kitchen door, almost knocking down his mother. "Oh, Mom, I'm sorry. I didn't know you were there." "Is

Clara in there? She is supposed to be working, Max, not



flirting with you. She gets off at 6:00pm. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't have sex with the help while they are on the clock."

Max suppressed a smile. "You think I had time to have sex? It's only been a few minutes. You terribly underestimate me."

Isabella closed her eyes and shook her head. "Is Clara in there?" she repeated.

Max nodded. "Yeah." He pushed past her and carried his beer upstairs to Melody's room. He didn't know if she was even there yet. He knocked before opening the door. There was no answer. He turned the knob and the door swung open freely. She wasn't there. He went back down to the kitchen to exchange his empty beer bottle for a fresh one.

He found his dad in his home office. "How's it going, Pop?" he asked, leaning against the door frame.

"Fine, Max. And yourself?" He didn't look up from what he was doing.

"Things are going pretty good. We've been busy."

"With what?"

Max shook his head in disbelief. "Making a album, Dad. You know, music? The new CD comes out on April first."

"April Fools Day, huh?" Arthur laughed. "I hope the joke's not on you." He said all this without ever looking at Max.

"Me, too," Max muttered. He walked back into the kitchen and dropped his half-empty beer bottle in the trashcan.

He went out to his car and drove away in the direction of Jason's house. He wanted to be around a family. He knew that Jason would be there with his dad, his step-mom and stepsister, Heather. They would be most likely all be in the same room, hanging out together even if it was doing something as simple as watching television. And without a doubt, Jason's parents knew when the new CD would be released.

He stood on the front porch of their house, his hands shoved in his pockets waiting for someone to answer the bell. Julie, Jason's stepmother, pulled open the door.

"Max," she said warmly. She reached out to hug him. "What a surprise."

"Can I come in?"

She nodded and pulled him by his hand into the kitchen where the family was sitting around the table having dinner. "Look who's here, everyone," she said. She dropped his hand. "Have you eaten?" She moved toward the cabinet to get him a plate.

"That would be great, thanks," he said. He sat in an empty chair next to Heather. "Hey, girly," he said and pulled her ponytail.

Jason grinned at him from across the table. "You sure you want to drag Hannah into that, man?" he said, already knowing why Max had showed up unexpectedly at his home.

Max frowned and shook his head. "I just hope Mom is nice to her."

"Max, can I ask you something?" Hannah asked the next morning. She had arrived in town about a hour earlier and she and Max were having brunch in the hotel restaurant.

"You can ask me anything."

"Well, Carmen and I were talking about things, and I just wondered if you had told your family about Tommy."

He was shocked. "No, why would I?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

"I don't want him, Hannah. I'm not going to be a part of his life, no more than I'm a part of Annie's other kid's lives."

"You don't want him?"

He hesitated and thought about his response. "When I have kids, I want it to be with someone I'm in love with. I want a family."

"What if it comes out?" Hannah said. "Wouldn't it be better if they knew already?"

"I don't think so. Listen, Hannah, you don't know my family. We're not real supportive of each other." He paused. "Speaking of families, I heard that you saw your mother."

Hannah frowned. "Did Jimmy tell you that?"

He nodded. "Yeah, when I went there to bring you back. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's not important," she said. "I don't think I'll see her again."

"But it was the first time you've seen her in years," Max said. "I think it's a big deal."

"She asked me for money. Can you believe that? You should feel lucky you have the mother you do."

"Don't jump the gun," he said. "Wait until you meet her."

Max held his breath through most of dinner. His family was being nice to Hannah, and their skills at acting like they were a caring family were almost perfected. Hannah seemed to be enjoying herself.

After dinner, as Clara was cleaning off the table, Melody stood up. She walked to the kitchen door. "Max," she said.

He looked up at her and she motioned that she wanted him to accompany him into the kitchen. He got up and followed her. "Yeah?"

She glanced at Clara who was loading the dishwasher. She looked back at Max. "Listen, I'm really sorry."

"About what?"

“Earlier today, Cliff told me about Annie’s baby. I think Mom overheard.”

“She did overhear,” Clara butted in. “I heard her telling your father.”

“Well, crap,” he said. He rubbed his forehead. “Should I go in there and tell them about it?”

“I think it’s just a matter of time, before they say something,” Melody said.

He pushed the door open and sat back down at the table. He took Hannah’s hand. “Mom, Dad, I have something to tell you.”

He looked up at him expectantly, but didn’t say anything. It would have been easier for him if they had just said what they knew. He felt his stomach tie into knots as he looked at the smug and self-righteous expression on his mother’s face. He wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of lecturing him.

“You know, what? Never mind. I don’t have anything to say. You already know, anyway.”

“I don’t know!” Megan said.

Max looked at his sister and her husband, then at his grandparents. “I’m sorry. I’m sure they will tell you.” He pulled Hannah out of her chair. “We’re leaving. It’s been a nice visit.”

They didn’t stop until they got into the car. “You gonna tell me how badly I screwed that up?”

“How did they know?”

He ran his hand through his hair. “Cliff and Melody.” He beat on the steering wheel. “It’s not that I hate them knowing, it’s just that they’re so happy that I’ve screwed something up.”

Hannah didn’t know what to say. She could see that he was hurting. His family looked so perfect on the outside, but they were filled with bitterness and jealousy and resentment.

She thought about his other “family.” That was a real family. There was no blood between any of them, but they

loved each other, and they truly cared about what happened to each other. None of them wanted to see the others hurting. None of them would say anything bad about the others to boost their own ego. She knew there had been fights between them; Max had told her of several, she had seen Casey and Carmen argue with Shannon.

Shannon. I haven't seen her since that day she tried warn me about Max. What am I supposed to do about her? If I'm going to have a relationship with Max, I can't avoid her.

"What am I supposed to do about Shannon? How was she at the wedding?"

"She's sorry, Hannah. She really is."

Hannah nodded. "I want to get along with her, for your sake and David's."

"I can't promise you she's not going to say something to make you mad again. She and Dana have been friends for years and years and they argue all the time."

"Because families fight," Hannah said. "And that's what y'all are: a big family."

"You, too, Hannah. You're a part of that."

She shook her head. "We've only been seeing each other a couple of months. I'm not a part of that."

Max pulled the car off the side of the road. "I don't care if we've been together two months or two years or twenty. Right now you are number one in my life and that makes you a part of it. Okay?"

Hannah smiled. "Okay."

He leaned over and kissed her. "Okay then."

Am I a part of it, too? No, because he doesn't know about me. Tell him about me banana-brain and see how long he keeps you around.

She fought to keep from listening to the taunting voice. Max was saying something as well, but she could only make out

bits and pieces. She closed her eyes and laid her head back against the seat. The two voices merged and swirled together. Hannah felt dizzy and had the sensation of falling into a deep pit. Nausea tossed her stomach around like a water balloon. She reached for Max's arm. "Pull over," she managed to mumble.

Max pulled the car over. Hannah pushed open the door and hung her head out, losing her balance and falling completely out of the car. Max rushed around the car and gently sat her back up. Vomit covered her clothes, face and hair. He didn't have anything in the rental car to clean her up with, so he took off the sweater she was wearing over a T-shirt and wiped her face with it.

"It's okay, Hannah, sweetie," he said in a soothing voice. "I'll get you back to the hotel and into a nice bath."

"I'm sorry, Max," she mumbled. "I can't help it. I'm sick." "I know you are."

She shook her head slightly. "I'm sick, Max."

He felt her head. She felt slightly warm, and her hair was damp with sweat. He drove them back to the hotel and carried her through the lobby, ignoring curious onlookers. In the room, he laid her on the bed while he ran a bath for her. She was sitting up getting undressed when he came back for her.

"Feeling any better?" He asked.

She nodded. The voice had stopped and her head was clear. "Yeah, I'm sorry." That was a close one.

## Chapter Ten

Hannah opened the pill bottle and dumped three of the pills into her hand. You already took those, stupid.

“No, I didn’t.” She replaced the pill bottle under her mattress and continued getting dressed. It was Monday, and she was glad to get back to work. She had taken the days before Thanksgiving off, and she felt like she hadn’t been in the office forever.

Hopefully, the voice wouldn’t accompany her. No doubt, though, that it would. It had been following her around whispering in her ear since Thanksgiving night. Dr. Stanley had had no better luck getting her in to see a local psychiatrist, so her first appointment with one was still weeks away. He

advised her, however, to take herself to the emergency room if it got too out of control.

“Good morning,” she said cheerfully as she walked into the kitchen. As always, Jason and Carmen were sitting at the table eating breakfast. Hannah poured herself a cup of coffee and joined them. “I’m going to miss having breakfast with y’all.”

Carmen nodded. “Yeah, moving day is getting closer. Two weeks from today we’ll be out. I can’t wait to get in there and decorate for Christmas.” They had originally planned to move out the week after Christmas, but due to Carmen’s relentlessness and drive, she was able to get into house early.

“A Christmas tree is going to look so beautiful in that front room,” Hannah said.

Max came into the kitchen. “Good morning.” He sat at the table and poured himself a bowl of cereal. He looked at Hannah. “You didn’t come to my room last night.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Jason said holding up his hands. “This doesn’t sound like a conversation we need to be a part of. He looked at Carmen. “Are you ready to go?”

Carmen nodded. “Yeah, let me grab my purse.”

“Where are y’all off to?” Hannah asked.

“Shopping,” Carmen replied, the excitement clear in her eyes. She left the room.

“Yeah, if she keeps up this pace, we’re going to have to go shopping for a pick-up truck,” Jason joked. He considered what he just said. “Hey, honey?” He called out as he followed her down the hall.

Hannah smiled and turned back to Max. “I’m sorry. I fell asleep.”

“I’m calling Dr. Klein today to see if he can make me an appointment with some kind of specialist about my snoring.”

“Really? Why? I thought it didn’t bother you.”

“It bothers me that you won’t sleep in the same bed with



me. That you can't sleep in the same bed with me." He paused. "Would you sleep with me if I got it fixed?"

She nodded. "Of course I would. I'd love to sleep next to you at night, but dude, you're louder than a chainsaw."

"I know. Jason's been complaining about it for years. He had to sleep with earplugs."

Taking a cue from their conversation, Hannah stopped by the drug store on her way home from work that evening and purchased a pack of earplugs. She wasn't sure if she would be able to sleep with them in, but she was willing to give it a try.

The house was empty when she arrived. She assumed Jason and Carmen were at their new house, but Max's whereabouts remained a mystery. She went to her room for a quick shower while she waited. After her shower, she reached under her mattress for her pill bottles. She poured the appropriate amount of the medicine into her open palm. She tilted her head back and started to empty her hand into her mouth.

Don't! That's too many! Don't take those!

Hannah lowered her hand and recounted the pills. "That's right."

No, it's not! You took some already today. That's too many.

She rubbed her forehead with her free hand. Did I take it already today? It wasn't impossible. She kept a few of the pills in her desk and a few in her pocketbook. What do I do? She knew that taking too much of the medication could cause some adverse side effects that she couldn't hide, like uncontrollable shaking. If she took too little of the medicine, she risked the possibility that her symptoms would worsen.

With a sigh, she put the pills back in the bottle and shoved the bottles back under the mattress. She pulled on her favorite pair of jeans and a white T-shirt. She slipped on a pair of

sneakers and walked back into the kitchen. Max was just coming in the back door.

“You’re late,” she said. “For what?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. Just later than usual.”

You know what he’s been out doing.

“I’m sorry. I’ve been at Mike’s in the studio.”

“Oh. Working on something important?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Not really, I guess. I mean, you never know, though. How was your day?”

“It was okay. Hey, I’ve got something for you.” She went back into her room and returned with the bag from the drug store. She handed it to him.

He stuck his hand in the bag and pulled out the earplugs. His smile broadened. “You don’t have to do this.”

She nodded. “Yes, I do. I want to.” She stood in front of him and accepted a kiss. “Did you talk to Dr. Klein?”

“Yeah, I went down to see him today. I’m going to see a specialist tomorrow.”

“What if they want to operate?”

He shrugged. “Then they’ll operate.” He pulled her to him and kissed her again. “Tonight’s the night of the photo shoot, remember?” Quintessential was having pictures made for the cover and insert of their new CD, Cowboy, which was also the title of the first single to be released.

She nodded. “Yeah. Where is it again?” “At Universal.”

“Life’s getting ready to get real busy, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but the good news is that this photo shoot is the last thing we have to do before Christmas.”

“Good.” Hannah relaxed against him. She was happy that he would have a clear schedule, but she knew that she had been spoiled by the amount of time she had gotten with him already.

“Just wait until after the first single, is released,” he said, as if he were reading her mind. “We’ll be crazy busy then; from then until the end of the tour.”

“What time do you have to be there?” She asked, suddenly aware that she was hungry.

“Eight.”

She glanced at the clock on the microwave. “That’s in, like, an hour.”

“Yeah, I know. We can go whenever you’re ready. Neil’s assistant is supposed to be arranging for a caterer for us and all of the crew. They probably won’t even start taking pictures until late. That’s how these things usually go.”

“I’m ready whenever you are,” she said. “Let’s go then, I’m starving.”

Hannah sat by Carmen on the floor against the wall. They were watching the photo shoot. Casey, Dana, and Shannon had come to eat, but had left already, citing their jobs the next day as the reason. Hannah was tired, too, but she was enjoying watching, and didn’t want to leave yet.

The photographer was having a hard time getting the five of them to settle down and be serious enough to get the job done. Going with the theme of cowboys, the guys were dressed in full western gear. Five horses had been brought in and the backdrop looked like the old west. It reminded Hannah of the movie “Young Guns.”

The guys, however, were more interested in play gun- fighting with the replica weapons that were supposed to be part of their costumes (until someone at the record company decided it would send the wrong image).

"I can't believe that this is someone's job," Hannah said, not taking her eyes off Max, who at the time was sitting atop a horse, his hand on his hat and smiling for the camera. He looked like a very happy Marlboro Man.

"What, taking pictures?" Hannah asked.

"No, posing. These guys. It's looks like way too much fun to be work."

"Oh, it's work," Carmen assured her. "These guys are just good at having a good time."

Hannah agreed. "Hey, guess what?" She finally turned her head and looked at Carmen.

"What?"

"I bought some ear plugs."

Carmen raised her eyebrows. "You're going to try it, huh?"

"Yeah. I didn't realize how important it was to him."

"Yeah, me either," Carmen said. "He's always struck me as someone who's content to be alone. I don't know, though. Max is changing. Jason and I have been praying for him for so long, and it seems like our prayers are finally being answered. I didn't know the answer was going to come in the form of you, but here you are." She patted Hannah's knee in a friendly, familiar way.

"It doesn't bother you that we're sleeping together? It's obviously wrong. I know what the Bible says, and I'm doing it."

"Well, obviously I think it's wrong, that's why I'm not doing it, but I can't condemn you for what you are doing. We all have to run our own race and answer for the choices we have made. I won't sit here and lie to you and tell you that Jason and I haven't struggled with this ourselves. Now that we're going to be alone in the house, it's going to be harder."

"When are y'all going to get married?"

Carmen considered her answer and then looked over at Jason. She smiled wistfully. "My tour starts in February, and

it's over in April. Theirs starts in March and is over in July. I don't want to wait until next summer. I don't need a lot of time to plan. Mike and Casey got married three weeks after he proposed and their wedding was beautiful. I want to get married in the next couple of months."

"And Jason?"

"He wants to wait. He wants to wait until the touring is over and they have lots of downtime. I can't see that happening. Unless we just quit, then it could be years before we both have lots of downtime."

"So what are you going to do?" Hannah asked.

Carmen sighed. "I don't know."

Hannah stood up. "I have to pee." She made her way to the bathroom. She looked at herself in the mirror as she washed her hands.

She didn't recognize her own reflection. It wasn't because she looked any different, other than the happiness in her eyes and the glow of her skin. She didn't recognize herself because all she could see was the person she used to be. She looked in the mirror and she saw dirty unkempt hair, no makeup, and dark eyes that were sunk back in her head.

Hannah-banana, Hannah-banana, Hannah-banana.  
The voice was barely a whisper, but she could hear it clearly.  
Hannah, look out! Pepper's hiding in the stall!

Hannah jumped and turned around to face the stalls. She lowered her head and glanced under the doors. She didn't see any feet.

He's there. He's there. He's there. The voice was getting louder.

Hannah backed toward the door and jumped again, when she felt the doorknob poke her in the back. She turned and flung open the door. She ran smack into Max. She screamed.

Max grabbed her by the shoulders. "Hannah," he said.

“What’s wrong?”

She took a couple of deep breaths. “I thought I heard someone else in the bathroom. It scared me.”

Max pushed past her and entered the bathroom. He opened all the stall doors. “Nope, no one here.” He pulled her to him. She was shaking and looking as frightened as a small child. He kissed the top of her head.

“Don’t worry, ma’am,” he said, tipping his cowboy hat. “I’m the law in these here parts. Me and my trusty side-kick, Slim, will protect you.” He nodded toward David, who had come over when he heard Hannah scream.

Hannah smiled. “My hero.”

Max entwined his fingers with Hannah’s. It was later that same night and they were in Max’s bed. Their lovemaking had been satisfying as always, but Max’s favorite part was always holding her afterward, skin to skin. He enjoyed touching her, feeling the smoothness of her skin and the warmth of her body. The creaminess of her skin was inviting, making him want to taste every inch of it.

“I’ve been thinking,” Max said.

“A dangerous pastime to be sure,” Hannah joked.

Max chuckled. “I don’t want to go to my parents house for Christmas. Do you want to go visit Jimmy and Amanda?” Hannah was surprised, but then again, she wasn’t. The Thanksgiving trip hadn’t turned out so great, and she wasn’t sure that he had even talked to his parents since. He knew that he had talked to each of his sisters; Megan was being supportive, albeit with an “I-told-you-this-would-happen” attitude, but Melody was being harder, stressing their already strained relationship.

She shook her head. "Not really. For Christmas, they always go over to her parents' house, and for the past few years I have just been tagging along. They are nice people and all, but...no, I don't want to go home either."

"Then let's go away somewhere, just me and you."

She nodded. "Now, that sounds like a plan. What did you have in mind? Something tropical? The Caribbean?"

"No, no. I was thinking something more Christmasy. Maybe with snow." He squeezed her and kissed her temple. "You just let me do the planning."

"Okay, then," she said. She ran a hand up his thigh. "I'll just plan the next half hour or so."

Afterward, Hannah reached for the earplugs on the nightstand. "I hope these work," she said.

"Me, too," he said. He pulled her close to him and they fell asleep, comfortably wrapped up in each other.

Four days later, Christmas Eve, Max and Hannah landed in Las Vegas. "What do you think?" Max asked as they followed the bellhop to the penthouse suite at the MGM Grand.

"Well, I don't see any snow," she said, stepping inside the room. "But I'll give you credit for Christmasy. The lobby was pretty."

"We can put a tree in your room if you want," the bellhop said. "If you're going out later, we could do it while you're gone."

Max looked at Hannah and conceded to her decision-making. She beamed. "That would be great, thanks."

Max pulled out his wallet and tipped the bellhop fifty dollars. He didn't do it slyly or by means of a handshake. He

simply handed the man the single bill and the bellhop took it, shoving it into his pocket without looking at it.

“Just stop by the front desk on your way out this evening.”

Max nodded slightly and shut the door behind him. “What do you think?”

Hannah looked around in awe. She had stayed in a couple of nice hotels since meeting Max, but this penthouse suite was unbelievable. “It’s amazing,” she said. “This room has an upstairs!” She raced to the steps and took them two by two to the bedroom. She sprinted into the bathroom. “There’s a TV in here!” She went back to the bed, where Max had lay down.

“This is great,” she said.

Max beckoned to her. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright. She was obviously excited. It brought him immense pleasure to see her like this, to give her the chance to experience new things. She came over to the bed and crawled in next to him. He kissed her when she reached the headboard.

“I thought you’d like it.”

She nodded. “I do. It’s almost enough to make me forget that you brought me to Sin City to celebrate the birth of Jesus.”

