

Karma

A story in Nick Scipio's Summer Camp Universe

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This story is fan fiction. It's also a short story of only five chapters. I've tried to write it in enough detail to explain at least the minimum needed for the characters to make sense, but it *is* a story based on someone else's written work with a pre-established history that would take too long to cover in full detail. If you want more back story, I suggest you read Nick's excellent *Summer Camp* series. Even if you don't want more back story, I *still* suggest you read *Summer Camp*.

The main character in this story is Regan Thomas, a minor character in Nick's epic. She's rich, self-centered, and one of the major factors in a seriously bad time for Nick's protagonist, Paul. They were in college in the 80's when that happened and this story is set twenty years later.

My incredible editor, Jo Beller, saw something redeeming in Regan while many other readers condemned her as a bad seed. Jo finally convinced me that there was more depth to her that should be explored. I pondered Regan's Karma and this story is the result. I give credit to Nick for creating characters to fire our imaginations and Jo for believing in this story. And, of course, to my wife/editor, Mrs. Wine Maker, for all her support. My writing is a tribute to her.

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Chapter One: Spiral descent

Killington, VT

November 12, 2000

My mother's hand was as cold as ice. She looked so pretty in her designer teal dress, salon-perfect hair, flawless makeup, and serene expression - one I had very rarely seen; she seemed so sublimely at peace.

She'd chosen an elegant ebony coffin with gleaming brass fittings. The soft rose pillows effortlessly set off her dress. Leave it to my mother to be perfect, even in death admonishing me for not being like her.

I swallowed painfully and blinked back a fresh stream of tears. I wanted to scream for her to get up and stop playing this cruel prank on me. Even seeing her like this, I couldn't accept that such a vibrant woman could have breast cancer. It boggled my mind that she hadn't checked herself regularly.

Setting her hand down gently, I stepped away from the casket to stand next to a large wreath of flowers done in a wrap of cardinal and straw. Those were the colors of Chi Omega. One of the few things we shared. Her sorority sisters would be out in force at her graveside service but had chosen to leave the funeral to the family.

I used my thoroughly soaked tissue to wipe my swollen eyes. I couldn't - wouldn't - start sniping at her again, even if she wasn't here to snipe back. I'd give anything to have one more chance to argue with her. Even if only to hear her express, politely and condescendingly, her profound disappointment that I couldn't be more like her.

God knows I'd had tried to be like her, to be that same vibrant, perfect woman. Even though she didn't think us anything alike, I knew we shared at least one trait: stubbornness. This is why we were here instead of Tennessee. Her family was from Tennessee, but she'd put her foot down in her will, and things were going to be done her way. The funeral would take place in town near her beloved Vermont chalet. At least I assumed it was because of her will, since I wasn't privy to its contents.

The rest of the family had raised hell, but nonetheless, here we were. They hadn't stayed for the whole first day, but they'd be back in force tomorrow for the second day of viewing. Then we'd have the funeral on day three, and she would fly back to Tennessee for burial. After that, I'd have to stay yet another day with Conrad since

Mother named us both in her will. As her most recent husband, I expected he would walk away with everything she'd treasured and that pissed me off. I couldn't stand him.

The tears flowed again, refusing to obey me. Some part of me said it was okay to cry, but another part warred with that notion. With a sniff, I realized that was pride. It's another trait I shared with my mother, who'd taught me how to make it an art. Pride argued that I couldn't be seen losing control like this in public, even at my own mother's funeral viewing. I had to maintain appearances.

I laughed humorlessly through the tears. The all-important family pride. Doing what the family expected had certainly worked well for me so far, hadn't it? All that trying to live up to other's unrealistic expectations had gotten me was two divorces and a distant - and sometimes barely civil - relationship with my parents. Ever since I was a teenager, I'd tried to be just like my mother, and tried to be exactly what my father expected me to be. I'd succeeded far beyond my wildest dreams of success. What was that old saying? "Be careful what you wish for because you just might get it."

I'd called both of my closest friends as soon as I'd found out that my mother had died, but both Gina and Margot were out of the country with their families. I'd left frantic messages for them to no avail. I felt all alone and badly needed to talk to someone I trusted.

I almost swore at Conrad again. He'd called my assistant yesterday to pass on the news about the funeral. No one had even told me she was ill, much less dead. If Daddy hadn't called to coordinate our schedules I probably would've missed the first viewing. Conrad hadn't mentioned the viewing at all, damn him. When I'd called him back, he'd blandly insisted that my assistant must've misunderstood. The lying bastard.

Through the haze of my grief, a cold, arrogant voice said, "If you're going to carry on like this, please take it to the ladies' room." Conrad was back for another go at me. He seemed to go out of his way to screw with me these days. Fine. At least the fury inside me pushed away the pain for a little while.

The tears dried up as if by magic and I was clearly able to see the bastard standing in front of me. I could see what attracted my mother to him; he was tall and handsome - the perfect piece of arm candy. Knowing my mother, he was probably good in bed, too. The thought of them together sent a wave of revulsion through me.

"Tell me, Conrad, do you even know why people have viewings for the dead?" I asked acerbically.

"Certainly not to carry on like some common piece of trash," he sniffed, "caterwauling on and on. She was my wife and I won't have you disrupting the solemn decorum that she wanted."

I considered taking the massive wreath that Hans and Kat Werner had sent and bashing him with it. Actually, I was reaching for it when I yanked myself up short. It'd taken a lot of years and experience for me to think about the consequences before I acted. It still didn't come naturally to me.

I frowned at Conrad's smarmy smile. He and I had cordially loathed one another since my mother married him four years ago. Well, that was partly a lie; we'd never been cordial, but this was out there even for him. Why attack me like this here, of all places?

Movement at the doorway gave me my answer. He wanted to embarrass me in front of someone that mattered. Daddy walked in with his wife, Melissa. I spared Conrad a glare of pure hatred and schooled my features. I wasn't going to disappoint Daddy.

"I'll grieve as I see fit. This isn't over, asshole," I snarled in a low voice.

Sweeping past Conrad as though he weren't there, I went directly to my father and let him take me into his arms.

His awkward embrace was both comforting in its familiarity and saddening in its brevity. We'd never been more than strangers who just happened to occupy the same house and gene pool. From the earliest moment I could remember, I knew that he was uncomfortable with children, even his own. My father's shows of affection had always been brief and awkward and that never changed in all these years.

I received a perfunctory hug and kiss from Melissa, but her eyes didn't reflect the sorrow on her face. I sometimes wondered how a woman like her had taken Daddy in. She was only ten years my senior and something of a cosmetically enhanced Barbie doll.

On the other hand, we were enough alike to disturb me. After marrying two men for their wealth and power, I couldn't very well deride her for doing the same, now could I. The fact that they were still married after almost eight years told me that at the very least she was better at handling a philandering husband than I was. Even with her good looks, I knew Daddy too well to expect he'd stopped playing the field. I wondered if I would be her in ten years. If I were, would it finally make him happy?

