

WHERE ANGELS TREAD

A Kensington Family Novel

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Where Angels Tread
The Kensingtons Book One
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CHAPTER 1

When Zachary was a little boy, he used to bounce off the last step of the school bus and directly into Heidi Griffin's arms, eager to tell her everything about his day with the kind of innocent childhood excitement that made her heart burst with love. She would lead him into the cozy kitchen and sit him down in front of a tall glass of milk and two warm peanut butter cookies, his favorite, and listen raptly as he chattered on and on about his latest art project, or else recited his multiplication tables, his cheeks flushed pink with pride. She knew then that those days would be short-lived, that she needed to drink in every moment with her son before he became an awkward, surly teenager who breezed by her without a backward glance.

Unfortunately, Heidi thought as she pressed her fingers against her temple in irritation, that time had come sooner than she ever imagined. As she looked at her son, now ten years old with a shock of red hair and a wiry body he had yet to grow into, she longed for the days when scraped knees and other childhood traumas were fixed with a quick kiss and a trip to the ice cream parlor. But the events of the past three years had left Zachary floundering; the sparkle in his blue-green eyes had faded, along with his infectious laugh and zest for life. He had become a shell of the boy she once knew, but Heidi, in her own heartache, had yet to figure out how to reach him. She felt like they were both drowning in their grief, desperately grasping for each other's hands but finding nothing but air instead.

Trying to control the quake of rage in her voice, Heidi waved the principal's note in front of Zachary's sullen face; he did his best to appear nonchalant, but Heidi knew from the way the color crept into his cheeks that he was steeling himself for a fight. "I need you to explain this to me," she said quietly, silently rereading the note once more. The principal of Zachary's middle school had mailed home a handwritten letter to Heidi, voicing his concern over Zachary's recent spate of absences; the only problem was that as far as Heidi knew, Zachary hadn't missed a day of school at all this year.

Zachary merely shrugged in response, his face mutinous, his shoulders hunched. Despite her anger, Heidi felt a rush of affection for her only child as he stood there in pants two sizes too big and a black faux leather jacket that looked as though it had jumped right out of an eighties hair band video. She knew that he was trying to be tough—as tough as any ten-year-old could be, that is—but to

her he was still the sweet boy who used to climb onto her lap every night and plant a soft kiss on her cheek before scampering off to the warm cocoon of his bed.

“Listen to me, Zachary,” she said, placing two fingers beneath his chin and forcing him to look into her eyes. “This is completely unacceptable. Mr. Lange wrote here that you’ve missed ten days of school in the past two months. Where have you been?” He averted his eyes and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, studiously ignoring her. She took a deep breath, and decided to try a different tactic. “Sweetheart, I know things have been rough around here. For both of us. But I can feel you slipping away from me and that scares me so much, Zachary. I don’t want to lose you, too.”

Zachary’s eyes filled with tears, and he ducked his head and swiped roughly at them with the back of his hand. Heidi reached out to rest a comforting hand on his shoulder, but he swatted her away impatiently; she felt a wetness behind her own eyes, the familiar sensation that she had experienced all too much of these past three years.

“I’ve been cutting, okay? What else do you want me to say? School is stupid.”

Heidi squared her shoulders, preparing for a battle of wills that she was determined, for once, to win. “And where exactly were you going? You shouldn’t be out wandering around by yourself. It’s not safe. Not to mention the fact that you’re going to have to repeat fifth grade if you continue acting like this.”

“I don’t care!” he shouted, startling Heidi so much that she took a step back, her eyes widening in alarm. When, she wondered, her chest swelling with emotion, had things gotten so bad? They used to be a tight-knit, loving family, before the accident that claimed every ounce of happiness she had. She remembered, before Zachary was born, how she used to dream for hours on end about giving him the perfect childhood, like the kind she used to see on those sappy classic television shows. She always thought that she would be the best mother in town. But somewhere along the way, things had begun to unravel like a ball of yarn, and once that first strand came loose, it was practically impossible to put the ball back together again.

“Zachary...” She reached out a hand toward her son, but he turned and darted away from her and down the hallway to the front door, which he disappeared out of, slamming the door behind him so hard that its decorative glass panes shook. That, she thought, sinking onto one of the wooden stools that circled her kitchen table, did not go as smoothly as she had hoped. Lately, there had been too many times when, rather than confronting what was really bothering him, Zachary

took off, roaming the streets for hours until Heidi's fingernails were bitten down to the skin with worry. Try as she might, she was unable to control his behavior.

What he really needed was the same thing that every other little boy needed. A father.

Heidi's throat tightened as she caught a glimpse of John's photo, taken three summers ago during a family trip to San Francisco. She gently picked up the photo, a sad smile creeping up on her face as she remembered how much fun they had on the trip, the first "real" family vacation they had taken since Zachary had been born. She and John had scrimped and saved for months to afford the trip, collecting spare change from their wallets and hosting garage sales to sell some of the items they never used anymore. They weren't rich, but they were happy.

Heidi had been behind the camera for this particular shot, trying to frame the photo just right so that she could capture the glorious purple and orange sunset lighting up the sky behind the Bay Bridge. Like most seven-year-olds, Zachary was getting impatient at having to stand still for so long, squirming in his father's arms and hopping from one foot to the next. "Mommy," he called impatiently as she twisted the lens to zoom out, "hurry up! I'm hungry and you *promised* we could have pizza tonight."

"I know," John said, kneeling down to brush a lock of Zachary's hair back from his forehead. "Let's take one real photo for Mommy because it will make her happy, and then we'll do one with silly faces." He stroked the little boy's cheek with the pad of his thumb. "How does that sound?"

"I'm going to pretend to be a dinosaur, Daddy. Rawr!" Zachary bared his teeth and clawed at the air. John grabbed Zachary around the waist and twirled him around in mid-air. Heidi snapped photo after photo of the two of them, Zachary shrieking with glee, John throwing his head back and laughing that deep belly laugh that Heidi so adored.

Months later, when she finally mustered up the energy to have the photos from their trip developed, she thumbed through them until she reached those shots. Her boys, carefree and laughing, so wrapped up in each other that they forgot about the beautiful scenery behind them and the line of other tourists waiting to have their own pictures taken in the same spot. She plucked a photo from the pile and carefully arranged it in a frame on the kitchen counter. When Zachary had returned home from school that day, he took one look at the picture and fled to his room, slamming the door behind him. He stayed there all evening, Heidi crouched in the hallway outside his room with her head pressed against the wall, hot tears sliding down her cheeks as she listened to her precious boy cry himself to sleep. She had known that it was her responsibility to comfort him,

but nothing she could do or say would bring back the one thing that would take all of their pain away. So they remained the same, cloaked in their sorrow, until life slowly returned to normal. Or, as Heidi now thought of it, the new normal.

After one last glance at John's smiling face, she set the photo back on the counter and bent down to retrieve a heavy pot from the cabinet. She filled it with water, glancing out of the window every now and then to try and spot Zachary's willowy form walking up the sidewalk to the front door. She never knew where he went during these times; when he returned, her questions always fell on deaf ears. There wasn't even anyone she could call; her parents had died not long after Zachary was born, and as far as she knew, he didn't have any close friends at school.

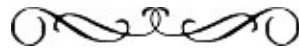
An hour later, Heidi's spaghetti dinner lay forgotten, the sauce hardening on the plates, the mozzarella cheese congealed into unappetizing globs. Heidi stood at the front window watching the rain come down in droves. The California sky had darkened to an inky blue despite the early hour, and the only souls she saw outside were scurrying into their warm homes to escape the downpour. A streak of white lightning crackled across the sky, followed by a deep rumble of thunder. Heidi crossed her arms around her body protectively and hurried down the sidewalk, the wind whipping her hair around her face wildly. Zachary was still nowhere to be seen.

Terrifying images of her son, soaked and trembling, alone in the dark somewhere, flashed through her mind. She grabbed her purse and keys and clambered into the old but reliable station wagon she bought used from a slick car salesman who had been trying his best to flirt with her. Cranking the volume on the radio up to mask the pounding of her own heart, she ground the engine to life and steered onto the slick roads, praying that she would find Zachary before he got hurt, or worse.

It was ironic, really, Heidi thought to herself as she drove through the neighboring streets. She had always loved the rain. As a child, she would stand at the door impatiently, waiting for the clouds to split open. As the first drops tumbled out of the sky, she would grab a blanket and a book and settle herself under the weeping willow tree in the front yard of her home, spending hours watching the puddles dance in the wind. "You're crazy," her mother used to say as she braved the rain to bring Heidi a steaming mug of hot chocolate. "Maybe you used to be a mermaid in your past life."

Even on her wedding day, when most brides prayed for sunshine and warmth, Heidi secretly wished that storm clouds would swirl through the sky. She believed then that rain was a promise of future happiness, a sign of good luck. But now, especially during these crisp fall nights, the rain haunted her, pelting

her with memories of the day her and Zachary's lives had changed forever.



Shane Kensington was bored. He was on desk duty at the station again, a position he had become all too familiar with over the past few years. What he craved were the days when he could patrol the streets in his cruiser, and the thrill he received every time a call came over the radio. His partner Buddy would always turn to Shane, a mischievous gleam in his eye, and say, “Ready to party?”

Shane always had the same response. “You better believe it.” It had become a running joke between the two men, who were as close as brothers. They had been assigned to the same station after graduating from the police academy and eventually requested to become partners, sharing countless late night cups of coffee, bleary-eyed talks about the future, and maybe a few dirty jokes here and there. Despite the fun they had together, when duty called, they were always first at the line of action, ready to serve and protect the community—and the people—that they loved so much.

From the time he was a little boy, growing up in the rolling hills of Central California's Santa Ynez Valley, Shane knew that he was destined to become a police officer. When he was in fourth grade, the police chief visited his school to talk to the class about safety. At the end of the presentation, Shane raised his hand and boldly asked if he could try on the officer's cap. “Now, Shane, that's not a good idea,” his pretty teacher Miss Winters had scolded, wagging her finger at him. “Officer Palen has to get back to work now.”

“That's okay,” the chief had replied, walking over to where Shane was sitting on the floor and kneeling down beside him. He gently removed his cap and placed it on Shane's head, then unpinned his badge and dropped it into the little boy's open palm. Shane turned it over, closely examining the motto—“To serve and protect”—and knew then, even at such a young age, that he would someday be standing before a class, just like Officer Palen.

That afternoon, Shane bounded off the school bus and dashed into the kitchen, where he found his mother Michelle trying to convince his baby sister Lacey, whose face was smeared with pureed peas, to eat her dinner. When Michelle saw Shane's face, flushed with excitement, she wiped her hands on a towel and placed them on his shoulders. She squatted down to his level, and staring him straight in the eyes like she did with each of her children, said, “What do you have to tell me?”

Tumbling over his words in his haste to describe the epiphany he had that day, Shane told his mother all about the police chief's visit. “When I grow up,”

he announced, chomping happily on the plate of crackers she offered him, "I'm going to be a police officer, and I'm going to get rid of all the bad guys."

Rather than laughing at his eagerness, his mother nodded seriously and sat down beside him, taking his small hand in her own. "If that's what you want to do, you're going to have to work really hard to accomplish it. I know you can do it, or anything else you set your mind to." With that, she ruffled his hair and turned back to Lacey, who was now teething on her plastic spoon and rubbing peas in her wispy blond hair.

His mother never again brought up their conversation; she didn't have to. She knew that Shane would take whatever steps he needed to in order to achieve his dreams, and she would stand beside him along the way, cheering him on. When Shane Kensington said he was going to do something, he meant it.

He glanced outside, the front doors of the station fogged over from the pounding rain outside. Nights like this were usually quiet; most Californians tended to huddle inside when the roads were slick with rain. While some of his fellow officers chose to take advantage of the silent dispatcher by playing a heated game of Texas hold 'em in the back room, Shane neglected to join them. They hadn't asked him; in fact, other than Buddy most of his colleagues tended to look right past him these days. Shane couldn't blame them; in a job where brotherhood and close friendships were the norm, Shane had chosen to isolate himself. He didn't used to be that way; a few years ago Shane would have been in the thick of the game, throwing down twenties and teasing the other men about his stellar hand of cards. But things were different now.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shane saw Buddy sauntering out of the break room, stretching his arms above his head and yawning. Shane quickly averted his eyes from the window; he didn't want Buddy to know that he had been dwelling on the events of the past, the ones he couldn't change. "Long night," Buddy said, digging his phone out of his pocket and glancing at the time. "Could use a little excitement, if you know what I mean." He winked at Shane, who smiled back weakly.

Just then, the doors to the police station flung open and Nick, a young officer mere weeks out of the academy, walked in. Behind him stood a sullen boy, shivering in the cold and looking down at the gray linoleum floor. "Sit there." Nick pointed to the empty row of orange plastic chairs lining the wall. "I'm going to call your mother now so she can come and pick you up."

The boy glowered at Nick briefly, then slumped over in one of the chairs, pulled out an MP3 player and a pair of headphones, and cranked up the volume. Shane could hear the steady beat of the music from across the room; it sounded like some kind of God-awful heavy metal. Teenagers these days, he thought,

shaking his head in annoyance. If Shane would have ever been brought into the police station, he would have been quaking in his boots, afraid of what his father would say when he found out that Shane was in trouble. Shane could picture his father's face, lined with disappointment. The Kensingtons had been raised to respect rules. By contrast, this boy seemed, if anything, kind of bored.

Nick peeled off his coat and nodded to Shane. "Want to handle it from here?" He disappeared into the back room, Buddy at his heels, and Shane could hear the other officers greeting them enthusiastically.

Shane heaved a sigh, then got up from his post behind the front desk and crossed the room to where the boy was sitting with his eyes closed, tapping his feet in time to the music. As Shane approached him, he realized with a jolt that the boy was young, much younger than he originally thought. His bright red hair was flattened around his ears, and a smattering of freckles dotted his nose and cheeks. Despite the tough-guy persona he seemed to be trying to give off, with his ill-fitting black clothes and studded belt, Shane guessed that the boy couldn't be more than ten or eleven. What on earth was he doing out alone on a night like this?

"Mind if I sit down?" he asked the boy, who peered at him from beneath his bangs and shrugged, then resumed tapping his foot. Shane bit back a smile; as the oldest of eight siblings, he knew a thing or two about bratty behavior. Luckily, he was a patient man; Shane felt confident that he would be able to get the boy to open up to him. "What's your name, son?"

The boy winced at the last word. "Zachary," he mumbled. "Zachary Griffin."

"Nice to meet you, Zachary. I'm Officer Kensington, but you can call me Shane. What kind of music are you listening to?" He pointed at the MP3 player. Zachary turned the music up a smidge louder, as though trying to drown out the sound of Shane's voice.

Shane was undeterred. "I like country, myself," he said, leaning his head against the wall. The music was so loud at this point that he could feel his heart beating along with the drums. He reached over and gently removed the player from Zachary's hands, and motioned for him to take off his headphones. After throwing Shane a bad-tempered look, the boy complied.

"Thank you," Shane said cheerfully. "Now that we've been introduced, why don't you tell me why you were outside by yourself tonight? It's dangerous to be roaming the streets on your own in this kind of weather. You could have been hit by a car."

Zachary shrugged again. "I ran away for a while."

Shane nodded slowly, careful to keep the line of communication open between himself and Zachary. He had a feeling that the boy was vulnerable;

perhaps he needed to talk to someone. “Where were you running to?”

Shane sensed immediately that he had asked the wrong question; Zachary’s eyes clouded over, and he slumped further in his chair. “Fine. You don’t have to tell me where you were going. But why don’t you at least tell me where you were coming from. I’m sure your parents are worried sick about you.”

“Am I in trouble?” Shane was taken aback by the pleading tone in the boy’s voice. He knew that beneath the tough exterior lived a little boy who was probably scared silly.

“Not with me, you aren’t. Our job is just to keep you safe. I can’t say the same for your parents. I’m going to have to call them here in a minute to come and pick you up.”

Zachary nodded, picking at a piece of dirt lodged beneath his fingernail. “It’s just my mom. You can call her on her cell phone. She’s probably out looking for me.”

Shane poured a cool glass of water for Zachary and punched in the phone number the boy had given him. A frantic voice answered on the first ring. “Mrs. Griffin? I’m Officer Kensington, with the Santa Ynez Police Department.”

“Oh my God. Is Zachary okay?”

“Yes ma’am, he’s fine. A little wet, but safe and sound. I’m going to need you to come down to the station and pick him up. We’ll look after him until then.”

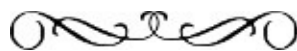
“I’ll be right there. Thank you so much for finding him.”

She hung up the phone, and Shane quietly laid the receiver back down. “Your mother will be here shortly,” he called to Zachary, who nodded and gulped down the rest of his water without taking a breath. He crumpled the paper cup in his hands and tossed it into the trash can across the room; his aim was perfect. “Wow, I’m impressed.” Shane walked over to the trash and looked inside. “That was a perfect shot. Do you play basketball?”

“Used to,” Zachary mumbled. “When I was younger. I don’t play anymore.”

“Too bad,” Shane said, grabbing a few pieces of paper and rolling them into a ball. “Care for a quick game of one-on-one?”

He tossed the paper balls to Zachary, and watched as a slow grin lit up the boy’s face. “You’re on,” he said happily.



Heidi barreled up to the front doors of the police station, all dignity forgotten. She knew that she looked crazed; her mascara, supposedly waterproof, was running in streams down her cheeks, her hair was plastered to her head like a helmet, and she was so wet that she looked as though she had just climbed out of

a swimming pool. Or a giant puddle.

Warm, wonderful relief coursed through her half-frozen body as she spotted Zachary through the window standing next to a police officer who had his back to Heidi. But what she saw next stopped her in her tracks; she hardly believed her own eyes. As she watched, Zachary lifted one arm above his head and lobbed what appeared to be a paper ball across the room, where it landed squarely in the garbage can. The officer cheered and clapped, and Zachary lifted up his hand for a high-five, his face shining with happiness. Heidi covered her mouth with her hands, unsure if she wanted to interrupt what looked like the most fun her boy had experienced in a long time.

Zachary glanced at the window and saw her standing there, and his shoulders immediately slumped. She took a deep breath and, steeling herself, pushed through the doors. Her eyes on her son, she barely noticed the officer standing beside him turn to greet her. “Are you okay?” she asked, rushing to Zachary’s side and pulling him into a tight hug.

“Mom, I’m fine,” he muttered, ducking out from her embrace and shoving his hands into his pockets.

“Are you sure?” she asked anxiously, brushing his matted hair back from his forehead. Before he could stop her, she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. To her surprise, he patted her arm comfortingly.

“I’m *fine*.”

“Mrs. Griffin? I’m Officer Kensington.”

Swinging around gratefully to offer her thanks, Heidi found herself face-to-face with one of the most handsome men she had ever laid eyes on. His brown hair was thick and wavy, his features were rugged and outdoorsy, and his body was muscular and toned. And his eyes. Oh God, those eyes. They were the palest shade of blue that Heidi had ever seen, and they contrasted sharply with his tanned skin, piercing her own eyes in a way that made her hot under the collar. She could practically feel her skin burning beneath the light sweater she wore. Crossing her arms around her body, self-consciously aware that her clothes were plastered against her skin, she averted her eyes in an attempt to clear her mind. “Thank you for finding my son.”

“Glad we could help.” His voice was soft, which was unexpected, given the imposing figure that he made standing before her in his crisp uniform. Heidi felt a shiver run through her entire body; something, she thought with a sinking feeling, that had little to do with her rain-soaked clothes.

“Can I take him home now?” She glanced at her son, who was now staring silently at the ceiling. Heidi could see that he was shutting down again, building the protective wall around himself that he used to ignore his emotions. To ignore

Heidi. Try as she might, she would soon be unable to reach him.

“I just need you to sign some paperwork, and you can be on your way.” Officer Kensington walked briskly to the front desk, where he rummaged around in a drawer for a moment before handing Heidi a few sheets of paper and a pen. “This should only take a minute or two.”

Heidi filled out the paperwork obediently, every now and then chancing a glance in the officer’s direction. She was surprised by her attraction to him. She knew that she needn’t feel guilty, but she and John had been together for so many years that she had forgotten the thrill of excitement that came with finding herself drawn to another man. Not that anything could come of it; dating was out of the question.

After signing her name with a flourish, she handed the paperwork back to Officer Kensington and motioned for Zachary to follow her. “Thank you again for picking him up. I was out of my mind with worry when I got your call.”

He smiled at her, revealing a row of even, white teeth. Kind of like the teeth you saw in a toothpaste commercial, Heidi thought, staring at his mouth. Suddenly aware of what she was doing, she snapped her head up and tried to tune in to what he was saying.

“Not a problem, Mrs. Griffin.”

“Call me Heidi,” she said hurriedly. “You rescued my son, so I think we can be on a first name basis.”

“Okay, then, Heidi.” He tipped his cap at her smartly, then offered her a wink. “You can call me Shane.”

CHAPTER 2

What the hell was he thinking? Had he never come across a beautiful woman before? A wink, for crying out loud. He had winked at her. He may as well have offered to take off her clothes right then and there. What a chump.

Shane was still stewing over his encounter with the beautiful Heidi Griffin the next day, and every time he thought about the conversation, he wanted to drop right through the center of the earth. Why couldn't he have said something suave? At the very least, he could have done something that didn't make him want to die right then and there, right on the floor of the police station.

The funny thing, Shane thought bitterly, was that he never used to have problems impressing pretty women. Truth be told, women would flock to him; for years, he had his pick of any girl in town. These days, they must have sensed the weight of sorrow hanging around him like a wool coat; he had only been out with a woman a handful of times in the past few years, and even then it never progressed past the first date. He sensed that Cherie, a nice girl his sister Jaime had introduced him to a few months ago, was interested in going out a second time, but he just didn't have the energy to pick up the phone and call her again. He remembered clearly the brokenhearted look on his mother's face when Jaime angrily confronted him after hearing from Cherie. "Snap out of it," Jaime had said, pointing a disapproving finger into his chest. "You're being a martyr, and that doesn't look good on anyone."

"That's enough, Jaime," his mother Michelle had said quietly, which was enough to make her daughter drop her finger in shame.

"I didn't mean that," Jaime whispered quietly, pulling her big brother into a hug. "I'm just worried about you, Shane. We want you to be happy, and you're not. You shouldn't be alone all the time. It's not good for you."

The problem, Shane knew, was that he no longer deserved to be happy. How could he, when he had taken from someone the most precious thing on earth—life. And the worst part was that he never even knew the man's name. He could have asked, or sought out the information on his own; in fact, the police report was sitting in the files right next to his desk. It would have taken all of two minutes to reread the events of that night. But he couldn't bring himself to know the identity of his victim. Without that, Shane could pretend that it never even happened. That he didn't make that one, fatal mistake. Or at least, he could try to pretend. Because apparently that wasn't working out for him too well.

Standing in front of his parents' home, he steeled himself to go inside. Sunday dinners at the Kensington house were a tradition, a weekly gathering where the Irish-Italian family could reconnect and find out what was going on in everyone's lives. From a young age, Shane's parents instilled in him a strong belief that there were only two things in life worth fighting for: family and love. His mother and father, and both sets of grandparents before them, were shining examples of what it meant to find your soul mate, the one person you chose to walk beside you through life. It was the running joke among the eight Kensington children that, up to this point, none of them had found the same kind of love they witnessed in their parents' relationship. But they were confident that it was out there, somewhere.

They had always been an incredibly close family. Robert Kensington, the family patriarch, was a self-made man with ruddy cheeks, blond hair, and a strong, muscular frame who built his carpentry business from the ground up, starting his career in the garage of his parents' home and ending up as the owner of the most successful custom furniture company in Central California. As a child, Shane loved to visit his father's studio and inhale the heady aroma of the fresh wood Robert used to build his creations. Robert was a man of few words, but when he did speak, he always said something worth listening to.

Michelle Kensington, Shane's mother, was a tiny dark-haired woman whose intelligence, gentleness, and firm belief that any problem could be solved with a dish of spaghetti garnered her the admiration and love of everyone who met her. She always treated her children with respect, which made her one of Shane's closest confidantes, and he suspected that his younger siblings all felt the same way. Michelle had a gift for patience and an ear for listening; Shane could always count on going to her for advice when he most needed it.

His stomach growling with the promise of his mother's home cooking, Shane pushed open the front door and was greeted by the chattering voices of several of his sisters, who were bustling around the dining room setting the table for dinner. Michelle stood over a simmering pot on the stovetop, wiping beads of sweat from her brow and blowing on a spoonful of sauce to cool it down before tasting it. Robert sat slightly removed from the action, rocking back and forth in his favorite recliner and surveying his family with a smile on his face.

"Shane!" Lacey cried out when she saw him, and flung herself into her brother's arms. He planted a kiss on the top of her head and stood back to admire her. Lacey, the baby of the family, was a dreamer. She left home right out of high school to move to Los Angeles and pursue her dreams of acting; so far, she had only received bit parts in a couple of television shows, but with her fresh, pretty face and bubbling energy, Shane was certain that it was only a matter of time

before she became a star.

“How’s the Hollywood life?” he teased.

She tossed her head and batted her eyes jokingly. “Oh, you know, the usual. Poolside parties, lunch with the stars, a new script every other day.” She giggled. “Or, maybe it’s more like my agent sending me on twenty auditions a week while I sit in my studio apartment and cross my fingers that someone, anyone, wants to hire me.”

“They will, Lace,” Jaime said, standing on her toes to kiss her brother on the cheek. “And when you’re rich and famous, remember that you promised me a guest house on your property with full access to the tennis courts and hot tub.” Lacey’s opposite in every way, Jaime, the first Kensington girl, was a go-getter and an academic. Growing up, she was never without a book in her hand, her nose buried in its pages, endearingly unaware of her surroundings. She earned a PhD in English from Stanford University and taught at colleges all over the world. Recently she returned home to Santa Ynez and opened up a small but successful book editing company.

“Sure, Jaime, no problem,” Lacey teased. “As long as you clean the house and take care of the gardens.”

Shane laughed; listening to his sisters’ banter almost always put him in a good mood. He walked into the kitchen to greet his mother, who offered him a sample of the piping hot tomato sauce. “Here. Taste.” As he licked the spoon clean, she peered at him with a concerned eye. “You’ve gotten far too skinny, Shane. I’m going to send you home today with one of the cherry pies I made yesterday and you’re under strict orders to eat the whole thing yourself.”

Shane wrapped his arms around his mother. “I think I can manage that,” he said.

She patted his cheek gently. “How are you doing?” Shane caught the hint of sadness in her voice; he knew that she had been worried about him lately, but tried her best not to show it.

He shrugged and dipped the spoon into the pot once more. “I’m fine. Keeping busy, I guess. They still have me mostly on desk duty, so it’s a little boring.”

Robert caught the tail end of the conversation as he strolled into the room and pecked his wife on the cheek. “Any chance of getting back in the cruiser sometime soon? That’s the whole reason you became a cop, Shane.”

Shane studied a smudge of mud on the top of his tennis shoe. “Chief doesn’t think I’m ready yet.”

Sensing that his oldest son didn’t want to provide any further details, Robert nodded and patted Shane on the back. “You’ll get there,” he said. “It just takes time.”

“It’s been more than three years,” Shane burst out, unable to hide his emotion anymore. He realized in horror that his eyes were wet with tears; he turned away from his parents to compose himself. When he turned back around, he saw them exchanging knowing glances.

“What?” he said, a little more roughly than he had intended. These days, his emotions were always simmering beneath the surface, ready to boil over at a moment’s notice. That, in a nutshell, he knew, was why Chief Palen hadn’t let him back in the squad car. But what the chief didn’t know was that Shane desperately craved the feeling he got when he sat behind the wheel at the start of his shift, the sound of the radio when it crackled to life, the pounding in his heart as he switched on his sirens and sped off to protect his community. It was his life’s blood, his purpose.

“Your father and I were discussing this the other day,” his mother began gently, and Shane could see that her hands had tightened ever so slightly on the handle of the wooden spoon she was still holding. “And we think that maybe you stopped seeing Dr. Holmby, your therapist, a little too early. Maybe you should schedule another appointment with him? The police department offered to cover the cost.”

“No,” Shane said, his cheeks burning crimson as he noticed for the first time Lacey and Jaime standing frozen in the doorway. “He only made things worse.”

“Shane,” his father chimed in, “I really think it’s worth a shot. Maybe it’s been long enough since it all happened that you’ll be able to see things with a fresh perspective.” Robert’s ice blue eyes, which many of his children had inherited, were clouded over with worry.

Shane took a step backward from the four pairs of eyes that were now watching him. Pitying him. Or was it something else? Judgment, perhaps.

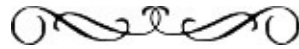
The room became blurred at the edges, and Shane stumbled over his feet in his haste to retreat, back to the solitude of his own house. “Where are you going?” he heard his mother call after him as he barreled through the living room and out the front door, his eyes firmly planted on his car parked in the driveway.

As he fumbled around in his pocket for his keys, he heard heavy footsteps approaching him. He looked up to find his father standing beside him, his weathered face lined with concern. Robert placed both hands on his son’s shoulders, forcing Shane to look him in the eyes. “It’s not your fault,” he whispered, so quietly that Shane could barely hear him over the rustling of the wind through the trees. “You have to forgive yourself.”

A lump burned in Shane’s throat, filling up his airwaves so that he could barely breathe. This time, he let the tears fall, hard and fast on the concrete. He felt the weight of his mistake lodging in his stomach, expanding so that it filled

his whole body. Shane shook his head roughly and tore his eyes away from his father's, then brushed the tears on his cheeks away brusquely.

"I can't," he said, unlocking his car door and putting one foot inside. "And I never will."



"I need a blood transfusion. Stat!" Heidi could barely hear Dr. Conway's shouted instructions in the chaos of the emergency room. "Hurry! She's losing a lot of blood." Heidi sprinted to the refrigerated case where the hospital stored its bags of donated blood and plasma and pulled out a bag labeled Type O, the universal donor. On nights like tonight when they didn't know the patient's blood type, O donors were a godsend.

"Her vitals are dipping!" Josie, the other emergency nurse on duty, called into the swell of voices. Her mind on autopilot, Heidi hooked the blood to a catheter inserted into the patient's arm and watched as the crimson liquid pulsated down the tube. She took a step back from the operating table and wiped her sweat-soaked brow with the back of her hand. She had hoped for a quiet shift, having tossed and turned fitfully all night, willing sleep to come. It never did.

What she hadn't counted on was her patient, a 17 year old girl named Megan, deciding to test out her new driver's license by going for a spin around the block. The girl, who had been texting one of her friends, drove her car at full speed into a light pole. As she thought of the shell-shocked expression on Megan's parents' faces when they arrived at the hospital, Heidi leaned over and stroked the girl's long brown hair, which was matted with blood. "Come on, baby," she whispered, praying that Megan could somehow hear her. "You can pull through this."

As the blood coursed through Megan's veins, Heidi was relieved to see a hint of color returning to the girl's pale cheeks. A good sign, she knew. She glanced at the vital sign monitors in the corner of the room and saw that Megan's heart rate, which had been falling dramatically since Heidi wheeled her into the emergency room, slowly began returning to normal.

Heidi leaned back against the wall as the operating room nurses rushed in to wheel Megan into surgery. "Do you think she'll be okay?" she whispered to Josie as Megan's head disappeared around the corner. Josie had been an emergency room nurse for the past fifteen years, and Heidi considered her both a mentor and a friend.

"Let's put it this way," Josie said, peeling off her gloves and lathering her hands and forearms with soap, "I've seen patients recover from worse than that. What we don't know, and won't know for a while, is whether she's going to

sustain any long term damage. Her head wound is pretty bad.”

“What kind of damage?” As a rookie nurse, Heidi had been horrified when Megan arrived in the ambulance. She was, in Heidi’s opinion, far too young to endure so much. She couldn’t help but imagine Zachary’s broken body being wheeled into the same emergency room, a thought that made her own blood run cold. Heidi made a mental note to remind herself to sit down with Zachary for a serious conversation on the dangers of texting and driving. Even though he was years away from receiving his license, she wanted to instill the fear of God in him while he was still young enough to listen. She knew that once he was a teenager, all hope was lost.

“Hard to say. Memory damage, speech problems. It’s very possible that she’ll be completely fine, after a long recovery. When they’re that young, their body is capable of bouncing back in surprising ways.” Josie turned to Dr. Conway, who was making notes on Megan’s chart. “Are you going to go out there and speak to the parents?”

Dr. Conway checked the clock on the wall. “I have to head upstairs and check on a patient from earlier this evening. Why don’t you and Heidi handle it?”

Josie nodded and beckoned for Heidi to follow her from the room. “I’ve never done this before,” Heidi whispered, picturing once more the expression of frozen terror on the mother’s face. “What should we say?”

“I’ll take the lead,” Josie whispered back. “Then next time it comes up you’ll know what to do.”

Josie pushed through the emergency room doors, where a handful of patients with less serious injuries were waiting to be seen. At the sight of the two nurses, Megan’s parents leapt to their feet and dashed across the room. “How is she?” her father asked, his face pale and drawn. Her mother’s eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, and she held a crumpled tissue to her mouth. Heidi saw that her hands were shaking.

“Right now, she’s stable,” Josie said, and began to explain the extent of Megan’s injuries. Heidi listened as Josie rattled off a number of medical terms, impressed at how cool and collected the veteran nurse was in the midst of such chaos. Heidi, who had joined the team at Saint Andrew’s Hospital a mere four months ago, knew that she still had a lot to learn.

It was still difficult for her to believe that her path in life had led her here, to a career helping to save other people’s lives. As a child, Heidi was terrified of blood; she clearly remembered the time she sliced a deep cut into the tip of her finger with a kitchen knife while trying to saw through a particularly dense bagel. Those first few drops of blood had sent Heidi into a dead faint, and she only came to fifteen minutes later once her mother had patched her up. “I guess

you'll never be a doctor," her mother had teased as she sat Heidi down in front of the television set with a plate of cookies. "Maybe a lawyer?" she asked, tugging playfully on Heidi's hair.

But Heidi, who had always loved children, dreamed of being a schoolteacher. Her favorite form of playtime was lining up her dolls—Heidi didn't have any siblings—and teaching them arithmetic, reading, and writing. While they weren't always the most enthusiastic audience, Heidi would pretend that she was shaping their minds and awakening in them the same love of learning that she had.

After graduating from high school, Heidi entered the University of California, Santa Barbara on a scholarship, where she immersed herself in her studies, as well as the vibrant local culture. Santa Barbara was a beautiful place; when Heidi closed her eyes at night, she could still picture the skinny palm trees that lined the edge of the golden sand, which led directly to an ocean so crystal clear that Heidi could see the outline of her toes while standing in the water.

Santa Barbara would always hold a special place in her heart for another reason: it was where she first met John. On that morning, she had woken up to a brilliant sunshine, and decided to bring her textbooks to the beach, where she could read in peace while enjoying the soft breeze blowing through her hair. She stayed there, her toes curled in the sand, until her stomach began rumbling with hunger. The town's historic wooden pier was only steps away, and every so often the tantalizing aroma of fried food wafted by, so Heidi gathered up her books and made her way over, her mind fixated on the juicy burger she planned to devour.

Her eyes on the hamburger joint, she failed to notice where she was going until she ran into something very solid. "Ouch!" a voice cried, snapping Heidi out of her trance. "Watch where you're going, please." She glanced up to find herself face to face with a young man about her own age, rubbing his hand along his sandy blond hair and surveying her with an expression of distaste.

"Sorry," she stammered, her face flushed with embarrassment. "I didn't see you there."

"I'm as solid as a rock," he said with a grin. "What on earth are you so fascinated with over there?" He followed her gaze to the row of colorful food stands dotting the pier.

"A hamburger," she admitted. "I've been out in the sun all day and I'm starving."

He stroked his chin, which was etched with a few days' worth of stubble, and stuck out his hand to shake hers. "I'm John. Tell you what. I'll forgive you for barreling into me if you let me buy you a burger."

“You’re on,” she said happily, and followed him through the clusters of tourists perusing the vendor booths, which were selling colorful seashell necklaces, caricature drawings, and hand-painted knick-knacks.

Long after the hamburgers were gone, they sat on the benches overlooking the dock and talked about life in Santa Barbara. “I’ve lived here since I was a kid,” John had said, his blue eyes sparkling in the sun. Heidi had been unable to take her own eyes away from him. “My father’s a fisherman, and I followed in his footsteps.” He gestured to one of the boats bobbing gently in the waves. “That one’s ours. She’s a real beauty, isn’t she? We take her out six days a week and bring back what we’ve caught—mostly oysters, clams, and mussels. Then we sell them to the local restaurants.”

“What’s it like?” Heidi asked, following his gaze out to the horizon. “Being out on the water all day long?”

“Peaceful,” he said. “Gives you a lot of time to think. You’ve never felt so small and insignificant until you spend your days surrounded by nothing but water for as far as the eye can see.”

He insisted on walking her back to her tiny apartment, and they ended up sitting on her balcony and talking until the sun disappeared through the palm trees. John came back the next weekend, and the next, until Heidi found herself falling head over heels in love with him. A year later, three months before she graduated from college, he proposed to her on bended knee as they strolled along the beach hand in hand one night.

Despite her precautions, Heidi found herself pregnant a few weeks later. John’s eyes shone with happiness when she told him, and he cried openly when they found out that they were having a boy. They decided to move back to the Santa Ynez Valley to be closer to Heidi’s parents, and John took on odd jobs as a handyman while searching for more stable work.

When she first laid eyes on her infant son, Heidi couldn’t imagine leaving him to go to work every day; after much discussion, she and John decided that Heidi would stay home to raise Zachary. Every so often, as she chased her squealing toddler around the house, Heidi’s mind would stray to her college diploma collecting dust somewhere in the back of the closet.

The night of the accident, Heidi had watched helplessly as the nurses in the emergency room tried in vain to save John’s life. Afterwards, when all hope was lost, a woman about her age dressed in hospital scrubs had held Heidi for hours as she sobbed and screamed into the night, unable and unwilling to imagine the rest of her life—and Zachary’s life—without John.

A few weeks later, when Heidi’s head had cleared enough for her to at least function, she surveyed the state of their finances. She knew that as a single

mother, she would need to provide for her son, but the thought of spending each day in a classroom no longer appealed to her. Her mind kept wandering back to that awful night, and the way the nurse had cried along with Heidi, telling her that everything was going to be okay. Shortly afterwards, Heidi took what little money they had saved up and enrolled in the local college to begin training to be a registered nurse.

Josie finished speaking with Megan's parents and sent them back to their seats with the promise of updating them as soon as she received any more information. As she bustled back to the nurses' station to write out some paperwork, Heidi filled two paper cups with coffee, poured in a swirl of creamer, and brought them over to where Megan's parents were huddled in the corner, staring blankly at the television set bolted to the wall. For whatever reason, the hospital's channel of choice always featured those sassy television judges who spent a lot of time yelling at the people who appeared on their show. Not exactly soothing programming for the patients and their families, Heidi thought to herself with a chuckle.

"Thank you," Megan's mother said gratefully when Heidi handed her the steaming coffee.

"I know you probably want to stay," Heidi said, "but I just want to assure you that your daughter is in the best of care. She won't be in the recovery room for at least a couple more hours, so you may want to go down to the cafeteria and grab a bite to eat. I promise I'll come and find you if there's any news."

"You know, Kathy, that's not a bad idea," the father said, running his hands through his gray hair distractedly. "Might help us take our mind off of things for a minute or two. It's been an excruciatingly long night." He got to his feet and offered his wife a helping hand. She stared at him for a moment, her eyes slightly unfocused, then allowed herself to be pulled to her feet.

Heidi watched as the man led his wife to the elevators, his arm wrapped comfortingly around her waist. When they disappeared through the elevator doors, Heidi turned and headed back to the nurses' station. She plopped down in an empty chair next to Josie, rubbing her bleary eyes and yawning widely. Josie smiled at her over the rim of her glasses. "Long night?"

"I'm ready to go home. I haven't had much sleep in the past few days. Zachary ran away again."

Josie set down her pen and peered at Heidi in concern. "What happened?"

"The usual. I confronted him about something, he shut down, then took off. This time he was picked up by the cops." Officer Kensington's face swam before Heidi's tired mind. If she were being perfectly honest with herself, a big part of the restless sleep she had been experiencing was because of him. She had been

so unsettled at her immediate and unexpected attraction to him that it threw her for a loop. Every time she thought of him, her skin tingled and her pulse quickened. Heidi did her best to squash those feelings; it felt to her like a betrayal of John, and of her marriage vows.

“Your boy’s just going through a rough time,” Josie said. “He’s at an awkward age where he’s just starting to come in to his own. The last thing he wants to do is listen to his mother.”

“What he needs,” Heidi said, “is a father. A male figure to help guide him until he’s an adult.”

“Think you’ll start dating again anytime soon?” Josie glanced at Heidi’s bare ring finger. Josie didn’t know it, but only last year was Heidi finally able to muster the strength she needed to stop wearing her wedding band. She had laced John’s ring through a gold chain, which she always kept hanging around her neck like a talisman.

Heidi winced. “No,” she replied flatly. “I’m just not ready.” Even as she said those words, Shane’s face, with those gorgeous eyes, popped into her head again. No, she thought firmly, closing her eyes to clear her mind. It was just a silly attraction, nothing more. For all she knew, he was married or in a committed relationship. Not that it mattered; Heidi would never find out.

Josie glanced at the slim watch wrapped around her wrist. “Your shift is almost over. I can cover you from here. Why don’t you go home early? Get some sleep. You look like you could use it.”

“Thanks,” Heidi said gratefully. “I think I’ll take you up on it. If it gets any later I’m going to have a hard time staying awake on the drive home.” She gathered up her purse and keys and bustled through the doors of the hospital, searching for her car. It was a cool, crisp night; the rain had stopped, leaving behind that heady, earthy smell that Heidi used to love so much.

She navigated the station wagon onto the highway, still yawning sleepily, her mind wandering to the cozy comfort of her warm bed. Maybe she’d treat herself to a warm mug of hot cocoa and a few chapters of a good mystery novel before turning in for the night. As she mentally worked her way through the stack of books on her shelf waiting to be read, a blue and red flash of police lights lit up the road ahead of her.