Max smiled. “Sin City is just what you make of it. I’m not planning on doing any gambling or hiring any hookers or going to any strip shows or anything else associated with this town. I just wanted to bring you to a great hotel. We don’t even have to leave the building.”

“What all is in this hotel?”

“Well, there’s the casino, of course, and about fifteen restaurants, and theaters and the Garden Arena, and there’s even a wedding chapel.” He raised his eyebrows. “So if we get drunk we can go down and get hitched.”

Hannah knew he was joking. “Then pour me a drink,” she joked back.



Max smiled, but it quickly faded. In the months he had known her, he had never seen her take a drink of alcohol. She had never given a reason for it, just that she didn't drink, but she didn't seem to be against it. Jason and Carmen didn't drink, either, but their reasons went right along with their reason for their chastity. He knew Jimmy drank beer, he had seen it in their refrigerator and Amanda had offered him one when he went to Crossdale to bring Hannah home with him.

"Do you want a drink?" He sat up. "I can fix you one. There's a bar in the room."

"Doesn't that cost extra?"

Max tried not to smile. No woman he had ever been with had ever shown any concern over the amount of money he was spending. Hannah, though, meticulously kept account of her finances almost to the point that she was obsessive-compulsive. He couldn't stop himself and the corners of his mouth turned up into a grin. Soon, he was laughing.

"Are you laughing at me?" "Yes, I'm laughing at you."

She picked up a pillow and hit him over the head with it. "Don't laugh at me."

He held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. Seriously, though, do you want a drink?"

Hannah considered it. She knew that mixing alcohol with her medication would make her drowsy, and she didn't want to sleep her whole vacation away. She glanced at her watch. It had been almost 24 hours since taking her medicine, and even then, she had only taken half her normal dosage. In fact, in the past week, she had missed four days entirely and on the other three days; she had taken half or less than what she needed.

Go ahead, Hannah. It won't hurt. You need to loosen up some.

She smiled at Max and nodded. "Make me a drink."

He jumped off the bed and she followed him down the stairs to the wet bar in the room. "Have you ever drunk?"

She nodded. "Back in high school, you know," she said. "Just beer, though."

Max poured Vodka into a glass then added orange juice. "We'll start with something simple," he said, pushing the glass toward her. "We'll move on later."

Hannah cocked her head and smiled at him. "Are you going to get me drunk and take advantage of me?"

He smiled over the rim of his own glass. "I'm sure you'll come up with a few good ideas of your own."

She took a sip of her drink and closed her eyes as she felt it move down her throat. "It's good."

Max fixed himself a drink and they sat on the couch. They found a TV station playing "It's a Wonderful Life" over and over. For the next six hours, they drank and ordered room service and watched the movie three times. It was after midnight when Max finally turned off the television.

"Are you ready to go upstairs?"

She nodded and tried to stand, feeling a little wobbly. "I think you might have to carry me," she said.

"That's no problem," he said, scooping her up. "Are you feeling a little drunk?"

She nodded. "I'm feeling a lot drunk," she said. She yawned. "I'm sorry."

"What? You're not going to poop out on me are you?" Max slowly navigated the steps.

"No, I promise."

He dropped her on the bed. "You want to go down and get married now?"

She didn't know what to say. He sounded serious. She studied him. "Are you serious?"

"I could be."

“What does that mean? You could be?”

“No. I don’t want a Vegas wedding.” He lay down on the bed next to her.

“Me either,” she said, throwing one arm and one leg across him. “Actually, I have this idea of what kind of wedding I’d like. A fantasy, I guess.”

“Really? Let’s hear it.”

“Well, I want a Christmas wedding. I vision this log cabin and snow falling outside, and a big Christmas trees and candles, and a big fireplace in the house, with a roaring fire. It would be small and intimate. I’d have a sleeveless white dress, like a princess, and long white gloves. There’s a guy playing the violin as I walk down the aisle, and the groom is in a tuxedo.”

“Who’s the groom?”

Hannah shrugged. “Don’t know.”

Max bit him lip and studied her. “I can give you Christmas trees tonight. That’s all I can promise, but if you’ll have me, I’ll...”

She placed her fingertips on his lips and he quit speaking. “It’s just a fantasy, Max. We’ve got time.” She pressed her body close to his, facing him. “Merry Christmas, Max.”

“Merry Christmas, Hannah.”

“This was my best Christmas eve.” She cupped her hand on his chin and pulled his head down for a kiss. It was the next morning and they were again sitting together on the couch.

“Mine, too.” He hugged her tighter. “You know, Jason and Carmen and Mike and David and Reed and all them always talk about how much they love Christmas. I never really felt that way. I’ve always sort of dreaded it. Ever since high school and I didn’t live at home, I hated going back there. My family isn’t

a family. That's why those other guys love Christmas. They love being with their families. I want that."

Hannah relaxed against him. "When I first met you, you said you didn't want that now."

He shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I changed. I'm such a different person than I was then. Hannah, you won't believe how far I've come since I met you. I'm ashamed to even think about who I was before and the things I did."

"It's not because of me, though, Max. You know who's responsible for changing you."

He nodded. "I know. It's God. I can feel Him working on me, but if it hadn't been for you, I would have never changed. I would have never given Him the chance."

Hannah shook her head. "Please don't give me the credit for this, Max. I don't deserve it." She lowered her voice.

"Sometimes I wonder if I'm even good enough for you at all."

Of course you're not. You're both bad. You know he hasn't changed. No one really changes. You didn't really change. You're still a whore.

They stayed in Vegas until they had to be in New York City on New Year's Eve. Two days later, Hannah was back at work, and Max was sitting at the kitchen table watching Mrs. Potts clean the oven and listening to her stories about her family. His cell phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Max, it's Neil. The production has been moved up on the video for Anything You Want."

"To when? Why?"

"Samantha wanted to move it. Who knows why? You know how she is, always changing her mind."

“Yeah, I know.” Samantha Sparks was notorious for flying by the seat of her pants, most of the time leaving disaster in her wake. “So when?”

“You start shooting next Monday. There is going to be a production meeting Sunday night, so you’ll have to be in LA by then. I don’t know when it will be done, but I would imagine you should be back home by Wednesday.”

Max sighed. “Okay. Oh, and Neil, remind me never to work with her again.”

“Anything you say, Max,” Neil agreed. Max knew it was a lie. Neil was paid well to make his clients happy, but if their working together would make him more money, he would do everything in his power to make sure it happened.

Max clicked off the call and dialed Hannah’s work number.

“Hello, Hannah Doherty.”

Max smiled into the phone. “Hello, Hannah Doherty.”

“Hello, Martin Fitzgerald. What can I help you with?”

“I’ve got some bad news. We’ll not bad, just a change in my schedule.”

“What is it?” This would be the first time in her relationship with Max that his scheduled had changed on the spur of the moment. From her conversations with the Carmen, Casey, Dana, and Shannon, she knew that she had been lucky.

“I have to fly to LA Sunday afternoon. The production of that music video starts Monday morning. Can you go?”

“Oh, okay. That’s not bad. We didn’t have anything planned. It’ll be good to go ahead and get it out of the way. When are we going to be back?”

“Neil said by Wednesday.”

“This will be fun,” Hannah said. “I’ve never really seen you working.”

“What are you talking about? You’ve been to the studio.”

"That's just you standing around with headphones and singing. I want to see you do something."

Max laughed. "Well, that's about as good as it gets," he said. "I'm a singer."

"And a dancer, and I've never see you do that, other than what you do around the house. I want to see something choreographed."

"Well, I'm not sure if this video will be or not, for me anyway. I'm sure Samantha will do some dancing."

"Well, it will be fun, nonetheless." Mr. Briggs stuck his head into Hannah's door. "I gotta go. Love you."

"I love you, too. I'll see you when you get home."

Hannah hung up the phone. "Come in, Mr. Briggs."

Her boss came into her office. "Hey Hannah." He handed her some papers. "There's going to be a three-day training workshop for the new software next week. Everyone who has been here less than a year is required to go."

Hannah glanced at the paperwork. The workshop was Monday through Wednesday, the same days she was supposed to be gone with Max. "Oh, man."

"Is there a problem?"

Hannah shook her head. "No, just...nothing. Thanks." She waited for Mr. Briggs to leave the office before tossing the papers onto her desk and muttered an expletive.

Now you can't go with Max and you can't watch him with Samantha Sparks. You've heard that song, Hannah, you know what the video is going to have to be like. He'll probably get him real excited and who do you think he will turn to?

"Not her," Hannah argued. "He would never do that to me."

Do you know that for sure, Hannah?

She shook her head. "No."

You know he's slept with her. You saw the pictures of them together. People like Max just don't have friends like her.

"I don't know that he has," Hannah said, but she knew deep in her heart he had.

She clicked an icon on her computer desktop and opened up the Internet browser. She used a search engine to find several pictures of Max and Samantha together. She focused on one of them together on the red carpet at some awards show. She couldn't stand the way she held his hand in both of hers and the way she leaned her body into his. His free hand was wrapped around her waist and rested low on her hip. It was obvious that they were very comfortable and familiar with each other's bodies.

"So what if he has," she mumbled. "That was a long time before he met me."

Whatever you say.

She closed the browser window and picked up the phone, using the speed dial to reach Max on his cell phone. "I've got bad news," she said when he answered.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't go with you. Mr. Briggs just told me that I have to go to some training workshop that same week. I can't believe it."

"Quit your job, Hannah. Come with me. You don't need that stinking job anyway."

"I do, though," she argued. "I like making my own way and having my independence."

"I understand that. I do. But my schedule is going to get real busy this spring, then a tour...I want you to be able to go with me to all that. Just quit your job."

"I don't know, Max." "What's there not to know?"

She sighed. Her phone beeped, signaling that she had

another call holding. "I've got to go. We'll talk about this when I get home." She answered the other line. "Hello?"

"Hello, Hannah." Her mother's voice sounded cold and hard.

"Why are you calling me?"

"I need that money," she said. "I know you're good for it. I know who you're living with."

"How do you know that?" Hannah asked. Her hand was shaking and she gripped the receiver tighter.

"I saw you with him. How did you manage to snag someone like him? Does he know you're insane?"

"I am not insane."

Joan laughed. "Oh, but you are little girl. Maybe he does know, but the media doesn't. The press would have a field day with this information."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying that I'm coming to your office this afternoon at four o'clock and you're going to give me ten thousand dollars in cash, and you're going to make this debt to the hospital disappear. If you're not there, or you don't give me the money, then I'm going to the tabloids with the information that you are schizo."

"You can't do that."

"Oh, yeah I can. I'll see you at four o'clock."

Hannah slammed down the phone furious and confused. She knew she needed to tell Max the truth about her illness. If her mother told him, at least he would know, but to blab it to the media was another story altogether. That would do more damage to his reputation than hers. She was nobody. She didn't even have a reputation. Sure, she had been seen around town with him, and the paparazzi had taken some pictures that had ended up on the Internet, but no one knew much about her.

She played over her options in her head and imagined the



consequences of each. It all played out the same, though. If Max found out, her relationship with him would be over. Her only option, the only one that gave her even a slim chance of keeping her secret, was giving her mother the money. She pulled her pocketbook from her bottom desk drawer and took a credit card out of her wallet. It had a three thousand dollar credit limit and she was saving it for emergencies. This seemed like an emergency to her. She opened her mother's account on her computer. She knew a few tricks that would eliminate some of the late charges and fees. Once she had reduced the amount as much as she could, she entered her own credit card number and paid off the balance.

She rubbed her chin. That was taken care of, but getting the ten thousand in cash was going to be a bigger problem. She had the money; part of the sales of Pepper's car padded her account nicely. It was just a matter of getting it in cash. Her savings was stored in her bank in Crossdale. She looked through her wallet once more. A flicker of silver caught her eye. She pulled the card out. It was a Visa Card that Max had given her to take shopping during their Christmas trip.

I can't steal from him.

What choice do you have?

Hannah tapped the card on her desk. I have no choice. With a few clicks of her mouse and Max's credit card number, she wired \$10,000 against Max's credit card to her checking account. She checked the clock. It was just past eleven in the morning. She would be able to retrieve her money on her lunch break.

Her hands shook as she approached the bank teller. "Can I help you?" The teller asked in a friendly voice.

Hannah nodded. "I had some money wired into my account this morning. I need to withdraw it please."

The teller handed Hannah a form. She gripped a pen with trembling fingers and wrote her name and account number in the appropriate places before giving the slip of paper back to the teller.

The teller punched a few keys on her keyboard and made a note on the form. "How do you want that?" She asked. "Cash? Or a cashier's check?"

"Cash."

The teller looked a little perturbed by her answer. "I'll be right back," she said. She returned a few seconds later. "Follow me, please."

Hannah followed her to another office where another smiling bank employee was waiting for her. "Please sign this, Ms. Doherty," she said. "Right here." She tapped another form with the tip of her pen. Hannah leaned over the desk and signed the form. "Large bills okay?"

"Yeah, fine," Hannah said. "Thank you."

The woman disappeared from the room. Hannah sat in a chair to wait. The woman returned a few minutes later carrying a slim stack of brand new one hundred dollar bills. She sat at her desk facing Hannah and counted out the money. Even though she had worked in the banking industry, it surprised her that such a large amount of money made a stack less than a half of an inch thick. She picked it up and put it in her wallet.

"Thank you for your business," the banker said, still smiling.

Hannah nodded. "Thank you."

She went back to her office and nervously waited for her mother to arrive. At four on the dot, her phone rang and Joan's arrival was announced. Hannah stood as the door to her office opened and Joan entered. "Hello, mother," Hannah said.

“Do you have my money?”

Hannah nodded and opened the top drawer to her desk and took out an envelope with the cash inside. She handed it to Joan.

“This is it? This is ten thousand dollars?”

Hannah nodded. “You can count it.”

Joan folded the envelope and shoved it into the front pocket of her jeans. “And the other?”

“I took care of it.” She handed Joan a statement of her account showing it paid in full.

“Okay, then. Your secret is safe with me.” She turned to leave. “Safe for now.”

Hannah sat back down at her desk, her whole body shaking. Thank God that’s over. “Please God,” she prayed. “Please keep that woman out of my life and don’t let her tell anyone.

What are you going to Him for? What’s he going to do to help you? Your faith has been worthless. He hasn’t helped you any. You’ve spent all this time praying and He hasn’t done anything.

“You can still go with me,” Max said. He was zipping up his suitcase. “It won’t be any trouble to get you a plane ticket.”

Hannah frowned. “That’s okay.”

“Are you okay, Hannah?” Max asked, putting his hand on her arm.

“Did you ever sleep with her?” She asked. The question had been on her mind since Max had told her he was going. The voice telling her that he was going to do it again wasn’t helping her insecurities.

Max raised his eyebrows. “Samantha Sparks?”

"Yeah, Samantha Sparks. Did you ever sleep with her?" She spoke slowly as if Max couldn't understand the question.

A red flag popped up in his brain, and something told him not to answer her. There's no reason to lie. If she's asking, she must suspect that I have. "Yeah, I have. Why?"

"Because I want to know. I want to know if you've had sex with the girl you're going to spend the next few days with."

He threw his hands up in the air. "I'm not going to spend the next few days with her. I'm going to work."

"You didn't ask me to come."

"I did ask you to come," he said shaking his head. "You're the one who can't because of your stupid job."

He didn't ask you to go. He's trying to make you think you're crazy. He's lying to you.

"You told me that it was going to be next month. Why did you change it?"

Max shook his head. "I didn't change it. Samantha and Neil did. We already talked about that. Don't you remember?" You didn't talk to him this morning. He's making that up. Hannah clenched her jaw. "I didn't talk to you this morning, Max. I don't know what you're talking about."

Max shook his head, disbelieving what he was hearing. "We talked. You were planning to go with me. Then you called back and told me about that stupid training. You don't remember any of this? I told you to quit your job."

He wants total control of you. That's why he's playing these mind games. Don't fall for it Hannah. You know what's true.

"You're lying to me. You changed it after I told you about work."

Max slammed his fist against the wall. "I didn't know it was going to be changed. I told you that already. Didn't you hear me?"

"I can hear just fine, and what I'm hearing is that you have slept with that whore."

He doesn't really love you. You could do so much better than him. Just let him go and screw that whore. You'd be better off.

"Hold on, now. There's no need to name call. You don't even know Sam."

"Oh, it's Sam now. I see." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"What do you see? Damn, Hannah, what has gotten into you? You're acting crazy!"

Oh sweet Hannah, he's calling you names. Don't let him call you that.

"Don't call me crazy!"

Max rubbed his forehead, frustrated with the situation. "What do you want me to do? Do you want to go? You can go. Quit your job and come with me."

"Why so you can bounce back and forth between us? Or maybe just have us both at one time?"

Max grabbed her shoulders. "Hannah! What the hell are you talking about?" He was mad. He pushed her so that she fell back against the bed.

See, he's just really no better than Frankie.

Max started to walk out of the room. Hannah jumped up from the bed and jumped on his back. She pulled on his hair and kicked her legs, trying to make him fall.

"Good God, Hannah!" He fought her off of him and pushed her back onto the bed. Her eyes were blazing. "You are crazy!"

She jumped up and stood in the middle of her bed. "Get out! Go to LA with that slut bitch whore Samantha Sparks, but if you have sex with her, don't think I'm sticking around."

Max backed out of the room and shut the door. He didn't

look back as he picked up his bag and headed for his car.

Hannah walked into the kitchen. Max had been gone for only a couple hours, and she missed him already. She had fallen asleep soon after he left and woke up with a much clearer head. She was sorry that she had argued with Max. That was so stupid. He's the best thing that ever happened to you. You're going to ruin it.

Yeah, so what if he has sex with other people, right? As long as he doesn't kick you out, you're golden.

"He's not going to sleep with anyone else," Hannah argued. "You're just trying to start something."

I'm not starting anything. You live in this freaking fantasy world. You're unbelievably stupid, Hannah. So stupid.

"Why have I been listening to you?" Hannah asked. "Why did you even come back anyway?"

Because you need someone to tell you the truth. I'm the only one who's always told you the truth. And the truth is that you're worthless. Your mother knows it, and Jimmy knows it, and Max knows it. No one has ever loved you. Max doesn't either. If he did, he sure doesn't now, after the way you attacked him.

Hannah shook her head. "I can't believe that I did that." She looked at her watch. Max's plane wouldn't have landed yet. "I've got to call him and apologize."

You don't have to apologize to him. He was the one that was wrong. He lied to you and tried to make you think you were crazy just so he could go out there and cheat on you.

"I'm not going to believe that."

Believe it.

“No. Go away.” She went to her room and pulled the pill bottles out from under her mattress. She opened one and poured the pills into her hand.

Don’t take those. It’s just another way for him to control you. You don’t need that medicine. You’re fine, Hannah.

She looked at the pills in her hand. “I don’t need these,” she whispered. She dumped them back into the bottle and shoved it under her mattress. She returned to the kitchen and looked around, thinking she needed to straighten up a little before heading out to church that night.

She opened the cabinet under the sink and reached far in the back for a garbage bag. A mouse ran out from under the box of bags, brushing her fingertips. She screamed and jumped back, hitting the back of her head on the inside of the cabinet. She grabbed the back of her head and fell backwards. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the mouse run under the stove. She tried to sit up, but a stabbing pain in her stomach pinned her to the floor.

The rats! The rats! They’re biting you! They are on you!

The pain worsened but Hannah managed to get to her feet. She staggered to her bedroom. She could feel the rats crawling all over her body. She stripped off her clothes, trying to fling the rats away from her. She noticed the fresh blood on her panties.

They’re inside you!

Hannah screamed. She picked up a dirty T-shirt off the floor and pulled it over her head, pulling it in every direction trying to stretch it to swallow her. She crawled onto her bed and covered herself with the sheet.

“They’re eating me!” she screamed.

## Chapter Eleven

Max pulled the car into the garage. He was glad to be home, even if Hannah was still angry with him. He assumed that she was from her refusal to answer his phone calls. He took his duffel bag out of the trunk and let himself into the house. He went directly to his room and threw his bag on the bed. He checked his answering machine before going upstairs to the kitchen.