"I'm so glad to see you both," I said, my voice astonishingly steady. "Thank you for coming."

"Where else would we be, darling?" Daddy said in a gruff voice. "You need your family around you at a time like this." His glance at his Rolex ruined the effect of those wonderful sentiments.

I almost laughed aloud at such an honest gesture from the man that sired me, the man whose love I'd worked so hard to get as a teen. He was also amazingly like both my ex-husbands. One would think I'd have learned something by watching my mother deal with him, but in the end, I'd ended up marrying men just like him.

Mentally, I shrugged. Why complain about it? What else was there? All men were alike, weren't they? Certainly, I had never met or been with anyone who'd make me believe otherwise, though some of my friends seemed genuinely happy in their marriages. Gina came to mind. She was genuinely in love with her husband. I didn't like him at first, but he made her happy, so I'd grown to like him over the years.

"Why don't you and Melissa go say your good-byes?" I said with my best hostess face on. "I'm sure you're exhausted from your flight and want to get out to the chalet to rest."

"We should speak to a few people first." With a smile, Daddy led Melissa to speak with the now solemn and visibly grief-stricken Conrad. It would be awkward for both men, I hoped.

Immediately, I felt guilty for being such a bitch. I always managed to be a bitch about something and then feel badly about it later, though thankfully I managed to keep my mouth shut more often than not these days. It was my worst flaw; I'm certain both of my ex-husbands would agree.

With a sigh, I grabbed my coat, walked out the front door of the funeral home, and looked at the sky. Lead gray clouds hung low above me, promising a good storm tonight. I felt some satisfaction that the weather matched my mood so well.

I shook myself. I'd had enough of this wallowing in self-pity. There'd be time for that once I was away from this place and away from Conrad. Part of me longed to go back to the chalet; I wanted to reacquaint myself with the bar. Another part of me wanted to go back inside and be with my mother. I knew that part of my dark mood was simply a

result of being tired.

After standing there for a little while, I thought I could be in the same room with the rest of them again. The viewing ended in half an hour. The relative lack of viewers told me that I hadn't been the only person that the self-centered asshole had failed to inform in a timely fashion.

Just before I turned to go back inside, a taxi pulled up and a ghost from my past - one I'd hoped never to see again - climbed out and paid the cabbie. I wanted to run back inside. Hell, I wanted to grab the taxi and tell him to head for LA, but I was rooted to the spot. Like a rabbit frozen in fear and unable to run from an advancing snake, I watched him approach with his bag over his shoulder.

"Hey, babe," Rod said with a grin. "Did you miss me?"

I stood in shock for a moment and then I ran back into the funeral home. I slammed the door in his face, holding it closed with my back, trembling. He'd been my boyfriend in high school and college; we'd broken up and gotten back together countless times over those years. I'd finally dumped him for good when I realized that if he were what a boyfriend was "supposed" to be, then it wasn't enough for me. Rod was a total asshole and serially unfaithful, screwing anything with boobs and a pussy. And let's not forget the cocaine in unlimited quantities. He'd been handsome and rich, a member of my social caste. I'd allowed society's expectations to either keep us together or keep getting us back together for far too long. What in hell was he doing here?

When Rod knocked on the door, I yelled back as calmly as I could. "Go back into whatever hole you crawled out of!"

"Come on, babe, be reasonable," he pleaded from outside. "I just came to pay my respects to your mother and talk with you. How can that hurt?"

How can that hurt? He apparently had a different set of memories than I did. Combined with my family's own dysfunctions, the entire tumultuous relationship with him had set the tone for every relationship of mine that followed. While I couldn't blame him for *my* mistakes, I didn't have to *like* what he'd done to me.

I was trying to find the lock on the door when Daddy, Melissa and Conrad came out, probably attracted by my yelling.

"Did you say Rod, darling?" Daddy asked. "Open the door and let him in."

Gritting my teeth, I opened the door and stepped back. Rod walked in with a smile for everyone. That was his way. He was the golden boy. No one ever believed he did, or could do, the kind of things he did, and he got off easier than OJ Simpson.

Daddy smiled and took his hand. "Rod, my boy! What a pleasant surprise! What brings you from Bermuda on a night like this?" Rod had fled to Bermuda after he beat charges over a car loaded with drugs, and *that* had suited me just fine. Oh, he'd made a show of transferring to Miami to finish his degree, but even without proof, I knew the later move to Bermuda was just a continuation of his flight from scrutiny. Rod worked best under the cover of darkness.

"It's good to see you, Mr. Thomas," Rod said diffidently. "I was trying to have a few private words with Regan to express my condolences and catch up on old times, but I think I've upset her. I'll just go into town, get a room, and leave her some space. I'll see you all after the funeral."

"Oh, I wouldn't hear of it," Conrad said with a malicious smile. "We have plenty of room, and I absolutely insist you stay with us."

My mouth dropped open like a hooked fish. "You've *got* to be kidding me! There's no way he's staying with me!"

Conrad turned to my father with a raised eyebrow. My father shook his head. "Don't be that way, baby. We have plenty of room and Rod is an old friend of the family. He can stay." With a triumphant smile, Conrad walked outside with Daddy.

Rod shrugged at me, hefted his bag, and followed. Daddy hadn't even looked at me. His decision settled the matter. Melissa looked at me, though, and then she looked at Rod and smiled. Her desire for Rod was clearly visible. This was just peachy. It was bad enough that I was staying with Daddy Clueless and three pit vipers, but now it appeared that one viper had a hunger for another.

"We're calling it a day and going to the chalet," Melissa said. "You're supposed to come with us."

I closed the door, resting my forehead against the cool wood. Then I started banging my head rhythmically against it. I loved my father, I really did, but he made me crazy. "I'm *supposed* to do a lot of things."

"So, I take it that you and Rod have a *history*," Melissa continued when I regained control of myself, acting as if I'd never tried to bash my own brains out on the door. "But that's over, right?" Her attraction to Rod turned to lust before my eyes, and for a moment I considered warning her, but I really didn't want to share my history with Rod. With a shrug, I realized that they probably deserved one another.

"It couldn't be more over if he was run over by a bus," I confirmed. "I'm going back in for a moment to see Mother again, and then I'll be out." I marched back inside and took a deep breath before walking more sedately to the casket.

After a minute of silence, I went to join my impatient family for the ride to the chalet. All of them had crammed themselves into Conrad's white SUV. I climbed in next to Daddy and sulked all the way to the chalet.

When we arrived, we all went in and started stripping off our outerwear. Melissa looked around the foyer and I remembered that she'd never been here before. While Mother was alive, she'd never have stood for either Melissa or Daddy coming here, much less actually *staying* here.

It'd been years since I'd been here myself and I wanted to refresh my memory of the place, so I decided to give Melissa the tour. The pine entryway opened into a wide stairway that led up to the great room. To either side of the entry were benches. Above them on the walls, hooks waited for coats.

