



The Tree Trimmer

Linn Sullivan

The Tree Trimmer

CHAPTER 1

Present Day

As the autumn leaves begin to fall and the gentle breeze carries with it the hint of winter, memories of the tree trimmer come to mind. Be it by destiny, or be it by fate, one chance encounter changed my whole perspective on life.

Thanksgiving 1999

Madisen proudly drove her new red 1960 Triumph TR-3A to the finer district of Detroit with her mother, Ann Marie, riding in the passenger seat. She flicked on the turn signals and steered the little car through the heavy wrought iron gates of her grandparents' estate.

Inside the mansion, the servants hustled to make the Parks family Thanksgiving one to remember, while the social elite rubbed elbows in the elegant living room. Katheryn Parks glanced out the large lavish window to see who their latest guest would be. Out of discuss, she shook her head at the sight of their only child, Ann Marie, getting out of a relic of metal with one of their twin granddaughters.

“Oh my,” Katheryn heard someone behind her say. Wanting to wither away with shame, she dreaded to see who was standing next to her. But determine to save face, she held her head high. However, her posture relaxed at the sight of her older sister, Millie. “That must be the dream car that Madisen has been going on about for weeks.”

“I suppose,” Katheryn looked down her nose at her big sister, “That it is good that the girls do not have high expectations with a father, who works on an auto assembly line.”

“Well,” Millie puffed out her chest and looked up at her younger sister, “Your son-in-law is a gifted mechanic. He’s restored my old Duesenberg.” She smiled at the memories of she and her late husband in that car. “Doug has that old motor sounding like new, so I took that old Duesy out for a spin the other day.” Millie fanned both hands at her face to rekindle the memory of the cool autumn breeze reinvigorating her old body to its youthful state. However, Katheryn did not share her sister’s fondness for Douglas Kahan. For years, she groomed Ann Marie on the fine etiquette of their society only for her to fall for the likes of him. While across the room stood the dashing Miles West, the man she would like to see her daughter married to.

The rich tones of the doorbell sounded gently through the vastness of the mansion. “Miss Ann Marie,” Sylvia, a long time servant to the family warmly greeted. “It’s so good to see you. And Miss Madisen, your Aunt Millie tells me that you girls are doing great at the University of Illinois.”

“Michelle and I really like our classes. And after Thanksgiving break, we can drive back to Crystal Lake in style. Dad and I found a 1960 Triumph.”

Sylvia smiled at Madisen’s enthusiasm, “That grandson of mine likes tinkering with cars about as much as you and your dad. Speaking of whom, where is the other half of your family?”

“They are coming. Michelle was packing the pies when we left.”

“Oh thank you, Ann Marie. We sure do appreciate the help.”

“Hold one of the pies back for you guys and cut the other one into extra thin pieces. You know Mom’s motto on desserts. ‘Less is more.’”

Madisen retorted, “Less might be more if you want more than a taste.”

Ann Marie shot her daughter a stern look as Sylvia chuckled, “Thank you again. I’m looking forward to a slab of that pie.”

Ann Marie and Madisen entered the living room without ceremony. Quickly, Ann Marie noticed her mother in a heated debate with Aunt Millie. While her father, Herbert, was over by the fireplace visiting with an old friend and cradling a glass of scotch. In the blink of an eye, Madisen vanished from her side and emerged between Aunt Millie and Katheryn.

“Can you see my new car?” She pointed it out to Millie.

“I sure did, honey. You were so reared back with pride that I first thought it had a rumble seat. When did you get it?”

“Dad and I picked it up this morning. I couldn’t wait a moment longer.”

“Did your dad tell you that he got the old Duesenberg running?”

“NO!” Madisen’s voice bounced around the room and Katheryn took a tiny step back and a quick glance around to capture the reaction of her distinguished guest at the sudden out burst of her granddaughter.

“This evening, we’ll take that old Duesy for a spin.” Millie looked around.

“Where are Doug and Michelle?”

“They’re coming.”

“I couldn’t help but hear,” Miles stepped into their conversation. “That your father is a pretty descent mechanic.”

“He’s the best.” Madisen’s smile radiated with pride, which added to Katheryn’s embarrassment. For years she had held her tongue about the truth of Douglas Kahan but no longer would she remain silent.

“Well, it is for sure that the state correctional facility will vouch for his mechanical expertise.”

Millie’s jaw dropped in disbelief as confusion clouded Madisen’s expression. “What are you talking about?”

“Something that you girls need to know about your father. For years, I have remained quiet...”

“That is enough, Katheryn.” Millie jumped in, but her sister would not be bridled.

“No,” Katheryn’s look toward her sister was stern. “It is only the beginning of a long list of felonies Douglas Kahan has accumulated over the years of his youth. At first, it was child’s play: hot wiring a car for a joy ride which evolved into stealing cars for a means of income. But incarceration did not teach him right from wrong, because the first job he landed after being released from prison was job in a chop shop. It was after that stretch behind bars that he met our Ann Marie. Therefore, he ought to be a fine mechanic, for he can start a car without a key; as well as tear one apart. And now, he has mastered putting them together on his first legal job, the Ford assembly line.”

Millie placed her arm around Madisen for it appeared that shock had made her weak. “No! That can’t be true.” Madisen stated, through a haze of tears but she could tell from Aunt Millie’s expression that a horrible secret had just been revealed. She always knew there was a secret surrounding her father, but she figured her grandparents didn’t want their friends to know that Doug came from a family with very little; in fact,

nearly living paycheck to paycheck with expenses sometimes exceeding their income. But never had she dreamed anything like this. Then, through tears of hatred, Madisen regained her strength. “You hate my father so much, that you,” she pointed an accusing finger at Katheryn, “would ruin his reputation.”

“No, he did that all on his own.” Katheryn coldly responded with indignity.

“What’s going on?” Ann Marie stepped in glancing from face to face for any clues.

“She knows, honey. I’m sorry.” Millie responded, defeated by her sister’s ambush of truth.

“Mom, if you tell me it’s all a lie, I will believe you.” Madisen’s eyes begged for the words that Ann Marie was at a loss to say to ease her daughter’s pain. “If you won’t say it, Dad will set things straight when he gets here.” Madisen stated, holding on to a fragment of hope.

CHAPTER 2

Dread balled up in the pit of Doug's stomach as he drove his '65 Ford through the servant's entrance. He did not mind the holidays, in fact, it was his idea that the girls should know Ann's parents. But society had taught him that he did not belong with the people in this social bracket and he was always glad to leave as soon as possible to enjoy the rest of the day with the people who mattered most in his life, his three girls: Ann, Madisen and Michelle.

"Why do you always park around behind the house?" Michelle's question generated a smile from Doug as he responded. "My old car might leave an oil spot on the driveway."

"Huh!" Michelle retorted. "It is more like their cars that will leave the oil spot. This car is flawless."

"Well, at least parked back here, your grandparents can't blame me for any oil spots around front."

Michelle got out of the car and pulled the seat forward to retrieve the pies. As Doug shut her door, she looked around at the cars of the working class. "I don't get it, Dad. Doesn't the haughty toity know that their high dollar cars have the same oil running through their engines?"

"Look at it this way," Doug continued. "The advantage to parking back here is we don't have to ring the doorbell. We can walk right on in without ceremony."

"But Mom says that family isn't announced."

“Yes, but I’ll bet your mom and Madisen had to wait at the door while you and I have direct access. Now, to me, that is a privilege I’m not ready to give up any time soon.” Doug held the door open for his daughter and they entered the kitchen where they were warmly greeted. Sylvia carefully removed each pie from the box and with them setting side by side, she sang their praises. “Lordy! If they aren’t a piece-o-art then I don’t know what is.”

“They are too pretty to eat.” Mary, the family cook, marveled.

“Correction,” Hank, the family butler grabbed a plate. “They are almost too pretty to eat, because I heard Miss Ann Marie say that one of those is ours.”

Doug shoved the largest one toward Ramona, the newest maid of the household, who was ready to cut one up. Doug would rather stay behind in the kitchen and visit with the common folks than to proceed on through the house. They meet one of the maids, Amy, but she quickly passed them, barely making eye contact. Doug watched her vanish around the corner. And as he proceeded on, he found the house to be unusually quiet. As he and Michelle entered the living room, he could feel the tension, and all eyes turned to him. Madisen rushed his direction with tears streaming down her cheeks. “Please Dad; say that it’s not true.”

“I’m afraid that you are going to have to elaborate on what has you so upset.”

“Please set them straight by saying that you are not an ex-con.”

The word *ex-con* from Madisen’s lips knocked the wind from his lungs faster than a hard punch to the abdomen and left him equally incapacitated as to what words to say to keep his family from disintegrating. Quickly, Ann rushed to Doug’s aid. “Girls, please hear your father out. Don’t make the same mistake that I made years ago.” Both,

Madisen and Michelle were devastated by the revelation of this secret and were unwilling to hear another word. Madisen started to leave with Michelle close behind. “Girls,” Ann called after them. “Where are you going?”

“Anywhere but here,” Madisen answered without breaking her stride.

Ann started after them, but Doug gently caught her by the arm. “Let them go. They need to come to terms with this news in their own way and in their own time.”

“I warned you that this could happen.” Ann sobbed as Doug drew her into his arms. In the distance, his focus landed on Katheryn, who was pretty pleased with herself. “Let’s go home.” He whispered to Ann.

As they exit the living room, Millie gave her sister a piece of her mind. “This is a fine mess you have stirred up this time and I don’t think that I will be able to fix it.”

“You should never have medaled the first time. Then maybe, Ann Marie would be married to Miles.”

Millie gathered up her things but before leaving for Doug and Ann’s home she dished out her final two cents. “You will never understand what they have because they truly love one another and not each other’s bank accounts.”

Katheryn laughed at the absurdity of Millie’s final assessment but her laughter was short lived as Herbert approached. “Why dear, what’s the matter? You look flushed.”

He took the champaign glass from her hand and placed it on the nearby walnut end table. “I’ll tell you what is wrong.” He worked hard to restrain the volume of his voice. “You just made a spectacle of us.”

“All I did is tell the truth.”

“But now was neither the time nor the place.”

Katheryn looked around at their guest and realized what her husband meant by her timing. She forced a smile and tried to gloss over the fact that Doug wasn't the only one humiliated, for some of that egg came back onto her.

CHAPTER 3

“Madisen!” Michelle shouted after her sister took a corner a little too fast. “I don’t know where we are going, but I want to get there in one piece.”

Madisen relaxed her foot on the accelerator after noticing that she was twenty miles per hour over the speed limit. “We are going back to our apartment.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, now.”

“But there are things at Mom and Dad’s that we need.”

“We’ll get along without them.”

“What happened at our grandparents’ home before we got there?”

“What difference does it make? The result is still the same. Our dad isn’t the man that we thought he was.”

“What did Mom mean by ‘Don’t make the same mistake that I did’?”

“I don’t know.” And part of Madisen was afraid to know.

“I think we should go home and get the rest of the story. We need to hear what Mom and Dad have to say.”

Madisen slammed on the brakes and the little car all but stopped on a dime. The force abruptly shoved Michelle forward, and equally traumatic, she was catapulted back by the seat belt. “Holy Mother of Saints! Are you trying to get us killed?”

“If you want to hear more of the story, you can walk home. But as for me, I’ve heard all that I want to hear.”

Michelle grabbed her purse and opened the door. She paused for a moment, reluctant to leave her sister, who was obviously wrecked by the truth. “I’ll make a deal with you. I’ll get out of this car, if you promise to drive like a little old lady all the way to Crystal Lake instead of a Nascar racer.”

Madisen couldn’t help but laugh through her tears at Michelle’s wacky analogy. “I promise, little old lady all the way.”

“You know, that in time, you will find your way home again.”

Madisen glanced in the rear-view mirror at Michelle as she started her journey home to hear the truth that mattered. But right now all that mattered to Madisen was the feeling of betrayal that pierced her heart.

As she guided the little car down the open highway, she reflected on a happier time- of when she and her dad found this little car. She was so excited to work on it with him. But as the yellow dashes on the highway hurdled past, she was fast forwarded to the few seconds that all of the happiness, security, and trust was diminished to an illusion. She gripped the steering wheel in a feeble attempt to cling to that happiness before her grandmother ripped it all away.

“Well, glory be!” Millie barely could believe her own eyes as she parted the sheer curtains to get a better look at Michelle ascending the front porch steps. Doug’s heart skipped a beat when she walked in. Then, hope built as he anticipated Madisen doing the same. Ann threw her arms around Michelle grateful to have one of their daughters home. Finally, Millie asked the question that Doug was dying to know the answer to. “Where is your sister?”

“She’s on the road to Crystal Lake. She let me off near the corner of High and Cranberry Street.”

“That’s a little over a mile away from home.” Alarm sounded in Ann’s voice.

“I know, but the walk home gave me plenty of time to reflect on the events of the day. Everyone heard Katheryn’s bitter version of the truth. And I came to realize that you are no longer that man. So when Madisen finds her way home, I would like to hear your side of the story.”

Teary eyed, Doug embraced his daughter, thankful for the second chance that she had given him.

“Dad, don’t lose hope. Madisen will come around in her own time.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what enticed you to come back home today?”

“The truth, but the time in which I hear the truth is irrelevant. What is relevant is that Madisen and I hear the truth together.”

“Thank you.” Doug squeezed her tighter as she whispered more words of encouragement. “You and I are a lot alike in the face of adversity. We are both able to remain calm. But Madisen is a lot like Mom. They both fly off the handle, but with time they eventually come around.”

As Doug prepared for bed, he was thankful for many things: the strong bond of love shared with Ann that was tested by the time of separation. He was thankful for the forgiveness that his loved ones carried in their hearts and their willingness to see that people can change. He was thankful for the daughter who returned home to give him a second chance and he was hopeful that their other daughter would soon rest her head on her childhood pillow and forgive him as well.

CHAPTER 4

The light of a new day had not diminished the anguish of Thanksgiving as Madisen pulled herself from bed. She meandered through the apartment to the kitchen in search of breakfast. Joining her at the table was a hefty dose of loneliness. Her gaze fell on the calendar hanging on the wall. It would be two days before Michelle returned to Crystal Lake, so in the meantime, Madisen flipped through the TV channels but nothing held her attention. She tried the radio but the Christmas carols added to her sorrow. To escape the solitude, she changed into her favorite blue jeans and a comfortable sweatshirt and bolted from the apartment. Bouncing down the stairs, she was hopeful that a lengthy walk would clear her head. But before exiting the building, she encountered a new maintenance worker. “Where is Midge?”

The beautiful redheaded lady with long flowing locks looked away from her task. Her sapphire eyes twinkled with pleasure. “Midge is spending the holiday with her son and grandchildren, but she will be back on Monday.”

“Oh,” Madisen’s attention fell on the name *Faith* printed on the redheaded lady’s name tag. Her name was like a message from Michelle to not despair, that all things right would prevail in the end.

“Are you going for a walk?” Faith’s inquiry broke Madisen’s train of thought.

“Yes,” she shook her head as if to clear her mind of a daydream.

“The south part of town is a beautiful place for a stroll and maybe you will find the answers that you seek.”

“What answers am I looking for?” Madisen’s senses were jolted to full alert.

“In time, you will know. Then, your troubled mind, heavy with thought, will be at peace.”

Madisen forced a faint smile. Her cheeks rosy with embarrassment that this total stranger had read her like an open book. Quickly, she exited the building, but before the door slowly swung shut, she heard, “Have a nice walk, Madisen.”

“How did she know my name?” Promptly, Madisen turned on her heels and reentered the vacant corridor. “Faith,” she said in a normal tone as she looked around the box- like- area. No answer. She opened the door to the janitor’s closet but it too was vacant. The soles of her tennis shoes squeaked against the shiny tile floor as she approached the stairwell to peer up three flights. “Faith,” she hollered and waited for a reply that never came. Puzzled by how quickly she had vanished, Madisen continued with her walk in a southern direction. She had heard other students talk about the splendor of the homes around the lake and along Lake View Road, so she had already planned to go that direction. However, following her conversation with Faith, an air of mystery had been added to her journey as to what she might find and how it could help her deal with her current situation?

CHAPTER 5

Jan Rainblot stepped from the back door of the old Rainblot mansion. She could feel the air from her lung expel past her lips but not a sound came forth as she nervously watched her eldest son, Jeremy, teetering at the top of a step ladder, patiently working with his twelve foot long pole to position the end of a string of clear lights on his favorite maple tree. The pole arched and quivered from the weight of the heavy duty light string as he guided the end to an upper most branch. The first attempt failed and the short string swung free of the branches and the pole, but Jeremy quickly regained control. He used the string's momentum to place it where he desired. As he climbed down the stepladder, pleased with his accomplishment, the tension drained from Jan's body and air refilled her lungs as she hollered across the large backyard. "Jeremy!" The slender young man with jet black curly hair turned. His expression radiated with pleasure as Jan continued, "I'm going into town. Do you need anything?"

"No. Not that I know of. What do you think of my favorite maple?"

"It's beautiful." She shouted and then softly added. "It's a work of art." Her eyes traced the multiple strings of clear lights up the trunk and around the diameter of the large tree. Each string equally spaced to form the shape of a fine crystal goblet on a stem.

Usually, Jeremy had all of the outside trees trimmed and ready to turn on by Thanksgiving night. But this year, illness had slowed the twenty-six year old down and now with the unseasonably warm weather, he was determined to make up for lost time. As he began on the old, unusually large red bud tree with multicolored lights, Jan left him to his work. The lower strings went on quickly, but now he must run an extension cord

up the tree to add more lights or he would risk blowing fuses. A fact, he learned on the coldest night in December. He whistled a Christmas carol on his way to the large colonial style home, which was built in the 1800's by his great great grandfather Rainblot, who was a skilled craftsman. His talents were displayed all through the sprawling home but the finest example was displayed in the foyer. The sweeping curve of the staircase had a hand carved banister with an elegantly carved swan poised atop of each hand rail. Their necks were gracefully curved. Their feathers had the finest detail etched into the grain of wood to make the stationary creatures lifelike.

In the attic, Jeremy searched among the stored heirlooms for his box of extension cords. "Oh no," he stated as he recalled taking the box over to his parents new home on the corner of First and Lake View Road. As he descended the steps from the attic, he caught a glimpse of the old red bud. "I can't leave you looking like that." The home on Lake View Road was three quarters of a mile from the old home place where he spent much of his childhood. Determined to complete his job, he started walking to the new address for an extension cord. He figured that he would be back before anyone had time to miss him.

With the new home in sight, a pain struck Jeremy across the back and he ached from backbone to sternum, little beads of perspiration dotted his fair complexion and the sun felt warm against his back. He stopped to catch his breath but the air would not go down into his lungs. Stars formed before his eyes, his arms tingled with a strange fatigue, and his legs became weak. Too weak to support his weight, and he fell to the ground a short distance from his destination, unable to call for help.

CHAPTER 6

Deep in thought, Madisen pondered the conversation she had with Faith. A flock of birds flew up from a grove of oak trees, drawing with them her attention. The reason for their flight laid precariously on the grass along the street. Her pace became urgent and filled with purpose as she approached the young slender man, who was a little older than she.

“Are you okay?” She said, but he did not wake. Carefully and fearfully she touched him but still he did not respond. She felt of his wrist and failed to find a pulse. His nail beds were blue and his face was pale. With a shaking hand, she felt for a pulse in his neck. It was thready but none the less there. “You hang in there,” she told the young stranger. Afraid to leave his side, she screamed out for help and her blood curdling plea was heard by an older lady working in her yard. She walked around the corner of her house and as soon as Madisen noticed her, she hollered, “Please call an ambulance. This guy has been hurt.” Promptly, the silver headed lady did just that.

Madisen gently held her hand on his neck. With each faint pulse, she willed this handsome young stranger to open his eyes, but wishes alone did not make that happen.

The screaming siren, in the distance, took an eternity to arrive. But as soon as the masculine EMTs baled out of the ambulance, Madisen stepped back for them to work with the guy she found. In a flash, they loaded him into the ambulance and the oldest medic turned to her. “Do you want to accompany him to the ER?” Without a word or hesitation, she got in the back of the ambulance. With lights and sirens, they started for

the hospital. Numb and slightly disoriented from the current events, Madisen inquired.

“What happened to him? Was he hit by a car?”

Promptly, the medic looked away from the patient. “You’re not family?”

“No, I found him along the street. I don’t even know his name. Can you tell me what happened to him?”

“He wasn’t hit by a car.” The medic picked up the two-way radio, “Shirley, we are in route with Jeremy Rainblot. His BP is 100 over 60...”

Shock numbed Madisen’s senses even more as she wondered how the medic knew this young man.

The ambulance slowed to a stop and a nurse and aging doctor met them at the ER entrance. The medics briefly paused before the aging doctor. “Jeremy.” He laid a gentle hand on the young lad’s shoulder.

“Dr. Joe, he was unresponsive when we arrived on the scene. I was able to get an IV started and the meds you requested have been administered.”

“Good.” Dr. Joe examined Jeremy’s fingernails. “It appears his circulation is improving. He should come around shortly.” He listened to Jeremy’s chest with the aid of a stethoscope. “Donna, get a blood pressure on him and get an EKG. Dr. Silvers will be down shortly.”

“Right away, Dr. Joe.”

Dr. Joe’s weary eyes fell upon the young lady following the medics and before he could inquire about her identity the oldest medic volunteered, “This is the young lady who found your grandson,” before he disappeared behind a set of double doors with Jeremy.

“Well, young lady. I can not show you enough gratitude for what you have done.”

“Is he going to be okay?”

“Thanks to you, Jeremy is going to be just fine.” Joe noticed his esteemed colleague enter the ER. “If you will excuse me...” Madisen watched Joe disappear behind the ER doors. His words of gratitude provided very little reassurance that Jeremy was going to be fine. For Joe’s body language conveyed an air of earnest concern.

Madisen located an empty seat in the ER lobby and kept her focus trained on the double doors that Jeremy was wheeled through. Occasionally, she glanced at her watch as if she had somewhere to be in the near future, but the painful truth was- she had all the time in the world to sit and wait.

She sprung to her feet at the sight of Dr. Joe and met him midway across the lobby anxious to hear what he had to say about Jeremy and at the same time, she was a little reluctant. His gentle smile, eased her mind as she heard, “My grandson is going to be fine. He’s being admitted.” Madisen’s muscles relaxed as Joe continued. “I’m glad that you waited for I did not get your name.”

“Madisen Kahan.” Joe firmly shook her hand. “Would it be possible for me to see Jeremy?”

“Why of course. I’ll show you to his room.”

Madisen’s glee dissipated as they neared Jeremy’s room for he was a mere few feet away from the Cardiac Care Unit. As they entered the room, she was stunned to see the handsome, slender young man sitting up in bed. His dark eyes snapped with the excitement of life. “Grandpa Joe, who is your lovely shadow?”

“This is Madisen Kahan, the young lady who found you lying along First Street. Now,” Joe folded his arms across his chest. “Do you mind telling me what you were doing on First Street?”

“I needed an extension cord. I was trimming the old red bud with Christmas lights when I noticed that all of the cords were at Mom and Dad’s new home, so I went after one.”

“Jeremy, Jeremy.” Joe slowly turned his head side to side, “What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that I needed an extension cord and that it wasn’t that far between Mom and Dad’s and the old Rainblot home place, so I started walking. And that is the last that I remember.”

“Well, you were lucky this time young man.” Joe shook an accusing finger at Jeremy.

Donna burst into the room. “I heard that you are better and word of your presence is spreading.”

Jeremy’s eyes twinkled. “How may I be of assistance?”

“We have a tree in need of your expertise. You know Cindy. She slaps the poor thing in the stand, band-aids it with lights. Puts the garland on like a tangle of scotch tape and then she throws tinsel at it to cover all the blemishes and pronounces it done. Our tree will be the laughing stock of the whole hospital. Not even the Grinch will want to steal it.”

“Well, Donna, I need just one thing.”

“Name it.”

“A pair of scrubs; these gowns are a little airish. And let’s face it, I’m sure the employees and the fellow patients would rather see a star at the top of the tree rather than a moon in the middle when I bend over.”

“I’ll see what I can dig up.” Donna laughed.

“Donna,” Dr. Joe interrupted, “before my grandson is off to save a tree in need, I want to see his latest EKG.”

“Sure thing Dr. Joe.” He followed her from the room.

“Are you sure that it is wise to get out of bed.” Madisen questioned in the privacy of the room.

“Actually, Donna is down playing Cindy’s decorating skills; for last year, the cleaning crew thought the tree and decorations were piled in the corner to be thrown away.” His comment generated a smile from Madisen. “There it is.”

“There’s what?”

“A radiant smile, since the moment we were introduced, you’ve been very serious. I knew that I had to do something drastic to get you to smile. Truth is Cindy is good at decorating. The nurses all know that I really enjoy trimming trees.”

Madisen smiled as she looked down at the floor, a few moments earlier she would not have believed that she would be talking to such a vibrant young man. “Well, it’s not everyday that I find a guy lying near the street.”

“Hmm,” Jeremy nodded, deep in thought and then repeated. “You found me?”

“Yes.”

“That’s funny how you see it because you are the one that I’ve been looking for; therefore, I was the one who found you.”

What! Madisen screamed in her mind and her wide eyed expression spoke of her thoughts but the words got lost in Donna's reentry with a pair of scrubs. "You've been cleared to roam the halls and trim the trees."

"Trees?" Jeremy pulled off the stickers from his chest from beneath his gown. As Madisen made her exit, she noticed the hideous vertical scar down Jeremy's chest as he eagerly threw the gown to the floor. Outside the door she almost ran into Dr. Joe and she hit him with the burning question ignited by the scar. "What's wrong with Jeremy? Why was he laying along the side of the street?"

Joe's gray eyes became weary and a sigh preceded his explanation. "Jeremy has a heart condition. His heart has enlarged and it doesn't always pump the blood properly, and when a stress is added to his heart, like the walk he took today, his heart can't take it and starts to beat abnormally. We were fortunate this time that medication regulated his heart because there have been a few times that we have had to shock his heart to get a regular or close to regular beat." Madisen's eyes fell on the red crash cart across the hall as Joe concluded. "His heart won't take much more treatment like that."

"Why?"

"He's had several open heart surgeries over the years to replace valves and buy more precious time. Jeremy is at the top of the list to receive a new heart."

"A heart transplant is his only cure?" Tears welled up in her eyes.

"I'm afraid so."

Madisen felt a cold hand on her shoulder and she turned to see Jeremy, beaming with a smile. "Ready to trim some trees? Donna told me the tree in the main lobby needed to be put up."

“What about the tree on this floor?” They passed a six- and- a- half foot artificial tree on their way to the elevator. Its misshapen form cried for attention, but Jeremy walked past it. “We will do it later. The tree in the main lobby is awesome.” His face beamed with joy and dressed in a pair of light green scrubs, he appeared to be an employee rather than a patient. A white t-shirt beneath the V-necked scrub top concealed the scar.

In the open space of the main lobby, Jeremy sat to work assembling the nine foot artificial tree in the custom made revolving tree stand. Madisen’s help was minimal as he put each section together. Standing on a step ladder, Jeremy chuckled as he placed the tree top on the lower section. “I’ll never forget the first time that I put this tree together.” He began his story as he climbed down the ladder. “I thought the company had done a pretty poor job on the way the tree top affixed to the rest of the tree. That is until I went to shaping the tree. That is when I found my mistake. The lower portion of the tree shaped up beautifully, but that top! No matter how I tried to shape those branches, it still looked like a cyclone hit it. Out of frustration, I plucked the top part off of the tree and pulled out the directions. The diagram showed the longest branches being pulled downward, which made no sense. I mean, why would a prominent Christmas tree manufacturer put the longest branches at the top of the tree?” Jeremy stopped shaping the lower portion to conclude his story. “Well, let me tell you they wouldn’t put the longest branches at the top. I had put the very top section of the tree on upside down. When I turned it the correct way; Wow, what a difference.”

Madisen smiled at his story and stepped back to look at the monstrous tree. She watched Jeremy shape each branch and embarrassment flushed her complexion, for she

could tell the branches she had shaped from those he had shaped. As he approached the section of the tree she had been working on, he quickly reformed some of the branches and moved on. She stood in amazement and watched as the artificial tree came to life in his skilled hands. When he finished shaping the tree, one would have thought it to be a live specimen.

“What are you looking for?” Madisen inquired as Jeremy ravaged each box.

“Christmas lights,” he opened the last box. “Here they are.” He removed a string of multi colored lights and sat to work weaving them through the branches. String after string that he added transforms the tree into a dimensional milky way of color from the trunk outward.

Again Jeremy returned to the numerous boxes. “Here is the garland.” Madisen pulled out a large puffy rope of intertwined red and silver; but he ignored her. His smile broadened as he found a string of clear lights, which he immediately folded in half and then did it again. “What are you doing?” Madisen watched as he twisted them together.

“Watch and you shall see.” Jeremy took the rope of clear lights and drizzled them in a spiral over the quilt of multicolored lights to give the tree a new dimension. Madisen stood in awe as he placed the elegant angel on top. Her golden horn was pointed heavenward.

Donna rounded the corner to the lobby and her stride became reluctant. Her focus landed on the tree that had become Jeremy’s latest masterpiece and bathed in its splendor was the artist himself, examining each strand of lights as the tree revolved. “I hate to interrupt.” Donna’s voice broke the magic of the moment and as she stood next to Jeremy. Bathed in the Christmas lights, her crisp white uniform all but glowed, as she

continued. "It's about time to switch shifts and you know how Sue can be. She will expect to see you in bed and not decorating the tree in the main lobby." To Madisen's surprise Jeremy quietly surrendered and retreated to his room with Donna, but Madisen chose to linger in the lobby a moment longer to drink in all the beauty. A middle aged lady, Glenetta, selected an ornament from a box and started to place it on the tree but soon stopped as she became caught up in its simple beauty. "No ornaments are going to be added by me, for the lights hang as their own ornaments."

"I agree. Adding anything else would take away from its splendor."

Madisen stepped in the doorway of Jeremy's room and her mouth dropped open, for she expected to see him lying in bed. But once again he was shaping a Christmas tree. She retraced her steps to the waiting room and sure enough the slim six- and- a- half foot tree was gone. She returned to his room and began to open boxes. "I figured Sue would have you strapped to the bed." She moved the lights closer to Jeremy.

"Well, I am tethered to the wall." He revealed the electrical cord that connected to the small rectangular box he wore in a sling. "I also got read the riot act when she discovered I had removed the EKG stickers. She had to put them back on. I thought that I would be home before nightfall."

Madisen froze, "When I found you, I thought." She stopped and her eyes met his. "I could barely find a pulse."

Jeremy took her trembling hand into his ice cold hands and pressed her warm hand against his chest. "My heart beats for a reason. I have been sent to help you see your way through a difficult time."

Madisen's eyes widened with wonder, confusion and fear that somehow Jeremy could look upon her soul and see the truth; the truth that shattered her heart and drove her from home. She tore away from him, unwilling to speak and dashed from his room. But as she hastily left the hospital, his words echoed in her mind. "...You are the one that I've been looking for...and I found you." Her pace quickened across the parking lot. "... I have been sent to help you." Warm tears streamed down her face as she broke into an all out run. Secure within the confines of her apartment she crumbled to the floor and all the emotion that she had suppressed brewed to the surface.

CHAPTER 7

Madisen stepped off the elevator and as she passed the waiting room something caught her attention. The six- and- a- half- foot Christmas tree was clad with clear lights intermingled among the branches with strings of red laced throughout. An angel clad in red and trimmed in gold resided at the top. Red velvet bows were scattered around the circumference along with candy canes. Madisen sat down in a wooden rocking chair to examine the Christmas scene.

Someone got creative with construction paper and fixed a fireplace. The paper flames added to the coziness of the room lit primarily by the tree lights. A green puffy string of garland along the mantle provided the illusion of depth.

“Are you here to see Jeremy?” Donna’s voice caused Madisen to pop out of her chair.

“Yes. I am.”

“I thought so. I just thought that I would let you know that he has all ready gone home.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you.” Madisen looked around the base of the chair to make sure that she had everything.

“Do you know where he lives?”

“The pale yellow house along First Street?”

“No, that is where his parents, Jan and Gary, live. If you still want to see Jeremy, you will have to go to the old Rainblot home place.”

“What street is it located on?”

“Fifteen hundred Oak Drive. It is a big white colonial style home. You will know it when you see it.”

Walking side by side with Donna down the hall, Madisen stated. “I’m surprised the doctor dismissed him so soon.”

“I’m afraid that we can’t do anything more for him. Jeremy is primarily in God’s hands.”

“Dr. Joe told me that Jeremy is on the heart donor list.”

“Yes,” Donna’s pleasant expression turned somber. “Jeremy is a good guy. We all love him to death. However, with terminally ill patients, all we can do is stabilize them and send them back home. But Jeremy is one of the lucky ones. He’s in no pain. Even though he can be a pain to take care of sometimes.” Donna smiled. “I know that he had to quit his job and it does take him longer to do the things he enjoys, because he wears out quicker, but by far he is fortunate.”

“After watching him last night, you wouldn’t know that anything is wrong.”

Donna agreed. “The second we were on the elevator, he began bargaining with me to decorate the tree in our lobby. Well, I wasn’t going to have any of that, but as I tucked him into bed, his words melted my heart. He said, ‘Please Donna, this will be my last Christmas.’ I tried to ignore that plea because I know he is real good at talking his way into and out of just about anything. But when I sat down at the desk, I looked at his EKG strips and I had a change of heart. I took the tree and decorations into his room as a compromise.”

“Thanks Donna.” Madisen waved farewell as Donna disappeared behind the break room door. The words of their conversation tugged at her heart, especially the words of this being his last Christmas. Jeremy just couldn’t give up hope that easily.

CHAPTER 8

From the street, Madisen could see the home Donna was talking about. It sat back a good distance from the street, nestled behind three mature maple trees. She walked down the winding lane to the sprawling front porch to ring the doorbell. Its rich tones echoed through the house.

“Well, I didn’t know if I would see you again after yesterday.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Would you like to come in?”

Madisen stepped into the foyer, and immediately the staircase commanded her attention. She rubbed her fingers over one of the carved mahogany swans poised atop of the banister. “They are beautiful.” Her eyes traced the arch of their necks.

“Thank you. The Rainblot family is filled with several generations of craftsmen. This house was built in the late 1800’s by my great, great grandfather. He was the one who hand carved the banister and swans.” As he told the story, his gaze did not leave Madisen, as if debating on whether or not to bring up the events of yesterday. Finally, he inquired. “How may I help you?”

Madisen looked past him, ignoring his question and moved into the spacious, lavish living room furnished mostly with antiques and some modern conveniences. Over the fireplace hung a portrait, she quickly picked out Jeremy from among his two brothers and five sisters. “Is this your parents, seated on the antique loveseat?”

“Yes, that is Jan and Gary.” Then he pointed out the eldest of the family, a young lady with flowing jet black hair parted down the middle. Her piercing blue eyes demanded attention. “This is Janette.”

Madisen’s attention would not be held on the subject of family as she turned away from the portrait. “You’re trimming another tree?” Her gaze scaled the seven foot slim artificial tree revolving on its stand. The multicolored lights peaked through the thicket of branches and the garland of silver and beads of gold which spiral around the tree. But the angel at the top gave Madisen chills.

“You are in time to help me finish decorating it.” Jeremy handed her an antique ball ornament. She placed it midway on the tree as she tried to shake the feeling of familiarity with the angel. But as she looked upon the face of this radiant being the words effortlessly spilled from her lips. “I can’t believe how much your angel looks like the substitute cleaning lady of our apartment complex.”

Jeremy halted handing her ornaments, “You’ve met Faith?”

Stunned, she nodded her reply as Jeremy rose to his feet.