He was shocked at the state of the kitchen. The same glasses and soda cans that had been on the counter when he left three days ago were exactly where he had left them. The pizza box from their last meal together Sunday afternoon was still perched on top of the stove. The garbage hadn't been emptied and the peels from the bananas he had had for breakfast Sunday were beginning to smell. Mrs. Potts was scheduled to come on Thursdays, tomorrow, but it wasn't like Hannah to not do the



most basic cleaning. It was like she hadn't even been there.

She's gone. She left me.

He had his hand on the phone, ready to pick it up and call Jimmy's Auto Service when it rang. He glanced at the caller ID box as he picked it up. It was the hospital where Hannah worked.

"Hello?" he said, fully expecting it to be her.

"Hannah Doherty, please."

"She's not here. Can I take a message?" He was convinced now that the reason she hadn't answered the phone or returned his calls was because she was back above the garage in North Carolina.

"This is Mr. Briggs from the hospital. Is Hannah sick? She hasn't been in to work all week, and she hasn't called."

"Umm, yeah," Max said, not knowing what else to say.

"I'll have her call you." He hung up the phone and parted the curtains above the kitchen sink. The Lexus, which had pretty much become Hannah's car, was parked in her spot under the tree, confirming to him that she had gone back to Crossdale.

Max went down the hall to Hannah's room. He tried the knob unsuccessfully. That's not right. Why would she lock the door if she's gone. He knocked on the door. "Hannah? Are you here?"

He heard a small moan from inside. He stepped back away from the door and kicked it several times just above the knob. The mechanism failed allowing Max entry into the room.

Hannah was lying on her back on her bed naked from the waist down. Her skin was pale and her eyes were rolled back in her head. A large rust colored stain was on the mattress under her hips. The stench in the room, a combination of old and new blood mixed with the odor of urine, was overwhelming.

Max rushed to her, thinking that she must have been attacked, stabbed, shot, raped, or injured in some way. "Hannah," he said, grabbing her shoulders.

She rolled her eyes toward him. "They're killing me, Max," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Who's killing you?" He glanced at the lower half of her body trying to determine where the blood was coming from.

"The rats. The rats are eating my insides. It hurts, Max."

He moved toward the end of the bed. "Where are you hurt?" He touched her leg and she jumped, bending her legs at the knees. He saw the blood smeared on the insides of her thighs. It became apparent where the blood was coming from.

"The rats, Max. Watch out. Don't let them eat you." "There's no rats, Hannah." He reached for the phone, knowing he should call someone, but not sure who. She began to moan again and Max quickly punched in Casey's work number.

"Hello, Orange County Family. This is Casey."

"Casey, you've got to get over here quick." "What's going on, Max?"

"Something's wrong with Hannah. She's hurt. Just come quick."

"Call 911. I'll be there as quick as I can."

He ended the call and dialed the emergency number. He gave the dispatcher the required information and turned his attention back to Hannah.

She grabbed his arm. "It hurts," she whispered. "The rats are eating me. It's killing me."

He shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about." He felt her forehead, expecting her to be warm and her delusions were caused by a fever. Her skin felt cold and clammy.

He covered her with a blanket. She closed her eyes and

began whimpering. Max noticed that her lips were dry and chapped looking. Her hair, which needed to be washed at least at least once a day, looked so wet and weighed down that he thought he could wring it out like a washcloth. It was obvious to him that it hadn't been washed since he left.

"God, Hannah. What's happening to you?" He mumbled. He glanced around the room looking for evidence of drugs. Maybe she's on a bad trip. He didn't see any signs of drug use other than her packet of birth control pills that were lying on the night table. He picked it up and opened it. The last pill she had taken had been on a Saturday, but he had no idea if she had not taken one in the past for days or if she had taken a weeks supply or more in the past three days.

"Hannah," he said sharply. "What did you do to yourself?" She slowly lifted her eyelids. "It's not me, Max. It's the rats."

What the hell is she talking about? He ran his hand through his hair and tried to think of what he could do for her. He just sat next to her bed and stroked her hair listening to her mumble about the rats.

"Max!" Casey's voice called out. Met her at the door to Hannah's room. "The paramedics are coming up the driveway, and Dr. Klein's on his way. What's going on?"

Max stepped aside and Casey entered room. "Oh," Casey gasped as she pulled back the blanket. "What is this?"

The ringing doorbell alerted Max to the paramedics' arrival and he left the room to let them in. They were followed in by Dr. Klein.

Max led the doctor and paramedics to Hannah's room and leaned against the door frame to watch as they poked and prodded her. The glances that passed back and forth between them were not good.

"Could she have been pregnant?" Casey asked as she once

again lifted the blanket.

Max shook his head. "I don't think so. She was on the pill." He handed Casey the pill pack that he was still holding.

"What's she talking about?" Dr. Klein asked, leaning his ear close to Hannah's face. Her voice was barely audible. "Rats?"

Max shrugged. "I don't know. That's the only thing she's been talking about. She says the rats are eating her."

Casey walked over to the door. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave for a minute." She pushed the door shut.

He returned to the kitchen. He lifted the full bag of garbage out of the can and took it outside before grabbing a can of Coke out of the refrigerator and sat down at the bar.

Dr. Klein joined him after a few minutes. "She's a very sick, girl, Max."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Well, for starters, she's severely dehydrated, which may be causing the delusions."

"Was she pregnant?"

Dr. Klein shook his head. "I'm not sure."

Casey came back into the kitchen. "She's ready."

The paramedics wheeled the gurney with Hannah's stricken body through the living room. Max followed them to the driveway. He started to climb into the back of the ambulance when Casey stopped him.

"Ride with me," she said. "I need to ask you some questions." He reluctantly got into the front seat of Casey's Jeep. "When was the last time you talked to her?"

Max shook his head. "Sunday, before I left. We had a fight. I tried calling a couple of times, but she didn't call back. I thought she was still mad." He paused. "She hasn't been at work all week."

Casey rubbed her forehead. "I tried calling her last night

and didn't get an answer. I didn't think anything of it."

"Do you think she's been like this since I left?"

Casey shrugged. "I don't know. I do know that she's been lying on that bed for a while. She's pretty sick."

At the hospital, Max waited helplessly in the waiting room while Casey disappeared behind the scenes looking for Dr. Klein and Hannah. Casey had called Michael from the car and within a few minutes, he made an appearance.

"Hey, man, what's going on?" Michael asked, sitting down in a chair across from Max.

Max shook his head. "I don't know, man." He recounted to Michael the events that had led up to the trip to the emergency room. "You know I don't think she's taken a shower since I left. Not to mention she hasn't done anything around the house. I mean, I know it's not her job, but it's not like her, Mike."

Max leaned forward and gave his head a small shake. "I don't think she's left her room in three days."

Casey came back into the waiting room. Max jumped up. "What is it, Casey?" He felt his knees shaking and he sat back down in the chair.

"They're not sure. She's getting some fluids and they're watching her. She is still talking about the rats. They're waiting for the results of a tox screen. Maybe you should call her brother."

"Yeah, I should." They went outside the main entrance and sat down on a bench. Max dialed information on his cell phone and the operator connected him to Jimmy Doherty.

"Hello," a gruff voice answered. Whoever had answered the phone had been asleep.

"Hi, yeah, is this Jimmy?"

"Yeah, who's this?" "Jimmy, this is Max."

"What's wrong?" Jimmy asked. Max thought he detected

a hint of worry in his voice.

“Hannah’s in the hospital.”

“What’s wrong?” Jimmy said again. “Was she in an accident?”

Max shook his head. His mind was full of jumbled words and he couldn’t make them come out in the right order. “She wasn’t acting quite like herself,” he finally said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, uh, she was talking about rats eating her. She was pretty delusional.”

“Oh, God,” Jimmy groaned. “An episode. I told her this would happen.”

“What are you talking about? What kind of episode?”

“She didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what? What’s wrong with her?”

Jimmy sighed. “Hannah’s a schizophrenic, Max.”

“Schizophrenic?”

The word caught Casey’s attention and she immediately got up and went back inside the hospital.

“She’s crazy? What does that mean?” Max knew nothing about the disease outside of the stigmas that came along with it.

“She’s supposed to be on medication, but she doesn’t always take it. I had to tell her everyday to take it. She’s not crazy most of the time, but she’s not well. She was diagnosed when she was seventeen.”

Max didn’t know what to say. He held the phone to his ear, but didn’t say anything. “You still there, Max?” Jimmy asked after several seconds.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“I’ll get down there as soon as I can. I’m leaving right now.”

“Okay,” Max said. He clicked off the phone.

“Is he coming?” Michael asked. Max nodded. “Right away.”

“What did he say?”

“He said that she’s been sick since she was a teenager. I can’t believe this. It can’t be true.”

Michael stood up and put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Let’s go back in and see what’s new.”

Casey was waiting for them in the waiting room. “Tox screen came back,” she said. “There were small traces of an anti-psychotic medication in her system. The psych doctor seems to think that she must have gone off of her medication about a week ago.”

“No other drugs?” Max asked.

Casey shook her head. “No, drugs, no alcohol, no birth control pills, no caffeine, no nicotine. She hasn’t had anything to eat, drink or smoke since you’ve been gone.”

“What does this mean, Casey? Schizophrenia? Is that like a split personality or something? How could she have been so normal?”

“Let’s go back to the house for a while. I’ll tell you everything I know, which isn’t much.”

Max shook his head. “I want to stay here. Can I see her?”

“She’s sedated, Max. She won’t know you’re here.”

“I’m staying.”

“Okay,” she relented. “I’m going to go by your place and see if I can find her pill bottles.” She looked at Michael. “You staying here?”

“No,” Max answered for him. “You go on home.”

Michael dug his car keys out of his pocket. “Here, I’ll leave you my car.”

“Thanks,” Max said, taking the keys.

“I’ll be back later,” Casey said as she hugged Max. “Give me a call if you need anything.”

Max watched them leave. He turned around and was greeted by Dr. Klein. “Can I see her, Doc?”

“Let’s get a cup of coffee first. They’re moving her up to the fifth floor - the psych ward. I’ll take you up there.”

They found their way to the cafeteria. “So I guess you have a lot of questions,” Dr. Klein said after they were seated at a table.

“I don’t know.” Max fiddled with his cup. “I don’t know anything about it. What does it mean? Is it like a split personality?”

“No, not quite. No one is sure of its exact cause. It’s a complicated disease. There’s no cure, but the symptoms are treatable. If she takes her medication like she’s supposed to, there’s no reason that she can’t lead a perfectly normal life. Now granted, I don’t know Hannah’s case, but I have to imagine that her meds have been working since you didn’t know.”

“She seemed so normal.” “And she will again.”

Max sat by Hannah’s bedside holding her hand in both of his. He had his head down and his eyes closed. His head hurt and his heart ached.

“Max,” Casey whispered, coming into the room. He looked up. “Did you find her medicine?”

Casey nodded and sat the bag she was carrying down on a table. “Yeah, and she had plenty. She didn’t stop taking it because she was out.”

“Then why?”

“I don’t know, Max. Hey, I brought you some supper.” She pulled a large meatball sandwich out of the bag along with a thermos of ice tea.

“Thanks, Case.”



“Has she woken up any?”

Max shook his head. “No, she’s hardly even moved.”

“I think they’ve got her pretty sedated. They don’t know what she’ll be like when she wakes up, so they want to try and get as many fluids and meds in her as possible before she wakes up. They don’t want her pulling out her IVs or anything like that.”

“That sounds so unlike her,” Max said, shaking his head. “Why would she have not told me? I love her Casey. She could have told me.”

Casey shook her head. “I brought something else, too.” She took a book out of the bag and handed it to him. “I stopped by the mall on my way over.”

Max accepted the book from her. He read the title: Understanding Schizophrenia. “Thanks.”

“So do you want to tell me what you fought about?”

Max ran his hand through his hair. “Oh, It was so stupid. Samantha Sparks.”

“Hmm,” Casey grunted.

“I know,” Max said. “I wish I had never agreed to do her video.”

“Is that what the fight was about? Because she’s known you were going to do that video. You had to.”

“No, not really. We were talking about it as I was packing and she asked me if I had ever slept with her. I didn’t lie, and she got all angry. She thought I was going to go up there and sleep with her again. I thought she finally trusted me.”

“She hasn’t been taking her medicine. She’s not herself.” “I guess.”

Casey stood up. “Well, I’ve got to go.”

“Thanks, Casey, for everything.”

Casey smiled and walked over to him. She planted a kiss on the top of his head. “Why don’t you come on back to the

house? She's not going to wake up tonight and if she does, they'll just sedate her again. I'll get you up in the morning early."

Max nodded. "Maybe I will, but I'm going to sit with her for a while longer, I think."

He was just nodding off in his chair when Hannah finally made a noise. He squeezed her hand. "I'm here, Hannah."

"Don't touch me, Frankie," she mumbled. "Get away from me."

Max pulled his hand away. "It's Max."

"You're hurting me, Frankie!" She screamed. "Leave me the hell alone!" It was loud enough to frighten Max and make the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

She began writhing around on the bed, as much as her restraints would let her. "Get the hell away from me!" She screamed.

Max backed away from her bed until he hit the solid door behind him. He turned and opened it, scared to stay and scared to leave. He stepped out of the room, bumping into Kelsey, the nurse assigned to Hannah's room.

"What's wrong, Max?"

"Hannah's screaming."

Kelsey pushed past him and called on her walkie-talkie to Dr. Kidd, the doctor now handling Hannah's case. Max waited at the door while Kelsey, then Dr. Kidd tried to talk to Hannah. The screaming continued. Dr. Kidd said something to Kelsey that Max didn't understand. Kelsey left the room, returning momentarily with a large syringe. Kelsey injected the contents of the syringe into Hannah's IV. Within seconds, Hannah lay motionless again.

Dr. Kidd walked over to Max. "We had to sedate her again. We can't let her wake up and be so violent." We'll give the meds more time to work and we'll back off the sedative slowly

again in 24 to 36 hours. You should go home and get some sleep.”

Max nodded. He knew the doctor was right. He hadn't left the hospital since Hannah was checked in. He drove home. There was an unfamiliar car in his driveway, signaling that Jimmy had arrived.

Jimmy looked at his hands. They were the rough and permanently stained hands of a mechanic. He looked older than twenty-six, and Max hoped it was from the stress of owning his own business and not because of Hannah's illness.

“What has she told you about her growing up? About our parents?”

“She said that your dad left when she was little, and you were raised by your mom. She got remarried when Hannah was a teenager and she didn't like her stepfather. So she moved in with you. Is that not true?”

“No.” Jimmy shook his head. “It's partly true. I don't know why she wouldn't have told you about Howard.” He looked at Max. “Did she tell you about Howard?”

Max shook his head.

“Well, it's like this. Her father, her biological father, took off right after she was born. She was sick baby and was in the hospital for a while. Anyway, a year or so after she was born, my mom married Howard who adopted us. Howard Doherty was our father, legally and as far as I'm concerned anyway. He died when I was sixteen.”

Jimmy paused and shook his head. “Less than a year later, Mom got hooked up with Pepper. They didn't get along very well at all.”

“So she came to live with you?”

“It wasn’t like that. She got sick first.”

Max wanted to ask the details, but at the same time he didn’t want to know. “What happened?” He asked, his concern and curiosity winning out.

“It was like she was two different people. One day she would be sad and depressed and wouldn’t come out of her room or eat, much less talk to anyone. Then there would be other days when she talked non-stop -- no, she yelled, and she screamed, and she broke things. She cussed and hit. And you never knew what you were going to get from day to day, minute to minute. She would seem perfectly fine and the smallest thing would cause her to go one way or another. I actually preferred when she was the mean Hannah.”

“Why?”

“Because sad and depressed Hannah would lock herself in her room and barricade the door. She would stay in there for days. I was terrified that one day we would have to force open the door and we’d find her dead.”

Max shook his head. “This just doesn’t sound like her at all. “How long did this go on?”

“From the time she as about twelve until she was diagnosed when she was seventeen.”

“Why so long? If it was so bad, why did it go on so long?” “I tried to get her to go to the doctor, but she would refuse. She’d promise me she’d be better, and for a few days she would be. But the older she got, the worse she got. She really had it in for our mom and Pepper. She used to go into their closet while they were gone and cut up their clothes, and she would pour out their booze all over their bedroom. One time she even slashed the tires on the car and scratched up the paint with a knife. She destroyed that car.”

“Did they have her arrested?”

Jimmy chuckled. “Naw. Pepper had a crop of pot growing

out by the edge of the woods. They didn't want the cops out there." He laughed harder. "She set fire to those pot plants." His face fell. "That was the same day of her first psychotic episode."

"What happened?"

Jimmy shook his head. "I'm not real sure. I was at the shop. Evidently, she set fire to the pot and then went back into the house. I guess the fire and the smoke and all confused her and she thought the house was on fire. She jumped out of her bedroom window on the second story. She broke an arm and a leg and was in the hospital for about a week. Of course, Crossdale is a small town and the rumors spread. People already thought that she was weird. Now, she was just plain crazy."

"Was she diagnosed then?"

"Oh, hell no. She got out of the hospital and came to live with me above the shop. Mom and Pepper had left town on the run. That's the last I've seen of her. I guess she's here, now, according to Hannah. Anyway, Hannah dropped out of high school and just kind of hung out in a daze until right before Halloween."

"What happened?" Max asked. He was entranced, as if Jimmy was telling a story about a stranger.

"She and Amanda drove to Asheville to Walmart. They went down the aisle of Halloween costumes and decorations and she just lost it. She thought the costumes were real and they were monsters trying to get her. It took three security guards to hold her down until the ambulance got there. She was admitted to a hospital in Asheville and the doctors there figured it out. From there, she went to another hospital, a residential facility, where she stayed for a year. When she came home from there she was better than I have ever seen her. For the past three years she's been great."

“No symptoms?”

Jimmy sighed. “I didn’t think so, but I talked to Justin and he said that for the past few months she’s been having one symptom – the voice.”

“The voice?”

Jimmy nodded. “Yeah. She has a female voice in her head that constantly tells her how worthless she is.”

Max shook his head. “She’s been having that since I’ve known her? Why wouldn’t she tell me?”

“Because who wants a schizo girlfriend? She was probably afraid that you would reject her. What would you have done?”

Max shrugged. “I don’t know. I feel like I don’t know anything anymore.” He paused. “What can I expect now?”

Jimmy sighed. “It’s a crazy disease, Max.” He shook his head at his own pun. “She knows she sick, and she knows she needs to take her medication, but sometimes, for some reason, she doesn’t. She won’t. The doctors told me that sometimes schizophrenics only feel normal when they have their symptoms, so what seems crazy to us, is normal for them.”

“What’s the deal with Frankie? Who’s that?” Max asked.

“Frankie?” Jimmy frowned at the mention of the name.

“He was this jerk-off boyfriend she had around the same time she jumped out the window. I’m surprised that she told you about him. He was mean to her, too.”

“Too?”

“Men haven’t been good to her. Her biological dad left when she was a baby, which Mom reminded her of time after time. Then Howard died and Pepper was just relentless. Even me. Even though I’ve tried to help her all I could, I’ve been selfish at times and did what was right for me before her. I moved out and left her there with Mom and Pepper to fend for herself.” He sighed. “Anyway, Frankie was just bad. He was like that voice – always telling her that she was worthless. Well,

he did make it a point of telling her that all she was good for was sex. Oh, and he told her that she was crazy.”

“How long was she with him?”

“Too long. I don’t know, several months. I would beg her to get away from him. I was so scared that she would end up pregnant.”

“Why would she stay with someone like that?”

“I guess because she felt like that’s all she was worth. I didn’t understand it then, and I don’t understand it entirely now, but her self esteem was so low. She didn’t understand that she was better than all that. And it was Frankie that started all the rumors about her being a slut.” He paused. “Did she tell you about Eli?”

Max shook his head. “Who’s Eli?”

“When she was in the residential hospital, she met another patient there, Eli. He had schizophrenia, too, and they hit it off. She was seventeen, he was twenty, and they got real serious about each other. They were both doing really well, and were making plans to get married when they both got out. He was a nice guy, and he treated her like a queen. For the first time in her life she had hope. I was so happy for her.”