The men stripped their outerwear quickly and went upstairs. I shrugged off my coat, hung it up, and pulled off my shoes. I motioned for Melissa to follow me up to the great room. At one time, I'd thought it was nothing to scream about, but I'd learned to love it and the rest of the place over the years. It had so many good memories. I'd shared it with my parents and with friends. That made me smile. These walls would ruin my reputation, such as it was, *if* they could talk. Back in college, and on selected trips later, my friends and I had had some wild times here.

Melissa looked impressed at the huge room, and I felt an unexpected burst of pride. It was over two stories tall with incredible floor-to-ceiling windows on the far end. The pine paneling that continued seamlessly from below supported antique ski equipment that added ambiance to the wide-open space. Throughout the room were scattered couches and end tables that fit the spirit of the place like a glove. The stone fireplace took up about half of one wall and a long wet bar ran along the opposite side of the room. Finally, two hallways led off, one to the left and one to the right.

I pointed to the glass doors that melded into the large windows. "We have a deck out there with a big hot tub and there are rooms down each of the hallways. Sometime during the screaming match when I arrived, Conrad said you were in the second room on the left side of the leftmost hall. I'm in the room next to yours." The first room on that side had been my room for as long as I could remember. I'd checked to be sure that Conrad was on the opposite side of the house. "There are bathrooms at the end of both halls and the kitchen is the first door on the right side of the rightmost hall. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go change."

When I had my door closed and locked behind me, I threw myself on the bed and held my head. How could things go so badly so quickly? I hid for half an hour, trying to convince myself it was all a bad dream. Then I gave up, grabbed some clothes, and sequestered myself in the bathroom for a long, hot shower.

The house was suspiciously quiet when I returned to the great room. Maybe I was alone. A check of the kitchen showed it to be empty and spotless. I walked back out and mixed myself a drink. I needed it. I needed more, but this was all I allowed myself these days.

I'd barely seated myself on one of the couches when Rod came out of my hallway. So much for being alone, I thought. He had changed into a set of slacks and a turtleneck. That was one thing about Rod. He always cleaned up well. You'd never know about the slime that lay under that slick and handsome exterior.

I took a breath and looked away from him, pretending I was alone. That, of course, didn't work. He fixed himself a drink and sat down across from me.

"I didn't come here to hurt you," he said softly

My head snapped up. "Forgive me," I said sarcastically, "but I don't see you coming all this way just to comfort me."

He smiled. "People change. We haven't seen each other in a lot of years. I understand that I hurt you, that I disappointed you, and I want to apologize for it. You didn't deserve that."

I blinked in surprise. Rod apologizing was... unbelievable. I'd have an easier time believing that he was gay than he was sorry. "I... Thank you." The subtle scent of his cologne wormed its way into my senses in unsettling reminders of him.

Against my will, I let him slowly get me talking. The years we'd been a couple worked against me, because he knew just how to get me to relax my guard. In an hour, the impossible had happened. I was sitting with Rod and having a civil conversation about the things that had happened to both of us in the last two decades. I even listened to his tales of woe about his ex-wives, and commiserated with stories about my failed marriages. It was surreal. He refilled my drink when it emptied and was more smooth and polished than I remembered him being. I guessed we'd both matured.

I considered telling him how badly my mother's death had hurt me, but I couldn't imagine being that honest with him. Part of me kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. This had to be a lead-in to something else. Rod didn't do anything without a reason. Compassion was not one of his failings, and he could never change enough to make it a virtue. I told myself that repeatedly, but still felt my will weakening.

Then my alarms went off. How much had I had to drink? I blinked at the smiling Rod, suddenly wary again. He was now sitting on the same couch as I was and had moved uncomfortably close. Looking down I saw what tripped my alarm. His hand was on my leg. Oh God! He was making a move on me! A wave of revulsion mixed with desire flooded through me. Some part of me wanted him, but I wasn't going to go there again.

"No," I said, moving his hand from my leg.

Surprisingly, he took that with a nod. "You're probably right," he said, standing up and going back to the bar. "We might not be ready for that. Still, if I can't help you feel better that way, there are other options." He dug under the bar, for a small serving platter and turned his back to me.

"Like what?" I asked, the alarms now screaming inside me. "Rod, I think I'd better call it a night before we do something that will undo what goodwill we've built up."

"You're right. I have one last peace offering."

He turned around and set the platter on the low table between us, and I suddenly knew where he was going. He'd laid several lines of cocaine on the mirror-bright surface next to an even larger pile of the stuff. Part of me wanted to slap it off the table or smash Rod in the head with it. More frightening, though, another part of me felt the "tingle." Any addict knew about that desire. No matter how long you'd been clean, it never fully went away. In previous times of stress I'd felt the draw of that insidious white powder, but I'd managed to avoid slipping. So far.

I watched him pull out the tightly rolled hundred he favored as a "tooter" and snort the lines. Then I gulped when he offered it to me. "No," I said weakly. "I gave that up five years ago. It almost destroyed my life. I won't go back to it."

"I'm not telling you to start snorting regularly again," he said seductively, "but this is the worst time in your life and you need something. You just said you didn't have anyone that could be there for you and you know how a line or two picks you up. You feel good. The pain just goes away. Then in a few days, when this is all over, you can just put it back away."

The frightening thing was his logic sounded almost reasonable.

Shaking off the impulse, I dragged myself to my feet. "I should've known this was all an act!" Then I did smash the tray off the table in a cloud of expensive drugs. "You want me to take that shit so I'll be back under your control. I remember how it was and what it did to me." I half-turned to stalk off and fired one more shot at Rod. "I may not be able to toss your sorry ass out of here, but if you value that pretty face of yours, stay the hell away from me."

He grabbed my hand. "Fine, reject me, but I'm doing this for you. This is the only way you'll make it." He slid a small vial into my hand and closed my fingers. "Just in case you change your mind."

I wanted to throw it back in his face, but my instincts and desires warred inside me. Enough of me wanted to do it that I couldn't force myself to just throw it away. I found my hand gripping the vial tightly. "I won't use this," I said defiantly.

In his eyes, I saw a muted flash of something. Was it satisfaction? Then he nodded. "Goodnight, Regan."

Breathing raggedly, I stumbled into the bathroom and showered mechanically, scrubbing the feel of the white powder off my arms and then my entire body. When I felt clean at last, I went to my room and locked the door behind me. I set the vial on my dresser and sat on the bed, staring at it. Could I do coke once and then stop again? Would I be ruining my life all over again? Did it matter anymore?

Silkily, the inner voice told me that I couldn't possibly hurt any worse than I did right now, and that Rod was right. That cocaine would make the pain go away. I could always go back into rehab if I couldn't stop on my own.

I stripped off my robe and turned off the lights, but I could still feel the siren call of the white powder in the darkness. Inside, I knew if I dithered long enough in making my decision, I'd probably give in, and the voice seized on that to urge me not to fight anymore. I was still wrestling with my demons when I fell asleep.