“Then, you really do have a problem that you need my help to work through. Question is? When are you going to tell me about what is bothering you?”

Nervous, Madisen bent down and plucked a blue satin finished ornament from the tissue paper packing. “What makes you so certain that I have a problem?” She avoided eye contact with Jeremy for fear he might see to the soul of the matter that she wished not to revisit.

“I know that you have a problem because you saw Faith.” Gently, he drew Madisen around to him. “Faith only comes to those in their hour of greatest need.”

“Then, you have seen her too.” Madisen brushed away a tear.

“No, I have not seen her.”

“But you are dying.” Madisen blurted out. “I would think that you would need her more than I.” Quickly, she covered her mouth for she realized how harsh her words must have sounded.

“You are right. I am dying and it’s okay to say it. You didn’t reveal a big secret. I’ve known for sometime that my life, as I know it, is going to be cut short. It’s because of this fact that I’ve made peace with my loved ones and with God. And by doing so, I have found inner peace. I guess that is why I’ve never met Faith.”

Longing for the peace that Jeremy spoke of, Madisen fell into his embrace and the tears would not be held back a moment longer. In a hushed voice, he concluded. “I’m lucky that I know my journey is coming to an end. But like you, I know not the hour or minute that I will see God. Some people need a little help to see their way through a problem. That’s when Faith intervenes. If you can’t tell me your problem, then tell God in secret. He will reveal to you what to do next.”

“I think he already has.” Madisen whispered, clinging to Jeremy and relying on the strength of his faith. For she truly began to understand what Jeremy meant by him finding her instead of the other way around. As she regained her composure, she looked deep into his warm eyes, which gave her encouragement, but the words of her father’s betrayal would not come. And once again, she slipped away, running away but not from him, but from the truth. A truth that she wished that she did not know.

CHAPTER 9

Madisen unlocked the door to her apartment and found Michelle waiting with open arms. The sisters embraced. "I'm so glad that you came back early." Madisen beamed through her tears.

"I needed to come back early because we need to talk about Dad's past." Michelle watched Madisen's smile wither away as she wilted down on the sofa. "I know the news about Dad's past hit you the hardest. However, I've come to realize that whatever mistakes he and Mom made are only a small part of their past. They've learned from their mistakes and we should learn by their example."

"What do you mean; Mom's mistakes? What shocking news did she have about her past?"

"I don't know what mistakes Mom made. All I do know is what she said at our grandparents' house. She begged us not to make the same mistake that she did. She wanted us to hear our father out."

"So what did he have to say?"

"I don't know his story. I told him to wait until we are both home. There is more to the story than what you were told. Plus, Mom has kept something from us as well. But what I have come to realize, is the past really doesn't matter. I've forgiven Dad and Mom for keeping us in the dark. And you will too, in your own time and in your own way. However, it may take the light of truth for you to let forgiveness enter your heart."

"No!" Madisen moved away from Michelle and faced the window.

“Come on Madisen, you know in your heart, that in time you will forgive Dad and then we will hear his story.”

“I don’t think that I can forgive. I don’t think that his version of the truth will smooth things over.”

“I know that it will, because you and Dad are close.”

“Close,” Madisen whirled around. “If we were so close then why didn’t he confide in me?”

“He was ashamed. He knew the truth would only cause pain. He was trying to protect us.”

“He failed.” Madisen started to storm out of the room but Michelle stopped her.

“Come on, let’s go home and talk to Mom and Dad. We need to hear them out.”

“Not now.”

“Okay, not today, but tomorrow.”

“I’m not going home.” Madisen stepped around her sister and proceeded to her bedroom with Michelle’s voice chasing her.

“Please, let’s resolve this matter before Christmas.”

“I’m not going home for Christmas.”

The slamming bedroom door pierced Michelle’s heart. At a loss for what to try next, she dialed the phone. But at the sound of Aunt Millie’s voice a wave of tears streamed down her cheeks. “Oh Aunt Millie, what am I going to do. Things are worse than I thought. I was so certain that Madisen would be ready to come home with me tonight or at least tomorrow. But she informed me that she isn’t coming home for Christmas.”

“Well, now. The first thing that you are going to do, deary, is lift that chin and dry those eyes. I know that when you look in the mirror you see a strong resemblance to your sister. But lovey, that’s where the similarities end. You are both different individuals, and it is going to take Madisen longer to come to terms with the truth that was forced upon her.”

“But she says that she won’t be home for Christmas.”

“Horse pucky! There is a lot of time between here and then. She will change her mind.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“Two reasons: First, the truth is something that everyone needs to hear, and with time Madisen will want to hear the whole story with you.”

Following a brief pause, Michelle inquired, “What is reason number two?”

“Oh yes, the second reason far exceeds the first, for Christmas is not only the season for miracles, but it is the most precious time for forgiveness and peace.”

The days turned into weeks and Madisen remained steadfast on her decision. Michelle abandoned all hope of a family Christmas and took down the artificial Christmas tree in their apartment. Since Thanksgiving, nothing had been the same. Thanks to their grandmother’s cruelty. As she carefully packed the ornaments away, she realized that it would be better to forewarn their parents of Madisen’s decision than to arrive alone and see the excitement of hope vanish at the sight of only her. With each ring of the phone, Michelle prayed that her mother would answer. The news would be easier to tell Mom. Michelle tried to convince herself. However, Doug answered.

“Hi Dad.”

“Hi Michelle. Are you girls done with exams?”

“Yes,” she glanced over at the door, where her luggage sat. “I was just calling to let you know that I’m headed home.”

“Good! We will be looking forward to seeing you girls. Is Madisen riding with you?”

“No. She’s....”

“She’s going to get a later start.”

Tears formed in Michelle’s eyes. It was getting harder to tell him the truth.

“Dad, Madisen isn’t coming home for Christmas. I’m sorry. I tried to change her mind, but I failed.”

Doug’s heart sank at the news, for he was afraid that Madisen might not be able to ever forgive him, and his heart crumbled at the sound of Michelle’s sorrow. “Honey, it is okay. I know that you tried and I love you. But there is one thing that I want you to do.”

“What’s that?”

“Pull yourself together and have a safe journey home. Your mom and I will be waiting. We love you, Michelle.”

“I love you too, Dad. So does Madisen. She misses you. I know she does. She’s just too stubborn.”

“She will find her way. Have faith.” Doug said in an attempt to convince himself as well as Michelle.

CHAPTER 10

Aimlessly, Madisen wondered around the deserted campus following her last exam. Her heart was filled with a sadness that would not go away, and her mind weighed heavy with questions that she was fearful to find the answers to. Aching for a friend, she found herself at the front door of the old Rainblot home place. After the third time of pressing the doorbell, she abandoned the front porch for the backyard. “There you are.” She called out to Jeremy, who was stringing multicolored lights on the old redbud with his long pole.

Jeremy remained silent and focused on his task as he laid the last string in place. “Ah, finally finished.” He moved back by Madisen to admire his work. “I was wondering if you would come by today?”

“I have a question for you.” Madisen paused then rephrased, “Well, it is more like a favor.”

“Ask away.”

“May I spend Christmas with you?”

“What! Christmas is a time to spend with family, not away from them. I’m spending the day with my family, and I can’t remember a time of not wanting to be home for Christmas.”

“So may I tag along?”

“No! I’m not going to give you an excuse or an easy way out for avoiding your problem. I know that a loved one ripped your heart open wide and it hurts.”

Anger flashed in Madisen's eyes. "What do you know about hurt? What do you even know about love, for I've never seen a girlfriend around here or anyone else as far as that goes? You're just good at doling out advice and meddling in other people's lives, but you know nothing of their pain."

"That's where you are wrong. My pain has not been just physical. I was diagnosed with this deadly heart disease when I was ten. Surgery after surgery and a whole pharmacy of pills, I found a time in my life that I felt normal. I've known love and for a while I dreamed of a future with her. I even allowed myself to dream of children. I told her that if we had a baby girl near Christmas, the perfect name would be Noel. But then the pills stopped working and that future vanished. I've run the full gamut of emotions, and anger took too much energy. So I let the anger go. We all have our own pain, and we all deal with difficult times in our own way and in our own time.

"You wear your heart on your sleeve, so when it is broken, that wall of vulnerability is revealed, and it takes longer to heal."

Madisen wanted to slip away from Jeremy, but his grasp on her forearms was too strong, so she crumbled in his arms, crying tears that she thought she had already cried. "I'm sorry, Jeremy. I'm sorry." She sobbed as he held her tighter. "I had no right to say what I did. Please forgive me."

"You are forgiven." As Madisen's sobbing subsided, he released his hold. "I owe you an apology as well. I've been pushing you far too hard to talk about a problem that you are not ready to deal with, so I hope that you can forgive me as well?"

Madisen nodded a yes because she was still too choked up to speak.

“Thank you, Madisen. Sometimes knowing that other people forgive you of your past mistakes makes it easier for you to forgive yourself. But for some, forgiving themselves for past mistakes is impossible. I think that is why some people choose to make part of their past a secret. In cases like that, all we can do is reassure them that we love them no matter what.”

Chills formed from the core of Madisen’s soul outward, for it was as if Jeremy somehow knew about she and her father. Seeing her shiver, Jeremy removed his coat and draped it around her. “I’m sorry. I’m freezing you to death. We can step inside my workshop. It is heated and you can warm up.” She walked by his side toward the fair-sized building painted white with a cupola and black weather vane on top.

“You mentioned a girlfriend; where is she?”

“I hope that she has moved on with her life.”

“Moved on!” Madisen abruptly stopped as Jeremy took a couple more steps before turning to face her. “How could she leave you when you need her the most?”

“She didn’t leave me. I left her. Some things are out of our control.”

His answer dumbfounded her, and she was on the verge of questioning him further until her attention was distracted by an unusual structure inside his workshop. The heat in the open room structure felt inviting, and she laid his coat on a nearby wrought iron chair. He watched her walk around the circumference of the structure, examining it from top to bottom.

Her eyes traced the metal foundation that was rounded at the sides but flat on top and beneath. Then, every few inches her eyes scaled a milky white round tube of about two inches in diameter to its highest point. Some of the tubes were knee high, while

others ranged from waist high to way over her head. She rubbed her fingers over the smooth surface of one tube. “What is this?”

“It’s a Christmas gift for my sister, Janette.”

“What does it do?”

“You will have to come back after Christmas and see for yourself, because I want Janette to be the first to see it.”

Madisen stepped between a set of tubes to the next row. She repeated this journey two more times until she was standing in the center of several rings of tubes. “What goes in this large open space?” Madisen peered through the narrow opening left by the tubes that were off set from one another. When no response came, she declared, “You mean that I’m going to have to wait and find out?”

“Yep!” Jeremy grinned, “and if I don’t get busy, it won’t be finished in time.”

“What do you have left to do?”

“Finish the final ring.”

Madisen meandered out from the four rings of tubes and watched Jeremy work. “Where are your brother and sisters?”

“They are scattered like the autumn leaves, here and there and wherever the wind takes them. But at Christmas time, everyone is home.”

Her attention was once again lured outside when the shop windows went from dusk to dark to all of a sudden light. She moved over to the window and gazed at the spectacle of Christmas lights painstakingly strewn on every tree dotting the huge yard. Every flowerbed had its own scene except the round bed closest to the back of the house.

“I know where the Christmas gift will sit.” She looked over at Jeremy, standing by her side.

“Yes, the lone dark spot reveals all. Would you like a guided tour?”

Madisen locked her arm in the bend of his and the two were off.

From front to back, the miniature Christmas lights crowded out the dark. “I don’t think that I have ever seen so many lights in one place.”

Her statement brought amusement to Jeremy as he recited the house rules while the Christmas lights were on. “There will be no using the washer or dryer. There will be no using the blow dryer in the bathroom, or pop goes a house fuse.”

“Personal experience is a good teacher.”

“Oh yes,” Mom ask me one day, “When are you going to concede that we have too many Christmas lights?”

“I told her, that when I flush the toilet and blow a fuse, then I will agree that I have too many Christmas lights.”

Madisen laughed at his response, but her eyes remained on the artistry before her. “You put up all of these lights?”

“Yes, all I have left is time.”

A somberness fell over Madisen as they weaved their way over the trail to look at all of the lights. The evening air seeped through her clothing causing her to chill. Jeremy pulled her closer to him. “Let’s go inside. I’ll brew up some hot chocolate.”

“That sounds nice.” Madisen abandoned Jeremy to his task as she entered the living room. It was lit by Christmas tree lights and a crackling fire. She sat down near

the fireplace, and the heat warmed her as she watched the Christmas tree revolve. The antique ornaments glistened and reflected the glow from the miniature lights.

Jeremy handed her a cup of hot cocoa and sat down next to her. The soft melody of *Carol of the Bells* whisked through the room adding a sense of magic to the lighting.

“Jeremy, what is your parent’s occupation?”

“Dad’s the manager of the local radio station and mom is a DJ. They’ve worked together for years and growing up in this house was special. Music was always playing. It really is true that music can bring back memories, because I can turn on the radio or put on some music and I can hear everyone’s voice. It feels like they are here even when it is just me.”

The memories that Madisen carried were those she sought to run from. And when that failed, she wished to suppress them. However, now she found herself ready to talk. “Did your father ever betray you?” She could not look at Jeremy, nor did she wait for a verbal response. “Mine did.” She took a cautious sip of the hot cocoa before continuing. “This Thanksgiving revealed a secret about my Dad’s past that I wish that I did not know. He is an ex-con. He served time for stealing cars.”

“Did all of that happen before or after he met your mom?”

“I don’t know. I had heard more than I wanted to hear so I left.”

“What did your Dad say about the revealed secret?”

“He didn’t deny it.”

“And that is what you wanted him to do?”

“I guess so. My dad isn’t a bad man.”

“I didn’t say that he is, because good people make mistakes, too. I just think that you need to hear his side of the story.”

“But I’ve already told them....”

“I know.” Jeremy finished her sentence. “You’ve already told them that you will not be home for Christmas.”

“Sort of, I told Michelle that I wasn’t going home, and she told Mom and Dad.”

“Do you love your dad?”

“Yes, but I can’t face him. I know that my actions and words hurt him.”

“But your words and actions can also help heal. I’ve always heard that this is the season for forgiveness. However, the truth and forgiveness are always available 365 days a year plus leap year. So reach out and seize it in your father’s loving embrace, for it is forgiveness that he seeks most for Christmas, because he feels like he has let you down.”

“You speak as if you know my father, Doug Kahan.”

“No. I never met Doug but he is walking in my father’s shoes of guilt. My dad, Gary, blamed himself for my heart problem. At first, I thought he blamed himself because of genetics. But a few months ago, I overheard Dad talking to Uncle Joe. This genetic disease that inflames the heart started when I was nine. At that time, we lived in Cincinnati. Mom and Dad took me to see a heart specialist, because I was exhibiting symptoms they had seen in my cousin, Aaron, who had the disease. But the specialist assured Mom and Dad that I had a respiratory infection. That explained the shortness of breath and the dry cough. My parents were so relieved that they didn’t pursue it any further.

“We came home for Christmas; Dad decided to have Uncle Joe check me out. Those test results yielded a different scenario, for it didn’t look like I would live to be this age. I was immediately admitted to the hospital, my family moved here, and the rest is history.”

“You mean that if it would have been caught sooner then you wouldn’t be waiting on a heart now?”

“Possibly, things might have been different. My dad knew what to look for, but that doctor told him what he wanted to hear verses what he needed to hear. That’s why it is so important for you to go home. You need to hear your dad’s side of the story.”

Madisen sat her empty cup down next to her feet and embraced Jeremy. “Thank you.” She whispered in his ear, feeling as though a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

“Where are you going?” Jeremy inquired as she took off.

“Home. I have to pack. Christmas is just three days away.” She stopped in the doorway of the living room. “What happened to your cousin, Aaron, who also had this awful heart disease?”

“He received a new heart.”

“Well Jeremy Rainblot, this is also the season for miracles, and I believe that you will get your new heart.”

“The miracle is yours to receive, for I neither wish for, nor pray for, a new heart because by doing so it would mean that someone would have to die, so I could live. My life is no more valuable than the next person’s, so I leave my fate to God’s will. I truly have peace in that.”

He embraced his new friend as she had found her way out of the darkness of her own torment and anguish. As she walked down the lighted driveway, Jeremy knew that he had completed his mission of reuniting Father and daughter. He could do no more. The rest was up to them.

CHAPTER 11

Madisen returned to an empty, dark apartment. At first, she packed some garments neatly into her suitcase and then she began throwing them in. Satisfied that she had all that she needed, she closed the lid and looked around the room. If she had forgotten something, maybe she could barrow it from Michelle, for burning bright inside of her was the desire to get home.

The miles seemed to fly as the little Triumph closed the distance between she and home. As she pulled into the lane, she was surprised to see a warm glow filtering through the sheer curtains of the living room.

Headlights caught Doug's attention, and he laid his book down on an end table to see who drove in. He could barely believe his eyes as he peered through the sheer curtains out into the night at the little car parked next to theirs. He parted the curtains for a better view, but his eyes were not playing tricks on him, and he rushed to the door to greet Madisen.

He wished to hug her tight but refrained. "Let me take your suitcase," he offered. She dropped it at her feet and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I'm sorry that it took me this long to return home," Madisen whispered in his ear as he squeezed her tighter. Warm tears flowed down his cheeks as he heard her conclude, "Can you ever forgive me?"

"In a heartbeat," he answered as he loosened his hold. "If you don't mind me asking, what made you change your mind about coming home?"

“It wasn’t a what. It was a who. A new friend of mine made me see things in a whole new light.” Madisen yawned as the grandfather clock tolled the wee hours of the morning. “Can we continue this discussion in the morning, when Michelle is up? She has waited to hear your story. Now, I will wait for her.”

“Fair enough,” Doug concluded.

As he slid beneath the covers with Ann, he was glad to have his girls home.

Doug woke with the sunrise fearful that last night had been a wonderful dream. He threw back the covers and walked the short distance down the hall to Madisen’s childhood bedroom. He peered in, relieved to see her sleeping.

In the kitchen, he fixed a pot of coffee and as he sipped at the fresh beverage, the caffeine awakened a whole new set of fears. How will he tell his daughters about his past crimes?

As the minutes ticked away, the aroma of coffee beckoned everyone to the kitchen. With Ann by his side to share in the story and their two daughters seated across the counter from them, Doug began at the only place that he could, the beginning.

“It wasn’t any secret that I grew up poor, but back then I didn’t really understand the financial strain that my parents had by raising my younger brother and myself. Mom worked for the Chevy plant and Dad was a dyed in the wool Ford employee. I had seen the sticker prices on the autos that rolled off of their assembly lines so I just didn’t see how they didn’t have money to spend on foolish things like a comic book.

Sammy Jones sat in front of me in the second grade. His dad was a banker and we frequently bickered back and forth as to whose dad was the best, a Ford assembly line worker or a banker? Sammy had a bedroom all to himself. I had to share a room with my brother, Dylan, who was two years younger than me. Sammy lived in a nice house in a lavish neighborhood. We lived in a small two bedroom apartment. Sammy's clothes were new. Mine were from a second hand store. None of that bothered me because Mom said that our good clothes were for church and the location of our residence was close to the factories where they worked. That helped save money, since they both walked to work rather than spending money on transportation.

But the one and only thing that bothered me was that Sammy always had the latest edition of the Superman Comic Book. So one evening after school, I walked over to Timmons Dime Store. At the magazine rack, I selected the newest Superman Comic Book. I quickly leafed through the pages and then with no one watching, I stuffed it inside my jacket and walked out of the store without the owner, Mr. Timmons, being suspicious. All the way home, I dreamed of the next day at school. At how I would flaunt the comic to Sammy; and how I would tell him that my dad bought it for me.

But by the time I got home, I did not shed my jacket until I was alone in the bedroom. Then, I hid it beneath my pillow. The next morning, as I sat on the edge of my twin bed, dressed for school, my best laid plan all of a sudden didn't seem so great. I held that comic book with both hands and stared at the pristine cover. I heard Mom call me from the other room and in a panic, I stuffed the comic beneath my pillow once more.

All day, Sammy tried to pick a row with me, but I remained quiet as if enduring an unknown punishment. But by the time I was home again, I was all consumed with guilt. I retrieved the comic book and showed Mom. “Where did you get this?”

“Timmons Dime Store,” as I hung my head, I finished what I had to say. “I took it.” For a moment there was silence, then, Mom said, “Doug, look at me.” It was hard to lift my head and see the disappointment in her eyes, but I did just as she told me. “Why did you take it?”

“Sammy Jones always has the newest Superman Comic Book and I wanted to have something before he did.”

“I see.” Charlotte Kahan leafed through the pages. “It looks to me like this book talks about honesty and doing the right thing. Is that why you are showing it to me now and confessing?”

“No! I didn’t read a word.” The thrill of just possessing it had been replaced with a burning hole of guilt that I could no longer take.

“Do you see that what you did is wrong?”

“Yes, and I won’t do it again.” The conjunction was added quickly in hopes that this guilty feeling would be my only punishment.

“I’m glad to hear that, Doug, but,” My heart sunk with that conjunction. “We are going to return the comic book, and you are going to tell Mr. Timmons what you did. Then, he will decide your punishment, and we will have to live with it.”

That was the longest walk to the dime store, ever. And facing Mr. Timmons with the truth, well, I didn’t think that I would get the words out after Mom handed him the comic book. “Doug has something to tell you.” She placed her hand at my back, and I

took a step forward. After carefully choosing my words, I told him what I did. “Mr. Timmons, I took that comic book from your store without paying for it.”

He deeply sighed, “Douglas Kahan,” his voice was soft and gentle. “I’m disappointed in you.” I hung my head in shame because my parents were frequent customers. “Now, I have one question for you. How did this crime come to light?”

Mom came to my rescue since his question puzzled me. “Doug brought the comic book to me and told me what he had done. I told him that you would decide his punishment.”

“I see.” He rubbed his chin. “Since you were not caught red handed with the incriminating evidence, but chose to be honest and bring your actions of wrong -doing to your mother and myself, I will not call the police.” Mr. Timmons watched me squirm, my eyes wide with fright as I awaited my fate. “No, I think jail would be too harsh of punishment for the crime committed. However, I could use some help around the store cleaning up. I think that one month should be adequate.”

I eagerly agreed to that one month because it sounded like a bargain compared to the police and jail.

On the walk home, I began to dread telling Dad what I had done and I asked Mom, “Do I have to tell Dad about the comic book?”

She placed her arm around my shoulders and drew me close to her side as we walked. “No, I don’t think that we need to trouble your father about a matter that you and I have solved.”

However, Dad found out. He stopped in at Timmons Dime Store for a pack of cigarettes and Mr. Timmons waited on him. “It took a lot of courage to do what your eldest son did,” Mr. Timmons commented as he punched in the price on the cash register.

Dad gave him a puzzled look as he handed him the cash. “What did Doug do?”

“He returned a comic book that he stole from my store. It took a lot of guts to tell me what he did.” Mr. Timmons noticed the anger flash through my father’s eyes. “I worked things out with your misses.” Mr. Timmons attempted to smooth things over. “Doug is real good help around the store. He helps me clean up, after hours. I seriously doubt that he will ever steal anything again.”

“Damn right he won’t.” Dad clutched his cigarettes in his fist as he left the store.

I was doing my homework at the kitchen table when Dad walked through the door. I could tell that he was angry. As he approached me, he undid his leather belt. “I understand that you took something from Timmons Dime Store.”

I rose from my chair, trembling. I tried to speak but fear blocked the words. I backed up against the cabinets, trapped with no where to hide. Dad seized me by the arm. His powerful grasp caused instant pain. “I work as many hours at the plant that I can get to put a roof over your head, food in your belly and clothes on your back, and this is how you repay me? You steal. Let me tell you, son, there was a lot of things that I wanted before you were born. I had a bright promising future. Do you honestly think that I wanted to work in an auto plant my entire life? But because of you, I threw my future away to provide for you, a child I never wanted, a child that robbed me of my future.” He spun me around and began beating me with his belt. My face was all ready wet with tears. And with each lash of the belt, I didn’t notice the volume of my sorrow,

for his words had hurt far worse than that belt. Mom came to my rescue, and I crumbled in her arms aching with the understanding of why Dad preferred Dylan over me. For I was the child that robbed him of his future dreams, and Dylan was the child that he would live his dreams through. He had always loved our mother and would have married her regardless. But the mistake of one night brought the wedding date to sooner rather than later.

As Doug concluded that segment of his life, he could see the tears well up in the eyes of his daughters, for they knew his childhood had been rough but they didn't realize how rough until now.

CHAPTER 12

Over a stack of pancakes smothered with triple berry sauce, Doug continued his story of the past.

“Once the month was up, Mr. Timmons offered me a Superman Comic Book. He told me that from the amount of work that I had done, I had more than earned it. However, I no longer looked at the comic book with the same fondness, so I declined.

“Well, then,” he placed the comic book on the shelf. “I don’t suppose that you would consider staying on as an employee? I will pay you fare wages for your work.”

I jumped at the offer for two reasons: money, and the chance to spend more time with Mr. Timmons. For over those weeks, I had become quite fond of him and looked up to him like a father figure. I worked with him for several years, and it wasn’t until my sophomore year that he became concerned about the company I was keeping. A new boy, Rickie Smith, had moved into our neighborhood, and he and I became instant friends. Mr. Timmons viewed Rickie as a bad seed and warned me just the same. Fearful that I was not taking heed of his warning, he told Mom about Rickie, but he never told my dad.

Mom questioned me about Rickie, but I assured her that Mr. Timmons was over reacting. Rickie was charismatic. Others might have described him as a poster boy for reckless abandonment. But one thing was for certain, he was like no other friend that I had.

One evening, after closing up shop, Rickie pulled up along the curb in this fire red, super charged Camaro with a T top. “You just gonna stand there on the sidewalk and gawk at this beauty, or are you goin’ to climb in for a spin?”

I couldn’t resist the temptation. The fine leather bucket seats molded to my body, and the tires left a black mark on the pavement as Rickie gunned the engine. For its time, it was a honey of a car. I had never ridden in something so fine. Out on the highway, it flew. “What does it have under the hood?”

“We’ll pull over up ahead and pop the hood to see what makes this beast go.” Rickie glanced in the rearview mirror. I looked over my shoulder to see the whirling lights of a squad car. He was in hot pursuit of us, and it wasn’t until then that I noticed the screwdriver jammed in the ignition.

As the Camaro floated along the surface of the two-lane highway, I prayed that it would have enough power under the hood to out run the police, because no one would believe that I didn’t know the car was stolen until now. I glanced over my shoulder again and I was relieved to see a greater distance between us and the squad car.

“Scared?” Rickie questioned with a wild mischievous smile. “I love the adrenaline rush.”

Just as I began to think that we were going to out- run the police, another squad car joined the pursuit, and he was too close for comfort. Up ahead, our way was blocked by yet another squad car. Rickie swerved onto a side road, but at the high rate of speed I felt the car start to roll. It was all over in a few seconds, but it felt like slow motion. The car came to rest on its tires. Remarkably, my only injuries were cuts sustained from

flying and falling glass. The Camaro had enough power under the hood to out run the police, but we were defeated in an escape by the number of them being far greater.

Still in a state of shock, I recalled the low voice of an officer telling me not to move. I looked over at the empty driver's seat and I thought they had already taken Rickie into custody. In the distance, I could hear more sirens converging on our location. It wasn't long until a paramedic was at my side. He immobilized my neck with a collar. "Do you hurt anywhere?"

"No."

The paramedic placed his hand around my biceps. "Do you feel me squeezing your arm?"

"Yes." I continued to stare straight ahead.

"Do you feel me now?"

"Yes. You are pressing on my leg."

"Good. I'm going to reach over you and unfasten your seatbelt. It saved your life."

I was stunned by what the medic said because I did not remember putting it on. But I did recall Rickie asking me if I was scared. That must have been when I fastened it. Thankfully, I did, because Rickie had been ejected from the car and pronounced dead at the scene.

With Rickie dead, I alone, was forced to face judgment for grand theft auto as well as a fist full of other charges. Mom and Mr. Timmons were the only ones there to give me moral support as my sentence was handed down.

Because it was my first offense on public record, the public defender advised me to take a plea, which I did. The judge sentenced me to one year in juvenile hall.

For weeks, Mom and Mr. Timmons were my only visitors, and they came as often as allowed. But all of a sudden, Mr. Timmons quit coming. I inquired about him each time that I saw Mom, but all she would say is that he had taken ill.

It wasn't until my release that I learned Mr. Timmons had a massive stroke that robbed him of his ability to speak and paralyzed one side of his body. As a result, the dime store closed and a mini mall took its place.

When I arrived at the threshold of my parent's apartment, Dad would not permit me to enter. He was not going to put a roof over a thief's head. I was on my own with only the clothes I had on my back and not a penny to my name. At a loss of where to go, I did not venture far from home. An hour later, Dylan showed up. Nervous, he reached into his denim coat pocket and withdrew a wad of bills. With extended arm, he presented it to me. "Mom and I figured that Dad might do something like this when you got out, so we started stashing away as much cash as we could. There is enough for room and board for a while." I took the one hundred dollars worth of cash and thanked my brother. He took a few steps down the street and then came back. "I've also been scouting out jobs. Tom Smith owns a garage. You are good with mechanical things and you were friends with his son. He might give you a job."

I got up from the doorstep of the store closed for the day and embraced my brother. "I am so sorry for the way Dad has treated you all of our lives. It isn't right," Dylan concluded.

“It’s okay and it isn’t your fault. I’ve made my share of mistakes, just like him, but I will be all right. Don’t worry.” Neither one of us had ever spoke of the beating I took when I stole that comic book. Dylan overheard every painful word and witnessed Dad’s anger first hand as he whipped me with the belt. Up until that night neither of us feared Dad, but from that evening on, we both did. We each went our separate ways that night, in more ways than one. Dylan graduated from high school in the top five percent of his class. He was showered with scholarships and grants. The next year, he began classes at the University of Michigan, majoring in music.

As for me, I was grateful to have a roof over my head and food to eat. I knew that my parents were poor, but they lived like Rockefellers in comparison. I did take Dylan’s advice and went to see Tom Smith about a job. He didn’t hesitate. He hired me on the spot. I was grateful for the opportunity since I didn’t have any job training skills, a high school diploma or an equivalent. It didn’t take Tom long to catch on to my abilities to fix mechanical problems. Plus, with my criminal background, he knew that I would keep my mouth shut. Therefore, he approached me with an offer that I could not refuse. At the time, I was scraping by with the minimal amount he was paying me. But this new job offered me twice the amount of pay. I couldn’t thank him enough. He jotted down the address of his second garage and told me to meet him there that evening. I didn’t even go home after work because punctuality was important to Tom, and I wanted to show him how reliable I would be. I got to the address ahead of him. I felt there had been some mistake, because I was standing in front of a set of double doors to a two story stone building.

“Punctual as always.” Tom’s voice made me jump.

“I first thought that I was in the wrong place.”

“Oh no, someone with your talent needs to be working on automobiles of fine quality. That is why I chose to promote you to this, my new endeavor.”

Once inside the open space of the warehouse, I wanted to turn and run, but it was too late. My greed had placed my hand in the Devil's, and I was led into purgatory. Forever gone was my chance to obtain a GED and a second honest paying job to supplement my income. For car after car setting around the perimeter of the building was not being serviced or fixed by the numerous workers; they were being torn apart and I just unknowingly agreed to participate in the destruction of some very nice automobiles in a chop shop.

“Let me introduce you to Hank. He will instruct you on what to do. He will also tell you when to be here and when you may leave. Now, I am going to caution you to follow his orders to a T. He is my eyes and ears around here, and I would not want to see anything happen to you, since you were the only true friend that Rickie had.”

The implication made me shiver, for I had never gotten myself in so deep.

Tom greeted his elder brother, Hank, who is average height with thinning brunet hair. He walked with a noticeable limp caused from a motorcycle accident. In his younger days, Hank had lived a life of reckless abandonment like Rickie. But on all outward public appearances, one would call him the poster boy for reform. He had turned his life around, settled down with a God- fearing woman and even became deacon in their church. But everyone in this building knew that was all an act.

“Hank, this is Doug Kahan.”

“Doug,” Hank put on his church pleasing smile to welcome him. “Rickie told me a lot about you.” The sparks from a car being slaughtered made me step closer to them. Then, the large double doors swung open, and all I wanted to do was find a good hiding place. I just knew the police would charge in at any second. But instead, a fire red corvette was carefully steered to the center of the garage to be dismantled.

“That Ron,” Hank laughed, “He’s as good at stealing cars with class as Rickie was.” This comment triggered a memory that I quickly dismissed as false at the time, but now I see things in a new light.

When I was on trial for grand theft auto, the public defender told me that the deceased, Rickie, was a career car thief, and he had the convictions to prove it. It was because of my association with Rickie that he would have an impossible job proving that I was an innocent bystander. That was the whole premises for taking the deal the prosecution offered.

Mr. Timmons’s instincts were right on. He didn’t need the file of convictions to know that Rickie was bad news. He just knew, and I should have listened. Many times I was given good advice and equally many times I chose not to heed their warnings.

CHAPTER 13

Days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months as I disassembled the finest of American made and imported cars. But the thing that amazed me the most was that it didn't matter what the showroom sticker was on the windshield, Hank and Tom reaped much more from the sale of the parts.

As the months slowly trickled by, I began to take advantage of my ill gotten profession to learn the workings of each fine auto. I paid attention to the significance of each working part on the operation of the whole, and my favorite car to work on became the Mustang.

On occasion, Tom had me working at the legitimate garage, on the cars that stymied the other mechanics. With my new -found understanding and appreciation of the craftsmanship of automakers, I soon determined that American- made was hard to beat, and their problems much easier to solve.

Almost a year to the day, my greatest fear came to light as a swat team raided the chop shop. Not a shot was fired since we easily surrendered to the firepower that invaded the illegal business. I was the youngest placed under arrest, but old enough to know that I would be going to jail, and for how long was at the mercy of the court system. To my dismay, I stood along side the public defender and announced my guilty plea to the same judge I had for grand theft auto a little over a year ago.

The aging, balding man glanced over his reading glasses at me and then back down at the paperwork to become familiar with my prior record. He looked back up at me with recognition. "Well Mr. Kahan, I see you have graduated from grand theft auto

to working in a chop shop. I'm sure that you learned a lot, and I'm equally sure that you will learn first hand that prison isn't as accommodating and nice as juvenile hall. Mr. Kahan, the first time you stood before me, I saw a fearful young man that still had promise for a bright future. You deceived me Mr. Kahan."

I wanted to crumble for I did not want to face the punishment the judge was about to dole out.

"Judge," my public defender tried to come to my defense but was cut short.

"Take it easy, Mr. Shriner. I am well aware of the circumstances surrounding your client's case. I am also well-versed in how one can be led astray and whether you truly believe that about your client or not is for you to know. But as for me, I still believe in the system, and I believe that standing before me is a broken individual that still has, in his grasp, a chance to turn his life around. He is still young and will still be young at the completion of his sentence. Now," Judge Carter rested his elbows on the bench. "Mr. Kahan, is there anything you would like to say before the court?"

I shook my head "no," for I felt anything that could be said had already been eloquently spoken by Judge Carter.

"Mr. Kahan, I am sentencing you to five years in a minimum security facility with the eligibility for parole being in two years. Mr. Kahan, make the most of this situation. Complete your GED and learn a trade that will best serve you honestly."

With the pounding of the gavel, I was led off to an uncertain future.

CHAPTER 14

With my back to the cell door, it didn't take long to see all of my living accommodations for at least the next two years.

"It is small, isn't it?" The sound of a lady's voice caused me to face the bars of my punishment. I said nothing in response, but I couldn't help but be captivated by her flawless beauty. Her red flowing hair rippled past her shoulders, and her blue eyes had a calming reassurance.