“What happened?”

“Eli was released from the hospital before her, and he went back to college. He was doing real well, and they were writing and calling all the time. They had a wedding date set. He bought her a ring. It was near time for final exams and I guess the stress was getting to him and he quit taking his meds. He walked away from the dorm one night and just disappeared. He was missing for a while, months. A woman out walking her dog early one morning found his remains in the woods about thirty miles from campus. The police think that he was probably hitchhiking and got picked up and killed.”

“How long ago was that?”

"His body was recovered right about the same time Hannah was getting out."

"How did she take it?"

"Surprisingly well. She said that he was her angel, and she always knew that he was just going to be here for a little while. She never spoke of him at all?"

Max shook his head. "Not once."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Max glanced at Jimmy and noticed that he had tears in his eyes. "She'll get better again," Max offered.

Jimmy nodded. "I know she will. I had just hoped so much that it was over. I just want her to be normal and live a happy and productive life." He looked at Max. "What's going on with you two? Hannah's happy, Max. Even when she came home after whatever that fight was about; I could tell that she was happy. What's going to happen now?"

Max considered his answer before speaking. "I'll get the best doctors, drugs, hospitals. Whatever it takes. I want her to be the Hannah I fell in love with."

"What if she can't be?"

Max shrugged. "I don't know. It's not going to happen. She's going to get better."

"So you don't want me taking her back to North Carolina?"

"No! I want her here with me."

Jimmy nodded. "I think that would be best." He ran his hand through his hair and nervously chewed on his bottom lip. "Umm, there's something else I need to talk to you about. I'm about tapped out financially, and her insurance doesn't cover this because it's a preexisting condition..."

Max held up his hand. "Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it. It's not a problem."

"Thanks, man." Jimmy held out his hand to Max. "I guess I need to be getting to bed. I'm about wiped out."



Hannah opened her eyes. She blinked twice and rubbed her eyes. She recognized that she was in a hospital room, but she couldn't remember what landed her there. She took inventory of her body. She wasn't in any pain so she assumed that she hadn't been in an accident. She looked around the room. Max was sitting in a chair in the corner reading a book. He hadn't noticed that she was awake. Above his head a camera was mounted to the ceiling. She tried to gently lift her arms, but was unable to. Although she couldn't see her wrists beneath the blanket that was pulled up to her chest, she knew that she was bound to the bed with restraints.

"Oh, God," she sighed, her voice full of disappointment and her eyes brimming with tears.

Max looked up and smiled at her. "Hey there," he said. He stood up and walked to her bed, leaving his book behind in the chair.

She turned her head away. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean? Why wouldn't I be here?" "Because I'm in the nut house, Max."

"You're in the hospital, Hannah, because you're sick, but you can get better."

She wondered if he knew just how sick she was. "I won't get better. I have schizophrenia."

"I know. Jimmy's here. He told me all about it."

"He's here?"

"He's back at the house. He's been here a lot, though."

"How long have I been here?"

"Three days. I brought you here Wednesday night. It's Saturday."

Hannah shook her head. "I'm sorry, Max. I should have

told you.”

Max shrugged slightly. “I imagine it’s a hard thing to talk about.” He bit his bottom lip. “Why did you stop taking your medication?”

“She told me I didn’t need it.” She waited for his reaction.

“She? She who?” He answered his own question as soon as the words left his mouth: the voice.

“So what are you doing here?” she asked again.

“Why wouldn’t I be here?”

“I don’t know. I thought you called Jimmy to come collect me and take me home.”

“Do you wanna go back to Crossdale?” She shook her head. “Not really.”

Max took her hand. “I don’t want you to go. I want you to stay.”

“I’m not well, Max. You don’t want me to stay.”

He nodded. “Yes, I do. I fell in love with you before I knew about this, but this was part of you then. It doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

She felt a tear roll down her cheek. “You’re in love with me?”

He wiped the tear away and lifted her chin with his fingers. He bent down and kissed her lightly on the lips. “God help me,” he said, smiling and shaking his head, “but I love you.”

Again, she tried to lift her arms and felt defeated when she couldn’t. She looked up helplessly at him. “Could you undo these?”

Max pulled back the blanket and reached for the restraint closest to him. He stopped and pulled back his hands. “I can’t. I’m sorry. The doctor said not to.”

“Come on, Max,” she pleaded. “I promise it’s okay. I feel fine.”

It was all he could do, but he backed away from the bed. “Let me get the doctor.”

“Max please! I just want a few more minutes alone with

you. I want to touch you. Please Max.”

The doctor had forewarned him that when she awoke she would beg him to free her. He shook his head. “Let me go get the doctor,” he repeated. He left the room hurriedly, but not quickly enough to escape the sounds of her sobbing.

Her doctor was heading down the hall. “Hey, doc,” Max called. “She’s awake.”

The doctor broke into a trot and pushed passed Max as he entered Hannah’s room. “Kelsey,” he called in the direction of the nurses’ station. “She’s awake.” He looked at Max. “Give me a few minutes to talk to her alone, okay Max?” The doctor closed the door, leaving Max in the hallway.

“Do you want me to call Jimmy or do you want to do it?” Kelsey asked, holding up the telephone receiver.

“I’ll do it,” Max said. He approached the desk and took the phone from her. He dialed the number to his own house. An unfamiliar female voice answered.

“Hello?” Whoever she was, she sounded anxious.

“Uh, this is Max.”

“Hello, Max. This is Amanda. Jimmy is in the shower. We were just getting ready to come to the hospital. Is there a change in Hannah’s status?”

“Yeah, actually. She’s awake. She woke up a few minutes ago. The doctor is in with her now.”

“Praise God! Oh, I’m so thankful. How is she?”

“She seems like herself, but scared.” He paused. “And disappointed.”

“Here’s Jimmy now,” Amanda said. “We’ll be on in just a few minutes.”

Max hung up the phone. He turned to look toward Hannah’s room. The door was still closed. “What’s next for her?” He asked Kelsey, who was still standing next to him.

“She’ll stay here for a few more days until we know her

meds are right. Then she'll probably be in an outpatient program to make sure she's coping all right. She won't be able to go back to work right away."

Max nodded. "So she should be back to herself really soon then?"

Kelsey looked at him sympathetically. "She is herself, Max. She can't help this. Don't say things like that to her. It will only make her feel like you think she's crazy."

Max nodded. "I know, I'm sorry."

Kelsey put her hand on his arm. "Don't apologize to me." She sighed. "I'm going to hate to see you go, though, once Hannah is out of here. I'll just have to go back to staring at the posters on my wall."

Max smirked. "You don't have posters of me on your wall."

She pulled a small wallet out of her smock pocket. From it she extracted her driver's licenses, her debit card, and a well-worn credit card sized Quintessential calendar.

"That's nuts," Max said, taking it from her and looking closely at it before handing it back. "You're so much more important than me. I should be carrying your picture around."

Kelsey blushed. "I'm just doing my job." Max shrugged slightly. "Me too."

Dr. Kidd approached the desk. "Kelsey, get Hannah something to eat. Max, you can go back in."

Max reentered the room. The first thing he noticed was that Hannah was sitting up in the bed with her hands folded in her lap. The restraints dangled on the sides of the bed.

"I see they let you loose," he joked. "I'm sorry I couldn't." She nodded her understanding. "Come over here to the bed. I still want to touch you." Max came over and sat on the edge of her bed. She reached out and stroked his face. "I'm so sorry I put you through this."

"I was so scared," he said, catching her hand in his. "I though you were going to die."

Hannah sighed. "Not that lucky this time. I never catch any breaks." She wasn't joking.

Max shook his head. "Why do you say that?" "I just want to be well."

"But you can get better, Hannah, and..."

She cut him off. "I'll never be better, Max. I might seem better, I might act normally, but I'll always be sick. Besides, what would I be losing by dying? I'd be gaining."

"But what about all of us? We'd lose. Me and Jimmy..."

Again, she cut him off. "Jimmy has been carrying the burden of me long enough. And you? I'm sure you'd move on."

Max put a hand on each side of her face so she couldn't look away from him while he spoke. "I love you, Hannah. I love you and I want you here with me. I can give you things that you never had and I want to give them to you."

"I know you've got more money than God," she said sarcastically.

"I'm not talking about stuff, dammit! I can give you a lifetime of unconditional love, and stability, and loyalty, and friendship, and respect. I want to, Hannah."

"Do you want to marry me?" She asked after a moment of silence, neither of them moving.

Max answered without hesitation. "Absolutely. I want to marry you." He planted a long kiss on her lips and finally removed his hands from her cheeks.

She looked down at her own hands. "You don't know, Max. You don't know what this disease is like."

He shook his head and went back across the room and picked up the book he had been reading, Understanding Schizophrenia. "I've read this book three times."

"You can't know by reading a book. You can't know."

He took a deep breath. “Maybe not, but I do know this, for the past four years I have slept with dozens, maybe hundreds, of women. I have never been in a serious relationship, and I didn’t want to be. I just wanted to have fun. I couldn’t imagine settling down. Then, I met you and you’re all I can think about, Hannah, and being with you is all I can think about. I love you, I want to marry you, and this disease isn’t going to change that.”

## Chapter Twelve

**H**annah spent one week bound to her room while the doctors stabilized her medications. While sedated, Max had spent almost every waking moment by her bedside, but now that she was alert, the visiting hours were strictly enforced, allowing him to visit only two hours every evening.

The week after that, when she was moved to the “rehabilitation” stage of her recovery, Quintessential began rehearsing for the tour. There was all new choreography to learn, and the guys were working 60 hours a week with the choreographer. Still, Max managed to sneak away to see her as often as possible.

“I thought you maybe you were having a miscarriage or something,” Max said. They were sitting on the patio outside the hospital cafeteria, enjoying an unusually warm late-January day.

Hannah smiled. "Nope. My birth control pill is one I took everyday, but I guess when I felt the cramps and saw the blood and the mouse..." Her voice trailed off, and she just sat there shaking her head, thinking about what had happened to her.

Max put his hand on top of hers. "You're going to be okay, you know that right?"

She nodded. "That's what you keep telling me."

"You're going to be better."

Hannah picked at her hamburger for a few seconds. "Are we really going to get married?"

"That's my, plan, yeah. You didn't believe me when I proposed?"

"I believed you." She paused again. "I can't have children."

"Because of the schizophrenia?"

"Yeah. I take the chance of passing this on."

Max shook his head. "First of all, whether or not you can have a baby is not an issue. I'd still want to marry you. Secondly, you can. The chance isn't that big. According to my book, there is only like an 8% chance that your child would have it. That's a 92% chance the baby won't. I'd have to go with the odds."

"But I don't have very good luck."

Max straightened his shoulders. "Well, I do. And besides, let's just cross that bridge when we get to it, okay?"

She nodded, happy to submit to his authority. "Okay." They sat in silence for a few minutes before she spoke again. "Are we going to announce our engagement? Have you told anyone?"

Max shook his head. "I haven't told anyone. I don't want to announce it right away." He hoped she didn't ask why. He hadn't even known he was going to propose until he heard the words come out of his mouth. Now, he wanted to get her a ring



before telling the world. “When are you getting out of this place?”

“Dr. Kidd said that unless something drastic happens, I can go home Friday. Of course, I have to come back once a week for an evaluation and I have to have a blood draw every other day for the next month.”

“Good grief. Why?”

Hannah shrugged. “I don’t know, but I suspect it because they want to make sure I’m taking my meds. If they’re taking my blood every 48 hours, then I have to take it.”

“What if you don’t?”

“If I don’t, then I get to come back here and stay until I comply.”

“How long is this going to go on? Are you going to be able to go on tour?”

She nodded. “I’m going on that tour. I know Dr. Kidd has been talking to Dr. Klein and Casey, so I’m thinking that she’s going to keep tabs on me out there.”

“She’s a good one,” Max said, nodding. “And she don’t care if you get mad at her.”

Hannah popped a French fry in her mouth. “It’s not going to be an issue. I’m going to take my medication. This isn’t going to happen again.”

Max smiled broadly. “That’s right, baby girl.”

There was a slight knock on the door. Hannah straightened her pajamas. “Come in,” she called. The door opened farther and David walked in carrying flowers.

“David.” She was shocked to see him.

He smiled sheepishly. He walked over to her bed and set the flowers on the bedside table. "Hey, Hannah. These are for you."

"Thank you, they're beautiful."

He sat down in the chair beside her bed. "You look good. Is there anything you need?"

"I am dying for a cigarette."

David patted his pockets. "Sorry, fresh out. They won't let you smoke here?"

"Well, they probably would, but I've decided to try and quit." She pulled the shoulder of her pajama top down so that he could see the nicotine patch on her upper arm.

"Do those work?"

"I guess so. I can certainly tell when it's time to change it. I never realized how much of a habit it was. I mean, like doing stuff with your hands. I suppose if not smoking drives me crazy, I'm in the right place."

David chuckled. "I like your sense of humor."

"Well, you have to have a good sense of humor when you're dealing with this stuff."

"I thought you were going to say you had to have a good sense of humor when you were dealing with Max."

Hannah laughed. "Well, that too. So, where's Shannon?" It didn't surprise her that David came without his new wife. Ever since Shannon had seemingly tried to sabotage Hannah's relationship with Max, the relationship between the two women had been strained. Hannah got the distinct impression that Shannon simply didn't like her.

"Oh, Shannon had a project to work on. She's been working more than us here lately."

"Is she going on tour?" Hannah knew that Casey and Dana both were taking a leave of absence from their jobs in order to tour with the band. She had resigned from her job at the

hospital, so she was free to travel, too. And she knew Carmen would be there as much as her own touring schedule would allow.

David frowned. "I don't think so. I think she's going to try to come to as many shows as she can, but she's not going to be leaving her job to do it like Dana and Casey."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "It's okay. I'm just going to share a bus with Jason. We'll cry and moan together about how lonely we are."

"Aww."

He smiled. "Oh, it will be okay. What's three months when you're talking about a lifetime together?"

"I guess you're right. I, personally, can't wait. Casey told me about the last tour and it sounds so fun."

"You think you'll be able to handle all the girls throwing themselves at Max? Because it happens, you know."

She nodded. "I think I'll be okay. As long as Max keeps himself in line, then everything should be fine."

"Do you think that will be a problem?" "I don't. I trust Max fully."

"You should. He loves you, Hannah. I am amazed every time I see him. I can see the difference in him."

"I wish I could take the credit for that."

He leaned forward. "You should take some credit for it." "I think Max and I have both come a long way."

David nodded solemnly. "I think we could all say that about ourselves."

"David, is something wrong?"

He took a deep breath, and Hannah thought he was going to start unloading his problems. He shook his head. "No, nothing."

He looked at his watch. "Well, I should get going. I'll see you later." He leaned over the bed and kissed her on the cheek. "Bye."

“Bye, David.” Hannah touched her face where he had kissed her. Other than Carmen, it was the first time Hannah had been kissed by someone in her new circle of friends. The peck on the cheek or even a quick friendly kiss on the lips was a gesture she had seen frequently between them when they were parting ways. David’s kiss was proof that even if Shannon didn’t accept her, he did.

She turned on the radio Max had brought her earlier that week. The song he had sung with Samantha Sparks was #1 on the pop charts, and one of the local stations had asked Max to give an interview. Hannah cranked up the volume when she heard it begin.

It was a basic interview: Thanks for coming, Max. How are you doing? (Great. It’s great to be here. Thanks for having me.) What is the group up to? (Getting ready for the tour.) When does the tour start? (March 8<sup>th</sup>.) When does the album drop? (April 1<sup>st</sup>, ha ha) What is the next single going to be? (Save Me.) What was it like working with Samantha? (Fun.) Did she handpick you for this single?

Hannah frowned at the last question, but she listened closely to Max’s answer.

“Yeah,” Max replied. “We’re friends, you know...we have the same manager, and she called and asked me if I would do this with her. Everything she touches turns to gold, it seems, so I jumped at it.”

“You two are just friends then,” the DJ said. His voice suggested that maybe they weren’t.

“Yes,” Max said, “just friends.”

“So are you seeing someone?” the DJ asked. “You have a girlfriend?”

“I do. I’m been seeing someone for several months now.”

“It’s serious?”

“Very.”

“So you’re off the market?”

Max chuckled slightly. “Most definately.”

“What’s her name? Is she in the business?”

“No, she’s not in the business at all. Her name’s Hannah.”

“Okay, girls,” the DJ said to the listeners. “You heard it here. Max Fitzgerald is off the market. So that’s like all five of you now, right?”

“Yeah,” Max said. “We’re all off the market. Sorry, ladies.”

The DJ laughed. “Thanks, Max, for stopping by.”

“No problem.”

“I’ve got something to tell you,” Hannah said quietly. She looked down at her hands clasped in her lap. Max had come by during his lunch break and was eating a burger and fries out of a fast-food bag.

Max put one of his hands on top of hers. “It’s okay, baby,” he said. “Tell me.”

“I stole ten thousand dollars from you.” She wouldn’t look him in the eye.

He didn’t say anything at first. “I know.”

She lifted her eyes and met his. “How? How long have you known?”

“I knew the day you wired the money. Patricia keeps track of my credit cards online...just in case one gets stolen or something. Anyway, she was worried that it had been stolen. She didn’t know it was your account the money went into, though.”

“How did you know then?”

He shrugged. “I knew you had that card and I just assumed it was you, especially when it wasn’t used again.”

“Why didn’t you say anything to me yet?”

“What’s there to say, Hannah? I think there are bigger things going on right now than a measly ten grand.”

“But you knew about it days before you even went to LA. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Are you wanting me to get mad at you? Do you want to fight about this?” He paused and shook his head. “What did you need the money for? What could you not come to me about?”

“My mother. She said she saw us together so she knows about you. She came to my office and demanded the money in cash. If I didn’t, she was going to tell the press I had schizophrenia.”

“And you were trying to protect me.”

“Well, I was trying not to lose you. It was purely selfish. I was just thinking that if she went to the press, the you would be done with me.”

“What makes you think she’s not going to now?”

Hannah shrugged. “I don’t know what she’ll do, but I was desperate. What if she does?”

“Well, if she does, she does, and we’ll deal with that. I don’t care what people say about me, but I hate to see you dragged though the mud.”

“That’s the same way I feel about you,” she said. “Listen, I have the money to pay you back. It’s in the bank in Crossdale. I just couldn’t get it in time.”

“You don’t have to pay me back. Keep your money.” He ate a French fry. “We’ve got to make a deal, Hannah.”

She swallowed hard. “What kind of deal?”

“Complete honesty. No keeping anything from each other. I don’t like to be blindsided.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

“Deal then?”

“Deal.” I can try.

He took a big bite out of his hamburger. "Your mother must be the stupidest person alive."

"Well, yeah, but why are you saying that?"

"Ten thousand dollars? Come on now. If she really knew who I was, she should have asked for ten times that at least."

"Well, she's not smart." She picked at her cafeteria food. "Have you told your parents about me?"

"What about you?"

"You know, that I'm in the crazy house."

"Quit saying that. And no. It's none of their business." Hannah nodded and picked up a French fry. She brought it to her mouth, but put it back down. "Has anyone else, the guys, the girls, said anything about me?"

He shook his head. "No. I mean, nothing other than total support and wanting you to get better. Who are you thinking about specifically?"

"I think you know who."

"Shannon?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I mean, I don't mean to be petty or whatever, but last night David came to see me by himself."

"He did?"

"You didn't know? You were gone to do that radio interview and he just showed up. I just wondered why she didn't come."

Max sighed. "I don't know. I haven't really talked to her. Did you ask David?"

She shook her head. "Yeah. He said she was working. I get the feeling that she doesn't like me very much."

Max frowned. "I don't know. I like her and all, she's my friend, but she can be a real bitch at times. But I assure you Hannah, if Shannon has a problem with you, it's her problem, not yours."

The jeweler escorted Max into a private room. "Wait right here," he said. He returned a few minutes later with a covered tray. He sat the tray down in front of Max and lifted the fabric covering the rings. There were five rings on the tray and Max picked each of them up and examined them one-by-one.