Dutifully, Heidi pulled her car over to the side of the road and waited for the squad car to speed by. As it did, she craned her neck to see inside. Moments later, as she steered back onto the highway, Heidi was cursing herself for the disappointment she felt when she saw that Shane Kensington wasn’t behind the wheel.

CHAPTER 3

“Shane, can you come in here for a minute?”

Following the sound of Chief Palen’s voice, Shane made his way into the veteran cop’s office, which was stacked floor to ceiling with hundreds of file folders detailing cases that the chief had worked on over his forty year career. Never in his wildest dreams did Shane imagine that he would one day be working side by side with the man who first inspired him to become a police officer. Chief Palen was a popular man both in the community and among the other officers, who treated him with a respect that bordered on reverence.

“Sit down, son,” he said, motioning for Shane to close the door behind him. He waited for Shane to settle into a chair before continuing. “I wanted to check on you, see how everything was going.” He pulled out a sheet of paper and moved his eyes down the text quickly. “It says here that you’ve stopped seeing Dr. Holmby.” He fixed his gaze on Shane, who squirmed slightly in his chair.

“Yes, sir.”

“Any particular reason?”

“I didn’t need to go anymore,” Shane lied, twisting his fingers in his lap. He thought he saw Palen glance down; that man didn’t miss a trick. “Sir?” he continued. “I’ve been meaning to ask when you think I’ll be able to go back on patrol duty.”

Chief Palen set the paper back down on his desk and frowned at Shane, then leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “You think you’re ready?”

“Yes, sir,” Shane said quickly. “It’s what I was born to do.”

The older man sighed. “I know, Kensington, believe me. I know. You remind me a lot of myself at your age, matter of fact. But after what happened...well let’s just say that I have to be mighty careful about putting you out there again. I don’t want a lawsuit on my hands; frankly, we were lucky it didn’t happen this time. We may have had to let you go. Liabilities, and so on.” He studied Shane’s face carefully; Shane tried his best to arrange his features into a confident and capable expression. He tried to smile at Chief Palen, but unfortunately it came out as more of a grimace.

“Tell you what,” Palen continued. “I’m going to keep an eye on you for the next couple of months or so. Then, if everything looks okay, I’ll give you a trial run.” He rested his chin on the tips of his fingers. “It’s not about the accident, Shane. You know that, right?”

“I know,” Shane said quickly, not wanting to rehash the events of that night. He had spent more than enough time dwelling on them already.

“It’s about how you unraveled afterwards. Not that I’m saying I blame you. It would have brought any man to his knees, no doubt about that. But when you’re out there, patrolling the streets, you need to be at the absolute top of your game. And I’m just not convinced that you’re there yet.”

“I’m there,” Shane said, imagining how good it would feel to run his fingers along the dashboard of his cruiser once more. “When you think I’m ready, that is,” he added hurriedly, not wanting to outwardly disagree with Palen.

“It’s settled then,” Palen said, reaching across his desk to pump Shane’s hand up and down. “We’ll meet again in two months, and go from there.” He reached for one of the file folders littering the side of his desk and pulled it toward himself, then patted around his shirt pocket for his reading glasses. “Gotta take another look at this homicide report,” he muttered, unfolding his glasses and sliding them onto his nose. Shane, knowing himself to be dismissed, left Palen’s office, closing the door quietly behind him. As he turned to walk back to the front desk, he saw Buddy strolling toward him with a broad grin on his face.

“Hey, man,” Buddy greeted Shane, then leaned in conspiratorially. “What did Palen want? Are we gonna be partners again?” He ran his hands through his buzzed blond hair. “Sanchez is great, but he’s just not the same.”

“Not yet,” Shane replied, “but he’s going to give me another shot in a couple of months, if he thinks I’m ready.”

Buddy’s face fell, but he tried to quickly recover by clearing his throat loudly. “Want to come over for dinner this weekend? Maribel’s making her famous enchiladas.”

Shane shuffled his feet uncomfortably. “Maybe some other time. I have a few things I need to take care of around the house.”

Buddy examined Shane’s face closely. “Come on, man. You haven’t been around in ages. You’ve barely even seen Henry. He’s getting so big now, you wouldn’t believe it. Right now he’s learning his ABCs.” Buddy puffed out his chest with pride.

Shane offered his friend a tight smile. “I’ll see what I can do.” Buddy shrugged, then patted Shane on the back and pushed through the front doors of the station, calling to Sanchez as he made his way to the police cruiser. Shane watched in envy as the two of them slid into the car and slowly pulled out of the parking lot.

Yanking the chair behind the front desk out so roughly that it tipped over, Shane swore loudly and kicked it, then immediately regretted his decision. As he was hopping around painfully on one foot, a voice called him from behind. He

swung around to find Nick, the rookie cop who brought in Zachary Griffin, watching him with a bemused expression on his face.

“Uh, everything okay here?” he asked uncertainly.

“Fine,” Shane snapped back, rubbing the toe of his right foot to try and assess the damage. It was already swelling rapidly; Shane would be lucky if he escaped with just a sprain. Just add it to the list of things going wrong in his life, Shane thought bitterly.

“Uh, that’s good. Listen, I found these on the floor last night.” Nick pulled out a small MP3 player and pair of headphones. “I think they belong to that kid I brought in. You know, the weird one wearing all black? Anyways, I thought you might want to give his mother a call to come down to the station and pick them up.” Nick dropped the items on the front desk and sauntered away. “Thanks,” he called over his shoulder.

Shane’s heart leapt as he fingered the small pair of headphones, picturing Heidi Griffin’s long red hair and the way her soaking wet sweater clung enticingly to her body. This day, he thought, was about to get a lot more interesting. He dug through the folders on his desk until he found the paperwork that Heidi had filled out, pumping his fist in the air when he saw that she had written down her address. She lived only a half mile down the road from him; it would be silly, he reasoned, to have her drive all the way out to the station to retrieve something so trivial. He might as well drop it off for her on his way home; besides, he wouldn’t mind seeing Zachary again. The image of the boy’s sad face splitting into a grin when Shane offered to play paper basketball with him was not something that he would soon forget.

Shane spent the rest of the day in restless anticipation, glancing at the clock every five minutes and pacing back and forth in front of his desk. It didn’t help that it was a particularly slow day at the station; the most exciting thing that happened was a young couple stopping by to turn in a wallet they had found on the side of the road.

When six o’clock hit, Shane grabbed his coat and headed out into the twilight. He had always loved the way the Santa Ynez countryside looked at this time of day, the sun setting magnificently over the bright green fields and rolling hills. Many people who visited the area for the first time ended up falling in love with it, and it was easy to see why, Shane thought as he drove through the winding country roads. The land gave off the kind of quiet serenity that was hard to come by these days, especially in a state like California that was already so jam-packed with people.

Ten minutes later Shane was pulling into the driveway of a small yellow bungalow. He double checked the address he had copied down from the police

report before opening the car door. The house was modest, but Shane could tell by the perfectly manicured lawn and rows of flowering bushes lining the sidewalk that someone—probably Heidi—had put a lot of time and effort into making it look like a home.

Straightening his tie nervously, he rapped sharply on the front door. He could see through the gauzy white drapes on the window to a light on in the back of the house. There was also an old station wagon parked in the driveway, a good sign that Heidi was home. He listened with all of his might for the sound of approaching footsteps, but the house remained still and quiet. Shane raised his hand to knock once more, then noticed a tiny doorbell to the left of the door that he had missed the first time. He pressed it firmly; the chiming of bells could be heard echoing throughout the house. He thought he saw a flash of red hair behind the window before the door swung open.

“Officer Kensington! This is a surprise.”

Heidi Griffin stood framed in the doorway, looking, if it was even at all possible, even more beautiful than Shane had remembered. Her auburn hair, now dry and styled, hung in soft waves down to her shoulders. She had big, curious honey brown eyes that were slightly wide-set, giving them even more of a striking appearance. She was wearing nursing scrubs, and despite their rather shapeless form, Shane could see the swell of her breasts beneath them.

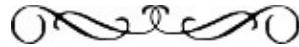
“How can I help you?” she asked curiously, a smile playing across her full lips. Shane realized with a start that he had been standing there staring at her like an idiot, his mouth practically hanging open. Get it together, he thought to himself, dragging his eyes away from her body.

He held up the MP3 player wordlessly; she regarded him with an expression of mild confusion. “Uh,” he said, clearing his throat. “We found this at the station. I think it belongs to Zachary.”

“Oh!” she said, reaching out her hand for the player. “I think you’re right. He didn’t even tell me he was missing it.” She glanced over her shoulder into the house. “He’s actually not here right now, but thank you so much for bringing it over. You certainly didn’t have to go through all that trouble.”

“No trouble at all,” he said. “I know you live pretty close to me so I figured I’d save you a trip.” He saw something flash behind her eyes, and her smile wavered for a moment. “No!” he said hurriedly, cursing himself when he realized how strange his words must have sounded. Like he was some kind of creepy stalker. “That came out wrong. I meant to say that when we found the player I looked up the address listed on the police report, saw that you lived relatively close to me, and just decided to drop it off on my way home from work.” He held up his hands. “I’ve never been here before. Promise.”

Heidi threw her head back and laughed; Shane was mesmerized by the way her hair sparkled in the last embers of the setting sun. “Thank you again for stopping by,” she said, offering him a smile. She hesitated, and Shane saw her fingers tighten around the door frame; she seemed to be having an internal debate about something. Finally, just as Shane was about to turn on his heels and head back to the car, she opened the door an inch wider and stood back. “Would you like to come in for some coffee?”



Heidi could feel her heart pounding in her chest as she led Shane Kensington into the living room, watching as he carefully wiped his boots on the doormat before sliding them off and arranging them by the front door. When he noticed her watching him, he grinned at her sheepishly. “My mother always taught us that it was polite to take our shoes off before going into someone’s house. I guess that’s one of the things that stuck with me.”

“Smart woman, your mother,” Heidi offered, returning his smile. She couldn’t believe that Shane, the man who had been haunting her dreams for the past few nights, was standing here, right in her very living room. She glanced down at the scrubs she still wore, and silently berated herself for not bothering to change when she returned home from her shift. Had she known he was going to turn up at her door, Heidi would have put on something a little sexier. Although, she thought, mentally pawing through her wardrobe, single mothers were usually short on cleavage-baring outfits. Stained t-shirts and ripped jeans were a much more appealing uniform.

“How do you take your coffee?” she asked, bustling into the kitchen with Shane at her heels.

“Cream and sugar, if you have it.” He stared around the room in interest. “What a great place you have. Lived here long?”

“About four months,” Heidi said in a muffled voice as she bent to retrieve the ground coffee she kept at the bottom of the pantry. “Before this we lived in a one bedroom apartment for a couple of years, so as you can imagine we were a little cramped.” She poured water into the ancient coffeemaker, praying that it wouldn’t decide that today was the day it would go bust. She added the ground coffee and switched on the appliance, breathing an audible sigh of relief when it churned to life. Heidi was keenly aware of the way Shane’s presence filled every nook and cranny of the room, and was grateful that she had something to distract herself with at the moment.

She rummaged around in the refrigerator for the creamer, then lifted the sugar

bowl out of the cabinet. When she turned around to ask Shane how many spoonfuls of sugar he'd prefer, she stopped in her tracks when she saw him examining John's photo, which was still on the counter. She cleared her throat, pushing down the lump of emotion that had formed unexpectedly. "That's my husband, John," she said.

She saw Shane flinch slightly and drop his hand away from the frame. "I'm sorry," he mumbled awkwardly. "I didn't realize you were married." He looked as though he was suddenly very sorry for coming inside.

"I'm not," Heidi added quickly. "Not anymore, at least. My husband—Zachary's father—died about three years ago." Even as she said those words out loud, she had a hard time believing that they were true. Had it really been that long since she had last heard John's voice, felt his strong arms wrapped tightly around her body? It didn't seem possible, but somehow, it was.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Shane murmured. Heidi busied herself with pouring the coffee into mugs, trying her best to hide the expression on her face. Since she met Shane, her mind and body were in constant turmoil, battling the mix of emotions tumbling through her at all times. Feelings of attraction, mixed with a healthy dose of guilt. Heidi knew in her heart that John would want her to move on, to be happy, but living a fulfilling life without him seemed to her like a betrayal of the worst kind.

"Thank you," Heidi said, handing Shane one of the mugs and leading him into the living room. She motioned for him to take a seat on the couch, while she settled herself across from him in the rocking chair that used to be John's throne. "It's been hard, but Zachary and I have been doing our best to pick up the pieces and try to live some semblance of a happy life." She took a sip of the coffee and grimaced. "Sorry. I made this much too strong."

"It's fine," Shane said, lifting his own mug to his lips. Heidi watched as he puckered his mouth to take in the first steaming sip. "I've had a long day and I could use a little extra caffeine." He licked a few drops of coffee from his lips. "I got to spend a little bit of time with Zachary the other day and he seems like a really sweet kid."

"If you can get past the persona he's trying to adopt, then you're right," Heidi said, running her finger along the rim of her mug. "It's his way of grieving, I guess. Although really all he's accomplishing is isolating himself from the other kids at school. And from me."

Shane's expression turned grave; Heidi's cheeks flushed in embarrassment. Why on earth was she pouring her heart out to this man? He was practically a stranger. She sensed, though, that Shane was a good listener, someone she could open up to.

He studied his coffee for a moment before replying. “I got that sense as well when I spoke with him the other day,” he admitted. “Like he was doing his best to act like he didn’t care, when I could tell that he did.”

Heidi nodded. “I saw you playing basketball with him through the window,” she said, remembering the look on her son’s face as he lifted his hand in the air for Shane to high-five. “I have to say, I haven’t seen Zachary look so happy in years. I wish I could play, but I was always hopeless at sports. I used to spend my time reading, so I guess you could say I’m kind of a nerd.”

Shane laughed. “Nothing wrong with a bookworm. My sister Jaime was the same way as a kid, and now she runs a successful editing company. I was the opposite, actually. I used to play every kind of sport imaginable. Basketball was one of my favorites. There’s no feeling in the world like that rush you get as the ball swooshes through that hoop.” He stopped talking, a faraway expression on his face. “Of course,” he added with a grin. “As I got older I realized that there were better things in life, but as a kid I was obsessed.”

“Zachary used to play, too. John would shoot hoops with him after work for an hour every night. He had a bunch of friends on the team, too. He hasn’t brought a friend home since then.” She cleared her throat awkwardly. “Listen to me going on and on about my son. You’ll have to forgive me. Since you officers picked him up, I’ve been worrying about him nonstop. I’m afraid he’s going down a bad path in life, and I feel helpless to stop it.”

Shane stared at her for a few moments, a frown playing across his lips. Heidi rocked back and forth in her chair, clutching her mug with slightly trembling hands. It had been a long time since she had such an open conversation with another person, especially a man. With a tug at her heart, she remembered the countless late night discussions she would have with John as they snuggled up on the couch and watched the flames dancing in the fireplace. She had to admit that it felt good—really good—to be able to talk to Shane. His presence put her at ease; every inch of him oozed masculinity, capability. She longed to breathe in his scent, which she imagined would be a tantalizing combination of wood and spice.

“I have an idea,” Shane said slowly, pulling Heidi out of her reverie. “Like I said, I used to play basketball all the time. I really miss it. None of my siblings have any kids and the only other brother who played is deployed to Iraq, so I don’t have anyone to shoot hoops with. Now, feel free to say no...” He took a deep breath. “But how would you feel about me stopping over after my shift a couple of nights a week to play with him? I could get him up to speed, maybe pique his interest again. If he seems like he’s enjoying it, I could nudge him into trying out for the team, help prepare him. What do you say?”

Heidi stared at Shane, lost for words. She was touched by his offer, but a little voice in the back of her mind was warning her that it probably wasn't a good idea. For Zachary, she thought quickly. He might think that Shane was only doing it out of pity, which would be even more devastating for his self-esteem. Not to mention, the little voice continued, that she didn't exactly trust herself around Shane. She had a sinking feeling that her strong attraction to him, which was already throwing her off balance, would only deepen when she saw him with her son.

"I'm not sure," she said slowly, clutching the handle of her mug. "Zachary's in a difficult place right now." She waved her hand around the house for emphasis. "As you can see, it's after six and he's not even here. He took off again. I'm his mother, and I have no idea where he is."

She cringed at the disappointed look on Shane's face. "It's not that I don't appreciate your offer," she added quickly. "It's incredibly kind and generous. But I'm not sure what Zachary's going to think of it, to tell you the truth. He's a tough nut to crack."

Shane shook his head back and forth, and Heidi noticed a dull flush creeping up his neck to his face. Before long, his cheeks were tinged pink with embarrassment. "I'm sorry for even bringing it up," he said, studying his shoes to avoid eye contact with Heidi. "It's not my place. Forget I even mentioned it, okay?" He downed the rest of his coffee in a few swallows and set the mug down on a coaster. "Thank you so much for the coffee and conversation. I should probably be heading out now, it's getting late."

He practically leapt out of his chair in his haste to get to the front door. Once there, he bent down to retrieve his shoes, hiding his face from Heidi. When he straightened up, he said briskly, "If you're ever worried about Zachary being gone for too long, don't hesitate to call us down at the station. We'll be happy to send a squad car out to look for him." After hesitating for a fraction of a second, he held out his hand to shake hers.

When Heidi grasped his hand, a burst of electricity shocked through her skin. She yanked her hand away; Heidi could tell by the unsettled look in Shane's eyes that he had felt it, too. Her chest rose and fell rapidly as she tried to catch her breath. Shane opened his mouth to say something, then closed it abruptly again when the doorknob twisted behind him. They both jumped apart guiltily as Zachary's form appeared in the doorway.

"Hi, Officer Kensington," he said brightly, raising his eyebrows in surprise and staring first at his mother, then Shane, and back to Heidi again. "What are you doing here?"

"Just stopping by to drop off your MP3 player," Shane said. Heidi noticed

that his voice was shaking ever so slightly. “You left it at the station the other night.”

“Thanks!” Zachary said, and Heidi was struck again by how different her son sounded when he spoke to Shane; it seemed as though his entire face lit up in the man’s presence.

“You’re very welcome,” Shane said warmly, clapping Zachary on the back. “I’ve just been talking for a while with your very nice mother, but it’s time for me to head out. Great to see you again.” He smiled at Zachary, and Heidi was amazed to see her son beam back broadly.

With one last long, searching look at Heidi, Shane stepped outside and into the night air. The moon, which cast dark shadows over most of the sidewalk, illuminated Shane’s face, causing his ice blue eyes to glow hauntingly. Shane nodded to both of them once more, then turned and started toward his car.

“Officer Kensington?” Zachary called down the sidewalk after Shane’s retreating back.

Shane stopped walking and swung around. “Yeah, Zachary?”

Zachary hesitated before blurting out nervously, “Would you mind if I stopped by the station to visit every now and then?”

Shane’s face split into a grin. “Of course not. You’re welcome any time.” With one last wave, he opened the door to his car and stepped inside.

Zachary turned around, his face shining with happiness. Heidi took one look at him and knew what she had to do. “Wait here,” she instructed her son. “I forgot to tell Officer Kensington something.” She slipped on a pair of sandals and hurried down the steps after him, ignoring Zachary’s inquisitive gaze. “Shane!” she called as the engine of his car roared to life.

He caught sight of her approaching form and quickly rolled down the window. “Heidi?”

The sound of her name caught Heidi by surprise; she loved the way his lips moved to form the syllables. “I, uh, wanted to ask you if your offer from before still stands?” He regarded her curiously. “I’d love for you to visit Zachary,” she pressed on, crossing her fingers in her pockets. Please, she thought, picturing the expression on her son’s face when he saw Shane standing in the doorway. My son needs you. And maybe I do, too.

“Absolutely,” Shane said, reaching out from the car window to squeeze her hand gently. “How does same time next week sound?”

“Perfect. We’ll be here.”

Shane nodded to her once more, then rolled up his window and threw his car into gear. As she watched him back out of the driveway, her stomach twisted into knots of both excitement and anxiety. Had she made the right decision? Heidi’s

gut told her that Shane's presence in their lives would be a good thing. But, as she pictured John's laughing face, immortalized in print, she couldn't help but wonder if she was going to regret letting Shane Kensington get too close.

CHAPTER 4

“So let me get this straight,” Scott said, his face twisting in confusion. “You have the hots for this woman, but you’re already sorry you offered to help her son? Makes a ton of sense to me, Shane.” Never one to mince words, the youngest Kensington boy shook his head in amusement.

Some members of the Kensington family were eagerly gathered around the webcam on Robert and Michelle’s computer, enjoying a rare video call with Scott, who was currently serving a three-year deployment in Iraq as a Combat Engineer, aiding in the reconstruction of the most war-torn areas. As a little boy Scott would line up his stuffed animals to discuss military maneuvers, and Michelle used to find plastic army men and women littered in hiding spaces around the house, keeping an eye on the imaginary enemy’s movements.

Since his deployment last year, they had only been able to hear his voice twice; even that, according to Scott, was more than the norm. Michelle crouched in front of the computer, her face alive with happiness. Shane knew that his mother had taken it hard when Scott decided to enlist in the military, but since then she had become his staunchest supporter.

Robert, noticing that Shane’s face had fallen, whispered something in his wife’s ear. She glanced at her eldest son and nodded, then turned back to the webcam. “Scott, honey, we’re going to let you talk to your brother for a few minutes on your own. You know, man to man.” She winked, then blew a kiss at Scott, who pretended to catch it in mid-air and stuff it into the front pocket of his fatigues. Michelle beckoned for her daughters to follow her into another room. Shane, throwing his mother a grateful smile, watched his family retreat, then settled into the computer chair. He missed his youngest brother terribly; despite their difference in age, they had always been the best of friends, and Shane craved Scott’s advice and words of wisdom more than anyone else’s, especially now.

“So tell me what’s going on, brother,” Scott said, peering at Shane in concern. “You like this woman?”

Shane sighed and rubbed his tired eyes. “I don’t know her yet, but I felt drawn to her from the first time I saw her. She’s kind, smart, and loving, and unless I’m completely misreading her I think maybe she feels something for me, too. But I’m scared, you know? I feel like I’m not at a place in my life right now where I can start up a relationship.”

“Whoa whoa, slow down,” Scott said. “You need to take it easy. One thing at a time. You offered to help her son with his basketball game, right?”

Shane nodded and slumped further down in his chair. As soon as the heart-pumping excitement from seeing Heidi—and touching her hand—had worn off, he began to regret his hasty offer. It’s not that he didn’t want to help Zachary. He did. But he was well aware that getting to know Heidi better could make for dangerous territory. Shane was a broken man, a man who wasn’t able to give a woman like Heidi everything that she would need to be happy.

“Just take it from there,” Scott continued. “Start slow. Get to know her and her son. For all you know, it’s going to work out to be a friendship and nothing more. What’s important here is that you make an effort to find out if it’s something worth pursuing.” His voice took on a serious tone. “The thing that worries me, though,” he said quietly, “is why you’re still being so hard on yourself. It’s been three years, Shane.”

Shane shrugged his shoulders and lowered his gaze to his lap.

“Listen,” Scott said. “Look at me.” Shane raised his head to meet his brother’s eyes, which were suddenly filled with sorrow. “I’ve seen a lot of terrible things here. Things you wouldn’t wish on your worst enemy.” Scott’s voice trailed off as he stared into the distance. “But there’s hope, too. For a better tomorrow. That’s what you need to understand. This one thing that you did, this one mistake, is only going to define you if you let it. But you *are* letting it, Shane. And that’s a damn shame.”

“I don’t know how to stop it,” Shane whispered.

“It’s going to be baby steps,” Scott said. “First, start putting yourself out there again. Into the real world, the world with people in it. For far too long you’ve been isolating yourself as a kind of sick punishment. After that, I’m confident that you’ll be able to slowly start rebuilding your life. But first, you have to tell yourself that it’s okay to do that. To be happy.”

Shane blew out a long breath, considering his brother’s words. “You’re right,” he said finally, raising his head a little higher. “It’s time I stopped hiding from the world. And you know what the first step is going to be?”

“Telling this chick Heidi that you want to take her out on a date?” Scott asked hopefully, a sly gleam in his eye.

“Nope, that’s not it.”

“Then what?”

“I’m going out for drinks with Buddy.”

*

“I’m surprised you asked me here, to tell you the truth,” Buddy confessed, licking the foam from the top of his beer tankard. “You’ve been practically shunning me and the rest of the guys. I’m starting to think you like being a loner.”

“Nope,” Shane replied, gulping down a mouthful of beer in the hopes of taking the edge off his anxiety. He wished he had eaten something a little more substantial than a pack of toaster strudel that day; his absence from the local bar in the past couple of years had made him something of a lightweight, although he would never confess that to Buddy. “Remember how we used to get together every Friday night with all the guys who weren’t on shift and stay here until the bartender practically kicked us out?” Shane smiled fondly as he pictured one memorable evening when the other officers had all gathered at his house after leaving the bar to play poker well into the morning; the next day, Shane’s wallet had felt alarmingly light.

“Yeah,” Buddy said, a reminiscent expression on his face. “I miss those days. Of course, I still do that stuff when Maribel lets me.” He winked. “But I gotta say, my friend, it’s just not the same without you.”

“How is Maribel?” Shane asked. Buddy’s wife and childhood sweetheart was one of the kindest people Shane had ever met. Buddy was crazy about her. Shane had stood beside them proudly on their wedding day as best man and was in the hospital waiting room when their first son Henry was born. The expression on Buddy’s face when he held his son for the first time was something that Shane would never forget; he clearly remembered the ache of longing in his stomach when he saw the new family together. How he wished that he could experience that kind of joy with someone.

“Great,” Buddy said, signaling for another beer. “Henry just started preschool.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe how fast he’s growing up. Maribel’s thinking about going back to work soon, maybe part time. She wants to be there for Henry when he gets home from school.” He paused, surveying Shane over the rim of his drink. “You really should come by for a visit. They both ask about you all the time.”

Shane cringed and took another long swallow of his beer. “There’s a lot of things I should be doing,” he said. “Add it to the list.”

When Buddy didn’t reply, Shane set his glass down on the table and look his friend squarely in the eye; Buddy returned his gaze warily. Shane felt as though he had an entire tribe of butterflies dancing around in his stomach. “I need to ask you something, and please be honest with me.”

“Okay,” Buddy said, still looking uneasy. “Shoot.”

“I need to know if you blame me for what happened.” There, Shane thought,

he had said it. He just wasn't sure if he was ready to hear the answer.

The bartender slid another beer across the counter to Buddy, who dug his wallet out from his pants pocket to count out a few dollar bills. After the bartender thanked him and moved away, Buddy turned his attention back to Shane; his face was stony. "Sometimes," he said, drawing in a deep breath, "the memories of that night haunt my dreams. I wake up yelling and gasping for air. I can still hear everything—the screeching of the tires, the shattering of the glass, and, always, the sound of that woman screaming. It's something I'll never forget." He reached down and rolled up the leg of his pants; Shane averted his eyes from the long red scar running from Buddy's knee to his ankle. Another thing, Shane thought, that was all his fault.

"Thankfully I've healed," Buddy continued, locking his gaze with Shane's. "No long term damage, unless you count knowing when it's going to rain before it happens." He laughed. "The doctors tell me that's 'cause arthritis set in after the injury and that I'll have it for the rest of my life. 'Course, that doesn't bother me; it's dead useful to tell you the truth."

"But do you blame me?" Shane pressed on. No matter what Buddy had to say, Shane needed to hear it.

Buddy traced his finger along the tankard, which was wet with condensation. "No," he said. "I don't even know why you're asking me that, to tell you the truth. I told you that I didn't blame you right after it happened, even when the doctors weren't sure if I'd ever be able to walk again."

Shane's face crumpled at the memory; the terror he had felt, standing at Buddy's bedside with Maribel, whose face was frozen in terror, was something that had stayed with him all these years.

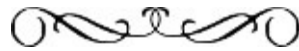
"It was an accident, Shane, and nothing more. It could have happened to any one of us. But I can tell you that until I'm blue in the face; you won't believe me until you're ready to."

"If no one blames me, why won't they look at me? I've practically been shunned by everyone else on the force."

"That," Buddy said, a shadow crossing his face, "is entirely in your head. You isolated yourself from all of your friends, myself included. The guys just don't know how to treat you anymore, so they started tiptoeing around you. You're like a ghost. Anytime you're ready to rejoin the land of the living, we'll be waiting for you with open arms." He glanced at his watch and groaned. "I gotta run, sorry. Maribel's visiting her mother today and asked me to pick Henry up from daycare." He stood up and clapped Shane on the back jovially. "It was nice to see you again, man. Think about what I've said. When you're ready, we're waiting."

As he watched Buddy walk away, an almost imperceptible limp in his gait, Shane clutched the handle of his tankard so hard that his knuckles turned white. "I'm ready," he growled. "Damn it, I'm ready!"

The pair of women seated at the stools next to Shane glanced his way in alarm, then shifted their bodies ever so slightly away from him. But Shane, too preoccupied with his thoughts, barely noticed. He was done being a martyr, he thought fiercely. It was time for him to get on with his life, make up for lost time. And that involved getting to know a certain woman named Heidi.



Heidi patted her hair nervously, feeling slightly ridiculous. Usually more of a wash and wear kind of girl, she had spent more money than she cared to admit on a sleek new curling iron that promised to make her look like a million dollars. Which, she thought, was practically what she had to fork over for it. Heidi studied her reflection in the mirror critically. It did have a nice effect, she had to admit. Rummaging around in her bathroom drawer, she dug out a battered tube of shimmery lipstick that she kept around for special occasions and swirled it over her mouth.

"Mom?" Zachary called.

"In here."

He appeared at the door, watching her suspiciously. "What are you doing?"

"Just getting ready," Heidi said, ignoring his questioning eyes. "Officer Kensington is going to be here in a few minutes."

Her son continued to stare at her. "Why are you wearing lipstick? You never wear makeup."

She glared at him. "Why don't you go outside so you don't keep Shane waiting?" He frowned, then swung around on his heels and slouched down the hall. Heidi turned back to her reflection, then opened up a pack of tissues and rubbed one vigorously over her mouth to remove the lipstick, chiding herself for acting like an excitable teenage girl. Shane, she reminded herself, was not coming to see her.

After smoothing her hair one last time and tucking her sleeveless blouse into her jeans, she switched off the bathroom light and walked casually into the living room. She chose a seat by the front window, grabbed a magazine, and pretended to read, all the while peering eagerly outside and waiting for the flash of Shane's blue cruiser to round the corner.

After a few minutes an unfamiliar car drove slowly down the street and pulled to a stop in front of her driveway. Heidi watched as Zachary raced to greet

it. Of course, she thought, there was no reason for Shane to bring his squad car. She was disappointed all the same; there was something about a man in uniform that really got her blood flowing.

As Shane stepped out of the car, Heidi felt her pulse quicken; her attraction to him, fueled by the touching way he interacted with her son, had only intensified since she last saw him. A far cry from the usual stiff police clothes she had seen him in so far, today Shane sported a pair of gym shorts and a t-shirt cut off at the shoulders, showing off his tanned arms and tight muscles. Tucked beneath his arm was a basketball, which he tossed to Zachary, who caught it deftly.

Heidi watched as Shane popped open the trunk of his car and lifted out a heavy box; when Zachary saw what was inside, he clapped his hands enthusiastically and raced to the front stoop. "Mom!" he called, cupping his hands around his mouth. "I need a screwdriver!" Then he bounded back down the steps and hurried to the car, where Shane was now pulling a large basketball hoop from the box.

After locating the toolbox, one of the things she hadn't so much as laid a finger on since John's death, Heidi slipped on a pair of shoes and went outside to greet Shane. "Wow, what do you have there?" She peered into the box, which besides the hoop contained a long pole and a base.

"I didn't know if you guys had a hoop, so I decided to bring one along." Shane straightened up and smiled at her, a slow sexy smile that she could feel throughout her entire body. She turned away to catch her breath for a second, praying that Zachary didn't notice anything. Heidi could barely admit her feelings for Shane to herself, let alone worry about having to explain them to her pre-teen son; she shuddered at the thought.

"That's incredibly generous," Heidi said gratefully once she regained her composure. "You didn't have to do that."

Shane waved his hand in the air unconcernedly. "It's my pleasure," he said, then turned and ruffled Zachary's hair. Heidi was shocked to see the grin on her son's face; if Heidi tried to touch his hair he always flung her hand away. Boys, she thought, shaking her head. They were a strange breed all right.

Heidi could see rivulets of sweat running down Shane's back as he bent over in the hot sun, muttering to himself as he tried to fit the pieces of the basketball hoop together. Zachary hopped from one foot to the other impatiently, every so often dribbling the ball and raising his arms to take an imaginary shot.

"There," Shane announced after a few minutes. "We're ready for business. Mind giving me a hand, Zachary?" Together they heaved the hoop to a standing position and dragged it over to the side of the driveway. Shane wiped the sweat from his forehead and surveyed his work. "We can always move it," he said to

Heidi. "If it's in the way."

"It's perfectly fine where it is," she replied, mentally trying to calculate how she was going to squeeze her car by the hoop without knocking it over. Heidi had never been very good at backing out of tight spaces, as Zachary could attest to, but the last thing she wanted to do was complain when Shane was going out of his way to be so helpful.

Shane raised his hands in the air, signaling for the ball; in his excitement, Zachary overshot and the ball whizzed past Shane's head and started bouncing down the road. "Sorry!" Zachary said as he dashed after it.

"Watch out for cars," Heidi called to her son as he finally caught up with the ball. She turned to Shane. "I'll just leave you two boys here. I think I'll catch up on some reading. I made some lemonade if you want to stop in when you're done playing. Of course," she added hastily, "I understand if you have something else you need to do. You're already giving up way too much of your time to help Zachary."

"I'm happy to," Shane said, his eyes on Zachary, who was skipping back up the road, clutching the ball to his side. "And I'd love to come inside afterwards. For lemonade, that is." He blushed, and when Heidi met his eyes, something unspoken seemed to pass between the two of them, a feeling that made Heidi's heart skip a beat.

Zachary jogged to their side, his eyes bright with excitement. "Ready?" he asked Shane, practically squirming with anticipation.

"Ready."

*

Heidi wished she could stand at the front window and take photo after photo of Shane and Zachary playing basketball in the driveway, but she didn't want her son to know that she was watching. The carefree expression on his face was something that Heidi hadn't seen since he was a little boy, and she didn't want to embarrass him or make him feel self-conscious by cheering him on. Instinctively, Heidi knew that this moment was something that Zachary needed to share with Shane, and Shane alone.

As for Shane, Heidi thought, he seemed to be enjoying himself almost as much as Zachary. From what she could tell, he was trying to teach a dubious-looking Zachary some kind of victory dance that involved wagging his bottom and waving his hands in the air. As he demonstrated it once more, gesturing for Zachary to follow along, Heidi whipped out her phone and took a quick video. This was too good not to immortalize on camera, she thought. Besides, she

wouldn't mind watching it again, in private. Heidi giggled to herself as she dropped her phone back on the table; she was suddenly feeling a little bit reckless.

She hurried to the front door and swung it open. "Hey!" she called out, and the boys turned around in surprise. "Got room for one more?" She laced up her tennis shoes and jogged down the sidewalk to the basketball hoop. Holding her hands up, she motioned for Shane to toss her the ball. "Give it here."

"Mom," Zachary said, looking doubtful. "You don't really know how to play." He looked at Shane for support.

"Come on! How hard can it be?" Heidi gestured again for the ball. "Just throw it through the hoop, right? It's not rocket science."

A grin lit up Shane's face as he turned to Zachary. "Let's give her a shot."

"Okay," Zachary shrugged. "But don't say I didn't warn you. She's terrible," he added in a mock whisper.

"I heard that," Heidi teased. "Better watch out or you're going to be doing all the chores around the house for the next week." An idea struck her. "Actually, why don't we make things a little bit more interesting? We'll each take ten shots at the hoop. If I make more than you, Zachary, you have to do all the dusting and dishwashing this week."

"What about me?" Shane asked mockingly.

Heidi considered her options for a minute. She could play it safe with Shane, she thought, maybe make a silly little bet that didn't mean anything. But suddenly, that newfound feeling of recklessness washed over her again, and she realized that she didn't want to play it safe. What Heidi really wanted was to go for it, to let him know that she was interested. "If I beat you, you buy me dinner this weekend."

Shane raised his eyebrows in surprise; if Heidi wasn't mistaken, and she was praying that she wasn't, he looked both pleased and flattered. "You're on," he said happily, tossing her the ball. She bounced it a few times, trying to familiarize herself with its weight. Then, squaring her shoulders, she lifted it above her head and took aim. She missed the hoop by about three feet.

Zachary shrieked with glee. "Told you!"

Ignoring him, Heidi took a deep breath. She needed to make this next shot. It might be all fun and games for Zachary, but for Heidi, something much more important was on the line. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Shane watching her from the sidelines. She wondered if he was hoping she would win.

Raising her arms once more, she lobbed the ball in the direction of the hoop. It bounced off the rim and landed at Shane's feet. Swearing under her breath, Heidi held her arms out for the ball once more; Shane picked it up and tossed it

in her direction. As the ball sailed by her head, she made a wild grab for it. Before she knew what was happening, her finger hit the ball at a strange angle and bent backwards with a sickening crunch.

CHAPTER 5

“I guess it could have been worse,” Shane said, peering at the white cast plastered around Heidi’s finger. Zachary stood behind him, craning his neck curiously.

“Yeah?” Heidi asked. “How so?”

“I could have knocked your finger clean off.” Shane shuffled his feet and offered Heidi a guilty smile. She couldn’t help but laugh, despite the throbbing pain shooting up and down the entire length of her arm.

“Remind me to thank you one day,” she teased. Heidi examined the cast closely, then held her finger up for both of them to see. “This looks ridiculous,” she sighed. “How am I going to do anything useful with this thing on my hand?” It was, she thought wryly, punishment for trying to act coy around Shane. She felt like a fool.

“You’re all set,” Dr. Conway said, jotting down a few notes on the chart hanging from the end of the emergency room bed. Although Shane had rushed her to Saint Andrew’s the moment they realized her finger was broken, she had to sit in the waiting room for nearly three hours as other patients who needed more immediate attention rotated through the revolving doors. “Guess you’ll be on desk duty around here for a while,” the doctor added as Heidi touched her finger and winced. “That needs to heal for about three weeks, then we’ll check it out again.” With one last nod in their direction, Dr. Conway bustled out of the room to help the next patient.

Shane helped Heidi into her coat, gently guiding her swollen finger through the sleeves. Heidi fished around in her pocket for a few coins and handed them to Zachary. “Here. Go get your dinner out of the vending machine.”

“Whatever I want?” His eyes were round with excitement. “Even chips?”

“Even chips,” Heidi agreed.

After Zachary had skipped out of the room to find the vending machines, Shane turned back to Heidi; she was touched to see worry etched along the lines of his face. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Heidi said, smiling reassuringly. “It was an accident, nothing to lose sleep over.”

Shane still looked uncertain. “Maybe I can help you around the house for a few days? You know, to make it up to you.” He toed at the pattern on the linoleum floor. “I can’t help but think this is partly my fault.”

“Partly?” she crowed, swatting him with her good hand. “If it weren’t for you helping my son I’d punch you right in the nose.”

He drew his face in closer. “Go ahead, take your best shot.”

She raised her fist mockingly and pressed it lightly against the tip of his nose. His face crinkled into a smile; as she withdrew her hand, he leaned in ever so slightly, his full lips parted. Heidi’s breath froze in her chest; was she really ready for this? She hadn’t kissed a man other than John since she was twenty years old. At this point, she’d practically forgotten how to go about doing it right. What if she missed?

Zachary pushed open the door to the room, then stopped abruptly when he saw the two of them standing there, staring into each other’s eyes. “What’s going on?” he asked suspiciously. The chocolate bar he was holding fell out of his hand, and he bent down to retrieve it, keeping his eyes on his mother.

Shane backed away quickly, then grabbed Heidi’s purse from the chair and shoved it at her. “Just helping your mom get her things,” he said, and Heidi cringed at the chipper tone of his voice. She was certain that he was trying to cover up the awkward moment. Secretly, Heidi was glad that Zachary had chosen that exact moment to interrupt them. When faced with the possibility of kissing Shane, she felt incredibly conflicted; her body was screaming for her to go for it, but images of John kept flashing through her mind. All in all, Heidi was feeling very confused.

Zachary ripped the wrapper from his candy bar and chomped on it hungrily. “Ready guys?” he asked, shoving his baseball cap on his head and slouching from the room.

“Lead the way,” Shane said, following closely behind Zachary, Heidi on his heels.

As the trio walked down the hallway, Heidi could feel the eyes of her fellow nurses following Shane’s progress. She arched her back proudly; he really was quite handsome, she thought, her eyes on his back. Shane seemed oblivious to the women now muttering to each other and pointing to him with interest.

Heidi felt a tug on her coat sleeve; she whirled around and came face to face with Josie, who had a knowing smile on her face. “Who’s that?” she breathed into Heidi’s ear. “He’s delicious, if you don’t mind me saying.”

Heidi blushed, glancing Shane’s way to make sure that he didn’t hear. If he had, he was doing a good job of pretending otherwise. “I’ll catch up with you guys in a second,” she called to Zachary, who nodded and led the way to the parking lot, where Shane’s car was waiting. She waited until they turned the corner, then rounded on Josie. “Could you be any more obvious?” she hissed, although if she were being perfectly honest she was rather enjoying the attention.

“Sorry,” Josie giggled. “I couldn’t help myself. Who *is* that? Are you two an item?” She was practically frothing at the mouth for the juicy details.

“Put your tongue back in,” Heidi chided her friend. “His name is Officer Shane Kensington, and no, we’re not at it.”

“*Officer* Kensington? That sounds intriguing.”

“He works for the Santa Ynez PD. Remember when I told you the other day that Zachary ran away? Shane’s the one who called for me to come and pick him up at the station. He and Zachary hit it off, so he offered to shoot some hoops with him a couple of times a week. I guess he picked up that Zachary was starved for a little bit of male attention.”

“That’s great and all,” teased Josie, “but it seems to me like you’re skating over the most important detail. Are you dating him?”