Finally, I mustered up the courage to answer her. "It isn't as bad as I expected." Her mystifying smile left me wondering if she found humor in my erroneous, naïve answer.

"Judge Carter is a good man who feels that you are worthy of a second chance. However," she raised her right index finger, "He only gives one second chance so make the most of your time here." She poked a blanket and other things between the bars from the cart beside her. Nestled in the blanket, I removed a Bible. Something about it held familiarity. I laid everything else on the cot and the words, "Thank you." dropped from my lips. She warmly smiled, pleased with my selection.

"I see you have chosen the right path."

A Bible was the only book in our small apartment. My mother always said that if she were only allowed one thing in which to own, she would choose a Bible and want for nothing else. I leafed through the pages as I reminisced about days gone by when Dylan and I would sit on either side of our mother as she read from the delicate pages. The memory brought me comfort, but the redheaded lady's next words generated chills: "I

know that for a good many years you have been troubled by the revelation of truth that your father should never have brought to light.”

Those words shook me to the core of my soul as I gazed deeply into her all knowing deep blue eyes. I wondered how she knew. Then, I received my answer as I opened the Bible to expose the first page. It wasn't just any Bible. It was my mother's Bible. For on the first page was the inscription,

My beloved boys, Douglas and Dylan

“She wanted you to have it, so that you will always remember that you are loved.”

Unable to stand any longer, I sat down on the edge of the cot. Many questions came to mind, but I was unable to ask them, for the redheaded lady left as silently as she had come.

The description of the redheaded lady and the mystery encircling her sent tingles down Madisen's spine. “Dad,” she hesitated, “what was the name of the redheaded lady that you met?”

At the same instant they drop the same name, “Faith”.

“How do you know Faith?” Michelle inquired of her sister.

“I met Faith the day after Thanksgiving. The weather was so nice that I decided to go for a walk. Faith was the cleaning lady that suggested the path I took. She told me that I would find the answers that I was looking for?” Tears welled up in Madisen's eyes for now she knew what Faith meant, for Jeremy convinced her to come home for the answers she sought.

Doug retrieved the worn out Bible from the drawer of the china cabinet. Everyone gathered around was familiar with it because he had read it to his girls the same way his mother had done with him and his brother. He slid it toward Madisen. “It’s time that I am passing this on to you, for you have started a journey, and this is your compass that will see you through life’s trials.”

Madisen slid the Bible closer to her as she recalled Jeremy’s words about Faith, “She only comes to those who need her the most.” It was clear how her father needed Faith but she was still lost on why she needed her.

“Did you ever see Faith again?” Michelle asked, intrigued by the mystery.

In unison, Madisen and Doug answered. “No.”

Before, Doug continued with his story, he poured himself another cup of coffee. A little mist of steam curled upward from his mug as he carefully wrapped his hands around it.

A middle aged man with a receding, graying hairline was the next person at my cell door. “Douglas Kahan.” He read from the paper on his clipboard. “You have one of two choices. You can remain on your current path, or you can turn your life around. Which will it be?”

I quickly chose the latter and stepped toward him. He flipped the page and studied the contents of the next page. “It looks like you have a fondness for cars. We have a pretty good automotive program. Are you interested?”

I couldn’t say “yes” fast enough. So for the next two years my fondness for cars turned into a passion as I hungered to learn how every part of the whole worked together

to make a fine running machine. Furthermore, I marveled at how little adjustments here and there could make an engine perform better. Those two years flew by as I completed my high school education and learned a trade that would serve me well in society.

As I stood before the parole board, I had mixed emotions about leaving, because within those walls my life had order. But beyond those prison gates laid freedom and an uncertain future. My poor judgment had led me astray more than once, and there were no guarantees that I wouldn't fall victim to my judgment once more. However, the parole board saw me fit to reenter society, so I left the correctional facility with some loose change in my pocket and the address of my parole officer. With no place else to go, I found my parole officer's office.

"Name?" the gray headed lady behind the desk blurted out in a harsh voice as I entered.

"Douglas Kahan," I stammered as she looked over her reading glasses perched at the end of her nose. She shuffled some papers around on her cluttered desk until she found my file.

"Are you aware of the terms stated in your parole?"

"Yes, I am." Nervous, I shifted my weight from one foot to the other.

"State those conditions." She folded her arms across her chest as she leaned back in her chair. Cold sweat caused me to chill as I ran down the short list.

"I am to find employment." She nodded her head in acknowledgement of my correct response but sternly watched me over her reading glasses as I continued. "I am to find housing." Once again, she nodded. "And finally, I am to report to you once a week."

“Good.” She leaned forward in her chair resting her elbows atop of her desk and my file. “It looks like you are good at taking cars apart.” She jotted down an address. “Now, we shall see how good you are at putting them together.” She handed me the slip of paper. I stared at its contents as she concluded. “The shift manager at Ford will be expecting you to report to work in the morning. Do not be late.” She paused, “Do you have a place to stay?”

“No.”

Once again she jotted something down on a little slip of paper. “It isn’t the Hilton. Tell Mitch that Sophie sent you. He will let you stay rent free until your first check comes. Then, you can pay him for your stay.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t just thank me with words. Stay on the straight and narrow path because you only get one second chance. Don’t blow it.”

CHAPTER 15

The address of the apartment complex was in the heart of the projects where drugs, gangs, guns and prostitution ran rampant. By day, the scars of the illegal night activity were visible. Buildings were riddled with bullet holes. Windows were either boarded up or had thick bars over them, and yellow crime scene tape flopped in the breeze. It wasn't the best environment for an ex-con, but for now it was the best that I could afford.

The owner, Mitch, was a grungy, over weight man with greasy long thinning hair. His breath stank of cigarettes, and his fingers had yellowed from his years of smoking. "Can I help ya?" His voice was heavy and raspy.

"Sophie sent me."

"She did, did she?" Short of breath, his thick chest rapidly rose and fell as he shoved a thick book on the counter toward me. "Sign here." As I jotted down my name, he laid the room key on the counter and didn't release it until he made his point. "I expect my pay at the end of two weeks. If I don't get it, I will garnish your wages and Sophie will know."

"You will receive prompt payment."

Mitch's laugh was interrupted by a full productive sounding cough. "It's those prompt payments that's made me a millionaire." He released the key. "Your apartment

is up those stairs.” He pointed the direction with a lit cigarette between his fingers, “and it’s the second door to the right.”

Standing in the doorway of my tiny apartment, which was dimly lit by a small north window, I flicked on the light to get a better look at what \$125 a month had purchased as a roach crawled over the toe of my shoe. The kitchen and living room co-existed in the same small square. An old refrigerator hummed along the east wall. The sink, stove and cabinets lined the north wall. A card table with two metal folding chairs sat nestled in the kitchen area. An old sofa divided the two living quarters and on around the room was a couple of mismatched chairs and a few end tables to fill the remaining space.

I secured the dead bolt and continued exploring. The bathroom was comprised of a dingy shower stall, an unclean toilet and a small sink scared with a rust stain extending from the faucet to the drain. The bedroom was dimly lit by a small north window, and I didn’t bother to turn on the light to see the condition of the twin bed and chest of drawers.

My stomach rumbled with hunger. And eager to escape my depressing surroundings, I left for the bank to withdraw the sixty-four dollar I had left to purchase food, cleaning supplies and paint.

Physically tired, I fell into bed but my mind would not allow my eyes to shut. Ford was the longtime work place of my father and eventually, I knew our paths would cross. I tried to imagine his reaction.

At dawn, I resolved that sleep was hopeless thanks to the drama playing in my mind as well as the drama unfolding outside my window. I showered and shaved and put on the best clothes that I could afford from the second hand store up the street.

With plenty of time to kill, I took my time walking to work and arrived as the night shift was leaving. I froze at the sight of my dad. For an instant our eyes locked. Then it was as if I became invisible, for he walked right past me without saying a word. In all of the scenarios that kept me awake, I never once thought of one so cruel. I was dead to him. I wanted to turn and run, but I needed the job far too badly to give in to my insecurities.

Once inside the walls of Ford, I was greeted by a grandfatherly man, Earl Clasky, who was short in stature and slightly overweight. His balding head glistened under the fluorescent lights. “You must be Doug? I wasn’t expecting you for another hour.” His firm handshake gave me reassurance. “But I’m glad that you’re early. Are you hungry?”

“Yes, I skipped breakfast.”

“Well, you’re in luck. Follow me.”

Over donuts and coffee, I got acquainted with the father of two and grandfather of four. “Well,” he brushed the powdered sugar from his hands, “Let’s get you to personnel to get your time card then we can get busy. I’m over-seein’ your training on the line.”

The nickel and dime tour ended with my work station. As I watched Earl, I tried to mimic his expertise. “Fine job,” he complimented as he watched me perform the task at hand and then concluded. “I heard that you have experience around cars. But kid, you are a natural for this job. Your training won’t take long.” His statement was meant as a compliment, but the reference to my criminal past shook my confidence. As I looked around at the other workers, I wondered how many of them knew about my past.

CHAPTER 16

On the long walk home, I had plenty of time to think, calculate and budget my earnings from my newly acquired paycheck. In reality, it was going to be stretched to meet my basic needs, which would leave me a foot during the winter. So if I wanted to take advantage of the public transportation instead of braving the bitter cold, I needed a second job, and I needed one now.

The *HELP WANTED* sign hanging in a club window was an answer to my prayer. The club was a favorite hang out for college students and other middle class youth. I applied for the busboy job, and my willingness to work weekends and long hours landed me the job. However, it also landed me with another problem. The club closed at two in the morning and public transportation did not enter my area of town at that hour. So to avoid witnessing a crime, I kept my head down and my eyes focused on the ground.

During my break at the club, I leafed through the classifieds of a newspaper left behind by a customer for a good, used, cheap car. Al, the owner of the club, sidled up beside me and peered over my shoulder. "Looking for new employment?" His gruff voice got my attention. Al was an older man with thinning gray course hair.

"No. I'm looking for cheap transportation as a barrier to the cold and safety on the way home."

"Take the bus."

"It doesn't go near my neighborhood at that hour."

"Where do you live?" Al started to wash down the bar but suddenly stopped at the mention of my address.

“Corner of Main and Constitution.”

“No wonder you are willing to work overtime. That is one of the worst areas of the city.” His eyebrows furrowed. “Don’t you have another full time job?”

“Yes, I work at Ford Monday thru Friday.”

“Wow. And you walk to and from work each day?”

“Yes sir.”

“Surely with two jobs, you can afford to live in a safer neighborhood.”

“To be honest, I do have some money saved up but not much. But no matter where I live, I’m going to need a car, and a cheap one. I figure that in the long run a car will be cheaper than public transportation.”

“Well, you may be right. One thing is for certain a car will get you from door to door instead of bus stop to bus stop. My brother-in-law owns a junkyard. It’s south of here about a mile. Sometimes, he gets a car that is in fare shape if you’re not afraid of a fixer-upper.”

“No. That sounds perfect.”

Al jotted down the address on a napkin. And on my rare day off, I walked to the junkyard in search of the perfect car. A middle aged man with a shinny bald head and beer belly greeted me near the gate. “Hello. May I help you?” A broad smile added to his butterball complexion.

“I’m looking for a car.”

“You must be the fella Al told me about.” He extended his hand. “I’m Hank.”

“Doug Kahan.” I reciprocated with a firm handshake.

“I don’t really have anything that will run, but you are welcome to look around.”

Hank's business was mostly the salvaging of any good parts before the car was placed in the crusher. But nonetheless, I took him up on his offer and walked up and down each row of cars. I was about to abandon my search when I stumbled upon a 1965 Ford Mustang GT coupe. At one time, it had been candy apple red but the harsh elements had worn hard on the body, leaving it dimpled and rusted. Hank tried to slow the rusting by using whatever paint he had on hand, but the rust was as resilient as cockroaches. Amazingly, the chrome bumper was in excellent shape. It's a wonder this little car hadn't become victim of the crusher. I ran my hand over the fender, feeling all of the dents and dings. I reached in and popped the hood. The more that I examined the motor and looked around the yard at the other cars for potential parts to make it run, the more hopeful I became. I closed the hood and stood back looking at the beauty that it could be once again.

"I see you found old Mabel."

"Oh," my heart sank, "then this car is not for sale." I figured since he had it named that it held a special place in his heart. However, he roared with laughter.

"I've had this car on my lot for years. It has never run. Time and time again, I've threatened to pull the bumper and place it in the crusher, but each time I've had a change of heart. This is as close to the crusher as it has gotten." They both looked a few feet down the row of cars to the crusher. Then, Hank looked back at me. "Do you think that you can make this car run again?"

"I know I can. How much do you want for it?"

Hank smiled as he rubbed his head with the palm of his hand. "How much cash do you have on you?"

I emptied my pockets on the hood and counted out all of the dollars and loose change. “I have twenty-five dollars.”

“I’ll make a deal with you. The car will be yours for twenty-five dollars if you can get it to run and roll off of this lot. Now there is a catch. You must use parts from this yard. You can bring in oil, gas, grease and maybe a battery. And I must warn you, I’ve already removed the best of the parts from these cars. However, I will promise you that I will not crush any car compatible with this one until you give me the go ahead. Do we have a deal?”

“May I have use of your tools?”

“You may as long as you put them back in their place when you are finished.”

“Then you have a deal.” On the strength of a handshake and a challenge, I purchased my car for twenty-five dollars.

Hank’s shop was located at the rear of his salvage parts business. The floor space was big enough to fit one car. Along the opposite wall was a mechanic’s dream. All sizes and kinds of wrenches meticulously hung from largest down to the smallest. To my left was a big red tool chest. I pulled out one of the drawers to unveil a surgeon’s selection of socket wrenches. To my right was a work bench and air-compressor. Just beyond the small walk-through door, next to the air-compressor, was the area where the salvaged parts were stored. It was kept under separate lock and key from the shop area.

Every spare moment that I had, I worked on the little Mustang to bring it to life. With a few adjustments, I wiped my hands clean and slid behind the steering wheel. I drew in a breath and held it as I turned the key. The little car had come a long way with its hodge podge of parts from various other makes and models of cars. The motor grinds

and finally it spit and spluttered its way to life. I pressed down on the foot feed and the engine evened out. The sound made Hank emerge from his business. A look of half shock and half glee graced his round face. “I’m seeing it. I’m hearing it.” He chuckled, “but I’m still not believing it.”

The rumble of the motor was music to my ears as well, and I prayed that it had enough life to roll beyond the junkyard gates, because as long as it did, it was all mine and I could soon replace the worst of the parts. I had saved up and purchased tools and the parts that I knew I needed the worst and stored them at my apartment for this very day. Exhilaration coursed through my body as the little Mustang rolled off of the lot on its own power. Once out on the street, I pressed down on the accelerator and it responded as if free from its own prison. It didn’t falter once on the journey home. I parked along the curb of the apartment complex and looked around at the surroundings. I couldn’t help but smile at the accomplishment, but I also couldn’t help but think how this little car blended in with its surroundings.

With each paycheck, I fine-tuned the motor even more until it thundered like the hooves of three hundred horses under the hood. The exterior was still a rough looker, so I parked every evening behind the club, and every time Al took out the trash, he looked my car over and laughed. “Twenty-five dollars looks like a gob of money for that heap.

“Don’t let the exterior fool you. It’s what’s under the hood that counts.”

“And what is under the hood.”

“One very fine tuned custom made motor.”

“Well,” Al rested a hand on my shoulder as his eyes remained fixed on the car. “One thing is for certain. No one in their right mind would ever steal your car, not even in your neighborhood.”

I couldn’t argue with that, for my car was the equal to a tattered, worn out old shoe that a puppy wouldn’t be interested in.

“By the way,” Al continued with a different subject. “I’m a little short handed Saturday night. Would you be interested in filling in as a waiter?”

“Waiter?”

“Yes, you will do just fine, because anyone who can build a car out of junked cars is over qualified to work as a bus boy.”

Doug stopped his end of the story and looked over at Ann, who gently smiled. “This is where I come into the picture.”

Michelle’s expression glowed as she rested her head in the palms of her hands with her elbows propped up on the counter. “This is how you and Dad met?” She encouraged her parents to continue with their story, for the details of their meeting had always been sketchy until now.

CHAPTER 17

Ann Marie drew in a deep breath before beginning her segment of the past. “The night that I met your father started out to be one of the worst nights of my life....”

Being the only child of Herbert and Katheryn Parks meant I was to associate with the children of the socially elite. Dad had made his millions in steel, and Mom was from old money. They both possessed the sophisticated skill of hob knobbing with the cream of society, but that skill was not inherited by me. I always felt like your dad’s old car among the children of wealth and privilege. The crowd that I was comfortable with was the middle class. But as soon as they found out who I was, they were gone. Those who tried to remain my friend, my parents would run off; thus, leaving me to lead an isolated childhood.

In college, things seemed to change. A boy that my parents approved of took an interest in me. His name was William Burkhart, a quarterback on the football team and a pre-law major. Oh my fingers would tangle in his thick black wavy hair and my knees would become weak by his touch and looking into those heavenly dark eyes would make my heart race. In addition to that, when I was on his arm, I fit in with the children of the elite crowd. No longer did I feel uncomfortable in their presence. It felt great to be liked.

But the night of my twenty first birthday, the pendulum of social acceptance swung the other direction. I had not seen William all day, and I felt invisible to the social elite. My confidence was obliterated by the time I returned to my apartment. But when I opened the door, a flood of balloons cascaded around my feet and legs and my ears were

greeted with “Surprise!” Quickly, I covered my gaping mouth with my cupped hand. Emotion kept a sound from escaping, and through a blur of tears, I hugged William and each of my long time acquaintances that now called me friend.

On the counter was a long white sheet cake. “Come make a wish.” Dee Dee encouraged after lighting the last candle.

“I have nothing more to wish for. You, my friends, have made my day perfect. Thank you.”

“We are just getting started.” William wrapped his arms around my waist and together we blew out the candles. He then announced that he had garnered reservations at this club that was a local hot spot. As I changed my clothes, I overheard my friends talking and laughing. But when I emerged from my bedroom, Dee Dee was wrapped in William’s arms. She hurriedly escaped his embrace, but not without leaving the impression that they had shared a kiss. I brushed aside my instincts and figured that I was just being paranoid.

I rode to the club with William. “I have a special evening planned.” His smile was tender and I laid my head over on his shoulder, content that my evening was going to be magical. Finally, Cinderella had found her prince.

The club was alive with music and people having a good time. And as I walked in on William’s arm, I felt special. The atmosphere was infectious, and I couldn’t stop myself from smiling. Food and drinks were ordered, but I was not used to drinking alcohol, so I didn’t take over a sip of my beverage. I didn’t want alcohol to cloud my memories of the evening. But as the night progressed, Dee Dee began to hang on William, and that knot of something being wrong returned to the pit of my stomach.

With her arm stretched across my date's shoulders, her voice drifted to my ears. "She'll never give you what you want." Dee Dee threw her head back and laughed as William tried to hush her. He glanced my way with embarrassment marring his expression as my cheeks flushed with warmth, for I did not know if his reaction was genuine or show.

Dee Dee leaned across the table before William. "You don't mind if we dance. Do ya?" Her breath reeked of alcohol.

I shook my head no, and she led him onto the dance floor. As I watched them move together, the painful truth came to light. I was William's girlfriend to please his parents but Dee Dee was the one he loved. I looked around our table. One by one each couple joined William and Dee Dee on the dance floor, leaving me alone. Heart-broken, I felt the tears roll to the surface. I was only their friend for appearances.

"May I get you something?" I looked up at the waiter feeling every bit the fool.

"No. I'm fine. Thank you." I grabbed my purse and headed for the lady's room. Staring at my reflection, I blotted my face with a cold damp towel, but that did not hinder the flow of my sorrow. Had I been so hungered for friends, that when they showed me acceptance, I turned a blind eye to the truth? I felt like such an idiot to let myself be used by those vultures.

Determine to hang on to some form of dignity, I emerged from the restroom. My so called friends were no longer on the dance floor, so I made my way to our table. The waiter was cleaning up the mess of glasses and debris. "Excuse me," I interrupted his task. "Have you seen my friends?" My eyes searched the perimeter.

"Yes, they paid the tab a little bit ago and left."

My heart nearly choked me as I raced from the interior of the club to where we had parked. William's car was gone. Dazed, I wandered back into the club at a loss of what to do next. I stared at the new group of people flocked around the table that was once reserved for our party. I wanted to cry.

"Did you find your friends?" I heard a kind voice ask. I turned to see the waiter, a handsome guy not much older than I with neatly trimmed brunet hair.

"No. They left me."

"I'm sorry." Those two words from his lips stunned me, for he had nothing to be sorry for. "You may set at the end of the bar. You will have a good view of the entrance. I'm sure they will come back for you."

"Thank you." I sat upon that bar stool like he suggested with my eyes fixed on that door. Wishing, willing for someone I knew to enter and take me away from this humiliating experience. But no one came.

"May I call you a cab?" The same kind waiter offered.

"Yes, thank you."

From memory he dialed the number and during his brief conversation, I noticed his name, *Doug*.

"The cab will be here for you shortly."

"Thank you, Doug. I don't know what I would have done without your help." He graciously smiled and returned to work. Before I exited the bar, I checked my purse for cash. I was several dollars shy of my fare home. But I strolled to the curb, hoping to convince the driver that if he took me home, I had extra cash there to pay my fare.

Al watched the young lady exit the bar and eased up beside Doug. “What’s her story? She doesn’t appear drunk.”

“She isn’t. The group, she came with left her behind.”

“Uh, that’s a cruel prank.” Al shook his head. “I’ve never seen that girl before. Who did she come in with?”

“A group of regulars that sit at table seven.”

Al leafed through the book of reservations, “Oh yah, Burkhart. That’s the uppity group from the heights.”

“He usually comes in with a blonde, so I was surprised when he showed up with the girl that just left. However,” Doug wiped out a glass with a tee towel, “The blonde arrived a few minutes later with another couple. Burkhart wasn’t paying much attention to the dark headed girl. In fact, he was more interested in the blonde. They left together.”

“Well, well, well.” Al smiled, “Someone is real observant. You didn’t take a particular fondness to that pretty brunet, did you?” Al chuckled.

A little embarrassed by Al’s teasing, Doug gave an honest answer: “Only a blind man would miss her beauty. When Burkhart came in with her, I thought that he had wisened up and traded up for a classy girlfriend, but I was wrong. He left with the bimbo. And as for the dark headed beauty, I doubt that she will ever come back here.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that.” Al glanced toward the entrance where the dark headed girl stood ringing her hands. She met Doug half way across the club.

“Didn’t the cab come?”

“Yes, he came and I got in but when he asked me the address of my destination, I told him that I was short of cash, but I would pay him in full when I got to my apartment. He refused to take me all the way home, but he offered to drop me off as far as my cash would take me. That’s in the middle of no where. I would have several miles to walk alone. I didn’t know what to do, but I didn’t want to do that, so I got out.”

“I wish that you would have told him that you were short of cash at your address. Trust me. He would have waited for the rest of his money.”

“Will you call me another cab, and I will do that?” Hope radiated from her angelic face.

Doug glanced around at the clock. “There is no use to call another cab. By now, word about you has already spread.” He watched her hope begin to fade. “However, I’m off in a few minutes. I can take you home.”

“Thank you so much.” Ann sat down at the end of the bar, grateful for a solution to her problem.

Al eyed the beautiful young girl as he overheard their private conversation. He eased up to Doug, “You go ahead and take off. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Doug started to leave, but Al stopped him with some sage advice. “Doug, you be sure to get her safely to her place. I know that you have had trouble in the past, and well, if anything happens to her, it won’t be Burkhart’s fault; it will be yours because you were last to be seen with her.”

Ann watched Doug approach and for the first time all evening she allowed herself to really look at his physical build. His light brown hair lay in a slight wave and was a

little long. However, he wore it well. He was physically fit and appeared strong. But the word that best described him was handsome.

“Are you ready?” He smiled as Ann locked on his kind, gentle hazel eyes. He was truly a diamond in the rough.

“Yes,” she slid down off of the bar stool. “My name is Ann Marie.”

He smiled, “It is nice to meet you Ann Marie. I’m Doug Kahan.” She placed her well manicured hand in his, and she was surprised by the roughness.

She walked close by his side to an empty parking lot. “I park around behind. Do you want to wait here and I’ll...”

“No. I’ve already been enough trouble. I’ll just tag along with you.”

As we rounded the corner of the building and approached a modest looking car, Doug’s pace did not falter like mine. Falling a few steps behind, I couldn’t see any other car until we got to the back alley. Parked next to the dumpster was the worst looking car that I had ever seen. I fought back my tears for I knew, in my heart, that this wreck wasn’t going to get me home. Doug held the passenger door open, but I was frozen in place.

“Don’t be fooled by what you see on the outside. She’s had a rough life, but she’s as good as gold under the hood.”

Something about his words made me wonder if he was describing his car or himself. Still unable to move, I uttered, “But I live clear across town.”

“It’s never failed to get me to and from where I need to go.”

Slowly, cautiously, I approached the car. The clean interior was no improvement from the exterior. The door squeaked and groaned as Doug closed it. As he inserted the

key in the ignition, I couldn't believe the irony of the evening. I arrived in an elegant carriage and like Cinderella, all that was beautiful had turned into a pumpkin. The sound of the motor halted my thoughts, for I fully expected a cloud of smoke to bellow from the exhaust, and for it to spit and splutter. But it did none of the above.

"Is everything all right?" Doug inquired as he easily shifted gears.

"Uh, yes, just fine. I can't get over how smooth your car runs. It hasn't even backfired."

"This old car isn't any ordinary Ford." He restrained his humor, taking her comment as a compliment instead of criticism.

"Where did you find a car like this?"

"Hank's Auto Salvage."

"A junk yard," after a few moments, Ann Marie added, "I'll believe it. How much did you have to pay?"

"Twenty-five dollars."

"Judging by the exterior, you paid too much. However, from the way it sounds, you got a bargain."

"I've done a lot of work under the hood that has increased its value."

"But you're a waiter." Ann Marie covered her mouth stunned at how that must have sounded.

His laughter placed her at ease again. "I'm a waiter by night."

"What do you do through the day?"

"I work at the Ford plant on the assembly line."

“Oh that’s where you learned so much about cars. I expected you to say that you are a mechanic by day.”

“I’ve learned a lot at Ford, but I’ve also worked as a mechanic.” Ready for a change of topics, Doug inquired, “What do you do by day?”

“I’m a student at the University. I’m majoring in nutrition, and next year I begin my culinary classes to become a chef.”

“Then, you are not from this area?”

“Wrong!” Ann Marie’s voice sang out. “I was born and raised in Motor City.”

“Oh, that explains how you have become so auto savvy.” He enjoyed the sound of her laughter.

“Actually, my aunt and uncle are car enthusiasts.”

“Is he a mechanic?”

“No. A banker.”

“Oh yes, that makes perfect sense.” Doug teased.

“Uncle John use to say that motors make sense.” Ann Marie shrugged.

“I understand.” Doug caught a glimpse of her doubt. “Really, I do understand.”

“I believe you.” She couldn’t take her eyes off of him. She just met him and she shouldn’t be comfortable around him. And in a matter of minutes, he would know where she lives. A knot drew up in her stomach and became tighter as he pulled into her apartment complex.

In each identical two story building, there were four apartments. She pointed him the correct direction still unsure of what to do. Slowly, she let him drive past her

building. The only one that was totally dark, because she failed to turn on the outdoor light.

“Is something wrong?”

“No.” She abruptly answered. “I live up here in the next building.” Still her gaze remained on the darkened building as Doug pulled into one of the few parking places within view of both buildings. When he switched off the car, alarm pulsed through Ann Marie’s body. “What are you doing?”

He could see her fear. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you. I was going to walk you to your door. I want to make sure that you get home safely. Let’s face it. If something were to happen to you, I would get the blame because you were seen with me last. Please, believe me. I wish you no harm and I sure didn’t mean to scare you.”

Ann Marie relaxed. “I’m the one who is sorry. All you have done is help me. I can’t expect you to walk me to the door. I will be fine. Thank you for bringing me home.” Her focus drifted toward the darkest building and his gaze followed hers.

“I don’t mind walking you to the door, if it will make you feel better.”

Ann Marie’s focus shifted to him. His offer was genuine and she would feel better. “This is silly.” She retorted, frustrated with herself. “If you walk me to the door, then you will have to walk back to your car alone.”

Doug chuckled, “Trust me, only a fool would dare mess with me.” He opened his car door and then walked around and opened hers. She took him by the arm and he started toward the building she had pointed out when he felt her falter.

“I lied.” Her warm sea green eyes filled with remorse as she pointed to the darkest building. “I live over there on the second floor.”

“Okay.” And he said nothing more.

Ann Marie fumbled with the keys and finally unlocked the door. She flipped on the interior light and stood in the doorway. Her figure bathed in a halo of light. “I’m sorry.” She said.

“Sorry for what?”

“Lying to you, your intentions are pure unlike the guy I left with earlier this evening.”

“I understand. We only just met.” Doug started to walk away. His mission fulfilled.

“Thank you for bringing me home.” She stepped slightly from the doorway. Her words stopped his progress, and he turned to face her once more.

“It was my pleasure.”

CHAPTER 18

Ann Marie could not concentrate on her studies or much of anything else, because every thought was securely wrapped around Doug. Cleaning, exercising, TV, nothing distracted her from the feelings she had for him. And she felt that he felt it, too. “It’s silly,” She said to herself. “He is a good honest guy who gave me a ride home last night.” She looked at her reflection in the mirror and recalled how she felt when he said, “It was my pleasure.” Defeated, she showered and then took her time selecting the perfect dress and fixing her hair and make-up. Her mission was to go to the club and confront Doug to put her mind to rest once and for all.

It didn’t take long for her to spot Doug and for him to spot her in the nearly vacant club in the early evening hour. He stopped stocking the bar as she sat down across from him. He couldn’t believe his eyes. Following a brief moment, he blinked, thinking that he was lost in a vision. But she was still there, pleasantly smiling. “Did you get left again?”

“No. I drove.” She started to fidget, feeling that she was too forward.

“That’s good, because I don’t get off until two in the morning. You would have a long wait.”

“Did you make it home okay?”

“Yep, so far that little car hasn’t let me down.” His night of sleep had been cut short by taking Ann Marie home but it was worth every lost moment. “It’s good to see you again.”

His words tugged at her heart, causing her cheeks to blush. She looked down at the top of the bar and then from the corner of her eye she noticed an older guy watching them. He was either another worker or the boss. “I’m sorry. I’m keeping you from your work.”

“What work? You are my first customer of the evening.” Doug looked down the bar at Al who laughed to himself and then waved his arm as if to say that it was okay. “It’s all right, but if it would make you feel better.” Doug poured her a Pepsi over a glass of ice and inserts a straw. Before serving the beverage, he placed a small napkin on the bar and then sat the glass on it.

“Thank you.” She took a small sip.

“I, huh.” Now it was Doug’s turn to fidget, but his strength renewed from the warmth and encouragement from her eyes. “I don’t have a lot of time off. Well, I only have Sunday’s off. Would you like to do something with me?”

“Sure. What?”

“I’m not sure what we will be able to do on a Sunday, but we can discuss any plans over lunch.”

“Lunch sounds great.”

“I’ll pick you up at noon.”

Ann hopped down from the bar stool. “How much for the soda?”

“It’s on me.”

“Thank you.”

Al walked up beside Doug, and they both watched her leave. “So,” Al began, “who is this girl?” He arched his right eyebrow.

“Her name is Ann Marie.”

“Ann Marie what?” Doug’s lack of an answer prompted some teasing, “Ha, so love struck that you failed to get her last name.” Al poked Doug in the ribs with his elbow as he watched Ann Marie drive off. “She’s quite a class act and drives a nice car, too. She’s no middle class.”

Doug’s posture wilted. “She’s out of my league.”

“I’m not saying that. What I am saying is be careful. You are a nice kid. I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Ann Marie isn’t anything like the company she was with the other night.”

“I hope not.” Al returned to work.

Doug couldn’t shake the feeling that Ann Marie was way too good for him. And what reason would she have for not sharing her last name? This question bogged down his thoughts, but memories of their non-stop conversation lifted his spirits. As Sunday approached, the excitement of anticipation was threaded with dread over one question- Ann Marie’s last name.

CHAPTER 19

All week Ann Marie's thoughts drifted to her brief time spent with Doug and how comfortable she felt in his presence. She didn't have that kind of relationship with William, and she had known him for years, a fact that made her seethe for she should have known him well enough to realize that Burkhart was using her. She was nothing but a trophy girlfriend to please his parents and make all the church ladies gush at what a gorgeous, perfect couple they made.

Rapidly, Ann Marie ran the brush through her hair to work out some frustrations of being made a fool by Burkhart's charm. Then it occurred to her. If it wasn't for the cruel, heartless prank pulled on her twenty first birthday, she would never have met Doug. A glow radiated from the crest of her soul, for Doug felt like the half of her that had always been missing.

Now that Sunday was finally here, she stood in her bathrobe before her full closet trying to decide what to wear. Doug did not come from money, so her finest dresses were out of the question and blue jeans were too casual for church. Therefore, she settled on a simple blue checked dress and a dark blue sweater.

Katheryn Parks watched the church doors like a hawk for the arrival of her daughter, for William had told them he had a special surprise lined out for Ann Marie, and she wanted to hear every detail first hand. "Ann Marie," Katheryn whisked her daughter to the side as she entered the church. "You look simply radiant. Why you are just a glow with

happiness! Things must be going well between you and William,” she clasped Ann Marie’s hands in hers fully expecting to feel an engagement ring.

“William!” Ann Marie’s jaw almost dropped at the mention of that loathsome creature’s name, but quickly she pulled herself together, “Yes, because of William Burkhart, I am happy.” She opted not to tell her mother about Doug, because she didn’t want him to become a statistic of their interference. As Katheryn moved off to visit with a friend, a voice from behind drew Ann Marie’s attention that direction.

“You’re all aglow, but not for that Burkhart kid.” Nervously, Ann Marie looked beyond Aunt Millie to make sure her parents were not in ear shot. “I’m right aren’t I?” Millie towed Ann Marie over to a pew and sat down. “I’d know that glow anywhere, because it’s how I felt when I met your Uncle John. You have found your soul mate. Darlin’, hang on to him because a love like that only comes once in a life time. I’m not saying that it is going to be easy, so warn him about your parents. If he truly loves you as much as you show it now, then he will stand by you no matter what.”

Ann Marie’s cheeks became rosy as she noticed her mother’s reaction from across the church. Jealous of Millie and Ann Marie’s special bond, Katheryn wondered what was transpiring between them.

Unphased, Millie continued, “Are you coming over after church to fill me in on your new beau?” Millie’s face glistened with her smile.

“I can’t. I’m meeting him for lunch, but I’ll tell you everything soon.”

As Katheryn and Herbert sat down in the pew in front of Millie and Ann Marie, Katheryn scanned the congregation for William but her eyes failed to find him. And it left her wondering what happened on her daughter’s birthday?

Reverend Tim Garrett seemed to talk forever, and Ann Marie feared that she might not be home when Doug arrived. So as soon as the service was over, she jumped up and almost ran into William and Dee Dee. “Oh I’m sorry. Pardon me.” Ann Marie pleasantly smiled as she sidestepped them, leaving them stunned, for they fully expected to encounter a meek, mild, withdrawn girl that they had always known. As Katheryn watched Ann Marie push her way up to Reverend Tim, she couldn’t help but notice how Dee Dee hung onto William. “Herbert, do you see what I see?” Katheryn stared daggers through the little tramp that dared try to steal her daughter’s boyfriend.

“See what, dear?”