They were all beautiful, and he couldn't decide. He looked at his watch. He had asked Carmen to meet him at the store, but she was running late. He really needed someone to help him decide, and because she was the one who knew Hannah the best, he had to confide in Carmen the secret of the engagement. Picking this ring was not a decision he wanted to mess up.

Another store associate showed Carmen into the room. "Sorry I'm late," she said. She saw the rings on the table. "Oh Max, those are beautiful!"

He nodded. "I know. How am I supposed to decide?" Carmen sat down and picked up one of the rings and slipped it on her finger. "What do you think?" She took it off and did the same with each of the other four rings.

Max shook his head. None of the rings were really speaking to him. None were saying I'm the one! Buy me!

"You don't have anything else? Money is not an object, remember."

The jeweler shifted from one foot to the other. "Well, I do have something. Let me get it." He left the room and returned a few minutes later with a box. He handed the box to Max.

Max opened the box and sucked in his breath when he saw the ring.

"Oh, goodness!" Carmen exclaimed. "That's the most beautiful ring I have ever seen."

Max looked up at the jeweler. "You were holding out on me."



The jeweler smiled. "I was merely testing your seriousness, sir. This ring is a one-of-a kind."

Carmen slipped the ring on her finger. "She'll say yes to this, for sure!"

"She's already said yes," Max said. "So I could buy her a twenty-dollar ring if I wanted." He held Carmen's hand close to his face so he could examine the ring.

"How much is this one?" Money was no object, really, but he didn't want to go broke buying it.

"Three-hundred thousand dollars.". "Wow,"

Carmen said under her breath.

"I'll take it." He slipped it off Carmen's finger and put it back in the box. "I brought one of her rings with me. How soon can you have it sized?" He handed over one of the rings that Hannah wore most of the time.

"I can have it ready in a couple of hours," the jeweler said. "Of course, I need a deposit."

"Of course," Max said, pulling his wallet out of his pocket.

Hannah was released from the hospital the next day. Casey came to spend the afternoon with her since Max was busy with rehearsals. When Casey left that evening, Hannah went to the laundry room to fold the towels that were in the dryer. She could tell that since she had been in the hospital, Mrs. Potts had done the only one doing any housework.

Max didn't call out her name when he came in the door, suspecting that she might be sleeping. The new medications were more powerful and made her tire easily. He found her in the laundry room folding towels. Her back was to him, and she had the radio on. Her ponytail swung side to side as she bobbed her head in time to the country music she loved.

Max watched her fold the towels for a few seconds. He suddenly got the feeling that he didn't know her at all. There were so many things that she had hid from him. How could he ever believe that she was who she said she was? He loved her, though. It scared him how much he loved her because, before now, he had never been in a situation that he couldn't just walk away from.

He could feel the bulge of the ring box in his pocket, but before he gave her the ring, there were things he needed to know. "Why didn't you ever tell me about Eli?"

Hannah jumped, clearly startled. "Max!" She put her hand on her chest and took a couple of deep breaths. She shook her head. "Eli? Who told you about Eli?"

"Jimmy." He crossed the room and sat on the table where she was standing with the basket of clean towels. He turned off the radio. "Why Hannah? You were engaged. You were going to marry him. He was murdered. How could you keep this from me?"

She shrugged, as if they were discussing something as simple as forgetting to pick up the dry-cleaning. "I didn't keep it from you. I just didn't tell you. I didn't think it was something you would want to hear about. Besides, he was just an angel."

"I don't know what that means, Hannah. Jimmy said you called him your angel. What does that mean?"

"He was there to help me get better. He helped me see that there was something worth getting better for. Once his job was done, he was gone."

Max turned this over in his mind. She seemed distant and removed like she was telling him about a movie. He didn't want to bring up old memories and make her sad, but he had to know about this part of her life. "Did you love him?" "You mean, did I love him as much as I love you?"

Max shook his head. "That's not what I'm asking. I'm not trying to make this a competition. Did you love him?"

Hannah dropped the towel she was holding. "Well of course I loved him, Max. I was going to marry him, for goodness sakes. If he hadn't died, we'd be married now."

"I'm sorry. It must be really hard to lose someone you love so much. I don't know what I would do if I lost you." He reached for her hand.

She allowed him to pull her to him. "Why do you love me?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. How do you explain love? I just do. Why do you love me?"

"Because you love me." I don't deserve this love. If he knew the real me, he'd run as far away as he could get.

Max squeezed her tighter. "I do love you, Hannah."

She felt a tear trickle down her cheek. "I love you, too, Max." She pulled away from him. "Complete honesty, right?"

He nodded. "That's the deal."

"How come, then, I feel like it's always me doing the confessing?"

"Do you want me to confess to something?"

"Do you have anything? I thought you were all out there, what-you-see-is-what-you-get, and that kind of thing. Do you have any secrets?"

He shook his head. "Not really. I slept with a married woman and got her pregnant. How's that?"

"It's okay, but I already know that. You don't have any rehab stories, or drug use, or homosexual stuff you want to confess to?"

Max shook his head. "No rehab, no drugs, and definitely no man-on-man action. Now, there was this one time I was with these two chicks and..."

"Never mind." She looked down at her feet.

Max lifted her chin with his fingers. "You can tell me, baby

girl.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “I can’t do this,” she sobbed.

Max hurt for her. He stroked her hair. “Just calm down and tell me. It will be okay, I promise.” He held her for a several moments while she regained her composure.

She took a couple of deep breaths. “There’s a reason why the people back in Crossdale think that I’m a tramp.”

“More than just because Frankie said so?”

She nodded. “Yeah,” she said quietly. She moved from in front of him and hopped up on the table so that she was sitting next to Max. It was easier to tell this story if she didn’t have to look at him.

“Frankie was the first guy I ever had sex with. I was sixteen. We worked together, and I really didn’t want anything to do with him. I didn’t have any friends. I was a weird kid, you know. I didn’t know why he was showing any interest. I wasn’t smart enough to know it was just a game.”

“Anyway, one night after work he...umm...he invited me back to his house and I went. I knew I didn’t like him; he wasn’t nice to me even then, but I didn’t think I would, I could, do any better. After that, I was just under his total control. I would do whatever he wanted, and what he wanted was sex, and a lot of it. I had that voice, that awful voice, in my head telling me that this was the best I was going to do. My mom was a slut and so was I.”

Max started to speak, but she cut him off. “Let me finish, please. One night, a few months into our relationship, we were at his house and some guys from the football team came in. I didn’t know it was a set up, but evidently Frankie had been bragging about how he could...” She paused and shook her head. “There were seven of his friends there that night, and I had sex with all of them...willingly.”

"But Hannah, you were sick. This was something that happened to you. It's not something you did. You didn't know what you were doing."

"Yes, I did, Max. I wasn't so far gone that I didn't know what I was doing. I liked that these guys all wanted to have sex with me. I liked it so much, that for the next few weeks, up until the time I jumped out of the window, I had a lot of sex with a lot of guys, and not just high school guys. I was no better than my mother."

"But that was then, right?" Max said. "You're not that person anymore, no more than I'm the person I used to be."

"Yeah, I guess, but..." "But what?"

"Didn't you ever wonder why I didn't hesitate to have sex with you that first night?"

"Not really."

"I didn't really change that much, Max. Even after I got out of the hospital and the voice was gone, and after Eli, I still really enjoyed sex. Well, no so much the sex, but the power that came with knowing I could get a guy to want me."

Max shrugged. "So what? You think I jumped into bed with you because of love at first sight? That I knew that you would be the one I wanted to marry? See, it's the same, Hannah. We were both just looking out for ourselves that night. We didn't know it was going to lead here."

Hannah was silent for a moment. "What if I told you that I've had sex with someone else since we've met?"

Max's first reaction was anger and jealousy. A picture of him bedding April Monk calmed him. He squeezed his hands together. "When?"

"After that first weekend together. I didn't know you would come back. It was Ray, that guy from the parts store. I kinda used him for a few months last year, you know, whenever I wanted

to...Then I stopped, because I was feeling guilty about the causal sex, and I didn't have sex with anyone for many many months. Then you and I met and I had a great time and it just awakened this horniness in me. A couple of days after you left, I called Ray up. I didn't know I'd ever see you again. I'm sorry."

Max nodded and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her to him. He kissed the side of her head. "It's okay. I have a confession, too, then. I forgot all about this, but I had sex with someone else that week, too. I guess we're even."

"I guess so." She looked at him. "I don't have anything else. I think I'm clean."

"Then I've got something for you." He hopped down off the table and dug into his pocket. He pulled out the ring box.

"Max," she whispered.

He smiled and opened the box. "Does it seem real now?" He removed the ring from the box and reached for her hand. He slid the ring on her trembling finger. "Will you marry me?"

She nodded and began crying all over again. "You know I will." She held her hand out in front of her to get a good look at her ring. It one large diamond flanked by two smaller ones set on a platinum band. A dozen tiny diamonds encrusted the band. "This thing is huge! I've never seen anything so beautiful!"

"I have," Max said softly.

Hannah looked up and met his eyes. "Oh, Max." She waved her hand in front of her face, trying to wave the tears back in. She felt like a silly beauty pageant contestant. She held her hand closer to her face, getting a good look at the ring.

"How many carats? You know, so when people ask."

"It's eight altogether. The big diamond is three, the smaller two are two carats each and the diamonds on the band make one."

She looked up at him. "This sounds like a stupid question and all, because I feel like I should know, but when are we

going to get married?” “What do you think?”

She shrugged. “Does it make a difference? I mean, really what’s it going to change if we do it soon or if we wait 5 years?”

Max shook his head. “I ain’t waiting five years!” “It was just a number.”

“I’d like to not wait too long. I want to be married to you. I want more than saying that this is my girlfriend or my fiancée. In my business, girlfriends and even fiancées come and go like the breeze. I want to walk around with you on my arm and say, ‘This is my wife’.”

“Wives don’t come and go?”

“You ain’t going no where, baby.”

Hannah laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I ain’t going no where.”

“Well I am,” he said, pushing her away. “I’m going to get in the shower and wash some of the stink off.”

She waved her hand in front of her face. “Pheww.”

“That’s sweat, baby,” he said as he pulled his shirt over his head. “That’s what a real man smells like.”

“Yeah, whatever,” she said. She handed him one of the unfolded towels. “Go hit the showers, chief.”

“Chief,” he repeated, laughing. He took the towel. “You know you’re welcome to join me.”

“I’ll be up in a minute,” she said, returning to the towels. Max disappeared up the stairs and Hannah finished folding the towels. She left the basket sitting on the table and went upstairs. The phone started ringing as she ascended the stairs and she ran to the nearest one.

“Hello?”

“Hi, is this Hannah?” “Yes, it is.”

“Hey, Hannah,” the voice said cheerfully. “This is Megan. How are you?”

“Oh, hello Megan. I’m fine. How are you?”

“Good. Listen, is Max around? I tried his cell, but didn’t get him.”

“Yeah, he’s here, but he’s in the shower. Can I have him call you back?”

“Please do. Thanks, Hannah. Bye.”

“Bye.” Hannah hung up the phone and walked down the hall to the bedroom. Max, already finished with his shower, was standing at the closet naked, looking for something to wear. He didn’t turn, so Hannah assumed he hadn’t heard her come into the room. She tiptoed across the carpet until she was inches behind him.

There were drops of water still on his back and shoulders. She stepped one step closer to him, put her hands on his hips and flicked her tongue at one of the drops. She felt him tense then relax and exhale loudly. She continued kissing him across his back while her fingers worked their way to the front side of his body. She placed her hands just below his waist. He put his hands on top of hers and pushed them down to where he needed her to touch him the most.

When he was sufficiently aroused, he turned around. He kissed her. She pulled her over-sized sweatshirt over her head and threw it to the floor. She wasn’t wearing a bra and Max immediately lowered his mouth to her breasts. She pulled away from him, stripped off the rest of her clothes, and led him by the hand to the bed. She pushed him back on the bed and spent several minutes kissing every inch of his skin.

She moved back to his face. “I’ve missed you so much,” she whispered. She wasn’t just talking about sex, even though this would be their first time since her hospitalization. She had missed being able to be with him fully, in their own bed, on their



own time.

He responded by kissing her again. He rolled on top of her never removing his lips from hers. They made love for several hours that night with hardly any words being spoken.

It was close to midnight and they were almost asleep when the phone rang. Max rolled over and picked up the extension next to the bed. Hannah sat up and removed one of her earplugs. "It's Megan," he said.

Hannah winced. "I forgot. She called earlier."

Max clicked on the phone. "Hey Meg, what's up?"

"I'm throwing a birthday party for Tyson next Saturday. Can you come?"

"Next Saturday, as in a week from tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Can you make it?"

"I don't know. We're in rehearsals for the tour. We're working with the choreographer twelve hours a day. I don't know if I can get away."

"Well, if you can, it's at 2pm at King's Castle."

"King's Castle? What the heck is that?"

"It's this new amusement place. It's kinda like an arcade, but they've got this huge play area for toddlers. Anyway, that's where it's going to be. Tyson would love it if you were there."

"I'll see what I can do. Bye." He clicked off the phone and looked at Hannah. "Birthday party for Tyson," he explained.

"Saturday?" He

nodded. "You  
going?"

"Not without you."

"Okay, then, are we going?"

He shook his head. "We'd have to fly there and back in the same day."

She shrugged. "Whatever you want to do, Max. It's totally up to you."

“This looks like the place,” Max said as he maneuvered the rental car into a parking spot in front of the huge castle-like structure.

“What gave it away? Was it the castle or was it the big sign up there with the name of the place?”

“Ha ha. I’ve got to tell you, Hannah, that I am not looking forward to going in there.” He sat back in his seat and made no move to get out of the car.

“So are we just going to sit here until it’s time to go back to the airport?”

Max moaned and climbed out of the car. He walked around to close Hannah’s door for her. “I’d open it for you if you give me time to get around there.”

“I know you would,” she replied, taking his hand. She leaned into him to shield herself from the cold wind.

Max took her left hand and ran his thumb over the ring. “I guess I’m going to tell them about our engagement.”

“Yeah? You’re not afraid of taking the focus off Tyson?” “Not really. He’s two years old. All he cares about is presents. Speaking of presents, you did get that bed shipped here, right?”

“Yes, Max. For the hundredth time, I did.” They had bought Tyson a new toddler bed for his birthday. It was shaped like Thomas the Tank Engine. They had also sent matching sheets and blankets.

Max hesitated before he opened the door to the place. He frowned at his reflection in the glass. “Maybe I should have worn a hat,” he said.

“You’re fine, Grizzly.” He hadn’t shaved in close to two weeks, so he was sporting a full beard and mustache. Hannah

thought it made him look at least ten years older. He was also wearing his hair much longer than he usually did, giving him the persona of a mountain man.

He pulled the door open. There was a sign with an arrow pointing in the direction of Tyson's party. Max and Hannah entered the private room.

"Max," Megan's husband, Jeremy said, extending his hand for a handshake. "Good that you could make it. Hello, Hannah."

"Hey."

"Hey, everyone," Jeremy called out. "Max and Hannah are here."

"Max!" Tyson yelled, running at him.

Max scooped him up. "Hey, buddy. Happy birthday." He hugged the boy close to himself. "Did you get the bed?" He asked Megan. He put Tyson back down.

She nodded. "Yeah, it came yesterday and we already put it up. He loves it."

"Thank you for the train bed," Tyson said.

"You're very welcome," Max said. "Go play." Tyson toddled off to where some other kids his own age were playing. Megan spent the next few minutes introducing Max and Hannah to the people they didn't already know.

They took a seat across the table from his parents. "How have you been?" Isabella asked.

"Good. We're in rehearsals now for the tour. It's really kicking my butt. I guess I got pretty out-of-shape this past year."

"Yes, I thought you looked like you might have put on some weight," Isabella said. She frowned at him. "You look bad, Max. That beard is awful."

"Thanks, Mom." Max said.

"I see you've still got the same girlfriend," his father,

Arthur, said. "That's quite a record."

Max nodded and squeezed Hannah's knee under the table. "Yeah, and you should get used to seeing her around."

"Really?" Isabella said. "And why is that? Are you getting married?"

Her words drew Melody's attention. She came over and sat down beside Hannah. "Are y'all getting married?"

"Yeah," Max said, taking a hold of Hannah's hand pulling to the tabletop. We're engaged. He moved his hand so his family could see the ring.

"When?" Melody asked. She was looking at Hannah, and obviously expected her to answer.

"We haven't set a date," Hannah replied. "We're going to wait until after the tour to nail down the details. Max is just so busy right now."

"What is it you do again?" Isabella asked, her dark eyes shooting darts though Hannah.

"I, um, I don't..."

"She just resigned from her job so she could go with me on tour," Max interrupted. "She's an accountant."

"She looks like an accountant," Isabella said.

Max raised his eyebrows. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"She's very mousy," Isabella continued. "The glasses, the ponytail, no make-up."

Max shook his head and Hannah could tell that he was very angry. She was used to people talking about her. "Mousy" was a compliment compared to some of the things she had been called.

"Mom, you do realize she's sitting right here?"

Isabella raised her chin higher. "Yes, I do."

Hannah nudged Max. "Look, Tyson's opening his presents." They stood up to get a better look at the birthday boy.

“Let’s go play Skee-ball,” Hannah said, pulling Max in the direction of the games. The presents had been opened, the cake had been eaten, and they were just wasting time until it was time to get back to the airport.

“Why? I’m just going to kick your butt.”

“We’ll see about that,” Hannah said, tugging harder on his hand. He relented and followed her.

“You suck at this,” Hannah laughed after they had thrown a couple of balls.

Max laughed, too. “I didn’t know you were a professional.”

Hannah rolled another ball up the slope, landing it in the middle hole. “I’m going to be in the Olympics.”

Max laughed harder. “Wow, my wife, the Olympic Skee-ball Champion.” “You wife?”

Max shrugged. “Well, I figure by the time the Olympics roll around again, we’ll be married.”

“Probably,” she agreed. “Never mind the fact that there’s no Skee-ball in the Olympics.”

Max laughed again and grabbed her around the waist pulling her to him. He looked over her head. April Monk was standing a few yards away watching them. He turned around, spinning Hannah around with him.

“Hey,” she protested, playfully beating him on the chest. “Are you trying to get me dizzy and mess up my game?”

“Max?” a female voice called.

Max froze. Hannah looked past him to the woman that was calling his name.

“Max?” she said again, stepping closer.

“Max, I think someone is calling you.” Hannah said.

He closed his eyes, and then turned around. "Hey, April."

"I thought that was you," April said. "How have you been?"

"Good. Oh, this is my girlfriend, my fiancée, Hannah." Hannah stepped forward and smiled. She extended her right hand to April and grabbed Max's hand with her left. "Nice to meet you," she said politely.

"Fiancée?" April raised her eyebrows. "Who would have ever thought that would happen?"

A man walked up to them. He instantly gave Hannah the chills, and she felt Max tense as well. He had long greasy hair, his body was covered with tattoos, and there was a prominent scar across his cheek, giving her the impression that he was dangerous.

April put her hand on the man's arm. "Max, you remember Bobby, don't you? My husband? Bobby, you remember Max, right?"

"Yeah," Bobby said. He rebuffed Max's handshake.

"Come on, Hannah," Max said. "We need to get out of here." He pulled her away from April and Bobby.

"It was nice to meet you," April called after them.

"That was rude," Hannah said once they were halfway across the complex. "Plus, we didn't finish our game."

"There was nothing good going to come out of that conversation. I promise you, and I'll take you to play Skee-ball once we get back home."

"Why? Who are they? What's going on?"

Max shook his head. "Nothing. It's just...shit," he said for lack of a better word. You should tell her the truth.

Hannah felt like there was more she should know, but she wasn't going to push him. If it were really important, he would tell me.

Max looked at his watch. "We need to get to the airport

anyway,” he said. “Let’s go say good-bye.”

They approached the tables where his family was still sitting. “We’re leaving now,” he said.

“Oh, Max so soon?” His mother said with mock sincerity.