“No,” Heidi said, a little too quickly. “He’s just a friend.”

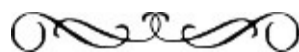
“Interesting.” Josie’s blue eyes danced with laughter; Heidi started to squirm uncomfortably. “So, then, I guess you wouldn’t mind if I made a move on him? Since you’re just friends and all.”

Heidi knew that Josie was sniffing around for the real scoop, but she wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of taking the bait. “Sure,” she shrugged. “He’s all yours. Why would I mind?”

“Great! Can I have his number?”

Heidi hesitated; she was fairly certain that Josie was trying to trick her into admitting her feelings for Shane, but she wouldn’t bet her life on it. Josie was a pretty woman who had never married, and despite being in her mid-forties, had a penchant for younger men. Men like Shane. “I don’t have it,” she lied. “Maybe some other time.”

Josie flashed her another knowing smile, then turned on her heels and walked down the hospital corridor. “Then give him mine,” she called back over her shoulder as she disappeared into one of the patient rooms.



“I need food,” Shane moaned desperately when Jaime answered the door to her apartment, a book in her hand and reading glasses perched on top of her head.

His sister stared back at him in confusion. “What’s going on? Are you hurt?”

“I’m not the one who’s hurt.” Shane cringed as he remembered the cracking sound Heidi’s finger made as it snapped. “Can I come in? I’ll explain.” Jaime opened the door wider and Shane stepped past her and into her tidy two-bedroom apartment, smiling to himself as he glanced around the pin-neat living room. Jaime was a stickler for cleanliness and order; even as a child, she used to

wash her dolls' hands and faces after each tea party. "Remind me again why you still live here?" he asked as she snapped the door closed behind him.

"What do you mean?"

"Your book editing company is hugely successful. You could live in a beach house, take lavish vacations, but here you are in the same apartment you've been living in since you took out that first loan to start your business."

Jaime shrugged. "I guess I'm not as impulsive as the rest of the Kensington children. I like to take my time with decisions, think things through. Right now I'm just hoarding all of my money until I decide what I want to do with it." She motioned for Shane to sit down on the couch, then set her book down on the table, but not before giving it a look of longing.

Noticing this, Shane said, "I won't be here long. I just know that you like to make a bunch of dinners ahead of time and freeze them, and I was hoping you'd be willing to share some with me."

Jaime frowned. "Of course I'll share, but what's going on, Shane? You're scaring me a little. Are you out on the street or something? You said you're not the one who's hurt...then who is?"

Shane dropped his head into his hands and shook it back and forth miserably. "I'm such a dunce," he moaned, and began explaining last night's disastrous basketball lesson to Jaime. When he finished, her face was twisted into a sympathetic smile. "How badly did I screw this up with her?" he asked, dreading her response. "I want to bring over some dinner so that she doesn't have to cook for a few days, but you know that I'm a hopeless chef. I might as well dig around for something from the dumpster next to the station. It would probably taste better than anything I could whip up."

"I think bringing her dinner is an incredibly sweet gesture that she'll really appreciate," Jaime said, her voice muffled as she dug around in the freezer. "How about lasagna?"

"Lasagna sounds great," Shane said, following her into the kitchen. She handed him a heavy ceramic pan lined with tinfoil. "Defrost it in the fridge overnight, the bake it at 350 degrees for about an hour."

"Thanks." Shane held the lasagna up to his nose and took a whiff. "This smells amazing. You're a lifesaver."

"You're making me blush," Jaime teased, sliding her reading glasses back onto her nose. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm in the middle of a tantalizing mystery novel that I'd like to finish before bed." She glanced at the clock pointedly, then winked at him.

"Sounds intriguing," Shane said, showing himself to the door. "Keep your fingers crossed that my lasagna—or should I say your lasagna—makes me look

like a hero instead of a fool.”

Jaime gave him an appraising look. “Why can’t you be both? A girl likes a man who can keep her on her toes. Just don’t go breaking one of them.”

*

Shane ground the heel of his shoe against Heidi’s front step, peering impatiently through the tiny windows on the front door to see if anyone was coming. He could only see shadows through the thick frosted panes. Perhaps, he thought in horror, Heidi had seen his car pulling into the driveway and was so angry about her finger that she was choosing to ignore him. He pressed the doorbell more insistently.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” he heard a voice on the other side of the door call. Shane puffed into the palm of his hand to test his breath, straightened his jacket, and held the pan of lasagna out in front of him like a peace offering. “Shane!” Heidi exclaimed when she opened the door, tightening the belt of her fluffy purple robe self-consciously. “This is a surprise.” She eyed the tinfoil-wrapped pan. “What’s that?”

“An ‘I’m sorry for breaking your finger’ present,” he said, lifting up a corner of the tinfoil and wafting the delicious scent of lasagna in her direction. “Will it work?”

Heidi stuck a finger into the pan and scooped up a gob of sauce. “It might,” she said, then licked her finger. “Wow, this is amazing! I didn’t know you were such a good cook.”

“I can’t take all the credit,” he said. “Or any of it, for that matter. My sister Jaime made it. I told her what happened and she took pity on me.” He handed the pan to her. “I’ve been instructed to tell you that it cooks at 350 for an hour. Enjoy.”

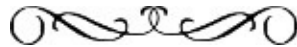
“Thanks,” Heidi said, setting it on the table by the door and crossing her arms over her chest; Shane’s eyes roved over the opening at the top of her robe. He felt a sudden, inexplicable urge to turn and run away. “Would you like to come in?” she asked. “I’d be willing to share.”

Shane swallowed hard and shook his head. “I’d love to,” he said, his voice coming out hoarse. He cleared his throat and tried again. “I have some things to catch up on around the house, though, so maybe I’ll take a rain check.”

Heidi nodded and stepped back into the house, her hand on the doorframe. “I’ll see you around? Despite our minor catastrophe, Zachary’s been talking about nothing but basketball since you left.”

Shane tried to smile, but he knew that it didn’t quite reach his eyes; he prayed

that Heidi didn't notice. "Definitely," he said, feeling around in his pocket for his keys. "I'll give you a call." Before she could say another word, he waved goodbye and walked quickly to his car, started the engine, and steered away without a backward glance. As he rounded the bend, he saw Heidi standing on her sidewalk barefoot, watching his car until it disappeared.



Closing the door behind her, Heidi leaned against it and breathed a quiet sigh of relief. She had felt obligated to invite Shane in, but the idea made her more than a little uncomfortable. Zachary was gone for the night; he had scored a rare invitation to a sleepover bash being thrown for a classmate's birthday. After speaking with the boy's mother Heidi had a hunch that Zachary was a last minute invite, but she was grateful all the same. Her son had made promising strides since meeting Shane, coming out of the shell he had shoved himself into, and Heidi was hopeful that he would now begin making friends his own age.

Heidi yawned widely as she stored the lasagna in the refrigerator for the next evening's dinner; she was too exhausted to even pop it in the oven tonight, having spent the wee hours of the morning tossing and turning in her bed. Try as she might, Heidi couldn't shake from her mind the words Zachary had said to her when they returned home from the hospital.

After saying their goodbyes to Shane and watching him drive away, her son had turned to her with a sad look on his face. "Are you replacing Dad?" he asked quietly, and Heidi could see tears forming in his eyes.

Her mouth had dropped open in shock. She sat down on the couch and patted the cushion next to her; Zachary dropped onto it and laid his head on her shoulder like he used to do when he was much younger. The gesture touched her. "Of course not," she whispered, stroking his hair. "What in the world gave you that idea?"

He choked back a sob. "You and Shane like each other. I can tell."

Heidi chose her next words carefully. "Of course we do," she said slowly. "But we like each other as friends. There is no one on earth who could ever take your father's place. You know that, right?"

Zachary hiccupped softly. "I guess so."

"Well I know so," she said, tipping his face so that she could look into his eyes. Heidi was startled at how young her son looked, how vulnerable. She was struck again by how much John's death shaped the course of their lives; where would they be now, she wondered, if he had lived?

Those had been the images that swirled through her racing mind the previous

night as she lay under the covers shivering, despite the warmth of the room. Heidi and John, snapping pictures as Zachary and his senior prom date smiled awkwardly at each other. Sitting arm in arm watching their son receive his college diploma. Dancing at his wedding, holding each other close as the DJ played their song. Playing with their first grandchild together, tickling the baby's stomach as he squealed with laughter. All of the things that could never be, precious memories that would never be made. Heidi felt each one like a heavy punch to the gut.

When she finally stumbled out of bed that morning, her heart heavy, her head pounding, Heidi knew what she had to do, for Zachary's sake. She would push aside whatever feelings she had developed for Shane and keep him at arm's length. No more flirting, no more stolen glances. No more hinting around for a date. Because her son had gone through the unimaginable, and he had come out the other side forever changed. Her focus right now needed to be on Zachary, and Zachary alone.

So what if that meant she would be alone for the conceivable future, sacrificing her own chance at happiness? It was, she reminded herself, something that any good mother would do.

CHAPTER 6

“Shane! I’m surprised to see you here after all this time.” Dr. Holmby opened the door to his office and beckoned for Shane to step inside. Shane felt like his feet were glued to the front stoop of the house where his former psychologist both lived and saw clients. Dr. Holmby cocked his head and watched Shane curiously. “Are you here for another appointment? If so, you’re in luck. I just had a cancellation and my schedule is wide open for the next hour. But only,” he added with a wink, “if you’re willing to come inside. I’m afraid we’d have a hard time chatting out here on the street.”

The tension in Shane’s body eased slightly; despite his reluctance to see Dr. Holmby again, he had to admit that the man, with his fatherly nature and cheerful sense of humor, had a natural ability for making his clients feel comfortable. Dr. Holmby made another motion for Shane to follow him; Shane nodded mutely and trudged inside.

A familiar wave of nausea passed through him as he took in the rich mahogany woodwork and hand-woven wall tapestries lining the psychologist’s office. The shelves of each bookcase were weighed down with heavy textbooks, and a stone fireplace stood regally in the corner. In front of the fireplace sat two dark red leather chairs, and Shane’s mind flashed back to the dozens of times he had perched uncomfortably in one of them, trying his best not to relive the darkest day of his life.

Dr. Holmby gathered up the yellow legal pad he used to take notes and settled himself in one of the chairs, crossing one leg over the other. Shane sat down across from him and stared at the inch of pale skin peeking out from under the hem of the other man’s corduroy trousers. Anything to avoid looking Dr. Holmby in the eye.

“So what brings you here, Shane?” Dr. Holmby asked, peering at Shane with interest over the tips of his fingers. “I have to say I didn’t think I’d be seeing you again.”

“Neither did I,” Shane admitted. “But to tell you the truth things haven’t been going so well in my life.”

“How so?”

Shane took a deep breath. It was now or never, he thought. If he ever wanted to truly get on with his life, he would need to begin the process of healing, however painful it turned out to be. “I’ve been living in this safe little cocoon

that I created for myself to try and keep the rest of the world out. I've avoided friends, let my relationship with my family suffer, and basically isolated myself from every person around me."

Dr. Holmby nodded along as Shane spoke, every so often jotting down a word or sentence on his notepad. "And what now has changed?"

"I met a woman," Shane said, and he could feel a smile breaking across his face, lifting his spirits. As Heidi's face swam in front of his eyes, the tension in his body visibly melted away. "Her name is Heidi, and she's amazing. She's a single mother, a strong, independent woman. She's smart, caring, beautiful. I think," he inhaled deeply, aware that he was about to admit something out loud for the first time.

"Go on," Dr. Holmby prompted, his pen poised above his notepad.

"I think I'm falling in love with her. Which is crazy, because I just met her. But there's an undeniable chemistry around us at all times."

"I see," Dr. Holmby said, careful to keep the expression on his face neutral. "And you said Heidi was a single mother? Have you met her child?"

Shane nodded. "His name's Zachary, and he's a great kid. A little shy, still trying to find his place in the world, but he's really opened up to me in the short amount of time we've spent together."

"So where do you want to take your relationship with Heidi from here?"

"I don't know. No, actually I do know," Shane admitted. "I'd like to ask her out, maybe start off slow."

"And why haven't you?"

"Because I'm terrified. I've been by myself so much for the last three years that I barely remember what it's like to have a relationship with someone. I don't want to do something to screw it up." Shane twisted his fingers together in his lap as he talked. "The other day, she asked me to come inside, and I freaked out, Dr. Holmby. I made up a lame excuse about having to do stuff at home and practically ran to my car." He sighed. "I'm hopeless, aren't I?"

Dr. Holmby chuckled. "Of course you're not hopeless, Shane. You've just been very lonely for a very long time. The fact that you're even willing to entertain the idea of stepping outside of your comfort zone with Heidi is a promising sign that you've begun the healing process. You've realized that sitting home alone dwelling—or trying not to dwell—on the accident is preventing you from being happy."

"What should I do now?" Shane asked uncertainly.

"That part is entirely up to you. Neither I nor anyone else can tell you how to live your life. Only you can decide what your next step will be. But I have to caution you—and you've heard me say this before during our many sessions—

that until you tear down the wall you've built around yourself, artificially protecting your mind from remembering what happened that night, you will never be able to truly move on with your life."

He leaned forward in his chair and gazed directly into Shane's eyes with a serious expression on his face. "Remembering is the first step to healing, to acknowledging what happened and going forward from there. If you refuse to let yourself recall the details of the accident, you will remain stuck in limbo. Forever."

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Shane stood awkwardly in front of the refrigerated case of flowers at the local supermarket, having a fierce debate with himself. Should he go with roses or sunflowers? At least he was aware that carnations were out of the question, he thought, passing over the canisters stuffed with the colorful flowers. His sister Lacey once received a bouquet of carnations from a boy on a first date, and after she returned home she dumped them down the garbage disposal as a wide-eyed Shane looked on. "Never," she warned Shane, wagging her finger in his direction, "ever buy a woman you like carnations. It screams cheap." And he hadn't, despite his mother's protests that her youngest daughter was being unreasonable. Shane wasn't about to take any chances.

Roses seemed like a good option, he thought, but somewhere in the back of his mind he was vaguely aware that each color signified a different meaning. He knew that red was for love, so he steered clear of that bin—he didn't want to scare Heidi off. What about pink? Or yellow? The choices were enough to make his head spin.

Finally, when he noticed the florist eyeing him suspiciously, as though expecting him to stuff a bouquet under his jacket, he hastily grabbed a handful of white roses, hedging his bets that they were probably innocent enough. He paid the florist, taking care to flash his police badge in her direction as he pulled out his wallet, and walked to his car, rehearsing his opening lines again and again.

He had stayed up half the night practicing what he was going to say to Heidi when she first opened the door and saw Shane standing there, even resorting to writing down a few options so that he wouldn't forget. "Hey baby" seemed a little too suave for his liking, as did any kind of joke he could come up with. Eventually, he decided that the best course of action would be just to hand her the flowers and ask her to dinner for Friday night. Simple, yet effective. Shane was really quite pleased with himself; he could definitely do this.

What he hadn't counted on, he thought anxiously as he stood at her front door

one nerve-wracking car ride later, was Heidi not being home. He shoved the flowers aside and dug out his phone to check the time; it was after six. He sat down on her front stoop, considering his options. He could go home and try again another time, but then Shane was afraid that he'd lose the courage he spent all day building. Perhaps he would sit here and wait until she came home? That seemed desperate.

After glancing dejectedly one last time at her front window, where the curtains were still tightly drawn, Shane decided on what he hoped would be a more romantic plan: he would surprise her at work. As he unlocked his car door, he imagined the excited smile that was sure to light up her face when he handed her the bouquet of flowers. Shane supposed that the other nurses might even clap and cheer at his chivalrous gesture. By the time he had pulled his car onto the highway, Shane's heart was pumping in excitement. He bobbed his head along to the radio enthusiastically, unconcerned with the amused stares from his fellow drivers. He was a man with a plan.

He swung into the parking lot of Saint Andrew's, grabbed the bouquet of flowers, and headed inside. The tired-looking nurse at the front desk smiled vaguely at him. "Patient name?"

"I'm here to see one of the nurses, actually. Heidi Griffin?"

"And does she know that you're coming? Heidi's an emergency room nurse, so unless she's on her break she won't be able to meet with you."

Shane's heart sank; he hadn't counted on that. As he stared around the bustling first floor of the hospital, he began doubting his decision. "You know what? Never mind," he said, backing away from the desk quickly. "I'll catch her another time. Please don't mention that I was here." He hurried toward the parking lot, suddenly desperate to get away from all of the people now watching him curiously and return to the solitude of his own home.

"Shane?" a familiar voice called. He cringed and plastered a smile on his face before turning around. Heidi stood ten feet behind him, her hair pulled into a messy bun, looking surprised to see him. "What are you doing here?" She eyed the bouquet of flowers apprehensively. "Are you visiting someone?"

"No," he said, wondering if she could feel the heat blasting off of his bright red face. He wished that the elderly couple sitting on a pair of plastic chairs in the corner would stop staring at him. "I—I actually came to see you." He shoved the flowers in her direction. "I was wondering...well, I was wondering if you'd like to go to dinner with me on Friday night. You know, as a date. Or something." Smooth, he thought as the elderly woman giggled and winked at him; her husband tried to shush her, but Heidi caught sight of them and blushed. Really smooth.

“Wow,” Heidi said, her hands straying to her hair distractedly. “I don’t know what to say, Shane. I’m flattered.” She motioned for him to follow her outside to the corner of the building. Once there, she fingered the leaves on a potted plant before turning to him; Shane’s stomach dropped at the expression on her face, a mixture of sadness and determination.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and Shane could tell that she was choosing her words with precision. “But I don’t think it’s a good idea.” She handed the flowers, now drooping slightly, back to him and crossed her arms defensively in front of her chest. “You’re a great guy, but my focus right now needs to be on Zachary.” Her face softened. “I hope you can understand.”

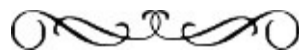
Shane nodded quickly, trying his best to look unconcerned; he was devastated, but determined not to show it. “I understand. And it’s no problem at all.” He passed the flowers back to her. “Keep these. Consider them a gift from a friend.” He shoved his hands into his pockets.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. “I’ll understand completely if you no longer want to help Zachary with his basketball game. If it will make you uncomfortable.”

Shaking his head fiercely, Shane said, “No way. I made a promise to him, and I plan to stick with it until he tries out for the team.”

Heidi smiled at him gratefully. “Thank you. I know he’ll appreciate it.” She inhaled deeply into the bouquet of flowers. “These are beautiful. They’ll definitely brighten up the desk at the nurses’ station. It’s been a long day and we could use some cheering up.” She held out her hand amicably, and he took it, trying his hardest to ignore the heat that passed between them when their skin touched. Had he just been imagining that she felt it too?

“I’ll see you around, then.” With one last glance at her eyes, which were now firmly planted on the ground at his feet, he headed back to his car, his thoughts on home and the comfort of his solitude.



Still holding the flowers with shaking hands, Heidi made a detour for the nearest bathroom. Once inside, she pressed her forehead against the cool glass of the mirror, trying not to picture the shocked look on Shane’s face when she had rejected him. He had, she thought in despair, every reason to be upset with her. Over the past few weeks she had given off plenty of signals that she was interested in him, and when he finally mustered up the courage to ask her on a proper date she shot him down so fast it made her own head spin.

There had been a moment, right after he told her to keep the flowers, the she almost broke down and confessed everything: how strong her feelings were for

him, how upset Zachary had been when he thought Shane was replacing his father, how she had decided that she needed to push her own feelings aside for the sake of her son. The weight of that decision now weighed heavily on her. There was, she knew, no going back. After a harsh rejection like that, Heidi was surprised that Shane was even still willing to help her son. But that was just the type of guy he was. A good one. And she had clearly just broken his heart.

She splashed cold water on her face and pinned her hair back into place. Heidi didn't want her colleagues, especially eagle-eyed Josie, to realize that anything was amiss. She debated whether or not to toss the flowers in the garbage so that she wouldn't have to see them, a constant reminder of what she had given up. As she held the fragrant roses in her hands, the white petals flushed with just a hint of pink, an idea struck her. If she couldn't enjoy these flowers, at least someone else should.

Now outwardly composed, she strode out of the bathroom and up the stairs to the third floor of the hospital. Waving to a few of the nurses she knew from the break room, she counted the numbers on the doors of the rooms she passed by until she reached one decorated with bundles of cheerful get well balloons. She knocked lightly; the middle aged woman holding a silent vigil at the bedside of a teenage girl swung her head up. When she saw Heidi standing in the doorway, she beamed and beckoned for her to come inside.

"How is she doing?" Heidi whispered, laying the flowers gently on the small table beside Megan's bed. Her mother thanked Heidi with a grateful smile and stroked her daughter's hair lovingly. Since the car accident that brought Megan into Heidi's emergency room, she had thought about the girl more than once, but hadn't yet had an opportunity to visit her.

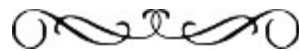
"Getting a little bit better, day by day. She had an MRI yesterday to assess whether or not she had any brain damage—as you can see, her head is still awfully swollen—but the doctors told me that there were promising signs that she'd make a full recovery." Megan's mother held out a photo with trembling hands. Heidi bent toward the picture and gasped; it showed Megan's crumpled car wrapped around the light pole. "It's a miracle she even survived. My God, we came so close to losing her. She's our only daughter."

Heidi placed a comforting hand on the woman's shoulder. "I understand, believe me I do. I'm a single mother—my son is ten—and I have no idea what I would do if I lost him." Heidi shuddered at the thought and handed the photo back to Megan's mother. As she caught a glimpse of the mangled car once more, a bubble of despair rose up into her throat. She was suddenly feeling very sorry for stopping by.

"I should be on my way," she stammered, wondering why the walls of the

room seemed like they were closing in on her. Heidi could feel beads of sweat dotting her forehead; Megan's mother was staring at her in apprehension. Heidi managed to wave goodbye before turning and positively fleeing from the room.

"Watch where you're going!" a man in a white coat called out as she ran blindly down the hallway to the elevators. When she reached them, she punched the button again and again until the doors finally opened. She stepped inside and slumped against the wall, relief swarming her body when the doors closed firmly behind her, taking her as far away from the sight of that broken car as she could possibly get.



That was that, Shane thought, downing the last of his beer and slamming his empty glass down on the table with a crack. He motioned for the bartender to bring him another one, then slumped over and rested his head on his arms. Shane had expected to be celebrating right now; instead, he was sitting alone in a bar in the middle of the week, drowning his sorrows in alcohol. The bitter taste of the beer flooded his taste buds, dulling every other part of him. That was the way he wanted it.

He had done it. Put his heart on the line, only to have her squash it like a bug. It was his own fault, really, for being arrogant enough to think that he deserved a real shot at happiness, after everything that had happened to him. When the bartender slid another beer in his direction, Shane slung it down in one breath, tossed a twenty on the counter, and stumbled out of the bar. Fortunately, he had the foresight to walk that night; the bar was only a few blocks away from his house.

As Shane stepped outside, cold droplets of rain showered down on his face. Great, he thought as he pulled his jacket tighter around his body. Just what he needed, another reminder. He could feel the effects of the beer blurring the edges of his mind, making him more susceptible to the memory of the night things went so terribly, terribly wrong.

Shane tried his best to fight it down; not now, he thought desperately as the echo of Buddy's laughter filled his ears. He stepped around to the side of the bar and pressed his hands against the cold concrete of the wall, trying to stem the flood of memories that he had always worked so hard to suppress. As he stood there, he forced his mind to go blissfully blank. To pretend, as he had done for the past three years, that the accident had never happened.

CHAPTER 7

Heidi poured the freshly squeezed lemonade into two tall glasses, added a generous helping of sugar to each, and stirred vigorously until the sugar was completely dissolved. She tossed in a couple of ice cubes and swirled them around in the glasses to cool off the lemonade before serving it. Despite the chill in the air signaling the first hint of winter, she could see through the window that Zachary and Shane were dying for a cold drink. They had been out there for hours, she realized, glancing at the clock. These days, she kept her distance from Shane, who had gallantly stuck with his promise to train with her son until he was ready for tryouts.

Thankfully, Heidi thought, tracing her finger along the days marked on the calendar, tryouts were being held that same week for the school's spring basketball league. Zachary, who hadn't skipped a day of school since Heidi received the letter from his principal, had worked hard in the ensuing weeks to keep his grades up, and Heidi was proud to find out that he was eligible to join the team.

She set the lemonade on a tray and added a plate of chocolate chip cookies before carrying it out to the boys, who were seated on the driveway discussing tactics. "Remember what I said about passing," Shane was saying as Zachary nodded along seriously. "You have to make sure you take your time to look around and see who is open and has the best chance of making the shot. Don't just lob the ball at the first guy you see."

"How's it going out here?" Heidi asked as she passed each of them a glass.

"Great!" Zachary said, tearing off a chunk of his cookie. "I'm ready for tryouts, and Coach Whitt said that he's throwing a pizza party for the whole team so we can get to know each other!" Heidi smiled fondly at her son, delighted at the gleam of excitement in his eyes. He turned to Shane. "You'll be able to come to tryouts, right?"

"Zachary," Heidi warned, "Shane has done more than enough already. Your tryouts are in the middle of the day, and he has to go to work. You can tell him all about it when you're finished."

Shane took a casual sip of lemonade and gave Heidi a tight smile. "Actually, I already told the chief that I'd need to take a couple of hours off." He ruffled Zachary's hair. "I wouldn't miss this for the world. Not when we've put so much time into it!"

“Can we try that bank shot once more, Shane?” Zachary asked, running his fingers along the basketball nervously. “I’m not sure I have that one down yet.”

Shane set down his cookie and brushed the crumbs from his fingers, then motioned for Zachary to pass him the ball. “Sure, let’s do it right now. This is going to be the last practice before your tryouts, so I want to make sure we go over everything again.” He caught the ball, then stood up and stretched his arms over his head. As he did, the t-shirt he wore rose a few inches above the waistband of his shorts, revealing the muscles of his stomach. Heidi glanced away quickly; try as she might to ignore her feelings, she still found herself wildly attracted to Shane.

“I’ll get out of your way,” she said, collecting the empty glasses and hurrying back up the sidewalk to the safety of her house. Once inside, she closed the door firmly behind her. In the weeks since Shane had asked her out, she had done her best to keep her distance from him. They had remained cordial to each other, but Heidi knew from the way she sometimes caught Shane looking at her that she had hurt him deeply with her rejection. She also missed his company, the ease of their conversations, and the way they could joke around with each other. Heidi had hoped that there would be some way for them to stay friends, but sadly the awkwardness they now felt around each other prevented that from happening.

Once Zachary made the team, Shane would have no reason to come over anymore. A small part of Heidi felt relieved that life would be able to return to normal, and she could pretend that she and Shane Kensington had never met. It might take a while for her to erase him from her memory, but Heidi knew that it would be worth it in the end. Nothing good could come from pining over something that could never be. When the day came when her son was ready to accept the presence of another man in their lives, Heidi had no doubt that Shane would be off the market. Frankly, she was surprised that a man like him was still single, but she never gathered up the courage to ask him why.

Later that evening, after Shane had gone home, Heidi sat at the dinner table with Zachary, toying with her own food and watching as he devoured a plate of macaroni and cheese with gusto, all the while chattering on and on about the other boys who were planning to try out for the team. “Eddie’s pretty cool,” he said through a mouthful of noodles. “His father’s in the army and lets Eddie try on his uniform. They live in a big house with a pool and Eddie already invited me to come over this summer and swim!”

“That’s great,” Heidi said gently, wetting her napkin in her water glass and wiping a dribble of cheese from her son’s chin. “Sounds like you’ve made a lot of new friends.”

“Uh huh,” Zachary said, nodding proudly. Without warning, a sad look

crossed his face and he began pushing the soggy noodles around his bowl absentmindedly.

“What’s wrong, buddy?” Heidi asked, lifting his chin with her fingers.

Zachary heaved a sigh and gazed at her with pleading eyes. “What about Shane?”

“What about him?”

“Do you think he’ll still be able to come over, even after I make the team?”

Heidi covered the little boy’s hand with her own. “I’m not sure if he will,” she said honestly. “Shane’s a very busy man with an important job, and he promised to help you all the way through basketball tryouts, which was already a lot more than he needed to do. I think that once tryouts are finished we should let Shane get back to his own life.”

Zachary hung his head in disappointment. “I’m sure you’ll still see him every so often,” she added. “And we’ll have to come up with a special way to thank him for being so generous with his time.”

“We could have him over for dinner,” Zachary said excitedly. “I could cook! Do you think he likes macaroni and cheese?”

A smile played across Heidi’s lips as she imagined serving Shane pasta out of a box as a thank you for spending countless hours with her son. She had no doubt in her mind that he would clean his plate and politely ask for more. “We’ll see,” she said. “Maybe I’ll think of something we could make together.” She glanced at the clock above the kitchen stove. “I didn’t realize it was so late! Finish your dinner and brush your teeth, then I’ll come upstairs and read a chapter to you before bedtime. Why don’t you pick out a new book?”

As her son scampered out of the room, Heidi rose from the table and began clearing away their dirty dishes. She added a squirt of soap to the dishpan and watched as it filled with hot, sudsy water. Despite having for the first time in several years a kitchen with a fully functioning automatic dishwasher, on most days Heidi preferred to scrub the plates by hand. She had always found the repetition soothing, a way to allow her mind to wander. Some of the most important decisions in Heidi’s life had been made while she was washing dishes: where she wanted to go to college, what to name her first child, how to make a living for herself and her son when she was thrust unwillingly into the perilous world of single motherhood.

Now, as she grabbed the sponge to work on a particularly stubborn pot, she began imagining for what seemed like the thousandth time over the past three years what her future would look like. While thoughts like this used to immediately cause Heidi to dissolve into heaving sobs when she realized that the life she and John planned together would never come to pass, she now found

herself more focused on the new life she knew she needed to build for herself. It's not that her love for John had dimmed in the years since his death; if anything, it had taken on an almost fairytale quality. He remained frozen in her mind as the perfect husband, the most loving father. His death had wiped away his faults, leaving Heidi with nothing but happy memories. Somewhere along the way, her grief had started to replace itself with cold, quiet acceptance.

She knew that Zachary's memories of his father would soon fade. Just last week, before bedtime, Heidi was sitting in the kitchen enjoying a cup of chamomile tea when she heard Zachary's frantic voice calling out to her from his bedroom. When she hurried into the room, her heart thumping with fear, she found him sitting up in bed grasping his hair between his hands, rocking back and forth and quivering. "What's the matter?" she had asked, rushing to his side and pressing her palm against his forehead.

"It's Dad," Zachary said, swiping at his eyes with the back of his hand.

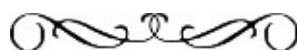
"What about Dad?"

Her son had gazed unseeingly into the darkness for several moments. Finally, he turned to her with tears swimming in his blue-green eyes. "I can't remember," he had whispered, his voice trembling with grief and, Heidi suspected, a hint of rage, "the color of his eyes."

Could she? Heidi wondered later, after she had sat quietly with her son for the better part of an hour, rubbing his back while he sobbed into her shoulder. How many times had she stared into those eyes while she and John made love? Fought over something stupid? Dreamed about their life together? If someone put a gun to her head and demanded that she describe her husband's eyes, would she be able to accurately describe their exact shade of ocean blue? Time had dulled the edges of her memory. John's voice, even after death so loud in her mind, had begun to quiet. She supposed, as painful as it was to admit, that in some ways she was moving on. And in some ways she never would.

Right now, Zachary was still a little boy, lost in a world that had shown itself to be cruel at a devastatingly young age. But he, too, would begin to heal. Just in the last few weeks, Heidi could see the process already taking place. And she knew that a big part of that was Shane's presence in their lives.

He had awakened something in both of them, a light, long dimmed, that was slowly creeping back into their lives. For Zachary, Shane represented not only a friend, but a mentor and—dare she say it?—a father figure. For Heidi, it was the belief that she would one day allow herself to fall in love again, if only she would open up her heart and mind to the possibility.



“What I don’t understand,” Buddy said with a satisfied groan, leaning back in his chair and loosening his belt a notch, “is why you’re still helping out the kid. You said she didn’t want to go out with you, so what’s the point?” Out of the corner of his eye, Shane could see Maribel rolling her eyes in her husband’s direction as she poured each of them another glass of wine. Shane’s determination to return to the land of the living, as Buddy had so aptly phrased it, prompted him to finally accept an invitation to dinner at his friends’ house. Shane was surprised to find that he was actually enjoying himself.

“I see them as separate,” Shane replied. “I’m not using Zachary to get to Heidi. I genuinely want to help this boy. If you met him, you would know why.” He shook his head sadly. “He’s been through a rough few years, apparently, although I don’t know the details. I haven’t wanted to ask.”

Maribel nodded wisely. “Losing a parent is probably the most traumatic thing that can happen to a child.” She smiled fondly at three year old Henry, who was smashing a hole in the center of his mashed potatoes to create a volcano. “But there’s one thing about this whole situation that I don’t understand.”

“What’s that?” Shane frowned.

“Why are you giving up so easily?”

Buddy stared at his wife in disbelief. “Didn’t you hear what Shane said? She shot him down without a second thought. Women,” he muttered. He leaned in toward his son, who was now adding a dollop of gravy to the center of his mashed potatoes. “Don’t ever get married, son,” Buddy whispered. “Take it from your old man.” Henry giggled and sprinkled a few peas on top of the volcano.

Maribel swatted her husband’s arm. “Just because you don’t know anything about women doesn’t mean you should poison our son’s mind.” She turned her attention back to Shane. “Try and see it from Heidi’s point of view. I don’t think the problem here is that she isn’t attracted to you or interested in dating you.”

Shane wrinkled his brow in confusion. “What else could it be?”

“A lot of things, I’m sure. She’s probably still mourning the loss of her husband, which means that her feelings for you are causing her a lot of pain and confusion. Add in the fact that she has a son to protect, and she’s probably very wary of bringing a man into Zachary’s life if she isn’t certain that he’ll stick around for a while. She can’t go playing the field, bringing home a new man every other week.”

Shane cringed at the thought. “Somehow I don’t think she’s like that anyways,” he muttered, annoyed at the idea of Heidi out on dates with faceless strangers.

“What I’m trying to say,” Maribel continued, “is that you didn’t give her enough time. If I were you I would have expected her to say no the first time you

asked her out. She needs to know that you're serious about her, and it's up to you to show her that's the case."

"What if he's not serious about her?" Buddy shot at his wife. "He barely even knows her. Once he gets to know her more, he may not like what he finds."

Maribel shrugged. "That's a risk, I guess, but somehow I don't think that's the case." They both looked pointedly at Shane, waiting for a response.

"You're right, Maribel," Shane said, a warmth spreading through his body as he pictured Heidi's face, the way her long hair swept her shoulders, the tinkling of her laugh. What he wouldn't give to be able to take her in his arms, trace his fingers along her cheekbones, kiss her softly as he felt her body melting into his. He gave an involuntary shudder of pleasure. "I am serious about her. I've only known her for a couple of months, that's true, but there's a connection between us that I've never encountered with another woman. Not even close."

"Then you need to express that to her," Maribel said with a faraway look in her eyes. "Be persistent, but patient. Let her know that she's special to you. I'm willing to bet my marriage that she'll come around."

"Hey!" Buddy crossed his arms and pouted. "Don't gamble with our marriage. What if you're wrong?"

"Because," Maribel replied, reaching across the table to squeeze her husband's hand, "I'm so sure that Heidi feels the same way about Shane that I'd only bet on something I'd never want to lose."

*

Shane glanced around the bleachers lining both sides of the basketball court, trying to find an open seat. He felt uncomfortable among the throngs of eager parents, aware that he didn't quite fit into their world. "Come on, Kenny!" a man nearby yelled through cupped hands. "Show 'em what you're made of!"

Spotting a seat near the back of the bleachers, Shane wound his way through the other spectators as they craned their necks to see around him and onto the court. Once he settled in, Shane stared around in interest. So this is what it's like to be a parent, he thought as the woman in front of him cheered and jumped up and down as her son, who had just made a shot, threw her an embarrassed look before quickly jogging away.

Scanning the crowd of middle schoolers, Shane spied Zachary's mop of red hair bobbing up and down on the other side of the court as he jumped in the air, waving his hands around for the ball. Holding his breath anxiously, Shane watched as a teammate passed the ball to Zachary, who took careful aim and lobbed it through the hoop. "Yes!" Shane whispered, pumping his fist in the air

discreetly.

The gray haired man sitting next to him winked. "That your boy?"

"A friend's son," he replied amicably. "I've been helping him prepare for tryouts."

"Is that so?" the man asked, his eyes fixated on the game. "I've been doing the same for my son." He pointed to a short boy with black hair dribbling the ball down the court. "Paid a fortune to send him to basketball camp over the summer, but it was worth it. Future scholarships and all."

"Hum," Shane offered vaguely.

"So did you hire a coach to train him? How long has he been preparing? Word on the street is that this league is pegged to win the state championship this year."

Shane was saved from responding when he spotted Heidi worming her way through the crowd self-consciously. "Excuse me. Sorry," He heard her say as she stepped around a couple screaming at their flustered-looking son. Shane waved his hand in the air; when she spotted him, she smiled gratefully. "Thanks," she said, plopping down beside him and shoving her bag under the bleachers. "I got held up at work. Did I miss anything?" As she turned her head to squint at the court, Shane caught an intoxicating whiff of her flowery shampoo.

"Zachary's doing great," he said, leaning away from her. The man next to him winked knowingly, but Shane did his best to ignore him. "He already made a couple of baskets."

"Look, there he is!" she cried as Zachary weaved his way through his opponents, dribbling the ball confidently. When he raised his arms in the air and aimed for the hoop, Heidi reached out and clutched Shane's hand, then buried her face in his shoulder. "I can't watch," she groaned. "I'm so nervous!"

Shane gave a shaky laugh and patted her arm, tossing the man beside him, who was now leering at Heidi, a filthy glare. "Don't be," he said, and Heidi raised her head an inch. "He just made the shot!" He raised his hand in the air, and Heidi high-fived him enthusiastically.

"I can't help it," she said. "This means so much to him. I don't even want to think about what's going to happen if he doesn't make the team. All the progress I've made with him over the last couple of months will be undone."

"I don't think you have to worry about that," Shane said confidently. "He's doing great." The gray haired man snorted. "Can I help you with something?" Shane asked.

"You obviously don't know much about basketball," the man said smugly.

Shane opened his mouth to retort, but Heidi tugged on his arm excitedly before he could think of a good response. "Look! They're done." She craned her

neck and watched as the coach beckoned the boys forward and into a huddle. “What do you think they’re doing?”

“I don’t know.” Shane shrugged. “Are they announcing the team today?”

Before Heidi could respond, the coach broke away from the gaggle of eager players and addressed the parents in a booming voice. “I know you’re all waiting to find out who made the team,” he called. Shane glanced around the gym; it was so quiet, you could hear a pin drop. “Give me a half hour, and I’ll post my decision.” He nodded briskly and breezed out of the room, clutching his clipboard to his chest.

Heidi turned toward Shane with a wide smile; he felt his stomach flutter uncomfortably. Why, he thought in despair, did she have to be so pretty? “What do you think?” she asked. “Did he make the team?”

“I think so,” Shane said, standing up and stretching. He rubbed his lower back and winced; those bleachers weren’t as easy to sit on as they used to be, he thought. “He did as well as he could have, so I’m happy.”

“What are you doing after this?” Heidi asked so abruptly that Shane almost tripped and toppled over the lady sitting in front of him. He stared at her; was she about to ask him on a date? He hadn’t even had a chance to woo her yet, as Maribel had put it.

“Nothing, why?” He tried hard to arrange his features into a nonchalant expression, but inside his heart was pounding wildly.

“Zachary and I have a little surprise for you,” she said with a wink. “But first you’ll have to come home with me. Is that okay?”

Shane swallowed hard and nodded mutely. He would go anywhere Heidi asked him to.

CHAPTER 8

“You didn’t need to go to all of this trouble,” Shane said as he stood up to clear the plates from the table. Heidi started to rise from her chair, but he held out a hand to stop her. “Please, let me. It’s the least I can do.” He winked at Zachary, who grinned back and shoveled another spoonful of celebration cake into his mouth.

After forty-five heart pounding minutes, the basketball coach had returned from his office and posted the results of the tryouts to the gym door. Heidi had been afraid to join the crowd standing on their tiptoes to read the scrap of paper, but Shane leapt down the bleachers two at a time. She watched from a distance as he pushed through the parents and players until he found Zachary. They disappeared into the crowd as she craned her neck anxiously, crossing her fingers and praying that they would emerge victorious. When she saw them next, their arms wrapped around each other and grins as big as the state of California on their faces, she could feel tears of joy spilling onto her cheeks. This, she knew, was going to be a defining moment in her son’s life.

Back at the house, Heidi and Zachary had surprised Shane with a delicious steak dinner. “But I’m not the one who made the team,” he said with a grin when he saw the lavish buffet she had spent all day preparing for him. “Shouldn’t we be having burgers or whatever Zachary’s favorite food is?”

“Trust me,” Heidi said with a laugh. “He won’t be starved for attention. I already promised him a new video game. We’re going to pick it out tomorrow.” She turned to Shane with a serious expression on her face and touched his arm lightly with her hand; her fingers tingled as they met his skin. “We wanted to do this as a small token of our appreciation. You’ve been amazing.”

Shane ducked his head and blushed. “It was nothing,” he mumbled.

Heidi gazed at him, her pulse quickening when her eyes met his. “It was more than you’ll ever know,” she whispered. She longed to stroke his soft brown hair, entwine her fingers through its subtle waves, but she clenched her hands self-consciously to stop herself. No, she thought firmly. She no longer had the right to fantasize about him, not when she had shut him down so completely.

But standing next to him, closer than they had been in weeks, was weakening her resolve. She desperately wished that Zachary would find another way to occupy himself, but she saw with a sigh that he was heaping another scoop of cake onto his plate. Heidi opened her mouth to stop him, then closed it again. It

was, after all, a celebration. A little too much sugar wouldn't hurt.

An hour later, after Zachary's sugar rush had melted away to sleepy silence, Heidi quietly congratulated herself for her foresight. "Off to bed for you, young man," she announced, clapping her hands together. Zachary dragged himself up from the table and wrapped his arms around her neck. She gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Goodnight, my love."