“Dee Dee and William are together. But just this morning, Ann Marie was telling me how her happiness was all due to William.”

Herbert darted a look over at Millie, who quickly scurried away to protect Ann Marie’s secret. For years she had stood idly by while Herbert and Katheryn wrecked their daughter’s happiness. Well, no more. Her reaction peaked Herbert’s suspicions that Ann Marie was seeing someone else. “Don’t worry, dear. I’ll get to the bottom of this matter.”

CHAPTER 20

The second Ann Marie arrived home she dashed to the living room window overlooking the parking lot and caught a glimpse of Doug parking next to her car. She eagerly greeted him at the door. He was simply dressed: blue jeans, a nice white shirt and a light denim jacket.

“I just got home from church. I was afraid that I would be late,” she stated a little breathless.

“Do you need a moment?”

“No. I’m starving.”

“What are you hungry for?”

“A cheese burger.”

“You’re in luck. I know where the best burgers are served in town.” He held out his hand, and Ann Marie laced her fingers among his, marveling at the perfect fit. “You look beautiful!”

“Thank you.”

Walking hand- in- hand and side -by- side, she faltered near their cars. “Doug, would you mind if we took my car? Not that I have anything against yours.” She quickly added the latter statement.

“You still don’t believe that my Mustang will get us where we need to go and then home again.”

“Well,” Ann Marie hesitated. “It is awful hard to get past its roughness.”

Doug stepped in front of her. “You got past my roughness.” He longed to kiss her, but instead he took one step back. “But,” he mischievously smiled, “I wouldn’t mind driving your Chevy.” Gladly, she dropped the keys in his hand.

Zippering down the freeway, Doug marveled at how the little car gracefully shifted gears and hugged the curves. To break the silence, Ann Marie switched on the radio, distracting him from the harmony of the motor. “Is something wrong?” She noticed the change in his expression.

“No, I just realized something.”

“What?”

“The reason that you wanted to bring your car instead of mine,” at a loss of what to say, she remained silent as he continued. “Your radio works and mine doesn’t.”

Ann Marie couldn’t help but laugh. “You guessed it. I can’t believe that you saw right through me.”

The sound of her laughter was the sweetest music of all.

Over cheeseburgers, he hungered for more time with her. “So, what’s next? A movie? Or something more inventive?”

“Let’s go inventive.” For she figured that a movie would take time away from talking to Doug, and she really enjoyed talking to him.

“Ok,” he looked across the street at the park. “Do you want to take a walk?”

“That would be perfect!” She placed her hand in his as they began their journey.

“Does anyone ever call you Ann?”

“No, why?”

“Because, I would like to call you Ann.”

The sound of her plain first name rolling off of his lips was pleasing to her ears. “You may call me Ann.” She stepped closer to him, placing her free hand above his elbow.

As they returned to her car, Ann felt that the day was passing far too quickly and not ready for their date to come to a conclusion, she invited, “May I cook you supper?” After the question spilled from her lips, embarrassment flushed her cheeks, and no words would bail her out of her state of forwardness.

“I never turn down a meal. However,” he smiled, “I can’t help but wonder if I’m going to be a guinea pig?”

Ann held up her left hand, “I swear. I will not try out any new recipes on you yet.” Their laughter became somber when her car would not start. “Oh no, now what?”

“And you were afraid that my car would break down.” Doug could not contain his amusement.

“I don’t understand. It’s never refused to start before.”

“Has it been harder to start lately?”

“Well, it has been a bit more difficult.” Concern almost made her panic.

“Well...” Doug drew it out. “It isn’t a serious problem; the choke is stuck.” He reached beneath the dash and popped the hood. “But next time, we’ll take old reliable.” Ann started to protest, but what could she say in her car’s defense. It had let her down.

“Ann,” Doug hollered from the front of the car. “Turn the key.” He held the choke in place. Relief and delight brightened her expression as the little car started.

“You fixed it!” Gratitude radiated from her.

“No. I got it started, but when we get back to your place. I can temporarily fix it.”

As Doug removed some tools from the trunk of his car, Ann stood between the two cars in disbelief. “You carry your tools with you?”

“Yep. The trunk is my garage.”

“Oh, I see. That is why you don’t have any car troubles.”

Doug sheepishly smiled as he wiped his hands clean on a paper towel. “No, I store them in the trunk because that’s the only place I have to store them. However, it is nice to have them handy in case I have car troubles.”

“Ha! I knew it.” Ann pointed an accusing finger.

“But,” Doug came to his car’s defense, “The only car trouble that I have had since I purchased this little filly was today when I drove your car.”

Ann just stood in disbelief.

“Okay,” he walked around and popped the hood of his car. “Let’s do a little comparison.”

Ann’s jaw dropped, and she blinked a couple of times, not believing what she saw before her eyes. “That motor looks new. And it looks like it has more power than mine.”

“It should have more power. However, after driving your car, I know that I have a few more adjustments to make.”

“You paid twenty-five dollars for that?”

“No. I paid twenty-five dollars on a bet that I could make it roll off the junkyard. I’ve since replaced a lot of the worn-out parts.”

“You didn’t use all Ford parts because I’ve never seen a motor like this in a Mustang.” She caught Doug’s look of surprise. “Uncle John taught me well.”

“A Mustang is a wild breed, and my car is like the horse. It’s made up of parts that work best together.”

“Do tell.”

“Nope.” Doug closed the hood to hide his secret.

“Why?”

“Because you promised me supper.”

Ann glanced from the horizon of their perfect day to her watch. “Yes, I did promise you dinner. Is there anything in particular that you do not like?”

Doug shrugged his shoulders. “I can’t think of anything. I’m pretty easy to please.”

“That’s good because I’ve never cooked for anyone before.”

Doug froze. “Should I be afraid?”

“Very afraid,” Ann teased pulling him along.

Her spacious apartment was neatly arranged. As she worked in the kitchen, Doug examined the photos on the wall and ended by examining the contents of a curio cabinet that sat across the corner.

Ann smiled as she heard the familiar sound of her TV. As she placed her chicken dish in the oven, she joined him on the sofa.

“So what are we having?”

“One of my concoctions.” She twisted a strand of her long hair around her index finger. “Do you have a favorite TV show?”

“No. I don’t own a TV.”

“Hmm.” She drew Doug’s attention to her.

“What’s that about?” He smiled.

“You’ve put that much money in on that motor.”

Doug laughed. “Well, I do have quite an investment in that motor, but that isn’t the real reason I lack a TV. I go to work at nine in the morning and get home after two in the morning.”

“You work two full time jobs five days a week.”

“Not anymore. When I picked up Saturday nights at the club, I only work at Ford on Mondays.”

The timer on the stove brought Ann out of her state of shock.

She sprinkled Colby-Jack cheese on top of her creation and placed it back into the oven for the cheese to melt. As the Sunday night movie came on, she placed their super on the table. She watched Doug slice through the tender chicken breast submerged in pureed tomatoes, chopped green bell peppers and onion. All topped with cheese.

Anticipation built. “Well?” She questioned.

“This is delicious!”

Ann glowed with his compliment and their conversation continued for hours.

Finally, he slid away from the table. “It is getting late. I had better head home. I have a bit of a drive.” Ann walked him to the door. The fact that he had tomorrow night off had not escaped her. “Would you like to come over for supper tomorrow?”

“I’m definitely not going to pass on an offer like that. The food is as good as the company.” He stroked his fingers along the outline of her face. He longed to taste her kiss but refrained. “Don’t forget to take your car to the garage to have that choke fixed.”

“Yes, about that. Can you fix it? I trust you.”

“I can fix it, and I will fix it. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Ann closed the door behind him and looked at the hands of the clock as they slowly moved toward midnight. In less than twenty-four hours she would see him again, but already those hours seemed to crawl.

CHAPTER 21

Al stopped stocking the bar the second he noticed Doug. “Well?” He hollered across the empty establishment.

“Well, what?” Doug hollered back as he approached the bar.

“What is her last name?”

The question struck Doug speechless. But it spoke volumes to Al, “You didn’t ask her.” He chuckled shaking his head. “Boy, are you love- struck.”

Doug couldn’t believe that question never crossed his mind during the time he spent with Ann over the past two days. “Okay. The next time I see her, I will ask.”

“Yah, right.” Al grinned.

“You don’t believe me.” Doug hung some long stem glasses overhead.

“Nope, because ignorance is bliss.” Al disappeared in the back room, and the truth lingered on Doug’s mind causing him to falter at his task. Maybe he was afraid that Ann was out of his league. No, correct that. He was terrified. A loud group of college students entered the club, distracting him from his insecurities.

However, as Sunday grew near, the gnawing fear and insecurities compounded as he approached her door. He didn’t have to knock for she opened it, pleased to see him. “I saw you pull in.” She beamed. Her beauty cured his fears.

“I have the part to fix your car.” Embarrassed over the awkwardness, Doug was at a loss.

But Ann came to his rescue. “Great. Then we can take my car.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see. Will it take you long to fix my car?”

“No.” The repair took a few minutes, and then they were off with Ann navigating the way. “Where are we going again?”

“You’ll see. It’s just up ahead.”

“A car show,” Doug beamed at the sign and the rows of cars.

“I heard about it this morning. I use to come with my aunt and uncle when I was in grade school. Plus, after seeing the motor wrapped in the rubble you call a car, I knew you are a car enthusiast, too.” The child- like glow about Doug’s expression confirmed her theory. As they strolled among the cars, they spoke to a few of the owners about the motors and from those conversations Doug learned how to get more power from his motor with a few minor adjustments.

Ann groaned.

“What’s wrong?” Then he realized that they had not eaten. “Oh my gosh, I’m sorry!” Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a hotdog stand. “Will that do for lunch?”

She glanced over her shoulder. “That sounds divine, but that isn’t why I groaned.”

“No.”

“I groaned because those minor adjustments are going to delay a paint job to your car.”

Doug chuckled as he handed Ann a hotdog smothered with the works. “Still infatuated with cosmetics? Weren’t you ever taught to never judge a book by its cover?”

“In my world, looks are everything.”

A knot drew up tight in the pit of Doug's stomach as he sat down across from her at a wooden picnic table. His mind raced with questions. Was she referring to the culinary world? A dish must be pleasing to the eye. Or was she referring to the way she was raised? Or both? "Okay," Doug posed a loaded question, "What do you see when you look at me?"

Ann blotted her lips with a napkin, "I see," she paused for a moment, looking him over well. "I see one handsome guy that is intelligent, kind and thoughtful. However, behind those warm, caring eyes lays a mystery. A truth that your body language tries to hide because it is too painful or..." She stopped when Doug looked away. Her heart pained at the fact that she had unknowingly hit a cord of truth, a truth that he didn't want to share. "I'm sorry." She placed her hand on top of his.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," he answered, realizing that she wasn't the one hiding things in their relationship. He was.

The drive home was quiet. Silently, Ann beat herself up over what she said and she wished to take back those words that made Doug so uncomfortable. However, she couldn't, but she did know how to get their conversation started again. "Where did you learn so much about cars?" The delay once again indicated that she had struck a nerve close to the problem.

"Curiosity," Doug finally broke the painful silence and elaborated. "I've always been one that wanted to know how things worked, so I would tear them apart and put them back together."

"I can see that about you." Doug enjoyed Ann's smile. "Did you ever tear something apart, only to discover that you couldn't put it back together?"

Doug's laughter broke the tension. "Oh yes, and those are the mistakes you only make once."

Over a candle lit dinner, the evening got better than the afternoon. And before he had a chance to say goodnight, Ann closed the distance between them. Feeling his yearning, she inquired. "When are you going to kiss me?" She leaned toward him, tilting her head. She didn't have long to anticipate his answer as their lips met. Their passion ignited a new desire. "Please stay." She invited in a hushed voice, longing for the moment to continue. Doug swept her off her feet and carried her to the bedroom where they began a journey of love in each other's arms.

Unbeknown to either Doug or Ann, their afternoon activities were documented by a middle aged man sporting a crew cut. Through the telephoto lens of his camera he captured the couple at the auto show. It had been an easy assignment, as a car enthusiast taking photos, he didn't stand out. But he was the only one taking photos of the young couple.

As he watched Doug and Ann leave the car show, he noticed an awkwardness between them and assumed a lover's spat had ensued. However, when he developed the photos, any signs of an argument were absent. He gazed long at the photo of Ann and Doug at the picnic table. Neither one was smiling, but neither one was mad. "What transpired between you two? Whatever happened, happened right here." He held up the previous photo. They were both smiling.

Once the photos were dry, he placed them in a large brown envelope and delivered them to Herbert Parks late that night.

“Tucker,” Herbert greeted the PI near his home office door, wearing a man’s silk smoking jacket over his casual clothes. “I take it that you have what I requested?”

“I do.” Tucker handed him the envelope.

Herbert used a letter opener to acquire the contents. “So,” he gazed at the photos, “She does have a new boyfriend.” He turned his head in disgust. “I want to know everything there is to know about this young man. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Tucker turned on his heels and vanished into the night with his new assignment.

CHAPTER 22

The dawn woke Doug with Ann asleep in his arms. The sheets were tangled about them, and he wished to freeze time, but like most things in his life, special moments all come to an end.

“Good-morning,” Ann said rolling in tighter against him. Her warm eyes did not show regret. “How long have you been awake?” She laid her head over on his chest and listened to the rhythm of his heart.

“I haven’t been awake long.” He wrapped his arms around her tighter. “However, I can’t stay much longer.”

Ann gathered a blanket up around her.

“Where are you going?”

“To make you breakfast. You do like scrambled eggs?”

“Nine this morning,” she retrieved a robe from the closet. As she slipped it on, the blanket crumpled to the floor. “I’ll lay out a towel and washcloth if you would like a shower.”

What I would like is for us to spend all day tangled up in the love we share. This was what he really wanted to say, but instead he replied, “That would be nice, thank you.”

The warm water felt good and as he dried off he noticed a necklace in a small dish next to the sink. He fished it out and the monogram AMP dangled below his hand.

As he got ready to leave, Ann asked, “When will I see you again?” She gathered up some folders for her classes.

“Not tonight, I’m filling in at the club. I’ll have overtime this week. And frankly, I can use the extra cash.”

“What about Sunday?” Ann quickly inquired.

“I’m available. Same time and location all right with you?”

She nodded a yes and as he leaned in for a kiss her folders fell to the floor and the contents scattered. Frantic, she started sweeping up the papers, but not before he made the discovery that she had been dreading.

“Good quiz score, Miss Parks.” He handed her the perfect quiz.

Her heart sank and her cheeks blushed at the fact he now knew her true identity. Surely, it would be a matter of time before he was gone from her life too.

“Is something wrong?” He noticed the change in her demeanor.

“No.” Ann abruptly answered as she wondered if the memories of last night would be enough to sustain her through this heartbreak. “I mean yes.” She looked up into his eyes filled with genuine concern and ended up saying. “I don’t know.” As tears started to form in her eyes she continued. “Please say that it doesn’t matter that my father is Herbert Parks.” She watched Doug’s eyes widen with surprise as she revealed her secret.

Most everybody knew that Herbert Parks and steel were synonymous, and Doug was no exception. This business tycoon was listed as one of the wealthiest people in the country and with that wealth came considerable power.

“Doug, please say something.” Ann trembled, hating herself for keeping this information from him, but she had to know that his love was genuine.

“I don’t know what to say. We grew up in such different worlds.”

“But we are not that different.”

“Not that different.” Doug’s voice was louder, for he did not see any similarities.

“You grew up wanting for nothing, and I grew up wanting most everything.”

“Some people don’t realize how lucky they are.” A tear spilled over Ann’s lashes. “Big houses are not always happy homes. Oh, the family photos sprinkled around the living room makes the space homey, and the portrait above the fireplace mantle displays family unity, but they are just decorations. My parents do not know me because I was raised by servants. I’m a decoration to them.” Doug wrapped his strong arms around her, holding her tight as she sobbed on his shoulder. “They don’t know me like....”

“I understand,” he interrupted, realizing that their lives paralleled one another even though they grew up on different sides of the tracks.

Sunday morning arrived with anticipation of seeing Doug, but this time fear had made her feelings like a sharp edged sword aimed straight for the heart. The ring of the telephone deeply stabbed her aching heart, and she answered with dread. "Hello."

"Ann, this is Doug. I'm real sorry. I have to cancel our date. I'm real sick."

"Okay." Ann bit back the tears.

"I'll see you next week, if that is all right?"

"Yes, I would like that." The line went dead and Ann wilted into a chair, clutching a pillow into her chest. He had promised to come today but last weekend was cluttered with disastrous moments.

At the park, she insinuated he was hiding something from her when she was really the one with the secret. Had keeping him in the dark about her parents ended their relationship? Or was he truly sick? It was a question that she needed answered. She dialed the phone number to the club, hopeful that Al would still be doing inventory.

"Hello." A gruff voice made her jump.

"I would like to speak with the owner, Al."

"Speaking."

"This is Ann Marie." Al's muscle's lost their tension as he slid down on a bar stool. From Doug's somber mood this week, he speculated that something had gone wrong between the two of them and now this call clinched it. "How may I help you?"

"I would like Doug's address. I know that he lives somewhere downtown."

"Why do you want his address?"

"He is sick and I want to fix him lunch."

"You don't want to go to that area."

“Why not?”

“Because there is downtown and then there is downtown, if you get my drift. Doug would appreciate the offer, but he also would not risk your safety.” For a brief moment Ann’s end of the line was quiet as she realized that Doug lived in the projects. But yet she had to know if he still loved her. “Please Al; I need to do this for him.”

Al sighed and pondered the matter for a moment. “All right, I’ll give you his address, but under one condition.” He waited for her agreement.

“Okay, what is it?”

“You take a cab to his address. Your car will get stolen if you drive it to his neighborhood.”

“Okay, I promise that I will take a cab.”

Al figured that a cab driver would not take her to that part of town so he rendered the apartment address.

“Thank you, Al.” Ann hung up, grateful for his help and she started preparing chicken noodle soup.

A cab driver in his mid sixties picked Ann up. “Where to?” He watched her settle in the backseat with a tightly sealed container.

“210 Constitution.”

“What?” He looked at her in his rearview mirror to make sure he heard the address correctly.

“Two ten Constitution, it’s an apartment building near the corner of Main and Constitution.”

“Are you sure of the address, Miss?”

“Yes, positive.”

Reluctant and against his better judgment, he pulled out for that destination.

“What business does a fine young lady like yourself have in a place like that?”

“I have a sick friend that I have fixed some lunch for.”

“The only kind of sick in that area is hung over or drug withdrawal.”

“I assure you that my friend is neither.”

As the miles tallied up the cash, Ann began to fear that she might not have brought enough money. She breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of Doug’s old battered up Mustang parked along the curb. Then another fear entered her mind. What if he had moved on to someone else?

The cab driver shifted around in his seat. “Miss, are you sure this is the correct address?”

“Yes,” she handed him the cash, “but if you don’t mind, will you wait for me while I see if my friend is home?”

“Honey, I won’t leave this spot until you tell me to.”

“Thank you.”

The cabby watched her vanish within the building and hoped like double hockey sticks that she made it snappy.

Ann stepped over the legs of a bum passed out in the hallway and climbed a flight of stairs to Doug’s floor. She walked to the end of a dimly lit hall and rapped her knuckles against the wooden door in a rapid fashion as she silently begged for him to open it.

At first, Doug ignored the knocking, but by the second time, he pulled himself off of the couch and slightly opened the door to see who was on the other side. “Ann,” he opened the door wide, blinking his eyes as if he might be hallucinating.

She smiled big and handed him the container. “Wait right there. I’ll be back in a flash.” Doug watched her in disbelief as she hustled down the hall and he listened to the heels of her shoes against every step before she exited the building.

The cab driver breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Ann bolt from the building. She opened the back door and leaned in, “My friend is home. Thank you for bringing me down here. How much more do I owe you?”

“You’re stayin’!”

“Yes, my friend needs me.”

“Missy, by leavin’ you down here, I feel that I’m committin’ a crime. No other cabby will come down here if you call, and I’m off in a few more minutes.”

“That’s okay. My friend will take me home. He’s a good honest man.”

The eyes of the cab driver grew wide with surprise and suspicion, so Ann quickly added. “Don’t judge a man by his address. You will misjudge his character.”

Defeated and anxious to get the double hockey sticks out of Dodge, the cab driver left Ann behind. She returned to Doug’s door where he obediently waited. He watched her enter his small apartment. “Why are you here?”

“You’re sick,” she took the container, “so I brought you lunch. I hope you have a pan to heat up the soup.”

“I do.” Doug securely locked the door, “But I can’t hold anything down.” Then it occurred to him. “How did you get my address?”

“Al told me.” Ann placed the soup in the refrigerator and inventoried its contents. She was pleased with what she saw. “He also told me to take a cab.”

“Only because no one in their right mind would bring you down here,” Doug peered down at the quiet street.

“The cab driver was a nice fellow. He didn’t like the idea of leaving me, but I assured him that I would be fine.” Ann’s beaming smile faded as she noticed Doug’s condition. He was ghostly pale and profusely sweating and trembling like a leaf. She removed her coat and decorative scarf, “it is warm in here. I’ll turn down the heat.”

“Please don’t. I’m freezing.”

Ann touched the back of her hand to his forehead, and the cold clamminess of his skin startled her even more. “I’m calling an ambulance.” She looked around for a phone and her search quickly ended. “How did you call me this morning?”

“I used the pay phone in the hall.” Doug wrapped up in a heavy blanket and collapsed on the sofa. “Trust me, Ann. I’ve been through this before. I just need to get warm and the pain will pass.”

“Pain!” Ann eased down next to him. “Where?”

“My stomach is drawing me up in knots.”

Ann popped up off of the sofa and checked her purse for change, but all she had was a few pennies. “Doug, do you have any change?”

“No. I ran out this morning before I got to say everything that I wanted to say to you.”

Ann paced the small span of the apartment in an attempt to calm down and find a solution on getting Doug help.

“Ann,” at first his voice was faint. “Ann,” the second time his voice was much stronger because she stopped pacing.

“What? What do you need?”

“For you to stop pacing; you are making me dizzy.”

She sat down close to him and pulled him into her arms. She could feel him tremble. “I think that you need medical attention. You’re scaring me. I don’t want anything to happen to you.” Then it occurred to her, “Doug, where are your car keys?”

“Coat pocket, why?”

“I’m taking you to the hospital.”

He took a hold of her arm. “No, I’ll be fine. The first time this happened, I went to see a doctor. He speculated food poisoning and sent me home. By the next day, I was fine.”

“What doctor did you see?”

“The doctor at the clinic down the street.”

“He probably thought that you were going through drug withdrawal. You need to see a real doctor.”

“Ann, I’ll be fine. I just need to lie down and get warm. I’m freezing.” Ann gently let him down on the sofa and she retrieved all of the covers from his bed and placed them over him.

To pass the time, she occupied herself by snooping around his apartment. The living room was furnished with second hand furniture purchased at good will. A card table and two metal folding chairs sat in the center of the kitchen area. She opened one cabinet and caught the glimpse of a roach scurrying to the darkest corner of the cupboard.

Quickly, she closed the cabinet and realized why Doug's refrigerator was so full. This building was probably over run with roaches. All of the cabinets were empty except the one over the stove, and it contained a few dishes and a couple of pans. Next, she flicked on the light to the small bathroom. A laundry basket with a few dirty clothes lay between the sink and toilet. Finally, she peeked into his bedroom. The mattress and box springs rested on a metal frame with the wall serving as a headboard. The Holy Bible laid next to a small reading lamp on top of a small table next to the bed. Doug's apartment was lacking in the finer things, but it was clean and neat.

The only source of entertainment was the radio that joyfully played on the counter. She peered out the window and witnessed a drug purchase. Quickly, she stepped away from the window and opted to do something else with her time. While a small serving of her soup heated on the stove, she checked on Doug. His skin was no longer cold and clammy, and it appeared that he was resting well.

Long toward evening he began to stir. "How are you feeling?" Ann sat down next to him as he sat up.

"I feel much better."

"You look much better." She felt of his face again. His skin was cool but dry.

Doug chuckled, "I imagine that I didn't look worth the cost of a bullet to put me out of my misery."

"I would still like for you to see a real doctor and not a doctor from some free clinic. You said that this has happened before. How many times before?"

"Just one and both times were equally bad. The funny thing is, it hits faster than you can snap your fingers. When I got up, I felt fine. I ate breakfast and cleaned up. I

was getting ready to leave when the pain started in my stomach. Then I popped out in a sweat even though I was freezing.”

“You said that you didn’t get to tell me everything this morning. What else were you going to say?”

“I wanted to explain why I understood your situation with your parents. A long time ago, when I was seven, my father told me that I had ruined his life. I was the child that stole his future, and my younger brother was the one who would fulfill his dreams. Mom tried to convince me that he only said those things out of anger, but I know differently. He always favored my brother. I was lucky to have my mom; she balanced things out.”

“I count myself fortunate to have had Uncle John and to still have Aunt Millie in my life. They were unable to have children, and I was with them so much that some people actually believed that I was their daughter. I cherished the thought and decided to try it out. One day, I called Aunt Millie “Mom”. It made her feel good that I thought that much of her. However, she explained that it would be best to call her Aunt Millie.

“I guess that we were both fortunate.” His stomach growled. “Did you bring something to eat?”

Ann hopped up. “I sure did. I’ll put it on the stove to reheat.” With Doug standing next to her as she slowly stirred the soup, she concluded. “I told you that we have a lot in common.”

As they ate their supper, Ann debated on the best way to bring up his living arrangements, for she felt that he could afford better.

“Your soup is real good. I’m glad that you brought it.”

“Thank you. I’m glad that you like it.”

“After supper, I had better get you home.”

“No offense, but you don’t look like you have any business behind the wheel.”

Doug still looked pale.

“I’m still sleepy,” Doug confessed. “But taking you home is the least I can do for the good care you have given me.”

“I can stay with you tonight.” She placed a hand on top of his. “I’m not about to let you out of my sight. You gave me quite a scare. Then, in the morning you can take me home.”

“That sounds best,” Doug agreed as he made his way to the bedroom. It wasn’t long until he was sound asleep. With nothing else to do, Ann decided to retire early. She switched off the radio and curled up in a blanket on the sofa. Just as she was about to fall asleep a popping noise jolted her awake. At first, she thought it had to be a car backfiring until she heard it again. Pow, pow, pow in rapid succession. Her heart raced, and her attention rapidly refocused on the door as she heard something fall against it and slide down the wooden surface. She thought the gun fire was outside, but her eyes widened with the fear that the shooting had occurred inside. She sprung from the sofa and started for the door to give assistance but equally fast she stopped cold with the thought of the shooter lingering outside of Doug’s door. Her eyes widened even more, and her heart nearly stopped when someone jiggled the knob. She wished to throw herself against the door to prevent their entry but fear had frozen every fiber of muscle. Her eyes scanned the locks which were securely in place. Then she heard the would- be assailant stagger away.

Afraid to stay on the sofa, she gathered up the blanket and switched on the radio to drown out the sounds of the night and snuggled up close to Doug. Feeling safer, she finally drifted off to sleep.

She woke the next morning to the aroma of coffee and the sound of the shower. She dragged herself from bed and poured herself a cup of the regular hot beverage. Standing near the window, she saw the spoils of the night, “Good morning.” Doug wrapped his arms around her, and she inhaled the clean scent of his damp hair.

“Good morning,” she reiterated. “How are you feeling this morning?” She turned to face him.

“I feel one- hundred percent better. However,” he was reluctant to continue.

“I know,” Ann concluded, “I look wretched.” She laid her head over on his shoulder.

“That isn’t exactly what I was going to say, but close.” His comment generated a smile from her.

“I like to never fell asleep last night with all the noise. It’s like living in a nightmare that you can’t wake from.”

“I know what you are talking about. I went through the same thing the first few nights that I lived here. That is why I splurged on the radio. It helps drown out what goes bump in the night.”

Doug collected his car keys and opened the door. Ann remained frozen in place fully expecting to see a dead body in the hall. “Ann, are you ready to go?” She remained silent and motionless. “Ann,” he repeated as she stared at the empty dank hallway.

“I’m sorry,” She muttered, wiping the sleep from her eyes. “Last night, I heard someone at the door. It sounded like they fell.”

“Sometimes the drunks stagger in and sleep it off in the hall. If they find an unlocked door, they enter.”

“Have you ever considered moving? You work two jobs. I know that you can afford better.”

“I have looked into other apartments.”

“There are some vacancies in my apartment complex.”

“I know, and I still can not afford one of those apartments.”

“You could move in with me, and we will split the rent.”

“I’m sorry, Ann. Even at half price. Those apartments are way above my means. Plus, I quickly learned that I would be living from paycheck to paycheck in the better neighborhoods. My parents lived like that, and I don’t want to live like that all of my life. The rent here is cheap, and in a few years, I’ll have enough saved up for something better.”

“Define cheap when you are risking physical harm.”

“Ann, have you ever had to choose between eating or putting a roof over your head?”

“No.”

“I have. That is how little money I had to my name before I started working at Ford. I couldn’t even pay the rent here until I got my first paycheck. I know that my place isn’t much to look at, but it’s the best that I can afford right now.”

Ann looked around the small apartment once more. It could be made homey with a few little odd and end pieces and window treatments. However, homey did not address the safety issue. She would have to come up with something else.

As Doug dropped her off at her apartment and kissed her good-bye, her mind remained heavy on searching for a solution to his living arrangements. He needed something safer ASAP, but her mind needed R-E-S-T. She laid down on the bed and abandoned her first class. Hopefully, after a good long nap a solution would come to mind.

CHAPTER 24

“Deary, what’s the matter?” Millie inquired of Ann Marie as she sluggishly worked at some household chores.

“I’m worried about Doug.” Ann laid down her dust cloth. In fact, her worry over his safety had consumed her week.

“Has something happened between the two of you?”

“Yes and no,” Ann Marie answered before explaining the events that occurred prior to her traveling via taxi to Doug’s place.

Millie was flabbergasted. “If I would have known that you were going to that part of town, I would have thrown myself before the taxi to stop you. What on earth were you thinking? You could have been hurt or worse!”

“Aunt Millie, I had to know the truth. I had to see for myself that Doug was sick. I was terrified that he was through with me because of who my parents are. I was almost thrilled to see that he was sick, but he was so sick that it scared me. I wanted to get him to a doctor, but he had seen a doctor at a clinic in his vicinity...Oh Aunt Millie, I’m almost certain that doctor got the wrong impression of Doug just because of his address.”

“Wrong impression?”

“I’m sure they thought he was a junky going through withdrawal, and they couldn’t be further from the truth.”

“Oh.”

“He doesn’t do anything like that.”

“Ann Marie, you haven’t known him that long, so are you certain?”

“Positive, Aunt Millie. He’s like Uncle John. Doug is doing his best to make his way in the world. The only difference is that Doug has even less than Uncle John did.”

Millie patted Ann Marie’s hand. “Darling, I can see that you love this boy very much, so I’m wondering when you are going to bring him by to meet me?”

Ann Marie’s expression lighted up with a solution. “Oh my gosh, Aunt Millie. I’ve got the solution to Doug’s living arrangements, and it will help you, too.”

“What?”

“Doug could live in the apartment above the detached garage and pay you the same amount of rent that he is now. Then, to make up for whatever extra rent that you would want, he could work it off by maintaining the yard, shoveling snow and doing other odd and end jobs.”

Millie could do nothing but stutter and stammer at her niece’s suggestion.

“Oh please, don’t say no. The scenario is perfect.”

“Nobody has lived in the apartment above the garage in years. It’s piled with odds and ends and coated with a thick layer of dust.”

“But it will clean, and you will both benefit.”

“Well,” Millie relaxed, “I usually do all of the yard work, but I don’t get it done as soon as I use to. It would be nice to have the help. But I think that you are forgetting one little thing.”

“What’s that?”

“You haven’t talked to Doug about your plan.”

“I will Sunday. Oh thank you Aunt Millie.” Ann Marie threw her arms around her loveable aunt, who chuckled out in delight.

CHAPTER 25

Ann Marie glanced at her watch every few seconds during the lengthy sermon, wondering when Reverend Tim was going to conclude. Millie watched in amusement as she recalled the butterflies and jitters that proceeded seeing the love of her life.

“Remember deary, bring that love of yours over for lunch.”

“I haven’t forgotten.” Ann Marie whispered. As soon as Reverend Tim was finished, she jumped to her feet. “You’ll like him Aunt Millie.”

“I’m sure that I will.”

Herbert and Katheryn caught their conversation and neither one was pleased. In fact, the second Herbert’s feet hit the threshold of their home; he was on the phone to his PI friend.

“Hello.” Tucker’s voice sounded half asleep until he realized who was on the other end.

“Tucker, what information have you gathered on our daughter’s new boyfriend?”

“Mr. Parks,” every sense jolted to full attention. “It wasn’t as hard as I thought to get information on this kid. I need to confirm a few facts and then I’ll be over this evening.”

“Good.” Herbert hung up, hopeful that Tucker had found what he would need to end Ann Marie’s infatuation with this guy once and for all and return her attention toward a more suitable young man.

Ann eagerly met Doug at the foot of the apartment complex stairs and fell into his arms. He whirled her around drinking in her passionate kiss. “To what do I deserve such a wonderful greeting?” He held her close as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“I’ve found a solution to your living arrangements.”

“Oh you have?”

“Yes,” Ann beamed, “and it won’t cost you a penny more than you are already paying.”

“And it’s in a nice neighborhood?”

“Definitely.”

“What’s the catch?” Doug gave her a suspicious look.

“Some light chores are involved.”

“Define ‘light chores’”.

“Some yard work: mowing the lawn, trimming the hedge and raking the leaves in the fall and shoveling the sidewalk in the winter.”

“And where is this utopia?”

“Come, and I will show you.” Ann placed her arm around his.

“Where are we going?”

“To my Aunt Millie’s. She has prepared lunch for us.”

“This apartment belongs to your aunt?”

“Yes. It is above the detached garage. It is fully furnished.”

“And she is in agreement to these terms?”

“Yes. You living there will benefit both parties.”

With Ann pointing the way from the passenger seat of Doug's old Mustang, he parked in the driveway of one of the biggest brick homes in the heights. Its modest size yard was dotted with conifers and an occasional red maple. The perimeter of the estate was cordoned off with an evergreen hedge. "Where did you say this apartment exists?" He switched off the motor.

"It's up there." She baled out of the car, eager to introduce him to her aunt.

Millie watched as Ann Marie and Doug got out of the most awful looking car that she had ever seen. The couple walked hand in hand toward the house. Doug is a handsome fellow, "but my Heavens! That car". She said aloud. Never, in all the days of John restoring cars, did she ever see one this hideous. The doorbell rang a second time, drawing her attention away from the beastly thing parked in her driveway.

"You must be Doug." Millie warmly greeted, extending her hand. Doug's moderate hold dramatically weakened as she concluded. "I've heard a lot of wonderful things about you." Millie chuckled at his response. "I do believe that I have caused your handsome fellow to blush." She stepped aside.

"I, a..." Doug stammered. "I don't know what to say."

"Honest and humble," Millie winked at Ann Marie as she mentally completed the sentence, *just like my John*. "I'll bet the two of you are starved. I have lunch ready to set on the table." They followed Millie to the dining room. The long rectangular mahogany table that seated ten had three place settings at one end. The predominate color of the room was a rich burgundy. Three narrow windows, which spanned the room, nearly reached from floor to ceiling with heavy burgundy curtains lying in ripples on the floor, indicating the millions John acquired from his lucrative business.

Millie placed a hand on one chair. “Doug, I would like for you to sit here.” Her attention turned to Ann Marie. “Dear, will you help me carry things in from the kitchen?”

“May I help?” Doug felt out of place in this formal setting.

“Of course.” Millie motioned for him to follow.