“Yeah, our plane leaves in just a bit.”

Megan stood up and walked over to Max. She hugged him. “Well, thanks for coming.” She hugged Hannah, too. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” Hannah replied.

Melody stood up to hug them, too. “Congratulations you guys.”

Max’s parents and grandparents also stood hugged them in congratulations and farewell. “Y’all have a good flight,” Arthur called as they walked away.

As they walked across the parking lot to the car they had rented at the airport, Max felt a chill run down his spine. He looked around him. Bobby Monk was standing against the side of the building, smoking a cigarette, and staring a hole right through him.

## Chapter Thirteen

Michael sank down on the floor. “I can’t take anymore,” he moaned.

The music stopped. “Are you sure, Mike?” Scott, the choreographer asked.

“I’ve been trying, man, but this is kicking my butt. I have to go home and go to bed.” He had shown up to the studio that morning with a temperature of 102, and a diagnosis of the flu.

Scott frowned and looked around at the other guys. They were all tired. They had been working for almost six weeks on the new dances. They were quick studies, but as the stage was built, little details had to change. They had it down for the most part, and the million or so girls that would buy tickets to the shows wouldn’t care if they missed a step here or there.

“Okay, then,” Scott said. “Go home. Take the rest of the day off.”



The guys filed out to the parking lot. Jason, David, Reed and Michael, because they were neighbors, all piled into Reed's SUV. Max got into the Viper and followed them. They were less than a half a mile down the street when they all heard the boom and felt their cars shake.

Max slammed on the brakes and turned around in his seat. One side of the building they had just left was gone, and flames shot through the roof. "Holy shit," he muttered. He threw his car in reverse and backed into a parking spot against the curb. He jumped out of the car. The other four guys joined him.

"What happened?" David said. "Call 911!" Mike said.

"I am!" Jason yelled. He stepped away and pressed his phone to one ear and his hand to the other.

"You think Scott is still inside?" Reed asked.

"Crap!" Max yelled. He took off toward the building. He stopped when the heat from the fire wouldn't allow him to get any closer. "We've got to go around back." He looked back at his friends. They were all following him looking at him for guidance. He had unknowingly and unintentionally taken the position of leader.

He glanced at Michael. His face was pale and he looked unable to take another step. "Mike, you stay here and wait for the cops and ambulance. Jason, you wait with him. Call Hannah and Dana and Shannon and Casey. They're going to hear about it. Tell them we're okay. Call Neil." He turned back around and led David and Reed to the back entrance of the building.

He tried the door. It was locked. "You think we can bust it down?"

David shook his head. "No. It's metal, man, and it opens out."

Max looked up. The building was designed so that all of the

windows on the first story were at least eight feet from the ground. "Someone give me a boost," He took off his jacket and his outer shirt, leaving him in just a T-shirt. He wrapped his shirt around his hand. Reed leaned down to lift him to the window.

"Make it quick," Reed said through gritted teeth.

Max didn't hesitate to smash his wrapped hand through the window. "Lift me higher," he said.

With a moan, Reed lifted him a few inches higher. He fumbled with the lock and slammed the window open. He put his hands on the windowsill and boosted himself into the building. He ran to the door and unlocked it.

David and Reed joined him in the dark, dusty room. They followed the maze of doors and hallways calling Scott's name until the smoke got too thick to continue. Max covered his nose and mouth with the collar of his shirt.

"Maybe he got out," Reed suggested.

"His car was still outside," David said. "He never left." "We've got to check his office," Max said. He looked around. The smoke was burning his eyes.

"It's right next to the studio," David said. "It's probably gone."

Max nodded slightly. The front of the building, where the large rehearsal studio and Scott's office was located had been blown away in the explosion. "We've got to get out of here," he said.

Reed and David agreed and they all left the building through the back door. Jason and Michael were standing alone together under a tree watching the as the firemen jumped out of their trucks and ran into the building. Max, David and Reed joined them.

"Anything?" Jason asked. "No,"

David said.

A detective approached the group. "Hello, gentlemen," he said, taking a notepad out of his inside jacket pocket. "I'm Lt. Roman. Can I get your names please?" He poised his pen over the paper and scribbled each man's name down. He looked up at them. "Quintessential, yeah, my kid is a big fan," he said.

"What happened?" He asked.

Max shook his head. "We don't know. We were just leaving and the place blew up. Scott Stokes is still inside. We went back in to look for him, but..."

"The smoke was too thick," Reed finished for him.

Lt. Roman wrote the name down. "You guys hold tight," he said. "Let me talk to the fire chief." He walked away just as Casey was pulling up.

She jumped out of her car and ran to Mike. She threw her arms around him. "I told you not to go to work today. You need to get home."

"I can't leave," he said. "The cop told us to stay here." Dana's car squealed to a stop behind them. She ran to Reed. "Shannon's coming," she told David.

Max looked at Jason. "Did you get a hold of Hannah?" Jason shook his head. "I tried the house and her cell phone." "She had an appointment with Dr. Kidd this morning," Casey volunteered.

Max pulled his cell phone from the clip on his waistband. He dialed the number to the house, knowing that Hannah rarely kept her cell phone on. After four rings the answering machine came on. He clicked off the phone. "She must not be home yet," he said.

Lt. Roman rejoined them. "Fire chief says it looks like a bomb. Unofficial, of course. He worked in Oklahoma City back in 1995 and he says it looks almost identical, just a smaller scale." He scratched his head. "Until we know for sure what's going on, I think y'all should stay together. Is there anywhere

you can all go?"

"Yeah, sure," Jason said. He looked around. "How about Mike's since he's sick and they've got the baby and all." Everyone nodded.

"Okay then," Lt. Roman said. He wrote down Michael's address. "I'll get some cops out there, and I'll be out there later this evening. Don't leave until we get this figured out. You guys should really get out of here," he said.

They filed back to their cars. Shannon was just getting there, and David filled her in on the plans. Max saw her face twist in anger when David told her that she wouldn't be able to go back to work that afternoon.

"But I'm in the middle of something!"

"Well, I'm sorry, Shannon!" David said, his voice rising. "I'm sorry if it inconveniences you that our rehearsal studio was blow to pieces this morning and someone might be trying to kill us."

They climbed into her car and Max was unable to hear the rest of the conversation. He started the car and tried Hannah again. Still no answer.

Hannah pulled into the driveway. She was really getting irritated with all these doctor's visits. It had been over a month since she was released from the hospital, and Dr. Kidd still insisted on drawing her blood three times a week. She hated it. Her arms were constantly bruised and it hurt to bend them.

She sighed as she unlocked the door. It wouldn't matter. In just a matter of a few hours, Dr. Kidd would know that she had missed two days worth of medication.

Why, why, why? Why can't I just do like I'm supposed to?

Just as she swung open the door, she was grabbed from

behind. A hand clamped over her mouth. She immediately reached up with both of her hands and tried to release herself. She felt cold hard metal press against her the exposed skin around her waist.

“Don’t scream,” the gravely voice said. He pushed Hannah into the house and locked the door behind him, never letting go of her.

When they got into the house, he pushed her down the hallway to the master bedroom. He threw her toward the bed and she fell, banging her head on the corner of the night table. She rolled over and met her abductor's eyes. Chills ran through her. It was Bobby Monk, the husband of the friend of Max's.

“I know you,” she said.

Bobby shook his head. “You don’t know me.” He grabbed her by the arm and jerked her to her feet. “Get on the bed,” he demanded, pointing the gun at her.

Hannah scrambled to get on the bed. Bobby pulled a roll of nylon rope out of his back pocket and a knife out of his front pocket. Working quickly, he tied Hannah's wrists to the bed. When she was satisfied that she was secure, he stripped off her jeans and cut her sweater off of her.

“What are you going to do to me?” She asked.

Bobby sat in a chair and lit a cigarette. “Nothing yet. We’re just waiting.”

“For Max?”

“Yeah, for Max. You think I’m here to see you?”

“Max won’t been home for hours.”

“Oh, I think he’ll be home sooner than that,” Bobby said. He took a long drag of the cigarette. “We’re just going to wait.”

Max dialed the number again. He counted the rings. When it got past four, he began to worry. The machine was supposed to turn on after four rings. Ten rings...fifteen...twenty...thirty rings. Max slapped the phone closed and pressed down on the accelerator.

He pulled the car into the yard, missing the driveway completely. He ran to the front door and fumbled with his keys, not able to open it fast enough. "Hannah!" he called rushing into the house. "Hannah, where are you?"

He saw a note lying on the counter, and sighed with relief, sure it was from her. He picked it up: You had a good time with my wife. Now it's my turn with your girlfriend.

"What the hell?" he muttered, shaking his head. He couldn't think straight. First, there was the bomb at the studio, and now this note. What was going on? He ran down the hall flinging open bedroom doors. The door to the room at the very end of the hall, the master bedroom, was locked. He banged on the door. "Hannah? Hannah, are you in here?"

He heard a set of footsteps approaching the door, then the sound of the lock unlatching. Finally, the door swung open and Max was greeted by a gun - and Bobby Monk.

"Run, Max!" Hannah screamed. "Run!"

"Hello, Max," the intruder said coldly. "Surprised to see me?" It was a rhetorical question, and he shoved the gun closer to Max's face. "Get in here."

Max knew he didn't have a choice, and he offered little resistance as Bobby pushed him into the room. He locked the door behind them. Max started toward the bed where Hannah was being held, but Bobby grabbed his arm and held him back.

"No, sir." He pushed Max toward the seating area. "She's mine," he said.

"No!" Max said. He tried to see what condition Hannah was in. "What have you done to her?"

Bobby shook his head. “Nothing more than you did to April.”

Still pointing the gun at Max, he dragged a wooden folding chair out of the corner, something he had brought in from another room. He unfolded it and ordered Max to sit down in it. Max hesitated and turned to take a swing at Bobby, disregarding the danger of the gun. He was met by the gun smashing against the side of his head. Everything went dark. When he came to, he was securely tied to the chair both his hands and feet bound by strong nylon cording. Max’s head lolled to one side, and he tried to focus on Hannah.

“Can you see her?” Bobby asked.

Max nodded. The chair was in the perfect position to see Hannah lying on the bed, her hands bound to the headboard with the same kind of rope. She was dressed only in her bra and panties. “What have you done to her?” he demanded again.

Bobby shook his head. “Nothing yet.” He double checked the knots keeping Max secure and went to the bed. Hannah screamed.

“No!” Max struggled with the ropes, but was tied tight. He wasn’t going anywhere. “Don’t hurt her!”

Bobby, who was now shirtless and had his jeans unzipped, pointed the gun at Max’s face. “Shut up.” He tied a dirty bandana around his head, blindfolding him.

Max dropped his head. Oh God, he prayed. I am so sorry for what I have caused. Please, please help us through this. Please don’t let him hurt her. Please God, let him take my life and spare hers. I love her so much. Please let her live, and don’t let him hurt her.

Hannah saw Bobby coming toward her. “No!” She screamed. “What are you going to do to me?”

Bobby smiled at her, and it sent chills down her spine. “What ever you want, baby,” he said.

"Please don't," Hannah said. "Please."

Bobby slid down on the bed next to her and put his hand over one of her breasts. "Do you know why I am here?"

Hannah shook her head. "No. Did Max do something to you?"

Bobby nodded. "He sure did, baby," he unclasped the front clasp of her bra. It fell open, exposing her to him. "Nice, nice," he murmured.

Hannah tried to ignore what he was doing to her. "What?"

"He had sex with my wife," Bobby said.

Hannah winced. "Is that what you are going to do to me?"

"Sure," Bobby said. He pushed down the waistband of his underwear to expose himself. He lay down next to Hannah and rubbed himself against her leg until he had achieved an erection. He positioned himself between her legs and ripped off her panties.

See, Banana-brain, you're only good for sex. Max is letting him do this to you.

"No!" Hannah cried more against the voice than Bobby Monk. "No! No!" "Hannah!"

Max cried.

"Shut up, both of you," Bobby said. He got back up off the bed, adjusted his briefs and grabbed the gun. He ripped off the blindfold. "Maybe you want to watch," he said to Max.

"Don't do that to her."

Bobby laughed. "Who the hell are you to tell me what to do? You didn't ask me before you screwed April."

"I didn't know she was married," Max explained.

"Oh, well, then," Bobby said sarcastically, "that just makes it okay. I'm sorry. I think I'll just go." He laughed.

"What do you want?" Max asked. "Money?"

Bobby shook his head. "I want rid of you." He pointed the gun at him again. "I'm tired of you getting everything you



want. We both came from the same place; why do you win and I lose? You're not winning anymore."

"Then shoot me," Max said. "Go ahead and kill me. Kill me and leave her alone. Let her go."

Bobby pulled back the hammer. Hannah heard the click and screamed. "No! Do whatever you want to me. Don't hurt him."

"Hannah, no!" Max said.

Bobby laughed. "Maybe I'll just kill you both." He uncocked the gun and holstered it in the waistband of his pants.

Max's cell phone began to ring. His customized ring tone told him that it was Jason. "I have to get that."

"No, you don't," Bobby snapped.

"Yes," Max insisted. "We're supposed to meet someone. If we don't show, they'll come looking."

"So?" Bobby said. "I wouldn't mind collecting me a whole room full of you pansy-fags."

"The cops might come," Max said. "The explosion, you know. We're supposed to be on guard."

Bobby considered this. "Answer it. Throw them off." "I can't reach it," Max said.

Bobby crossed the room to Max and pulled the phone off of Max's waistband. He flipped it open and held it up to Max's ear. "Hello?"

"Max," Jason said. "I was starting to think that you didn't want to talk to me."

"No, man. What's up?" I've got to let him know somehow what's going on.

"Everyone else is already at Mike's. You and Hannah need to get over here. They want us all together. They don't think it was random."

"I don't really feel like going out tonight. I think me and Hannah are just going to order in."

“What? Max, what are you talking about? Didn’t you hear me? The bomb was meant for us.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll call you sometime tomorrow.” “Max, what is going on, man? You’re freaking me out.” “I’m sorry.”

Max could hear Jason gasp. “Should I send someone over?” He asked. “Is Hannah okay?”

“Yeah, you should.” “Like an ambulance?” “Oh, no.”

Max winced as Bobby pushed the gun against his temple. “Hurry up,” he growled.

“Like the police?”

“Yeah, man. I’ll talk to you later. Bye.”

Bobby pulled the phone the phone away from his ear. “That took too long.”

“Sorry, man,” Max said unapologetically. He glanced toward Hannah. She was staring straight up at the ceiling.

Bobby went back to the bed and double-checked Hannah’s bonds. He put his shirt back on and rechecked the ropes around Max. “I’m going to get something to eat and some smokes.” Max watched him disappear. He waited until he heard the front door shut. “Hannah?” Max called. “Are you okay?” Hannah didn’t answer. “Hannah?” He looked down at his shoes. “I’m sorry. This is all my fault. Everything that has happened today is my fault.”

“Why, Max?” Hannah asked. “Why did you sleep with his wife?” Because that’s what he does, stupid. He sleeps with women, lots of women. You’re just one of them. You know he’s been doing it since you’ve been together.

“I didn’t know, Hannah. I promise.”

“It’s always something with you, Max: Samantha Sparks, Casey’s sister and now this. What can I expect next?” What difference does it make, Hannah? You’re going to die.

“I’m sorry, Hannah. Nothing else is going to happen. Jason knows something is wrong. Hopefully, he’ll send the police.”

“This has been a bad, bad day, Max.” “I know.”

“The voice is back.”

Max’s eyes welled with tears. He didn’t cry often, but he couldn’t help himself. He had promised her that she would get better. “How bad is it?”

“She doesn’t like you. She says I’m going to die.”

“You’re not going to die, Hannah. Listen to me; don’t listen to her. We’re going to get through this.” Dear God, please, She is so fragile. She can’t take this. Please get her out of this situation. “Did he hurt you?”

Hannah finally turned her head and looked at Max. “No. Please don’t let him rape me.”

“I’ve got to get us out of here,” he said. He pulled and tugged against the ropes to no avail. This is my chance. I’ve got to get us out of here while he is gone. Jason, buddy, I hope you called the police.

There has got to be a way to break this chair. He looked around. There was nothing other than the wall that he could slam the chair into to break it, and because his ankles were tied to the chair he couldn’t stand up.

“Crap!” He screamed. “Hannah! Hannah, listen to me. Can you get loose?”

She pulled at her bonds. “I don’t think so.”

He wiggled and bounced in the chair as much as he could, trying to loosen the joints in the chair. The chairs had taken a lot of abuse when all five of the guys had lived there, and as he moved around, he felt the chair getting weaker and weaker. He

moved around furiously. Sweat formed on his forehead and began to roll down his face, stinging his eyes.

Finally, he heard the telltale crack of one of the legs breaking. He continued slamming himself around on the chair until the front legs broke free. He stood up with his arms still tied to the chair behind his back. He swung himself around and slammed the chair against the dresser, smashing it to pieces. Once the chair fell apart, he was able to slip his hands out of the ropes. He ran to the bed to free Hannah.

Bobby suddenly reappeared and held the gun to Max's head. "The police are outside! What the hell did you say on the phone? I should kill you right now." He pulled the hammer back and placed the barrel of the gun against Max's temple.

"If you kill him the police will kill you," Hannah said. "You don't want to die."

Bobby looked at her. "You're right little lady, I don't want to die. I want to live. I want to live like a rock star, too. Although I would have expected that you would have a little better place than this." He lowered the gun. "How much money do you have?"

"What?" Max asked.

"How much money do you have?" Bobby repeated slowly. "I don't know."

The answer seemed to annoy him. "What do you mean, you don't know? You have millions, right? It has to be; I see your ugly face every time I turn around."

"Yeah, millions," Max agreed, "but it's invested. I can't get to most of it."

"But someone can," Bobby said. "I want it."

"Okay," Max agreed, willing to agree to anything. "You can have it. Just let us go."

They could hear someone in the kitchen. Bobby went to the door, eased it open a few inches and fired two shots.

"We've got this place surrounded," a voice called through some sort of megaphone.

Thank you, Jason. Thank you, God!

"Get out of the house," Bobby demanded. "I'll kill them both. Get out!" He fired a shot into the wall over Max's head. Hannah screamed.

He pointed the gun back at Max. "This is not going to end pretty." He paced the floor smoking cigarettes and muttering to himself.

Max sat next to Hannah on the bed and held her close. "It's going to be okay, honey," he said soothingly. He watched Bobby with one eye while untying the ropes keeping Hannah bound to the bed.

"What are we going to do?" Hannah whispered. "I don't know."

"I'm scared, Max."

"What are you doing?" Bobby screamed. He pressed the gun to Max's forehead. "Who said you could untie her?"

"What difference does it make?" Max said. "You have us trapped in the room. We can't go anywhere."

"Because I want her tied up when I'm screwing her brains out." He motioned with his hand to an armchair in the corner of the room. "Go sit over there. You can watch."

Max gave Hannah one final squeeze before following the orders. Bobby retied Hannah to the bed. "Now, I'm finally going to do what I came here to do."

Max waited until Bobby was looking down before lunging at him. Bobby looked up and fired the gun. Max fell backwards.

Hannah heard him moan and hit the floor. "Max!" She screamed and kicked her legs, trying to kick him in the face.

"You shot him!"

“And I’ll shoot you, too, you bitch. Shut up and stay still.” He grabbed her ankle and twisted her leg until she thought it would break.

Hannah stilled. Bobby moved closer to her and pressed the gun to the side of her head. “Don’t fight me or this will be ugly.”

Bobby glanced back at Max to make sure he was still incapacitated. He approached Hannah. “Now, let me finish what I came here to do,” he snarled at her. He leaned so close to her she could smell his nasty breath.

“This is not what you came here for,” Hannah snapped. “You could have done this way before Max got home. You were waiting for him.”

“Yeah, because I wanted him to see this.” “He can’t see it.”

Bobby laughed and again looked at Max. “Yeah, I think I took care of him.” He laid the gun just above Hannah’s head and started to undress himself. He looked down as he undid his pants. When he looked back up, Hannah saw first the flash of terror in his eyes, and then she heard the blast. As if in slow motion, the hole formed in Bobby’s forehead and he fell backwards.