"Night," he mumbled. "Goodnight, Shane."

"Night buddy," Shane said, fingering the stem of his wine glass. She saw his eyes roam to the clock on the wall. He opened his mouth and Heidi, fearing that he was preparing to leave, thought fast.

"Have time for one more drink?" she asked hopefully. Now that Zachary was in bed, Heidi craved a little bit of time alone with Shane. She told herself that it would be nice to relax and have an adult conversation for a change, but part of her couldn't help but wonder if the combination of wine and alone time might just spark something between them. It wouldn't hurt to have just a little bit of fun, she thought as she watched Shane mull over her offer. What her son didn't know would never harm him, and maybe it could help get Shane out of her system, once and for all.

"I could stay a little longer," he said, and her heart soared. "That is, if I'm not imposing on you."

"Not at all." She uncorked a new bottle of wine and filled both glasses to the brim. When Shane widened his eyes, she giggled. "It's a celebration," she said flirtatiously. "I never do this kind of stuff."

"Me neither." Shane carried his glass of wine to the couch and set it down carefully on Heidi's coffee table. "It's nice to loosen up every so often."

Heidi joined him on the couch, which was so small that their knees touched. A rush of electricity surged through her body. "I would think that it's all fun and games for you and the other officers when you're not on duty."

To her disappointment, Shane shifted his legs ever so slightly so that their bodies no longer touched. "It used to be, but I don't have much time for that anymore."

"Why not?"

Shane hesitated, and Heidi saw something dark flash behind his eyes. "I was in an accident a few years ago and, well, it changed me. I went into a funk for a long time, and I'm just now starting to come out of it." He took a long sip of his wine; Heidi was mesmerized by the way it stained his lips slightly purple.

"What kind of accident?" she asked, tearing her eyes away from his face.

"A car crash. I was the driver."

Heidi's blood ran cold. What a coincidence, she thought, that they were

connected by tragedy. “That’s how my husband was killed.”

Shane stared hard at her, then covered his hand with hers. “I’m sorry,” he said simply.

“It’s okay,” Heidi said, waving her hand. “Actually, it’s not okay, but it was a long time ago. Not something I really want to think about tonight.”

Shane nodded as if he understood, which, she realized with a jolt, he probably did. He cleared his throat, then gave her hand a squeeze and released it. “Do you have any family around here?”

“No,” Heidi said. “I grew up in Santa Ynez as an only child and moved back here after college to raise Zachary around my parents. They died one after the other when he was just a toddler. We’re basically alone now. I have a couple of friends at work, but the friends I had before the accident drifted away.” She tilted her glass slightly, entranced at the way the light hit the liquid. “I think they were a little afraid to be around me,” she admitted. “Like my tragedy could somehow rub off on them.”

“Believe me,” Shane said, “I get that. I lost a lot of friends after my accident, and I’m just now starting to come out of my shell again. Helped along by several years of therapy.” He laughed hollowly. “But I’m fortunate enough to have a big, loving family to lean on.” He paused uncertainly, as though worried he would upset her.

“It’s okay,” Heidi said. “I always wished for a bigger family, so it’s nice to hear about what it’s like for other people. How many brothers and sisters do you have?”

“There are eight of us. Four boys and four girls.”

Heidi was shocked, lost in unpleasant thoughts of what it must feel like to give birth eight separate times. The pain of labor was something that she would never forget. She and John used to talk about having more children, someday. It was one of the things that hurt most about his death; how Heidi wished now that someday had come a lot sooner. “Your mother must be a saint.”

Shane grinned. “It’s kind of funny, actually. She just always wanted an even number of boys and girls, and it didn’t work out that way until there were eight of us. I shudder to think what would have happened if the eighth baby had been a boy.”

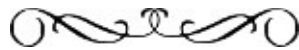
Heidi smiled wistfully, and the two of them lapsed into comfortable silence broken only occasionally by the distant creaking sound of Zachary’s bed. Heidi leaned her head against the back of the couch and gazed up at the ceiling. It felt good, she thought, sitting here with Shane. Actually, it felt better than good. It was like she was in the process of waking up from a deep sleep that began the day she had been forced to say goodbye to John.

She listened to the sound of Shane's breath rise and fall, and imagined what it would be like to lay her head on his chest and hear the steady, soothing beat of his heart. Heidi gazed at Shane from the corner of her eye; he looked deeply relaxed, his eyes half-closed alluringly and his lips parted slightly. At that moment, she wanted nothing more than to gently run her finger along the bottom of his lip.

Shifting her body slightly to the left, she inched her head along the back of the couch until it was resting against Shane's shoulder. She felt a sharp intake of breath, and knew that she had taken him by surprise. Heidi rose her head up to meet Shane's gaze, certain that this was the moment that they had been leading up to since the first day she laid eyes on him.

But when she leaned in and began to pucker her lips, she felt Shane recoil slightly. When she opened her eyes, she found him staring at her with a startling mixture of disappointment and annoyance on his face. Carefully, he set down his wine glass and gently disentangled himself from her body. As she watched in disbelief, he rose from the couch, and after one last longing look, headed for the front door.

"It's time for me to go."



Shane breathed a sigh of relief when he reached his car, scrambling inside and locking the door firmly behind him before he lost what little willpower he had left. That, he thought, was a close call. At any other time he would have jumped at the chance to kiss Heidi, but after his conversation with Maribel he knew that it was far more important for him to wait for the right moment. And tonight wasn't the right time, no matter how much he wanted it to be. The last thing he wanted was for something to happen, only to have Heidi bitterly regret it later.

When they kissed, Shane wanted it to be the start of something great.

CHAPTER 9

Heidi's eyes popped open as the sunlight peeking through the curtains played across her face. She sat up quickly, but immediately regretted it. "Damn it," she said out loud, massaging her temples. It felt like her entire head was about to split open at any moment.

She stared around the room with bleary eyes, the events of the previous night slowly working their way through her brain. There had been wine, that much she remembered. Some came before Shane had left so abruptly, but most of it Heidi drank afterwards, the sting of his rejection burning her stomach like acid. Not for the first time, she felt like a fool in Shane's presence. What kind of hold did that man have over her?

A clattering sound in the kitchen roused her from the bed, and she found Zachary standing over the frying pan mixing what appeared to be an entire canister of salt into a slightly burned pile of scrambled eggs. "I made breakfast," he said sheepishly.

Heidi pulled her son into a tight hug, breathing in the scent of his shampoo. "Thank you. It smells wonderful." She glanced at the clock and groaned. "I overslept. The bus is supposed to be here in five minutes." Her voice softened when she caught a whiff of eggs in the air. "You know what? Let's eat breakfast together. I'll drive you in on my way to work." Zachary grinned at her and shoveled a pile of eggs onto her plate, then watched anxiously as she took her first bite. "Delicious," she said, and meant it.

Zachary gobbled down his eggs in less time than it took Heidi to pour herself a glass of water, then kept her company while she swallowed a couple of ibuprofen. "Are you sick?"

"No, just tired." Heidi wasn't about to go into the effects of overindulging in alcohol with her ten year old son, although she was perfectly aware that the time for that particular conversation wasn't too far away. She had already endured an excruciating discussion with him just last year on the birds and the bees, her forehead slick with sweat as he listened with bugged-out eyes. It was one of those moments when Heidi acutely felt the absence of a man in her life. She would have gladly passed that task on to someone else.

After finishing her breakfast, she hurried to the bedroom to change while Zachary shoved his books and homework into his backpack. "Go outside and wait for me," she called while she rummaged through the pile of clean laundry

she had neglected to fold in search of her scrubs. She finally located a rather wrinkled set, and dressed as quickly as she could.

As she was adding a dab of makeup to her pale cheeks, Zachary's voice floated in from outside. "Mom! There's something on the porch."

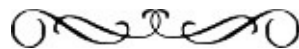
The last time Zachary had said those very same words, she remembered, was when her neighbor's cat had left a particularly unpleasant gift on their sidewalk. Heidi had donned a pair of latex gloves and cleaned up the dead bunny while Zachary hovered over her shoulder, trying his best not to cry.

Grabbing the box of latex gloves and a garbage bag, she rushed to the front door. "I don't have time for this right now," she said grumpily. "Was it Sprinkles again? I swear to God if I find that cat lurking around here one more time..." She pushed open the door and looked around. "Well? Where is it?" Zachary pointed to the ground below the stairs, just out of her sight.

Steeling herself for the mess, she stepped down tentatively and pinched her nose closed with her fingers. Zachary cocked his head and stared at her with a puzzled expression. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" she snapped, then stopped short when she saw what her son was pointing to.

It was a single long-stemmed red rose.



"What are you smiling about?" Jaime asked, hitching her purse over her shoulder and peering at Shane suspiciously.

"What are you doing here?" Shane gave a start and gazed around the foyer of the police station. He was supposed to be manning the front desk, as usual, but instead was staring into space with a smile on his face. By now, Heidi would have found the surprise he left for her. He hadn't left a card or any indication who it was from, but Shane decided to hedge his bets that Heidi didn't have more than one eager suitor. At least, he certainly hoped not.

"I was in the neighborhood having a breakfast meeting with one of my authors, so I thought I'd stop by and say hello." She gazed around the room with a confused look on her face. "Who were you smiling at?"

"No one." Shane grinned, and his sister's expression changed to one of alarm.

"Are you okay?" She stuck out a hand to feel his forehead, and he knocked it away impatiently.

"I'm fine. Just thinking about something, that's all."

"Something, or someone?" Jaime dragged one of the plastic chairs across the floor, ignoring the curious stares of the officers passing through, and sat down

directly in front of Shane. “Tell me everything.”

“There’s nothing to tell.” Shane tried to arrange his face into a more casual expression, but Jaime wasn’t easily tricked. She crossed her legs and raised her eyebrows at him. “Fine. I was thinking about a woman I met. But I’m not saying anything about her yet, because I don’t want to jinx it. Are you happy now?”

“Not really. When do we get to meet this mystery lady?” Jaime’s blue eyes, so like his own, shone with excitement. “Mom’s going to flip out when she finds out you’re finally dating again. I’m pretty sure she’s been praying every night for a nice girl to fall out of the sky and directly into your lap.”

“I’m not dating anyone,” Shane said stubbornly. “And please, for the love of God, don’t mention anything to Mom. You know she’ll just ask a million questions.”

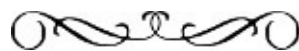
Jaime drew a cross over her heart. “I won’t, I swear.”

“Good. Now what about you? Now that you know about my love life, I’d like to know a little something about yours.”

Shane thought he saw a shadow flit across Jaime’s face, but a moment later it was gone. Before he could ask her anything else, she stood up and flashed him a smile that didn’t quite meet her eyes. “I gotta run. I have another meeting in a few minutes. I’ll see you soon, okay?”

His eyes following his sister’s back as she hurried to her car, Shane wondered whether there was something she wasn’t telling him. Jaime was a great girl; she had looks, personality, and brains. Any guy would be lucky to have her, but as far as he knew, she hadn’t dated anyone since college, and even then it wasn’t serious. When Jaime taught for a year at an English-speaking university in Rome, their mother wondered aloud incessantly whether she would bring home a “nice Italian boy,” as she put it. To her disappointment, Jaime had returned home empty-handed, brushing off any questions that didn’t relate to her work.

But, Shane thought, he didn’t have the time to ponder over his younger sister’s love life. He had to worry about his own first. He slid his cell phone out from his pocket and glanced at the screen, hoping to find a missed call or a text from Heidi, but there were no new messages. That’s okay, he thought with a grin. He had waited this long. A few more hours couldn’t hurt.



“Tell me again why you’re mad?” Josie stared at Heidi, who was pacing around the nurses’ station in agitation. “If a guy left an anonymous rose on my doorstep, I’d be putty in his hands. Even if he was old and bald.”

“Because he practically ran out of the house last night instead of kissing me.

Talk about humiliating.”

“But you just told me you rejected him first!”

Heidi waved Josie’s words away irritably; as far as she was concerned, that was a minor technicality. She was furious at Shane Kensington. Who did he think he was, she fumed, playing with her emotions like that? First, he wanted to take her out on a date. Then, he didn’t want to kiss her. Now, he was acting like some kind of sappy lead actor in a romantic movie, leaving a rose by her front door as an apology. Well she wasn’t going to stand for that. Did he take her for some kind of sucker?

She glared at the rose, sitting innocently in a paper cup filled with water. When she first found it, she had been touched at the sweet gesture, even bringing it into work to show it off to her fellow nurses. But after having a chance to think it over, she decided that it was a pity present, a little token to make up for that fact that he had humiliated her. And Heidi wasn’t someone to be pitied.

Josie stroked one of the petals of the rose, which was beginning to bloom spectacularly. Heidi threw it another dirty look and flounced away from the station, eager to get back to the chaos of the emergency room. At least then her thoughts wouldn’t be on Shane, and how upset she was with him.

When she pushed through the heavy double doors leading to the emergency room, she was greeted with even more noise than usual. Nurses scurried this way and that, pushing trays filled with medical supplies. Dr. Conway stood in the middle of the hallway, barking orders at anyone who could hear him. Heidi rushed to his side. “What’s going on?”

“We’ve got two shooting victims. A couple of police officers. Someone ambushed them during a routine disturbance call.”

Heidi’s blood froze. “What are their names?” she asked faintly.

“I don’t know yet,” the doctor said curtly. “We’ve got to get them into surgery immediately.”

As he jogged away from her, his white coat billowing behind him, Heidi noticed a hum of activity centered around one of the examining rooms. After taking a few deep, calming breaths, she walked slowly toward it, clutching her clipboard to her chest in fear. If it was Shane lying in there...no, she didn’t want to think about that.

She pushed passed the crowd of nurses, and after closing her eyes tightly and whispering a silent prayer, she stared down at the faces of the two officers, lying side by side on identical stretchers. Heidi gasped; their sickeningly pale faces were covered with bright red blood, and they both appeared to be unconscious. Though their faces were swollen almost beyond recognition, Heidi could tell from their fair hair that neither of them was Shane. Her body was shaking with

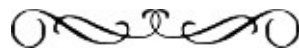
relief. “What happened?” she whispered to Josie, who had now appeared at her side.

“Shot and then beat in the head with the butt of the gun, from what I heard.”

Heidi gazed down at them in horror. Her father had been an accountant in a long line of accountants, so she never gave a second thought to what it would be like to feel the pulsating terror that came with knowing that someone she cared about was out on the street, risking his or her life every single day. She had spent many sleepless nights worrying about John, who had enjoyed a relatively safe career as a local fisherman.

Josie leaned in toward Heidi. “Their wives are in the waiting room. Do you want to go and talk to them?” Taking a step back, Heidi shook her head emphatically. “I can’t. There’s no way. I have no idea what to say.”

Josie squeezed Heidi’s hand in understanding. “It’s okay,” she said. “I’ll go.”



Shane slumped in his chair, watching the pale, drawn faces of the other officers. They were gathered in the conference room, waiting for Chief Palen to come in and brief them on the situation. There were a lot of rumors flying around, and Shane wasn’t sure what to believe. All he knew was that Nick, the rookie cop who brought Zachary in, and his partner Kevin had been badly injured in an ambush. Next to Shane, Buddy drummed his fingers against the table in agitation. “What’s taking so long?” he growled under his breath.

The door to the conference room swung open and an uneasy hush hung over the room. Chief Palen, looking much older than he had the last time Shane saw him this close, pulled out a chair at the head of the table and sat down heavily. All eyes were on him as he opened his mouth to speak.

“I’m not going to sugarcoat this, because you officers deserve to know the truth. Nick and Kevin are in critical condition at Saint Andrew’s Hospital, and their families have been notified.” He swallowed. “We haven’t received the reports yet from the hospital, but I spoke to one of the doctors and he seems optimistic that they’ll both have a chance at a full recovery.” The officers gathered around the table began to cheer, but Palen held up his hand for silence.

“The more pressing issue,” he continued once the room had quieted down, “is that the person or persons responsible for this is on the loose. Now, we don’t know if this was a one-time deal, or if this guy’s got some kind of grudge he’s holding. If it’s the latter, he’s extremely dangerous. I’m going to need all of you to be on your guard at all times.” As the officers sat, stony-faced, Chief Palen went over a few more details before dismissing them.

“Kensington.” As Shane got up to leave, Palen put a hand on his arm to stop him. “Can I talk to you for a minute?” He waited until everyone had filed out of the room, still muttering under their breath about the shootings of their fellow officers. When the last man exited, Palen crossed to the other side of the room to close the door, then leaned against it, observing Shane with a serious expression on his face.

“Now that Nick and Kevin are down for the count for the time being, I’m short two officers.” Shane, understanding where the conversation was headed, raised his chin and looked Chief Palen squarely in the eye. “Now I’ve been watching you for the past couple of months, as promised, and I’ve seen a change in you. You’re more involved, less mopey. A good sign. But I don’t want to rush you, so I have to ask: do you think you’re ready to get back in the cruiser?”

“Yes, sir.” Shane’s heart leapt in his chest at the thought of being relieved from front desk duty, once and for all. “I’m most definitely ready.”

Palen nodded. “Monday, then, you’re back on the job.”

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“I’ll write up a police report, and I’ll have one of the officers stop by your house to ask you a few questions.” Shane gave a sympathetic smile to the tearful woman and her sobbing daughter, who had stopped by the station to report that they believed their toy poodle had been stolen from their backyard. “Most lost dogs find their way home,” he reassured them. “You’ve had him microchipped and he’s wearing his collar with identification tags, so that’s a good start.” The little girl gave an almighty sniff, and dragging her stuffed bear by the arm, followed her mother from the station.

As Shane watched them leave, memories of his own lost dog flooded his mind. Kenny, their miniature schnauzer, had run away from home one stormy spring evening. Though the family searched high and low for their little dog, they were never able to find him. His sister Holly, who had been barely out of diapers at the time, had been particularly affected by the dog’s loss, which was one of the things that had prompted her to choose a career as a veterinarian. Holly had been an animal lover for as long as Shane could remember, regularly bringing home injured birds and squirrels and nursing them back to life on the kitchen table, much to his mother’s horror.

Shane tapped his fingers against the counter of the front desk, his eyes roaming to the line of cruisers parked outside. Now that he knew he would finally be back in action next week, he was more eager than ever to escape the confines of desk duty. He knew that Chief Palen was relying on him to be at the

top of his game, and Shane was more than ready to show Palen what he was made of.

As he was staring vacantly out of the window, imagining what it would feel like to receive his first call from the dispatcher, a familiar station wagon careened into the parking lot. Shane's hands immediately flew to his hair, which he smoothed self-consciously. Here she was, he thought with a smile.

His smile immediately turned to a frown when he realized that she was storming into the station with a determined look on her face. Not exactly the reaction he had hoped for, or had been imagining all day. Shane thought that at the very least, Heidi would leap across the room and jump into his arms. Like something out of a romance novel.

He smiled tentatively at her when she pushed open the front door. When she spotted him standing behind the desk, she marched right up to it and spread her hands on the counter. Shane opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, not entirely sure what to say at a time like this. "Hi," he offered weakly, then took a step back as she continued to glare at him. She looked, he thought, rather dangerous. It was kind of a turn on.

"Hi?" she hissed between gritted teeth. "Is that all you have to say to me? Hi?"

Shane thought fast; clearly, Heidi was expecting a different reaction, but for the life of him he had no idea what it was. "Um, how are you?"

She stared at him in disbelief. "You have no idea what you did, do you?"

Finally, Shane thought with relief, a question he could answer. "I gave you a rose!" he said triumphantly.

For a moment, he thought Heidi was going to burst out laughing, but she quickly rearranged her features into what she apparently believed to be a menacing grimace. She opened her mouth to speak, then stopped, clearly at a loss for words. She threw him a puzzled look. "You really don't know what you did?" Shane noticed that her voice had softened slightly. A good sign.

"I guess not," he said. "I thought I did something nice, but since you are so obviously angry with me I must be mistaken. Tell you what." Shane checked his watch. "I'm going to be done here in fifteen minutes. Why don't you let me take you out for a coffee, and we can talk about what I did."

Heidi looked taken aback, then regarded him suspiciously. "This isn't a date, is it?"

Shane held his hands up in mock defense. "I wouldn't even dream of it."

CHAPTER 10

This man is a smooth talker, Heidi thought irritably as she followed him into the coffee shop a block down the road from the police station. Once the shock of seeing those injured police officers had worn off, along with her relief that Shane wasn't one of them, Heidi had resumed being angry at him. And rightfully so, she thought, her eyes on his back as he stepped into the line of customers waiting to order their drinks. "What'll you have?" he asked her, a playful gleam in his eyes.

"A hot chocolate." She glanced around the room for an open table. She found one way in the back of the shop, a little round bistro table with two spindly chairs. It was a tad too cozy for her liking, but she would rather not have to stand outside in the cold. She made her way over and dropped her purse on the floor before settling onto one of the chairs.

Shane joined her a short while later, setting down one of the paper cups in front of her. "I hope you like whipped cream."

"It's fine. Thanks," she added grudgingly, then blew on the top of the cup for something to do. Anything to avoid looking too closely at Shane; once she did, Heidi was perfectly aware that her last ounce of resolve would melt away.

Shane settled into his chair, then observed her with bright eyes. "Please. Tell me what I did to make you so upset so that I don't do it again."

"I shouldn't have to say it," she shot back stubbornly, and took a sip of her drink. More liquid came out than she had expected, and it was piping hot. She started choking, then quickly tried to cover it up with a hacking cough.

Shane watched her with mild interest. "Might want to let it cool off a little bit."

Damn him, she thought furiously, her cheeks burning. So Shane Kensington was one of those guys, one of those confident, cocky guys who knew the effect he had on women. Well it wasn't going to work on her. She ignored him and took another sip of her drink, careful to avoid meeting his eyes. When she glanced up, she saw that he was staring at her. "What?"

Shane shrugged. "I'm just waiting for you to tell me why you're upset."

Heidi heaved a sigh and shook her head. Where should she even begin? "I thought you were dead," she blurted out.

He looked taken aback. "You thought I was dead so you're mad at me?" He sipped his latte, then pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Seems logical."

“No,” Heidi said. This conversation wasn’t going how she imagined it. “I’m mad because of the rose.”

Shane traced his finger along the rim of his cup. “I’m sorry if that was being too forward,” he said. “I was trying to do something romantic, like Maribel said.”

Now it was Heidi’s turn to be confused. “Who is Maribel?”

“My partner Buddy’s wife. She told me that I needed to woo you.” He glanced up at Heidi with a pained expression on his face. “Clearly, you aren’t interested in being wooed. At least not by me.” He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I’ve been out of the dating world for a long time now and I’m not quite sure what to do anymore. When you turned me down, I was going to back off, but then Maribel convinced me that I just didn’t try hard enough.”

Despite her annoyance, Heidi was touched that he had gone to such lengths to try and impress her. “It’s not that I’m not interested in you. I just can’t date you.”

Shane nodded his head. “I understand.”

“No, I don’t think you do, but that’s not your fault. I should have been a lot clearer when you asked me out, but I was taken by surprised and didn’t know what to say.” Heidi drew in a breath before continuing. “I can’t date you because it would upset my son. It has nothing to do with my feelings for you.” She described the heartbreaking conversation she had with Zachary after they had returned home from the hospital while Shane listened intently.

When she had finished, he was quiet for a few moments, lost in thought. “Can I ask you something?” Heidi nodded uncertainly, unsure of where the conversation was headed. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Where do your feelings come into consideration?”

Color filled Heidi’s cheeks. “Look, you’re not a parent, so you don’t understand. My son comes above everything, including myself. The last thing I want him to think, especially now when he’s so vulnerable, is that I’m in any way trying to replace his father with someone else.”

Shane sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. “I get that,” he said. “But what happens five, ten, fifteen years down the road? Zachary’s off doing his own thing, and you’re alone. Aren’t you going to regret it?”

Heidi drained her cup and tossed it into the garbage can, then stood up and swung her purse over her shoulder. “I’ll cross that bridge when I get there.” Then, without a backward glance, she hurried out of the coffee shop, trying to get as far away from Shane as possible.

Later that night, alone in her bedroom, Heidi replayed her conversation with Shane over and over again in her head. She had been so flustered that she had neglected to tell him why she was even upset about the rose, which was the whole reason she had stormed down to the station that day. Now, she was no closer to understanding why he had rejected her advances. Heidi decided to put that particular problem out of her mind for the time being; she had far too many other things to think about.

She laid her head back against her pillow and closed her eyes, willing sleep to come. Heidi had spent far too many restless nights since Shane had come into her life, and tonight, she realized, would be no exception. She couldn't shake his last words to her from her mind; images of her, old and alone, kept creeping into her brain. He was right, of course, and she knew that perfectly well. More than anything, she feared having to be alone, forced to watch life pass by from the sidelines, never fully able to participate.

Leaning across her bed toward her nightstand, she picked up the framed photo of her and John on their wedding day. The sun had broken through the clouds just long enough for their photographer to snap some spectacular pictures against a backdrop of the famous rolling green hills of Santa Ynez. This particular shot was taken during the magic hour, right before the sun set, and the two of them were bathed in a warm golden-red light as they stood with their arms wrapped around each other, the smiles on their faces holding the promise of a long and happy future.

"What am I supposed to do, John?" she asked the photo, pressing it against her chest and allowing the tears to fall hard and fast on her pillow. "I'm lost." She sat like that for a long time, rocking back and forth and feeling sorry for herself, for Zachary, and for John. Life had been brutally unkind to her little family, that much was certain. But time had marched on nonetheless, and whether she and Zachary liked it or not, they had to pick up the pieces and move on.

It had already been happening, slowly but surely. Heidi remembered, not long after the accident, meeting with a lawyer to discuss her options for suing the driver of the other car. She had marched into the office with swollen eyes and ice in her heart, resolved to make that person pay for what he did to her. For ruining the lives of three people.

The lawyer had been sympathetic, but determined. "I believe we can collect a large settlement," he had said, shuffling through a pile of papers on his desk. "The man who did this..."

"Stop," Heidi had croaked, holding up her hand. "Please don't speak his name. I have no interest in knowing who this monster was. It won't bring my

husband back.”

The lawyer nodded. “Fair enough. So this man was clearly the responsible party and, like I was saying, we should be able to sue for a considerable sum. Enough to keep you and your son afloat for a very long time, if you manage it wisely.”

“Tell me,” Heidi said, covering her hands with her face. “What caused the accident? Drugs, drinking, talking on a cell phone? Why did the car veer into our lane and crash into us?”

The lawyer pressed his fingertips against the edge of his desk. “It’s my understanding that the driver fell asleep at the wheel and lost control of the car.”

Heidi’s mouth dropped open. That was not at all what she had expected to hear. She came to the lawyer’s office fully intending to crucify the person who had stolen everything from her. But this? It all seemed so human, something that could easily have happened to her, or to John, or to anyone else. How many times had Heidi herself sat behind the wheel after being up all night, nursing Zachary as a baby or cooling his fevered forehead with a wet towel when he had the flu?

She sat there for a long time, staring at her hands. “Mrs. Griffin?” the lawyer finally asked into the silence. “Are you okay? I know this must be very difficult to hear.”

Heidi wiped a few tears from her eyes and pushed the stack of legal documents the lawyer had set in front of her across the desk. “I can’t do this,” she whispered.

“Sorry?”

“It was a mistake, and ruining this man’s life isn’t going to bring John back. I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to sue.”

The lawyer stared at Heidi in disbelief. “You realize that you’re giving up a financially comfortable future for you and your son by doing this, right?”

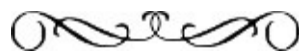
Heidi nodded as she gathered up her things and prepared to leave the office. “I know, but I have to learn now how to make it on my own. There’s no one for me to rely on but me. I’m sure the person who caused the accident is going to be haunted by what he did for the rest of his life, and I’m willing to bet that’s punishment enough.”

That very same night, clutching a half-empty bottle of wine and rolling John’s wedding ring around in her palm, Heidi had made the decision to go back to school and become a nurse. Shortly afterwards, she emptied her bank account of the few thousand dollars that she and John had managed to set aside for a down payment on a house of their own and used it to pay for the first year of her tuition.

Now, three years later, Heidi was amazed at how far she had come. Sure, things had been rough at first, living in a tiny one bedroom apartment and existing on peanut butter sandwiches, but now she had a house, a career, and a stable, if somewhat lonely, life. At this point, what more could she ask for?

But she knew, deep down inside, that something was missing. She hadn't really realized what it was until the day when she first crossed paths with Shane. Now, she knew with every aching fiber of her soul what that something was: love.

She thought back to the grief-stricken, panicked look that filled her son's eyes when he had asked, after watching her and Shane together, whether Shane was going to take his father's place. Rather than making a snap decision to close off her heart to protect her son, she should have taken that opportunity to have an open, honest conversation with Zachary about their future. A future that could include Shane, if he'd still have her.



As he stuck his hand out of the window to let the breeze blow through his fingers, Shane sighed happily. Being back in the squad car was better than he had even imagined. From the passenger seat came the sound of Buddy's whistling filling the car; Shane soon joined in on the familiar tune.

When they finished, Shane met Buddy's eyes and they grinned at each other. "I can't tell you how happy I am to be partners with you again, man," Buddy said, clapping Shane on the shoulder. "I gotta say, you're a changed man lately. Things going well with that lady friend of yours?" He winked mischievously.

"Nope," Shane replied in a cheerful tone. "Things are going pretty terribly, actually." He gave Buddy a quick rundown of his disastrous coffee date with Heidi.

When he finished, Buddy shook his head sympathetically. "Then why are you so happy?"

"Because, as you so aptly put it, I'm finally starting to get back to the land of the living. Putting the accident behind me, trying to move on with my life. Even if things with Heidi don't work out, and right now it looks like they aren't going to, at least I know that I was able to put myself out there again. It took a lot for me to do that."

"Maribel's got a cousin you might be interested in," Buddy said, winking at Shane. "That is, if you like blond hair, red lips, and a body that'll make you want to go running to confession."

Shane shrugged, then glanced in his rearview mirror before changing lanes.

His first patrol shift was coming to an end, and it was time to steer the car back to the station. “To tell you the truth, I’m not that interested. I prefer red hair, brown eyes, and a gorgeous smile.”

Buddy shook his head. “You’ve got it bad, my friend. When you’ve changed your mind, let me know.”

That wasn’t going to happen anytime soon, Shane thought to himself as he pulled into the parking lot of the station and switched off the engine. Despite Heidi making her feelings about dating him perfectly clear, Shane still held out hope that she would change her mind. He knew that he had given her something to think about, and he was willing to wait around until she realized that he was right. He could only hope desperately that it wouldn’t take long for her to come around to the idea.

“You mind giving me a ride home?” Buddy asked as they got out of the car and stretched their stiff legs. “Maribel’s got my car since hers is in the shop.”

“Sure, no problem,” Shane replied. “Just let me grab my coat from inside and I’ll be right out.” When he emerged from the station a few minutes later, Shane spotted Buddy standing beside his car with a strange grin on his face. “What’s going on?” Shane asked as he approached the car.

“You have a secret admirer,” Buddy said, pointing to the windshield.

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“What’s this?” Shane asked the moment Heidi opened her front door. She gave him a sly smile, and after glancing over her shoulder, stepped onto her porch and closed the door behind her. In his hands Shane grasped the single long-stemmed red rose that had been stretched out across the front window of his car, tucked underneath the windshield wipers. After he found the rose, Shane had to endure fifteen whole minutes of Buddy’s taunts before dropping him off at his house. Shane immediately turned the car around and headed to Heidi’s.

“Just a little present,” Heidi said, reaching out to stroke one of the petals.

“I have to say, Heidi, that you’re confusing the hell out of me.” Shane leaned against the porch railing and crossed his legs at the ankles. “You’re sending me all kinds of mixed signals. Is this some kind of game you’re playing? Because I’m not that kind of guy.” When Shane first spotted the rose, he had been annoyed and more than a little hurt; he felt as though Heidi was throwing his romantic gesture back in his face.

Heidi’s face fell. “I know. After we had coffee the other day, I started thinking about what you said, about me being alone for the rest of my life.” She took a deep breath. “And I don’t want that to happen. Not because I can’t stand

the thought of being by myself, but because I can't stand the thought of not giving you and me a chance. I think there might be something special here, and I don't want to pass it up."

Shane considered her words carefully. If Heidi had said this to him at any other time, he would have been ecstatic. But now, he worried about her sincerity. Shane wanted to believe that Heidi was ready to take their relationship to the next level, but he wasn't sure if she really knew what she wanted. Not that he blamed her, he thought. He couldn't imagine what it must be like to walk in her shoes. But at the same time, Shane knew enough about himself to recognize that he was in a very vulnerable place, and he didn't want to give his heart to someone who wasn't prepared to fully accept it.

Shane's face must have betrayed his inner turmoil, because when Heidi spoke next her voice was very small. "I really made a mess of things, didn't I?" She sat down on the steps leading down to her sidewalk, and circled her arms around her knees. Shane dropped down beside her and placed the rose in her lap; she lifted it to her nose and inhaled deeply. "Roses are my favorite flowers. How did you know that?"

Shane shrugged. "Lucky guess, I suppose."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, each lost in their own thoughts. Shane felt like he was being tugged in two directions, as if there was an intense battle going on between his head and his heart. He glanced over at Heidi, wanting nothing more than to reach out and smooth back the lock of hair that had fallen over her face. He knew that they were just two broken souls floundering through life. Shane couldn't fault Heidi for her actions; he knew that she was just trying to do what she thought was right for herself and her son. As he studied the delicate curve of her face, he wondered what it would have been like if they had met years ago, long before life had worn them down.

That thought still in his mind, he stood up, dusted off his pants, and hopped down the steps to the sidewalk below. Heidi watched him, a forlorn look on her face. "I guess this is it?" she asked.

Ignoring her, he bent down and offered her his hand. She took it in bewilderment. "Hi," he said. "I'm Shane Kensington. What's your name?"

"Heidi," she whispered. "Heidi Griffin."

"Heidi Griffin, I have to say that you are, without a doubt, the loveliest woman I have ever met. Would it be all right if I took you out for dinner some night?"

A slow smile spread across her face, lighting up her features in a way that took Shane's breath away. She straightened her back and held her head up to meet his eyes. "I would love nothing more."

“Great. Then it’s a date.”

CHAPTER 11

Heidi gently removed the delicate gold hoops from the bottom drawer of her jewelry box and fastened them around each ear, then stood back to admire the effect. Her father had surprised her with the earrings as a sixteenth birthday present, and Heidi couldn't even remember the last time she had any occasion to wear them. She touched the other pieces of jewelry still tucked away beneath the velvet cloth, considering whether or not to add a bracelet to her ensemble. Holding up a gold tennis bracelet studded with tiny emeralds, she wrapped it around her wrist and held it out for Josie to see. Her friend had generously offered to watch Zachary for the evening so that Heidi and Shane could have their first date.

"Pretty," Josie said, fingering the stones. "It goes really well with the color of your hair."

"John gave it to me. Do you think it's weird for me to wear it tonight?"

Josie frowned thoughtfully, considering Heidi's words. "I don't think so," she said. "You may not want to mention it to Shane in case it makes him uncomfortable. Do you feel okay wearing it?"

Heidi paused, then removed the bracelet and laid it carefully back in its box. "I don't know," she said truthfully. "Part of me still thinks of tonight as a betrayal of John, even though I know that's silly." She glanced at her nightstand, where their wedding picture still stood. Looking around to see what had caught Heidi's attention, Josie reached over and picked up the frame, holding it up to her nose to examine John's face.

"So handsome," she said.

"He was," Heidi agreed, her voice catching in her throat. She sat down on the bed beside Josie; the other woman wrapped her arm around Heidi's shoulder and pulled her close.

"You don't have to do this if you're not ready," she said.

Heidi nodded. "I know. But I think I am ready. As ready as I'll ever be, at least. This isn't one of those things that you can prepare yourself for."

"So," Josie said, clapping her hands together, "what kind of stuff does Zachary like to do? I'm not that great with kids, and I'd rather not sit around staring at each other all night long."

Heidi laughed and bent underneath the bed to retrieve a pair of high heels. "You don't have to entertain him. I just want you here to keep him out of trouble."

Although, I must say he's been great lately."

"No more running away?"

"Not even once. Ever since he made the basketball team he's been blossoming." Heidi hesitated. "Just don't tell him where I'm going tonight. I said I was getting dinner with a friend."

Josie raised her eyebrows. "You didn't tell him about Shane?"

Heidi had debated back and forth with herself all week over whether or not it would be a good idea to tell Zachary that she and Shane had a date. On the one hand, she didn't want to lie to her son. But on the other, she didn't want to upset him for no reason. For all she knew, the chemistry that had been building up between her and Shane would all come crashing down now that they were finally taking their friendship to the next level. It was no longer forbidden fruit.

In the end, she had decided to wait and see how her relationship with Shane progressed. If their first date ended up being their last, Heidi saw no reason for Zachary to be involved. A big part of her hoped, though, that tonight would be the start of a new beginning for the two of them.

Having finally located the matching shoes, Heidi straightened up and slid her feet into them, then smoothed her dress and stood in front of Josie self-consciously. "How do I look?"

Josie reached out her hand to straighten Heidi's hem, then stood back and looked her up and down. "Shane's never seen you all dressed up, has he?" Heidi shook her head. "I can tell you right now that you're going to knock his socks off."

Heidi grinned. "I hope so." She studied her reflection critically in the mirror. As a small treat to herself, she had gone to the mall that morning and picked out a formfitting strapless green dress with a matching shawl. Heidi had cringed slightly when she handed her credit card over to the cashier, but she had to admit that it felt good to splurge on herself for a change. "Hey! I don't look half bad!"

Josie laughed and pushed her out of the room. "That's putting it mildly. What time is Officer Kensington supposed to pick you up?"

Heidi blushed. "Any minute now. And please stop calling him that."

"I can't help it," Josie said. "It just sounds so sexy."

Heidi groaned and ran her fingers through her hair anxiously. "I'm already nervous enough, and you're making it worse." She heard the rumble of a car pulling into the driveway, and peered out of the small window on her front door. "He's here."

"Good luck," Josie mouthed, giving Heidi the thumbs up and disappearing back into the bedroom just as the doorbell rang. Heidi drew in a deep breath, straightened her shawl around her shoulders, and plastered what she hoped was a

confident smile on her face before pulling open the front door to greet Shane.

Silhouetted against the darkening sky, Shane looked effortlessly handsome in a pair of dark jeans, a crisp white shirt, and a charcoal blazer. He was holding two dozen red roses wrapped in delicate white paper and tied with a crimson bow, which he handed to her with a smile on his face. "For you." He brought her hand up to his mouth and brushed his lips against it lightly; her skin tingled as his breath passed over it. "You look stunning." He stepped back and raked his eyes over her body. "Wow."

Heidi blushed and accepted the roses. "Thank you. I would invite you in, but I haven't mentioned anything about tonight to Zachary yet, and I don't want him to get suspicious."

Shane frowned. "Isn't he going to know I'm here?"

Heidi set the roses down on the living room table and grabbed her purse. "I may or may not have bought him a new video game this morning. He currently is completely unaware of what's going on around him. I'm fairly certain that even a bomb exploding on our roof couldn't bring him out of his room."

Shane laughed, a deep rumbling laugh that made Heidi's hairs stand on end. He offered her his arm, which she took, and he led her outside. When they reached his car, he pulled the door open for her and waited until she had tucked her dress around her before closing it softly and crossing over to the driver's side. As he settled into his seat, he turned to her and studied her face. "I've been so looking forward to tonight," he said with sincerity.

"So have I," Heidi admitted. "Where are we going?"

Shane turned the key in the engine and winked at her. "You'll just have to wait and see."

Heidi sighed happily and leaned back against the seat. She had to admit that it felt wonderful to be taken care of again; she couldn't wait to see what Shane had planned for their date. Enjoying the comfortable silence that had settled between the two of them, she gazed out of the window as they drove through the winding hills, every now and then passing a quaint farmhouse surrounded by acres and acres of bright green grass that stretched as far as the eye could see. These days, Heidi rarely had a chance to enjoy the beautiful Santa Ynez countryside; her schedule was always jam-packed with a to-do list that never quite seemed to be finished.

Before long, Shane exited the highway and navigated the car onto a wide dirt road that led up a steep hill. At the end of the road, Heidi could make out the shadow outline of a building. "I hope you like Italian food," Shane said, reaching across the seat and resting his hand gently on Heidi's.

"That sounds amazing," she murmured. "Is this a restaurant?" As they

approached the building, Heidi realized that it was completely deserted; she twisted around to look for a parking lot, but there wasn't a car in sight.

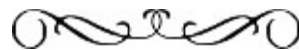
Shane smiled at her and gave her hand a squeeze, then pulled up right in front of the building, which Heidi could now see was an intimate Mediterranean style villa surrounded by lush plants that were blooming in spectacular colors. A dark haired man dressed in a tuxedo hurried toward the car and opened Heidi's door; she took the hand he offered her and stepped outside, gazing up at the dozens of strands of twinkling lights framing the doorway to the restaurant. Above the door hung an elaborate sign with Ristorante Rossi scrawled in elegant gold letters.

When the man saw Shane emerging from the car, he rushed to greet him, pulling him into a bear hug that Shane enthusiastically returned. "We haven't seen you in so long," the man said. "How are you? Cody told us you were coming."

"It's so nice to see you, Mario. I'm better than ever." He gestured toward Heidi. "This is the beautiful Heidi Griffin. I spoke to Cody about all of the details, so I'm assuming everything is in order?"

"Absolutely. Follow me and I'll take you to your table."

Shane rested his hand lightly against the small of Heidi's back, and they followed Mario through the doors and into the foyer of the restaurant. It was, Heidi thought as she gazed around at the black marble floors and arched doorways, nothing short of spectacular.



Shane's eyes were on Heidi as they walked around the front area of the restaurant, taking in the floor-to-ceiling tapestries and elegant white drapes that hung from the ceiling. He rested his hand lightly on her back, every so often stroking the soft material of her dress with his fingers. She looked stunning tonight, he thought for what must have been the twentieth time since he rang her doorbell. Her long hair was curled around her shoulders and pinned back from her face with a gold clip. Her legs were long and lean, accentuated by the dainty shoes she was wearing. And that dress. Shane could barely take his eyes away from the way it made her skin shimmer in the soft lighting.