For a moment Doug stood in awe of the large kitchen. His whole apartment would fit twice in this room alone. Millie handed him a couple of potholders. “Be a dear and carry this into the other room. There is a heat resistant mat centered among our place settings. Set it there.”

Doug placed a potholder over each curved handle of the stainless steel pot with a gold trim decoration. Millie and Ann followed, carrying the side dishes: lettuce salad, homemade bread, butter and a pitcher of ice water.

Following grace, Millie lifted the lid off of the decorative pot, and Ann inhaled the aroma. “Hmmm. Your famous vegetable soup.”

“Well,” Millie blushed, “famous under this roof.” With a silver ladle she dipped up a generous helping for Doug. The aroma was pleasing, but the taste was beyond words.

“I see where Ann gets her skills in the kitchen. This is wonderful.”

“Thank you.” His statement conjured up memories. “As a little girl, Ann Marie spent several hours sitting on the counter watching and learning. However, I too learned a valuable lesson.” Both ladies laughed as Millie continued. “Ann Marie wasn’t much over four years old, and she was quite the little helper. She loved to stir things up for me. I was fixing a custard for dessert and I was almost ready to put it in the oven when the

phone rang. I left her sitting on the counter stirring the custard. When I returned, she was still busy stirring. I added the vanilla and popped it in the oven.

“John served himself a hearty helping and gave me the strangest look with the first bite. Puzzled by his reaction, I sampled the custard. Instead of the expected creamy texture that a custard should have, it was crunchy.

“Ann Marie added the egg shells in my absence. So after that, I sat her off the counter before leaving the kitchen.”

“Her cooking skills have vastly improved.” Doug teased.

“That’s a relief!” Millie added with a hearty laugh.

“Okay, is this pick- on Ann Marie day?” Deep down she was glad to see Millie and Doug getting along.

As the laughter subsided, Millie stated, “I hear that you are looking for a new place to live?”

“A new location would be nice.”

“I’m sure Ann Marie has told you about the apartment above my garage?”

“Yes, and the generous terms.”

“How much rent do you currently pay per month?”

“One hundred twenty-five dollars.”

Millie nearly choked on her water for she was not expecting such a low amount.

“Are you all right, Aunt Millie?”

“Yes dear, quite fine.” If Doug wasn’t such a likeable young man, she would not be agreeable with the terms. “After dessert, we will show you the apartment. Do you have a lot of things to move in?”

“No, I do not.”

Following a delectable serving of blackberry cobbler topped with vanilla ice-cream, the young couple followed Millie to the detached garage. Her focus remained on Doug’s car. There wasn’t anywhere to hide the beastly sight of metal from view of the street. All of her garage space was consumed with antique cars that her late husband restored.

Millie unlocked the ground level walk through door and flicked on the fluorescent light. Doug stood in awe of the classic white roadster and black Model T that consumed the space of the two car garage. “Those two were John’s problem children. They withstand the old adage of fix or repair daily.”

“They’re Fords, so they will run.” Doug’s smile widened like a child’s in a candy store.

“Doug is an excellent mechanic,” Ann stated with pride.

“So I’ve heard.” Millie continued up the stairs and showed Doug the spacious fully furnished place. “If there is anything that you do not have a need for, we can store it elsewhere.”

“The apartment is perfect as it is.”

“It’s ready for you to immediately move in,” Ann encouraged.

Doug looked over at Millie, trying to determine whether or not she wanted him there. However, her facial expression revealed nothing. “When may I move in?”

“You may move in whenever you like.”

“Is today too soon?”

“No.”

“Good, I’ll go home and pack my things.”

Before exiting the garage, Millie paused by the Roadster, “Do you think that you could get them running?”

“A Ford was built to do nothing but run.” He ran his hand over the smooth front fender of the roadster. “I would be honored to work on a piece of history.”

“But not at this moment.” Ann pulled on Doug’s hand. “We have to get your things.”

“We?” Doug stated in surprise.

“Yes, two pair of hands are quicker than one, and I’ll be equally glad to have you out of that neighborhood.”

Millie waved as the couple backed down her long lane. She walked over to where his car had been parked, fully expecting to see an oil stain. Not only was the oil stain absent from her pavement, but her ears could not believe the smooth sound of the muscle car’s motor. Her John always said that a true mechanic’s skill could be measured by the car they drove. Millie shook her head, concluding that Doug must be a genius.

The deadbolt snapped back with the turn of the key. For a moment, Doug stood in the doorway remembering his first day. He felt Ann’s hand at his back and shook off the nostalgia.

As they concluded packing his clothing into a duffle bag, Ann inquired, “Anything else?” She watched him walk around the bed to a small table.

“Just this,” he picked up his mother’s Bible and placed it on top of his clothing in the duffle bag.

“What about the furniture and food?”

“Anyone moving in here has more need of it than I do.” Doug flicked off the light and locked the door to his past.

CHAPTER 26

Herbert poured himself a brandy as he watched the evening hours wane toward nightfall as Tucker entered the den. “What do you have for me?”

“I think you will be impressed. It wasn’t hard to track down information on Douglas Kahan. He grew up near the projects and currently lives in the low rent district of the projects where all state prison parolees are set up.”

“He has a record?”

Tucker plopped the file down on the burly desktop. “See for yourself. He’s had a few brushes with the law concerning grand theft auto.”

Herbert leafed through the file of mistakes that Doug has made, smiling at how easy it will be to get rid of him.

“Sir, if I may impart some advice.”

Herbert motioned with his hand for Tucker to continue. “Save your money. I think this relationship will self destruct. Ann Marie is going through a phase. The poor little rich girl has fallen for the bad boy type that Daddy will not approve of. Oh it may appear as true love, but Ann Marie is accustomed to a certain way of life, a lifestyle that Mr. Kahan can never provide for her.”

“I don’t know about that, Tucker. Ann Marie has always been a champion for the underdog.”

“But I have observed them together. He drives a car that looks like it should be in a junkyard, so they always take Ann Marie’s car. Plus, I witnessed a disagreement

between the two love birds in the park. Trust me. It is only a matter of time before that relationship falls apart.”

Herbert poured another glass of brandy for his friend, and they toasted to a job well done.

Before retiring for the night, Herbert placed the file in his desk drawer and securely locked it. He felt confident that if Tucker’s prediction was wrong that he had enough ammunition on Doug to buy him off, or he would reveal everything to Ann Marie and then he would get nothing.

CHAPTER 27

A MONTH LATER

Ann quietly stood in the doorway of the garage watching Doug work on the roadster. “You have got to be the easiest guy to find.”

Doug briefly looked away from his work beneath the hood. “What can I say?” He grinned, pleased to see her. “It’s a character flaw.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned against him as she gazed down at the motor her uncle endlessly toyed with. “So tell me, what is your prognosis?”

“It’s a Ford. It’ll run.”

“You’ve been saying that for weeks.”

“All good things come in time.”

“Ann Marie.” The sound of Millie’s voice drew Ann outside. “I thought I heard you pull in.” She smiled at the glow on her niece’s face for she had never seen Ann Marie so happy.

“Isn’t it great to have Doug living here?”

Millie had to agree, for she had become quite fond of the young man, but not his car. Her focus landed on the beastly thing. “I don’t know what I’m going to do about that eyesore?”

“Doug says that outward looks are not what is important, but what is important is what is under the hood. And trust me, I’ve seen that motor. It’s awesome.”

“I will agree that Doug is a talented young man, and I will also agree that outward appearances should not matter. However, my neighbors are beginning to complain about the unsightly appearance of his car.”

“Have you seen beneath the hood?” Ann Marie walked over to the driver’s side and popped the hood.

“Now Ann Marie, you know that a motor is a motor...” Millie’s jaw dropped and her voice trailed off. Ann chuckled at her Aunt’s reaction. For even with her limited knowledge, Millie recognized the motor’s potential. She blinked as if in a dream. But every time her eyes refocused, all she saw was the motor that exuded power.

“What are my two favorite girls up to?” Doug emerged from the garage drying his clean hands.

“We are just admiring your handy work. Have you got it all tuned up?” Ann referred to the minor changes in his motor that he was going to make following the car show in the park.

“Yep, would the two of you like to take a ride?”

Dismay struck Millie speechless for she did not want to hurt Doug’s feelings. Ann let the hood fall shut, and the noise made Millie jump. As Ann started for the passenger side of the Mustang, Millie’s eyes remained glued to the rough exterior. She felt her lower jaw move up and down, and she heard her voice, but all that came out was spluttering. But before Ann could reach for the car door, Doug clarified. “I mean the roadster is finished.”

Millie’s jaw dropped once again. “You’ve got it running?” Her eyes were as big as pools.

“Yes, and it is such a pretty day for a drive. We can put the top down. Is anyone game?”

They both gleefully followed Doug to the garage and tears nearly came to Millie's eyes at the sound of the roadster's motor. With a feeling of nostalgia, she slid into the passenger seat. Cruising down the street with the breeze playing with her locks of gray, she felt transported to her youth. After coming full circle, Doug parked the roadster in the driveway, but Millie was still on cloud nine. "There isn't anything that you can't do with a motor, is there?"

Doug wasn't sure how to answer Millie's question. "Well, it just took time and patience to get this old girl to running. I'm going to start on the Model T next."

"NO!" Millie's outburst stunned both Doug and Ann Marie. Millie popped out of the roadster and started for the attached garage, motioning for them to follow. "I don't want to squander your time on that old relic." With Doug's help, she opened the center garage door. "Your time will be best utilized on this." She concluded pulling the cover off of a 1930's Duesenbeurg. The chrome glistened, and the red and gray paint on the car's exterior shined. "This was John's pride and joy, but after he died, no one could get it to run again."

"This is one fine car." Doug walked around the auto, examining its exterior like a hungry wolf staring down its prey. Ann cleared her throat but he was little distracted.

"Uh, hello," she said. "Do I not rate a ride in the roadster?"

"Of course," Doug pulled open the hood of the Deusy as Millie sidled up beside him.

"What do you think? Can you get this one going again?"

"I'm sure going to try. A car this fine and rare should run, but I'm not going to lie to you; it will take more than time and patience. A good deal of creativity may be

needed.” Doug’s thoughts came to an abrupt halt when Ann slapped him on the upper arm with the back of her hand.

“I never thought that I would have to battle a car for my boyfriend’s attention.”

“I’m sorry.” He felt guilty. “I’ve never had a challenge like this before.”

Millie chuckled, “I tell you what. If peace will ensue, the two of you may take the roadster out on your date.”

Ann dashed from the garage with Doug close behind. Millie glanced out the garage door in time to see Ann wave a hearty farewell. The breeze played with Ann’s long brown tresses as they zipped down the lane. Millie reciprocated the gesture before closing the garage door. Once again, Doug’s rugged old Mustang garnered her attention. But this time the frustration of what to do was met with an answer. If Doug can get her old roadster to running, doing body work would be a snap. This realization made her eyes wide with excitement as she hurried into the house and grabbed her purse. With her car keys in hand, she was off to purchase some paint.

Herbert shook hands with the minister on the front steps of the church following a board meeting as Doug and Ann drove past. Reverend Tim waved to the young couple and Ann heartedly waved back. However, the sight of her father caused her heart to sink.

Herbert’s jaw dropped at the sight of Ann Marie with that Kahan kid driving a car that he knew all too well.

“That must be the young man renting Millie’s apartment. I’ve heard that he is quite the mechanic.”

“What?”

“Well, within a month’s time he has that old car of Millie’s running.”

“That isn’t what I was referring to. He is living in the apartment above Millie’s garage?”

“Yes, for over a month. He’s been a big help to Millie.”

Herbert didn’t say a word more as his steps fell heavy on the church steps.

Tucker had said that their relationship would self destruct, but obviously they had grown closer. And this was something that he had to squelch immediately. Enough time had already been wasted on foolish love.

The moment he arrived home, he unlocked the central drawer to his desk and removed the file that Tucker had gathered on Douglas Kahan. Herbert leafed through the pages. “It shouldn’t be too hard to buy him off.” He grinned, feeling satisfied that he would prevail and show Ann Marie what Doug was truly after- money.

Millie peaked out the window as she heard the roadster pull into the driveway. She muffled her amusement as Doug kissed Ann Marie farewell and then watched as she drove down the driveway before retiring to his apartment.

At the door, he found a gift. Curious, he opened the brown paper bag with the big red bow and removed one of the cans of red spray paint.

“I hope red is the color you intended for your car.”

He turned to see Millie. “Is there any other color?”

“I’m glad that you like it.”

“Ann has been at me to paint my car for awhile now.”

“No pressure,” Millie hesitated. “But will you be able to do that soon?”

Doug smiled and Millie became uncomfortable, “I mean, don’t you think it’s about time to give your car an outward appearance to match the creation under the hood?”

Doug couldn’t help but laugh. “Your neighbors are complaining.”

“Yes, I’m afraid they are.”

“Well, I better get started on the paint job before they have it towed away.”

The laughter relieved Millie’s nerves and as the laughter subsided, Doug explained. “When I first drove my car off of the junkyard, its rough exterior blended in with my former residence. Painting it then would have gotten it stolen. Let’s face it, thieves have taste. But once I moved here, I knew that I needed to get the body work done on my filly and soon. I noticed how the neighbors looked at her. She was out of her element.” And as Doug thought to himself, *so was I*. “The only excuse that I have is being busy with other things that seemed more important. But now,” he held up one of the cans of paint, “I have no excuses.”

“If you promise to cover the Model T when you paint, you may use this garage as your body shop. My car can sit out, and we will store the roadster in my car’s place.”

“You’ve got a deal.” They sealed their agreement on the strength of a handshake.

CHAPTER 28

A job posting sheet at the plant caught Doug's attention as he clocked in for the day. Earl's job was soon going to be available. In a state of shock, Doug walked down the assembly line; it was business as usual. He appeared to be the only one phased by Earl's leaving. At his work station, Doug tried to shake the foreboding feeling as he commenced with the job Earl taught him how to do.

"Good morning." The jovial greeting of the grandfatherly man caused Doug to jump. Not to mention, Earl's jovial demeanor added confusion to Doug's mixed bag of emotions.

"Earl, are you leaving the plant?"

"You betcha. After forty years of service, I'm ready for tranquility."

"Then it is your job that is posted?"

"Yep, and I know just the guy for the job."

"Who?"

"You."

"Me!" Doug's voice rang out above the noise and his tool clattered to the floor.

"Yes, you." Earl smiled even bigger.

"But I've only been here a few months."

"That don't matter. Management is waiting for me to express my opinion on who would be best fitted to fill my shoes, and that someone is you. So, I'm encouraging you to apply for the job."

"But surely management will go with someone with more experience."

“Not in this case, and I’ll tell you why: You have a vast knowledge of cars. You do this job better than anyone and that includes me. You also care about the people on this line. You listen to them and give them solutions to problems. In short, you care more for the quality of work than the fat increase you will get. However, that increase might provide you with the funds to purchase a new Ford. Trust me. I’m also thinking of the well being of the people who park around your car,” he concluded with a laugh.

“Hey!” Doug shook his index finger at his mentor. “Don’t knock a work in progress!” Then he became serious. “Who else has applied for your position?”

This question washed the glee from Earl’s face. “Your father.” Doug wilted. A promotion like this was what his dad had worked toward for years. “Now, you listen to me.” Earl placed a hand on Doug’s shoulder. “You apply for that job. You have my support and the support of everyone in this department. A lot of us have worked with your dad, and we know that he is only out for the money. He doesn’t care about the job, nor does he give a rat’s behind about the folks that will be working for him. Plus, I know there is hard feelings between you and your father. But if he gets the job, you will see him, work with him on a daily basis, and I have no doubts that he will make your life a living hell. So, I am looking out for your best interest. You have to apply for my job. I know in my heart that you can do it.”

During lunch break, Doug filled out the paperwork for the position and filed it for consideration.

Feeling that his day could not get anymore awkward or stressful, Doug entered the club and greeted Al. His bushy gray eyebrows were furrowed indicating a potential problem. Reluctant, Doug inquired. “How are things going?”

“Things are going the same as usual with one exception. The neatly dressed middle aged man at the bar asked especially for you. Do you know him?”

“No, but I guess that I’m about to.” Doug walked down to the far end of the bar. “Hello, Al told me that you are looking for me.”

“Douglas Kahan.”

“Yes.”

“We have a special someone in common.”

The word *common* struck Doug as odd as he looked this neatly dressed business man over. His dark tailor- made suit appeared to cost more than he made in a month.

“That special someone is my daughter, Ann Marie.” Judging by Mr. Parks’s expression, this wasn’t a cordial visit.

“What may I do for you?”

Doug’s question took Herbert by surprise, for this wasn’t the general response that he usually got. “Do you care for my daughter?”

“Deeply; she is an exceptional young woman.”

“That is something else that you and I have in common. We both see Ann Marie in the same light. However, I’m afraid that is where the similarities end. Ann Marie broke off a promising relationship with a fine upstanding young man...”

“Are you referring to the guy who brought her to this club and left her stranded with no way or means in which to get home?”

Again Doug’s question took Herbert by surprise and knocked him off of his train of thought. He knew Ann Marie had broken up with William, but he didn’t know why until now. “How did she get home?”

“I took her home after I got off work.” Doug watched Mr. Parks for an ounce of gratitude, but he didn’t even get as much as a thank you. In Herbert’s mind, Ann Marie’s infatuation with Doug was due to him rescuing her and nothing more. “As I was saying, Ann Marie has a promising future ahead of her. And for a moment, you are a distraction.” He reached into the breast pocket of his suit and removed an envelope. He slid it across the counter toward Doug. “A mere distraction from the upstanding young man that she is yet to meet and marry.” A smirk lightened Herbert’s expression as he watched Doug pick up the envelope but that smirk was whipped off abruptly when Doug immediately ripped the envelope and its contents in half without looking inside. Buying him off was not going to be as easy as he thought. Anger flashed in Herbert’s eyes. “You have one week to end your relationship with my daughter, or I will end it for you. I have a nice file on your criminal activities.” Herbert grinned at Doug’s reaction. Finally, victory was his. “I see that you have not shared that part of your life with Ann Marie, so I will.” He strolled away from the bar and out the door victorious and relishing in the fact that Tucker was correct. Ridding Douglas Kahan from Ann Marie’s life was not going to cost him a thing.

“What was that all about?” Al inquired noticing Doug’s fowl expression.

“Nothing.”

“That didn’t look like nothing to me. Who was that guy, and what did he want?”

“That, my friend, was Mr. Parks.”

“Oh,” there was no need for any further explanation, for Al knew that girl would only bring Doug heartache.

When business slowed, Al let Doug go home early. As he exited the rear of the building, he glared at his car illuminated by the security light. And for the first time, he looked at it the same way everyone else did. All he could see was the ugliness, neglect and misuse. The motor thundered beneath the hood as Doug wasted no time leaving the lot. Out on the open highway, his thoughts ran rampant. He had only been fooling himself. He belonged in the projects, not the heights. He was as much out of place in that luxury neighborhood as his beat-up car.

Slowly, Doug pulled into the detached garage and parked his car. He flicked on the lights and closed the door. Carefully and slowly he walked around the old Mustang, examining the imperfection he had pounded out and then sanded to a smooth finish. He didn't lack much, having it ready to paint. From the workbench, he selected a heavy rubber mallet. He would love to pound on the car at random to fight off his day of frustration but at the risk of undoing hours of work, he sat to the task of smoothing out the final dents. With each blow of the hammer against the metal of the car, Doug could hear the words of Mr. Parks, so he swung harder and faster to drown out his thoughts.

The noise woke Millie with a start. She pulled on her housecoat and trudged to the kitchen to find the source of the noise. The light in the detached garage drew her Doug's direction. She stopped inside the door, "Doug." He didn't stop "Douglas," her voice rang out halting his work. "What on earth are you doing? It is twelve thirty in the morning?"

"I'm sorry, Millie. I couldn't sleep and beating out my frustrations on this heap of metal seemed like a good idea at the time."

“Heap of metal,” Millie repeated, stunned by those words coming from him.
“Come sit down and tell me what has you so upset.”

As Doug fell onto the wooden bench next to Millie, fatigue wore on his labored muscles, and he rested his head against the wall. “I’ll never be good enough for Ann.”

“Where’s that coming from?”

“I met your brother-in-law today.”

Millie rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Don’t let that pompous horse’s rear end intimidate you. You and Ann Marie are good for each other. You make each other happy.”

“I’ve made a lot of mistakes.”

“You give me the name of one living, breathing human being that hasn’t made their share of mistakes.”

“Millie, I work two full time jobs and still my savings isn’t enough to support a future with Ann as my wife.”

Millie glowed with the mentioning of his last two words. “I’m going to share with you a bit of wisdom. I married for love. My John was from a middle class family. He was smart, ambitious, charming, handsome, and my father did not approve of him. But love knows no boundaries. When you meet that special someone, bank accounts are irrelevant. A fact my father could not see. So against his wishes, we got married. In other words, we eloped. My father was furious. He cut me off, but I didn’t care. Money could not buy the kind of love that we shared. Together, we were greater than the sum of our parts, and John’s business thrived. We were successful in every sense of the word except one. We couldn’t have a child.

“Now, my little sister, Katheryn, being much younger than I, witnessed first hand the power my father exhibited over me (or tried to have over me), and it terrified her. She abandoned love and married Herbert for money, security and Father’s approval. She succeeded on winning both money and approval and somehow in a loveless marriage Ann Marie was born. Katheryn and Herbert have always been devoted parents, but they do not know their daughter.

“I’ve never seen Ann Marie so happy. That happiness evolved from your relationship. And I see a lot of my John’s qualities in you. So what difference does it make if Herbert does not approve of you. Ann Marie loves you, and you love her; that is all that matters.”

“But he threatened to use my mistakes against me.”

“That’s the funny thing about mistakes. They are in the past, and they are learning tools, sometimes hard painful tools. But they are what they are, and Ann Marie knows that.”

As Millie went off to bed, Doug remained on the bench gazing at his car. The blemishes were magnified by the sanding. And he wondered how he was going to tell Ann about his past transgressions when he couldn’t even tell Millie. The truth would make him as vulnerable as the sanded places on that old car, and all he would be left clinging to would be Ann’s understanding and forgiveness.

CHAPTER 29

With bloodshot eyes, Doug reported for work at Ford.

“The boss wants to see you.” Earl eagerly reported.

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“What for?”

“Interview for my job.” Earl became sober with concern over Doug’s appearance.

“Are you feeling all right? You don’t look so good.”

Now, more than ever, he wished that he would have called in sick, but now it was too late. “I’m fine. I didn’t sleep very well last night.” Truth was he didn’t sleep a wink.

“Before you go in to see Mr. Simmons, I have some Visine in my locker. That should clear up your eyes. Steve made coffee this morning. That should be thick enough with caffeine to jolt the dead to life.”

Doug winced at the bitter taste of the strong black coffee. But after consuming a quarter of a cup, he could already feel the caffeine working by the time he reached their boss’s door.

“Good morning Mr. Kahan and how are you today?”

“Feeling pretty good.”

“Please have a seat.” Mr. Simmons motioned at the two chairs before his cluttered desk. “I’ve got to be honest with you Mr. Kahan...”

“Doug, please.”

“Doug, I was quite surprised to see your application come across my desk for this promotion. You’ve only been here a few months, so what makes you think that you would be a good candidate for this job?”

A brief moment of silence transpired, for Doug had not given his current situation at Ford another thought after meeting Ann’s dad. Finally, his old car gave him inspiration. “There isn’t anything that I don’t know about a motor, especially a Ford motor. And even though I’ve been on the job for a short time, I’ve learned a lot more from Earl. He is a good teacher. Not only have I learned to do my job well, but I’ve also picked up some finer points on people skills from him. I’ve always been one to listen, but I’ve observed Earl handle some touchy situations between employees with the greatest of ease. So I believe that working with him has given me the edge on this job.”

“Oh really, you’ve got the advantage over someone who has been here for thirty years plus.”

“If that person has worked along side Earl, then I would say that he has the advantage over me.”

Mr. Simmons’s eyebrows raised and his lips pursed together as his head nodded. “Honesty, I like that. Now, to be honest with you, Earl has spoken highly of you which weighs well in your favor. Plus, I’ve seen the car you drive and I’ve heard rumors that you got it from a junkyard. Is that true?”

“Yes, it is true. I paid the owner of the junkyard twenty-five dollars for it as it was. I used parts from other junked cars to get it running. Once it was beyond the gates of the junkyard, I replaced the more worn out parts first. It is now a fine tuned machine

and in a couple of days, it will have a new paint job. Then, it will look like it rolled off the assembly line.”

Mr. Simmons chuckled, “I have no doubts about your abilities. I know that you can tear a car apart, and I don’t doubt that you can build one from the ground up. You are an asset to Ford.”

Doug wilted at the vague reference to his criminal record, but Mr. Simmons put him at ease once more. “I do have one more person to interview for the job, but I’ve known this guy for years, and he can’t do what you can do. So, unless he impresses me more than you just did, I’ll be offering the job to you. But in all fairness, I must interview this final candidate.” Mr. Simmons rose from his chair and extended his hand. Doug smiled and firmly shook his hand, eager to see the outcome of the day.

But as Doug walked down the hall, he met his dad. A sick feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. He tried to hurry past, but his dad blocked his escape. He laughed in Doug’s face. “You just wasted a half hour of Mr. Simmons’s time. There is no way they would consider an ex-con like you for a management job. In fact, you only got a job on this line because Ford took pity on you.”

Doug pushed his way past his father with his pace becoming more urgent as his stomach churned. Quickly, he bolted into the men’s room and fell to his knees before the toilet. The vial taste of bile was worse than Steve’s coffee. But the worst yet was the truth. He was and would always be an ex-con, so why would Ford choose to promote him?

However, by the end of the day, Mr. Simmons did what he said he would do and offered the job to him. Earl was beside himself with excitement and word of Doug’s

promotion rippled through the factory, reaching his father's ears in warp time. Equally quick was his father's temper over the indignation of losing yet another promotion. But this time it was worse, for he lost this job to his felonious son who had worked on the line for a few months. It was more than he could take, and he walked off the job. The rumor mill had it that he went to work at General Motors at the bottom of the pay scale.

By the weekend, Doug met Ann with restored hope and the determination to tell her about the sins of his past. But the second he looked into those warm brown eyes, he was lost.

"You said that you have something to tell me?" Inquisitively, Ann looked at him puzzled by his demeanor.

Doug opened his mouth, but not a word came forth. He drank in her beauty, not wanting to lose a moment of her love. "I was promoted at Ford."

Ann's expression erupted into glee as she jumped into his embrace. A long passionate kiss ensued, and any ounce of strength that remained to tell her the truth about his past was lost to the memory of their one passionate night together.

Feeling the longing in his touch, Ann ached to be close to him again. It had taken them some time to get back to this point because of the awkwardness of their diverse social realm. But with nothing standing in their way, they each gave into one another. Hour after hour, Doug drank in every ounce of Ann's love, not knowing when their romance might come to a tragic conclusion.

CHAPTER 30

Doug woke with Ann nestled in his arms. Quietly, he watched her sleep, knowing that he could no longer tell her about his past. The moment of truth had passed and he hoped that Millie would be right about Ann's forgiveness if and when Herbert shared the truth with her. In fact, he was surprised that he hadn't told her by now.

"Good morning," Ann greeted with a warm smile, comfortable in his embrace.

"Good morning." He kissed her on the forehead.

Neither one was eager to leave the bed. "I began to wonder if our relationship would ever get back to this point. In fact, I was certain my omission of my last name had ended our relationship."

Doug pulled her closer to him to hide the guilt of his omission, which was the greater of the two. His actions evoked a smile from Ann as she continued, "But after last night, it's clear our relationship is stronger than ever." Doug kissed her on the neck, enticing a giggle as she turned to face him. "With this promotion at Ford, you won't have to work so many extra hours."

"Not true." He smiled at her puzzled expression. "The extra income will help me save up quicker for a future with you."

Ann beamed, "Why Douglas Kahan, is there something you would like to ask me?"

"In fact, there is, but not at this moment."

Ann wanted to immediately say yes to his inferred marriage proposal, but he passionately kissed her, and she got lost in the moment of their love.

She watched from her bedroom window as he drove off to work. She gathered her robe up tighter around her body, but it was little comfort as compared to his loving embrace. She looked at the bed they shared. The covers were twisted and tangled. The hours until tomorrow were far too many.

To pass the time, she changed clothes and drove over to share her exciting news with Aunt Millie. From the moment Ann walked through the door, Millie could see a change in her niece. “Ann Marie, you are simply glowing.”

“Oh Aunt Millie,” she took the older lady by the hand as they sat down on the loveseat. “I’ve got the most wonderful news. I think Doug is going to propose.”

“Oh,” Millie cupped her hands over her mouth and nose. “I just knew that love would see the two of you through the difficulties of the past.”

“Aunt Millie, I’m not going to keep anything from Doug ever again. The last time I did, I was certain I had thrown our future away for good.”

Millie looked a little puzzled following her conversation with Doug the night before, “Didn’t Doug tell you...” She did not get the chance to finish.

“Yes, he told me about the promotion at Ford. That is what prompted our conversation about the future.”

Millie hesitated as she realized that whatever was in Doug’s past, he had not shared it with Ann Marie. Fearing that he had made a grave mistake, she decided to prepare Ann Marie for any surprises Herbert might have. “I think there is something that you need to know.” Millie’s somberness faded Ann’s smile.

“About Doug?”

“Yes,” Millie drew in a ragged breath and then laid out the truth to Ann. “Your father tried to pay Doug off the other day.”

“So he would leave me?” Ann jumped up, but Millie served as the anchor that held her niece in place. “Herbert’s payoff didn’t work. Doug tore the envelope up right before him without looking at the contents. Your father has met a kid that loves you above all else. But that’s not going to stop your father from interfering,” Millie warned as she waved her index finger around at Ann Marie.

CHAPTER 31

Doug passed a jewelry store on his way to the club. A few blocks down, he parked his car and walked back to the store window. The diamond rings glistened beneath the bright lights. With two full time jobs, he had managed to put back a little nest egg, one big enough to purchase a nice ring for Ann. Plus, with the added income from his promotion, money shouldn't be as big of a concern. So without further hesitation, he walked in the store. He gazed upon the engagement rings wondering which one Ann would like best.

"May I help you?" A lady in her early sixties with fading reddish hair inquired.

"Yes, I'm looking for the perfect ring for a perfect girl."

The lady's red lips curled up into a smile. "Did you have a certain cut or particular style in mind?"

"Not really, but the ring should match her warmth, gentleness and kindness."

"Hmmm. I don't know what your price range is, but let me show you this ring."

She walked to the far end of the counter near the back of the store with Doug following her on the opposite side. "This ring set has been a favorite of mine." She removed the box containing Ann's engagement ring from the showcase. It is a princess cut diamond with two small cut diamonds on each side of the central one. "The larger central stone represents the future. The two smaller stones represent the past and present. Whenever two lives come together, the past and the present become small as the two embark on a journey through life as one. That is why the future is so much larger, because you will have many years together."

“It is exquisite but I’m almost afraid to inquire about the price.”

“It sells for twenty-five hundred, but I’ll let you have it for two thousand.” She pulled the small engagement ring from the box so Doug could take a closer look. He had saved up a little over two thousand dollars. The ring was perfect for Ann, but it would drain him financially.

Following his reluctance she placed the engagement ring back in the box. “I understand,” she started to place the ring set back in the case.

“May I see the other ring?”

The lady’s expression perked up at Doug’s continued interest, for usually the guy moved back up the showcase in search of something cheaper. She handed him the simple gold band that matched his simplicity to the letter. He slid it on and to the lady’s amazement, it perfectly fit. “Well, I’ll be.” Her eyes were as wide as pools and her mouth gaped open. Quickly, she pulled herself together. “We have a lay- a-way plan, if you would like...”

“I’m prepared to pay for them in full, if I may take them today?”

“Why of course, that will be fine.” She eyed Doug and he caught her reaction.

“I’m not going to lie to you. The funds, for the rings, are there in my account, but I won’t have much left. However, Friday is payday.”

The lady smiled at Doug’s candor. “Your girlfriend is one lucky young lady.”

“I’m the lucky one.”

“I don’t know your girlfriend, but she must be special?”

“Ann is special.”

She enjoyed the way he talked about Ann, and his heart felt smile verified that her love was cherished above all else. “I’ve worked in this store for over forty years. And in that time, I’ve watched several young men pick out rings. I’ve even watched young couples shop for rings. And over my many years of experience, I’ve got to where I can tell if a couple will make it or not. I would say that you and your Ann will be together for many anniversaries to come.”

CHAPTER 32

As Ann Marie warmly greeted Reverend Tim at the chapel doors, her radiance did not escape him. “Well, Miss Parks you are simply glowing this morning.”

“Thank you Reverend.” She moved on the instant she spotted Aunt Millie. The two embraced.

“Gracious child, I’ve never seen you so happy, but that’s a good thing.” Millie added.

“People have been saying the oddest things to me. Like this morning, Reverend Tim said that I’m glowing.”

“Honey, you are. Your happiness is shining from the inside out, and I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks Aunt Millie, I don’t think anything could wipe away my smile today.”

It wasn’t long until Ann’s words were put to the test. As she visited with a friend in the aisle, she noticed her father and mother enter the church. Quickly, the glow was extinguished and in its place brewed a loathsome feeling for what Herbert tried to do to her relationship with Doug.

Ann’s direct glare cut Herbert to the core, but he consoled himself with the fact that Ann Marie was better off without Doug. In truth, he was a little surprised that Doug told her about his criminal past. But oh well, what was done was done. He couldn’t help but smile a little over his victory. “Hello sweetheart,” Katheryn gave her daughter a quick kiss on the cheek before sliding into the pew ahead of Ann Marie and Millie. Herbert’s eyes darted around the church as he spoke in a soft kind voice to Ann Marie:

“It really is for the best that you are rid of that Kahan boy. Your heart will mend and you will fall for someone more suited.”

Ann Marie’s jaw dropped but not a sound came forth. What on earth was he talking about? She hadn’t dumped Doug, nor did she have any intentions of doing so. How could he sit there in that pew after the indignation he inflicted on the man she would marry? Reverend Tim stepped to the pulpit before she had a chance to pump her father for answers. Millie leaned toward Ann Marie and whispered, “Hang on to the love you have for Doug, no matter what, because your father will not stop trying to tank your relationship.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let Doug go, no matter what Dad tries to do.” And that was a sentiment that she intended to impart with him at the conclusion of the day’s service. Her glare bore imaginary holes in the back of her father’s skull as he sat pleased, smiling over the fact that Doug Kahan was foolish enough to think that his daughter would forgive him of his criminal escapades. Why, it was laughable.

Ann Marie was thoroughly convinced that Reverend Tim loved the sound of his own voice since his sermon ran long. She would love to have pressed the fast forward button to get to the conclusion, but all she could do was fidget.

Millie could see that Ann Marie was angry and probably orchestrating every word she would say to her father. Fretting over the outcome of the day, Millie bit her lower lip as she pondered what to do. But as soon as the congregation was dismissed, Ann Marie was gone in a flash. Desperately, Millie searched outside for her niece, but it was no use. Her shoulders slumped and with a heavy heart, Millie returned home wishing that she

could turn back time and advise Ann Marie to listen to Doug before jumping to any conclusions. For in life, mistakes will occur, and second chances at love are rare.

Herbert found Ann Marie waiting in his study. Her ferocity had not diminished a tithe.

And now that she had her father cornered, she unleashed her temper. “I know what you did, and this time it didn’t work.”

Ready to console his daughter, Herbert was taken off guard. “What didn’t work?” A sick feeling settled in the pit of his stomach.

“Don’t try to deny that you tried to buy Doug off. Money doesn’t buy everything, Father. What Doug and I have is real love.”