Chapter Two: An unexpected visitor

It was pitch black outside when I woke up needing to use the restroom. The clock on the nightstand said it was a little before 6:00 AM. My mouth tasted terrible. That just wouldn't do. I had to take a toothbrush to my teeth right now.

I grabbed a robe and wrapped it around myself. It was too early for this crowd to be up, but there was no way I was taking chances around Rod. I hurried out of my room toward the bathroom and stopped dead in my tracks. Five feet away, staring at me with equal surprise was Melissa.

She didn't let that surprise stop her from softly closing Rod's door behind her and holding a finger up to her lips. Her robe was loose; her hair was in wild disarray. Even after all that bastard had done, and all the time that had passed, I still felt a momentary surge of jealousy. With a snort to myself, I forced it down. I really was an idiot to have any emotion for Rod other than contempt.

I smiled and shook my head. Daddy had outdone himself in getting a woman that suited him this time. I wondered if he knew his sweetie was sleeping around on him. If he knew, did he care? Regardless, I certainly didn't. I motioned for her to go on without saying a word. Neither Rod's past nor Melissa's present infidelity was my problem. If Daddy didn't know that someone was diddling his darling on the side, it only sounded like fitting justice to me.

With a languid smile, Melissa opened Daddy's door and slipped back inside.

I locked the bathroom door behind me since I didn't want Rod walking in on me. Rod had a bad habit of doing that to me *and* my friends. I did my business and decided to shower so I could dress and get the hell out of this cursed place before people started getting up. The last day of the viewing would be soon enough to look at them.

As I dressed in my room a few minutes later, I kept glancing at the vial of cocaine. My hand itched to put it in my purse, just in case. I almost did, but in the end, I left it there

and locked my door behind me on the way out. There was no need for me to be worried someone might see it. The maid would leave the locked room alone in her morning cleaning rounds.

I smiled maliciously as I boosted Conrad's spare keys from the hook by the door and let myself out. I could take one of the other cars in the three-car garage, but this would piss him off, and that made it the perfect choice.

In a few minutes, I had his SUV on the road into town and my stomach was starting to growl. I tried to find a place that was open for breakfast this early. And it needed to be someplace that I wouldn't run into any of Mother's family.

The first place I saw that fit the bill was one of those all-night diners. It looked like it should have had a flickering neon sign. The coffee was probably going to rip the lining out of my stomach. Screw it. I parked and walked in past two truckers on their way out. I saw them stare at me and knew I didn't quite fit the usual customer in this place. Good.

The waitress that seated me looked a little worse for wear. Her frazzled bottle-red hair threatened to escape from her hairnet in the same way her tits tried to escape her low-cut top. In this crowd, that probably earned some good tips.

"What'll it be, Hon?" She sounded like she should give up her two-pack-a-day habit while she still had a throat.

I looked at the menu. "What won't kill me?"

The waitress - Alice, her tag read - laughed roughly. "If I had a nickel for every time I heard that. Go with the omelets, and the coffee isn't too bad."

"Fine," I said. "Give me a veggie omelet, no onions, and a coffee."

"You got it."

I forgot her as soon as she swayed off to another table. I let the black cloud of thoughts flow over me and put my head into my hands. This depression and anger always seemed to be waiting for a chance to slip into my head. My life sucked.

I shook my head to force the negative thoughts out. Fighting these black moods and self-criticism was a never-ending battle. I knew I wasn't being fair to myself. Until

Mother died, I'd had my life turned around, at least some. Actually, Gina and Margot had turned my life around.

Gina, especially, had finally told me that I needed to change. She'd been pretty firm, too. I yelled and screamed. I threw a tantrum. I sulked. And when the choice became clear that I'd lose my best friends if I didn't do something, I'd started changing. Years later, with what seemed like their tireless support, I was still fighting to change. In the process I'd found out that I didn't really know who Regan Thomas was, though in the last few years I'd started looking forward to meeting her.

After a few minutes, when Alice set the coffee on the table, I dragged myself back from the depths of my thoughts. I looked out into the parking lot while I sipped the paint thinner she called 'not too bad' coffee. I think I was wrong. She didn't smoke at all. She just drank this stuff.

A beaten up, muddy Land Rover lumbered into the parking lot. A man in a worn leather bomber jacket climbed out and stretched. My imagination placed him as a construction worker. A handsome construction worker. He looked a lot better than the average customer in this joint did. Forget this joint. He looked a lot better than most men anywhere did. Fit and trim, he probably worked out. And his walk...

He walked up to the doorway and smiled at Alice while she flirted with him. I gave him an automatic once-over as she led him down toward the empty table next to mine. Tall, with a ruggedly handsome face and dark eyes framed in straight black hair that fell to his shoulders. With the beat up leather jacket covering his torso, it was hard to be certain, but he seemed muscular. His walk exuded an air of confidence without the usual arrogance. That was an unusual combination in men, in my experience.

When he stopped beside my table, I knew what was coming next: the come on. Men only had one thing on their minds. His words startled me, though. "You're Regan Thomas, right?"

"Do I know you?" I asked with a frown.

His lips curved a little. "Probably not, but I know you. I'm Antonio Di Ricco. I'm so sorry to hear about your mother." He offered me his hand and I shook it automatically while trying to recall the name.

When I did place it, my frown deepened. "I remember someone by that name, but he was my father's age," I said. "A big guy, kind of, you know, round."

He nodded. "That's my dad, Big Tony. I came with him to see your dad a few times when we were teenagers. The round part happens to men in my family if they don't work out," he added with a grin, "and even my father would tell you that since he never works out, he's fatter than hell. Mind if I join you?"

My memory clicked. I remembered him now, a skinny kid that resented his father dragging him around. I remembered overhearing his father tell Daddy that he thought his kid would give him a stroke or end up in prison or, more likely, both. After hearing Daddy agree with his friend, I decided to avoid the kid.

Well, that was then and this was now. I wasn't inclined to let Daddy make my calls anymore.

"Sure, have a seat. I remember you now," I said with a nod. "So, if your dad is Big Tony, does that make you Little Tony?"

He shrugged as he sat, although I saw the barest flicker - an echo of some long ago pain - in his eyes. "I just go by Tony. I don't like being compared to my father." He looked at Alice, and pointed at me. "I'll take whatever she's having."

"Okay, Tony it is," I said as Alice sashayed back off. "I didn't think you knew my mother or father so well."

"I don't," he agreed. "My dad got word too late to make it here. I'm here in the area for work, so Dad called to ask me to come in his place. You know, wave the family flag."

That I understood all too well. "Mine usually just tells me he wants me somewhere and then expects me to obey."

Tony laughed. "My father lost that hold on me when he disowned me and tossed my sorry ass out of his house on my seventeenth birthday."

I sucked in my breath. "He disowned you? That's terrible! If he did that, why come here for him at all?"

Tony shrugged again. "I'm not here for him. I'm here for myself. I'm a Di Ricco and we pay our debts, both money and honor. My family should be here for yours at a time like this so I'm here."

I nodded, impressed despite myself.