Max untied her bonds before collapsing on the bed beside her. She leaned over him and kissed each of his cheeks. “It’s going to be okay, Max. Just hang on. Stay with me.”

She quickly got herself dressed as best she could in the rags that used to be her clothes, and ran to the door. She knew the police were inside the house and she didn’t want to take the chance that they would shoot her as soon as she opened the door.

Hannah slowly eased the door open a couple of inches. “It’s Hannah,” she called out. “He’s dead. We need an ambulance. Max has been shot. I’m coming out.”

She opened the door. Several officers were pointing their guns at her, ready to fire. She held up her hands. "He's dead. Max needs help!"

Two of the cops rushed into the bedroom, guns still drawn. She heard the cackle of radios as the officers communicated with each other. Paramedics were already on the scene, and Max was loaded into an ambulance within minutes. As Hannah climbed in the back with him, she saw more paramedics loading Bobby Monk's sheet covered body into a van.

"It's not bad," Max said as they rode to the hospital.

Hannah clutched his hand. "You're going to be okay, baby." She glanced at the paramedic who was cleaning the wound. She didn't know much about gunshot wounds or medicine or even basic first aid, but she figured a bullet in the stomach had to be bad.

"Is he dead?" Max asked.

Hannah nodded. "Yes, Max. He's dead."

He turned away from her and faced the wall. Hannah continued holding his hand until they reached the hospital. Once there, Max was rushed away to a trauma room, leaving her standing alone in the waiting room. Not knowing what else to do, she sat in a chair in the corner and waited.

Hannah-banana, Hannah-banana, Hannah-banana.

"Go away," Hannah hissed.

I can't, Hannah. You keep bringing me back. It's your fault I'm here.

She began to sob. She felt a hand on her back and she looked up. It was Kelsey, her nurse from the psych ward.

"Hannah, do you need to see a doctor?" Kelsey asked. "Were you hurt?"

Hannah shook her head. "No. Max was shot." She cried harder.

Kelsey wrapped her arms around her. "I know, honey. Listen, you need to come upstairs with me, okay."

She nodded. "Okay." She didn't argue or ask why; she knew why. She followed Kelsey upstairs. Kelsey showed her to a room and waited outside the door while she took a shower. She then helped her into a gown and settled her into the bed.

"I'm going to bring you some medication," Kelsey said. "Dr. Kidd will come in in a couple of minutes. Please stay in bed and don't make me use restraints."

Hannah nodded. "What about Max? Will I get to see him?"

Kelsey nodded. "Yeah. I'll keep you updated." She left the room and returned in seconds with Hannah's meds and a paper cup of water.

"Are you hungry?" Kelsey asked after Hannah had taken the medication.

Hannah nodded. "Yeah, a little."

There was a knock on the door and Dr. Kidd stuck his head in. "Feel like some company, Hannah?"

She nodded. "Yeah, come on in."

Kelsey patted her on the shoulder. "I'll be back in a few minutes with something to eat."

She left and Dr. Kidd took the chair next to Hannah's bed. "You've had quite an afternoon, haven't you, honey," he said.

Hannah nodded. "It hasn't been good."

"Is there anything you want to tell me about? Did he hurt you?"

Hannah shook her head. "No." She sat in silence for a few moments. "I thought he was going to rape me."

"Tell me about it."

She took a deep breath before she began. Talking to Dr. Kidd was easy, and she liked their chats. It was the only part of her appointments that she didn't detest. She told him as many



of the details as she could remember, including the return of the voice.

"I guess I've really screwed this up," she said.

"Why do you say that?"

"What did my blood tests say?"

"That you haven't been taking your medicine," he answered.

"Why, Hannah? Was it the voice?"

She shook her head. "No. That wasn't back until today." She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know why. I just get so tired of it all, you know."

He nodded. "Yes, I know, but you've got to take your meds. I'm sorry, sugar, but that's the way it has to be."

Hannah couldn't help but smile. She liked it when he called her sugar. His side of the conversation was always peppered with 'sugar's and 'honey's and 'sweetie's and 'darling's. It wasn't inappropriate or sexual; it was just the friendly way he talked.

She nodded. "I know it does, but it's just so hard. It's so hard to be different."

He frowned. "That's a bad excuse. We're all different. Didn't you tell me once that one of your friends was a diabetic?"

She nodded. "Yeah, Jason."

"Doesn't he have to take medicine everyday?"

"Yeah."

Dr. Kidd shrugged. "How is it different?" "It's not, I guess."

He leaned forward and put his hand on her arm. "We're going to get through this, I promise."

"Do you know anything about Max?"

He shook his head. "I'll go find out for you, okay?"

"Okay." Dr. Kidd headed for the door. "Do you think he'll be okay?" she called out to him.

He turned around to face her. "I don't know, sweetie. I don't know how badly he was hurt."

She shook her head. "I don't mean that. I mean because he killed that man. Is he going to be okay?"

Dr. Kidd let go of the doorknob and turned all the way around. "Oh, sweetie, I don't know. There's no way to tell how he's going to handle it. Max is a man of principle and doing what's right. It's going to be hard for him, I'm sure."

Max opened his eyes. He moaned in pain. He couldn't believe that he had actually been shot. Well, at least I'm alive. Better than the other guy, I suppose.

"Hey, Max," a familiar voice said.

He turned his head slightly and squinted. His eyesight was usually pretty good, and he assumed it was the medication blurring his vision. "Casey."

She stood over his bed and brushed his hair off his forehead. "Hey, how are you feeling?"

"I feel pain."

She nodded. "I expect so. They'll be in to give you more pain medication in a minute."

"Where's Hannah? Is she okay?"

Casey shook her head. "She's not hurt."

"But?"

"She's upstairs with Dr. Kidd. They admitted her."

Max tried to swallow, but his throat was dry. "Can I have a drink?"

"Yeah, I'll go get it. Be right back." She left the room. As she left a nurse came in and pushed a syringe of Demerol into his IV. Casey came back with a cup of ice water.

"She was hearing the voice," Max said, after wetting his throat.

"Max, she hadn't been taking her medicine. She missed two days."

Max shook his head. "No, you're wrong."

"I wish I were, honey. But Dr. Kidd's going to bring her down to see you later."

"I want to see her now."

Casey shook her head. "Not now. Your Mom and Dad and Megan and Melody are in the waiting room. Do you want me to let them in?"

Max sighed. "Do they know about Hannah?"

Casey nodded. "They know that she was admitted to the psych ward."

"Crap," he muttered. "I guess you have to let them in." His voice was getting light and Casey could tell that the medicine was kicking in.

"Max?"

"Hmm?"

"Don't you want to know about yourself?" "What's there to know? I was shot and I'm alive."

"The bullet went in and out and passed through your large intestines and barely missed your right kidney. They repaired the damage in surgery and you should be out of here in less than a week."

"What about the tour?"

Casey shrugged. "I don't know." She stepped away from the bed. "I'll go get your family."

"Great."

Max rolled his eyes toward the door and watched his family file in. Max's sisters came to the bed, but his parents kept their distance.

"How are you, Max?" Melody asked. She kissed him

lightly on the cheek.

“Oh, I’m going to be okay.”

“That’s what the doctor said,” Megan said. “You should be out of here in a few days.”

“Are you planning on coming home?” his mother asked. “I’m planning on going home, to my home, with Hannah.” “Oh,”

Isabella said curtly. “How long is she going to be in the hospital?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, Max,” Isabella said, coming to the bed. “What are you doing with her? They admitted her to the psych ward for Heaven’s sake. I’m not stupid, I know they don’t just send people up there for post-traumatic stress.”

Max could barely hold his eyes open. “I love her, Mom. We’re getting married.”

“Yes, Max, I know. Why her?” “I love her.” He closed his eyes. “She’s crazy, Max.”

“Mom, I think he’s asleep,” Megan said. “You can get off his case now.”

Max kept his eyes closed.

“I am not on his case,” Isabella said. “I just think he should think about what he is doing. That girl is liable to ruin his life. You can’t trust crazy people.”

“Mom!” Melody said, “You don’t even know Hannah. Max says he loves her.”

“Max is stupid,” Isabella said. “He’s always been stupid over girls. He never has made the best choices.”

“Isabella,” Max’s father scolded. “You shouldn’t say that. He might be able to hear you.”

That’s right. I can hear everything you’re saying.

“I don’t care if he can hear me,” Isabella said. “It’s nothing that I wouldn’t say to his face. If it hadn’t been for his stupid

behavior, he wouldn't have gotten himself shot."

"You can't blame Max for that," Megan said, jumping to his defense. "Bobby Monk was a bad man. He was crazy."

"Really?" Isabella said. "Crazy like Hannah?"

Max's eyes flew open. He looked right at his mother. "Leave. Get out of here."

"Fine," she said. She turned on her heel and left. Arthur followed. Melody and Megan, not knowing what else to do, kissed Max goodbye and left.

Max turned his head toward the window and began to cry. Here he was, a world-renowned celebrity with all the perks life had to offer, lying all alone in a hospital room. His life should have been so full, but he felt so empty. He had just tossed out of his room the one person who should have never turned her back on him. Mothers were supposed to love their children unconditionally, but since Max's fame and passed Isabella's her resentment and jealousy of him had destroyed their relationship.

Hours later, Max was enjoying the company of Jason, David, Reed and Dana, when Dr. Kidd knocked on the room door. "Max, do you feel like one more guest?" He opened the door wider and Hannah stepped inside.

Max winced as he tried to sit up straighter. "Hannah!" She went over and sat on the edge of his bed.

"Hey, we're gonna go," Dana said. "We'll see you in the morning." She kissed Max's forehead. They all left leaving Max, Hannah and Dr. Kidd in the room.

"I'm going to wait in the hall," Dr. Kidd said. He stepped back outside.

Hannah immediately wrapped her arms around Max's neck. "I'm so glad you're going to be okay."

Max pulled away from her. "What about you?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Max. I messed up."

"I promised you that you'd get better. I promised you that this wouldn't happen anymore. I let you down."

"It's my fault. I didn't take the medicine." She paused. "Dr. Kidd is starting me on injectable meds. I can't fake taking that."

"When will you get out?"

"Probably before you do."

Max's eyes welled up with tears. "I'm so sorry, Hannah. I'm so sorry that I put you through that."

"It's okay. How are you doing, Max? With it all?"

He knew what she was trying to ask. "Dr. Kidd was already down here asking me about that. I don't know. I don't think it has hit me yet that I actually killed someone."

Hannah delicately stretched out on the bed next to him, making sure not to jostle him too much. "We're certainly a pair, aren't we?"

"Certainly are," he agreed. He kissed her on the top of her head. "I love you so much, Hannah."

"Me, too, Max. I realized today just how much. I can't live without you. I don't want to live without you."

"I wonder how long Dr. Kidd will let you stay here with me. I just want to lay here and hold you."

"Me too."

Max clutched her to him. The void he was feeling earlier had almost disappeared. He didn't need his mother. He had a family in the other guys, and in Hannah he had everything else he needed.

## Chapter Fourteen

A week later, Max and Hannah were both discharged from the hospital. Casey and Michael drove them to their own house where they would be staying while recuperating. Casey had volunteered to take a few days off work to play nurse to them.

"I'm not sure I ever want to go back there," Hannah said from the backseat.

"To the hospital?" Casey asked.

Hannah shook her head. "No, to the house. I'm not sure I'll ever forget what happened there."

"Me, either," Max agreed.

"Y'all don't have to go back," Michael offered. "We've got plenty of room. You could have the whole upstairs."

"Nah," Max said. "We couldn't impose."

"I think it might be a good idea," Casey said. "I mean, none of us are going to be there much while the tour is going on and

afterwards you can stay as long as you want.”

“Just stay until y’all are ready to buy or build a house,” Michael suggested. “It’s no big deal, really.”

“You’re there two or three times a week to eat anyway,” Casey added. She turned around in her seat. “What do you think, Hannah?”

“I don’t want to put anyone out.”

Casey rolled her eyes. “Don’t be silly. Do you want to?”

Hannah looked at Max. His eyes told her that the decision was hers to make. She sighed. “Come on, Max. Give me more than that. Do you want to?”

He shrugged. “I want to go some where different, and I know you do, too. Why not there?”

She looked back at Casey. “Okay. Thank you.”

“When is this big meeting again?” Max asked. “Am I going to have time for a nap first?” Quintessential’s manager, Neil Black, had called a meeting to discuss the new plan for the tour.

“Maybe for a couple hours,” Michael said. “Neil said he was coming over around dinner time.”

“No doubt to snag a free meal,” Casey muttered.

“He might as well,” Michael said. “Everyone else will be expecting to eat.”

“I’ll surprise them all and order pizza,” she replied.

“Suits me,” Max said. “Anything has got to be better than hospital food.”

“A-men!” Hannah exclaimed.

Everyone laughed.

When they arrived at Michael and Casey’s house, Max struggled with the stairs leading to the second story. Casey wrung her hands. “I should have thought and given you our room,” she fretted. “You shouldn’t have to climb the steps.” Max

leaned against Michael for support. “It’s okay, Case. I



probably won't be coming down much anyway. I'm sure the exercise is good for me."

When they finally reached the second story, Casey led them into a guest room with a private bath. "I've already unpacked your things," Casey said. She opened the closet door to show them. "If there's anything else you need, let me know and I'll go get it."

Max looked around the large room. It reminded him of a hotel room with a king-sized bed, a television hidden in an armoire, a desk and a small dining table. "This is great, Casey. Thank you." He held out an arm to her and she came to him for a one-armed hug.

Hannah sat on the bed. She felt sleepy, a side effect of her medication. Dr. Kidd had started her on a new injectable medication. It was a guarantee that she wouldn't miss a dose because now it would be Casey or another health care provider giving her the shot.

"You okay, Hannah?" Michael asked. He put a hand on her shoulder.

She looked up at him and covered his hand with hers. "Yeah, just a little sleepy." She offered him a weak smile. "Thank you so much." She looked over at Casey, who was still wrapped in Max's arm. "Thank you, Casey."

Casey pulled away from Max and grabbed Michael's other hand. "No problem. That's what friends do."

"Families," Max corrected. "That's what families do." Casey nodded and pulled on Michael's hand. "Come on, babe. Let's let them get to sleep."

Michael nodded and pointed to a baby monitor next to the bed. "If you need us, just turn that thing on and yell." He smiled broadly. "Just remember to turn it off, or we'll hear everything that goes on in here."

"Good to know," Max said. He sat down on the bed next

to Hannah after Casey and Michael left the room. ‘Feeling okay?’

“Tired.” She stood up and walked to the dresser, pulling open drawers until she found her nightclothes. She quickly disrobed and pulled a nightshirt over her head. Max followed suit, stripping down to his boxers. They climbed under the covers.

“Don’t you need your earplugs?” Max mumbled.

“I’m so tired I could sleep through tornado,” she said. She wiggled close to him and pressed the front of her body against his back. She laid her hand gently on top of his bandages. “Sleep tight, baby.”

“I’ve been on the phones all week rearranging and rescheduling,” Neil said. They were finished with dinner, and all had retired to the living room. Neil, sitting in an armchair, reached in his briefcase and pulled out a stack of papers. He handed them out to the guys.

“We’re starting the tour a month late. Max’s doctor has said that he should be back to normal by then.”

“Why not just cancel?” David said. “Or postpone until this winter.”

Neil shook his head. “The tour has to go on, you know, to coincide with the release of the CD.” He looked at Max. “You’re on board with this, aren’t you? You’ll be good, right?”

“Not one hundred percent,” Max said. “I won’t be able to keep up with dancing.”

Neil shook his head. “No, but you can sing. You can walk around the stage and dance as much as you feel like you can. You can sit in a chair the whole time; I don’t really care. The tour has to go on, and I’d really like you to come with us and do

as much as you can.”

“Well, I’d never consider staying home. I’m going, and I plan to be in every show. I just don’t know how much dancing I’ll be up for.”

Neil nodded. “Good.” He held up a copy of the papers he had just passed around. “This is the new itinerary. We’re going to be doing a lot of radio interviews and CD signings and things like that.”

“I still don’t see why the tour has to go on,” David said.

Hannah glanced at him and frowned. She had had the feeling that things weren’t right between him and Shannon since he had visited her in the hospital. In fact, Shannon was conveniently missing from this meeting.

“It’s okay, David,” Max said. “I want to do it.”

David stood up. “Maybe I don’t want to.” Worried glances flew across the room.

“What are you saying, Dave?” Neil said. “You’re under contract, you have to.” David rolled his eyes and walked out of the room without speaking.

Michael began to follow him, but Max stopped him. “Let me go,” he said. He grunted as he pushed himself off the couch. He stumbled into the kitchen. David was standing at the sink filling a glass with water.

“What’s going on, man?”

David shook his head. “Nothing.”

“Yeah, right. What is it?” When David still refused to answer, Max took a guess. “Shannon? This is about Shannon, isn’t it?”

David nodded. “She won’t go on tour. She won’t even commit to coming out on the road and seeing me.”

“Oh, man. So that’s why you don’t want to go?”

David turned to face him. “Yeah, that’s why I don’t want to go. I think my marriage is in a lot of trouble, Max. I might need

to quit in order to save it.”

“Quit? Quit Quintessential? Man, you can’t do that.”

“What else can I do?”

“This is her problem, David. You were in the group when you started dating her. This is your job and it’s just as important as hers.”

“That’s what I said,” David mumbled. “We had a fight right before I came over here. She didn’t want to hear any of that.”

“So you’re seriously considering pulling out of this?”

David sighed. “I can’t do that to you guys. I don’t want to do that. I love touring. I love the crowds. I love the fans. I love singing. I just kinda hoped that the tour would just be canceled. I love my wife, too, Max. I don’t want to have to chose one over the other.”

“Is she making you choose?”

“No, she said go. She’d try to make it out some. She said she’d be here when I got back.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, man,” Max said, shaking his head.

“It’s okay. It will work out.” He looked at his watch. “Listen, I’m going to go on back home. I’ll get the itinerary from Neil later.” He walked to the back door.

Max watched him leave before going back into the living room with the others. “David went home.”

“Everything okay?” Dana asked.

Max shot her a look that he hoped relayed the message she’s-your-best-friend-and-you-better-do-something-about- her.

A week later, Max found Michael and Casey in the den curled up together watching television. He eased down into an

armchair.

“What’s up, honey?” Casey asked. “Can I get you anything?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m fine. Just feeling a little stiff. I didn’t move around enough today I guess.”

“Hannah asleep?” Mike asked.

Max nodded. “Yeah.” Her new injectable medication made her extra sleepy and she often went to bed right after supper. Max, who was still taking pain relievers, took several naps during the day, and it seemed that they were never awake at the same time.

“Hopefully, once her body gets use to the medication, she won’t be sleeping all the time,” Casey said. “She just had an injection this afternoon.”

“Oh, I know.” Max sighed. “I was hoping to take her away for a weekend before the tour starts.”

“To where?” Casey asked.

“I’m thinking somewhere in the mountains. She likes the snow.”

“That sounds nice; being holed up in a cabin, snuggled up on the couch in front of a roaring fireplace and a blizzard outside.”

“And both of them sound asleep,” Michael added.

Max laughed, but quickly covered his mouth with his hands and sighed.

“What’s wrong?” Casey asked, leaning forward and touching his knee.

He shook his head. “I’ve got this crazy, crazy idea, but I’m not sure I can pull it off, or even if it’s a good idea.”

“What is it?” Michael asked.

“At Christmas, Hannah told me about her fantasy wedding. I want to try to arrange everything just like she wanted it and surprise her with it.”

“Surprise her with a wedding?” Casey asked.

Max nodded. “Yeah. I mean, I’m prepared that she’d say no and want to do it her way, you know plan it herself and all.”

“Then why try this at all?” Michael asked.

“Because I really think she’d go for it. I do; and I really, really want to marry her.”

“Then why not just ask?”

Casey playfully slapped Michael’s arm. “Because this is romantic, dope.” She leaned forward. “Do you know enough details? Like the dress and everything?”