Herbert stepped back as if the wind had been knocked from his lungs. For a moment, Ann felt victorious. But as the realization settled in that Doug had not shared his shady past with Ann Marie, he walked around to his desk and unlocked the central drawer. With new life coursing through his veins, Herbert laid the file down before Ann Marie. “Before you harshly judge me, I think that you should look at the contents of this file. The man that you share real feelings for is hiding something very big from you.”

Ann Marie started to open the file as Herbert continued, “I’m sorry honey. Douglas isn’t the boy from down the street.”

Her focus snapped back to her father. “What makes you think that I will believe a word in this file? You will stoop to all measures to tank our relationship.”

“It is true that I do not approve of Douglas Kahan. But the information in that file is public record. You can check it anyway that you like.”

Part of Ann Marie wanted to follow Aunt Millie’s advice and walk away. However, time and time again, her father had proven her choices in men to be poor.

Even as she opened the folder with a trembling, reluctant hand, she still hoped that Doug would be different. But as the mug shot of Douglas Kahan stared back at her, she could not deny the truth. His lie stung her eyes as the warm tears streamed down her cheeks. The closer Herbert came to console his only child, the further she retreated. Running from the house, she slid behind the wheel of her car and took off in a flash. She blinked away the tears blurring her vision as her mind raced faster than the engine beneath the hood of her vintage sports car.

Time and time again, her boyfriends had been after one thing and one thing only, money. She thought Doug was different. But once again, she had been proven wrong. He was just one more bad choice added to the long list of bad choices. “What’s wrong with me?” She cried out wiping away the tears of Doug’s criminal betrayal. “Am I so desperate for someone to love that my judgment has swayed from bad to worse?”

Memories of the nights spent tangled in his arms, giving her love freely, almost repulsed her to the point of being physically ill. She had been made a fool for the last time.

CHAPTER 33

Doug parked in his usual spot in the apartment complex and stared up at Ann's windows. He dug deep into the pocket of his denim coat for the elegant princess cut diamond ring. He smiled at its brilliance as he recalled what the sales lady told him about the significance of each stone before returning it to his pocket. As he climbed the stairs to Ann's apartment, he was surprised that she hadn't greeted him before now. He rang the doorbell and waited. As he rang the doorbell again a state of panic welled up in the pit of his stomach as his mind became clogged with a series of what ifs. Slowly, he started down the stairs. His heart leaped as Ann parked next to his car. She brushed away her tears and long gone were the feelings of excitement to see Doug. In fact, he was the last person she wished to see.

Quickly, his smile vanished as she emerged from her car. He could tell that something was wrong, and that his greatest fear had been realized. Standing face-to-face, he began, "Please, let me explain."

"Explain!" Ann blurted out at his audacity. "What kind of fool do you think I am?" She stepped back, repulsed by his touch.

"Ann, you are one of the most intelligent..."

"Don't you dare patronize me. I saw your prison record. No wonder you are so good with cars."

Her words struck harder than a fist to the abdomen. His mouth opened, but not a word came out. No explanation would wash away the pain. He dropped to one knee and

instead of proposing he begged her forgiveness, but she had no use for him. He had betrayed her and made her out a fool. She would trust him no more.

As she stepped around him, he pulled himself up off of the pavement and watched her vanish from his life. Numb, he aimlessly drove the city streets as tears of regret streamed down his cheeks. By evening, his journey ended at Millie's. The dejected look on his face confirmed her worst fear. She met him in the driveway. "Doug, I'm sorry. My niece is strong willed and hot tempered. Please, give her time to cool down. She will come around."

Doug could no more control his tears than he could the events of the day. "Millie, I made a fool of myself, for all to see, as I begged her to give me another chance, but she won't."

"I still believe that she will come around. Please give her time."

CHAPTER 34

Standing before his parole officer's door, Doug felt the engagement ring in his pocket. Its edges were as rough and harsh as the truth of Ann's feelings toward him. Millie encouraged him to give her time and he had. He removed the ring from his pocket and gazed upon it. Most of his bank account was tied up in this little item. Hocking it would be the most logical thing, but he returned it to his pocket and knocked on the door.

"Enter." A muffled voice responded.

Doug entered one last time with an uncertain future lying before him.

"Kahan," the overweight parole officer shifted some folders around on her desk and ultimately yanked the desired one from beneath the pile. "I must say that I am impressed. Most guys with a record like yours do not succeed in turning their lives around."

The odor of cigarette smoke stung Doug's eyes and throat. He said nothing as she finished up his walking papers. "Now that you can go anywhere, where are you going to go?" A ring of smoke encircled her head as she handed him a copy of his papers.

"I'm going to a state that never gets cold."

"Best of luck to ya," she laughed, stretching her arm across her messy desk.

"Thank you," Doug firmly shook her hand before departing.

Millie glanced out the window of her home, and the air rushed from her lungs in a gasp at the sight of Doug packing his belongings in the trunk of his old Mustang. With a sense of urgency, she tore through the house and bolted out the backdoor. "Doug." Her

breathing was heavy, and each word came between a huff and puff. “Doug, please, give Ann Marie more time. She is stubborn. She will come around.” Hope glistened in her eyes, but was dashed as he closed the trunk lid.

“Millie, it has been two weeks. I understand why she won’t have anything to do with me. My past is as rough as this old car’s exterior.” He handed her the sack of spray paint. “Maybe you can get a refund for these.”

“You’ll use them.” She shoved them back toward him.

“No. You can’t hide what something truly is.”

“Part of your youth was wasted on wrong living. And like your dented battered car, we all have our share of dents and dings. It is how you handle them. That is what makes you the person that you are. And Douglas Kahan, you have turned your life around. Your life now is like this spray paint as long as you stay on the right path, because what is in your heart is as good and true as what is under the hood of your car.”

He leaned against the trunk and confessed his feelings. “A few days ago, I had all kinds of hopes and dreams of a future with Ann.

“I understand her father and I don’t blame him for my failed relationship. That lies squarely on my shoulders. I should have trusted in Ann and in our love to tell her about my past. But instead, I let fear win, and it left me on my knees begging for a second chance, an undeserved second chance.”

“Have you seen or talked to Ann Marie?”

“No, I hurt her badly.”

“Doug, I know my niece. The love she has for you didn’t just vanish. That kind of love permanently stamps the heart. Please, go see her or call her. Talk this out.”

Filled with hope, Doug took Millie's advice and called Ann. The sound of her voice tugged on the strings of his heart, and a lump formed in his throat. The prolonged silence prompted Ann to repeat. "Hello."

"Ann, please don't hang up on me."

She became weak at the sound of Doug's voice, and tears boiled to the surface. She tried to hang on to the anger and hurt of his betrayal, but it was no use. The bond of their love was too strong to hold on to anything negative. Unable to speak, she hung up and crumbled to the floor, a wreck of emotions. Her heartache was no longer caused by betrayal, but by Doug's absence from her life. She pounded her fist against the wall, for she thought she was over him, that loving him had been a mistake not worth repeating. But if all of this were true, then why did she feel this way now?

From the kitchen, Millie heard Doug's old mustang start up. She rushed to the living room in time to see him leave the lane. At first her heart leaped for joy and then she noticed the brown paper bag containing the red spray paint cans. She peered back out the large picture window with a heavy heart, and subconsciously she knew that the call did not go well. She eased down into a wing back chair and said a little prayer. "Lord, never were two hearts made to beat as one until now. Protect Doug on his journey and I pray that they will someday find their way back together again. Amen."

CHAPTER 35

Ann Marie woke Saturday morning with a melancholy feeling. She rolled over on her side and watched the minutes slowly tick by. After hearing Doug's voice yesterday, all of the hurt and anger had been replaced with a longing to rekindle what they once had. A tear escaped her eyelashes as she was faced with one of two options. She could keep pride as her companion, which would free Doug to love another, or she could go to him and beg his forgiveness and hope that he would give her the second chance that she refused him.

With a new found energy of hope, she stood before Doug's door and knocked. Her heart pounded with every second that he did not respond. She pounded on the door and visualized their encounter. "I've been such a fool. Please forgive me." She whispered those last three words as she struck the door once more, but still he did not respond. Panic replaced the energy of hope as she continued to pound on the door. "Doug," she cried out. "I beg you. Please give me another chance. I was such a fool." The tears would no longer be held.

Millie placed her breakfast dishes in the sink and noticed Ann Marie's car parked in the driveway. "Oh my," she sighed as she slipped out the backdoor and trudged up to Doug's old apartment where she found Ann Marie in tears banging on the door. "He's gone my child."

The sound of Millie's voice caused Ann Marie to jump. "When will he be back?"

“He isn’t coming back.” Millie embraced her niece to avoid seeing the pain on her face.

“Where did he go?” Ann sobbed as she clung to a ray of hope.

“I don’t know, honey.”

Ann Marie’s heart shattered, and Millie’s shoulder became damp with her regret.

“I’m sorry, honey. I begged him not to go because I knew this day would come.”

Millie tried to comfort Ann Marie.

“I was such a fool, and I made such a big mistake.”

“Honey, he still loves you. You have not lost that.” Millie gazed into Ann’s teary eyes.

“But what if he has moved on to another girlfriend? I hurt him bad.”

“A love like yours is enduring. Have faith, we will find him.”

“How?”

“Someone out there knows where he went. We will track him down.”

“Oh my goodness,” Ann Marie covered her mouth as realization sparked inspiration.

“What is it?”

“I think I know of someone who might know where he went.” Ann’s legs could not carry her quick enough to her car.

“Good luck, honey.” Millie called after her.

CHAPTER 36

Al fumbled a glass that he was drying with a t-towel the second he noticed Ann Marie walk into his sparsely populated club. He warned Doug that she was a heartache load of trouble. But the longer they dated, the more he began to think that he was wrong until a few days ago. “Whatever it is that you are looking for,” Al began as she closed the distance. “You ain’t gonna find it here.” His gruff voice stopped her short.

Feeling that he was not going to help her, the tears started to come again. “I’ve made a terrible mistake.”

Unmoved by her emotion, Al continued, “Missy, the only mistake made was when two different worlds met and tried to co-exist as one.”

“The geography of where we grew up is different, but otherwise, we are the same. I let Doug walk out of my life because I was hurt and mad. Now, all that I feel is the heartache of his absence. I want to find him so that I can beg his forgiveness and see if he will give me the second chance that I denied him.”

Al could tell that Ann Marie’s words and feeling were genuine since he witnessed the same agony bearing down on Doug. “Well Miss Parks,” his expression softened. “I truly wish that I could help you, because he would probably give you that second chance. But he turned in his resignation a few days ago. And I’m afraid he not only left Detroit, but the whole state of Michigan.”

“But he had a good job at Ford.”

“Yes, but there was no longer anything else here for him, except a past that cost him you.”

“You don’t have any idea where he went?”

“I don’t believe that he had any set destination in mind, because he said that he was moving to a state that never got cold.”

Something about that statement sounded like a ray of hope. But on the drive back to Aunt Millie’s, she began to feel defeated. Even though Al narrowed the search down to a few states, the odds were still stacked against her on finding her one true love, Doug.

Millie greeted Ann Marie with open arms. “It’s no use.” She sobbed.

Millie stroked Ann Marie’s silky long hair as she tried to find the words to console a love sick heart. “In time your heart will heal. Don’t give up. Where the good Lord shuts a door, He always opens a window.”

“Al said that Doug has moved to a state with a year round warm climate. That is all he knew.”

“Well then, a window has been opened. It’s just bigger than we thought. Your Uncle John used to know this PI, Frank Mills. He used him to do background checks on new employees. I’ll ask him to look for Doug. If anyone can find him, Frank will.”

CHAPTER 37

TWO WEEKS LATER

Doug reached into the pocket of his denim coat. The princess cut engagement ring poked at his fingers. He removed it and gazed upon the future he once dreamed of having with Ann. Many times he thought about pawning, it so he could arrive in LA sooner, but something inside kept him from doing that. Frustration enticed him to throw it as far as he could. But time and time again, he returned it to his pocket where he had it on the night he was going to propose to Ann.

Looking upon its hard surface did not evoke the pain that it once did. Instead, it provided a solution to his lack of cash. But again, he returned it to his pocket. He counted the small denomination of bills and loose change he had left. It wasn't enough to afford a room in a dive motel and food, so he must choose which basic necessity he needed the worst. Since California was balmy as compared to Detroit, he opted to stretch out in the backseat of his car. And as the sun sat, he drifted off to sleep.

By morning's first light, a solution to his financial woes gently flopped against the Mustang's front windshield. The corner of the classifieds was lodged beneath the wiper, but as the breeze off of the ocean picked up, the paper rippled against the glass waking Doug. The words *Help Wanted* caused him to scurry from the backseat and lay siege to the paper. He zeroed in on the SOS from a garage a few blocks away.

Desperately looking for a good mechanic.

Must have experience working with most

Every kind of car.

He wadded the paper around to find the date. The ad was only a couple of days old, so maybe the position had not been filled. On the way there, he stopped at a diner for breakfast and then with a full stomach, he proceeded on.

Ed whistled to a tune on the radio as he worked beneath the hood of a Cadillac. He was a slender man with thinning dark hair. His skills had built up his business to the point of needing help to keep up with the work. But finding another good mechanic had cost him more in ads than he dared think.

Out of the corner of one eye, he caught the glimpse of something that distracted him from his work. Carefully, he watched the battered, rusted, wreck of a Ford Mustang roll onto his lot. Concern creased his forehead, for there was no need to attempt fixing something that belonged in a junkyard. But before the driver killed the engine, he couldn't help but be amazed at how quiet and smooth the engine sounded.

As the driver emerged from the car, Ed noticed the newspaper in the kid's hand. "Oh no," he muttered under his breath as the young man approached. "May I help ya?"

"I hope so. I came to apply for the job mentioned in this ad if it is still open."

It was on the tip of Ed's tongue to say that the position had been successfully filled, but something about this kid and his car kept him from doing so. "What's your name?" Ed's voice became raspy.

"Doug Kahan." He shook hands with the fatherly figure.

"Ed Deskins," He paused for a moment. His eyes fixed on the Mustang. "If you don't mind me asking, what happened to your car?"

"Life."

Ed's thick eyebrows raised. "How long have you had it?"

"Goin' on two years."

"Must have been a rough two years. Where did you get it?"

"Junkyard."

"It looks like it never should have left. What's under the hood?"

Doug tossed the classifieds in the trash barrel as he walked with Ed to his car. He popped the hood, and Ed had to blink twice at the engine before his eyes. He leaned in to closer examine the workmanship. "Did you do this work?"

"Yes."

"Wait a minute, that isn't a Ford part." Ed stepped back to look at the body of the car once more.

"You're correct." Doug answered. "The motor is a hybrid of parts from high performance engines."

"Start her up. I want to hear it run again."

Doug reached in and turned the key. The smooth sounding engine made Ed smile and feel as giddy as a child at Christmas. When Doug rejoined him at the front of the car, Ed announced. "You've got the job. When can you start?"

"Right now."

"Fabulous." Ed started back to the garage as Doug killed the motor.

"Where do you want me to start?"

"Right here; this old caddy has been a problem child for years. The owner has never complained, but it just doesn't run like I think it should. I've adjusted here and there and still no difference. That bugs the snot out of me. I want you to listen." Ed

started up the old caddy, and Doug leaned in. He could hear the roughness. It sounded as though it was on the verge of missing, but didn't. "How old are the spark plugs?"

"Practically new."

"Adjust the timing?"

"Yep, no change. It's no worse, and it's no better."

Doug stopped at the potential problem. Without taking his eyes off of it, he inquired, "Do you mind?"

"No." Like a nurse handing the doctor a scalpel, Ed handed Doug the tools he requested. With a few adjustments the motor ran smooth. "Where did you work before coming here?"

"I worked for the Ford plant in Detroit."

"Well," Ed stepped back and spread his arms out toward the Caddy. "This ain't no Ford. Where did you learn to do that?"

Doug hung his head. "I made a lot of poor choices growing up, friendships and jobs included."

Ed sat down on a low metal stool on rollers. "Go on." His dark thick eyebrows furrowed.

Doug leaned against the Cadillac and rehashed the criminal history that he hoped to leave in Detroit. As he concluded the garage fell silent. Doug felt like walking away, but he couldn't make his legs move. Reality had bound his past to him and he must learn to face it.

"You know," Ed broke the agonizing silence. "A lesser man would never have told me the truth. You may have acquired your skills dishonestly, but anybody that can

create what is beneath that hood,” he pointed to the wreck of a Mustang, “has pure raw talent.” Ed stepped to the open garage door and peered out at the Ford. Its looks had been deceiving as he recalled the motor concealed beneath life’s damaged frame. Then his focus returned to Doug. “Are you dependable?”

“I still have the job?” Doug questioned in shock.

“You bet, anybody that can take a car apart and put it back together is someone that I want working here and not for my competitors. So I ask you again. Are you dependable?”

“If you are asking me whether I will show up at the time you say? My answer is “yes”, and I will stay until you tell me to leave.”

“Excellent.” Ed shook Doug’s hand, thankful for an answered prayer: a mechanic that was his equal if not superior.

CHAPTER 38

In the early morning hour, Ed crossed the street with the keys to his shop jingling in his hand. He stumbled and came to a quick halt at the sight of Doug sitting in his car waiting for him to open shop. Ed blinked in disbelief, for he wasn't expecting Doug to be early.

“Good morning.” Doug greeted getting out of his car.

“Good morning.” Still a little stunned Ed continued, “You must be eager to start work.”

“I think I know where the problem lies with the old GMC.”

“Good. That old truck about cost me a good night's sleep.”

Ed followed Doug through the shop to the old GMC. His stomach tied up in knots, hopeful that Doug had found the solution. The owner of the old pickup had taken it to several shops in the area, but no one had been able to solve its problem. A satisfied customer referred the owner to Ed. After tinkering with it for two days with no success, Ed was stymied. As he watched Doug work, it wasn't long until he began to see what Doug was up to, and then both of them were working on it.

Finally, the moment of truth, Ed cleaned his hands and turned the key. The motor roared to life with the stamina it had lacked in years. Pleased with their accomplishment, Ed expressed his gratitude. “I don't know what brought you to my garage, but I'm grateful.” As he started off to call the owner, Doug's smile faded as he reached into his coat pocket. The familiar roughness of the ring served as a jagged reminder of why he left Detroit. But coming to California had not filled the emptiness of his heart. With

each passing day, Doug tried to fill that void with work. But everyday at five, he was left to his loneliness.

Each morning was the same. Ed shook his head at the sight of Doug sitting in his car waiting for him to open shop. “For the life of me, you must live close to the garage to beat me here every morning.”

Doug hung his head. “I’m sort of between homes right now.”

Ed gazed at the old Mustang and then down the street in which he had watched Doug drive every evening. It never occurred to him that Doug was living in his car. Even though he knew there weren’t any residential properties in that direction. “Where have you been stayin’?”

“In my car; I park along the beach. A camp ground is close, and I make use of the shower house.”

“My goodness; why didn’t you say something sooner? My sis runs a boarding house. She’s lookin’ for someone to do some odd jobs. You’d fit the bill to a T. In exchange for your work, I’m sure room and board arrangements could be made.”

“The offer sounds good. But I’m a mechanic, not a carpenter, plumber or electrician.”

“That’s fine. I’m neither of those things either. The biggest part of your job would be lawn care and whatever you can’t fix can be hired out.”

“I can definitely do the lawn work. And as for the rest, I will do my best because it sure would be nice to have a bed for the night.”

“I’ll give her a call now if you will hold down the shop.”

Doug grinned as a customer pulled in with a classic car. Ed closed his office door and started dialing.

“Hello.” A woman’s voice sounded distant.

“Hi Betty. I’ve got an answer to your problem.”

“Now what problem would that be?” Her voice was stronger and filled with sarcasm.

“I know a fella that would do your lawn work and other odd jobs for a roof over his head.”

“I’m not taking in some indigent.”

“Here me out.” He knew this would be a tough sale, but a battle worth winning. “The fella that I’m talking about is my new mechanic, Doug Kahan.”

Betty fell silent, and this made Ed nervous because he had spoke at length about this kid’s abilities as well as his criminal history. “Come on Betty. Give him a chance, the same chance you gave me. You believed in me when no one else would. Now, I can support myself. Doug can use my old room. What do you say, Sis? This kid is trying to turn his life around. He just needs a chance.” Ed paused for a moment hoping that Betty would say something, anything.

“Oh all right, I’ll give him a shot. But only because you are his reference.”

“Thanks Betty. You won’t be sorry.” Ed hung up, knowing that his sister still had her doubts. But he was confident that Doug would eliminate any of those doubts in a week’s time. For not only was he reliable and an excellent mechanic, but he was drawing in more customers than he had before.

Ed exited his office to find Doug working on a '56 Ford Fairlane. "What's its problem?"

"Nothing much, the owner just brought it in for an oil change and tune up."

Ed glanced into the waiting room. He didn't recognize the owner. This caused him to smile at the prospect of this person becoming a repeat customer. "Tonight, after work, we will go over to my sister's."

"Sounds good," Doug didn't miss a beat as he continued working under the hood of the Fairlane.

CHAPTER 39

From the passenger seat of the old Mustang, Ed directed Doug to a quaint little house tucked behind some majestic shade trees. The curving sidewalk gracefully ended at a white front porch with wicker furniture. A ceiling fan stirred the air, carrying with it the fresh sent of honeysuckle. The wind chimes added to the melody of the doorbell. Instantly, a short lady with curly brown hair greeted them. She walked with a slight limp over to a wicker chair. As she sat down, the hem of her homemade dress revealed an artificial leg.

“I would have guessed your occupation by the sight of your car, because only a mechanic with a lot of skill could make something that bad looking run.” Betty pulled at her hem to try to conceal what Doug had already noticed.

“And runs well.” Ed added with pride.

“Have you ever thought of giving that poor thing a coat of paint?” Her smile was pleasant.

“You can’t hide a rough life.”

Betty became serious and shifted her weight in the chair. Her hem extended further over her artificial limb. She knew all too well how rough life could be. “You also can’t run from the past because it molds you into the person that you are.” Her comment made Ed drop his head and become nervous as she continued on the current topic. “I understand that you hale from Detroit. Why did you leave?”

“There wasn’t anything left for me.” Doug grasped the engagement ring in his pocket.

“Why did you choose to come to LA?”

“It’s much warmer during the long winter months.”

Betty chuckled, “I’ll expect that’s right.” She glanced at her watch. “Well, it’s getting long about supper time. Ed can show you to your room, and then you two come and join me. I put on a pot of vegetable soup.”

“Oh, you are in for a treat, Doug. My sister is one of the best cooks around.”

Doug retrieved his bag of clothes from the trunk and followed Ed around to the back of the two story house. From the back door, they descended a flight of steps. Ed flicked on a light to a room on the right of the staircase. “It’s nothing fancy but it’s comfortable.”

Doug laid his bag of clothes on top of the twin bed that was covered with a homemade quilt, pieced from scrap material. An old stuffed chair that needed reupholstering sat across the corner. Along one wall was a chest of drawers with old trinkets on top for decoration, and along the other wall was an antique wardrobe. Two small rectangular windows provided some light and air to the room. One window looked out over the front yard while the other one had a view of the lane.

Ed left Doug to unpack. At the top of the stairs he made a sharp left and walked down a short poorly lit hall to the kitchen where Betty was sitting the table. She looked up at her brother, “I see a longing in that boy. He has had it rough.”

“But he is determined to turn his life around, and I’m in the position to help. Just like you helped me.”

Their conversation fell silent upon Doug’s entry, and Ed hung his head and quickly took his seat at the table, hoping that Doug did not hear his last few words.

Betty moved the pot of soup from the stove top to the table with the soup ladle being ready for serving.

“That sure does smell good.” Ed nervously looked from Betty to Doug.

“It sure does,” Doug confirmed, watching the sibling’s reaction after he entered the room. He wondered what he interrupted, and he wondered how Betty helped Ed. Getting in on the end of that conversation left him hungry for answers but it was evident that neither Betty nor Ed wished to travel down memory lane to explain what he just heard.

Betty took her seat and bowed her head. “Good gracious Heavenly Father, bless this food, and thank you for second chances. Amen.”

Ed’s eyes once again darted over to Doug, uncomfortable with the prospect of rehashing the past, for Doug was a much better man than himself.

CHAPTER 40

Ed's deliberate pace to work the next morning came to an abrupt halt at the sight of Doug parked in his usual place and leaning against his car. Ed chuckled and fished his shop keys from his pocket. "Good morning." He greeted Doug as he swiftly walked past. "I thought for sure that I would beat you this morning."

"I'm use to early hours."

"I'll say!" Ed tossed his keys on his desk as Doug raised the large garage doors to begin the day's work. It wasn't long until Ed joined him. "Here, you might as well have your own key." He handed the spare to Doug. "That way, when you get here you can start work."

Doug smiled and placed the key in the pocket of his jeans. He couldn't believe the transformation in Ed's attitude. It was as if last evening did not happen, but the words, "...*just like you helped me....*" haunted Doug's thoughts. There was more to their story than they cared to share, so he remained silent about his curiosity.

At the conclusion of the day, Doug returned to Betty's Bed and Breakfast and found her fighting with the old washing machine. And by the looks of things, the washer was winning the battle. Out of frustration, Betty hauled off and kicked the washer with her good leg and lost balance on her artificial leg causing her to fall to the floor. Doug rushed to her assistance. "Are you okay?" He helped her to her feet.

"Oh yes," Betty said disgusted with herself, "nothing hurt but my pride." She brushed the wrinkles out of her dress and then checked her hair with her fingers. "I get

so aggravated at that machine that I forget that I lack two good legs.” A smile washed over her to hide her embarrassment.

“If you don’t mind me asking, how did you loose your leg?”

“An accident; it was just an accident.” Made nervous by this question, Betty started for the kitchen. “I need to call a repairman.”

“Do you mind if I have a look at it?”

“Do you think that you can fix it?”

“Well, it has a motor.”

“If you think that you can fix it, hop to it, but I don’t want it taking off like a race car when I pull out on the knob.”

“I promise, I won’t put wheels on it. I can’t have it running over my favorite landlady or knocking her down.”

Betty laughed as she returned to preparing supper. From the kitchen window, she watched Doug retrieve tools from the trunk of his car. Then it wasn’t long until she heard the washer running. She stepped to the door of the utility room and folded her arms across her chest. “What did you find wrong with it?”

“It just needed a tune up. I first thought it had thrown a belt, but that didn’t seem to be the case. I oiled and greased it and tightened a few bolts.” He shrugged as he washed his hands in a nearby sink. “If it gives you anymore trouble, I’ll tear into it again.”

Betty turned her head from side to side in awe. “Ed is right. You are as handy as a pocket in a shirt. I don’t know what brought you our way, but you are sure a Godsend

to Ed and myself.” The timer called Betty to the kitchen. “Would you like to join me for supper?”

The rich aroma of fresh baked rolls made it easy to accept her offer.

CHAPTER 41

The next morning, Ed found Doug busy at work on a '57 Chevy. "Need any help?" He offered.

"No, I'm just putting the finishing touches on a tune up." Doug wiped his hands clean before closing the hood.

"I heard that you came to my sister's rescue yesterday."

At first, Doug gave Ed a blank look, then it dawned on him. "Oh the washer."

"Yes, that old washer agitates the worst out of my sister and I both. I've tried fixin' it but only succeeded in making it worse." He laughed. "I'm sure glad that you are there to help her. She sure sings your praises."

"You are both kind, and I enjoy working for both of you." Doug leaned against the fender of the Chevy as he watched Ed work on a Plymouth. "Ed," he began and then wondered if he should continue with this train of thought.

"Yes, what's on your mind?"

After a brief moment of careful contemplating, Doug inquired, "How did Betty lose her leg?"

Ed drew in a deep breath and slowly let it out. He picked up a rag and wiped his hands clean. "Let's get a soda pop and take a break."

Doug wished that he could take that haunting question back but the words, "... *like you helped me...*" Had raised many questions. Then, Betty's answer and reaction to that haunting question raised even more suspicion.

Ed flopped down on a wooden bench and rested his head against the cool cinder block wall. He took a sip of his cold Orange Crush and looked over at Doug sitting in a chair a short distance across from him. He knew of Doug's criminal past and felt the lesser of the two men. So he decided to bare all to Doug.

“Love makes you do foolish careless things. Back when I was nineteen and Betty was twenty, I fell head over heels in love with a girl that I wanted to spend the rest of my years with. We had gone together for two years. I had saved up every penny I could to buy a ring and make a start for us. But it wasn't me that she wanted; I found her with my best friend. I was devastated. They had been carrying on behind my back for months. And for months, I was oblivious.

“I threw that engagement ring into the ocean and got rip roarin' drunk.

“Betty was home for a week. She had moved to New York, and her career was beginning on Broadway. She had always dreamed of singing and dancing on a Broadway stage, and she was getting her chance. Her role was small, but she was quickly blossoming into a young lady loaded with talent. She had a God given gift. That is for sure.

“Someone told her about the mess I was in, and she came lookin' for me. By the time she found me I was distraught over my girlfriend's betrayal. And thanks to the booze, I didn't care if I saw the sunrise.

“Betty fought with me for the keys, but I kept'em.

“Oh how I wish that I could turn back time, but I can't.”

‘You're going to kill yourself.’ I can still hear her words. She leaned in the open passenger window, still reachin' for the keys. But the engine roared to life and my foot

fell hard against the accelerator. The sudden movement of the car jerked her off balance. She was struggling to pull herself into my car when I side swiped another car pulling into the lot. Both of Betty's legs were injured.

"I can still hear her screams of agony in my sleep.

"I slammed on the brakes." Ed's eyes filled with tears. "It should have been me that was hurt or even killed, not Betty.

"All my life my big sister protected me and in a few drunken seconds, I destroyed every hope, every dream she had.

"The doctor couldn't repair her left leg. It was too badly mangled, so he removed it above the knee. Thankfully, he was able to save her right leg, but she underwent several surgeries over the years to regain what use she has of it.

"I was charged and pleaded guilty to every charge the courts threw at me. Prison was too good a place for me after what I had done, and the judge knew it. That's why he handed down the worst sentence ever. I'll never forget his words."

"Son, I'm sentencing you to community service, because there isn't any hell that I can put you in that is any worse than what you are doing to yourself right now."

"I tried drowning my mistakes in a bottle. I tried to end my own life but I didn't have the courage sober or drunk to pull the trigger. Finally, I went to the hospital to see Betty. I fell to my knees at her bed and begged her forgiveness. I had no right to ask, and I didn't deserve the forgiveness and love she gave me.

"But it was her love and forgiveness that pulled me out of the abyss so deep and so dark that I thought the weight of my guilt would surely crush me. I didn't leave Betty's side after that day. I sobered up and stayed that way. We relied on each other's

strength to see us through the tough times. Oh people in the community looked down on me for what I done. One lady even went as far as to ask me how I could face my sister after ending her career before it barely had a chance to begin. So I asked my sister how she could forgive what I did to her?

“Betty confessed that at first, when she knew that she would never be able to dance again, hate consumed her. It wore her down. And then one morning, she awoke to see a beautiful nurse by her side. Her radiant red hair flowed in waves past her shoulders and her brilliant blue eyes sparkled with hope. She told Betty that she had one of two choices to make. She could hold on to her hatred and two lives would be destroyed, or she could release the hate and with the strength of love she would walk again. At first the red headed nurse’s message didn’t make any sense until she saw me. Then it was crystal clear, for it takes a lot more energy to hate than to love. Love is the only feeling that builds up. Then as Betty spoke the words of forgiveness another thing was made clear. She had realized her Broadway dream. For weeks, she had sung and danced on a Broadway stage, everyday at rehearsal. Some would love to make it as far as she did, but won’t get that chance. So Betty felt grateful for the gift that she was given.

“Plus God does not close a door but what he opens a window. For Betty’s other passion is cooking. I fixed up my car, sold it, and gave Betty the proceeds to start her Bed and Breakfast. Her business has been a success. Not only does she provide good food but a homey atmosphere. Her guests are not just customers; they are extended family. And she has several repeat customers. I helped her around the place doing the odd jobs that were hard for her to do.

“Then one day, a customer’s car wouldn’t start. I got it going. He commented that I should own my own garage someday. Betty heard his complement and floated me the money to start this place. So I guess that you could say that she and I both learned to walk again.”

“That is why you always walk to work, you never bought another car.”

“After that near fatal car accident, I never got behind the wheel of a car again, except to fix it. I love the sound of those motors. And speaking of which, I’ve got to get that green ’47 Plymouth done. The owner will be here any minute.” Together they finished the tune up on the Plymouth.

For the rest of the day, Doug couldn’t shake the feeling that he had met the same red headed lady. But how could it be? Betty met this red headed nurse thirty years ago. But yet, Ed’s description matched the lady he met a few years ago at the prison. With this dilemma weighing heavy on Doug’s mind, he entered the kitchen hungry for answers. The aroma of fresh baked chocolate chip cookies distracted him a little.

“Doug, perfect timing, I was just ready to take this batch up. Do you care to sample?”

“It’s an awful job, but it’s one that needs to be done.” He retrieved a sauce dish from the cabinet. Betty laughed as she slid three cookies off onto his plate and served him up a glass of ice cold milk. “Betty, do you have a moment to talk?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” She joined Doug at the table. “The Turners and McIntires won’t be back until late this evening. So what’s on your mind?”

“Ed told me about the accident that cost you your leg.”

Betty sighed, “Myself, I would just as soon leave that story in the past. However, that past greets me every morning when I slide this leg on and every night when I remove it to sleep. I’m also reminded of the past a few times at night when I get up to go to the bathroom and forget that half of my leg is missing. That sudden crash to the floor jolts me back to reality pretty darn quick.” She took another bite of cookie. “Can you imagine, forgetting that part of your leg is missing? It’s been over thirty years. You would think that I would remember by now.” Betty laughed.

“I don’t mean to drudge up a painful memory but do you remember a certain red headed nurse?”

“I sure do. The doctors and other nurses tended to my physical healing, but she tended to my mental and spiritual healing. She spoke to me on a level that no one else had. It was as if she could see my heart.

“I was consumed with hate, not at Ed, but at the world and myself. I tried to convince myself that I should never have dove into that car like I did. That I should have let Ed go. He would have been all right, but I knew in the depths of my heart that he would not be. We lost our parents in a car accident two years prior, and I couldn’t stand the thought of losing him.

“And that is what the red headed lady pointed out to me. That if I didn’t let go of the hate, then I would surely lose the one person that I held on to so tight. After seeing Ed that day at the hospital, I knew the hell he was putting himself through, for he wore it on the outside like a coat of armor to shield anyone from his path of destruction.

“She didn’t just pull me from the abyss, but Ed too. After that day, we have both followed the path laid before us to the best of our abilities.”

“Do you remember what this lady looked like?”

“I sure do. Every detail. She had the prettiest red flowing hair that cascaded past her shoulders. Its fullness seemed to come from an unfelt breeze. Her radiant blue eyes sparkled with hope. Her figure was slender. Perfect actually, right down to her beautifully manicured red finger nails.

“Why do you ask?”

“I met the same lady a short time after the prison guard left me in my cell to face all that I had done wrong. She poked some items between the bars for me. One item was my mother’s Bible wrapped in a blanket. She had told me that I had been given a second chance and when I laid all else aside and held onto the Bible she said that I was on the right path. I never saw her again after that day.”

“That was the same with me; out of all the doctors and nurses who cared for me. I only saw this mysterious red headed lady once.

“I returned to the hospital a few weeks after being dismissed to thank her. But when I asked the elderly lady at the information desk where I could find a nurse named, Faith, she kindly replied. ‘I’m sorry, honey, we don’t have any employees with that name.’”