"Besides, throwing me out was the right thing to do," he continued, "even if I didn't like it at the time. I was a real punk. In his place, I'd have thrown me out, too. "

"Wow." I knew that Daddy, Melissa and Conrad all understood money, but I doubted any of them even knew that honor existed. I shook my head and leaned back as my omelet arrived.

Alice smiled at Tony. "I put a rush on yours, sugar."

I took a bite and decided it probably wasn't immediately fatal.

Tony smiled at Alice. "Thanks." Then he stood and took off his jacket; I was right about him working out. His black tee shirt did nothing to hide his solid physique.

I felt a moment of physical longing, but repressed it. The very last thing I needed now was a complication like him in my life. Other women could have casual flings but I'd never been able to be that way. If I slept with a man, it was because we were in a relationship for the long haul - not that the long haul ever seemed to last more than three or four years for me. Men being men, I doubted that my four-year record was in any danger.

Fortunately, men were not my only option when I was horny. Having a bit of fun between the sheets was different with another woman; for whatever reason, I had no problem with the idea of casual girl-girl sex - sometimes very casual. I wouldn't be jumping into bed, though, with a disowned...

"What do you do for a living?" I asked as I continued to eat slowly.

"I'm in construction," he said, confirming my first impression. "We're building an apartment complex at a job site about three hundred miles down the highway."

I'd guessed right. I smiled. Too bad a relationship was out of the question. Still, it was for the best. He'd just use me for my body and my money and then cheat on me in spite of both. He was a man, after all.

"That sounds very interesting," I said politely.

"No, it doesn't," he replied with a grin. "I can tell that swinging a hammer isn't very

interesting to you, but that's okay," he said, forestalling my objection as his expression sobered. "If there's anything that I can do for you, all you have to do is ask. I didn't know your mother, but it was obvious to me that she loved you. I could see it even when I was a kid."

Men didn't usually surprise me. Not even when I found out they'd been sleeping around.

"And if I do need to ask you for something, how would I get hold of you?" I finally got out. I figured it was time for the line about how 'if I wanted to get a hold of him all I had to do was put my hand out.'

Instead, he dug out a worn leather wallet and pulled out a card. He flipped it over to write on it. "Here's my cell number," he said. "If you need anything at all, call me. Day or night." He handed me the card and I looked at the numbers written in a strong, bold hand. A flip of the card showed it wasn't his card. It was for some truck stop. I could only imagine why a man would have the number for a truck stop in his wallet. I'll never understand men.

I slid the card into my purse and considered him silently as his plate arrived and he seasoned it to taste. "Do you miss the world you had when you were growing up?" I asked.

He grinned at me and took another bite of his omelet. "What's not to miss? Having money to burn and no idea how I want to spend it? Having my dad try to mold me into someone just like him? Frankly, I'm better off not having everything laid out for me," he waved his fork at me. "Not that I'm better than anyone else."

There was some pride in there. He and I had a lot in common. A lot more than met the eye, I thought.

"So you were a rebel without a clue?" I asked. "Trying to find a place and way for yourself?"

"Oh, hell no! I knew exactly what my goal in life was; I was being a pain in my father's ass," he said. "People think it's easier to be rich. We both know that's not true. Hell, if I'd gotten a tattoo back then, my dad would have tossed me out even faster."

"You have a tattoo?" I asked with more interest than I'd expected and certainly more than I'd intended to let on. I'd considered getting one when I was younger, but the horror stories were just too much for me to get past. "What kind?"

"A mermaid - on my left butt-cheek," he said before taking a sip of his coffee.

"Bull," I said with an unladylike snort. "No way do you have a mermaid on your ass."

"True enough. The tattoo is classified, so I have to spread some false stories to keep my adoring public guessing."

I shook my head and smiled at him. "I bet. Do you keep a club in the car to drive them back?"

"Actually, it's a Louisville Slugger. Works every time."

We ate slowly and talked about our lives as spoiled rich kids for almost an hour, though it seemed like only a few minutes. When I looked at my watch, I'd been thinking we had plenty of time to keep talking, and I was a bit shocked to see that the funeral home would open in less than twenty minutes. The quick burn of disappointment surprised me, both in its depth and in the fact that I'd felt it at all.

I didn't know when I'd ever been so comfortable just sitting and talking with a man. I supposed our shared past helped, but he was neither fish nor fowl. He wasn't a rich guy that grew up like Rod, or a poor schmuck like the truckers that shared the diner with us. He was different from the men I'd associated with in the past. He was exotic.

Part of me wanted to stay right here talking with him. That made me feel a bit closer to him than I'd ever felt to anyone outside my clique. I'd never been chatty with guys, but I felt a connection with Tony that I'd never expected.

Regretfully, I grabbed my purse. "I've got to go to the funeral home. I really wish we had more time to talk because it's been fun."

He pulled out a twenty and tossed it on the table, silencing my objections. "If I can't spend my money on breakfast with a friend, then why have it? I'm going to go to the viewing and I'll be here for the funeral, too, so we can talk again. I'd like that."

His hand briefly touched mine as he stood up. An electric tingle unsettled my stomach. I reminded myself that I didn't need this kind of entanglement, that he was just a man and couldn't be trusted, even if part of me seemed to want to trust him. Even with everything Gina and Margot had done to help me, I still couldn't bring myself to trust men. I could almost feel Gina frowning at me and sighed.

"Let's set something up before we leave the viewing then," I said, making the decision to go with my emotions rather than my brain.

He smiled as he slid his jacket on. "I'd like that. I'll see you there." I watched Tony's perfect ass walk out the door and sighed. I headed for the ladies room. God willing, I wouldn't catch anything in there.

When I arrived at the funeral home, Tony was talking with Daddy. I could tell right away that Daddy had no idea who he was, and that he was getting an abbreviated form of the same introduction I'd gotten. Melissa was giving Tony the eye from behind Daddy. I recognized the look. While her behavior didn't surprise me, the sudden spike of jealousy stunned me.

What the hell was that? I'd just met the guy, and already I wanted to club the competition in the head like a baby seal? Was I seeing her as competition? That surprised me even more. He wasn't mine, and I wasn't dating him, so that thought had no place in my head. I forced it back down, composed my features, and walked up to them.

"There's no need to stay in a hotel. We have plenty of room at the chalet," Daddy said.

Tony shook his head. "That's really not necessary, sir. I don't want to disturb your family."

"Absolutely not," Melissa said with a wide smile. "We wouldn't hear of it. You're staying with us, and that's final."

That last bit was loud enough for Conrad to overhear from his post beside the coffin, and he hurried up, smoothing a sudden worried look. "Hello, I'm Conrad. What's this about the chalet?"

"I've decided that Tony should stay with us tonight rather than at a motel," Daddy said with a smile. "It makes no sense to see all that space go to waste."

From his facial expression, Conrad was looking for a way to back out of that commitment before it became final. I was sorry about Tony being trapped with Melissa, but I wasn't about to let Conrad have his way.