From the back of the restaurant, Shane could see Cody grinning and giving him the thumbs up. Shane smiled back at him, then beckoned for his brother to join them in the foyer. "Heidi," he said as Cody walked toward them, straightening his white chef's coat. "I'd like you to meet my brother, Cody Kensington. He's the owner and executive chef of Ristorante Rossi." Cody, the

second Kensington boy, was a gentle giant who inherited his father's unassuming nature and his mother's sweet soul. He used to spend his weekends and summer vacations in the kitchen, watching his mother and grandmother lovingly prepare the special recipes that had been passed down through the generations. It was no surprise to any of them when Cody announced a few years ago that he planned to open an Italian restaurant, serving his mother's famous dishes to hoards of happy customers.

When Shane sat down to plan his date with Heidi, he knew that he wanted to take her somewhere intimate and romantic. He made reservations for dinner at one of the most popular vineyards in town with beautiful views of the Santa Ynez Valley, but then an idea struck him. All he needed was for Cody to be on board, and luckily, his brother had been more than happy to help.

"A pleasure to meet you," Cody said, drawing Heidi's hand to his lips. "Welcome to Ristorante Rossi. You are our special guests tonight. We've prepared a sumptuous Italian feast that I hope you will enjoy. Mario, will you please show Shane and Ms. Griffin to their table?"

As he led Heidi through the restaurant, Shane heard her draw in a breath. Cody had arranged for the restaurant to close early that evening, so Shane and Heidi were the only diners. The table, the best in the house, sat near the window overlooking the sprawling hills and valley beneath them. Shane had arranged for his sister Lana, a high-end florist, to send over a lush bouquet of exotic flowers, which glistened in the light of the votive candles flickering on the white tablecloth.

Once they were settled in their chairs, Mario spread their napkins on their laps and uncorked a bottle of red wine. "Dinner this evening will start with a hazelnut and butter lettuce salad, followed by a hand-rolled ravioli with a rich Bolognese sauce. You will finish with a light tiramisu and dessert wine selection."

"Thank you, Mario," Shane said, offering a smile to the man who had been his brother's second in command since he opened the restaurant. Mario bowed slightly and shuffled away from the table. Out of the corner of his eye, Shane could see the strolling violinist he had hired to accompany them while they ate unpacking his instrument in the front hallway.

Shane raised his wine glass; Heidi followed suit. "To our first date. I am a lucky man tonight." They drank deeply from their glasses; Shane yearned to lean across the table and lick the droplets of wine from Heidi's lips.

"I don't know what to say," Heidi said, reaching across the table to grasp his hand. "This is too much. You didn't have to go to so much trouble. I would have been happy doing anything with you."

“I wanted tonight to be special. You deserve nothing less.” He squeezed her hand and signaled to the violinist, who began to play a haunting melody. Shane couldn’t take his eyes from Heidi’s face as she watched the violinist effortlessly slide the bow across the instrument. When the song ended, she clapped enthusiastically.

Later in the evening, as they spooned up the last bites of their tiramisu, Shane marveled over how perfectly their first date had gone. They had such a natural chemistry between them that it seemed as though they had been together for a lifetime; there were no awkward moments or uncomfortable lulls in the conversation. Shane was so enchanted by Heidi that he was very sorry to see that the night was winding down.

“You never told me what an amazing chef your brother is,” Heidi remarked as she set her spoon down and dabbed her napkin at her lips. “That was the most delicious dinner I’ve ever had.”

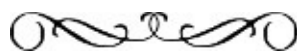
“He really outdid himself,” Shane agreed. “Cody used to hang around the kitchen all the time when our mother and grandmother were cooking, so none of us were the least bit surprised when he decided to open up his own restaurant. He’s a natural.”

“Your family sounds wonderful,” Heidi said, a wistful look in her eyes. “I always wanted to grow up in a big family, but I was an only child.”

“They’re pretty great. Hopefully some day you’ll have the chance to meet them.”

“I hope so, too,” she said sincerely. She glanced out of the window at the blackened sky, where just a hint of moonlight was peeking through the clouds. “I don’t want this night to end, Shane. It’s been like something out of a dream. For one night, I’ve had the chance to live someone else’s life. Heidi Griffin doesn’t get to do stuff like this.”

“I hope,” Shane said, reaching across the table to trail a finger down the soft skin of her cheek, “that this will be the first of many new experiences, for both of us.”



Heidi stared dreamily out of the car window on the drive home, lost in the memories of the wonderful evening she had just spent with Shane. It wasn’t even over yet, and she was already sorry that the night was coming to an end. He had been, as Heidi expected, a perfect gentleman, but the lengths he had gone to in order to make their first date special took her breath away.

Shane placed a warm hand in her lap and she covered it with her own,

amazed at how comfortable it felt to touch him. So natural, as though they had been doing it forever. As they pulled into Heidi's driveway, she glanced up at the window to Zachary's room; the curtains were drawn tightly, and no light peeked out from behind them. Shane followed Heidi's eyes to the window.

"Does he know about tonight?" he asked casually, unbuckling his seat belt. "I'd love to come in and say hello, if you think it's okay."

Heidi hesitated, not wanting to spoil the evening in any way. "I actually haven't told him about us yet." She looked at Shane with pleading eyes. "It's nothing personal; I just didn't want to upset him for no reason."

Shane nodded before walking around the car and opening Heidi's door. "It's perfectly fine," he said, offering her a hand. "I understand. You have to do what's best for him."

They walked in silence toward the front door. When they reached the porch, Heidi stopped and turned to face Shane. "Thank you again for the best evening I've had in a long time. It was wonderful."

Shane laid a light hand on her bare arm, and she shivered under the warmth of his touch. He took a tentative step closer to her, his pale eyes fixed on her own. Heidi turned her chin up, her knees shaking slightly as she realized that this would be the first time their relationship became physical; there was no going back. She wondered absurdly if nosy Josie was peering out unseen through the living room curtains. Heidi decided that she didn't really care.

Running his hands lightly down her arm, Shane took another step toward her until their noses were practically touching. Heidi could feel her heart slamming against the walls of her chest as he bent down and lightly grazed his lips against her cheek, then her jawline, and finally at the base of her neck. It was, she decided as she closed her eyes in pleasure, one of the most sensual things she had ever experienced.

He took a step back and cupped her face in his hands; Heidi could see desire stamped in every inch of his face. "Goodnight, Heidi," he whispered, then turned and walked back down the sidewalk to his car, leaving Heidi's hands trembling as she fumbled for her keys.

*

"Well?" Josie demanded when Heidi stepped through the door and kicked off her shoes with a sigh. "Where is he?"

"What do you mean?" Heidi rubbed the soles of her aching feet. It had been a long time since she last put on a pair of strappy heels, and her feet were less than happy with her. She unwrapped her shawl and draped it across an armchair, then

settled onto the couch beside her friend.

Josie winked at her coyly. "I thought he might want to come in for a little dessert, if you know what I mean."

Heidi laughed. "Hardly. Shane's not the kind of guy who hops into bed with a woman on their first date."

Josie raised her eyebrows dubiously, and then shrugged. "So, how'd it go?"

"I can't even describe it. I had the best time. How was Zachary?" Heidi cocked her head and listened for any sound of movement coming from behind his closed bedroom door. "Did he ask any questions about where I was?"

Josie stood up from the couch and stretched her arms over her head, then hunted around for her purse and keys. "He didn't come out of his room at all, actually. I tried enticing him with a movie, ice cream, a trip to play miniature golf. Nothing worked."

Heidi chewed her lip. "That doesn't sound like him, especially lately. I've never known him to turn down sweets. I better go check on him. Thanks for staying here, Josie. I really appreciate it."

"No problem." Josie opened the front door and stepped outside, wrapping her arms around her body to guard against the chill. "See you at work." She turned and disappeared into the night.

Heidi closed the door behind her and paced around the living room for a few moments, debating whether or not to check on Zachary now or wait until morning. She regretted not telling him about her date with Shane sooner; the last thing she wanted was for her son not to trust her.

She tiptoed to his bedroom door and pressed her ear against it, but was greeted by nothing but silence. "Zachary?" Heidi rapped lightly on the door with her knuckles. "Are you awake, sweetheart?" She turned the knob quietly and pushed open the door an inch, then squinted into the dark room. Panic filled her heart when she saw that her son's bed was empty.

"I'm over here," a small voice called.

Heidi whipped her head around and gave an audible sigh of relief. Zachary was sitting in a dark corner of the room, curled up in the squashy beanbag chair Heidi had given him on his last birthday. She flipped on the lights, then perched on the edge of his bed; Zachary slumped further in his chair and purposely avoided her gaze.

"Talk to me, Zachary," she whispered. He turned his head toward the wall and curled up into a ball in his chair. Heidi took a few tentative steps across the room, then kneeled down in front of him and stroked the back of his silky hair with her hand. "No one is ever going to replace your father. Not Shane, not anyone else."

A silent tear trailed down Zachary's cheek; another wobbled dangerously on the end of his nose. He gave a hearty sniff and wiped them away. Heidi could feel tears forming in her own eyes, but she struggled to control them. She needed to present a strong front to her son, to show him that it was okay that the two of them were beginning to move on with their lives.

She wrapped her arms around her son, who suddenly looked much smaller than his ten years, and drew his head to her chest. They sat there in silence, rocking back and forth together, listening to the sound of the wind outside rustling the leaves on the trees. Heidi could hear the first few droplets of rain pattering against the window, just as they did on the night of the accident. Before long, they would morph into a steady pounding, soaking the ground and stirring up that earthy smell that Heidi used to love so much.

"Why did Daddy have to die?" Zachary turned his head and looked up at her with watery, red-rimmed eyes.

Her son's question left Heidi gasping for air. "I don't know. It wasn't fair."

"Do you think he would recognize me if he saw me now?"

Heidi stroked Zachary's cheek, his skin still soft and dewy with youth. "Of course he would. You're his son, and nothing is going to change that. Nothing."

Zachary nodded and rested his head against Heidi's chest once more. They sat like that for a long time, each lost in their own thoughts. Heidi's chest was weighted down with sorrow, and conflicted thoughts chased each other through her brain. She would do anything to have John back, but the feelings she had for Shane were startlingly real. Was it possible, she wondered, to fall in love with one man while still being in love with another? She knew in her heart that John would want her to remarry, to be happy, and for the first time since the accident Heidi could picture a future where that was possible. Her date with Shane had reawakened in her something that had been dead for the past three years.

Zachary let out a soft sigh and wriggled out of her grasp, then turned and stared at her with bright eyes. "I like Shane," he whispered, reaching out and clutching her hand. "He's really nice."

"He likes you, too," Heidi said, planting a soft kiss on the little boy's head. "And I like Shane very much. He's a good man." She took a breath, preparing to ask the question that she knew would make or break her budding relationship with Shane; because, above all else, she needed to know that her son would be happy. "Is it okay with you if I continue seeing him?"

Zachary nodded his head against her chest, then was silent for a long while. When he finally spoke, he asked a question that made Heidi laugh out loud. "Do you think he'll come by and play basketball with me sometimes?"

Tears of happiness filled Heidi's eyes, and this time she didn't bother trying

to hide them. "I think he'd like that very much." She stood up and pulled Zachary to his feet, then led him by the hand to his bed. "It's late," she whispered, "and time for you to go to sleep." She reached out and tucked the covers under his chin, then padded to the bathroom and filled a cup with water for him and placed it on his nightstand. "Goodnight, sweet boy," she said, leaning down to kiss his cheek. "I love you."

"I love you, too," he mumbled, turning over and wrapping the covers tighter around him, his eyes already heavy with sleep. As Heidi crossed the room and reached out her hand to switch off the light, she caught sight of John's photo, which Zachary kept on the bookshelf across from his bed, smiling down on his son while he slept. Watching over him, protecting him. With one last look at John's face, Heidi switched off the light, closed the door softly, and tiptoed from the room.

CHAPTER 12

“Well?” Cody asked, sidling up to Shane as they stood in front of the television set in their parents’ living room, cheering on Joshua, who was in the middle of pitching a no-hitter against the Diamondbacks. Joshua, the athlete of the family, now spent his days as a pitcher for the New York Mets. With his blond hair and brooding dark eyes that stared down his opponents from the pitcher’s mound, it was no wonder that every time Shane saw his brother there was a new model-gorgeous woman clinging to his arm. Joshua had a reputation as a playboy, but Shane knew that underneath it all, his brother longed to settle down with a woman who would love him for him, and not because he was a star athlete.

Robert let out a whoop after Joshua’s latest strikeout that was so loud it caused Jaime to throw her book in the air in alarm. “That’s my boy!” he yelled, red-faced, into the screen. “Show ‘em what you’re made of.” He pumped his fist in the air victoriously and drained the bottle of beer he had been clenching in his fist. Shane laughed; his father was always a bundle of nerves when he watched his son play. The last time they had been to a game, Robert had screamed himself hoarse, causing the spectators around them to throw him dirty looks that he purposely ignored.

When Robert’s yells died down, Shane turned back to his brother, who had taken a rare afternoon off from the restaurant to join in on the Sunday gathering at their parents’ house. “Well what?”

“How was the end of your date? From what I could see, it looked like the two of you were really enjoying yourselves.” Shane paused before answering, remembering the sweet taste of Heidi’s skin beneath his lips. Cody punched him playfully on the arm. “Wow, you have it bad, don’t you? She’s a beautiful woman, that’s for sure.”

“That’s only part of it,” Shane said, a smile spreading across his face. “She’s smart, hard-working, an amazing mother. Kind, good-hearted. I could go on and on.” He took a sip of the scotch he was nursing. “I can’t believe my good luck in finding someone like her.”

Holly, overhearing their conversation, came up behind Shane and wrapped her arms around her brother’s waist. “As a woman, I can’t tell you what it means to hear you describe her like that. With so much respect.”

“It’s nothing more than she deserves,” Shane said seriously.

“So when do we get to meet her?” Holly looked at Shane eagerly. “I’m dying

to know the woman who put the light back in your eyes.”

Shane frowned. “What do you mean by that?” He thought he saw Cody throw a warning glance at their sister, who hesitated. Shane stared back and forth between the two of them. “Come on, you can say whatever it is that you’re thinking.”

Cody opened his mouth to speak, but Holly interrupted him. “You’ve been like a zombie for the past three years, and it’s nice to finally see you happy again. I was worried that you would never come back around. We’ve missed you, Shane.”

Shane studied his glass. “You’re not wrong. I feel like a new man. Did I tell you I’m back on patrol duty?”

Robert swung around at his son’s words. “Palen’s finally letting you back in the car?”

Shane nodded. “I don’t know if you heard about the officer shooting a few days ago, but two of our guys, Nick and Kevin, got hurt pretty badly.”

Holly covered her mouth with her hands. “Did they catch whoever did it?”

“Not yet, but it’s all hands on deck right now. We have to be careful whenever we take a call, obviously, in case whoever this guy is tries to ambush anyone else.”

Michelle chose that moment to walk into the room, carrying a plate of fried mozzarella sticks. The grin slid from her lips as she heard her son’s words, and she pinched her face up anxiously. “I don’t like the sound of this, Shane. What if you get hurt?”

“Don’t worry about it, Mom.” Shane crossed the room and planted a kiss on his mother’s cheek; she reached up a hand to stroke his face, her eyes filled with concern. “That’s why we’re trained to deal with situations like this. Besides, now we’re even more on our guard than ever.”

“Well...okay,” she said, setting the platter of appetizers carefully down on the coffee table. “Just be careful, Shane. I don’t want anything to happen to you.” She turned to her husband, whose eyes were fixed on the television set, watching as Joshua faced down the opposing team’s best player. “I just heard from Lacey,” she said, and Shane could sense the excitement in her voice. “She had an audition this week for the lead in a new movie!”

“Come on, Joshua, you can take him...what’s that, honey? Did you say Lacey had an audition?” Robert pulled his eyes away from the game just long enough to listen to his wife describing the role.

“It’s for a lead in a romantic comedy—you know how perfect Lacey would be in a role like that! And some of the most famous actors in Hollywood are up for the lead opposite her, including Carson Moroney!” Shane’s sisters squealed

at the sound of Carson's name, and even Shane, who only barely kept up with the latest news from Hollywood out of respect for Lacey, could understand why. Carson burst onto the scene last year, and since then had graced the covers of every magazine Shane passed in the grocery store. Always shirtless, of course. Shane didn't know how he would feel if his youngest sister ended up starring alongside a man who Shane assumed was a big-time playboy.

He listened vaguely as his sisters chattered on and on about the finer points of Carson's physique before draining the last of his scotch and plopping down on the couch beside his father, whose attention was back on the game. Shane squinted to read a local news bulletin that was flashing across the bottom of the screen, then gasped so loudly that the rest of the family turned toward him in alarm.

"What's going on?" Cody asked, crossing the room to read the bottom of the television. "Oh, no." He looked at Shane, and Shane could see that his brother was worried. "Do you have to go in?"

"What's going on?" Michelle asked, fear in her voice. "What does it say?"

"There was another shooting," Shane said briskly, hopping up off the couch and dashing across the room to grab his coat. "Two more officers down." Shane could feel his pulse quickening as his mother gasped. Not again, he thought desperately, wracking through his brain to try and remember which of his fellow officers were on duty that day. Buddy, he knew, was safely in San Francisco, visiting Maribel's family.

"Sorry Mom, I have to go to the station. I'm sure Chief Palen wants to get as many patrol cars out as possible tonight." He kissed his mother on the cheek, gave his sisters a hug, and shook hands with his father and Cody.

"Be safe, son," Robert said, grasping Shane's hand longer than was necessary. Shane nodded curtly and hurried outside to his car. His heart was racing with adrenaline as he steered onto the highway for the short drive to the station. Normally such a safe town, the Santa Ynez police officers regularly joked that they were mostly on parking ticket patrol. Shane could count on two hands the number of times he'd responded to a potentially dangerous dispatch since joining the force ten years ago, and the murder rate was one of lowest in the state. Why, he wondered desperately, did someone have it in for him and the other officers? They put their lives on the line day in and day out to protect their community, and that included the person who was responsible for carrying out these heinous shootings.

As Shane swung his car into the parking lot, he could see that the station was buzzing with activity. Through the front windows, he spotted Chief Palen standing in the middle of a crowd of officers, barking directions. Shane switched

off his car and hurried inside. “Kensington!” Palen called. “Glad you’re here. I take it you heard about what happened?”

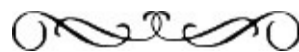
Shane nodded. “How can I help?”

“We have a description of the shooter this time, thanks to a witness who called in when she heard the shots. A male, appears to be in his early fifties, gray hair and a beard. He’s driving an older model car, green, but she didn’t know the make or model. I want everyone out in their cruisers looking for this guy. He’s armed, and he’s incredibly dangerous.”

“Are the officers who got shot okay?”

“I don’t know yet. There’s no word from the hospital. Apparently they were just sitting in the squad car talking when the guy came up beside them and fired through the window. They weren’t even responding to a call.” Shane could see that the chief, normally stoic in the face of danger, was rattled by the recent chain of events. Palen took it personally when his officers were injured.

Grateful that he kept a spare uniform in his locker, Shane tore off his civilian clothes and emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, pinning his badge to the pocket of his shirt. He wound his way through the crowd of officers who were receiving their orders and jogged outside to his squad car. A few minutes later he was speeding through the winding roads that crisscrossed up and down the hills that surrounded the valley. Shane had a hunch that whoever was responsible for the shootings would hightail it out of the city the first chance he had, and head for one of the many rural areas that could easily hide a killer.



Heidi’s eyes were glued to the television set hanging on the break room wall, barely tasting the turkey sandwich she packed for her lunch. Fear was snaking itself around her lungs and squeezing, causing her to grab her chest and wheeze. “Are you okay?” Josie asked, peering at Heidi in concern. She raised her eyes to the television set, where a serious-looking reporter was providing details about the latest officer shooting. “Oh,” Josie said softly. “Have you heard from Shane at all?”

Heidi glanced at her phone, which was sitting beside her on the table. She hadn’t expected Shane to call; after all, they weren’t technically dating. But there was no word yet on the identity of the victims, and until she knew that Shane was safe Heidi would be able to think of nothing else. Because the shooting had occurred across town, the officers weren’t brought into Heidi’s hospital. All she could do was wait and pray.

She chewed a bite of her sandwich absentmindedly and listened as Josie

chatted with a few other nurses about the shootings. “I can’t imagine knowing my husband was out there trying to chase down a lunatic,” one nurse said, shaking her head sadly. “The agony of never knowing if he was okay. Can you imagine?”

Heidi checked her phone again, but the screen was blank and silent. This is silly, she thought to herself. She may not be Shane’s wife, or even his girlfriend, but she had every right to know whether he was okay. Grabbing her phone, she tapped out a quick text, then laid it face down on the table. A watched pot doesn’t boil, she reminded herself. She would only drive herself crazy by checking her phone every ten seconds for a response; besides, knowing Shane, he was probably out right now looking for the guy who did this. There was no way he would sit back and watch while his fellow officers risked their lives. He just wasn’t that kind of guy.

The alarm on Josie’s phone sounded, signaling the end of their lunch break. Heidi slipped her phone back into her pocket, anxious because Shane still hadn’t responded to her message, and hurried down the hall after Josie. It had been a low key day so far, which Heidi, still amped up from her date last night with Shane, was grateful for. Josie had spilled the beans to the other nurses about Shane, so Heidi spent the morning recounting every detail of their evening together. While she pretended to be annoyed by all of the attention, in reality Heidi rather enjoyed it. It was nice to be excited about something for a change.

Back in the emergency room, Heidi scanned her eyes down the patient sign-in list for the next person in line. She poked her head into the waiting room. “Mr. Keller?” An elderly man accompanied by his wife stood up slowly and shuffled up to Heidi. “Follow me,” she said pleasantly, leading them into the examining room and closing the door behind them. She peered at Mr. Keller, who looked perfectly healthy. “What brings you here today?”

“Show her, Burt,” his wife urged, tugging on her husband’s sleeve. Mr. Keller rolled up the sleeve of his flannel shirt to reveal a large bandage wrapped in gauze.

Heidi gently unwound the gauze and peeled off the bandage. “That’s quite a burn,” she said when she saw the angry red mark on his skin. “It looks like it might be getting infected, too.”

“I told you,” the woman said, stroking her husband’s hair. She turned to Heidi and rolled her eyes. “He never wants to come to the doctor. I said, ‘Burt, do you want to lose your arm?’ That got him up off the chair, let me tell you.”

Heidi giggled and reached for a tube of antibiotic cream. “Better safe than sorry,” she agreed, dabbing a generous amount over the burn. Mr. Keller flinched and jerked his arm slightly. “Almost done,” Heidi said, unwrapping a new

bandage and placing it over the wound. "I'm going to ask the doctor to write you a prescription for an oral antibiotic, which you'll take twice a day for ten days. If you notice that the burn is getting worse, or changing color, make sure to visit a doctor. I think it'll heal nicely, though."

As Heidi left the room to track down Dr. Conway, she saw Mrs. Keller press her lips gently against her husband's cheek and whisper in his ear. The intimate gesture touched Heidi, who peeked at her phone again to see if she had heard back from Shane. He remained ominously silent.

When her shift ended a few hours later, she hurried to her car with the idea of stopping at Shane's house on her way home. She wouldn't go in, she reasoned with herself; she would just check for his car in the driveway. Her stomach fluttered nervously as she rounded the corner to his house, a small Spanish-style bungalow with a flat red tile roof, tidy front lawn, and a fat palm tree swaying slightly in the wind. With a sinking heart, she realized that he wasn't home.

"Zachary!" Heidi called a few minutes later as she let herself into her own house. "I'm home." She tossed her purse onto the couch and sank into the cushions, exhausted from the hours she had spent worrying about Shane. Zachary skipped into the room and flung himself onto the couch beside her. As he chattered on about his day, which, as far as Heidi could tell, was spent locked in his room playing video games, she stroked his hair absentmindedly.

Just as Heidi's eyes started to close and her mind sank into the blissful peace of sleep, Zachary jumped up from the couch and pressed his nose against the window. "Look! Shane's here!"

Heidi's eyes flew open and she followed Zachary to the window, watching with him as Shane unfolded his long legs and stepped out of his car. When he glanced up at the window and saw them looking down at him, he grinned happily and waved. Heidi hurried to the door and flung it open, not even bothering to slip on her shoes. "Go wait in your room," she instructed Zachary, who nodded obediently and shuffled away.

Shane's eyes widened in surprise as he saw Heidi running down the sidewalk toward him, her hair flying behind her; she was half-beaming and half-sobbing in relief at the sight of him. Without giving it a second thought, she threw her arms around his neck and pulled his face down to hers, then planted her lips firmly on his. He kissed her back softly at first, and then more urgently. She parted her lips and took his tongue between her teeth; she could feel his body shudder with delight.

When they finally broke apart, Shane searched her face with his eyes. "What was that for?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her waist and drawing her nearer to him. He kissed her neck, and then trailed his lips down her collarbone.

“Not a bad way to say hello.”

Heidi cupped his face in her hands and pressed her lips against his forehead. “I didn’t know if you were hurt,” she whispered. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

A shadow crossed Shane’s eyes. “I take it you heard about the shootings today. I’m fine. When I heard what happened, I left my parents’ house and went to the station. Chief Palen has everyone out looking for the suspect, and I just now got done with my shift.” He ran his hands along her temple. “I had to see you, so I came straight here.”

“Why didn’t you answer my messages?” Heidi asked, crossing her arms in front of her body. “I was scared out of my wits.” She motioned for Shane to follow her into the house, and together they walked up the steps and into the living room.

“Sorry about that,” Shane said. “I was in such a hurry to get to the station that I left my phone at my parents’ house. I’ll have to stop over later and get it.”

Heidi groaned. “I hope no one’s reading your texts, because I sounded crazier and crazier as the day wore on and I hadn’t heard back from you. I tried to keep it together, but the thought of you getting hurt made me frantic.”

“I’m flattered,” Shane said, patting her playfully on the bottom. “It’s nice to be worried about.” He glanced around the room. “Is Zachary here? I was hoping to take the two of you out to dinner.”

Heidi was taken aback. “You want to go out with both of us?”

Shane cocked his head. “Of course. If you and I are going to be together, I want to make sure that Zachary is completely comfortable with it. I thought we could grab some pizza, maybe head to the arcade afterwards. My treat.”

Heidi hesitated. “That’s incredibly generous, Shane, but you don’t have to do that.”

He ran his hands along the small of her back, causing a shiver of pleasure to run up her spine. “Please,” he whispered in her ear. “It would mean a lot to me.”

Heidi turned around to face him, then kissed him softly; the taste of his mouth was intoxicating, and all of her senses were screaming with desire. “Then we would love to go.”

CHAPTER 13

For Heidi, the next few weeks seemed like a chapter from the pages of someone else's life. She and Shane spent nearly all of their free time together, and Shane insisted that they include Zachary in on their plans as often as possible. Heidi was more than happy to agree; the expression on her son's face every time Shane asked him to come along was one of pure happiness. It began to feel like the three of them were becoming a family.

More than anything, Heidi appreciated how respectful Shane was. He never tried to rush her into doing anything she wasn't ready for, and was more than happy to let her guide the physical aspect of their relationship. Between the odd hours of their jobs and Heidi's responsibility toward taking care of Zachary, the stolen moments that she and Shane spent kissing, drinking in every ounce of each other, were precious.

Despite Zachary's initial hesitation over her relationship with Shane, the two of them were now closer than ever. Shane made a point of being present at as many of Zachary's basketball games as he could, cheering along from the stands and high-fiving the fathers of the other players. Afterwards, the two of them always went out for pizza and soda while Heidi drove home to enjoy some much-needed alone time. When they appeared at the door, fresh-faced and laughing, Heidi marveled at how different dating was as a single mother. Any man who was interested in her would have to take on somewhat of a father role to her son. Luckily, Shane was more than up for the challenge.

Every so often, though, Heidi caught sight of a brooding, almost mournful, expression on Shane's face. It only happened when he thought that no one was watching him; he appeared to be lost deep in thought, but the pain reflected in his features was evident to Heidi. On more than one occasion she entertained the idea of urging him to tell her what was on his mind, but something stopped her. She figured that when Shane was ready to talk about whatever it was that bothered him, he knew that she would be there to listen with an open heart.

These thoughts were rolling through Heidi's head as the three of them enjoyed an outing to Solvang, a quaint Danish-inspired town complete with windmills, whimsical architecture, Danish pastries, and, strangely enough, an ostrich farm. When Zachary spotted the sign for the farm he had begged them to stop, and Shane immediately steered his car into the dirt parking lot. Now, Heidi watched from the sidelines as her two boys tossed handfuls of food pellets

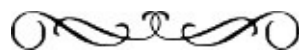
through the fence separating them from the towering birds that fixed their fierce-looking eyes on their visitors. Zachary shrieked with laughter as a particularly large ostrich stuck its beak through a hole in the fence and plucked a pellet from the metal bowl he was holding. Shane caught Heidi's eye and grinned, then beckoned for her to join them. "No way," she called. "I'd rather keep a safe distance, but you two look like you're having fun."

On the way out, Shane slipped his hand into Heidi's and together they watched Zachary skipping toward the car, a stuffed ostrich souvenir dangling from his arm. Heidi leaned her head against Shane's shoulder, breathing in his familiar spicy scent; it made her senses foggy with desire. "Zachary has a sleepover this Saturday night," she whispered in his ear, and she could feel his body stiffen. "Would you be interested in coming over for dinner? I'm not as good of a cook as your brother, of course, but I'll come up with something special." Checking to make sure that Zachary's attention was elsewhere, Heidi nibbled lightly on Shane's ear for good measure; he groaned softly.

"I'd love to," he said. "I've been working a lot of overtime lately to try and catch the shooter, so I think Palen will be okay with me taking the night off." He turned and faced her with a tender expression on his face. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

Heidi knew that there was no point in pretending; Shane understood the hidden meaning behind her offer. She stood on her toes and kissed him softly on the lips, then gazed into his eyes. "I'm ready."

"Mom!" Zachary called. "Shane! Can we go and see the miniature horses?" Laughing at her son's innocence, Heidi linked arms with Shane, and together they joined Zachary for another adventure.



"What's this about?" Shane whispered to Buddy as he took his place around the conference table. Chief Palen had called an emergency meeting at the station, and his already tense staff was squirming uncomfortably in their chairs as they waited for him to arrive. "Someone else wasn't hurt, were they?"

"I don't think so," Buddy whispered back, glancing around to make sure that no one was listening to them. "But it better be for a good reason. Maribel's already up in arms about this whole situation, and when I got called away from the dinner table I thought she was going to phone Palen herself and give him a piece of her mind. She's really mad."

"Why?" Shane was genuinely perplexed. If anything, he thought that Maribel would be comforted to know that Palen was taking the shootings so seriously;

the manhunt for the perpetrator had now spread across three counties.

“She thinks we should have caught him by now.” Shane opened his mouth to argue, but Buddy raised his hand to cut him off. “I know it doesn’t make sense. I’ve told her we’ve been working our tails off, but she’s upset just the same. I can’t blame her. I’m sure it’s not easy sitting at home with Henry wondering whether or not I’ll be next.” Buddy shuddered. “I’ll be able to breathe easy again once this guy’s behind bars.”

Shane nodded, remembering the conversation he had just last night with Heidi as they sat cuddled on the couch together, watching the local news. When they flashed the artist’s sketch of the unnamed man across the screen, Heidi covered her eyes with her hands. “I can’t even bear to look at this,” she had said. “It makes me crazy knowing he’s out there at the same time as you.” When Shane left for the night, Heidi hugged him tighter than usual. “Be safe,” she whispered in his ear before kissing him. “Make sure you come home to me tomorrow.”

Her words inspired Shane to be even more vigilant; he kept his eyes peeled at all times, searching for the person who was terrorizing him and his fellow officers. For the first time in his life, Shane finally had someone worth coming home to, and he wasn’t about to let anyone take that away from him.

The door to the conference room burst open and Chief Palen marched in, carrying a stack of papers and looking grave. A hush fell over the room as the officers eyed Palen apprehensively; Shane’s pulse quickened as he saw the eyes of the perpetrator staring down at them from the oversized poster Palen had tacked to the wall. Palen settled into a chair at the head of the table and pressed his fingertips together. “We have a name.”

A rash of mutterings broke out around the room; Buddy whooped and punched his fist in the air victoriously. Shane, however, was watching Palen; the chief seemed less than thrilled about this new development. “Settle down,” Palen said, raising his hand in the air to signal for silence. “It’s not time yet for a celebration. If anything, the new information we got today makes the situation even more urgent.”

He opened up the folder he had placed on the table in front of him and passed a stack of papers around the room. Shane took one and stared down at the bearded face of the man who was causing the people in this room so many sleepless nights. “His name’s Sam Shephard,” Palen said. “He’s from Atlanta, but has ties to the area. We got a call this morning from his sister when she recognized his face on the news. Says he’s had mental health issues all of his life, been in and out of institutions. He’s a drifter, and he’s had more than one run-in with the law. I got ahold of his record, and he’s been picked up for a

bunch of small crimes over the last thirty years: petty theft, trespassing, harassment. His sister said that lately he's been having delusional thoughts, believes that the cops are out to get him. Apparently, he's trying to rub us all out before we can get to him."

"Where is he now?" Buddy asked, examining the photo with an expression of distaste. "Has anyone who knows him seen him recently?"

"His sister saw him last about two months ago, when he showed up on her doorstep rambling on incoherently. She called the Santa Barbara police, but by the time they showed up he was already gone. This was after Nick and Kevin were shot, but before we had a sketch of the suspect, so he wasn't pursued."

"What does this mean for us?" Shane asked. "We've already been hunting this guy down for the past three months, with no luck."

"It means," Palen said, rubbing his forehead, "more late nights, more patrol cars out looking for him. He's already got four of our best guys, and it's by the grace of God that no one was killed. We have to assume that he's watching the reports on television. My guess is that he's madder than ever that he hasn't managed to kill one of us."

He reached into a duffel bag at his feet and pulled out a bag of pagers. "I know these are a little outdated, but it's the easiest way I can think of for reaching all of you at once. Until we catch this guy, every person in this room is responsible for carrying the pager with them at all times. If you get a notification, you drop whatever it is that you're doing and get down to the station as soon as possible. It means that we've either had a sighting, or another incident."

He stood up from behind the desk and began pacing the room with his arms crossed behind his back. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you this, but in my forty years as a police officer I've rarely been this distressed. It's only a matter of time before someone gets killed, or this guy starts going after innocent people in the community, unless we do everything we can to apprehend him. I'm counting on each of you to do your part."

When the bag of pagers reached him, Shane grabbed one and set it on the desk in front of him. He was willing to do whatever it took to put Sam Shephard behind bars, where he belonged, but Shane was less than thrilled at the idea of working even longer hours. His relationship with Heidi was heating up, and the last thing he wanted to do was take precious time away from her to be out patrolling the streets. But, he thought with a sigh, he knew what his life was going to be like when he enrolled in the police academy. Up until this point, it had never bothered him much.

"Wait 'til Maribel hears about this," Buddy grumbled as they left the

conference room a few minutes later. “She’s going to have a cow.”

“Heidi’s not going to be too happy either,” Shane said, examining his pager. “She tries not to bring it up too much, but I know she’s worried.”

“Speaking of Heidi,” Buddy said, “Maribel and I were talking about it the other night and we’d love to have the two of you over for dinner sometime soon. In all the time we’ve known you, we’ve never been able to have a double date. I think it’s high time, don’t you?”

“Definitely,” Shane replied, “but it’ll have to wait a little while longer, I’m afraid. Between my patrol shifts and her long hours as a nurse and taking care of her son, we barely get any alone time. In fact, tomorrow night is going to be our first time alone at her house. Zachary’s going to a sleepover.” Shane would never admit it to Buddy, but his stomach was twisted in nerves at the thought of spending the night with Heidi. Somewhere along the way, he had lost his confidence with women; his relationship with Heidi was going so well that he was terrified of making any mistakes.

“You dog!” Buddy cried, punching Shane playfully on the arm. “I understand, don’t worry. Just give us a holler when you’re ready. I’d love to meet the woman who’s responsible for the constant smile on my best friend’s face.” He grinned at Shane. “Seriously, man, I’m so happy for you. A few months ago I thought we had lost you, that you were never going to come out of the fog that was hanging around you all the time. Now, you’re like a new man. It’s like the accident never happened.” Buddy cringed and looked at Shane anxiously. “Sorry, but you know what I mean.”

“I think what happened that night is going to stay with me until the day I die,” Shane said quietly. “Nothing is ever going to change that. But being with Heidi has reminded me of what it really means to live again. I thought I didn’t deserve it, but she’s shown me that life is worth living. That it’s okay to be happy.”

“Have you talked about the accident with her at all?”

Shane shrugged. “I mentioned it, but I didn’t really want to go into detail. We both have tragedy in our past, but I think we’ve sort of made a silent pact to keep the past in the past and try our best to live for the future. It’s therapeutic for both of us. I only know the most basic details of what happened to her husband, and that’s okay for now. Someday I’m sure we’ll talk about it more, but that time hasn’t come yet.”

Buddy nodded. “I understand. Maribel’s father died when she was a teenager, and even though they were really close, I can count on one hand the number of times she’s mentioned him. It’s too painful.” They walked together to their cars, shielding their eyes against the glare of the California sun. “How’s that sister of

yours doing?” Buddy asked with a sly smile. “You know I’ve always had a soft spot for her. Just don’t tell Maribel.”

“Lacey? She’s great, actually. Had a big audition for a movie role, but I haven’t heard yet if she got it or not.” He wagged his finger in mock annoyance at Buddy. “Don’t get any ideas, my friend. She’s way too good for you.”

Buddy threw back his head and laughed, then held up his hands in self-defense. “I’m not interested, just curious. She dating anyone?”

Shane groaned; the last thing that he wanted to think about was his baby sister’s love life. “Who knows? She always has a swarm of men hanging around her. Apparently the actor who’s up for the lead opposite her is some kind of sex icon, which I’m really thrilled about.” He shuddered. “I would rather she get together with Bryan, to tell you the truth.”

“Who’s Bryan?”

“He’s been her best friend since they were practically in diapers. He’s also in love with her, but I’m pretty sure she hasn’t noticed.” Shane shrugged. “Oh well. I try not to get involved in any of my sisters’ love lives. Some things I’m just better off not knowing.”

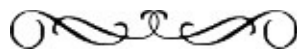
“I hear you,” Buddy said, shaking his head, “believe me. My sister’s boyfriend dumped her the other day after four years, can you believe that? Left her for another woman. Maribel had to stop me from showing up at his house and threatening to twist off his manhood, if you know what I mean.”

“Thanks for that image.” Shane patted Buddy on the back and unlocked his car door. “Tell Maribel thanks for the offer to have Heidi and me over for dinner. I’ll talk it over with her, and as soon as we find a time that works for everyone I’m sure she’d be happy to meet you.”

“Will do,” Buddy said, jingling his keys in his hand and heading for his car. “And Shane?”

Shane turned his head to face his friend. “Yeah?”

“Be safe out there.”



Heidi never thought that the repetition of peeling potatoes would be therapeutic, but tonight it was enough to take the edge off of her nerves. She had just returned home from dropping an excited Zachary off at his sleepover party, and truth be told, she was a tiny bit sorry that he wouldn’t be around for the evening. Not because she didn’t want to be with Shane; she did. But damn it, she was scared. Terrified.

Part of her also felt guilty, though she was doing her best to ignore it. When

she woke up that morning and saw John's photo perched beside her bed, Heidi knew that for the first time since his death, she would have to take it down. She could only imagine the look on Shane's face if he stepped into her bedroom for the first time and came face to face with her dead husband. If that didn't kill the mood, she thought wryly, nothing would.

So, with a heavy heart, she had wrapped the photo carefully in tissue paper and stored it at the back of her closet. Afterwards, she went straight to the kitchen to pour herself an oversized glass of wine, ignoring the fact that it was 10:30 in the morning. "What are you doing, Mom?" Zachary asked as he walked into the room just as she was draining the last few drops of wine. He watched her with wide eyes as she hurriedly shoved the glass into the dishpan and wiped her mouth.

"Just thirsty." She turned her head so that her son wouldn't spot her burning cheeks. "What time do you need to be at the sleepover tonight?"

"Six," he said, perching on one of the kitchen stools and reaching for the box of cereal. He poured a heaping bowl, then shoved a spoonful into his mouth and watched her thoughtfully while he chewed. "Are you going to be okay here without me?"

"What makes you ask that?" Heidi asked, reaching across the table to stroke her son's cheek.

He shrugged. "I just don't want you to be lonely." He rotated the cereal box and began solving the puzzle on the back.

Heidi debated whether or not to mention that Shane was coming over, but decided against it. While she didn't want her son to worry about her, she had a hunch that he would forget all about it once the sleepover was in full swing. And the very last thing she wanted to do was have to explain to a ten year old that a man who was not his father was going to be spending the night. No, Heidi had thought with a shudder, he was too young for that particular conversation.

She dropped the peeled potatoes one by one in the boiling water and added a pinch of salt, then unwrapped the package of salmon she had purchased that morning. Grabbing a mixing bowl from the cabinet, she added balsamic vinegar, honey, a few cloves of garlic, and a squirt of mustard for the salmon glaze. After much deliberation, Heidi had decided to stay away from Italian food; even though she knew it was Shane's favorite, there would be no way for her to compete with the old family recipes he was so used to. Her nerves were already at a breaking point; the last thing she wanted to do was worry about burning the lasagna.

She smoothed her apron and checked the clock above the stove. It was time for her to finish getting ready for Shane's arrival. Heidi poured the glaze over the

salmon and stored it in the refrigerator, then untied the back of her apron and draped it over the table.