Madisen shot out of her chair in disbelief. “Dad, it isn’t possible that the same lady Betty saw fifty years ago is the same lady that I saw a few days ago. It can’t be.” Doug drew his daughter into his arms and held her tight as Jeremy’s words ran through her mind and trickled from her lips. “She only comes to people in their hour of greatest need.” It was clear that Betty and Ed needed Faith. It was also equally clear that her father needed

Faith. But with tears in her eyes, Madisen uttered. “I don’t understand why Faith came to me instead of Jeremy?”

“Some things are not meant to be understood at the time. But this I do know. I am so grateful that Faith put you on the path that brought you home, for I needed your forgiveness and love more than anything this Christmas.” Doug kissed his daughter on the forehead. As once again Madisen recalled Jeremy’s word. “Sometimes the greatest gift that you can give someone is the love of forgiveness.”

Michelle looked at her family. The bond of love and forgiveness had been the tools to heal shattered hearts for generations, and now those tools were working to reunite father and daughter. But she was left with one burning question: “How did the two of you reunite?”

CHAPTER 42

“The days turned into weeks, and I began to realize that I might never have Doug in my life again.” Ann eased down into a kitchen chair, stirring her cup of warm coffee as she recalled over hearing a conversation between Aunt Millie and the PI, Frank Mills.

“I’m sorry Millie. I can’t find Douglas Kahan. It is as if he has fallen off of the earth.”

Those were not the words that I wanted to hear as I stepped into the living room. “No, that can’t be. You have to find him.”

“I’m sorry miss. I have turned up nothing.” Frank looked into the sorrow of Ann Marie’s eyes. “But if I turn up something I will be elated to let you know.” The silver headed gentleman slipped past her.

“I’m sorry honey, don’t give up hope. Frank will still look for Doug just not as reverently.” She led Ann Marie over to the sofa where they sat side by side. “How are you feeling? You look a little peaked.”

“I feel a lot better now, but I was sure sick this morning. I guess that will teach me to eat leftover Chinese.”

However, that wave of sickness wasn’t due to Chinese because it returned the next day and the day after that. To squelch her suspicions, Ann picked up a home pregnancy kit in a nearby town to keep her parents from finding out. She figured that this would be the longest five minutes of her life as she read the directions, but she didn’t have to wait that long to see the results. At the sight of the positive test, she was excited

because she would always have a part of Doug with her. As she drove to Aunt Millie's to share the news, reality began to sink in.

"Oh dear," a stunned look graced Millie's face as she eased down into a comfortable stuffed chair, and the excitement over a new life came crashing down on Ann Marie. "What am I going to do, Aunt Millie? When Mom and Dad find out..." She could no longer speak.

Millie jumped from her chair. "I know precisely what we will do." She wrapped her arms around Ann Marie. "You are going to move out of that costly apartment and move in with me. Then, you can save up the money Herbert gives you for the rent to apply toward your classes. You are almost finished. You can't quit now. I'll help you all that I can and when you need a shoulder to cry on, you will have a soft place to land." As Ann's tears subsided, Millie posed a difficult question. "Have you given any thought about what you are going to do with the baby?"

"I'm keeping it." Every sense was jolted to life with that question, and she was stunned that Aunt Millie would think otherwise.

"That's my girl." Millie squeezed Ann Marie tighter. "I'll help you raise this little bundle." She beamed, imagining the joy this child would bring to her home.

For months, Millie and Ann Marie concealed the pregnancy as long as they could. Then, Ann did her best to avoid her parents. But one Sunday morning their paths crossed. Ann Marie wished to hide, but it was too late. Kathryn had seen her, and Herbert soon caught on. He took Ann Marie by the arm and escorted her to their car with Kathryn close behind. "I see why you have been dodging us." He released Ann's arm and rubbed his forehead as he pivoted on his heels. Ann had been showing up at church

at an hour that she knew her parents would already be seated, but as fate would have it, they were running late. “Don’t tell me the child you are carrying belongs to that Kahan boy!” Herbert couldn’t bare the look on his daughter’s face, for he knew the answer before he asked the question.

Katheryn quickly covered her mouth with the realization. “Now I know why Mildred Hines was congratulating me at the supermarket Saturday. Good Heavens Ann Marie... The whole congregation will know, if they don’t already.”

Tears welled up in Ann’s eyes. She knew her parents would not take to her condition well, but she wasn’t expecting them to be this vial.

“Get in.” Herbert flung open the car door, unable to bare the embarrassment a moment longer.

“What are you going to do?”

“We are putting an end to this pregnancy. No daughter of mine is going to give birth to the spawn of an ex-con.”

“NO!” Ann Marie screamed in a haze of tears. One arm instinctively encompassed her stomach while the other arm pressed against the car in resistance to her father’s force.

They both noticed the size of Ann’s stomach and realized their daughter was in her third trimester. Thus, an abortion was out of the question. “You are not raising this child. You will give it up.” Herbert sharply insisted.

“I’m going to raise my baby and shower it with love.”

“Then you will do it on your own, because we no longer have a daughter.”

Herbert and Katheryn got into their car and drove off leaving Ann Marie in the middle of the lot to face the world alone.

From the church window, Mildred Hines noticed the confrontation between the Parks family. Evidently, the pregnancy was unwanted by the parents, and things had ended poorly. Swiftly, Mildred moved through the church to Millie and whispered, “I think your niece needs you. She is in the west parking lot.”

“Thank you,” Millie rushed to Ann Marie’s side. Over wrought with emotion, Ann Marie relayed what happened. “They have cut me off. I’m dead to them. That is if I ever existed to them in the first place. I never measured up to their high standards.”

Millie helped Ann Marie into her car, and she fumed as she drove home. Again she questioned God as to why she and John were not blessed with ten tiny toes and ten tiny fingers. With the thought of the baby, Millie snapped to Ann Marie’s aid. “Honey,” she began in a soothing tone, “You must let go of this turmoil. It is not good for you or the baby. And I want you to know that you are not alone. You and your precious child have me to lean on.”

Herbert and Katheryn’s reaction to Ann’s pregnancy had hit her hard, but Millie’s words were comforting. For all of Ann Marie’s life, she has had one constant: Aunt Millie.

As they walked side by side to the house, a pain shot through Ann Marie’s stomach causing her to stop in the driveway. She clutched her stomach.

“Are you all right?” Millie took hold of Ann Marie’s arm.

“Yah, I think so.” For as sudden as the pain had started it left. “That was a devil of a kick.” Little beads of sweat popped out on Ann Marie’s forehead.

“When we get inside, you better lie down for a while.”

“That sounds like a...” Ann Marie screamed in excruciating pain and nearly dropped to her knees. Gently, Millie let her niece go down on the pavement. She hollered for help but the neighborhood was quiet. She hated to leave Ann Marie but she knew that she must to call for help. For the first pain was not a kick but a contraction. As Millie called for an ambulance, Ann Marie tried to breath through the pain. She couldn't lose her baby, for this child was the only part of Doug that she may ever have.

CHAPTER 43

Dr. Richardson met Ann Marie and Millie at the emergency room doors. After his initial exam, he gave his orders.

“These are just Braxton-Hicks contractions, right?” Ann Marie hoped for the best.

“I’m afraid not.” Dr. Richardson laid a hand on her shoulder. “But what I need for you to do is relax and let the medication running in your IV do its job.”

“Is my baby okay?” Tears welled up in Ann Marie’s eyes.

“I believe so, but as soon as the contractions have stopped, we will take another listen to that little one.”

With nothing to do but watch time tick by, Ann Marie placed her hands on her stomach. She smiled at every little kick, feeling that it was a good sign. Her baby was still alive and strong. “Well, how are we doing?” Dr. Richardson reentered, removing the stethoscope from around his neck.

“Much better.”

“No more contractions?”

“No.”

“Good.” He pressed the cold stethoscope against one area of her stomach and then moved it to another area. “Hmmm.” He moved the stethoscope again to verify what he was hearing.

“Is something wrong?” Ann Marie squeezed Millie’s hand.

“I’m hearing a second heartbeat,” he stated, stymied by his find, and he wondered why he hadn’t heard it before.

Once again tears were on the brink of falling as alarm tensed Ann Marie’s body. She should never have let her parent’s reaction affect her so badly. “Dr. Richardson, is my baby going to be all right?”

“As far as I can tell, your babies are going to be fine.”

“Babies,” Ann Marie’s eyes became wide with surprise and her expression was one of joy.

“Yes, if all goes well tonight and in the morning, we will do an ultrasound to verify what I’m hearing.

“But one word of caution: from here on out, your stress level has to be null. We don’t want these twins arriving too soon.”

The joyful excitement created by the news of twins ever so gently twained to worry for Ann Marie. Millie fell asleep discussing names. She was over the moon with the thought of having two pair of little feet running around her home. But the pairs didn’t end there. She would need another crib. She would need twice the amount of formula, diapers and clothes or do twice the amount of laundry. There would be twice the number of immunizations. Her medical bills would be twice as much.

She hadn’t finished her education, and Dr. Richardson said she needed to drop her stress level to nothing. Does this mean she would have to drop out with only a few weeks left? She had plenty of worries with one baby, but now her worries had doubled.

As the sun peeked through the blinds, Ann Marie began to wonder if her parents were right. Maybe she ought to put her twins up for adoption. There was probably a

couple out there somewhere better equipped and ready to take on the demands of twins than she was. Ann blinked away her sorrow as Aunt Millie woke. She couldn't let Aunt Millie know the thoughts that were scurrying around in her mind at the time, for she would try to talk her out of it. And she needed to do what was in the best interest for her children.

“Good morning.” Dr. Richardson's jovial tone bounced around the room, infecting everyone.

“Good morning.” Millie yawned, a little embarrassed by being caught just waking up. She ran her short pudgy fingers through her hair to give it a less disgruntled life.

“The nurse tells me that you had an uneventful night. Did you rest well?”

“No.”

“No.” Dr. Richardson repeated. “How come?”

“I was thinking double all night.”

“Oh is that all,” he joked. “Well, we are ready to take you down for your ultrasound.”

A couple of orderlies entered and transferred Ann Marie from her bed to a cot. Down in the x-ray department Dr. Richardson placed some cold gel on her stomach and then slid a probe around in the gel until he heard a galloping sound. With Millie by her side, Ann Marie inquired, “What is that sound?”

“It's the baby's heartbeat, and this baby is good and strong.” He moved the probe, and the galloping sound stopped for a moment and then resumed. “There it is,” he stated after locating the second baby. “Both babies are good and strong.” He turned the

monitor toward Ann Marie and Millie. With his index finger, he traced the outline of one baby and then the other. “Would you like to know the sex of your twins?”

“You can tell us that!” Millie stated in disbelief. “They are so small.”

“They are small, and in time they will grow. But I believe that I can tell you with a seventy-five percent certainty what they will be.” He awaited Ann Marie’s decision. From Millie’s excitement she agreed so that she would only have to concentrate on one set of names.

“I believe your twins will be girls.”

The fact that her daughters were healthy lightened Ann Marie’s heart, and as she gazed upon her two girls nestled together, she focused on the positive. She would have twice the love, twice the joy, twice the laughter. Twice she would experience first steps, first words and first days of school. There would be a lot of firsts to experience twice and she would love every experience twice as much.

As a tear trickled down her cheek, Ann Marie couldn’t believe that moments earlier she had thought of giving them up for adoption. For as their little hearts raced, so did hers, and their tiny images on the screen made Ann Marie’s love twice as strong.

CHAPTER 44

“Mom,” Michelle broke into the story, “Were you able to return to your classes that year?”

But before Ann had a chance to answer, Madisen chimed in, “When did you find Dad?”

“Okay, hold on.” Ann held up her hand and shook a finger at Madisen, “You were always in a hurry, and some stories are not meant to be rushed.”

“I only missed a week of classes, and the instructors let me make up my assignments. And at the conclusion of every week, I had an appointment with Dr. Richardson to make sure all was going well. It was on that last visit that he gave me a final warning.

“It wouldn’t surprise me a bit for your girls to arrive next week.” Dr. Richardson draped his stethoscope about his neck.

“But it’s too soon. I’ve followed your instructions to the letter.”

“I know you have. I just didn’t want you to panic if you went into early labor. Both girls have developed enough that they will be fine. They will be small, but they will have their whole lives to grow.” He watched Ann Marie, for she didn’t seem relieved.

“Is there something bothering you?”

“I have finals next week.”

“Early in the week?”

“Two of them are on the first day, but the last one is on Thursday.”

“See if your instructor will let you take that final earlier, or see if you can take it after the babies are born.”

With a premature delivery in her future, Ann Marie took Dr. Richardson’s advice and talked to that instructor about taking the final earlier. However, Dr. Hunter was not in favor of letting her do that. She would let Ann take the final after the girls were born. It wasn’t the solution that Ann hoped for, but it was a solution to her potential problem.

As the week progressed, Ann Marie was thankful to be able to take her seat in Dr. Hunter’s class. But midway through the final, she went into labor. She continued marking each answer with a number two pencil and breathing through the contractions. She kept track of the interval between each contraction with her watch. When she turned in her exam, she informed Dr. Hunter that she needed help right away. At that point, Dr. Hunter was wishing that she would have let Ann Marie take the final earlier; because by the time she arrived at the hospital, she was crowning.

Ann looks over at Madisen. “That is what I meant by you being in a hurry, for it wasn’t long until you arrived followed by Michelle a few minutes later.

“I was truly blessed to have Aunt Millie, for she loved you two like grandchildren. As for me, I was learning the true meaning of double trouble. There were days that you two were a tag team duo. I wouldn’t anymore than get one of you laid down to sleep than the other one would wake up and cry. Fatigue became my best companion as I prayed for you both to sleep at the same time. Then viola, I got my prayer answered, but be careful what you pray for because when you both slept at the same time, you also were both awake at the same time. And these two arms could only

care for one daughter at a time. So while one girl was happy in my arms the other was left crying in the crib, and I cried with her. That is when Aunt Millie came to my rescue. She would take care of the other daughter. Then when you guys were a tag team again, she would send me off to bed, and she would take over.

“Ann Marie, you better head off to bed. Your eyelids are almost shut now.” Millie reached down to take Michelle.

“I’ll go up to bed as soon as I finish feeding Madisen. I mean Michelle.” Ann tossed her head in an attempt to shake the fog of fatigue from her brain.

“Honey, that is what I mean. You are exhausted. If you get sick, I would be doomed, for I can’t keep up the pace that you are.”

Unable to refute what Aunt Millie said, Ann Marie placed Michelle in her Aunt’s loving arms. But before she left the room, she heard Millie humming a tune that reminded her of her childhood.

Ann didn’t wake until the next day, and she was startled by the number of hours that she had slept. She jumped out of bed to check on the girls, but midway across the room dizziness slowed her progress. She staggered from side to side as a veil of starry darkness descended upon her. She fought to remain conscious, but it was a fight soon lost to weakness.

A crashing sound followed by a thud enticed Millie to investigate. She peeked into the nursery where both girls were sound asleep. Then she moved down the hall to find Ann Marie lying on the hardwood floor. The contents of a small table laid shattered close to her niece with the tablecloth in Ann Marie’s grasp. “Ann Marie!” Millie knelt

next to her and patted her cheek. “Ann Marie,” she repeated as the tears brewed to the surface at how pale her niece’s complexion was. She glanced toward the bed and her heart sank at the amount of blood. Then her focus returned to Ann Marie. Her gown was soaked. “Oh Ann Marie!” Millie snubbed as she hurried downstairs to call for help. Her hand trembled as she dialed the number.

“Hello.”

“My niece needs help. She’s bleeding to death. Please come quick.” Millie’s voice shook as she tried to suppress her fear.

“What is your address?”

Millie opened her mouth, but her mind drew a blank. “I’ve forgot my own address.”

“You are doing fine. Just calm down.” She heard just before laying the receiver down. She rushed out the front door and looked at the numbers by the door and rushed back inside.

“Are you still there?”

“Yes, I am. We have your address, and I have dispatched an ambulance to your location.”

“I hear them!” In her excitement, Millie hung up and rushed outside. Down the street she could see the flashing lights. As it approached, she moved toward the curb waving her arms. The medic behind the wheel jumped out.

“Come quick.” She rushed toward the house, standing at the foot of the steps. Short of breath, she directed the medics. “Ann Marie’s room is the second door to the

left.” As her breathing evened out, she pulled herself upstairs and stood in the doorway watching them work.

“She’s as pale as a ghost.”

“Her pulse is thready.”

Noticing Millie in the doorway, one medic inquired, “What is the cause of all the blood loss?”

“She delivered twins last week.”

“She’s hemorrhaging. I’ll go call in what we have.” He brushed past Millie.

“Mildred,” she felt a gentle touch on her shoulder. “Mildred,” a lady’s voice repeated. Millie turned to see her next door neighbor standing close by. She embraced the middle aged slender woman, glad to have someone to cling to in her hour of need.

“Do you want me to stay with the twins?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The medics carried Ann Marie from the room on a gurney with Millie close behind. “May I ride with you to the hospital?”

“Are you the next of kin?”

“Yes.”

“It would be best if you did. They will need signatures at the hospital. She will go directly to surgery when we arrive.”

Dr. Richardson entered the waiting room. His green scrubs were damp with perspiration. He pulled a chair around close to Millie and sat down. “It’s a good thing that you found her when you did. A few minutes more and ...” He paused.

“How is she?”

“She pulled through the surgery. She is young and physically strong. That is in our favor. We infused six units of blood over the course of the surgery.”

“Did you get the bleeding stopped?”

“Yes. However, she will not have anymore children. We had to do a complete hysterectomy.”

“May I see her?”

“Yes.” Dr. Richardson walked with Millie to Ann Marie’s room. She was glad to see the color restored to her niece’s cheeks.

“Where am I?” Ann Marie softly said as her eyes focused on the far wall in the dimly lit room.

“You’re in the hospital, honey.”

Ann Marie turned her head toward Aunt Millie, “Why am I...” she paused.

“What happened?”

“You were hemorrhaging.” Millie choked back the tears. “You were sleeping so well that I decided to let you rest.” Millie brushed away her tears over the nearly fatal decision. “Did you feel wet? Is that what woke you up?”

“No. I thought that I heard one of the girls crying. I looked at the alarm clock and was shocked by the time. It was almost noon. I couldn’t believe I had slept that long. I jumped out of bed and started for the door. The house was quiet, but I knew that I heard one of the girls. Then I felt dizzy. I reached out for the table to regain my balance, but I don’t remember anything else.”

“I heard you fall and I found you on the floor.” That was a memory that Millie wished that she could forget. “How long have you been bleeding?”

“A small amount each day. I thought it was normal.”

Millie laid a warm hand on top of Ann Marie’s. “What’s wrong Aunt Millie?” Ann’s dark eyes searched her Aunt’s face.

“To stop the bleeding, Dr. Richardson had to do a complete hysterectomy. You won’t be able to have anymore children.”

Ann Marie relaxed as tears ran down the side of her face. Being saddened by that fact was irrelevant since she didn’t have Doug in her life.

CHAPTER 45

THREE YEARS LATER

Ann Marie picked up the last bit of ripped birthday paper from the floor and stuffed it into a trash bag while Michelle and Madisen played with their new toys. A ribbon from a helium balloon dangled in her hair. She brushed it aside as she stopped to watch her daughters play.

“It was a great party.” Millie fell into her comfy chair. Moments earlier her home had been the center of a birthday party with seven other children and their parents in attendance. The Raggedy Ann cake was mostly devoured, and the leftover homemade ice-cream had turned to liquid.

“It was fun.” A faint smile caressed Ann Marie’s lips as melancholy sank in her heart. She picked up a photo of she and Doug that was taken in the park. “I wish that Doug were here,” she said ever so softly.

“Me too, honey.”

“Daddy,” Madisen’s ears perked up at the mention of Doug’s name. “Tell us a Daddy story.”

“Daddy.” Michelle cheered, clapping her small hands with glee.

“Okay,” Ann Marie motioned with both arms for them to come. Quickly, Madisen grabbed the photo album before climbing up on the sofa. There were not many photos of Doug, but she was thankful for the few that she did have as she began with the story that she had told a zillion times. “Once upon a time...”

Almost in unison, Michelle and Madisen exclaimed, “Daddy!” as they pointed to a photo of Douglas Kahan.

The doorbell rang, drawing Millie away from the story. “Frank,” her jaw dropped at the sight of the PI that was her husband’s friend. He couldn’t help but smile as he slid past Millie. “Is Ann Marie home?”

“She’s in the living room with the girls.” The souls of Millie’s shoes fell heavy against the grains of the hardwood floor as she followed Frank. He paused within the doorway to watch Ann Marie with her girls. But her attention was drawn his direction. “Girls go play for a moment.” She closed the photo album and laid it on the coffee table.

“Mommy,” Madisen tugged on Ann Marie’s pant leg. “When is Daddy coming home?”

“I don’t know.” She looked from her daughter into the twinkle of Frank’s gray eyes, but she was afraid to hope.

“I have an early Christmas gift for you. I found Doug.”

Ann Marie’s legs almost went out from under her. Gently, Millie eased her niece onto the sofa. “Where is he?” Ann Marie’s lower lip quivered as tears welled up on her lashes.

“He’s in LA. Here is his address.”

Ann Marie’s hand trembled as she took the slip of paper. “Where did you get this?”

“I was working another case, but while I was at the license bureau in LA, I inquired about Doug. That is what I was given.”

Ann Marie’s stomach tied up in knots as she inquired, “Has Doug been in any more trouble with the law?”

“No, or I would have found him sooner. Doug is a true success story. He has turned his life around.”

Ann Marie rose from the sofa and embraced Frank as tears of joy shimmered in her eyes. This was the moment that Frank had been waiting for since he witnessed the sorrow in her eyes a few years ago. It was that sorrow that haunted him and spurred his search for Doug.

As Ann Marie tucked her girls into bed, Madisen inquired, “Is Daddy going to come home soon?”

“I’m going to go visit with Daddy and see if he is ready to come home.” Ann Marie tried to remain hopeful that Doug had not moved on with his life.

“Tell Daddy that it is time to come home because we miss him.” Madisen sounded older than her years and Michelle nodded in agreement.

“I’ll tell him that we all miss him terribly.” She kissed each daughter on the forehead. And as she left them to slumber, she hoped that Doug would soon be a part of their lives once more.

CHAPTER 46

With Millie's blessing, Ann Marie flew to LA and rented a car. Armed with a map of the city, she plotted her route to the address Frank acquired. She parked her white Ford Escort across the street from a quaint bed and breakfast. "This can't be right," Ann Marie muttered as she rummaged through her purse for the slip of paper Frank gave her. She held it up comparing the numbers of the house to the paper as well as the street name. She had found the right place, and her attention centered on the sign in the front yard that read *Betty's Bed and Breakfast*. She bit her lower lip to hold back the tears. She feared that Doug had moved on and why not, she rejected him. But not willing to give up that glimmer of hope, Ann Marie walked up to the front door and rang the doorbell.

A blonde, blue eyed girl a few years younger than herself opened the door. "Hello, may I help you?" Her smile added to her bubbly personality.

Ann Marie started to step away, "I shouldn't have come. It was a mistake. I'm sorry."

"Miss, I hate to see you leave. I'm sorry that I upset you. How may I help?"

At the top of the porch steps, Ann Marie turned and her focus landed on the lady's name tag *Hope* was the name scrolled in big letters. "I was looking for someone."

"Really, who?" Hope's curious enthusiasm was almost childlike.

"Douglas Kahan."

“Doug,” she beamed with delight. “He is a terrific guy. I help out here from time to time when my grandmother, Betty, needs me most. But Doug moved out a few days ago.”

“Where does he live now?”

“I don’t know, and my grandmother is gone all week.”

“But I’m only in town for a few days.” Ann Marie felt her second chance slowly fading away.

“Don’t fret. Doug works for Uncle Ed. He owns a garage. You can find Doug there.”

“How do I get there?”

“Let’s see,” Hope pondered. “Go North.” She pointed the direction of her intent.

“That’s South.”

“Okay, go South.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, you go that direction.” Her pointing was steadfast. “I’ve been told that I’m directionally challenged. But I’m one hundred percent certain the direction to Ed’s garage is that way. Now, at the stop sign, turn right. I believe that will be a west onto Brook Street or is that East on Brook? Anyway, go two blocks.” She emphasized by holding up two fingers, “And make a left. You’ll see it.”

“Thank you,” Ann Marie felt swimmy headed after those directions, but one thing was for certain, she wasn’t too far away from Doug. So she shouldn’t have too much trouble finding him.

The street name at the stop sign was not Brook. It was Normal. With no traffic behind her, Ann Marie looked at her map. Brook Street was three blocks away and after driving there she paused momentarily in the middle of the street for there wasn't a stop sign. A car behind her honked its horn, so she turned right and came to a dead end. She turned around in a driveway and tried to find her way back to Normal Street, but with every twist and turn she found herself lost and alone. Wondering what else could possibly go wrong, she soon got her answer as the car spit and spluttered and jerked to a stop. With the engine dead and refusing to restart, Ann Marie was almost in tears.

"Having car trouble?" She looked out her window at an elderly gentleman walking his dog.

"I'm afraid so."

"Well you're in luck. You are just one block away from a garage." His knarled index finger pointed the direction. "The mechanic there will get you back on the road lickity split."

"Let me guess. He drives an old beat up Ford Mustang that looks like it should still be in the junkyard." Ann Marie's tone was sarcastic.

The elderly guy laughed, "It sounds like you know him." He started to walk off with his little dog toodling by his side.

"Wait!" Ann Marie hollered out as she grabbed her purse from the passenger seat. "Which way did you say that garage is?"

"Just up the street, one block." He pointed again.

"Thank you! Thank you so very much!" Her heart leaped with the joy of hope, and her legs could not carry her fast enough. It wasn't long until Ed's garage was in

sight. She abruptly stopped at the edge of the lot as she spotted Doug working on a car's motor. All of her doubts returned, and she stood frozen watching him work.

As Doug made the final adjustments, he let the hood of the old Falcon down. He stepped back to admire the restoration work when he spotted Ann Marie down the street. His heart almost stopped at the sight of her. He was afraid to blink for fear she might disappear. Many times he wished for a moment like this.

At first, his pace toward her was quick; then he noticed the lack of a car. Maybe fate had brought them together only for a moment because her love belonged to another. As Doug's pace slowed, Ann felt her smile fade, and her feet felt cumbersome. She feared what he might say.

Standing a few feet apart, he wished to take her in his arms and never let her go, but instead he remained motionless, paralyzed by a love he still desired. "I never expected to see you again."

His words evoked dread and caused Ann's legs to become weak as she feared the worst but nonetheless her words flowed effortlessly from her lips. "I've searched for you ever since you left." Unable to speak another word, nor hold back the tears, she found herself lost in his embrace.

"Millie told me to wait, to give you more time, but I thought you would never forgive me. I'm sorry I left." He held her tighter for it seemed that his words had crushed her strength.

"I'm the one who is sorry, for I'm the one who drove you to the arms of another."

Doug loosened his hold and fell into her warm dark eyes. "The love I have for you consumes my whole heart. I could never love anyone else."

“Then you are not seeing. I mean. You are not...” She couldn’t bring herself to say the words *in love with someone else*. So Doug finished, “I’m not in love with anyone else, because I never stopped loving you.”

Ann fell back into his arms and drank in the love she had longed for in the kiss they shared. Lost in each other’s embrace, it was as if no time had passed since they were last together.

“How did you get here?” Doug inquired.

Ann laughed, “My rental car stalled on me a block down the street.”

Doug gathered some tools into a tool box and with his hand locked in hers they strolled down the street. At the sight of the little white car, he smiled. “I love Fords.”

“I’m becoming more fond of them, but can you get it to run?”

“Of course, it’s a Ford. They’re built to run.” He reached in and popped the hood. “Jump in and turn the key. Let’s see what the matter is.” It didn’t take him long to get the little car running. Then as he jumped into the passenger seat, he had another question for Ann. “How did you find me?”

“A PI friend of Aunt Millie’s was working another case. He inquired about you at the DMV. He got your address, Betty’s Bed and Breakfast. Her granddaughter told me that you had moved out but that you worked for her Uncle Ed.”

“What? Granddaughter?”

“Her name is Hope. She can’t be more than twenty. She’s slender, blonde and bright blue eyes.”

Doug looked puzzled. “Neither Betty nor Ed ever married and neither of them have children, let alone grandchildren.”

“She called the lady that runs the bed and breakfast grandmother and your boss, uncle.”

“Well,” Doug shrugged it off. “Betty and Ed treat everyone like family, but I’ve never met the young girl you’re describing.”

Ann parked in the garage lot with their daughters weighing heavy on her mind. “We have a lot to talk about.” She looked long into his eyes. Following their embrace, the years apart melted as if they didn’t exist, but it wasn’t just her heart she had to consider.

“What’s wrong?” Doug questioned the worried look on Ann’s face.

“I don’t want to talk here. Is there somewhere else that we can go?”

He glanced at his watch. “I’ll tell Ed that I’m knocking off early. My apartment isn’t far away. You could ride with me or...”

“I’ll follow.”

Doug laughed as his gaze fell upon his car. “Would you believe a tow truck about towed it away?”

“It’s hard to believe.” Ann struggled to contain her amusement.

“Another person’s car wouldn’t start. It was a nice shiny Toyota. My car was parked next to it. The tow truck was hooked on to my car and about to drive off when I came out of the store. The only way that I could convince the driver that he had the wrong car was to start it up. His jaw nearly hit the curb. Finally, the owner of the Toyota showed up. ‘Oh thank goodness, will you come back and get my car next?’

“No need. I can take your car now. The Toyota owner was so relieved and so was I. It just goes to show, you can’t judge a car by what’s on the outside.”

“I know. It’s what’s on the inside that matters,” Ann concluded feeling that Doug was the same man she fell in love with over three years ago.

“Ed!” Doug hollered through the open space of the garage.

“What’s all the ruckus about?” Ed emerged from beneath an old GMC.

“I’m headed home, if that’s all right?”

Concern creased his forehead. “Are you feelin’ all right?” Ed looked Doug over for his last illness was still fresh on Ed’s mind. At the snap of a finger, Doug was sick, profusely sweating and doubled over in pain. His skin was cold and clammy to the touch and he nearly passed out. He wanted to go home and go to bed, but Ed wouldn’t hear of it. He rushed Doug to the hospital emergency room where the doctor inquired, “What did you take?”

“I took two aspirin last night for a headache. I felt fine this morning. I ate breakfast and drove to work and then wham, this hit. It’s happened before.”

“How many times before?” The doctor inquired further.

“Twice.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

The doctor gave Doug a suspicious look but when the toxicology results came back negative for any drugs in his system. The doctor ordered further lab work which indicated poor dietary intake. “What is your diet like? In other words, what do you eat in the course of a day?”

Again the doctor was surprised by Doug's answer of fruits, vegetables, meat, cheese and other dairy products. Very little junk food made up his diet. "Well, based on what you just told me and what your lab results say, I would say that you have an absorption problem compounded with an irritable bowel. My suggestion to you is this: limit the amount of raw fruits and vegetables that you eat. Don't quit eating them all together just don't eat as much. Take a multipurpose vitamin and by all means do not take anymore aspirin or aspirin based pain relievers. Your system has a hard time breaking that drug down. That is why you got sick. For pain relief, try Tylenol. If it makes you sick, I don't know what else you can do for pain relief."

Doug took the doctor's suggestion to heart and in a month's time his lab work looked better and Doug felt better too.

"I'm fine honest. I haven't taken anymore aspirin and Tylenol does not make me sick. Honestly, I'm fine. The reason I'm wanting to leave early is I have a second chance with Ann."

"The young lady you told me about years ago?"

"The one and the same; she's here now."

Ed peeked outside. "Your description of her pales in comparison to her beauty. Good luck, son. I hope all works out for ya."

"Thanks."

Ann followed close behind Doug's old Mustang, for she didn't want to get lost nor lose Doug again. In his apartment, she wandered around the clean neat space. With the evenings getting cooler, he grabbed his denim jacket. "I know this quaint little café that has a knockout view of the ocean. I think that you will like it, and we can catch up

there. But now, the most pressing question is, do we take the good car that hasn't broken down or the good looking car that might leave us stranded?"

"Hey, if it wasn't for my rental stalling, I might not have found you." She looked down at the two Fords parked side by side. Then it occurred to her that if Doug's car wasn't so unique she might not have found him either because her conversation with the older gentleman hastened her pace to the garage.

Over on an end table by the door, she made her selection of keys and placed her choice in his hands. "It has taken too many years to find you and two Fords to reunite us, so I believe it best to stay with the one that has beauty on the inside."

CHAPTER 47

With Ann on his arm, they walked toward the entrance of the Sea Side Café. As he placed his keys in his jacket pocket, his fingers found the familiar shape of the princess cut engagement ring. It had been a while since he last wore this coat, and he had virtually forgotten about the ring.

A friendly waitress with wavy auburn hair cascading down her back warmly greeted them. *Joy* was printed on her name tag and matched her personality. “Two this evening?”

“Yes,” Doug answered.

“I have the perfect table reserved for you.”

“Reserved?” Doug questioned as they followed her to the best table in the house. “I’m sorry. There must be a misunderstanding. We don’t have reservations.”

“As in love as you two are, a lesser table would not do.” She placed the menus on the table. “Have a wonderful evening.” Her eyes glimmered with a spark of hope as she left them. Doug seated Ann and then took his place across from her.

“You’re right. The view is spectacular.” The Hollywood sign shown in the distance and the rugged landscape, down to the beach, was dotted with evergreens and a manmade waterfall cascaded down to a pond. Usually, the scenery captivated Doug’s attention but this time his eyes did not leave Ann. The ring in his pocket served as a reminder of what he was going to do until fate intervened. His love for her had not diminished, but the words of proposal did not seem appropriate.

Ann's attention shifted to him, "I haven't exactly been honest with you." She smiled, "There is someone else in my life."

Those words twisted like a jagged knife through his heart as he feared fate had dealt him an ugly hand once more. "Wait. What did you just say?"

Ann reached into her purse as she repeated. "Actually there are two little someones that are as close to my heart as you." She handed him the current wallet size photo of Madisen and Michelle meticulously posed together and dressed identically. Doug's gaze froze on the two little girls as he concentrated on what Ann was telling him, "I've had a small portion of you with me everyday since you left. I don't know what I would have done without Aunt Millie."

"I'm a father?" Momentary shock dominated his expression.

"Yes." Tears brimmed on Ann's lashes.

"I'm a Dad." Doug repeated as joy flooded his heart as the reality sat in. "How old..."

"They are three."

"What's their names?"

"Madisen and Michelle." She pointed to each girl as she said their name. "They are identical in looks, but total opposites in personality."

"I've missed out on so much."

"That's no fault of your own. I shoulder that responsibility. I led you to believe that we were over."

"I should have listened to Millie. If I would have, I would have been there for you from the beginning."

“You are here now.” Ann laid a hand on top of his.

He reached into his coat pocket and removed the princess cut ring with the two smaller cut diamonds situated on each side of the central diamond. Ann’s eyes became wide with surprise, and she covered her mouth after drawing in a deep breath. “This too is long over due. Ann Marie Parks will you be my wife? You have already given me more than any man deserves, two beautiful daughters and a second chance at a life long love.”

“Yes, I will marry you.” A tear trickled down her cheeks as Doug slid the perfectly sized ring onto her finger. “When did you...” She didn’t complete the question because Doug gave her the answer. “I’ve had it for some time.”

“Doug, I’m so sorry. I was such a fool.”

“No. I should have told you the truth about my past. Then, none of this would have happened.”

“How long did you have this ring before Dad told me about your past?”

“A few hours, I purchased it that day. I was going to ask you to marry me that evening, but instead I was begging for another chance that you are giving me now.”