"Daddy's absolutely right," I agreed, stepping up beside my father. "We have six rooms, and the place would just rattle with all of us there alone. Please Tony, take a spare room. It's no trouble."

Melissa shot me a calculating look. Then she nodded, her brain already working the angles. "Yes, Tony. Please do," Melissa added. Weren't we a fine pair of conniving bitches?

Trapped, Conrad nodded. "Of course, we'd be happy to have you."

"Well, since you all insist, I'll do it," Tony said, glancing at Melissa warily. Right then I knew that whatever else he might be, he was smarter than the average bear.

That thought was so arrogant and presumptuous that I snorted at myself. That got me a frown from everyone. I coughed to cover my slip-up. "Sorry, my throat's a bit dry."

Daddy quirked an eyebrow at me and headed for the front door with Melissa on his arm. Conrad seized the moment to cut Tony off and start talking. Conrad loved to talk, and his favorite subject was himself.

I looked at the casket and dozens of Mother's family were milling around her. I slipped to the side of the room and made my way back to the area near Mother. A couple of the older women were looking at her and speaking in low tones to one another. Not low enough for me to miss hearing, unfortunately.

"It's a terrible shame, her having a daughter like that," one of them said. She was some kind of great aunt. The woman next to her was her sister. The matching sour expressions were a good clue about that. Her words solidified my anger, gave it focus.

"Yes," her sister agreed. "Regan had such potential and was such a great disappointment to her mother. She married well enough but her other habits," she tsked disapprovingly.

I wondered angrily, which of my failings she meant. God knows I'd had enough of them to piss my mother off.

"I mean, really! She's one of those drug sniffing hippies," Sister A chortled.

I almost laughed. She thought I was a hippie. Puh-leeze!

"And all those rumors about her and..." she looked around and lowered her voice just a tiny bit. "And all those women she slept with. She's not only a slut but also a lesbian! Imagine having a pervert for a daughter!"

A spike of pain shot through my head as my heartbeat thundered in my ears. The room turned red. I shoved the wreath to the side and it fell with a crash. The sisters recoiled from me as if I were the Devil herself.

"She was never ashamed of me!" I snarled. "You don't know me! You don't know a thing about my relationship with my mother! How dare you?"

Conrad was there in a flash. "That is enough! You've disgraced yourself and our family," he gloated. "Get out."

"You," I said, turning on him, "are full of it, too. Do you think marrying into a family makes it yours? You're even more of an outsider than I am, you *poser*. My mother may have married you, but she at least loved me."

He wagged a finger in my face and glared. "Go call one of your little dyke friends for a drug party and leave the people that loved your mother alone to grieve! You're obviously drugged out or you wouldn't behave like this in front of your mother."

No one talked about my friends that way. No one!

I leapt at him.

And someone snatched me out of the air. I kicked and screamed at Conrad while my abductor carried me toward the front door over his shoulder. Like a sack of potatoes.

"Let me go! Let! Me! Go!" I said, beating on the leather-clad back. It was Tony. Why was he taking me out of here like this when I needed to shred that bastard Conrad?

He grabbed my coat off the hook and carried me into the parking lot. "I don't think so," he said calmly, setting me down beside Conrad's SUV. I started to go around him and go back inside but he blocked me. "That's what he wants," he said. "Can't you see that? He's baiting you."

"So what? I'll give him what he wants and you call the paramedics."

"Save it," he said, planting an arm in front of me again. "Save it for later when they

won't find the body."

I turned my head at the comment. The innocent grin I saw on his face broke my fury and I took a deep breath and forced myself to turn away from him. I put my clenched fists on the hood in front of me. The visual of Conrad beaten to a bloody pulp helped to calm me, oddly enough, and turned my snarl into a brief smile. My head was pounding and I quickly lost that smile as I realized that Tony was right. I'd fallen right into Conrad's trap. He wanted to portray me in the worst light possible in front of as many people as possible, and I'd stepped right up to the plate when those women started nattering. What did I care what they thought anyway? Dammit!

Unwillingly, I nodded. "You're right. As much as I hate it," I grated out. My hands twitched with adrenaline withdrawal. "I thought I'd changed, but underneath I can still see the college girl in me. I'm sorry. I shouldn't act without thinking just because it's what my emotions tell me to do."

"You don't need to apologize to me. We need to leave, but we can come back later when most of the people have left," he said. His voice was calm and it didn't sound like an order. It just sounded reasonable. That was strange. Only the people that knew me best could usually talk me down like this when I was on a tear. My mind shied away from how he could do that.

"I'd rather go back in there and cut off his balls," I muttered. "If I could find them."

"There's always time for that later," he said again, finally touching me on my shoulder. I realized that the cold was starting to seep through without my coat on and his hand felt warm, almost hot against me. That sent the last of the anger running away and a jolt of need replaced it; a need that I couldn't allow myself to act on. I picked up my coat from where he'd set it down and slid into it.

I stepped around to the driver's door, pulling away without seeming as though it was a slight. "I have to go somewhere, but where should we go? What should we do?"

"Do you know how to ice-skate?"

I stared at him over the hood in disbelief. "Ice-skate at a time like this?"

He grinned impishly. "Trust me."

With a sigh, I gave in and climbed into the SUV. He wanted to go ice-skating. What

other unexpected surprises would this man spring on me next?

Chapter Three: Blindsided

I laughed darkly at how impulsive and out of character this was, even for me.

Tony looked up from tying on his skates and grinned. "What?"

"This," I said, waving my hand at the small crowd of kids and adults filling the rink. "What the hell am I doing here?"

My subconscious supplied its own answer. My ex-husbands had been right about one thing regarding me; I was a hedonist. I had a weakness for doing things that brought me pleasure, even when it hurt others. Or me. I liked to luxuriate in pleasure and comfort.

Sex had always been a part of that. So was the cocaine. Perhaps especially the cocaine. Hard knocks had finally shown me that I had to have limits in seeking my pleasures, or else risk losing everything worthwhile in my life.

"Getting away from Conrad before you do something that you'll regret," Tony said, letting the grin slip away. "You were ready to tear him to shreds and, however much you might have enjoyed it at the moment, you would have regretted it later."

I used anger to cover the shock I felt at hearing him echo my thoughts. "They can all go screw themselves," I said bitterly. "If Conrad ever loved my mother, I never saw it. All he wants is her money and he'll probably get it. The rest of those vultures care more about their gossip. They've never cared about me. I was the 'failure' they all had to put up with."

Tying off his laces, Tony hobbled over to me and sat down, using his hand to lift my chin so I was looking directly into his eyes. "I know all about being the 'black sheep', remember? Just ask my Dad." His eyes grew distant and he smiled. "Oh, the things I've done to make him pull his hair out. I can't imagine a nice girl like you even being in my league."

I laughed with an abrupt shot of genuine humor and amazement. I tried to restrain it, but the laughter took on a life of its own and I couldn't stop. I laughed until I couldn't breathe.