Shane wouldn't know it when she opened the door, perfectly dressed, but Heidi had spent the better part of the morning tearing through her closet for something suitable to wear. She had taken to wearing sweatpants on their evenings spent in, but that wouldn't do for tonight. Neither, she knew, would a fancy dress, so she opted instead for a dark pair of jeans and a sleeveless blouse. She slipped the blouse over her head, and spritzed on a generous amount of her favorite perfume, the one that smelled like honeysuckle. She added a touch of makeup and had just stepped back to analyze her reflection when the doorbell rang. Heidi ran a comb through her long hair one last time, and after taking a deep breath, hurried to answer it.

"Hi," Shane said, cradling in his arms a bottle of white wine and a bouquet of sunflowers. He smiled at Heidi, and a sense of relief flooded her when she realized from the slight strain in his expression that he felt just as nervous as she did. "I thought I'd take a break from roses for a while. I've given you so many that you could practically plant a garden. I'm not one for creativity, unfortunately, so Lana suggested sunflowers."

"They're lovely." Heidi took the bouquet from him and opened the door wide enough for him to step inside. As he did, his arm brushed up against her chest, and a shiver ran through her body. As usual, she thought as she looked him up and down, Shane managed to look effortlessly handsome. His hair was charmingly windswept, and he was wearing a casual button-down shirt and a crisp pair of jeans. He also, she noticed with a twinge of pleasure, had allowed several days' worth of stubble to grow on his face. If there was one thing that made Heidi grow weak in the knees, it was a man who could go unshaven and still look sexy.

Shane followed Heidi into the kitchen and set the wine down on the table. "Can I interest you in a pre-dinner drink?" Heidi nodded and handed him the wine opener; she noticed that his hands trembled slightly as he uncorked the bottle and poured two glasses. "To a memorable night," he said with a soft smile, clinking his glass against hers and taking a sip. "So." He clapped his hands and looked around the room eagerly. "I don't smell any sauce cooking."

Heidi laughed and playfully pinched his arm. "You'll just have to do without it for one night." She opened the fridge and bent down to retrieve the salmon; as she did, she could feel Shane's eyes on her back.

"I don't know if that's going to work," he teased, peering around her into the fridge. "Didn't we have the conversation yet about what a picky eater I am? I consider spaghetti to be a food group, and it genuinely confuses me when other

people don't agree." He took a sip of his wine, then came behind her as she straightened up and wrapped his arms around her waist. Her skin tingled pleasantly as he softly kissed the nape of her neck.

Setting the pan of salmon down on the counter, Heidi turned around to face Shane. She gently touched the middle of his forehead, then ran her finger down his nose until it came to rest on his lips, which parted slightly under her touch. Keeping her finger pressed against his bottom lip, she leaned in and kissed him lightly. "What's that for?" he whispered softly.

Heidi kissed him again, this time running her tongue along the outside of his mouth, enjoying the groan of pleasure that escaped from his lips. He pinned her arms to her sides and backed her up against the wall, then licked the tip of her ear, trailing his tongue down the side of her neck until her whole body was trembling.

As she closed her eyes, he slid one strap of her blouse from her shoulder and ran his fingers up and down her arms, stroking her skin lightly. The second strap he pulled down more roughly, then pushed her blouse down around her waist. "My God," he said softly, his eyes drinking in the black and pink lace of her bra. "You're beautiful."

He leaned in slowly and kissed her again, and while his lips teased hers he cupped his hands over her breasts. Through the gauzy fabric of her bra she could feel the heat of his hand pressed up against her skin, and her chest rose and fell as she struggled to catch her breath.

Heidi reached up and deftly unbuttoned Shane's shirt, gasping as she saw for the first time the smooth muscles of his chest and stomach. Sliding down to her knees on the ground, she played her lips along his stomach, which contracted with pleasure. She slid her fingers under the waistband of his pants as he pushed her bra down and stroked her nipples, then brought his face down to her chest.

A shrill beeping sound broke through the silence like a foghorn; they both jumped in alarm, their minds hazy with desire. "What is that?" Heidi gasped, staring around for the source of the noise. The beeping was so loud that she could feel it pulsating in her brain; she squeezed her eyes shut to try and ward off the sound.

A shock of recognition crossed Shane's face as he felt around in the pocket of his jeans. "Oh, hell."

CHAPTER 14

Out of all the minutes in a day, Shane thought furiously, sliding the small black device out of his pocket and fumbling around to turn it off, why did Palen have to pick that exact moment to page him? He wanted to scream at the injustice of it all. He and Heidi, finally alone for the night, and now it was ruined.

“What is that?” Heidi asked again, staring at the pager with wide eyes. Her breasts were still exposed; Shane looked away and took a few deep breaths to try and regain control of himself. He screwed up his face and debated whether or not to answer the page. So what if Palen had said that it was a requirement? Shane was rather busy at the moment; the chief would just have to understand.

As Heidi listened closely, Shane gave her a quick rundown of the meeting he and the other officers had earlier that day, purposely leaving out the part about how dangerous Chief Palen considered Sam Shephard to be. He didn’t want to worry her needlessly; besides, he reasoned, Heidi was perceptive enough to know that Shane would never even consider leaving her unless it was something beyond his control.

“I’m just going to ignore it,” he said, tossing the pager onto the kitchen table and crossing his fingers that it had broken. “It’ll be fine.” He turned back to Heidi, whose cheeks were still flushed pink with pleasure. “Where were we?” Tracing his fingers along the top of her chest, he bent down and nibbled on her lips.

Heidi inclined her head slightly away from him. “Shouldn’t you answer that?” she asked, and Shane could hear a note of uncertainty in her voice.

He stared at her in disbelief. “Are you telling me that you want me to leave?” He tried not to betray the hurt that he felt, but her words cut through him like a knife.

She pushed her hair behind her ears and crossed her arms over her chest. “Of course not, but it’s what I signed up for, right? I knew what I was getting into when I decided to fall for a police officer. Part of the gig, I guess.” She stood up and pulled the straps of her shirt back over her shoulders while Shane looked on morosely. He glanced over at the kitchen table, where the pager lay silent. He knew that the fierce internal debate he was having probably showed in every feature of his face.

Heidi switched off the oven and picked up the pager, examining it closely. “Old-fashioned,” she said with a smile. “I never thought I’d see one of these

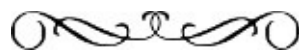
again.”

Shane heaved a sigh and joined her at the table, twirling his fingers absentmindedly through her long hair. She reached up and grasped his fingers briefly, then patted him on the arm. “Let me ask you something,” she said. “If you ignored the call and we continued on with our evening as though nothing had happened, how would you feel tomorrow?”

“Amazing, because I got to spend the whole night with you. It’s what I’ve been dreaming about for months now. But guilty, also,” he admitted, “because I made a promise to serve and protect this community, and it’s my duty to be there when the other officers need me. Everyone’s really stressed out right now, obviously.”

Heidi nodded knowingly. “I thought that’s what you’d say. You’re not the kind of man who worms his way out of his responsibilities, and you aren’t going to feel good about yourself knowing that you did this time. Besides,” she added playfully, “now you’re really going to be thinking about me.”

“You have no idea,” Shane said, leaning down to kiss her soft cheek. As he did, he inhaled the flowery perfume she was wearing. He wanted so badly to stay, but he knew that Heidi was right. He grabbed the pager and slid it back into his pocket, buttoned his shirt, and after one last, long kiss, said goodbye to Heidi and walked outside and into the night, determined to catch a killer.



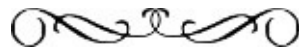
Heidi watched from the front window as Shane’s car pulled out of the driveway and disappeared down the road. Her heart was hammering in her chest, her blood frozen with fear. Shane didn’t tell her exactly why he had been called in to work, but he didn’t have to. She knew that the only thing important enough to tear him away from her arms would be the same face that had been plastered across the cover of every newspaper in town: Sam Shephard.

She hated having to pretend to Shane that she thought it was best for him to go, when inside every nerve in her body was screaming for him to stay. Not just because she had been looking forward to tonight and everything it would mean for their relationship, but also because she was beside herself with worry. Shane, she knew, was a target, for the simple reason that he chose to put on a police uniform every morning. Heidi fervently wished that she hadn’t been working at the hospital on the night the first two victims were brought in; in her mind, the only thing she could see beneath their bruised and battered faces was Shane. Please God, she thought desperately, keep him safe tonight. And every other night.

Wandering into the kitchen, she stared sadly at the platter of uncooked salmon sitting on the counter before wrapping it up and storing it in the fridge. She straightened her blouse, which was hanging oddly around her shoulders. As she did, her mind flashed back to the way Shane's hands felt on her body as he caressed her breasts. She could still smell his scent on her skin. Despite the giddy nervousness she felt leading up to their night, being with Shane, if only for those few precious minutes, seemed like the most natural thing in the world. Like it was meant to be.

Heidi glanced at the clock, then sighed heavily. She hadn't counted on being alone for the entire night, and the weight of worry was still pressing around her heart, causing it to flutter anxiously. She rummaged around in the freezer for a few seconds, then pulled out a pint of chocolate peanut butter ice cream, grabbed a spoon, and headed to her favorite armchair in front of the television. Settling into the chair, she peeled off the lid of the ice cream and dipped the spoon inside, then switched on the news.

What she saw on the screen made her drop her spoon to the floor with a loud clatter.



Shane sat huddled around the table with the other officers, their faces pale and drawn, a somber silence weighing heavily in the room. His stolen moments with Heidi seemed like something out of a dream, so removed was he now from the intoxicating feeling of wrapping his arms around her, pressing his lips against every inch of her sweet skin. Next to Shane, Buddy drummed his fingers on the table with an expression of intense anger that was mirrored on the faces of his fellow officers. A mixture of anger, sorrow, and determination.

Their heads swung around as the door to the room opened and Chief Palen stepped inside, looking more serious than Shane had ever seen him. And older, Shane thought, as though the man had the weight of the world pressed against his shoulders.

When Palen took his seat at the table and opened his mouth to speak, his voice came out as a croak. "I've been on this force for over forty years," he said, rubbing the purple bags under his tired eyes, "and I've never lost an officer. It's been a point of pride for this community and for this team I have sitting in front of me. Tonight..." Palen stopped and covered his face with his hands; Shane could see that his broad shoulders were shaking. "Tonight, I can't say that anymore."

Shane peered around the room; many of his fellow officers sat with their eyes

closed tightly, as though trying desperately to ward off the terrible news. Rumors had been swirling since he stepped into the station that night, which was filled with a frantic energy that Shane had never before experienced. He had known then that the worst had happened; one of his comrades was dead.

He had searched the sea of familiar faces for Buddy, who had been on patrol duty that night. When Shane finally spotted the top of his blond head, illuminated under the harsh light of the police station, he had rushed over and thrown his arms around his friend. "Who was it?" he asked anxiously, doing his best to suppress the wave of vomit that was forcing its way up his throat.

Buddy bowed his head, tightening his grip on Shane's shoulders. "Kelly," he whispered, his hands trembling with rage. "That bastard shot her in cold blood while she was parked on the side of the road, talking on her cell phone."

"No," Shane had whispered, sinking to his knees. He hadn't known Kelly for very long; she had only joined the force nine months ago, but her sunny smile and pleasant disposition had made her very popular among the officers. She was also a young wife and mother, constantly showing off pictures of her one year old daughter. She delighted in dressing the baby up in frilly outfits, which caused the other officers to tease her good-naturedly.

Now, sitting in the conference room and listening to Palen paying tribute to their fallen officer, Shane's knees began trembling uncontrollably as he imagined what it would be like for Kelly's daughter, growing up without a mother to guide her. Thoughts that he had worked so hard to suppress for the last three years came hurtling back to him as he pictured the girl's first ballet recital, shopping for prom dresses without her mother, and walking down the aisle at her wedding, careful not to look at the empty seat next to her father's.

Ignoring the stares of the other officers, Shane pushed back his chair, and covering his mouth with his hand, rushed out of the room and through the doors to the station. He dropped to his knees outside and vomited onto the ground, then rocked back and forth on his heels, the tears that he had refused to shed for so long pouring out of him like rain.

He cried not just for Kelly, who would never kiss her husband again or see her daughter grow up, but for the man he, Shane, had killed. He may not know the man's name, or what he did for a living, or his hopes and dreams for the future. But on that dreadful night, as Shane rushed toward the other car to try and save the man dangling lifelessly out of the window, Shane saw one thing that he had tried his hardest to suppress. Sitting in the backseat of the car was a little boy who bore witness to his father's horrific death. Shane, unable to come to terms with what he had done, forced himself to bury the sounds and images from that awful night. But now, as he pictured Kelly's daughter, the memories

began flooding back to him, clearer than ever before.

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“Can you believe that guy?” Buddy crowed, punching Shane playfully on the arm. “I’ve seen a lot of strange things in my day, but a half-naked man running through Hattner’s Vineyards stealing grapes has got to be one for the books. Wait ‘til we tell the other guys about that one.”

Shane unlocked the doors to the cruiser, still shaking his head and chuckling. It had been an interesting night all right, he thought. Two burglaries, a domestic dispute, a fire in the back country, and that was all before the frantic phone call came in from the aged owner of Hattner’s Vineyards, one of the oldest and most distinguished wineries in all of the Santa Ynez Valley. The owner had been beside himself with anxiety when he phoned in to the station to report a man running mostly naked through the acres and acres of grapevines. Shane and Buddy had taken the call, and after a quick search found the man sitting cross-legged among the brambles wearing nothing but a pair of tattered boxers, his face stained red with the juice from the handful of grapes he had managed to gobble up. Hattner had declined to press charges on the man as long as he promised to never trespass on the property again, and so Shane and Buddy had let him off with a stern warning.

The vineyards were on the far end of town, and the prospect of driving all the way back to the station was daunting. Shane had been sick all day with a nasty cold, and he tossed and turned for most of the night before starting on a double shift. He thought wistfully of the warm bed waiting for him at home. He glanced over at Buddy, who was leaning his head against the passenger seat with his eyes closed. Shane stifled a yawn and rubbed his bleary eyes. He knew that he was taking a risk by driving, but Buddy and Maribel were dealing with a colicky baby, and Shane knew from Buddy’s frequent complaints that they hadn’t slept through the night in months. There was no way he could ask Buddy to drive, not at this late hour.

Shane steered the car onto the winding country roads, fiddling with the volume of the radio while Buddy snored lightly beside him. Shane counted the mile markers as they drove by; the road stretching ahead seemed endless. He felt his eyes beginning to close, so he blasted the air conditioner on high, shivering as the shock of cold air hit his skin.

Rain began to fall, lightly at first and then more heavily, coming down in torrents and bursts. Shane leaned forward and squinted through the fog beginning to form on his windshield. Damn it, he thought. He normally loved

listening to the patter of the rain against the dusty roads, but tonight he was already fighting his own exhaustion.

Soon the rain settled into a steady rhythm, providing a lulling backdrop to the sound of his tires on the road. Shane's eyes felt heavy; he began to wonder if he should pull over for a while and explain to Buddy that he wasn't able to make it back safely. As the car rumbled past a small farmer's market, now closed for the night, Shane realized that they were only a few miles from the station. He could make it.

He could make it.

The next thing he remembered was the flash of headlights coming toward the cruiser, the sound of the other car's tires squealing as it tried to avoid hitting Shane. He tried to veer right, but he was too late; his tires skidded on the rain-soaked roads and careened directly into the other car, hitting it head on and causing it to spiral into the metal guardrail. Buddy's yells filled the air as the cruiser rolled over and came to a stop upside down, pinning both men inside.

Shane unbuckled his seatbelt and squeezed his way through a hole in the twisted wreckage of his car, ignoring the blinding pain in his head, which had slammed off of the steering wheel upon impact. He gasped for air as his hands hit the pavement; at that moment, the sky burst open, sending sheets of rain onto his head. He shook the water from his eyes and stumbled over to the other car, his heart frozen with fear. As he approached it, he saw a man hanging lifelessly from the window, his body dragging on the ground, his head lolling strangely on his shoulders. From inside the car he heard the heart-wrenching screams of a woman, and watched helplessly as she clawed desperately at the body.

"John! John! Wake up! Oh my God, John!"

From the backseat of the car came the cries of a young boy, no more than seven or eight, his eyes wide and terrified. The woman, her long hair matted down against her head with a sickening combination of blood and rain, forced her way out of the car and scrambled to his side. "Zachary, are you hurt? No, don't try to get out. Stay where you are."

"Where's Daddy?" the little boy screamed. "I want Daddy."

Before Shane could take another step, he blacked out, his ears still ringing with the sounds of the little boy's agony as he wailed louder and louder into the night. His life, thanks to Shane, forever changed.

Shane lay sprawled across the sidewalk, ignoring the tears still streaming down his cheeks. He thought of Heidi, how his whole body came alive when he

pressed his lips against hers, how the sound of her laughter filled his soul with the type of happiness that he had never before known. And Zachary, who had been spiraling out of control before he met Shane, lost in a cycle of grief that had left the little boy drowning and gasping for air.

He loved them both, more than he ever thought was possible. They rekindled in Shane a light that he thought had been lost forever. And what had he done in return? Before tonight, he had hoped that his presence in their lives had done something to ease the sorrow of losing a husband and a father. He wanted, someday, for the three of them to become a family.

Had he known, on some level, that it had been them all along? Perhaps the reason why he had been so drawn to Zachary in the first place was because a part of Shane knew that he was the reason the troubled boy was about to enter his pre-teen years without the strong guidance of a father's hand.

And Heidi, his Heidi. Shane had confided to Jaime the other night that he planned to ask for her hand in marriage. So what if they had only known each other for a short time? Shane knew better than most how brief life could be, and he was certain that he wanted to spend whatever time he had left on this sweet earth with her beside him.

Now, it could never be.

There was, Shane knew, a possibility that he was wrong. Perhaps in the stress and turmoil of the past few hours he was simply imagining that Heidi was the one who had emerged from that mangled car, her auburn hair streaming like rain down her face. Could he be sure, over the pounding of the storm, that it was John's name she had screamed into the night? Shane had been in shock, mere seconds away from passing out from the pain that was searing through his own body.

When he awoke the next day in the intensive care unit, his family gathered around his hospital bed, his strong, silent father had been the one to break the awful news to him. The man in the other car was dead. And it had been Shane's fault. Even though no one said it, Shane knew from the way they turned away, unable to witness his grief.

From that day on, Shane would live a half-life, suppressing every image and sound from the accident that threatened to disrupt the shaky wall he had built around himself for protection, immunity from the pain. Until he met Heidi, that is, and his life once more regained its purpose.

Shane knew that the answer lay hidden in a file mere steps away from where he was now sitting, his head in his hands, his body quaking uncontrollably. If he wanted to, he could march inside the station right now and finally, once and for all, learn the name of the man whose life he had unwittingly stolen.

His world, Shane knew, was about to come crashing down around him, and this time, he would probably never be able to pick up the pieces. But first, he needed to pretend that everything was okay. Just for one more night.

CHAPTER 15

Heidi almost didn't hear the quiet knocking at her door at first. The empty ice cream carton lay strewn at her feet as she gazed open-mouthed at the television set, where the somber newscaster was now flashing pictures of Officer Kelly Rookwell across the screen. "An unimaginable tragedy," he was saying, "that will surely continue to rock the Santa Ynez Valley for years to come."

Holding a tissue to her eyes to stem the flow of tears, Heidi glanced at her phone. She hadn't heard from Shane yet that night, and it was close to midnight. Her pulse quickened as she thought of him slinking through the dark, winding roads that snaked through the hills outside town, his hand clenched around the handle of his gun, waiting to be ambushed at any minute.

The tapping at the door, quiet at first, turned into a steady pounding. Her heart hammering in her chest, Heidi leapt up from the chair and pressed her eye against the peephole. When she saw who it was, she left out a soft gasp and yanked open the door. "Shane! What are you doing here?"

He looked awful, like someone who was carrying all the misery in the world on his back. His eyes were bloodshot and swollen, his cheeks were ruddy and tear-stained, and his shoulders slumped pitifully. "Heidi," he whispered, reaching out to touch the ends of her hair.

"I heard what happened," she said, swallowing hard. "I'm so sorry."

He shook his head roughly back and forth. Fixing his eyes on hers, he opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again. He took a step forward, and without warning, grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to his chest. Reaching down, his trembling mouth found hers, and he was kissing her like he had never kissed her before. Every nerve in her body was on fire as he teased his tongue along hers, and she melted against him, her legs weak beneath her.

He trailed his lips over her eyes, her cheeks, her lips, leaving hot moisture wherever his mouth touched. While he kissed her, he moaned her name softly again and again. Still pressed together, they stumbled inside and Heidi kicked the door closed behind them. With one fluid motion, he lifted her into his arms, burying his face between her breasts. She wrapped her legs around his waist and lifted her shirt over her head and unhooked her bra, letting it fall to the floor. She guided his strong hands toward her nipples, gasping at the jolt of pleasure that ran through her body when he grazed his fingers over them. She grabbed the back of his hair with clenched hands and held on tight.

He carried her into the bedroom, their hot mouths still desperately seeking each other, and laid her gently on the covers. Climbing onto the bed beside her, he kneeled before her and played his tongue along her breasts, her stomach, and beneath the waistband of her jeans as she moaned with pleasure. She lifted her hips slightly, and he slid off her pants, stroking her legs lightly up and down. He stopped then and stared at her body, lying naked beneath him. "I've waited so long for this," he whispered, stroking her skin lightly with his fingers. "You have no idea what this means to me."

Locking her eyes on his, Heidi reached up and began undoing the buttons on his shirt, stopping after each one to softly caress the muscles of his chest, which was hot beneath her touch. As she watched through hazy eyes, he stood up, unbuttoned his pants, and slid them down past his waist. He reached out his hands for her and pulled her to her feet. She stood beside him, enjoying the heady sensation of their bodies pressed against each other.

Locking Shane's arms behind his back, Heidi circled her tongue around his neck, then trailed her mouth down his collarbone, his chest, then lingered at the curve of his waist. She felt his intake of breath, heard the moan of pleasure escape from his lips. He guided her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her waist, twisting his fingers through her hair and seeking her mouth with his.

Heidi lay back on the bed and pulled him toward her. He kneeled on top of her on all fours. He bent down and slowly ran the stubble on his face up and down the length of her torso, kissing every part of her that his mouth could reach, lingering once more over the soft skin of her breasts.

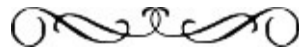
When she could take it no longer, they joined together, staring deeply into each other's eyes as though nothing else in the world existed except right here, right now. They rocked back and forth slowly, while Heidi pressed the tips of her fingers into Shane's back and lifted her hips toward him, moving against him in tune with his body.

As he moved above her, she closed her eyes and gave herself over to him completely, feeling the sweat from his body rolling onto her chest and down her stomach. He called her name over and over again, then collapsed into her arms and buried his face in her neck. They lay together for a long time, their limbs entwined around each other, their chests rising and falling rapidly as they struggled to catch their breath.

Heidi raised her hand to Shane's face and stroked his cheek. Propping himself up on his elbow, he stared down at her. Heidi smiled at him and kissed him once more, but when she drew her face away she was surprised to see what she thought was a dark shadow cross his face. "Are you okay?" she asked anxiously, wondering if he was regretting his decision to make love to her.

He pressed his lips against the palm of her hand and held them there. When he finally glanced up, he fixed his light blue eyes on hers and stared at her for several long moments. Then, his face softened and he reached for her once more, rolling her on top of him and kissing her hard on the mouth. "I love you, Heidi," he whispered into her lips. "I love you so much."

Heidi sat back on her heels and ran her hands in a circular motion along his chest, then gently fingered the light brown hairs that trailed down his torso. "Oh, Shane," she said, cupping her hands around his face and drawing her mouth down to his. "I love you, too."



Shane watched Heidi as she slept, fascinated by the way the early morning sunlight streaming through the open window lit up her face to make it, if possible, even more beautiful. Careful not to wake her, he pressed his lips lightly against the curve of her back. She groaned softly in her sleep and rolled toward him. Her eyes fluttered awake and she wrapped her arms around his waist. "Morning," she said sleepily.

"Good morning," he whispered in her ear. Heidi didn't know it, but Shane had lay awake all night, his heart breaking with the weight of the decision he knew he had to make. Staring at the ceiling while Heidi slept, Shane had struggled through a fierce internal debate with himself, running through his options again and again. He could go to the station, open the file containing the accident report, and find out whether John Griffin was the man he had killed. Whether Shane had been the one to change the course of Heidi's life forever.

Or he could stay with Heidi the rest of the day, making love to her and convincing himself that his memory of the accident was false, tainted by his own fears and insecurities. But Shane knew that if he stayed with her today, he would never seek the truth. He and Heidi would continue on with their lives, eventually get married and grow old together. The prospect, Shane thought with agony, was more than tempting. Perhaps it was fate, what was meant to be.

But in the end, Shane knew in his heart that he would never be able to live with himself with the burden of the unknown pressing down on his chest at every moment. How could he look Heidi in the eye, day in and day out, and wonder whether he was the person who had caused her and her child unimaginable suffering? No, he decided. He would rather lose Heidi than lie to her, even if the lie was based on uncertainty.

His resolve almost broke now when she reached for him, her eyes hooded with sleep, a tired smile playing across her lips. "Last night was incredible," she

said, running her fingers along his forehead. “Can I make you some breakfast?”

Shane caught her hand and squeezed it. “Thank you, but I have to get back to the station.”

She rolled over and glanced at the clock, then groaned loudly and pressed her face into the pillow. “And I have to pick up Zachary in an hour, then go straight to work for a ten hour shift.” She batted her eyes at Shane playfully. “Do you have to go right this minute?” She patted the sheets next to her in a come-hither way that made Shane laugh in spite of himself.

He reached for her one last time and wrapped his arms around her body, stroking her back lightly and pressing his lips against the top of her head. “Yes,” he whispered, glad that she couldn’t see the tears that sprung to his eyes. “I do. But you’ll never know how much I regret it.”

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“Shane, are you in here?” Buddy called as he strolled into the back office of the station. “Palen said we need to get down to the town borders and set up roadblocks. No one gets in or out of the area until we make sure that Shephard’s not with them. Hey, what are you doing?” Buddy asked suspiciously.

Shane jumped and tried to hide the folder he was holding from Buddy’s sight, but his friend was too fast. Buddy plucked the file from Shane’s fingers and frowned down at it. “What’s this?” he asked. “This file’s like three years old.” Shane averted his eyes, and Buddy let out a gasp of understanding. “No,” he said fiercely, and stuffed the folder back into the drawer of the file cabinet, which was hanging open. “I’m not going to let you do this.”

“Why not?” Shane asked, trying to wrestle Buddy’s hands away from the drawer.

Buddy grabbed Shane’s wrists and held them together, then looked Shane in the eyes with a grave expression on his face. “Why now, after all these years? You were finally making progress in your life, and I thought you were putting it all behind you. You’ve been happy, Shane, more so than I’ve ever seen you before. What about Heidi?”

Shane slumped against the cabinet, then slid to the floor and dropped his head in his hands in despair. Buddy kneeled next to him. “What’s going on, man? Come on, you know you can tell me anything.”

Shane closed his eyes and leaned his head back. “I think it was Heidi,” he whispered.

“Who was Heidi?” Buddy’s voice was filled with confusion.

“It was Heidi, in the car that night. It was her husband. I killed her husband.”

A moan of sorrow escaped from Shane's lips when the full weight of his words, spoken out loud for the first time, hit him. "What am I going to do?"

Buddy glanced at the file cabinet. "Are you sure?"

"No, that's why I'm here. I have to find out. I need to know the truth." Shane explained the flashback of the accident, and the horror he felt when he remembered hearing Heidi call her son's familiar name amidst the smoking wreckage.

As he listened, Buddy twisted up his face in concern. "Look, Shane," he said uncertainly, "I was there, too, remember? I don't recall hearing anyone saying anything about a kid being in the backseat. Are you one hundred percent on this?"

"No, that's why I need to find out," Shane said again as he struggled to his feet and reached for the file.

Buddy stretched out a hand to stop him once more. "Why? What does it matter anymore? Knowing the truth isn't going to change what happened. Heidi is happy with you. What she doesn't know won't hurt her."

Shane's temper flared up. "How can you say that?" he said through gritted teeth. "You think I'd be able to look at her ever again, knowing what I might have done?" He pushed Buddy's hands away roughly and seized the file, then pressed it protectively against his chest.

"You're going to lose her, Shane," Buddy said, shaking his head sadly. "If what you think happened really did, your relationship is going to be over."

"Don't you think I'm aware of that?" Shane whispered as Buddy's words, which he already knew in his soul to be true, came crashing down on top of him.

Buddy shook his head once more, then began walking toward the door. "I'm not going to be here to witness this," he said. "You're ruining your own life. On a side note, you better get your act together because Palen's furious that you left the meeting last night. I've been instructed to tell you that if you do that again he's going to take disciplinary action."

Turning his face to avoid Buddy's accusatory stare, Shane listened as the sound of his friend's footsteps died down, then pressed his eyes together tightly for a moment. If only this all turned out to be a nightmare, he thought as he opened them again and stared down at the file, which seemed to be taunting him. He would give anything to wake up and find himself in Heidi's arms. Shane had never experienced the kind of happiness that he felt last night, and even if it proved to be fleeting, it was a memory that he would carry with him for the rest of his life.

Taking a deep breath, he flipped open the file and ran his finger along the length of the report, which spanned several pages. The events of the night, laid

out before him in painstaking detail, sounded cold and official, a far cry from the terror that seized his heart when his eyes snapped open and he first saw the white glare of headlights speeding toward him.

At the bottom of the second page, Shane's name was listed, along with Buddy's, as injured parties. With hands trembling so violently that he could barely grasp the folder, Shane turned the page and forced himself to look, for the very first time, at the name of the man whose death altered Shane's past, present, and future.

John David Griffin. Husband to Heidi, father to Zachary.

Shane quietly closed the file and returned it to the drawer where he found it, then sank to his knees, where he stayed for a long time, once again building up the protective wall, brick by brick, that he had come so close to tearing down forever.

CHAPTER 16

All things considered, Heidi thought as she waved goodbye to the occupants of the car pulling out of the hospital parking lot, it had been a pretty good day. While underneath the surface her mind was buzzing with worry over Shane's safety in the wake of the recent shootings, she had been able to push those thoughts away for a few precious minutes as she helped Megan prepare to leave the hospital, three months after her car accident. It wasn't normally within her realm of duty to leave the emergency room, but Heidi had taken it upon herself to check up on the girl every so often to see how she was doing. Today, when Heidi learned that Megan was finally going home, she had asked Dr. Conway for special permission to see the teen and her family off.

After one last wave, Heidi turned and made her way back into the emergency room. Josie glanced up from a stack of paperwork she was filling out, shot Heidi a wry smile, and hurried over to her side. "Why do you look so happy?" she taunted. "And don't even bother trying to get out of telling me. You're a terrible liar."

"I know," Heidi admitted. "But a girl doesn't kiss and tell." She placed a hand over her mouth to cover her broad grin. Heidi couldn't help it; since Shane left that morning, she had been wandering around in a love-struck daze. She was surprised she hadn't yet broken out into a victory dance in front of the entire emergency waiting room.

Josie squealed and pulled Heidi's hand away from her mouth. "You had sex, didn't you? It's written all over your face." Correctly interpreting the blush that crept over Heidi's cheeks, Josie pinched her playfully on the arm. "I'm so jealous! That's quite a man you have for yourself. I hope you realize that."

"Oh, I do," Heidi replied. "Trust me, I'm not going to let him get away." As she said those last words, her heart soared. She knew now with absolute certainty that she wanted Shane to be in her and Zachary's lives forever. In fact, she planned to sit down with Zachary that very evening and propose the idea of Shane moving in with them; despite her son's earlier reservations, Heidi had a feeling that he would now be more than okay with the idea. Finally, she thought, suppressing another grin, they were going to have a proper family again.

"So," Josie continued, walking down the emergency room hallway with Heidi, "how are you holding up with all of this Sam Shephard stuff going on?" She stopped and fixed Heidi with a piercing stare. "How do you sleep at night

knowing Shane's out there with him?"

Heidi winced at Josie's characteristic bluntness. "Shane's tough, and he's smart. He has years of experience, and I trust that he'll be able to get himself out of a dangerous situation." She paused and pursed her lips with worry. "At least that's what I tell myself, because I have to. Otherwise, I'd drive myself crazy by panicking all the time. If I'm going to be involved with a police officer, I'm just going to have to get used to the idea, I guess."

"That's why I don't bother with relationships," Josie said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Too much trouble, if you ask me. You get attached, and then what if something happens?" She stopped in her tracks and covered her mouth with her hands, her eyes wide with horror. "Oh Heidi, I'm so sorry," she stammered. "I didn't mean to imply anything about John. I'm such an idiot."

"It's okay," Heidi said, smiling at her friend reassuringly. "I know you didn't mean anything by it. And you're right, in a way. If you put your heart out there, you're going to be vulnerable to all sorts of things. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't do it. I would rather have married John knowing that he was going to die young than never have met him at all. I wouldn't trade our time together for anything in the world."

"Is it weird," Josie began tentatively, "now that you've found someone else?"

"It was awful at first, when I realized I was attracted to Shane. The guilt I felt...you have no idea how it was eating me up inside. But then as I got to know him better and saw what an amazing guy he was, I began to see that John wouldn't want me to be alone for the rest of my life. He would want me to be happy, the same way I would feel if the situation would have been reversed. I still love John, and that's never going to change, but I'm in love with Shane now, too. It's like two different chapters of my life, if that makes any sense."

"You're lucky, then," Josie said. "Most people would kill to have just one person to love, let alone two." She patted Heidi on the arm and pushed open the door to the nearest examining room, where a middle-aged man sat with his daughter, whose arm was in a sling. "I'll see you later," she whispered to Heidi, who waved and continued down the hall.

As she walked, Heidi reflected on Josie's parting words to her. She had never thought of herself as lucky before; in fact, it was quite the opposite. It was difficult, now that so many years had passed, remembering exactly what it was like in the aftermath of John's death. The details, once so forcefully engrained in Heidi's memory, were beginning to blur at the edges. And that, she realized, was okay. Loving Shane wasn't an insult to John's memory; for Heidi, putting her heart on the line once more was a testament to just how great her and John's love had really been. She wanted desperately to love, and be loved again. It was a

force so powerful that she didn't want to live without it; even if her feelings for Shane meant that she would have to be vulnerable once more, it was well worth the risk.

These thoughts were still on her mind as she gathered up her purse and keys and headed for the parking lot to retrieve her car. On the drive home, she planned out the conversation she wanted to have with Zachary about their future, and how very much she wanted Shane to be a part of it.

"Zachary!" she called as she jiggled the keys in the front door. "Honey, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Her son came bounding out of his bedroom and planted a kiss on her cheek. For what seemed like the hundredth time, Heidi marveled at just how much her son had blossomed over the past few months. His sleepover had been a resounding success; when she picked him up that morning, he had chattered on for the entire car ride home about the plans he and his friends made to go to basketball camp that summer. "But summer's still months away," Heidi had teased. "Don't you think you're getting a little bit ahead of yourself?"

"No way, Mom," Zachary had said. "And guess what? At the end of camp there's a big tournament between all the players. Do you think you and Shane will be able to come?"

Heidi had reached across the seat to tousle her son's vivid hair. "I'm sure that can be arranged."

"When's Shane coming over again?" he had asked excitedly. "My friends and I were talking about a new type of shot we want to try at next week's game and I want to practice it with Shane first."

Now, sitting down on the couch, Heidi motioned for her son to sit next to her. She took a deep breath, then turned to face him. "What do you think of Shane?"

Zachary's face lit up. "He's the best. Did I tell you that he came to my game last week, even though he had to use up his lunch hour to do it?"

Heidi smiled softly and took her son's hand in her own, then peered into his eager face. "You did. He loves watching you play. He's told me so a million times." Heidi laughed. "But I have something really important I want to ask you, and I need you to be honest with me, okay? Can you do that?"

Zachary nodded, then cocked his head and regarded her curiously, waiting for her next words.

"I would like to ask Shane to be a part of our family. How would you feel about having him move in here with us? If he wants to." When Zachary didn't immediately respond, Heidi rushed on. "But if you're not comfortable with that, it doesn't have to happen right now." She studied her son's eyes anxiously.

Zachary bent his head and stared at his hands, turning them over so that the

palms faced upwards. As he traced his thumb lightly over the blue line of his vein, Heidi's heart hammered so loudly in her chest that she wouldn't be surprised if he could hear it. She felt slightly nauseous; in her excitement, had she raised the subject too soon? If her son wasn't on board, it would present plenty of unforeseen complications.

When he raised his head to meet her gaze, Heidi was shocked to see tears in his eyes. Her stomach dropped like a stone. "I'm sorry," she stammered. "Maybe this is all happening too fast."

But before she could process what was happening, Zachary threw his arms around her and laughed; Heidi soon joined in. When he pulled away from her, his face was shining with excitement. "When can he move in?"

Heidi buried her face in the top of her son's head and let the tears of happiness stream down her cheeks. "We'll ask him tonight," she whispered. Her heart had never felt so full.

*

Zachary leapt up from the couch when Shane's car pulled into the driveway; he had been watching the window eagerly since Shane had phoned to tell Heidi that he was leaving the station. Rushing out of her bedroom to greet him, Heidi smoothed the fabric of the casual dress she had chosen to wear. It was, after all, going to be a night for celebrating. "Go say hello," she urged her son as she made a detour into the kitchen to pull a bottle of champagne and two flutes out of the cabinet. She uncorked the bottle and listened with one ear as Zachary opened the door to greet Shane.

She poured the champagne into the flutes, added a single strawberry to each, and stored them in the fridge, out of sight for now. First, Heidi knew, she needed to formally ask Shane to move in with them. After that, there would be plenty of time for toasting the start of their new life together. "I'll be right there," she called as she closed the door to the fridge and headed into the living room.

"Shane, Shane, can we practice the lay-up shot tonight?" Zachary stood in front of Shane, blocking his face from Heidi's view, and dribbled the ball on the living room floor.

"I need to talk to your mother," Shane replied softly. "Why don't you head outside and give it a go yourself for now?" Zachary obeyed, bouncing the ball down the sidewalk before lobbing it at the hoop.

Shane turned around to face Heidi, who stopped in her tracks when she caught sight of the look of intense pain and sorrow on his face. "What's the matter?" she gasped, reaching for his hand. "Did someone else get hurt?"

He shook his head mutely and pulled his hand away from hers, leaving her grasping at the empty air between them. She dropped her hand to her side and took a step toward him, her face screwed up in concern, but he shook his head and held out his hand to stop her. “Don’t.” The word came out as a croak.

“What’s going on, Shane?” Heidi asked, her voice rising an octave. “You’re scaring me. Did something happen at the station?” She guided him over to the couch and forced him to sit down. He dropped his head in his hands and raked his fingers through his hair, hunched over like someone twice his age. “I wasn’t at the station. Not for hours.” When he finally raised his head, his hair was standing on end. He looked like a man who had suffered more in the last few hours than most people did in a lifetime.

Heidi felt numb inside. Something was wrong, she knew. Something was terribly, terribly wrong. “Where were you?” All sorts of scenarios ran through her head, each more crazy than the next. What in the world could have possibly happened in the twelve hours since she had last seen him?

Shane rocked back and forth, clenching and unclenching his hands. “I was on Highway 101.”

Heidi stared at him in confusion. “Okay,” she said slowly. “And what were you doing there?”

“Sitting in my car on the side of the road, just past the farmer’s market, a couple of miles from the police station.”

Heidi reeled back as though she had been punched in the face. “Why were you there?” She searched her brain frantically, trying and failing for Shane to have a reason to be at that particular stretch of the road. It was the place that haunted her dreams, the one that caused her to take the long way through the side streets of town, just to avoid having to pass it on her way to work. The setting of the worst day of her life, the day that she cradled John in her arms as he took his last struggling breaths and watched the life drain from his body.

Hot rage seared through Heidi’s limbs as she stared at Shane in disbelief. Was this some kind of a sick joke? Heidi had never mentioned where the accident took place. She had barely talked to Shane about it at all, unable to form the words needed to describe it out loud even after all this time. “What the hell is going on?” she asked through gritted teeth.

“I had to—I had to see where it happened.” Shane fixed his eyes on hers; they had a dead, haunted look that shook Heidi to her very core.

“How did you know?” she demanded. “You had no right to go down there.”

“It was me. Heidi, it was me. I did it.” He reached for her, a look of desperation on his face, but she took a step back before collapsing on the floor.

“What are you saying, Shane? What the hell are you saying?”

“It was an accident. You have to believe me. I—I fell asleep at the wheel, and never saw the car coming. It’s been tormenting me for the past three years. I dream about it all the time. I’m sorry,” he whispered, his face twisted into a tortured expression.

Heidi’s mind raced as she tried to process his words. She never knew who had been in the other car on that fateful night, having determined long ago that knowing the name of the person who destroyed her family would do her no good. But Shane? Shane, the police officer, the man who put his life on the line every time he went to work in the morning? It didn’t make sense.

But it did, a tiny voice in the back of her brain said. After all, why did Shane take such an immediate interest in Zachary? Heidi had been so flattered by the handsome officer’s attention, blinded by her attraction to him, that she didn’t even stop to wonder why Shane would be so adamant in his offer to help Zachary. Looking back now, it certainly seemed strange. The only conclusion, Heidi knew, was that Shane used her, played on her emotions to try and atone for his sins. To undo some of the guilt he surely carried around with him every day of his life by helping out the poor family of the man he killed.

“You used me,” she said, closing her eyes to avoid Shane’s pitiful gaze. “You used me to make yourself feel better.”

“What?” Shane spluttered. “No, Heidi, no! I didn’t know it was him. You have to believe me.”

“You told me you were in an accident, but you never told me any of the details,” Heidi spat out. “I thought it was just because you didn’t want to talk about it, which was something that I understood. I actually sympathized with you! The man who killed my husband.” She watched with pleasure as the remaining color drained from Shane’s cheeks; she wanted him to suffer now just as much as she and Zachary had suffered for the past three years.

“I didn’t remember the details of the accident until recently,” he whispered, his voice so low that Heidi had to strain to hear him. “I forced myself to forget, to try and pretend that it had never happened. And I had no idea it was your husband. I never knew the name of the person in the other car. I didn’t want to know. This is all just an awful coincidence. Please, Heidi, you have to believe me. I would never do anything to intentionally hurt you or Zachary, and I never used you to make myself feel better.”