Max nodded. “Yeah. Will you help me?”

Casey nodded. “Of course.”

Max spent the next hour describing Hannah’s dream wedding as she had explained it to him. Casey wrote the details in a notebook, and Michael offered suggestions of how to sneak all of their friends away without Hannah becoming suspicious.

“You find a place and leave the rest to me,” Casey said, closing her notebook. “I’ll get Dana to help me and we’ll pull it together.”

“Are you planning on calling her brother?” Michael asked.

Max nodded. “Oh yeah, of course.”

“What about your family?” Casey asked.

Max shook his head. “I don’t think so. They probably wouldn’t come anyway.”

“Not even your sisters?”

He shrugged, and then shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. I’m not inviting them...or the press. I want to keep this as low key as possible, Casey.”

She nodded. “No problem.”

Max stood up. “Well, I’m going to bed. Thanks a lot, guys.”

Hannah opened the pack of birth control pills and looked at the days of the week printed inside. She shook her head and recounted the days. Something wasn't right. She should have started her period two days ago. She knew that she had missed some pills while in the hospital, and she had just picked up where she let off when she finally started taking them again. Still, though, she was late.

"Oh no," she said aloud. She had been taking these pills for almost four years and had never been late. "What happened?"

She went downstairs to the kitchen where Casey was cooking. Seven-month-old Will reached for her from his playpen as she walked by. She picked him up. "Can I ask you something, professionally?"

"Sure."

Hannah explained to her the situation with her pills. "So what do you think?"

Casey shook her head. "You're probably just going to run a little late this month. Your body got confused. I wouldn't worry." She cocked her head to the side. "Did you and Max have unprotected sex after you missed the pills?"

Hannah bit her lip. She didn't want to answer. They had been instructed not to have intercourse for a few weeks, in order for Max to heal and not put any pressure on his wounds. Of course, they hadn't adhered to the doctor's orders.

"I'm just saying," Casey continued, "that if you did, it's possible you're pregnant."

Hannah felt her stomach turn over. She hugged Will close to her for a second before returning him to the playpen. "Thanks, Casey. I'm sure it's just late." She went back upstairs and grabbed her purse and returned to the kitchen. Again Will reached for her.

"I'm going to run to the store. Do you need anything?"

Casey wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "I don't reckon I could talk you into taking him with you? I need to take a shower before Mike gets home. We're supposed to go to Birdie's for dinner. You can take my car."

Hannah scoped up Will. "No problem. What are you cooking if y'all are going to Mike's mom's?"

"Oh, this is dessert," Casey said, waving her hand toward the stove. "Thanks, Hannah."

Once inside the drugstore, Hannah picked up a pregnancy test and several other items. She paid for them, and left the store clutching the bag. Inside the car, she shoved the pregnancy test in her jacket pocket.

"I'm back," she called once back inside the house. "In my room."

Hannah carried Will into the master bedroom and deposited him on the bed where Casey was sitting putting on a pair of socks.

"Did you get what you needed?" Casey asked.

Hannah knew that she knew. "Yeah."

"Mike just called. He and Max will be home in about five minutes."

Hannah took her bag up to her room. She put her purchases away and hung her coat in the closet, pulling the test kit out of the pocket. She started toward the bathroom with it, but stopped and sat down at the table.

She was sitting at the table in their bedroom when Max came in. Her back was to him so he couldn't see what she was doing, but he could tell she was fiddling with something.

"Hey, sweetie," he said as he came up behind her. He draped his coat over the back of one of the chairs. "What'cha doing?"

She shook her head. "Just sitting here." She was holding a small rectangular box, and she sat it on the table in front of her.



“Whoa,” Max said. “Is that what I think it is?”

She nodded. “If you think it’s a home pregnancy test, it is.”

“Are you pregnant?” He lowered himself into a chair with a slight wince.

She shrugged and picked up the box. “I don’t know. I haven’t done it yet.”

Max waited a moment before speaking. “You think you might be?”

She nodded again. “I’m late. I missed some pills when I was in the hospital. It’s a possibility. We didn’t protect ourselves.”

“Are you going to do it today?”

“Yeah.” She pushed away from the table and disappeared into the bathroom with the box. A minute or so later, she returned to her seat.

Max raised his eyebrows. “So?”

“Three minutes.”

“Oh.”

“What if it’s positive?” Hannah asked, clearly alarmed.

“What if it is? It would be okay with me.”

“I’m scared.”

Max reached across the table and grabbed her hand. “Don’t be scared. I’m right here. You don’t have to go through anything alone.”

Her eyes welled up with tears. “I can’t take my meds if I’m pregnant.”

“You can’t take these meds, but Dr. Kidd and I talked about this already, and there are medications you can take while you’re pregnant.”

“You talked about this? Why?”

“Because Hannah, I’m going to spend the rest of my life with you. I need to know all the possibilities.”

“So what if he had said I couldn’t, or I shouldn’t, get pregnant? Then what? Would you have broken off the engagement?”

“Of course not. I just wanted to know.”

Hannah crossed her arms over her chest. “And he said it was okay?”

Max nodded. “He said we could manage your disease and a pregnancy.”

She signed and shook her head. “I’ll never get better switching medication all the time.”

Max frowned. “There’s no cure.”

She rubbed her temples with her fingertips. “I’m scared.”

He slid his chair closer to hers. He put one hand on her back and the other on her leg. “I understand that, baby girl. Let’s not worry until we know for sure, okay?”

They fell silent again. Max drummed his fingertips on the table. “Time’s up.”

With a nod, she slid her chair away from the table and went back into the bathroom. She held her breath and closed her eyes. Please God. Please God, what? I don’t even know what I want. Lord, I’m scared. Just give me the strength to handle whatever the result will be.

She opened her eyes and looked down at the test stick. Negative. “Damn,” she muttered. No matter how scared she was or how hesitant she was about getting pregnant, she knew Max wanted it to be positive. And she knew she didn’t want to disappoint him.

She returned to the bedroom and handed the test to Max. “Negative,” she said.

She saw the flame of hope in his eyes flicker, and then burn out. He gave a small nod. “It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry, Max.”

He shook his head. “For what?”

"I know you wanted it to be positive."

He stood up and pulled her to him. "Oh, baby girl, don't worry about me. I'm fine."

"But you looked so disappointed."

"I'm not going to lie to you; I want badly to have babies with you. I want to build a family. There's nothing more I want in this life than to be your husband and the father of your children. So what if we're not pregnant this time. We will be sometime." He pulled back some so he could look into her eyes. "Are you still unsure about having kids?"

"It will be okay?"

Max nodded. "I promise." He pulled her close to him again. "I promise."

Hannah buried her face in his chest. She knew that he loved her, he would always take care of her, and for as long as she lived she would be safe with him. "I want it, too, Max."

"Pack your stuff," Max said. It was a Friday morning two weeks later. They would be leaving to start the tour in five days.

Hannah raised her head from her pillow. "What's going on?"

"We're going on vacation," Max announced. "One last shebang before we hit the road."

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," Max said, his eyes sparkling.

She shook her head. "Oh boy. Last time you took me on a surprise vacation, we ended up in Vegas."

"Hey, that was a fun trip!" "Yeah, it was. Vegas again?" Max shook his head. "Nope." "Can I have a hint?"

Max considered it for a moment. "Pack warm."

"Pack warm," she muttered as she pulled herself out of the bed. "When are we coming back?"

"Sunday night. Pack quick. Our plane leaves in two hours."

Two hours later, Max and Hannah had boarded a small charter plane heading north into the Blue Ridge Mountains.

"Look at the snow," Max said, peering out of the window.

"I feel like Buddy Holly," Hannah said, nervously clutching the armrest.

He laughed. "Don't worry, sweetie. Everything is going to be fine."

They landed at the small airport without incident, and a car was waiting to take them to the inn Max had reserved for the weekend.

Hannah climbed out of the car and followed Max through the front door. The innkeeper came out from behind the front desk. "Ms. Doherty, Mr. Fitzgerald, I'm so happy you have arrived. Here are your keys." He handed a set of keys to Max.

Hannah looked around. "Nice place, very char..." Her voice trailed off when she saw the large Christmas tree behind her. "What kind of place is this?" She whispered. "They still have their Christmas decorations up."

Max chuckled. "No, I had them decorate the place like this. This is how I wanted it for you. Everyone is here: Mike and Casey, David and Shannon, Reed and Dana, Jason and Carmen, even Jimmy and Amanda. There's a violinist and everything. I wanted it to be perfect."

"Wanted what to be perfect?" "Our wedding."

"What's going on, Max?"

"If you say no, that will be okay, too, because I know we're going to get married soon. If you want, we'll just go out there and have a big party. There's lots of food and I've got the whole lodge for the weekend."

“Are you serious? Get married this weekend?”

“Tonight.”

“Do I have a dress?”

Max nodded. “It’s upstairs.”

“Rings?”

“They’re beautiful. Carmen approved.”

“She’s really here?”

“Yeah,” Max said. “She’s upstairs.”

Hannah took a deep breath. “Okay, I’ll marry you. Tonight. Yes. We’ll get married tonight.”

A smile overtook Max’s face. “Thank you.”

“So what do I need to do?” Hannah asked. “How long do I have?”

Max held the room key out to her. “Room #3 at the top of the stairs. Carmen’s up there. She’s waiting for you. She knows what to do.”

Hannah took the key from him. “You’re crazy, you know that?”

He nodded and leaned in to kiss her. “I know.” He looked at his watch. “Okay, it’s about two hours until show time. I’ll see you in the parlor after while. I gotta go. I’ve got things to do.” He started up the stairs.

“Hey!” Hannah called after him. “What about a preacher?”

Max stopped. “Reverend Moss is here.”

“Here?”

“Yeah, just for the ceremony. Cool, huh?”

“Totally. You were pretty darn sure this was going to happen, weren’t you?”

“I really wanted it to.” He disappeared up the stairs.

Hannah wandered into the parlor. The small room was overwhelmed with Christmas trees and sparking lights. If she hadn’t known better she would have thought it was Christmas instead of almost spring. There was an aisle of red carpet

leading to a platform that she was sure had been built just for this occasion. A dozen chairs flanked both sides of the aisle. Candles were everywhere, ready to be lit.

On the right side of the parlor, double doors opened into a formal dining room. The table was set with thirteen place settings, decorated in gold trimmed china and poinsettias as centerpieces. She could smell the meal cooking from the kitchen.

She turned and ran up the stairs. I'm getting married! She flung open the door to room #3 and squealed with delight to see Carmen sitting on the bed buffing her nails while she waited for her friend's arrival.

Carmen jumped up. "Can you believe this?" She grabbed Hannah's arms and the two women jumped up and down.

"What are you doing here?" Hannah asked when they calmed down some. "What about your tour? Didn't you have a show tonight?"

Carmen shook her head. "Not anymore."

"You canceled a show for me?"

"Rescheduled, and of course I did. I wouldn't miss this for the world. Two of my best friends are getting married and come hell or high water I was going to be there."

"How did you know I would say yes?" "Come on, girl. I know you're not crazy!"

Hannah laughed. "Not that crazy anyway." She looked around the room and spotted a dress bag hanging on the back of the door. "So, is that my dress? Have you seen it?"

"Oh yeah." Carmen crossed the room and unzipped the bag. Out tumbled yards and yards of white fabric.

Hannah reached out and touched the delicate lace and beading that adorned the strapless gown. "Beautiful," she breathed.

"Go hop in the shower," Carmen directed. "I've already

showered. I'm going to do my hair and makeup while you're in there, and I'll do yours when you get out. Then we'll get dressed. That should leave us with plenty of time."

"You're going to do our hair?"

Carmen put her hands on her hips. "What you don't trust me?"

"Is there going to be a photographer here?" Hannah joked.

Carmen gave her a push toward the bathroom. "Ha ha, very funny."

Once inside the bathroom, she quickly undressed and stepped inside the steaming shower. She washed herself quickly, shampooed her hair, and took her time shaving her legs. She wrapped herself in a large bath towel and left the bathroom.

"Your panties and bustier are on the bed," Carmen said.

Hannah dropped the towel and pulled the lacy panties on. "I don't think I've ever worn one of these," she said as laid the bustier against her chest. "How am I supposed to do this? It fastens in the back."

Carmen came over to help her. "Sexy," she said with a smile. She fastened it, then handed Hannah a pair of thigh-high white stockings.

Hannah pulled them on. "Oh, I feel like a tramp."

Carmen laughed. She picked up another garment off the bed. "Here, maybe this will help."

Hannah slipped on the crinoline underskirt. "Better," she said.

"Okay, come sit here," Carmen said, pulling out a chair and picking up a hair dryer. "We've got a lot of work to do." An hour later, hair and make-up completed, each woman helped the other into her dress.

Hannah stepped into her shoes. "I feel like Cinderella." Carmen looked at her and gave a satisfactory nod. "Yes, I did a good job." She spun around. "How do I look?"

“Beautiful as always.”

There was a knock at the door. Carmen pulled it open. “Y’all ready?” Hannah heard Jimmy ask. “It’s time.”

“Yeah, we’re ready.” Carmen turned back to Hannah. “You look perfect. You’re bouquet’s on the bed.” She left as Jimmy came in.

“You ready, sis?” Jimmy asked.

Hannah turned away from the mirror and faced him. “Yes.” She smiled broadly. “Isn’t this amazing? Can you believe this is happening to me?”

Jimmy shook his head slightly. “Nope.” He leaned over and gave her a light kiss on the cheek. “You do look beautiful. I’m very happy for you.”

“Thank you.”

He held out his arm and she took it. She grabbed her bouquet off the bed as he led her out of the room. “So how soon am I going to be Uncle Jimmy?”

“There are no shotguns here,” Hannah said. They approached the stairs leading down to the parlor.

He nodded. They stopped at the top of the stairs and waited for their cue. “I’m so proud of you, Hannah.”

She turned to him and hugged him, not caring if it messed up her hair or makeup or smashed her dress. “You’ve been so good to me, Jimmy. Thank you for bringing me this far.”

He squeezed her tight. “You know it wasn’t just me. You make me proud to be your brother. I love you, Hannah.”

“I love you, too, Jimmy.”

Hannah glanced down the stairs. The lobby was just as she had pictured it in her fantasy; Max had gotten it perfect. Jimmy gave her arm a small tug and, and they began their walk down the stairs and toward the makeshift altar where Reverend Moss, Jason, and Carmen were standing with Max. When they reached the end of the aisle, Reverend Moss began speaking.



“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God, signifying the union between Christ and His Church: and therefore is not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God. Into this holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. If any man can show just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace.”

He looked up and smiled, his eyes twinkling, knowing that no one was going to object. “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?”

“I do,” Jimmy said. He kissed her on the cheek and stepped away. Max stepped up into his place beside Hannah.

Reverend Moss began again. “Friends, we have been invited here today to share with Max and Hannah the most important few moments of their lives. In the past few months we have seen how their love and understanding of each other has grown and matured. Today is the day they will join their lives together as husband and wife.”

“We have been invited to witness Max and Hannah as they promise to face the future together, accepting whatever may lie ahead as they have bravely faced the trials in their past. God, in his never-ending grace, has given them the strength and the peace to continue on this journey and never look back. It is by God’s grace and mercy that Max and Hannah are able to stand before us today.”

“Max and Hannah, nothing is easier than saying words and nothing harder than living them day after day. What you promise today must be renewed and redecided tomorrow. At the end of this ceremony legally you will be man and wife, but you still must decide each day that stretches out before you, that you

want to be married.

“The Bible says that when married, man and woman become one flesh, but marriage is not total absorption in each other; it is two people looking out in the same direction --together. Love makes burdens lighter, because you divide them. It makes joys more intense because you share them. It makes you stronger so you can reach out and become involved with life in ways you dared not risk alone.”

“In the past few months, I have come to know both of you very well on a personal basis; I have had the opportunity to be your pastor, your counselor, and your friend. I know that the love the two of you share is real, and I am confident that the Lord is going to bless your marriage as long as you remember to always put Christ first. Choosing who you will take as your spouse, your helpmeet, is one of the biggest decisions you will ever make, and I believe that you both have chosen well.” He looked down at Max. “Max, you have something you wanted to say?”

Max nodded and looked into Hannah’s eyes. “I know I was taking a big chance arranging all this, and I am so glad you said yes. It was the right decision. I promise you, it was the right decision. I know we haven’t been together for very long in a lot of people’s eyes, but we have gone through a lifetime of drama in these past few months. I never thought I would fall so hard and so fast for someone. And I never thought my life would be so totally different from where I was this time last year.”

“I love you. I could say it a billion times and it would still never express just how I feel. You will never regret making the decision to marry me. I am making this promise right now to you that I will always treat you with all the respect and dignity and admiration that you deserve.” He turned his eyes back to Reverend Moss signaling that he was finished.

“Max, will you...”

“Wait,” Hannah interrupted. “Can I say something?”

Max raised his eyebrows in a worrisome sort of way. She shook her head slightly; trying to calm whatever fears he was feeling. Hannah looked up at the preacher. “Can I?”

Reverend Moss nodded. “Of course.”

Hannah smiled at Max. “I didn’t get any time to prepare something to say; this was sprung on me kinda sudden-like, but I know I am making the right decision, Max. I know that by marrying you today, I will never have to worry again. I know you are always going to be by my side, supporting me, taking care of me, and loving me. I promise I am going to love you every day of my life. I never thought I could be good enough for someone like you; I never thought that someone like you would ever fall in love with someone like me, but you make me believe that I am worthy. You make me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. You make me feel like I am the most loved person in the world. I know I am the luckiest woman in the world. You are never going to regret asking me to marry you.” She looked up at the pastor. “I’m done,” she whispered.

Reverend Moss nodded and began to speak again. “Max, will you have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep only unto her, so long as you both shall live?”

Max nodded. “I will.”

Reverend Moss turned to Hannah. “Hannah, will you have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love him, comfort him, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep only unto him, so long as you

both shall live?"

"I will," Hannah answered.

Again, Reverend Moss turned to Max. "Please repeat after me: I, Martin, take you, Hannah, as my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; this is my solemn vow."

Max repeated the words, never taking his eyes from Hannah.

"Hannah, repeat after me," Reverend Moss continued. "I, Hannah, take you, Martin, to my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; this is my solemn vow."

"The rings, please."

Hannah turned around and handed Carmen her bouquet in exchange for the ring. Max got the other ring from Jason.

"Max," Reverend Moss said, "please place the ring on the fourth finger of her left hand and repeat after me."

Hannah held out her hand and Max took it gently into his. He slid the ring onto her finger. "With this ring I thee wed: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

"Hannah, please place the ring on the fourth finger of Max's left hand and repeat after me. With this ring I thee wed: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Hannah slid the ring onto his finger. He immediately closed his hand around hers. She grasped his hand with her free one, and he covered them all with his other hand.

"Bless, O Lord, these rings," Reverend Moss prayed, "that

they who wear them may abide in thy peace, and continue in thy favor, unto their life's end; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

He looked out at the small congregation and motioned for them all to stand. "Let us pray. O, eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all mankind, Giver of all spiritual grace, the Author of everlasting life; send your blessing upon these your servants, Max and Hannah, whom we bless in thy Name; that they, living faithfully together, may surely perform and keep the vow and covenant made between them, and may ever remain in perfect love and peace together. Look mercifully upon them Lord, that they may love, honor, and cherish each other, and so live together in faithfulness and patience, in wisdom and true godliness, that their home may be a haven of blessing and of peace and live according to thy laws; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Reverend Moss looked up. "Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder. Forasmuch as Max and Hannah have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, and pledged their solemn vows, to each other, and have declared the same by giving and receiving a ring; I pronounce that they are man and wife, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

He looked down at Max and Hannah in a fatherly way. "Mankind did not create love; love is created by God. True love is both freely given and freely accepted, just as God's love of us is unconditional and free. Today truly is a glorious day the Lord has made - as today both of you are blessed with God's greatest of all gifts - the gift of abiding love and devotion between a man and a woman. All present here today - and those here in heart - wish both of you all the joy, happiness and success and the world has to offer. Max, you may kiss your bride."

End.

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