When I finally managed some semblance of control, I saw he was quirking a smile at me. I shook my head. "You have no idea. Unless you're a lot wilder than I think you are, I can top your antics on your best day."

"We'll see. After we skate a bit, we'll have lunch - on me - and we'll trade war stories," he said as he stood up, helping me to my feet. I prayed that I didn't fall down too often. It had been twenty-five years since I'd last been on skates and I didn't want a sore butt.

Taking advantage of his help, I stumbled onto the ice and clumsily began to move. He skated backwards in front of me slowly, as though he were just out for a stroll.

"You're doing great," he encouraged.

"I haven't fallen and been cut to sausage, you mean," I said, windmilling my arms to keep what little balance I had. Then an eight-year-old menace blew past me at warp four, dressed from head to toe in blinding fuchsia. At this rate, I'd be lucky to survive. "Graceful, I'm not. How did I let you talk me into this hare-brained idea?"

"It's my smooth negotiating skills."

"Hah! You threw me over your shoulder and carried me off," I objected. "How smooth is that?"

"You're here, aren't you?" he asked with another innocent grin. "There's an old saying, 'if it works, it ain't stupid.' Following that logic, I think I was smooth enough."

It was hard to argue with that. Screw it. If I was here, I might as well have a good time.

For an hour, Tony taught me how to skate all over again. At times, he was so close I could feel the heat of his body as he showed me how to move. I tried telling myself that it wasn't doing anything to me, but I hadn't been that good at lying to myself since I was a teen. It slung-shot my hormones like a teen-aged boy watching Julie Newmar as *Catwoman*.

By the time we were ready to get off the ice, I was exhausted, both physically and emotionally. I'd managed to trade my worries about the funeral for worries about what I was getting myself into with Tony. Every touch of his hands and body made the next touch seem less intrusive and more welcome. I wondered if that was how one tamed a

wild horse. Did you touch *it* until *it* was used to your hands, caress it until I wanted more? It, I told myself, not I. That was an embarrassing slip to make, even in my mind. Caress it until it wanted more.

I sighed in resignation. This was getting more complicated and I was losing control of where it was going. Already, I felt some kind of connection between us that was nebulous and hard to describe. Disturbing, too, in a way I couldn't quite put my finger on.

We turned in our skates and walked to the car. The sky was darker than it had been earlier and the snow was coming down more heavily.

Tony took my keys out of my hand and jumped in the driver's seat with a possessive grin. I shook my head and smiled, taking the passenger seat. When we were secure, he took off in an almost uncontrolled spin.

I squeaked and grabbed the dashboard, glaring at him. "Tony! You stop that this very second!"

He laughed but slowed down and brought the SUV under control. "Yes, Ma'am."

"Men! You're all just little boys under the skin."

Tony didn't go for the bait and just drove silently until we pulled into a Pizza Hut.

As he parked the car, I looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Pizza Hut is your idea of a romantic lunch?"

He smiled smugly back at me and opened his door. "I just said lunch. Romantic is your add-on. Thanks for the insight, though. I promise I'll start thinking romantically."

I cursed under my breath as I climbed out and walked slowly to the back of the vehicle. Where had that come from? He was right. He'd never said a *romantic* lunch, but somehow that's what it had morphed to in my mind when I wasn't thinking about it. What was I doing to myself this time?

We shed our coats and hung them when we got inside, then a hostess led us to a booth. Shortly, I had a tall glass of iced tea and the promise of a hot pepperoni pizza to hold my grumbling stomach at bay.

Tony sat across from me watching me intently, as if he expected me to say something. Not having any idea what that might be, I smiled and stared back at him. After a minute, it started becoming almost comical.

I couldn't take it and shook my head. "We're just being silly," I told him. "I think we had a miscue somewhere."

"Maybe," he agreed. "I don't believe in rushing things faster than they need to go, so let's just forget the word *romantic*, for now."

I let my breath out in a sigh of relief. "Thank you. I'm not ready for that yet." Yet? I winced. What the hell possessed me to add that damned word?

Tony's eyes twinkled at me, but he let it go. "So, we've talked about our childhood. What did the next twenty years bring you?"

I snorted. "Nothing but trouble. Two nasty ex-husbands, a lifetime full of regrets, and a bunch of people I've hurt or disappointed over the years."

"Come on," he said, frowning, "it can't have been that bad."

I laughed dismissively. "Oh yes it could."

With little nods and an interested expression, he slowly drew me into talking about college and leaving Tennessee for UCLA. Again, I found myself amazed at the things I told him. We only barely knew each other and I was complaining about how like my father my ex-husbands were. I even found myself telling him about some of the higher and lower points of my days in pre-med, including Rod.

"So, you're a doctor?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No. I didn't really want to be one. That was for Daddy." At least that was part of the story. Having seen a *real* doctor up close and personal, I had finally realized that I'd never had the drive to be one.

Thankfully, Tony didn't dwell on that. "This Rod guy sounds like a real piece of work," he said with a scowl, "though I can't throw stones. I've had my share of relationships, but I've never been married. I think I'm too ornery for any woman to want," he said with a grin. "I'm too much of a pirate."

That grin did things to my insides that I forced aside. I firmly reminded myself that I needed another man in my life like I needed another hole in my head.

Using my confused state against me, he kept digging. "So, with all that behind you, what do you do to keep busy now? Did you ever go back and finish your degree?"

I ignored the last part of his question and smirked at him. "Don't I get to ask questions about your mysterious past?"

"It's polite to talk about the lady on a date," he said piously.

"Is this a date?" I asked, my eyebrows rising almost against my will.

"You're the one who said it was a *romantic* lunch. We can quibble about the details later," he said, his tone falsely dismissive. "Back to you."

I shook my head but smiled. "I do charity work." I proudly launched into my list of charities I raised money for.

Tony listened and nodded. The small frown between his eyes made me wonder if I'd said something wrong.

"That's a lot of charity work," he agreed, "but are you satisfied by it? What you do for yourself? You know, to feel like *you've* made a personal impact."

I blinked in surprise. "What? Of course I'm satisfied with it. What gives you the idea I'm not?"

The arrival of the pizza disrupted my rising anger, and I forced myself back from letting the emotion overtake me before I could think.

Once Tony had a few bites inside, leaving a string of cheese on his chin, he continued.

"I hear how much money you've raised, but it doesn't seem like you're getting much *personal* satisfaction from it. Don't get me wrong," he added before I could object. "Giving money to charities does help people, but it's not very personal. That always seemed to me like helping the hypothetical needy."

What did that mean? I let the silence drag on as I thought about it and ate slowly. He didn't interrupt me.

When I kept running into brick walls of incomprehension, I looked back up and shrugged. "I must be missing something. What are you getting at? I'm satisfied with it." At least the thinking had derailed my initial angry reaction.

"Have you ever served food at a soup kitchen or helped a complete stranger because it made you feel good?"

I stared at him, confused. "Why would I do that when I can fund an entire kitchen? My money works much harder than I ever could by myself. I assure you that I help plenty of needy people."