Heidi covered her eyes with her hands and sobbed, her shoulders trembling uncontrollably. She felt Shane drop to his knees in front of her; he crawled forward on the floor and wrapped his arms around her, cradling her head and stroking her hair while her body shuddered with the memories of that awful night.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again and again into her hair, his voice choked with emotion. “I’m so sorry, Heidi.”

She wept until there was nothing left for her to give; when she finally hiccupped into silence, she slumped over in his arms. When she raised her head to meet his eyes, she saw that he, too, had been crying.

In that moment, something in her broke. She knew that Shane was telling the truth, that he would never be capable of purposely hurting her so badly. She, too, had done her best to block out the memories of the accident, unable to bear even hearing the name of the person who caused it. Was it so hard to imagine that it would have been the same for Shane? She remembered the haunted look in his eyes when he walked through the door that evening, so different from the face of the man who made love to her last night. He was not the same man who whispered his love to her in the dark while he caressed every inch of her body. Shane, her Shane, wasn’t capable of such deception.

She reached up and grabbed his face with her hands, forcing herself to look into the eyes of the man she still loved, but who had stolen from her the most precious thing that she had. “Please,” he said again, touching her cheek. “I love you.” Cautiously, he bent his head toward her, seeking out her lips.

After a moment’s hesitation, she turned her head away. “I’m sorry,” she said, and the shock of pain that seared through her body when she realized what she had to do made her double over. Struggling to regain some semblance of composure, Heidi untangled herself from Shane’s embrace. Taking a deep breath, she wiped the smudge of mascara from under her eyes and forced herself to look at Shane, whose face was contorted in agony.

“Heidi,” he began, reaching for her once more, but she held up her hand to stop him.

“Don’t,” she said quietly. “You’re only going to make this worse.”

His face crumpled. It took every ounce of strength that Heidi had to choke out the words that she knew needed to be said. And once they escaped her lips, there would be no turning back. But it had to be done. As much as she loved Shane, Heidi knew that she would be unable to face him every day. How could she, when every time she looked at him she would only think of John? It wasn’t fair to Shane, and it wouldn’t be fair to Heidi. It would be best, she knew, to pick up the pieces of her life and try to move on while living every day with the searing pain of a broken heart. Again.

“We can make this work,” he said desperately, his voice shaking so much that Heidi could barely understand him. “I’ll do anything. Please, I can’t lose you. We love each other.”

Heidi got up from the floor and peered out of the front window, watching

silently as Zachary raised his arms above his head and took aim at the basketball hoop. When he saw her reflection, he waved happily before tossing the ball through the air. Their lives, she knew, were about to change again, and this time she didn't know if either of them would ever recover. Had she been foolish to believe that she deserved a second chance at happiness?

She gave a start when she felt a hand on her shoulder, and turned around to find Shane standing behind her. The tortured expression on his face was gone, replaced instead by one of deepest sadness. He stroked her lightly on the cheek, then bent down to kiss her gently on the lips. "I understand," he whispered when they broke apart. "It's nothing less than I deserve." He turned to go, and Heidi had to cross her arms in front of her body to restrain herself from reaching out for him one last time.

"Just so you know," he said as he placed a trembling hand on the doorknob. "I wish it had been me instead." He pushed open the door and stepped outside, then closed it gently behind him.

Heidi stood at the front window, the tears pouring silently down her face, and watched as the man she loved walked out of her life forever.

CHAPTER 17

“Come in,” Shane called dully, barely glancing over at the front door. He was sitting on his couch surrounded by empty beer bottles and pizza boxes. He hadn’t showered in days, and had let his beard grow in thick and full. What did it matter? Heidi was gone, Shane knew, and there was no longer any point in even getting up in the morning, much less bothering to make himself look presentable.

It had been three weeks since he had last seen Heidi’s face light up in his presence, heard her laughter ringing through the house, and he missed her with a constant ache that pulsed through every inch of his body. But he deserved every bit of his suffering. How could he have been so arrogant as to think that he deserved even an ounce of happiness? Shane had been right to cut himself off from the world following the accident, and he bitterly regretted forcing his way into Heidi and Zachary’s lives. They would have been better off without him.

Since the breakup, Shane had locked himself in his house. He hadn’t even reported to the station, which meant that Palen would probably be forced to fire him. Not that it really mattered, he thought. He had already endured a stream of visitors, each of them trying and failing to come up with the right words that would get him off the couch and ready to face the world again.

First to come by had been Buddy. “You missed Kelly’s funeral,” he said quietly when Shane opened the door. “You should have been there. Officers from as far away as San Diego and San Francisco came, as well as our entire team.”

“I couldn’t do it,” Shane had replied hollowly. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t say sorry to me. I’m just saying that you should have been there. She was one of us, and so are you.” Buddy folded his arms in front of his chest and planted himself directly in front of Shane, forcing Shane to look up at him from where he was sitting on the couch. “Have you completely given up, man? We’re all out there day and night hunting for this guy, and you’re sitting here in your t-shirt and boxers feeling sorry for yourself.” Shane had stood up and silently walked into his bedroom, closing the door firmly behind him. After a few minutes, he heard Buddy quietly leave the house.

Next to arrive had been Jaime and his mother, Michelle’s arms laden down with trays of food and pastries. “A little something to make you feel better,” she had said, kissing him noisily on the cheek and bustling into the kitchen to make him a plate of spaghetti.

When she left the room, Jaime plopped down on the couch next to Shane and

wrapped her arms around him. “It’s going to be okay,” she had whispered, cradling Shane’s head in her arms while he tried valiantly to hold back his tears. “You’re going to get through this. We’ll help you, all of us. That’s what family’s for, but you can’t shut us out again, Shane. Please.”

After struggling through an hour of awkward conversation, during which Michelle had fussed over the state of Shane’s house and Jaime gazed at him through watery eyes, thankfully, they had left.

And it sounded, by the persistent knocking at his door, that it was now someone else’s turn to try.

“It’s open,” Shane called again, tossing the empty beer bottle he was holding into the trash can across the room. He winced when he made it easily, his mind flashing back to the day when he first met Zachary and Heidi down at the station.

The door creaked open, but Shane didn’t even bother to look up and greet the person who entered; he continued staring blankly at the wall across from him. “Shane Kensington,” a familiar booming voice shouted, startling Shane out of his silence.

“Chief Palen?” he gasped, looking up at the formidable figure of the man he had admired for so many years. “What are you doing here?”

Palen stared around the room with an expression of distaste on his face. “It’s a little dirty in here, don’t you think?” He pushed aside a greasy pizza box and sat down tentatively on the armchair across from Shane. “I have to say, I expected more from you.”

Shane slumped down into the cushions, avoiding Palen’s gaze. “Why?” he mumbled.

“Because this,” Palen said, waving his arm around the room to indicate the mess, “isn’t you. And you asked why I’m here? I’m here to see why one of my best men has decided to stop coming to the station when we need him the most.”

Shane laughed hollowly. “I’m not one of your best men. Maybe I used to be, years ago, but not anymore.”

“That’s not true,” Palen said quietly. “You’re smart, you’re determined, and you’re brave. Those are the three qualities that I prize above all else for my team. Do you know how many men would have gone through what you did and still be left standing? Not many.”

Shane shrugged. “If that’s the case, why did you put me on desk duty for three years? You didn’t trust me.”

Palen pounded his fist onto his lap. “That’s not true, Kensington. It had nothing to do with me. You didn’t trust yourself or your own judgment, which is dangerous for a cop. I had to wait until you regained some of your confidence,

but I always knew you'd be back on the streets. And I was right. Now, when are you coming back? We need you."

Shane shrugged again and fiddled with the drawstring on his stained gym shorts. Palen heaved a sigh and leaned forward in his chair. "I don't usually talk about my personal life at the station, but I think, given the circumstances, you should know something about me. Something that no one else in this entire town knows, except for my wife."

Palen drew a deep breath before continuing. "I have three kids. They're all grown now, but they were the three best kids I could have ever asked for. They brought me more joy in my life than anything else I've ever experienced. But I used to have four kids. My son Peter, my firstborn, was killed when he was only two years old."

Shane swung his head up and stared at Palen, whose eyes were slightly unfocused as he struggled to form the next words. "It was my fault. It was Halloween, and we were trick-or-treating in the neighborhood. I was holding Peter's hand when I got distracted by someone that I knew. I stopped to talk for just a second, and I didn't realize it but I loosened my grip on his hand. Before I knew what was happening, he had run out onto the street when he spotted a piece of candy and got hit by a car."

Palen dropped his head in his hands; Shane thought that he was crying, but when Palen looked up again, his eyes were clear. "After he died, I was a shell of a man. I couldn't stay in our house, the house we built from the ground up, because of the memories. I insisted that we move here, to Santa Ynez, to get a fresh start. I got a job on the force, and did everything I could to try and forget what I did that night. But it was always with me."

Shane was now staring at Palen as though he had never seen him before. How, Shane wondered, could a man go through life with such a terrible weight on his shoulders? Palen was the kind of man who was admired by everyone he met; there was no hint of such a tragedy in his past.

"My wife forgave me," Palen said, twisting the strap of his watch around his wrist, "and we went on to have other children. But it was a long time before I could learn to forgive myself. I had to, though, or else I'd never be able to function. I would have missed out on all of the precious memories I have with my wife and kids because I'd be too busy blaming myself for the accident. Could it have been prevented? Probably. But that's just not what was in the cards that night. It's been more than forty years, but I've finally come to terms with that."

"Why are you telling me this?" Shane asked.

"Because I hate to see you missing out on life. And I hate even more that one

of the most dedicated officers I have has decided to give up his badge. This town would be a worse place without you patrolling the streets, and I need you back. I expect you to report to the station tomorrow at 10:00 am. No excuses. If you aren't there, I'm going to personally drive over here and get you. And trust me, I'm not going to be happy about that."

He grinned at Shane, who smiled back weakly, then stood up with a groan and tilted his cap at Shane before disappearing through the front door. Shane watched him leave, then absentmindedly flipped on the television set. The first thing that popped up on the television was a split-screen image of Kelly's smiling face, taken on her wedding day, next to the wild-eyed Sam Shephard in an old mug shot, snapped after an arrest years ago for petty theft in Georgia. "Jesus," Shane muttered to himself, hurrying to change the channel. "I can't escape this anywhere."

After a quick scan of the other stations, half of which were also discussing the latest details of the Shephard manhunt, Shane switched off the television and flopped back into the cushions, preparing to spend another long night staring idly at the ceiling. It was Sunday, time for the weekly Kensington family dinner, but despite his mother's tearful pleas for him to join them, Shane had no intention of leaving his house. Perhaps, he thought dully, he would find a way to never leave his house again. He opened up the nearest box of pizza and took a bite of a half-eaten slice, then tossed it back in the box and kicked the lid closed. His appetite, usually so robust, was practically nonexistent.

He tried not to look at his uniform, draped carelessly over the armchair across the room. Shane remembered clearly the day he finally graduated from the police academy. He was only twenty-one years old, still fresh-faced with excitement and possibility, enamored with the idea of spending his life protecting the community that he loved so much. As he listened to Chief Palen swear in the new officers, Shane standing proudly among them, he scanned the audience for the faces of his family. Every one of his siblings had attended, as well as his parents and grandparents, and the excitement on their faces as they watched him accept his badge mirrored his own.

Somewhere along the way, his sense of pride and accomplishment had faded, leaving Shane to dwell not on all of the good that he had achieved throughout his career, but only on the years he had wasted feeling sorry for himself. Now, he wished desperately that he could reclaim the feeling of wonder he had when he first knew, so many years ago, that he wanted to dedicate his life to serving others.

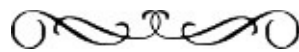
Had he made mistakes along the way? Sure, he thought, but so did other people. And Shane knew that Chief Palen's words to him rang true: the only

person holding him back was himself. It was time for Shane to learn to come to terms with the accident that had so drastically changed the course of his life, shattering the man he had once been. He would never forget; no, that was impossible. The sound of Heidi screams would haunt him until the day he died.

But maybe, just maybe, it was time for Shane to forgive himself.

He stood up and crossed the room. Running his fingers along the gleaming badge that he had worn so proudly for more than a decade, the image of Sam Shephard flashed through his mind. He pictured the sorrow etched on his fellow officers' faces when they found out that they had lost one of their own. Shane remembered the last time he had seen Kelly alive. She had shown him a picture of her laughing baby girl, the one who, like Zachary, would go through life carrying the burden of sorrow on her shoulders. How Kelly's husband, like Heidi, would lay in bed each night, convincing himself that if he just closed his eyes, it would all turn out to be a terrible mistake.

Shane knew then, with a clarity that almost knocked him off his feet, the steps he would have to take in order to atone for his sins. He would do for Kelly's husband and daughter what he couldn't do for Heidi and Zachary: make sure that the person they loved didn't die in vain.



“Please call me if you see him,” Heidi said to the mother of Zachary's teammate, then hung up the phone and rubbed her aching temples. She glanced at the clock; it was well past eight o'clock, and the darkness outside was pressing in on her, suffocating her. Zachary was out there somewhere, roaming the streets alone, while Heidi paced the house and gnawed her fingernails down to the stubs.

History, she thought, peering out through the curtains, seemed to be repeating itself. From the moment she first broke the news to Zachary that she and Shane were no longer together, her son had walled her out, retreating into himself the way he did for so long after John's death. Now, this afternoon, she had received a new letter from his principal, informing her that Zachary was once more cutting class. What was worse, she knew, was the phone call from his basketball coach, wondering whether Zachary was sick.

“He hasn't been to practice in three weeks,” the coach had said while Heidi clutched at the wall for support. “I thought he was under the weather, but if he's just skipping out I'm going to have to replace him with someone else. There are a lot of boys on the benches, waiting for a shot at starting the games. Tell Zachary if he wants to play again this year he better get his act together.”

His eleventh birthday, a mere three days after Shane's abrupt departure from

their lives, had been a dismal affair. For weeks in advance, Heidi and Shane had planned a special surprise for the big day; Shane had pulled strings at work to score tickets to the Lakers basketball game in Los Angeles. Even though Heidi still took the day off from work to drive Zachary down to the game, Shane's absence was so conspicuous that Heidi could practically taste it. Zachary, sensing that Shane was missing from their celebration, though Heidi neglected to mention that he was originally supposed to join them, slumped down into his chair for the duration of the game, barely even watching the players running up and down the court.

Afterwards, the two of them had stopped off at the beach to feed the seagulls, one of Zachary's favorite activities as a child. In an attempt to lighten the mood, Heidi had snapped photo after photo of the birds flocking to Zachary's outstretched hand as he half-heartedly tossed chunks of bread to them. A few days later, when Heidi picked the photos up from the print shop, she could see nothing but disappointment and misery present in every inch of his slouched body.

The following day, Zachary began disappearing after school once more, leaving Heidi to drive the shadowy streets aimlessly, calling his name from the open car window. She had a hunch, though Zachary would never admit it, that he was hoping for the police to pick him up again in the off chance that he'd be able to see Shane.

Heidi had made a judgment call not to reveal to Zachary the reason why she had decided to erase Shane from their lives. The pain she experienced, knowing that Shane was responsible for John's death, was all-consuming, and she didn't want her son to feel the loss of his father all over again. Not now, when she thought that Zachary had finally begun to heal. It would be better, Heidi had decided, to say that while Shane loved them, the two of them had decided to just stay friends.

"Do you think he'll still come by sometimes to play basketball with me?" Zachary had asked through tearful eyes. Heidi didn't have the heart to say no. But when Shane failed to show up that week or the next, Zachary stopped peering out of the window anxiously, waiting for his car to drive down the street. The basketball now lay discarded in the hall closet, hidden from sight under a pile of coats and shoes.

Heidi was so consumed with worry over her son's behavior that she had not yet dealt with her own feelings over losing Shane, the man she had fallen so deeply in love with. His absence from her life was raw and painful; she could feel it in every breath that she took. On more than one occasion, she had scrolled through her phone and stared at his number, only to quietly slide it back into her

purse. She wasn't angry at Shane, and she didn't blame him for John's death; she knew that it was an accident that he deeply regretted. But there was no way that she would be able to look into Shane's eyes and see anyone other than John. A future with Shane was out of the question.

The phone rang, and Heidi jumped up to answer it, her heart pounding in her chest. What if it was the police calling to tell her that Zachary had been hurt? She bit back a wave of nausea that rose in her throat. "Hello?"

"Hi, is this Heidi Griffin?" A male voice that Heidi didn't recognize filled the line. She swayed slightly where she was standing, clutching the edge of the wall for support.

She closed her eyes tightly to ward off the terrible news she knew was coming. "Yes," she whispered.

"My name's Buddy Sanders, and I work for the Santa Ynez Police Department."

"Oh God," Heidi cried. "Where is he? What happened to him?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"Aren't you calling to tell me about my son?"

The man on the other line cleared his throat awkwardly. "No, ma'am, I was calling about Shane Kensington." A second wave of nausea passed through Heidi's stomach, and she fumbled for the television remote to turn on the evening news. She had been so preoccupied with Zachary that she hadn't heard any reports that day, and the images of Zachary lying dead in a ditch somewhere were quickly replaced with Shane. She scanned the channels rapidly. "Are you still there?" the voice asked.

"Yes." Heidi braced herself for the man's next words.

"My apologies for scaring you, but I'm not calling on any kind of official business." Heidi let out a sigh of relief; she slid down the wall and sat cross-legged on the floor, holding the phone in one shaking hand. "I know this may not be my place, but Shane is my partner and best friend, and I was wondering if I could stop by sometime to talk to you about him?"

Heidi frowned. "I'm not sure if Shane mentioned to you then that we broke up a few weeks ago. Whatever it is, I don't think I'll be able to help you."

"See, the thing is," the man said hesitantly, "is that you're kind of my last resort. Shane's been putting himself in unnecessary danger lately, and I need someone who would be able to get through to him. I've tried, and so has his family, but he won't listen to any of us. I know how much he cares about you, and...well, we hope you can maybe break through to him."

"I'm sorry," Heidi said, pushing back the image of Shane's face swimming

through her mind, “but I just don’t think that’s a good idea. Shane and I—we aren’t going to see each other anymore, and I don’t think having me talk to him is going to help either one of us. Right now, I need to focus on my son. I hope you can understand.”

She pulled the phone away from her ear, and after hesitating for a fraction of a second, ended the call. Although she loved Shane and normally would do anything in her power to help him through whatever was happening, she knew that the only way for either of them to heal would be to never see each other again. Reopening wounds that were still so fresh could only lead to more heartbreak, and Heidi was certain that neither of them would be able to recover from it.

CHAPTER 18

Hidden by the dense coverage of the trees blanketing the sky above him, Shane sat in his car, his eyes focused on a homeless camp set deep into the hills above the valley. Surrounded by nothing but twisting dirt roads too narrow for a car to traverse, it was the perfect setting for someone who needed a place to go undercover. Shane was familiar with the camp, having visited it on more than one occasion for a drug bust.

It had now been two weeks since he had returned to the police force with guns blazing, so to speak. He had a new, focused determination that was evident to everyone around him. Shane wouldn't rest until he personally hunted down Sam Shephard.

He had become a man obsessed. After his shift each day, which he spent roaming the streets with Buddy, stopping anyone who looked suspicious, he would take his own car out into the darkest parts of the town, places that could easily obscure a person who had everything to hide. Despite the pleas of his family and Buddy, Shane had no intention of stopping until the man responsible for ruining so many lives was behind bars. His determination was only strengthened that morning when Palen broke the news that Nick, one of the first men Shephard shot, would need to rely on a wheelchair for the rest of his life. His career as a police officer was effectively over.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are, you bastard," Shane whispered, his right hand clenched on the butt of his gun. He had reported his suspicions about Shephard's whereabouts to Palen, but the chief had seemed less than convinced.

"We're offering a ten thousand dollar reward, Kensington," he had said, glancing up from the report he was reading. "His face is plastered all over town. Do you really think that a group of homeless people wouldn't recognize him and turn him in? If anyone could use the money, it's them."

"I really think we should stake it out," Shane had replied, clutching the edge of Palen's desk so hard that his knuckles turned white. "Just in case. I have a strong suspicion that he's out there, but I haven't been able to confirm it yet."

Palen set down the highlighter he was holding and peered at Shane over the tips of his fingers. "I don't know what's gotten into you lately, Shane, but I'm starting to get suspicious. You're volunteering for double shifts, coming into the station early and leaving late, trying to convince me to let you take the most dangerous patrol areas. Normally I would be pleased to have an officer so

determined to help, but I have a feeling there's something else going on here. And I don't like it."

"I just want to bring this guy to justice," Shane had said.

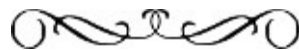
"We're doing everything we can, and believe me, we'll catch him eventually. He's mentally unstable, and it's only a matter of time before he gives himself up. In the meantime, I do not want you going out to that homeless camp. You and Buddy are responsible for patrolling downtown, and right now I want it to stay that way. Do you understand?"

Shane was undeterred. "I can do it on my own. Put someone else with Buddy for now. Or maybe I can check it out after my shift is over."

Palen stood up and leaned forward so that he and Shane were practically nose to nose. "I must not be making myself clear here, Kensington. I forbid you to go out there. You may not have been in attendance at Kelly's funeral, but I sure as hell was. And I am not going to have another one of my officers gunned down by some lunatic. Now take whatever personal problems you have right now and shove them aside, because I need everyone to be at the top of their game."

With that, Palen had resumed reading his report. Shane knew himself to be dismissed; he turned, and without another word, stormed angrily from the office.

But despite Palen's warnings, Shane had spent the last two nights camped out in front of the shadowed hill, peering up at the orange light reflecting down from the campfires flickering in the inky black sky. Shephard was out there, Shane knew, and he was prepared to wait for as long as it took.



"I'm coming, I'm coming," Heidi called as she padded toward the front door. It was her day off from the emergency room, and she planned to spend the time before Zachary came home from school relaxing in her bed with a good mystery book and a plate of chocolate chip cookies. Therapy, Josie had called it when Heidi confided her plans.

She was just turning the page to find out the name of the murderer when the doorbell rang, sending her book flying through the air in alarm. Brushing the crumbs from her lips, she ran a comb through her hair and straightened her t-shirt.

She peered through the front window. Standing on her front porch were a burly man with a blond buzz cut and a pretty woman about Heidi's age, with brown hair and light blue eyes that looked strangely familiar. Heidi opened the door a few inches and stuck her head outside. "Can I help you?"

The woman smiled anxiously at Heidi and offered her hand to shake. "I'm

Jaime Kensington, Shane's sister. And this is Buddy Sanders. I'm terribly sorry to bother you, but can we please come in?"

Heidi regarded the two of them warily. "Buddy Sanders," she said, addressing the man. "Aren't you the one who called me last week?"

Buddy inclined his head slightly in agreement. "That'd be me."

"But I thought I told you that I wasn't able to help." Heidi moved her hand to the doorframe, preparing to close it, but Jaime held out a hand to stop her.

"Wait, please." Heidi was startled to see tears forming behind the woman's eyes, which were the exact same color and shape as Shane's. She had to look away to stifle the ball of emotion rising in her chest; how often she had stared into his eyes and seen the promise of future happiness reflected in them. If only circumstances had been different.

After hesitating for another moment, she opened the door and ushered them inside. "Okay, but I'm really not sure how much help I could possibly be. I haven't seen or talked to Shane in a month. We didn't exactly end on good terms."

"I know," Jaime said, pushing her hair behind her ears and perching on the edge of the couch. "Shane told us what happened, about the accident."

Buddy nodded, and Heidi swung her head from one face to the other. "I hope you're not here to try and convince me to get back together with Shane," she said hotly, "because I can assure you that if that were an option for me I would have done it already. I miss him, but what's done is done."

Jaime shook her head. "We're not trying to butt into your relationship in any way. I'm sure you made the decision you had to make in order to protect yourself and your son. Shane doesn't blame you for not wanting to be with him anymore; if anything, he's taking full responsibility."

She swallowed hard and fingered the thin gold necklace she was wearing. "That's the problem. Shane has sort of...gone off the deep end. He's determined to catch Sam Shephard on his own, even though he knows how incredibly dangerous this man is. We think"—she looked at Buddy for support, and he grabbed her hand and squeezed it—"we think that he's somehow trying to make up for what happened to your husband by catching this guy. A way for him to forgive himself by being the hero this time around. And I'm afraid..." Jaime's voice wobbled and a lone tear slipped down her cheek.

"We're afraid he's going to get killed," Buddy said into the silence.

Heidi's jaw dropped. "But Shane's so sensible. Would he really do something to put himself in danger? He doesn't have a death wish. Does he?" she added in a small voice. She knew how hard she was taking their breakup, and could only imagine how much worse it was for Shane, especially if he blamed himself.

“I don’t know,” Jaime said, now crying softly into her hands. “All I know is that no one can get through to him. Please. I know that you aren’t together anymore, and it’s not your problem. But Shane loves you and he always spoke so highly of you. If there’s any way for you to call him, maybe try and talk some sense into this crazy plan of his, maybe he’ll stop what he’s doing.”

Noticing that she had been pacing the room while listening to Jaime speak, Heidi sat down heavily on her armchair. The last thing in the world she wanted to do was open up the lines of communication with Shane; she knew perfectly well that hearing his voice again would erase any progress she had made in the past month as she tried her best to get over him. A task at which she was already failing dismally. On the other hand, she loved Shane and probably always would; there was no way she could sit back and look the other way when his life was potentially in danger. What if something were to happen to him? Heidi knew that she would blame herself forever if she did nothing to stop him.

Jaime and Buddy were both staring at Heidi, visibly tense, and waiting for a response. “Okay,” she said finally. “I’ll give him a call tonight.”

*

Heidi held the phone with trembling hands, trying to navigate her shaky fingers over the keypad; even though she hadn’t dialed Shane’s number in a long time, she still knew it by heart. She let out a deep breath and hit the call button, crossing her fingers that Shane would pick up. Even though she’d rather not have to speak with him at all, the prospect of sitting in her house alone, waiting for Shane to call her back, was not one that she was willing to face. No, she decided, it would be better to just get it over with once and for all. She would do what Jaime and Buddy asked of her, and then she could go on with her life, trying once more to pretend that Shane Kensington didn’t exist.

The phone rang once, twice, three times. By the end of the fourth ring, the voicemail picked up; the sound of Shane’s soft baritone threw Heidi for a loop. “Shane?” she said, cringing at how meek her voice sounded. “It’s...me. Heidi. Please call me back.”

She purposely left her message vague, as she had discussed with Jaime and Buddy, so that Shane wouldn’t ignore her like he did the rest of his family and friends. Heidi didn’t think much of that plan; the last thing she wanted Shane to assume, especially in his fragile state, was that she wanted to get back together. But they needed a way to get through to him, and as Jaime pointedly said, Heidi was the best chance they had.

Setting the phone down on the table, Heidi wandered into the kitchen with

the vague idea of cooking something for dinner. Zachary was studying at a friend's house—a promising sign, Heidi thought—so she was alone once more for the evening. A chill lingered in the air, and Heidi shivered and wrapped her sweater more tightly around her body. It was the perfect night, she decided, for a piping hot bowl of homemade chicken soup. She opened the fridge and removed a few stalks of celery, carrots, and an onion. She had just reached into the cabinet for the cutting board when her phone rang shrilly. Throwing the cutting board onto the countertop, Heidi dashed into the living room to answer it.

“Shane?”

“No...Heidi, this is Lisa Norman, Alex's mother?” Heidi frowned, trying to place the name. “Alex is on the basketball team with Zachary.”

“Oh!” Heidi said, slapping her forehead with her hand. “I'm sorry, my brain's a little bit fried right now. Of course, how are you, Lisa?”

“I'm fine, but I just wanted to call and let you know that as we were driving home today from my parents' house we saw Zachary wandering on the side of Highway 101. We stopped and offered him a ride, but he declined. I asked if you knew he was out there and he said you did, but something didn't sit well with me so I thought I'd give you a call just to be completely sure.”

Heidi froze; as a single mother, the last thing she wanted this woman to think was that she could barely handle her own child. But, Heidi realized, thinking fast, she now had a pretty good idea of where Zachary had been spending his time when he disappeared for hours on end. When she spoke next, she tried to keep her voice light. “I take it he was near the farmer's market, right? My sister works there, and he likes to visit her sometimes to help out. She'll drive him home once it gets dark.”

“Oh, okay then,” Lisa said, sounding relieved. “Good. I'm sorry for bothering you.”

“You weren't. Thanks for looking out for him.” Heidi hung up the phone, then ran to the closet to retrieve her purse and keys. As she passed the front window, she glanced at the sky outside. Storm clouds were passing over, and Heidi could sense a hint of rain in the air. She needed to get to Zachary before the sky burst open; that stretch of road, as she was intimately familiar with, could be particularly treacherous when the rain kicked up the dust from the nearby fields.

Ten minutes later she was drumming her fingers on the steering wheel nervously, peering out of the windshield to search for any sign of her son's lone figure walking down the side of the road. She had just passed the police station and was quickly approaching the farmer's market. Heidi could feel her entire body tensing up; she had done her best to avoid this part of town since the

accident, and the memories that were now being conjured up were almost more than she could stand. She pushed them to the back of her brain, reminding herself that she needed her wits about her so that she could find her son.

Heidi gripped the wheel harder as her car neared the accident site, which was marked by a tall weeping willow tree just beyond the guardrail. Heidi could see from the mismatched color of one section of the guardrail that it had been replaced since their car had careened into it at full speed, twisting the metal until it distorted.

Steering her car over to the side of the road, she threw the gears in park and hopped out. “Zachary!” she called. “Zachary!”

“Mom?” A familiar voice responded from the side of the road.

Heidi peeked over the guardrail; there, sitting under the weeping willow with his knees wrapped around his chest, was Zachary. He looked so small, she thought as she swung her leg over the guardrail and made her way over to him. When she reached his side, she knelt down beside him and pulled him into a hug. “What are you doing here?” she whispered into his soft hair. “I was worried about you. And I don’t just mean tonight.”

He tightened his arms around her neck, burying his head in her chest. She stroked his hair gently, and they sat together, listening to the rustle of the wind through the leaves above them. “Have you come here before?” she asked.

He nodded. “All the time.”

“How did you remember? We haven’t been here since that night.”

Zachary pulled away from her arms and leaned back against the tree. Heidi joined him, and together they stared out over the guardrail to the road beyond. The sounds and images from the accident were playing through her mind, but this time, they were like a badly tuned radio. Time, Heidi knew, was beginning to work its magic.

“I remember the tree,” he said quietly, “because I was looking at it right before we got hit. I liked the way the branches reached down toward the ground.”

“But why?” Heidi asked, reaching for his hand. “Why do you come back? I would think that you’d never want to see this place again. I know I don’t.” Zachary picked at a small hole on the knee of his jeans, digging his fingernails into the loose thread to unravel it further. Heidi reached her hand out to stop him. “Talk to me,” she said. “It’s important that you tell me what you’re feeling.”

Zachary balled his hands into fists, and without warning, punched the ground. “Because I’m starting to forget,” he burst out. Alarmed at the sudden noise, a black bird that had been fluttering among the branches took flight. “I can’t remember his face, or the sound of his voice.” His face bunched up angrily, and

Heidi could see the color rising in his cheeks.

She pulled him back onto her lap. “Sometimes I can’t either,” she said. “And it scares me, too.” She rested her chin on her son’s head and stared out at the road, where an old station wagon was passing by slowly. The elderly man driving it spotted them and waved merrily.

“When I come here,” Zachary said, “I can still feel him. Sometimes I talk to him. Is that weird?” He twisted his head around to face her.

“No, it’s not. I talk to your father all the time. It’s just your way of keeping him close to you. And there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I pretend that he’s my angel,” Zachary whispered, turning his face to the sky.

Heidi choked back the lump forming in her throat and leaned down to kiss her son on the cheek. “He’s very proud of you. I hope you know that.”

Zachary nodded, then squinted up at Heidi. “There’s something else.”

“What, baby?”

“I know about the accident.”

Heidi froze, her hand hovering over her son’s hair. “What do you mean?”

He sighed. “I heard you and Shane talking. I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to listen. But your voices were loud and I could hear you from outside.”

Heidi buried her head in her hands. “You weren’t supposed to hear that, honey. I didn’t want you to know what happened with Shane. Don’t be mad at him, though. I’m not. It was just an accident.”

Zachary frowned at her. “I know that. Why would I be mad? I always thought...”

“Thought what?”

“I always thought that maybe Dad sent Shane to watch over us since he couldn’t do it himself.”

CHAPTER 19

Shane slid the phone out of his pocket and frowned when he saw that he had missed a call from Heidi. He keyed in his voicemail password and drew the phone to his ear, his stomach lurching sadly when he heard her voice for the first time in weeks. As he listened to the message, though, his sadness quickly turned to anger. It sounded just like the frantic calls he had been receiving from his family all week, he thought furiously. Now, it seemed as though they had bribed Heidi into joining the choir of people telling him that he should stay home, like a good little boy.

Well, he wasn't going to stand for it. Not now, when Shane knew that he was so close to the finish line. Despite Palen's orders to stay away from the homeless camp, Shane was there again tonight, sitting quietly in his car, shielded by the blackness of the cloudy sky. Palen may have thought that the homeless men and women who lived in the hills would be foaming at the mouth for a chance at the reward money for turning Shephard in to the police, but Shane didn't believe that was true for one second. The police and the homeless community in Santa Ynez had always experienced a relationship that was fraught with tension; Palen was instrumental in making sure that they stayed out of the town limits, causing them to flee to the hillside to avoid being arrested for loitering.

Shane was convinced that they would do whatever they could to protect a man whose mission it was to rid the town of every police officer he could, reward money or not. And it was up to him, the lone believer, to make sure that Shephard never hurt another one of his fellow officers again.

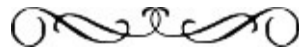
He had been the subject of ridicule at the office, once word got around that Shane was taking matters into his own hands. "Think you're a real tough guy, huh?" Buddy's old partner Frank had asked as a crowd of officers cheered him on. "Going to catch Shephard single-handedly?" When Shane had turned to Buddy, standing beside Frank and squirming uncomfortably, for support, his friend had merely shrugged and walked away. Shane knew then that he was truly on his own.

And that was just fine with him, he thought angrily as he peered through his binoculars to the hill looming above him. Shane was used to being alone.

But the lack of support he had experienced from the other officers had caused a sense of recklessness to grow inside of him, snaking and snarling through his veins like a many-headed monster.

He patted the duffel bag on the seat beside him. Tucked away inside of it was the costume he had painstakingly planned out. With the entire Santa Ynez police force out searching for Shephard, Shane knew that the only chance of capturing him was by going undercover, becoming someone who Shephard thought that he could trust. Then, once Shane gained the man's confidence, he would be able to record a confession and place him under arrest. It would finally be over.

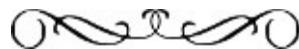
As he watched the first rays of the rising sun peeking through the clouds, Shane's pulse quickened with a mixture of nerves and excitement. His plan would begin at daybreak.



Only after Zachary was finally asleep, now that the sun was breaking over the horizon, was Heidi once more able to focus her attention on Shane. She and her son had stayed at the site of the accident for hours, talking, laughing, and sharing memories of John. Afterwards, Heidi treated him to a hamburger and chocolate milkshake at the 24-hour diner downtown. Other than a few seedy-looking men wrapped in overcoats, they were the only customers in the entire place.

Now, alone in her bedroom, she ran her fingers over the screen of her phone. Her heart was pounding with fear; Shane had never returned her call. It seemed unlikely that he would ignore her completely, so the only conclusion that formed in Heidi's mind was that he was hurt, or worse. Buddy had said that it was only a matter of time before Shane was killed, and Heidi knew that there was no reason to suspect that he was embellishing the truth. Heidi knew that Shane had a quiet determination about him, and if anyone would want to take it upon himself to restore safety to their community, it was Shane Kensington.

Heidi pressed the redial button on the phone, but hung up the call before the voicemail picked up. There was no use in leaving another message, she knew. With no choice but to wait, Heidi sank down on her bed and watched the orange and pink sunlight spread higher and higher in the clear morning sky.



Shane unzipped the duffel bag and slowly removed the contents inside. He had spent an hour the evening before rooting through his closet for clothes that made him look appropriately homeless. Luckily, he thought now as he observed the raggedy shirt he held in his hand, he had a bad habit of holding on to old clothes that were better suited for the garbage can.

He yanked his sweatshirt over his head and pulled on the flannel button-down

shirt that was worn through at the elbows. Next, he slid a pair of stained jeans over his hips, removed the heavy gold watch that his father had given him as a graduation gift when he completed the police academy, and donned a weathered baseball cap. His tennis shoes, too white to be believable, had been rolled in a puddle of mud and dirt sitting in his front yard.

Not bad, Shane thought as he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the rearview mirror. If he didn't know any better, he would think that he had been down on his luck for some time now. Shane only hoped that the other people camped out in the tents dotting the hills would be none the wiser.

He switched on his engine and pushed the gear into reverse, then slowly backed his car into a patch of grass that was completely obscured by a clump of towering birch trees. From the backseat he removed a worn backpack and slung it over his shoulder; hidden inside were a few basic supplies and a tape recorder that he would use as evidence once Shephard confessed. Reaching inside the glove compartment of his car, Shane carefully removed his gun and tucked it behind his sock, then shook his pant leg down to completely conceal it.

The trek up the hillside was a long one, and Shane stopped a few times to catch his breath. Above him, he could see the flaps of a few tattered tents blowing in the breeze, their occupants still sleeping soundly inside. Among them, he knew, was the man who would shoot him dead without batting an eye. Not if I get you first, Shane thought grimly, hitching his backpack further up his shoulders and continuing his ascent.

When he reached the top, a few bleary-eyed men peered at him suspiciously from a makeshift campfire burning in the corner. Above the fire, a few tin cans were strung, and the men were eyeing them hungrily. "Whatcha got in there today?" one asked, pointing inside one of the cans.

"Mushroom soup," grunted another. "Picked it up from the backdoor of one of them restaurants down the hill. They was just gonna throw it away, so I says I'd take it."

"Excuse me," Shane said, picking his way through a scattering of sleeping forms huddled inside dirty blankets. "Do you men mind if I join you?" He tossed his backpack on the ground beside the campfire and glanced around for an empty log to sit on.

The man stirring the soup pointed at Shane with a rusty spoon handle. "Whatcha doin' here? This is a private camp." The other men nodded in agreement; one bared his yellowed teeth at Shane in a leer.

"Lost my job," Shane said. "Tried to rough it near town for a few days but the police kicked me out. Heard about this place and thought I'd come and check it out for myself." Without waiting for an invitation, he perched on the edge of a

log near the outskirts of the campfire and drew out a hunting knife. As the men eyed him warily, he brought out a block of cheese and began cutting it into chunks, which he tossed into their open hands. "Peace offering," he said, popping a piece of cheese into his own mouth.

The first man lowered his spoon and nodded to Shane, then passed him one of the tin cans. "Damn police," he grunted, watching as Shane took a tentative sip. "Can't trust 'em anymore'n you can throw 'em." He snickered. "And some of 'em are so tubby, that ain't far."

The other men threw their heads back and howled with laughter; after a brief hesitation, Shane joined in. "'Course," the man continued, a sly gleam in his eye. "One of us is actually doin' somethin' about it, eh fellows?" The men shifted on their logs uncomfortably; the air around them grew thick with tension. Shane felt a few eyes darting his way, and did his best to arrange his features into a nonchalant expression.

"Is that right?" he asked. "What do you mean by that?"

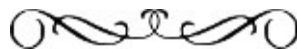
Sensing that he may have said too much, the man muttered something under his breath and continued filling the tin cans with soup. "I'll let him tell you hisself, if he wanna." He brought the dented spoon to his mouth and took a noisy slurp. "That's the ticket," he moaned happily, rubbing his stomach. "I ain't had a hot cuppa soup in a long time."

Shane heard the leaves behind him crunching, followed by the sound of heavy footsteps approaching the campfire. "What you got there, Bernie?" a deep voice boomed. The men hastened to make room on the logs for the newcomer, who sat down with a groan. "Got a big day ahead of me," he said with a wink. "Gonna need my strength."

"Here ya go, Sammy," the man said, passing him a can. "Got ourselves a feast this morning."

At the sound of the man's name, Shane could feel his blood pulsating behind his ears. Here we go, he thought to himself. Turning slightly on his log, Shane glanced quickly at the man sitting adjacent to him, now spooning the steaming soup into his mouth.

His face hit Shane like a punch to the gut. The shaggy beard, deep age lines, and dull green eyes were unmistakable.



Heidi's thoughts were elsewhere as she wrapped a sports bandage around the wrist of a little boy with bright blue eyes and a trembling lower lip. "There," she said, patting him gently on the arm. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" She rolled her

chair over to the medicine cabinet, opened a drawer, and withdrew a cherry lollipop. The boy's eyes lit up in excitement. "I thought that might help," she said, winking at the little boy's father, who hovered over him anxiously. "Try and keep him from moving his wrist around too much. Luckily, it's just a small sprain, so it should heal pretty quickly."

Heidi leaned over the boy, who was now enthusiastically unwrapping the lollipop. "Now I need you to promise me that you won't jump down the steps anymore. You don't want to get hurt again, do you?" He swung his head back and forth and popped the lollipop in his mouth; his tongue immediately turned bright red.

"I think that's the last time he'll try that," the father said with a laugh. "I have three kids and two eyeballs. Somehow, it seems like that doesn't add up." With a cheerful wave at Heidi, he steered his son from the room.

Heidi watched them until they rounded the corner, then slid her phone out of her pocket. It wasn't strictly forbidden to keep her phone on her while she was on duty, but it was definitely frowned upon unless there was an emergency. This, Heidi decided, looking once more at the blank screen, could definitely be categorized as an emergency. No one had heard from Shane in two days, despite the numerous messages from his family that Heidi knew were now crowding his voicemail.