“Aunt Millie told me that morning to hold onto the love that we shared. I didn’t heed her advice. I let pain and betrayal rob you of knowing your daughters for three years.”

“You knew that you were pregnant then?”

“No. Not that day. I didn’t discover that I was pregnant until you had left. But before that, I had gone to your apartment to beg your forgiveness only to find that you had left.”

Doug held Ann's hands in his and her face in his steady loving gaze. "We have both made mistakes, and because of those mistakes our daughters do not know me."

"That's not entirely true. What photos I have of you and I, I have shared with Michelle and Madisen. I've told them stories of our time together. That photo album is their favorite storybook."

"Then, they know about the time I served?"

"No. I've never told them that. The explanation I've given them for us being apart is that you are away working. But now, it is time to come home."

Following their meal, they strolled along the beach, hand in hand with Ann's head resting on his shoulder. "What do your parents think of our daughters?"

"They have no part in our daughters' lives. They disowned me."

Doug stopped and held Ann in his arms. "I'll never let you go again." Listening to the rhythm of his heart, the loneliness that had been her companion shattered and she relied on his strength.

As they strolled to the car a round stain glass window beckoned them in the distance. Without a word, they walked together and stood at the bottom of the steps leading to the church doors. "Doug, there is one more thing you should know." Looking into his eyes, she confessed, "I can not have anymore children. Following the delivery of our daughters something went wrong, and I had to have surgery." She could not bring herself to say the word hysterectomy because before she found him the inability to have more children was mute.

"Ann, you have already given me more than I ever hoped for."

The interior of the church was tranquil with a glow that seemed to be heaven sent. An opera of candlelight flanked the alter and added to the atmosphere. The wooden pews shined in the light. The youthful minister disrupted the stillness with his jovial tone. “Good evening.” Neither Ann nor Doug witnessed the direction from which he had come, but nonetheless he stood before them. His brunet hair laid in curls and the candlelight cast a glow around him. In his eyes burned the love that Ann and Doug still had for one another. “Father” Doug began but was cut short by the minister holding up his hand. “There is but one Father. I am merely a messenger of His word. My name is Gabriel.” He extended his hand and Doug embraced his firm, sincere handshake.

“Gabriel, would you do us the honor of joining us together in marriage?”

“Of course,” he clapped his hands and almost instantly the church became brighter. “Do you have witnesses for this blessed union?”

“No. I’m afraid that we do not.” Ann stated.

“Would you mind if my sisters served as your witnesses?”

“Not at all.” Ann was relieved that this youthful minister had the solution to their problem. Their eyes widened with surprise as Hope emerged from one corner of the church and Joy from the opposite corner. Both sisters shared the same beautiful smile and their eyes twinkle with the future. “I just love twilight weddings.” Hope beamed.

“You’re the young lady from the bed and breakfast.” Ann announced.

“I have been watching over Betty and Ed for some time. They fill their home and hearts with hope.”

Doug and Ann’s attention turned to Joy. “I have been watching over the two of you and the three of us have been waiting for this day.”

In awe of what they had been told Ann, handed Gabriel the engagement ring as Doug gave him the simple gold wedding band. They followed him to the alter with an engraved cross on the center. “Years ago, a chain of events were set into motion by Faith. At the time those events stood without a reason until now. Those individual events brought this man and this woman together.” Gabriel stepped from behind the pulpit to join together Ann and Doug’s hands. With them facing one another, Gabriel continued, “Your love has been tested, and yet your hearts have remained true to one another. Your love and forgiveness have made you one. Let this love that you share for one another grow and fill every aspect of your life. Forgiving others as you have forgiven each other.” Gabriel removed the rings from his pocket and held them dearly. “These rings are a symbol of two hearts coming together as one. They have traveled several miles, and a few times the engagement ring was nearly tossed away.” Quickly, Doug looked to Gabriel for he had never shared that bit of information with anyone. “But yet, love prevailed.” Gabriel handed the ring to Doug. “With the placement of these rings, you may make your vows to one another.” Bathed in light, Doug had never seen Ann look so beautiful. As he carefully slid the ring back onto her finger, he vowed, “Ann, as you accept this ring know that you hold my heart and all the love that it contains. Time has not tarnished my feelings for you; it has only made me painfully aware to treasure the moments we have together.”

“Doug, from the moment we met, I knew that you were someone special. You are the love that I was longing for, and like a fool I almost tossed our love away, a mistake I will never make again. You are my love, my life and my soul mate through life.”

With all attention back to Gabriel, he concluded, “With the loving devotion you have for one another keep you together not just in the good times but the bad. Keep God in your hearts and let your faith guide your journey through life as one. You may kiss the bride.”

Doug and Ann passionately kissed with the three siblings standing by. “It is nice to meet you Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Kahan.” Gabriel shook their hands as Hope and Joy gave them hugs of well wishes. As Doug and Ann started to leave, Gabriel stated, “May the Good Lord always watch over your long journey.” Doug and Ann turned to wave farewell and the three siblings did the same. Outside, Doug reached into his pocket for his keys and found a few dollars. He returned to offer Gabriel all that he had but when they stepped inside, the three siblings were gone. And also gone was the glow that existed within. “Hello,” Doug’s voice echoed around the interior but there wasn’t any response.

“Where did they go?” Ann looked around. “They were just here.”

“I know.” Doug took Ann by the hand. “Not all things are meant to be understood at the time. But this is Christmas Eve, the night of miracles and we just witnessed one.”

“Let’s go home.”

“That sounds good, but first I’ve got to say good-bye to Betty and Ed.”

They parked in the driveway of the bed and breakfast and Ed and Betty greeted them at the door. “Ed, Betty, I would like for you to meet my wife.” Their faces lit up with the exciting news.

“Your wife?” Betty stated giving Ann a hug. “Where did you two get married?”

“At the little church down by the pier.”

“You mean, the church with the round stain glass window?”

“Yes,” Ann confirmed.

“But that little church has been abandon for some time. It’s set for demolition after the first of the year.” Betty stated looking confused.

Ann started to say something, but Doug placed his arm around her shoulders and concluded, “Let’s just say that on this night of miracles, we received a gift that we will always cherish.”

“I remember the Christmas you are talking about.” Madisen beamed.

“Me too.” Michelle added.

“Aunt Millie had a devil of a time getting us to go to bed.” Madisen recounted.

“As a result of us staying up so late, we slept in Christmas morning.”

“Yes, but before we went to bed on Christmas Eve, we both prayed that God would bring home both Mommy and Daddy safely.”

“When we woke, our footsteps thundered through the house waking Aunt Millie. We ran into the living room where the tree was all aglow, but the two of you were not there. Aunt Millie took us into her arms and told us that God answers prayers on His time, not ours.”

“But before grace was said, the two of you came through the front door.”

Michelle concluded.

“That was the best Christmas ever.” Madisen stated.

A tear welled up in Doug's eyes as he remembered his two little girls rushing down the hall to the open entryway. He knelt down on one knee and held both girls as close and as tight as he could. It was a welcome home that he would never forget.

CHAPTER 48

Christmas morning passed with the same rapid fanfare of opened gifts, smiling faces and crumpled wrapping paper lying about the floor. But this year, it held a special meaning for Madisen thanks to Jeremy. She waded through the mound of wrapping paper and sat down next to her father on the sofa. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what Gabriel said about allowing love and forgiveness to grow. Mom was disowned by her parents because she refused to give us up, so when did our grandparents become a part of our lives?” The room fell silent until Michelle piped up with a question of her own.

“And when did you paint your car? I don’t remember it looking as bad as Mom says?”

“Well, I will answer both of those questions in chronological order.” Doug smiled. “That first Christmas we spent as a family, Aunt Millie had a very special gift for me.”

“Oh yes,” Millie laughed. “I remember. I hadn’t anything else to give your father so I gave him the sack containing the cans of red spray paint.”

“When it was warm enough in the spring, I rebuffed the car and painted it. By the time I was through, it looked as though it just rolled off the assembly line instead of the junkyard.

“But the second miracle happened early that summer, during Bible School.”

Aunt Millie was too busy to pick you girls up from Bible School so she asked me if I could. I was working at Ford again, and Ann was working the early shift at the

restaurant. Aunt Millie dropped you girls off in Louisa's care and went on about her business.

Because they were short handed, Jenny, the minister's wife, called Katheryn Parks to see if she would help for just one day. She was reluctant to help with the nursery class but as soon as she saw the two cute identical brunets she was taken in. Louisa knew the connection between you two girls and Katheryn but she kept still, allowing a grandmother to unknowingly dote over her granddaughters. She helped you while Louisa was teaching. She even participated in the outdoor games of duck, duck, goose and red rover. She joyfully listened as Joyce, the music director, wondered how to get less volume from some children and a little more volume from a few that were shy. But Katheryn thought that you two sang the prettiest. She even supervised over crafts, making sure you two didn't get a speck of paint on your clothes. Then as the other children were going home, she stayed with you two.

"Is someone coming to pick you up?" Katheryn knelt down eye level to the two little girls standing side by side holding hands in front of the church doors.

"Our daddy is coming to get us." Madisen piped up.

"There he is," Michelle pointed and both girls raced toward Doug. He knelt down and embraced both girls with his gaze fixed on Katheryn. She pulled at her hair not knowing what to do with herself. Trapped in that awkward moment, Katheryn was speechless.

"Were you girls good today?" They both nodded "yes" in response.

"Mrs. Parks looked after us today." Madisen added.

"She's fun like Aunt Millie." Michelle smiled at Katheryn.

“I’m going to let you girls in on a little secret. Mrs. Parks is a very special lady.” Both girls looked at Katheryn, and she couldn’t believe that she didn’t see it before. But in each little girl she could see her Ann Marie. Then Doug concluded, “Mrs. Parks is your grandmother.” Both little girls raced back to her, and she greeted them with open arms, hugging both and kissing one and then the other.

She rose to her feet, wiping a tear from her eye. “How is Ann Marie?”

“She’s doing fine. She is a chef at The Manhattan.”

“That is a prestigious restaurant.”

“She is a fine chef.”

“And if you don’t mind me asking, what are you doing?”

“I’m a plant manager along the assembly line at Ford.”

She smiled, pleased with what she had heard, “Are you kids living with Millie?”

“No. We bought a home up the street from Millie. We’ve lived there a little over two months.”

Her smile broadened as she wiped away another tear. “Do you have plans following church on Sunday? We would like to have you over for lunch, and then maybe we could join you to watch the girls sing in the program Sunday night?”

Doug hesitated as he didn’t know what Ann’s reaction would be to her mother’s invitation. Following his brief silence, Katheryn piped up. “I’m sorry, you already have plans. That’s quite all right, I understand. Maybe another day would be best for Herbert and I to get acquainted with Michelle and Madisen.” She started to leave but Doug’s voice stopped her. “No. Sunday, lunch at your place, would be nice. We will see you then.”

“Okay. Thank you, Doug.” She waved goodbye to her granddaughters, thankful for the opportunity granted her.

Ann, on the other hand, did not share the same joy as her mother. “Douglas, because of them, we spent three years apart, and now you want to include them in our daughters’ lives. Need I remind you further that they disowned me because I was carrying your child?”

“Ann, remember what Gabriel said the day we were married about letting our love grow and forgiving others as we forgave each other?”

“Yes, I remember, but are you sure it’s a good idea to have my parents involved in Michelle and Madisen’s lives?”

“Dad,” Madisen tried to hold back the tears. “Why did Grandma blurt the truth out to me?”

“Because I am not the man they wanted for their daughter. They accepted me, but I didn’t measure up to their friends’ high standards, and I never will.”

Madisen wrapped her arms around her dad. “You are a much better person than any of them put together.”

Michelle moved closer to Doug. “Madisen is right. You are the best. But we also need to practice what Gabriel said. We need to let our love grow enough to forgive our grandparents. That would be the best gift ever. One of forgiveness.”

They all pile into the little Ford and weaved their way through the city to the Parks’ residence. It was unusually quiet and they began to wonder if anyone was home. The doorbell echoed through the residence and finally Katheryn opened the door. Her

expression burst into joy with their presence. “Herbert come see!” She hollered out hugging one girl and then the other, stopping with Madisen. “I’m so sorry.” She repeated. “We heard that you refused to come home. I’m so sorry, honey.”

“It was a long journey to overcome my grief, but a very special friend helped me to find my way home. I don’t feel hard toward you, because I love you too much to let the hurt win.” Madisen embraced a teary eyed grandmother and then her grandfather. “We are so glad to have you girls home.” Herbert added.

As Katheryn embraced Doug, she whispered in his ear, “You are the best son-in-law we could ever hope for. Thank you for reuniting our small family.”

Looking Katheryn in the eye, Doug softly corrected, “I’m not the one to thank, for God works in mysterious ways, and I would say this is the third miracle that I have experienced in my life. And at the heart of each miracle has been the love of forgiveness.”

CHAPTER 49

In the quiet early morning hour, Madisen sat alone at the counter slowly stirring the creamer into her coffee. She watched the swirl of cream change the rich dark color to the creamy caramel she savored.

“You’re up early.” Doug walked around the counter and opened a cupboard to retrieve a cup.

“Yah, my thoughts wouldn’t let me sleep a moment longer.”

“What’s on your mind?” Doug joined Madisen, cradling a hot cup of coffee.

“Yesterday and Christmases passed, I was reminiscing about how special that first Christmas was with you. It was an answer to a prayer and this Christmas was equally special.”

“That’s what happens when forgiveness is at the heart of the matter. Love walks right on in. This year was an answer to a prayer for me. I’m so grateful that you came home and gave me a second chance.”

“Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, I’ve learned a lot about life through Jeremy’s eyes. Dad would you and Mom mind if I returned to Crystal Lake today to thank him for the gift he gave us?”

“Not at all, you have a safe journey.”

The yellow center line looked like dots as her little car hurdled down the road. Memories of Thanksgiving crowded her mind. The last time she made this trip to Crystal Lake, it

was through a haze of tears and a heavy heart. But this time, the miles seemed to melt away.

She pulled into the driveway of the old Rainblot home place. Something about it dampened her spirits.

She rang the doorbell, and the stately rich chimes sounded through the vast area of the old colonial home, rich with history. As Madisen waited, she looked around the yard. From her vantage point, on the sprawling front porch, she smiled at the clear lights glistening against the sunlight strung high up in the maple trees and the few evergreens were decorated with multicolored lights.

“Hello.” A lady’s voice drew Madisen’s attention to the front door.

“Hello.” She echoed to the slender lady with shoulder length wavy jet black hair that caressed her porcelain complexion. Her piercing blue eyes sparkled with wonder.

“You must be Janette?” Madisen stated as she recalled the family portrait hanging on the wall of the family room.

“I am.” She appeared a bit surprised. “And you are?”

“Madisen Kahan. I returned to college early to see Jeremy. Is he around?”

“Jeremy?” Janette looked even more puzzled.

“Yes, is he home?” Madisen beamed, anxious to see him.

“Surely, you mean David?” Janette questioned, for judging by this young visitor’s age, she must be looking for her youngest brother.

“No, Jeremy. How do you like the Christmas display he made for you? I saw it but he wouldn’t tell me what it would do until you saw it first?”

“Christmas display?” Janette could hardly believe her ears.

“Yah, it’s made up of rods that poke upward at different heights. It’s a circular piece.”

The description sent chills down Janette’s spine. Their yard was open to the public for viewing every night, so that would explain how this young stranger could describe Jeremy’s creation. However, it did not explain how she knew it was a Christmas gift from a brother she held close to her heart. “Jeremy gave me that creation a few years ago.”

“That’s impossible, because when I decided to go home for Christmas, he was putting the finishing touches on it.”

Janette reached around to the antique hall tree and retrieved her cape. She slipped it on as she stepped outside. “I don’t know how to tell you this, but Jeremy is no longer living.”

Madisen stepped away as Janette reached out to put an arm around her. “No that can’t be, he was just here. He can’t be gone.” Tears welled up on Madisen’s long lashes and felt cold as they trickled down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Madisen, but will you walk with me. There is something you need to see.”

Saddened and numb from the shock of Jeremy’s passing, Madisen quietly walked along side Janette up to Rose Hill Cemetery. Madisen began to shiver as her focus fell on a freshly dug grave. But Janette walked past it and on back to another grave. They stopped before a tombstone that was waist high and three feet across. Through a blur of tears Madisen stared at the oval black and white photo of Jeremy, which was centered above his name deeply engraved in the gray and black granite. *Jeremy Ryan Rainblot.*

But it was the next line that robbed her lungs of air and sent Madisen staggering away.

Born Dec. 25, 1969 Died Dec. 28, 1995 A multitude of Jeremy's words that didn't make sense at the time flood her memory. "...Hmmm... You found me... That's funny how you see it because... I was waiting for you... I have been sent to help you see your way clear of a difficult time."

She felt Janette's supportive arm across her back. "I believe that you saw my brother when you say that you did because no one outside of the family knows about the light display being his last Christmas present to me. I love water features, and he managed to create the illusion of a rhythmic water fountain with lights."

Madisen's focus landed on the grave behind Jeremy's. *Joe Rainblot* and his date of death *Nov. 25, 1998* "Is that Doctor Joe?" Madisen pointed.

"Yes, he was the Chief of Staff for several years at Oaks and Rice Hospital. He was also our grandfather. The same thing that killed Jeremy eventually got him too. He kept searching for something to buy Jeremy more time, but the years of misdiagnosis when we lived in Ohio let the family heart disease progress to such a state that any time Jeremy had was already bought." Curiously, Janette looked at Madisen. Her complexion was pale with realization and confusion. "Did you also see our grandfather?"

"I saw a man advanced in years. Average height and weight. Graying straight hair that had once been black. His face showed a worried expression."

"You truly did witness a miracle."

As twilight faded to dark, Janette and Madisen walked back to the old Rainblot home place and entered the estate through the backyard gate. Part way through the lit yard, Madisen stopped to admire the decorated trees. The tall maples were lit with clear

lights. The old red bud was adorned with multicolored lights. The few evergreens were decorated with a mat of multicolored lights and twisted strings of clear lights gracefully spiral around the evergreens to resemble a rope of garland. A short distance away a bridge was lit with clear lights that reflect in the water. Together, they walked onto the bridge that connected one side of the hour glass pond to the other. They stood in the middle of the bridge admiring the lighted boats and illuminated elves busy making Santa's toys. "Who did all of this?" Madisen looked to Janette.

"A lot of my family members and myself." As she laughed, her breath froze in the air. "It's a real art to putting them all up, but the biggest challenge is rigging the lights so fuses in the house won't blow.

"Jeremy used to put a lot of this out by himself. And one particular year he didn't get them rigged quite right. When Mom ran the washer and drier fuses blew. After a few more times of replacing blown fuses, the Mom fuse blew. 'Jeremy, when are you going to decide that you have too many Christmas lights?' Janette's jaw dropped when Madisen finished the story.

"I'll know when I have too many lights when I flush the toilet and blow a fuse." Madisen glanced around the yard. "Where is Jeremy's last creation?"

"It's up close to the house." They proceeded toward the back of the illuminated home. Multicolored lights outline the roof top. "It's one of a kind." Janette added, "I would be sick if something happened to it. Jeremy was an electrical engineer. Things like this were child's play to him. No one in the family can figure out how he created it." They stopped a few feet from the structure and watched as the knee high, outer most row of clear lights began to light. Then rhythmically, the next row began with each row of

rods progressing in height, growing taller and taller until the inner scene was covered by a fountain of clear lights. Then the fountain shut off to reveal the lit forest scene in the open center. Three artificial trees were covered with multi colored lights with the central seven -foot tree sporting lighted balls as well. Two motion deer moved their heads peeking around the central tree at one another. Once again, the fountain of lights began. Only this time they illuminated someone else. Madisen's eyes became wide as her focus once again landed on a ghost.

“David,” Janette called out to her youngest brother, standing on the other side of the display. He weaved his way through the rods of rhythmic lights and emerged on the opposite side inches from them. He was the spitting image of Jeremy and Madisen began to wonder if it was David that she spoke to before Christmas. But as Janette concluded her introductions, he took Madisen's gloved hand in his and said, “It's nice to meet you.”

“We haven't already met?” Madisen questioned in shock over the resemblance of the two brothers.

“No, I'm afraid not. I know that I would remember meeting a girl as pretty as you.”

Madisen shivered as the shock diminished.

“Let's get you inside and warmed up.” Janette placed an arm around Madisen's shoulders as they walked to the house.

While Janette made hot chocolate in the kitchen, Madisen was drawn to the family room. Her attention turned from the familiar angel to David as he draped a lap robe over her shoulders. “This was one of my favorite blankets growing up. It'll warm you up in no time.”

“Thank you,” Madisen smiled up at him as she gathered the blanket, made up of denim blocks around her neck. “Are you a student at the University?”

“Yes, I’m following in my big brother’s footsteps. I’m an electrical engineering major.”

“I’m an engineering major too.” Madisen said in shock. “I can’t believe that we haven’t met before now.”

“Me neither, our schedules must be total opposites.”

“Here we go.” Janette carefully carried a tray with three cups of hot chocolate. They each took a cup and Madisen wrapped her ice cold fingers around the warm mug. She sat down on the sofa next to David. Her eyes trailed down from the old family portrait hanging above the mantle to a 5X7 photo that she hadn’t noticed before. She rose from her seat to get a closer look at the couple within the golden frame. “Who is this with Jeremy?”

“That’s Shelly Turner. She and Jeremy were engaged. That photo was taken during the good times of Jeremy’s life.”

“Did they get married?”

Sadly, Janette shook her head “no”. “The medication quit working, and they put their marriage on hold. Shelly stayed with Jeremy up until the end.”

Once more, Madisen recalled a conversation she had with Jeremy about his girlfriend.

“You mentioned a girlfriend, where is she?”

“I hope that she has moved on with her life.”

“Moved on!... How could she leave you when you need her the most?”

“She didn’t leave me. I left her. Some things are out of our control.”

Now, Madisen understood what Jeremy meant. He passed away. “Has Shelly moved on? I mean, has she married someone else?”

Janette sighed, “No she isn’t seeing anyone.”

“But Kevin is still in love with her.” David added.

“Still,” Madisen picked up on that key word, and she looked to Janette to give the explanation.

“It’s funny how things work out. Kevin Rainblot is our cousin and the same age as Jeremy. The two of them were roommates at the University. Kevin was an automotive engineering major while Jeremy was an electrical engineering major.

“It was Kevin who fell for Shelly first. But when he introduced Shelly to Jeremy, it was love at first sight. Due to all of Jeremy’s health issues, he had never dated and Kevin could see the bond that began to form between them, so he stepped aside and let Shelly’s relationship with Jeremy grow.”

“What about Kevin? Is he still single?”

“Yes, he is still friends with Shelly.”

“Where is Shelly now? I’ve got to talk to her.” Madisen sat her mug on the mantel and folded the small blanket as Janette gave her directions on how to find Shelly.

Madisen navigated her little car down the streets of Crystal Lake to the apartment address that Janette had given her. She parked in the nearly empty lot and peered up at the only window flooded with light. A lone Christmas tree attempted to add cheer to the desolate surroundings.

Madisen sat frozen behind the steering wheel wondering how she could pass Jeremy's message on to Shelly without sounding like a flake. She drew in a jagged breath and hoped like all get outs that she would find the words to convey Jeremy's message, for he wasn't just sent to help her, but to help Shelly as well.

She pulled hard on the heavy door to the apartment complex and stepped in from the cold. This apartment building was designed a lot like the one she lives in. As she climbed the stairs, she shoved her gloves into her coat pockets. Then with all the nerve she could muster, knocked on the door.

A slender, physically- fit lady with long wavy brunet hair peeked through the space the door chain would allow. "Hi," Madisen smiled, "Are you Shelly Turner?"

"I am." Her tone of voice was flat, and her expression had a hint of sadness.

"I'm Madisen Kahan."

"Oh," Shelly interrupted, "you are the young lady that Janette told me about. Wait one minute." She closed the door and removed the chain. "Please come in." She motioned with the wave of her hand. Her apartment was small but neatly decorated and tastefully furnished.

"So Janette told you my story?"

"She called a few minutes ago and told me that you had witnessed a miracle and that I needed to hear you out."

Both young ladies sat down on the light colored sofa facing each other. Madisen looked into Shelly's warm brown eyes, anxious to share her miracle. "I met Jeremy."

"Really, when did you meet him?" Skepticism furrowed Shelly's eyebrows.

"Just after Thanksgiving this year."

“That’s”

Madisen held up a hand to interrupt. “I know. That’s impossible. I know that now. But a few days ago he was as real to me as you are. He helped me see my way clear of a problem and now I have a message to relay to you.”

Shelly popped up, not believing what she was hearing. “You must have David and Jeremy confused.”

“No. I don’t. I spoke to Jeremy.”

Look!” Shelly’s voice became stern. “David and Janette mean well, but...”

“When I spoke to Jeremy, he told me that he had a girlfriend, and for a while his life felt normal. Then he got sick again. For a short time, he was mad because he was going to lose a future with you. A future with a family.” She took Shelly by the hand. She could see the tears start to form. “He told me that a baby girl born around Christmas Day should be named Noel.”

Shelly erupted into tears and embraced Madisen. “I believe you.” She whispered. As she regained composure, she repeated, “I believe you; for that conversation was strictly between the two of us.”

“Shelly, Jeremy wants you to move on, and I think that you know a guy that loves you as much as Jeremy did.”

Shelly wiped her eyes dry and retrieved a photo from a set of shelves. “This is Kevin Rainblot.” Madisen gazed at the photo of Shelly and Kevin embracing each other at a carnival and then she looked over at the shelf where the photo sat. Right next to it was the engagement photo of Shelly and Jeremy. At one time, Shelly’s heart had been

torn between two cousins but eventually Jeremy won. “You look very much in love with Kevin.”

A pleasant smile caressed Shelly’s lips. “I won’t deny that I still have feelings for Kevin.” She placed the photo back on the shelf. “It’s just awkward for us. We can’t go back, and we can’t move forward.

“You see, I met Kevin first. I had seen him around campus, and I was smitten by how handsome he was: physically fit and that thick wavy blonde hair. A one- hundred mile per hour wind couldn’t rustle it up, but his warm brown eyes stole my heart. I guess that he had been paying attention to me as well, because he walked up to where I was sitting in a nearly empty cafeteria and asked if it would be all right to join me. We hit it off from the start and spent as much time together as possible.

“One evening, Kevin was going to take me out for supper and a movie. I went over to his dorm room to wait, and that is when I met Jeremy. That short jet black curly hair and bright blue eyes, slim and trim. Oh my, he was a heart throb too! But the one thing about Jeremy, he was easy to talk to. He possessed a certain understanding and genuine concern that Kevin didn’t quite have. I remember thinking that if I hadn’t met Kevin, I would have fallen head over heels in love with Jeremy.

“That’s when Kevin walked in. I felt ashamed of what I was thinking because I first loved him. The two guys razzed each other for a bit and then before we left, Kevin asked Jeremy to join us. At first he declined, but then he reluctantly accepted. The three of us had a great time.

“Then, I found myself wanting to meet Kevin at the dorm so I could see Jeremy. I guess Kevin caught on to my feelings, for Jeremy and he began to bow out of the

picture. I was thankful to him for making the choice for me, because it was so easy to fall in love with Jeremy.”

“When did you find out about Jeremy’s heart condition?”

“Long after I had fallen so deeply in love with him that I couldn’t help myself. I asked Jeremy to come home with me one weekend. My parents own a farm. We walked the place over as well as sat and dreamed about the future. My parents loved Jeremy as well. When we returned to college, Jeremy slept through his first class. I couldn’t help but tease him over lunch, and then I razzed him even more about wearing his lunch on his shirt. He went to the dorm to change and failed to lock the door. Kevin had never been shy about changing his shirt before me but Jeremy was, and when I walked in I found out why. The hideous scar down his chest robbed my lungs of air. The truth hit me like a punch to the abdomen. My mouth flew open but no sound came out.

“I can explain.” He said.

“But there wasn’t much need for explanation, for I had seen that same kind of scar on my grandfather’s chest following open heart surgery. The only thing I didn’t count on was hearing how many open heart surgeries Jeremy had been through, and that he was on a donor list awaiting a new heart. But he assured me that if the cocktail of drugs he currently took continued to work that he would be removed from the list.

“I was so hurt that he kept the truth from me. But after learning the truth a lot of little things made sense, like why he wouldn’t run, and why he avoided stairs and most of all when we got close to being intimate he pulled away. I thought it was to protect my honor, but it was to protect his secret.

“He assured me that the only reason he kept his heart condition a secret from me was so I wouldn’t treat him any different than any other guy. I was so mad and hurt that I spouted off, ‘well since you don’t want to be treated differently, then I guess you will understand this.’ I walked out.

“Kevin found me later that day. I was upset with him too because he knew and didn’t tell me, but his reason was different and that about made me love him more.”

“What?” Madisen started to ask then answered it herself. “He wanted Jeremy to have a normal happy relationship. That’s why he bowed out.”

“Exactly.” Tears welled up in Shelly’s eyes. “Kevin found me on campus. He encouraged me to give Jeremy another chance. It didn’t take much encouragement, because I had had enough time to cool down and get over my hurt. I met Jeremy on his way to class. I didn’t have to say a word for he met me with open arms. I swore from that moment on that I would never let him go again.”

“Loving Kevin isn’t betraying Jeremy; it would be honoring his wish.”

CHAPTER 50

The light of a new day woke Madisen from a restful slumber. She packed a few things into the trunk of her car, ready for the long trip home to spend New Years with friends and family.

Stopped at a street light, she gazed over at Oaks and Rice Hospital with more questions. Determine to find the answers, she flicked on her turn signals and pulled into the visitors parking lot. As she entered the main lobby, she was stunned to see the giant Christmas tree that Jeremy decorated, looking the same while everything else around it was different.

“Hello Miss Kahan, how are you today?” She turned toward the kind gentle voice.

“Doctor Joe.” She blinked, not once but twice.

“Well, you are partially correct. I’m Dr. Joseph Rainblot. Doctor Joe was my father.” The longer he spoke, the more Madisen began to notice the little differences between the two men. The son’s jet black hair had less gray, and his eyes lacked the weight of worry. “I took more after my dad and my brother Garry, took more after our mother.”

“How did you know my name?”

Joe smiled and motioned for them to take a seat in the nearby lobby, “I was the attending physician in the ER when you were brought in.”

“When I was brought in?”

“Yes, you were just beginning to come around when you arrived at our ER. The paramedics found you in the exact same location as Shelly found Jeremy.”

Alarm fired in Madisen’s eyes. “When Shelly found Jeremy, was he alive?”

“No. And he had made it crystal clear that if his heart stopped, he didn’t want any heroic efforts done to revive him.” Joe smiled as he recalled. “The ironic thing is, from Christmas day to the minute he passed away, Jeremy seemed to be improving.” Then Joe studied Madisen with his own curiosity. “The day you were brought in, did you feel faint before you collapsed?” Being a science person, Joe sought a tangible explanation for the surrounding events of what Madisen experienced.

“No. I don’t remember a single moment that you are talking about. For on that day, I was a passenger in the ambulance and Jeremy was the patient. When we arrived at the ER your father met us. Jeremy’s nurse, Donna, can vouch for me.” Madisen felt anxious, fearful that her words would make her appear insane.

“Janette told me of the miracle you experienced, but I’ve always been a skeptic. Were you under a lot of pressure, or stressed about something?”

“I had just learned a secret about my father. It was devastating news to me, but Jeremy helped me to see my way past the pain and open my heart and mind to hear my dad’s explanation to the past. That explanation has helped me heal.” Madisen panned the large lobby in hopes of seeing Donna.

“Who are you looking for?”

“Donna; she can back everything that I’m telling you.”

Joseph laid a hand on Madisen’s knee which made her jump but drew her full attention to him. “Miss Kahan, Donna passed away a few months ago from cancer.”

Madisen's jaw dropped, and her heart nearly stopped as she recalled Donna's words following Jeremy's dismissal: "...With the terminally ill patients all we can do is stabilize them and send them home. Jeremy is one of the lucky ones. He's in no pain..."

"Miss Kahan, are you all right?"

"I came here searching for answers, to understand what happened to me between Thanksgiving and Christmas. And now, you must think that I'm a total nut case."

"No. I don't think that. Some of my colleagues would say that what you experienced was all stress-induced. And being a skeptic, I would have agreed, but not now. When Jeremy was alive, I witnessed his unwavering faith. It gave him strength. And at that time, I could not believe that faith could be stronger than medicine. But now, I realize that God works in mysterious ways. And sometimes, some things are not meant to be scientifically explained. I owe you a debt of thanks for restoring my faith."

Their attention fell on the Christmas tree in the main lobby. "How come it appears untouched by time? It looks exactly the same way it did when Jeremy decorated it."

"During his illness, Jeremy became known as the tree trimmer. Whether he was a patient or not, he would light up every tree in this hospital. After he passed away, no one had the heart to take that one down. So someone came up with the idea of putting it on wheels so it could be rolled in and out of storage. And every year that it is plugged in, those little lights shine with all the faith, hope and joy that Jeremy possessed."

On the drive home, Dr. Joseph Rainblot's words of faith, hope and joy rang with familiarity. Then it occurred to her: three angels, Faith, Hope and Joy helped set her broken family on a path of healing through love that comes from forgiveness.

CHAPTER 51

Before the hour of her first class, Madisen walked to Rose Hill cemetery. She traced Jeremy's oval photo with her gloved index finger as she reminisced. "I didn't get the chance to thank you in person, for helping to heal our broken family. With the truth and love of forgiveness, the bond of love that we have for one another has grown stronger. Thank you for helping me get past my own pain, so I could forgive my father and forgive myself."

Out of the corner of her eye, Madisen noticed a couple approaching. She smiled as the sight of Kevin and Shelly walking hand-in-hand. They stopped at Jeremy's grave, and Kevin extended his hand. "So this is the lady we owe a debt of gratitude." As she shook his hand, he concluded, "Thank you for helping us get to that next step."

"I can't take all of the credit."

"I know. Jeremy was a special person when he was alive and even now, he is still working to mend what is broken."

Shelly laid a long stem red rose at the base of Jeremy's tombstone. "When he died, my heart shattered. I didn't think it possible to ever love again." She looked into Kevin's warm eyes. "But love has been with me every step of the way." Her focus turned to Madisen. "It just took you to point it out to me." The two girls embraced.

With melancholy piercing Madisen's heart, she wandered to her first class. The second she stepped through the large wooden swinging doors, her gaze fell on David. He relocated his book bag, so she could sit next to him. "I can't believe it." Madisen

beamed in amazement. “We finally have a class together.” As they compared schedules, their smiles broadened, for they had more than one class together.

“It looks like my big brother held true to his word. He is still looking out for me.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I was little and Jeremy was sick, I was scared of losing him. To ease my fears, he told me that no matter where he was he would always look out for me.”

As the lecture began, Madisen reflected on the changes that had occurred since her chance encounter with Jeremy. Love had been rekindled between Shelly and Kevin. Dr. Joseph Rainblot’s faith had been restored and a promise had been kept as she and David began to explore a life of love. And for the rest of her small family, the New Year brought with it new beginnings as she, Michelle, Doug, Ann, Aunt Millie, Katheryn and Herbert all gathered under the same roof to ring in the New Year. As midnight rolled around, Madisen looked at each member of her family and swore that she would always remember this year as being the year that many hearts were healed with the love of forgiveness, and her small family came together as one.

PRESENT DAY

Now every fall, when the rich vibrant colored leaves fall to the ground, the long light stringing poles come out of storage, and memories of the tree trimmer also come to mind. While David meticulously places each string of lights in the maples of the old Rainblot home place, Madisen shares the story of the tree trimmer with their two children, Noelle and JD, short for Jeremy David, about how her perspective on life forever changed.

The End