Dr. Conway rounded the corner with Josie at his heels, and Heidi hurriedly shoved the phone back in her pocket and returned the remaining portion of the sports bandage roll to the cabinet. Josie poked her head into the room where Heidi was sitting. "How are you doing?" she asked, her brows furrowed in concern. "Has anyone been able to reach Shane yet?"

"No," Heidi whispered, motioning for her to step inside the room. "He hasn't been returning anyone's calls." Every time she pictured Shane, a sick feeling swelled in her stomach. The idea of never seeing his face again...well, that was something Heidi didn't want to imagine.

"So does this change things between the two of you?" Josie asked, perching on the edge of the examining table and folding her arms across her chest. "Think you'll get back together?"

"I don't know," Heidi said uncomfortably. She had been so undone by finding Zachary at the scene of the accident, followed by Shane's alarming disappearance, that she found herself telling Josie the entire story when she arrived at work that morning. Her emotions were in such turmoil that it was unbearable to keep them bottled up inside any longer. Josie had listened sympathetically, and had agreed with Heidi that the position she was in was practically impossible.

“I’m still not sure how I’d ever be able to look at him and see anything else but John,” Heidi continued, then hesitated.

“But?” Josie prompted.

“But I’m torn,” Heidi admitted. “Right now, the not knowing if he’s safe or not, that’s killing me. I don’t know what I would do if anything happened to him.” She felt the color drain from her face. “What am I doing? I can’t sit here any longer.” She stood up and took a step toward the door, but Josie held out a hand to stop her.

“What the hell do you think you’ll be able to do?” Josie said with a snort. “You’ll only get yourself killed. You said Buddy was going after him, right? Leave it to the professionals. I don’t want anything to happen to you, Heidi. If you’re not worried about yourself, at least think about Zachary.”

Heidi’s shoulders wilted. “You’re right,” she said, sitting back down heavily and dropping her head into her hands. Buddy had called her earlier in the day to tell her that if he hadn’t been able to get in touch with Shane by midday, he would bring a couple of other officers out to go looking for him. The fear in his voice when he told Heidi his plan did nothing to ease the anxiety bubbling up in her chest.

“Just hang tight,” he had said. “If we find him, I’ll let you know.”

So now, the only thing Heidi could do was sit back and wait, praying and hoping that Buddy would catch up with Shane before he did something that could never be undone.

CHAPTER 20

Shane instinctively reached for the handle of his gun, still tucked safely out of sight beneath the leg of his jeans. Then, he slowly withdrew his hand. Here he was, sitting no more than ten feet away from the man whose face was plastered all over the county, and at that moment there was nothing he could do about it. He needed to wait, Shane reminded himself, until he was one hundred percent certain that he had the right person. If he marched into the police station proclaiming he had captured Sam Shephard only to be mistaken, he would be the butt of jokes for years to come. Patience, Shane thought, picking up his tin can once more and draining the last drops of soup from the bottom.

Slowly, the men around the campfire trickled away to be replaced by others who emerged from their tents and took seats on the logs. Most regarded Shane curiously; others ignored his existence. Through it all, Shephard remained in his seat, idly carving a thick stick with a small penknife and whistling through the gap in his front teeth.

Shane waited, biding his time. Once the area had mostly cleared away, he slid down the log he was sitting on until he was directly across from Shephard. "I'm Jimmy," he lied, holding out his hand for the other man to shake. "Just found the camp this morning."

Shephard peered at him, then nodded curtly, avoiding Shane's outstretched hand. "Sam," he said gruffly.

"Been here long, Sam?" Shane asked casually, tossing his can to where the others were scattered around the campfire. He picked up a long stick and poked at the dying embers of the fire, which glowed orange against the black coals.

"Bout six months. Born and raised in California, though. Lived in Georgia for a while, but I missed it here. Eventually I'd like to make my way out to the coast, see the ocean again. It's been a while."

Shane nodded, keeping his eyes fixated on Sam's hands as he deftly whittled the stick. The man wore a heavy overcoat with plenty of deep pockets; Shane couldn't be certain that a more powerful weapon wasn't concealed inside one of them. "What's that I heard earlier about you having some important business to take care of today?"

Sam smiled, an eerie smile that made the hairs on the back of Shane's neck stand on end. "That's right. I got a job to do." He ran the tip of his knife along his thumb until a thin red line appeared, then brought his thumb to his lips and

licked it clean.

This is it, Shane thought, his heart pounding wildly. When Sam turned his head in the other direction, Shane reached into his backpack and quickly switched on the tape recorder still hidden inside. "Need any help?" he asked. "I could use something to do, myself. Happy to lend a hand if I can."

Sam's smile widened until it curled at the edges into a sneer. "Depends."

Shane leaned forward, pushing his backpack in front of him with his foot. He didn't want to miss a word of what Sam was about to say. "On what?" he breathed.

Sam bared his teeth, which were yellow and mossy; Shane recoiled slightly. "Have you ever killed a man?" Sam asked, now running the blade of his knife along the top of his shoe. "It takes guts. Not everyone can do it. But the feeling afterward? It's like the best kind of high. Watching the color drain from someone's face as he takes his last breath." He licked his lips hungrily as Shane watched, transfixed.

"You're not one of us," he said suddenly, and Shane felt his pulse quicken. "These other men? You might have them fooled." Sam laughed and shook his head. "But not me. I know who you are. Or should I say what? A spineless pig." He laughed again, sending a prickle of chills down Shane's spine. Shane's fingers inched toward his gun; his senses were heightened. At any moment, he knew, this man could attack. He had proven on more than one occasion that he was a cold-blooded killer.

"I don't know what you mean," Shane said, working to keep his voice neutral. "Who do you think I am?"

Sam spat on the ground and peered up at Shane. "Could be wrong," he grunted. "My apologies if I am. My name's been in every paper in the state for weeks now. Makes a man paranoid, you know."

Shane nodded. "I understand." His hand relaxed, and it drifted once more to his backpack.

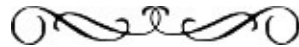
"Thing is," Sam continued, "I recognize you. Seen you 'round town quite a bit. Used to have a pretty little lady friend with you. Wouldn't mind getting my hands around her neck."

The blood rushed into Shane's ears as he grabbed his gun and aimed it at Sam, who, at the exact same moment, pulled a rifle from the inside of his overcoat. For one heart-stopping second, the two men stared each other in the eyes, frozen, their fingers over the triggers.

Shane fired the gun once, twice, three times. Through the roar of the gunfire, he heard the other people in the camp screaming and stampeding around, trying desperately to escape the hail of bullets. A searing pain, stronger than anything

he had ever experienced, tore through Shane's chest. There was another explosion of agony in his leg, and then his hip.

As he fell backwards onto the ground, the pain blurring the edges of his hazy mind, he reached out an arm and grasped at the air above him. "Heidi," he whispered. "Heidi. It's over." A slow smile crept across his face. Then, darkness.



Heidi's first thought upon seeing Buddy arguing with the nurse at the emergency room reception desk as she made her way to her car was that he had come to update her on Shane. "It's okay," Heidi called to Corrine, the nurse on duty. "He's here to see me." She hurried over to the desk and pulled Buddy to the side. Only when he turned to face her did she notice that his eyes were bloodshot from crying.

"Oh God," she whispered as he slumped against the wall and struggled to control himself. He sank to the ground and dropped his head in his hands, then let out a noise like a wounded animal. From the corner of her eye, Heidi noticed for the first time a small cluster of police officers standing near the entrance, looking grave.

Heidi dropped to her knees beside Buddy and shook him roughly on the arm; he raised his head slightly and peered at her through tearstained eyes. "Tell me what happened." She was surprised at the cold calmness of her voice, when inside she felt like she was spiraling out of control, down a dark and deep hole into the abyss. "Where's Shane?"

Buddy raised his hand and pointed a shaking finger toward the area just beyond the emergency room doors. Heidi jumped to her feet and craned her neck, trying to see over the flurry of nurses and doctors hovering over what appeared to be two identical stretchers. Pressing her hand against her stomach to ward off the waves of nausea passing through her, Heidi stumbled over to the doors and pushed through them. "Out of my way," she said roughly, forcing her way into the crowd, which pressed together more tightly. "Move!" she screamed as loud as she could, trying her best to barrel her way to the front. Several of the nurses turned to look at her in surprise.

Josie disentangled herself from the crowd and grabbed Heidi by the arm, then steered her away and into an empty examining room out of sight from the stretchers. "Stay away," she ordered, struggling to hold onto Heidi as she fought tooth and nail to escape Josie's clutches. "Please, Heidi, you have to let us do our jobs."

"Shane!" Heidi screamed, tearing her arm away from Josie's grip and running

back down the hallway. The crowd around the stretchers had thinned; Dr. Conway was now standing in front of them, waving his clipboard and barking orders at the top of his lungs. When he saw Heidi sprinting toward him, he caught her around the waist with one arm and pushed her out the doors and into the waiting area.

“Watch her,” he warned Corinne, who nodded and grabbed Heidi by the wrist. “Don’t let her anywhere near here. Call Dr. Francis from the operating room and tell him that we need him down here now. We don’t have an extra second to spare.” He turned to Heidi, whose face had now drained of all color, and placed a sympathetic hand on her shoulder. “I understand that this is a friend of yours. I promise I’ll do everything I can for him.” The pager attached to the waistband of his scrubs buzzed, and he sprinted back through the emergency room doors.

“I’m sorry,” Corinne said to Heidi, blocking the doors as she attempted to follow. Corinne’s eyes were filled with tears. “You heard what Dr. Conway said.” She directed Heidi to a chair, then hovered over her nervously, chewing her lip and glancing every few seconds toward the doors.

“Don’t worry,” Heidi said tonelessly, slouching down in her chair. “I’m not going in there.” She knew that it was no use; the best thing she could do for Shane was to let Dr. Conway and her fellow nurses work their magic. Corinne offered her a pained smile and returned to her post at the emergency room desk, where a small line of patients had formed in her absence. When Corinne’s attention was directed at a man whose son had a jelly bean stuck up his nose, Heidi stood up and crossed the room to where Buddy was sitting alone.

She had barely opened her mouth to speak when they were suddenly surrounded by a large group of people, all trying to talk over one another. Heidi closed her mouth and looked around in bewilderment. A small dark-haired woman whose eyes were red-rimmed was gesturing wildly at Buddy; Heidi could see that she was being practically held up by a red-faced man with blond hair that was graying at the temples. Behind them stood three women, all with identical expressions of shock on their faces, and a tall man Heidi quickly recognized as Cody, Shane’s younger brother. In the corner of the room, crying and talking on her cell phone, was Jaime. As Heidi watched, she closed her phone with a snap and joined the rest of her family, who were now demanding answers from Buddy.

“I don’t know,” Heidi heard him say again and again. “We just don’t know anything yet.”

Heidi hovered at the edge of the grief-stricken group, feeling distinctly uncomfortable despite her own terror over Shane. She felt like an intruder, an

unwelcome witness to their anguish as they clamored to know what had happened to their beloved family member. She began backing away slowly before anyone could recognize her.

“Heidi!” a voice called, and, cringing, she swung around to find Jaime motioning frantically to her. At the sound of her name, the rest of the family turned around and eyed her with interest. Heidi had no choice but to step forward and join them.

The small, dark-haired woman peered at Heidi intently; her eyes, so unlike Shane’s, were as black as coal. Despite her obvious despair, the woman smiled wanly at Heidi and extended her arms for a hug; after the slightest of hesitations, Heidi wrapped her arms around her. “I’m Michelle, Shane’s mother,” she whispered. “We’ve heard so much about you. I only wish we didn’t have to meet under these circumstances.” One by one, the three sisters stepped forward and introduced themselves, followed by Robert, the family patriarch. Far from being angry at Heidi for breaking Shane’s heart, they seemed grateful for her presence.

“Tell us what you know,” Robert said to Buddy, drawing his wife to his side; Michelle rested her head on her husband’s broad shoulder.

Buddy drew in a shaky breath. “When we couldn’t get in touch with Shane, we suspected he went out to the homeless camp. We found his car almost completely hidden in a clump of trees, but saw no signs of any struggle. We had a pretty good idea that he decided to walk up to the camp to see if Shephard was there.” Michelle gasped and covered her mouth with her hands; Robert tightened his grip around her waist.

Buddy nodded grimly. “It took us a good while to trek up there. On the way up the hill, we heard...” He stopped and pinched his eyes closed. “We heard gunshots. Seven or eight of them.” Heidi swayed on the spot; Cody reached out a hand to steady her. “By the time we got up there, it was too late. It looked like Shane and Shephard got into a gun battle. Both were down. We called for reinforcements, then followed the ambulance to the hospital.” He pounded his fist against the wall. “That’s it. They won’t tell us a damn thing.”

“Thank you,” Michelle said, stepping forward and circling her arms around Buddy, whose shoulders were heaving with emotion. “Thank you for risking your life to save our son.”

“He would have done the same for me,” Buddy said gruffly, wiping his eyes with the cuffs of his uniform. He turned to Heidi. “Is there anything you can find out?”

Heidi shook her head frantically. “No one will let me inside the emergency room, so I know as much as you do. Less, actually.” She wound a trembling finger around a loose strand of hair; try as she might, she was unable to shake

the image of Shane lying prone and bleeding on the hard ground. Suppressing an urge to run back through the emergency room doors, she contented herself instead with pacing in circles around the waiting area. Before long, Shane's sister Lacey joined her.

"I'm scared," she said, peering at Heidi behind wide eyes. She tossed her long blond hair over her shoulders and gripped Heidi's arm; she was so tiny that Heidi could look right over her head. "What if he doesn't make it?"

Heidi shook her head violently. "Don't even say that. Shane's a fighter. If anyone can make it through this, it's him."

Lacey nodded. "I guess you're right. Luckily I've been staying with my parents for the last few days. If I had to drive up from Los Angeles, I would have been a basket case." She offered Heidi a shaky smile. "I'm sorry we haven't had a chance to meet before now. I know you never had an opportunity to get to know the family before..." Lacey's voice trailed off, and Heidi looked away, tears in her eyes. She knew what the end of Lacey's sentence would be, and she didn't want to hear it. Heidi's mind was spinning with all of the things she never had a chance to say to Shane. What if now she never could?

Lacey shrugged. "Anyways, I'm glad you're here now. I know that Shane would really appreciate it."

Heidi opened her mouth to respond, but closed it again, unable to find the right words. Lacey rejoined her family, leaving Heidi with the opportunity to sneak away from the group unseen. What she needed right now was time to grieve in private.

Skirting around the group of police officers still standing in the corner, she made her way outside. Heidi glanced around to make sure that no one was watching; in the hustle and bustle of the emergency room parking lot, she was thankful to be practically invisible. The afternoon sun, now high in the sky, beat down on the top of Heidi's head; she turned her face upward to let it warm her face and allowed, finally, the tears to stream freely down her cheeks. "Please," she whispered into the sky. "John, or whoever else is listening. I need him to be okay."

"Heidi?" Cody's head appeared around the corner, and she hastened to wipe her eyes. "The doctor is coming out to talk to us in a couple of minutes."

"Be right there," she said, then turned her face once more to the sky. "Promise me. Just promise me that he'll be okay."

CHAPTER 21

“It’s too soon to tell,” Dr. Conway said, folding his hands and avoiding Heidi’s eyes while he addressed the Kensington family, who were gathered anxiously around him in a corner of the waiting room. “He’s in surgery right now to remove the bullet from his chest.”

Michelle gasped and swayed slightly on the spot; her children reached out their hands to steady her. “How many times was he hit?” Cody asked, and Heidi could tell that he was working to keep his voice steady.

Dr. Conway sighed heavily. “Three. Once in his right hip and once in his left leg. Those bullets have already been removed; they caused significant damage that will require extensive physical therapy, but they aren’t life threatening. The one in his chest is, of course, much more concerning. It clipped the edge of one of his heart valves, which has caused a lot of internal bleeding. My colleague in the operating room is working right now to stop the bleeding. I can assure you that we are doing everything we can for Shane.”

Heidi glanced around at the pale, drawn faces surrounding her, and knew that hers looked the same. She recognized from the tone of Dr. Conway’s voice that things were serious, even though he was doing his best to reassure the family. It was, she knew, the blessing and the curse of spending the last year working in the hospital. She herself had put on many a brave face when speaking to devastated families; Heidi couldn’t believe that she was once again finding herself on the receiving end.

Dr. Conway nodded to the Kensingtons and walked away, Heidi hot on his heels. She grabbed him by the arm just as he was about to disappear through the door. “Wait.” He turned around and studied her with sympathetic eyes. “Tell me what’s really going on,” she said. “I deserve to know the truth.”

He continued to stare at her for a few moments, then heaved a sigh and beckoned her inside. “Follow me,” he said quietly. As Heidi pushed through the door after him, she turned around and saw Jaime watching her. She gave Heidi a brief, almost imperceptible nod, as if to say *we’re counting on you*, before turning back to her family.

Dr. Conway was hurrying down the hall, and Heidi jogged to catch up with him. “Are you sure you really want to know?” he asked when she arrived at his side, panting slightly. She squared her shoulders and nodded. “It’s not looking good,” he said briskly. “Because the shooting occurred so far away from the

hospital, the delay in getting him treatment caused his body to go into shock. There was a period of time—and we aren't sure how long—where he was without oxygen to the brain.”

Heidi moaned and dropped to her knees in the middle of the hallway; Dr. Conway grabbed her by the wrists and guided her to her feet. He placed his hands on her shoulders and looked directly into her eyes. “We aren't going to know until he wakes up if he sustained any brain damage. He's in surgery right now, but Dr. Francis is confident that the wound to his heart can be repaired. Once he's in recovery, it's a waiting game.”

“How soon will we find out?” Heidi asked faintly. She knew from her brief experience as a nurse that a brain injury was one of the most feared diagnoses. Some patients never recovered, while some went on to overcome their injuries and lead long and fulfilling lives. Only time would tell, and Heidi couldn't bear the thought of not knowing.

“I think it will be apparent fairly early on whether there's any damage. If there is, it will take time to assess exactly how much.” He smiled sadly at Heidi, who stood frozen with fear. “The best thing you can do for Shane is to be there for him when he wakes up. He's been through a lot.”

As she watched Dr. Conway walk away, Heidi felt a comforting hand on her arm. She turned and flung herself onto Josie, who stroked her hair softly and held her until the shuddering sobs wracking her body had finally subsided. Heidi looked up at Josie through tear-stained cheeks. “What am I going to do?” she choked out. “What if I've lost him forever?”

*

The group gathered around Shane's bed in the recovery room was withdrawn and silent. Heidi sat in the corner, hunched up against the wall with her knees drawn to her chest. As she gazed at his still form and pale face, so small and helpless-looking among the many wires hooked up to his body, she suppressed the urge to climb into the bed with him. Heidi wanted nothing more than to run her fingers once more through his hair, trace her finger down the strong bones of his cheek, and tell him that she loved him.

Instead, she sat back and watched as Shane's family crowded around him, holding a quiet vigil. His mother couldn't take her eyes from her son, and stood beside him clutching his hand so tightly that several times Robert had to gently loosen her grasp. “You're leaving fingernail marks,” he murmured to her, bringing her hand to his lips and kissing it softly.

They remained there throughout the night, watching from the hospital

window as the first hint of sunlight broke through the horizon. Every so often someone left the room for a cup of coffee or to get a breath of fresh air, but hour after hour they sat, waiting and praying for the first flicker of Shane's eyelids to indicate that he was going to be okay.

The doctors and nurses bustled in and out of the room, speaking in hushed voices and shooting furtive glances in Heidi's direction. She knew word around the hospital had spread quickly that Heidi Griffin, the long-suffering widow and single mother, was about to lose the only other man she ever loved. She could feel their sympathetic eyes boring into her, but she kept her gaze on the ground, determined to ignore the fact that she was the subject of their whispered conversations in the hall. The focus, she knew, should remain on Shane and his recovery.

Heidi must have dozed off for a few minutes because she woke to find Michelle sitting beside her, gazing over at Shane's bed. "Shane is my firstborn," Michelle whispered when she noticed that Heidi was awake. "I couldn't have asked for a better son." Not knowing what to say, Heidi nodded quietly and draped her arm around the woman.

"He loved you, you know," Michelle continued, and Heidi felt a hard lump of emotion form in her throat, obstructing her airway. She struggled to catch her breath. "I know you two had your problems and that you aren't together anymore, but I want you to know that Shane considered you family, and so do we."

"Thank you," Heidi whispered. "That means a lot to me."

"And if something should happen and Shane...well, if Shane doesn't wake up." Michelle stopped and pressed her fingers against her lips to compose herself. "I want you to know that you and your son are welcome any time. Shane would want that."

Heidi nodded again, unable to form the words she needed to thank Michelle for her kindness, even amidst the woman's own suffering. She squeezed her hand, and Michelle squeezed back; somehow, Heidi knew, that was enough.

From across the room came a gasp and small scream. "Shane!" Lacey said. "Mom, come here! I think I saw something." Heidi and Michelle jumped up and hurried to Shane's bedside, joining the rest of the family who were now crowded around, jostling for a view.

"What did you see?" Michelle demanded.

"His finger moved," Lacey said excitedly, pointing at where his hand rested on top of the white bedcovers.

Heidi tried not to let her devastation show in her face; she knew that the finger twitch was probably involuntary, a reflex that had no correlation to

Shane's recovery. Moving around Shane's sisters, she reached down and stroked Shane's forehead lightly, then bent over and pressed her lips against his temple.

"I love you," she whispered into his ear. "Come back to me so we can spend the rest of our lives together." She felt his fingers twitch once more, and she grasped his hand in hers, running her thumb gently along his palm.

"Come back, Shane. I'm waiting for you."

EPILOGUE

“There it is!” Zachary called, pointing out of the car window to the giant weeping willow visible from the highway. “Pull over, Mom.”

Heidi steered the car to the side of the road and turned off the engine, reaching around to the backseat as Zachary bounded out of the car and jumped over the guardrail leading down to the grassy field just beyond the road. It was a beautiful day; the air was fresh with the first hint of spring, and the sweet scent of wildflowers hung in the air like perfume. “Wait up,” Heidi called to her son as she emerged from the car carrying a bouquet of sunflowers and daisies. “I can’t climb over that thing as fast as you.”

Heidi swung one leg over the guardrail and joined her son, who was now sitting against the thick trunk of the willow tree and turning his face up to the sky. A smile lit up his features as the warm sun played across his face. Heidi crouched down beside him and threw her arm around his shoulders, setting the bouquet of flowers carefully on the ground. “Where do you want to leave them?” she asked.

Zachary patted the ground beside him. “Right here,” he said. “Underneath the tree. That way they’ll be protected.”

Heidi nodded and unwrapped the cellophane wrapper from around the flowers. As she did, she glanced up at the car to find that the passenger side door was hanging open. She stood up and hurried over to the guardrail. “What are you doing?” she asked, her worried eyes on the figure now emerging from the car. “You know you’re not supposed to walk very far.”

Shane unfolded his long legs and leaned heavily against the walking stick he now relied on; he was undergoing a rigid and extensive physical therapy routine before he could regain full use of his hip. He hobbled over to the guardrail and attempted to lift his leg, but Heidi held out her hand to stop him when she saw the wince of pain cross his face. “You don’t need to do this, Shane,” she said.

“I do.” His voice was determined. Slowly, he guided his injured leg over the guardrail and limped over to where Heidi was standing. He smiled down at her. “See? I told you I could do it. I wouldn’t miss this for the world.” Taking her hand in his, they made their way across the grass slowly, stopping every now and then so that Shane could catch his breath. “I’ll be good as new before you know it,” he said, wrapping his arm around Heidi for support. She reached around her waist and grasped his hand in her own.

They reached the edge of the tree, where Zachary was waiting for them. “Ready?” he asked.

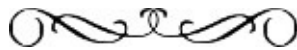
Heidi squeezed Shane’s hand. “Ready.”

From his duffel bag, Zachary removed the photo of John that Heidi had mounted on a piece of thick wood. He handed it to Heidi, who smiled briefly as the memory of the day she snapped the photo came rushing back to her. Heidi stepped forward and laid the photo gently against the tree beside the bouquet of flowers. She bowed her head and closed her eyes, imagining that the quiet breeze tickling her ears was a sign of John’s presence. “I love you,” she whispered. “And I always will.”

She backed slowly away from the tree and tore her eyes from John’s smiling face. Linking her arm through Shane’s, she motioned for Zachary to join them. When he did, the three of them stood there quietly, each lost in their own private thoughts. For Heidi, although this spot symbolized the loss of everything she had once dreamed about for the future, it was now a place for quiet remembrance, acceptance of events that could never change, and hope for a new beginning.

“Come on,” she said after a few more moments of quiet reflection. “It’s time to go home.” Then, hand in hand, the three of them walked back to the car, ready to begin their life together as a family. It was, Heidi knew, the start of something great.

THE END



Author’s Note

To sign up for my new release list to be notified about upcoming books in the Kensington series and other Clare Kenna novels, please go to <http://goo.gl/forms/xOjRcI1mfZ> and enter your first name and email address.

Turn the page for a sneak peak of FOREVER MY LOVE, the second book in the Kensington series, now available wherever digital books are sold.

Want to stay in touch? I’d love to hear from you! Feel free to send me an email at ClareKennaAuthor@gmail.com. Follow me on Twitter at [@ClareKennaBooks](https://twitter.com/ClareKennaBooks), or like my Facebook page at

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Clare Kenna

FOREVER MY LOVE

A Kensington Family Novel

CHAPTER 1

Ethan Conway stared at the woman sitting across the table from him with a vacant expression on his face, trying his best to listen as she described what she did for a living, but not really caring to hear about it. Most men would probably say that she was beautiful, with her willowy frame, mile-long legs, and thick blond hair, and at one point in his life, Ethan almost certainly would have agreed. But right now, he wasn't giving her a second glance. The date was a sham, a way to appease his overbearing sister Hillary and stop her from talking incessantly about how he needed to get back into the dating world before it was too late. Too late for what, Ethan wasn't sure.

"Then I went back to school to get my MBA, since it provides so many more opportunities for women in today's workplace," his date was saying, pausing from her endless stream of chatter to take a long sip from the glass of white wine sitting in front of her. In a moment of panic, as he watched her pat her lips dry with a cloth napkin, Ethan couldn't remember her name. He thought that it began with a K, but he couldn't be certain. Kristy? Kirsten? Karen? The possibilities were endless.

"Interesting," he murmured, arranging his features into what he sincerely hoped was an attentive expression. Secretly, he was praying that the fire alarm in Ristorante Rossi would go off, forcing everyone to leave so that he could return once more to the comforting solitude of his cabin. Perhaps it would still be early enough to take Bentley, his ten year old hound dog, for a walk through the hills and valleys that surrounded his property in the small town of Santa Ynez, California, that he called home. Under the table, Ethan slid his phone out of his pocket to check the time.

He barely noticed that his date had stopped talking, and when he brought his head up to meet her gaze, her smile had become fixed. "Am I boring you?" she

asked in a stiff tone, and it was apparent from the ice in her voice that Ethan had better not agree.

“Of course not,” he said quickly. “I’m so sorry, but I just realized that I completely forgot to give my dog his medicine tonight. Do you mind if we skip dessert?” It wasn’t exactly a lie, he thought defensively as he signaled for the waiter to bring the check to their table, tucked away in a quiet corner of the intimate restaurant. The bouquet of lilies draped across the tablecloth had been Hillary’s idea; she stopped by Ethan’s house as he was getting ready for the evening and thrust them into his arms.

“Give her these,” she had said, “and don’t even think about telling Kate that they came from me.” Ah, there it was, he thought as the waiter hurried over with the bill. Her name was Kate.

“Hang on,” he said, raising a finger, then fished around in the pocket of his sport coat for his leather wallet. He opened it and slid his credit card into the black check holder, then handed it to the waiter with a smile. “We’re in a bit of a hurry.” Ethan had, indeed, forgotten to give Bentley his joint supplement, which helped keep the old dog’s arthritic limbs from seizing up. It could technically wait until later, but Ethan didn’t want Bentley to suffer thanks to his own forgetfulness.

He turned back to Kate with a bright smile on his face, relieved that he would soon be able to slip into the driver’s seat of his car, crank up the radio, and erase this night, like so many others, from his memory. “Where were we?” he asked, enthusiastically cutting off a bite of his steak and rolling it in the accompanying wine sauce. Kate looked very much like she wanted to cry, or perhaps throw her fork squarely into Ethan’s face.

Ethan’s smile faltered and his stomach sank like a stone as he noticed her turn away from him to subtly dab at the corners of her eyes. Damn it, he thought fiercely. He was doing it again. Acting like a complete jerk for no reason. He supposed that unconsciously he was rebelling against the pressure he was receiving from Hillary to date again, and Kate had the misfortune of being his latest failed experiment. In his defense, he had every reason to want to lock himself away in his house and never come out again. No one understood the pain of what he had been through, and time hadn’t dulled its sharp edges. Ethan was mistrustful of women, for very good reason.

“I’m sorry,” he said, swallowing hard and reaching across the table to cover Kate’s hand with his own. “I didn’t mean to upset you.” He took a deep breath. “I really wasn’t in the right mentality to start dating again, but my sister said that you were really nice and I wanted to give you a chance.” Again, he thought to himself, not technically a lie. “Apparently, I’m just not ready to put myself out

there again. I hope you can understand. You're a lovely woman, and you deserve a date who can give you his full attention. Unfortunately, I'm just not that guy."

Kate watched him through narrowed eyes until he had finished speaking, then stood up from her chair abruptly and swung her shawl over her shoulders; the restaurant patrons at the next table stared at them through bugged-out eyes, their meals forgotten. "I don't care what kind of baggage you have," she hissed in a voice that carried across the room. "That doesn't give you the right to treat me as poorly as you have been all night. You disgust me. Goodbye, Ethan." She grabbed her purse and flounced out of the restaurant, leaving Ethan sitting alone at the table with flaming cheeks, wishing that he could sink right through the floor and never be seen again.

When the waiter returned with the receipt, he scrawled his signature across the bottom as fast as he could and hurried outside to his car, offering a silent prayer of thanks when the crisp California air filled his lungs. Ethan had felt like he was suffocating inside that restaurant, surrounded by happy couples and sitting across from a woman he didn't care about at all. There was no reason for him to try and impress her, not when he had no intention of allowing the relationship to progress past the first date.

To an outsider, Ethan knew that he probably came off as arrogant and self-centered, toying with the emotions of an innocent woman and embarrassing her with his public display of inattention. He felt a sickening swell of shame in his stomach as he remembered the hurt expression in her eyes when he had so abruptly signaled for the check. But in reality, Ethan was still recovering—would perhaps always be recovering—from the searing pain of a broken heart.

He pictured her now—Kelly, his Kelly. Somehow he still thought of her that way, even though they had been divorced for nearly five years now and he hadn't laid eyes on her since the day he turned and walked out of the home they shared, never to return. Ethan had been smitten with her from the moment they first met, so long ago, during study hall class in their freshman year of high school. From the time he was fourteen, Kelly had been an inextricable part of his life; it was impossible to erase her from his memories, or else he would have none left. They had become instantly inseparable; first, as best friends, and later, as a couple.

Since their divorce, Ethan had been spiraling out of control, down a dark and endless hole from which he had been unable to climb out of. He had cut himself off from everyone he knew, with the single exception of Hillary, who was his only living family member. Other than his father, that is, but Ethan never really counted him; the man had, for all intents and purposes, disappeared from his life decades ago. Since then, Ethan had only heard from him once, with the

exception of a few perfunctory birthday cards in the mail, and even those had stopped when he had reached the tender age of ten.

Now an emergency room doctor by trade, Ethan had established a successful career for himself in San Francisco, but after leaving Kelly he returned to his hometown of Santa Ynez to head the small community hospital's emergency department. He purchased a cabin for himself on the very outskirts of town set deep into the canyon roads, which he regularly disappeared into for long walks with Bentley, to try and forget about the past that was always looming darkly in the back of his mind.

*

"Bentley," he called fifteen minutes later, loosening the tie around his neck and clapping his hands together. "Come here, boy." The sound of scuffling filled the hallway, and the old dog, still so full of energy, skittered around the corner to greet Ethan. Bentley flopped onto his back at Ethan's feet and stuck his paws up in the air, and Ethan dropped to his knees to rub the dog's graying belly. "I missed you," he whispered into Bentley's floppy ears; the dog thumped his tail on the floor merrily and offered Ethan a very humanlike grin.

Ethan glanced around for the tennis ball that was always within arm's reach, and tossed it down the hallway. Bentley clambered to his feet and scurried after it. A surprise from Kelly for Ethan's twenty-fifth birthday, man and dog had become the very best of friends. Bentley was the only remnant of his past life that Ethan brought with him after the divorce other than the clothes on his back; leaving Bentley behind was, of course, not an option.

Ethan tossed the ball a few more times before Bentley tired of the game, plopping down on his favorite plush rug in front of the fireplace with his tongue lolling on the floor. Kicking off his shoes, Ethan sank down to the ground to join his dog, petting him absentmindedly and reflecting on his disastrous date. Away from the flickering of the candlelight and the soft music humming through the restaurant's speaker system, Ethan felt acutely aware of how rude his behavior had been. Sure, he hadn't wanted to go out on the date, but that certainly wasn't Kate's fault. The least he could have done was treat her with the respect that she deserved.

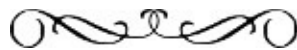
He was a mess, and he knew it. It may have been five years since the divorce, but Kelly's betrayal had cut him so deeply that he didn't know if he would ever recover, let alone muster up the courage to begin dating again. Right now, Ethan would prefer to be alone forever than open himself up to trusting someone with his heart. He hadn't been the only one to mourn Kelly's absence in his life; after

he moved to Santa Ynez, Bentley spent the next month wandering around the cabin and howling disconsolately. Every night, the dog placed his eager head on Kelly's side of the bed, hoping that she would be there; when he saw that it was cold and empty, he would sigh heavily and retreat from the room.

Ethan's phone buzzed in his pocket, and he reached down to check the caller ID. He groaned out loud when he saw that it was Hillary, and debated for a few seconds whether he really wanted to listen to her scolding when she found out how awful the date had been. Ethan knew that his older sister meant well; growing up, she had always done her best to watch out for him, despite being just a kid herself. After their mother died, Hillary had dropped out of college to take care of Ethan, putting her own dreams on hold in order to earn enough money to keep a roof over their heads and food in their stomachs.

Deciding to let the call go to voicemail, Ethan tossed the phone across the room onto the couch and lay back on the ground with his hands linked behind his head. Outside, he could hear the soft hooting of an owl in the branches of the maple tree that towered over his cozy cabin. When Ethan left San Francisco, he had no idea where he was headed; all he knew was that he needed to start a new life, far away from the demons of his past. It had been dumb luck that he found the cabin that he now called home, tucked away at the edge of the town. His closest neighbor was half a mile down the road, and Ethan knew that if he glanced outside his window now, he would be surrounded by nothing but darkness.

It was the perfect place for a man like Ethan, who had been too hurt by the curveballs life had thrown him to care about anything other than his solitude. He was an island, a man alone.



Jaime Kensington was running late. She sprinted through her apartment, tearing clothes out of her closet and rummaging under the bed for a matching pair of shoes. As she caught sight of her runny nose and red-rimmed eyes in the mirror above her vanity, she groaned out loud and splashed water on her face. The last thing she needed right now was to explain to her family why she had spent the entire morning curled up in a ball on the couch, sobbing uncontrollably over a silly talk show airing on television.

Today would hopefully be a cause for celebration; every member of the Kensington family who lived in town was going down to the courthouse to support Shane, Jaime's oldest brother, as the jury announced whether the man responsible for shooting him a few months earlier would be sentenced to life in

prison. Jaime knew that she needed to compose herself before showing her face to the rest of her family; they would only fret over her, and Shane deserved to have his day of triumph uninterrupted by her own drama. Glancing at the clock on her nightstand, Jaime dragged a comb through her long brown hair as fast as she could and twisted it into a barrette at the back of her head.

After throwing one last filthy glare at the television set, now gaping blankly at her, Jaime shoved her arms into her gray blazer and headed for the front door. As she gave a hearty sniff and reached for a tissue in her purse, Jaime cursed herself for being stupid enough to watch that particular program, which today had featured the toothy host grinning in satisfaction as she arranged for surprise reunions between parents and children who had lost touch with each other over the years. Jaime, however, didn't find it the least bit heartwarming; on the contrary, all the show did was dredge up memories that had long haunted her. Mistakes she had made, the kind that could never be undone.

Jaime hurried out to her car, tripping over her high heels in the process, and revved the engine to life. She was supposed to pick up Shane on the way down to court, and he had expected her five minutes ago. Pressing down on the gas pedal, Jaime sped onto the highway for the short drive to the house that Shane shared with his girlfriend Heidi and her young son.

"Where were you?" Shane demanded a few minutes later as he limped over to her car, leaning heavily on his walking stick. Shane, a police officer, was shot in the line of duty; while the doctors were confident that he would eventually regain full use of his leg and hip, he was currently undergoing a rigorous physical therapy routine. Since Heidi worked odd hours as an emergency room nurse at Saint Andrew's Hospital, Jaime regularly offered to drive Shane to his appointments.

"Sorry," Jaime said, reaching over to push open his car door. "I overslept." She cringed as the lie slipped out of her mouth so easily, and it wasn't even believable, at that. Jaime, a stickler for punctuality, could not remember for the life of her one time where she had overslept; she set three alarm clocks every night to make absolutely certain that it never happened. Shane threw her a confused look, then shrugged and sank back into the passenger seat, resting his head on the cushion and staring at the ceiling. "Are you nervous?" Jaime grasped her brother's hand briefly in her own.

"A little," Shane admitted. "But mostly I'm just relieved that this is going to be over with. I can't really move on with my life until it's in the books." He shifted in his seat and pressed his forehead against the window, watching as the bright green hills of Santa Ynez rolled by.

"I meant to ask you," he said after a time, glancing over at Jaime through the

corner of his eye. “Are you interested in going out on a date with one of the male nurses that Heidi works with? She’s decided that he’s perfect for you, but I told her that I hadn’t seen you date anyone in years. You’re too focused on your career.” At his last words, he rolled his eyes at her dramatically. “Which is ridiculous, by the way. Your business is still going to be there, even if you cut loose and have a little fun once in a while.”

Jaime gripped her hands on the steering wheel, watching as her knuckles slowly changed from pink to white. Here we go again, she thought wearily. There was always someone in her family trying to set her up on a date; just last week, her sister Lacey had called from Los Angeles and practically begged Jaime to go out with an actor she had met on the set of the new movie she was filming. Lacey didn’t seem to care that the last thing Jaime wanted to do was date someone in Hollywood; she vastly preferred the intellectual type, a man who had no problem keeping up a good, long conversation. At that last thought, a pang of pain shot through Jaime’s chest; she rubbed it discreetly with the tips of her fingers until it disappeared. She tried not to think about Alan these days.

“I’m just not interested in dating right now,” she said, trying to keep her voice light. Or ever, she thought to herself as she jerked the steering wheel to the left and swung into the parking lot of the courthouse, where she could see a crowd of familiar faces gathered between the two white pillars supporting the old building. When her mother Michelle spotted Jaime’s car, she hurried forward to greet her two children, her brown eyes wide from nerves.

“Are you ready?” she asked Shane, holding out an arm to steady him as he stepped out of the car. “We’ve been waiting for you. What took so long?”

“Sorry,” Jaime said, walking around the front of the car to peck her mother’s cheek. “I was running a little late this morning. Forgot to set my alarm clock last night.” Her mother frowned at Jaime, who blushed deeply and ducked her head. To Jaime’s immense relief, Michelle didn’t pursue the matter other than to throw her another suspicious glance as she helped Shane navigate the courtroom steps.

“Are we all here?” Jaime’s father Robert called, his ruddy cheeks growing even redder under the glare of the sun. Shielding his eyes, he counted out his children; five of the eight Kensington siblings were mulling around, chatting amicably and waiting to enter the courthouse. “Let’s go,” he called, cupping his hands together around his mouth to amplify his voice. “We should have been inside fifteen minutes ago.”

Trudging up the steps behind her brother Cody, Jaime poked him in the back. “How were you able to get away from the restaurant?” she whispered when he turned around in surprise. Cody, an amazing chef with a penchant for mouth-watering Italian dishes, owned Ristoranti Rossi, one of Santa Ynez’s most

popular restaurants that he named for Michelle's side of the family. Cody rarely left the restaurant during operating hours; he was entirely mistrustful of allowing anyone else to take over the reins. Like Jaime, he was somewhat of a control freak.

"I'm forcing myself to take more breaks," he said, flashing her a wide grin; his light blue eyes, so like her own, sparkled in the sunlight. "Guess who was at the restaurant last night?" he said to Shane, who was limping up the stairs behind Jaime. "Ethan Conway."

At the mention of Ethan's name, Jaime's heart performed a small cartwheel in her chest. Dr. Conway, as she usually referred to him, had been one of the men responsible for saving Shane's life after the shooting. He was a highly respected doctor in the community, not to mention jarringly handsome, with deep green eyes and dark hair that was thick and luxurious. During Shane's stay in the hospital, Jaime ran into Ethan many times on her regular trips to visit Heidi to receive an update on Shane; Ethan, the emergency room doctor, was Heidi's boss.

"He looked like he was getting himself into some kind of trouble," Cody was snickering, and Jaime perked her ears up attentively. "There on some kind of date, by the looks of it, but it wasn't going well. The woman made a scene in front of the entire dining room and stormed out."

"I'll have to ask Heidi about it," Shane said, breathing heavily as he leaned on his walking stick. "But Dr. Conway's pretty private from what I understand, so she probably won't know much."

Lost in thought at the idea of Ethan on a date with another woman, Jaime almost ran headlong into the heavy wooden doors leading to the interior of the courtroom. She had harbored a minor crush on him since they first met, and even though she had no intentions of starting up a relationship with anyone for the foreseeable future, the image of him with another woman did nothing to help her bad mood.

She was dying to know what he did, though, that made his date so angry. It was typical, Jaime thought, shaking her head in annoyance; men couldn't be trusted. There was once a time, long ago, when Jaime had believed in the possibility of true love. She thought that she had found it with Alan, until he proved to her that it was all just a selfish game, designed to see who could inflict the most pain. And he had most definitely won the gold medal.