Tony shrugged. "Maybe it's just me. I like getting my hands dirty. Things like the Habitat for Humanity. They build houses for people that couldn't afford to build or buy their own. My *personal* satisfaction comes from seeing them come home for the first time. Nothing beats that feeling. That lets me use the skills I learned for work to help others."

I heard what he was saying, but I didn't see how the two were different. Instead, I changed the subject by zeroing in on his work. "Speaking of your work, do you mostly work around here or do you travel?"

His smile told me that he saw right through my conversational shift, but he agreeably switched topics. "I travel every few months; when one project doesn't need me anymore, I go to one that does. Not just in this state, but all over the general area."

"You said you'd never married, but what about other long-term relationships?" I asked. A part of me wasn't sure what I wanted to hear him say.

"Some," he admitted. "They never lasted, though. We just never seemed to mesh."

"I'm sure that one day you'll find the right woman."

He nodded, his eyes dark and expressive. "I think you're right. Timing is everything."

I felt a shiver of something I didn't understand shoot through me and I hurriedly looked at my watch. "Just look at the time! We need to get a move on." His expression told me I wasn't fooling anyone, but in truth, it was already late in the afternoon and I needed to get back to the funeral home.

While he paid for lunch, I went to the ladies room and scrubbed my hands across my face. What was wrong with me? Maybe I should just give in and have a fling with him, because this itch was getting very distracting. Stubbornly, I shook my head at my reflection in the mirror. I didn't do casual. When the little devil's voice told me that I should be thinking about making it more than casual, I covered my eyes and groaned. I didn't need this!

I washed my hands and composed myself. As I came out, the woman sitting next to the bathroom made me stop in my tracks. Or rather, what she was saying into the pay phone made me stop. She was younger than me and very, very pregnant. She was also slumped over the table with her face buried in one hand.

"I don't know what to do, Mom," she said, dispiritedly. "He took everything. He quit his job and just took off with everything. No one knows where he went." Then her voice took on a bitter tone. "What everyone knows is *who* he ran off with. Why couldn't they have bothered to tell me before he left me like this?"

Smothering a dark and knowing smile, I slipped back into the bathroom. I listened to her through the barely open door. I could have told her some places to call to get help, but she seemed too proud to take advantage of them. Her pain bothered me. I didn't want to leave her in despair.

"I know you can't help me very much," she continued, "but can you wire me just a little? Fifty dollars? Oh, thank you!" She sounded almost pathetically grateful. "I'll pay you back as soon as I can. I've got a week before the landlord comes looking for the rent and that'll buy me food and give me some gas money so I can find a job."

I blanched. Dear God, she didn't need to be working. She looked like she was due any day. She needed to be off her feet.

"No," the woman said with a little heat. "I can't come home. I love you but *he's* still there. I can't live with *him*. I just can't. I'd rather starve. Please try to understand."

What about her baby? Her next comment told me that I wasn't the only one asking that question.

"I don't have much of a choice, do I?" she said bitterly. "As soon as he's born I'll take him to the fire station or give him up for adoption. I don't want to, but I can't afford to keep him. He deserves better than me," she said, almost in tears.

My heart ached. I wanted to help her, but she sounded as stubborn as me. I'd never had a baby and I doubted I ever would, but her plight still struck a chord in me. I thought furiously. What could I do?

"Yes," she continued. "Please wire it to me at the Western Union office down on Main Street. And if you're going to send *him* to do it, could you make sure he at least spells my name right?" She spelled out Williamson. "At least he remembered Joan last time," she said tiredly. Then she slowly recited her address. I repeated it silently several times while I set my purse on the counter and dug through it looking for something to write on. The first thing I found was the card Tony had given me with his number. That was ironic.

I counted out what I had in cash and it totaled out to almost four hundred dollars. Not very much, but I mostly paid for stuff with my card. It would just have to do.

Now I just had to figure out how to give it to her without her being able to turn me down. I folded the bills up and walked out of the bathroom. She was listening to her mother and still had her face buried in her hand, her elbow propped up on the table. Her purse was beside her elbow. I could see her open change purse inside it. She was probably using the change for the call. I deftly dropped the bills into her purse and walked out.

Tony had the SUV idling by the curb. I climbed in feeling light inside. I grinned at him. Who said I didn't know how to get personal satisfaction?

Everyone had deserted the funeral home by the time we arrived. All the family was gone, even Conrad. That made me boil inside. How dare they just leave her like this?

I went to stand beside my mother. Looking down at her, I realized how badly having them leave her here alone hurt me. After tomorrow I'd never see her again. That brought on a fresh onslaught of tears.

I'm not sure how long I stood there holding her hand, feeling like every tear that fell made me somehow emptier inside, when I felt someone beside me. I looked up, ready to chew off Conrad's head for bothering me again, if he'd had the balls to come back, and only barely cut off my attack when I saw it was Tony.

"Regan, the viewing is over and it's time to leave," he said gently. Were construction workers supposed to be gentle? They should be tough and decisive, sure, but gentle?

"I'm not going," I said with a willful toss of my head. "I'm staying here with Mother."

I expected a condescending smile, but he didn't smile at all, he just nodded. "I know, but you can't. We have to go."

"She's my mother and I won't leave her," I shouted, abruptly angry with him. "I won't! She *needs* me here!" I waited for him to either walk away or counter-attack, perversely glad for the outlet for my pain.

Following his developing pattern of behavior, he did neither of those things. He instead reached out, pulled me into his arms and held me tightly.

My body stiffened in shock and tried to shove him away but he was too strong. "Let me go!" I wailed. "Just leave me alone!"

"No."

As quickly as it arrived, the anger fled my body. I felt grief for my loss and a deep and abiding fear of never seeing my mother again flood through me. "I don't want her to go," I cried, suddenly clutching him. "Please, don't let her go."

"I know you don't," he whispered, "but she's already gone."

I sobbed and half-broke away from him and started pounding my fists on his chest. "Liar! She's right here!"

He didn't resist my attack, but it was like hitting a brick wall, except I had a better chance of knocking down the wall. When the tears pushed the anger away, he pulled me back into his arms and this time I didn't resist. "It hurts, I know," he whispered. "But she's already gone to a better place; a happier place."

"But I don't want her to go!"

He turned me away from the casket and pulled me along toward the door while I cried and railed against him. By the time he put my coat on me, all the fight had gone out of my body. I just stood there and let him slip it on and lead me out to his Land Rover. I didn't even object when he strapped me in like a child.

Tony belted himself in and took the Rover out to the street, leaving Conrad's SUV

behind. "Left or right?" he prompted.

When I looked outside, snow was falling heavily and the wind had picked up. I took a deep breath and pulled myself together enough to give him directions out of town and up the mountain.

He didn't try to talk to me on the drive, other than occasionally to prompt me for directions. I didn't understand, but I was grateful. Weren't men supposed to try to fix everything? Not all of them, apparently. At least one could listen without judging. I felt wrung out. I'd lost both my control and composure again, and I was glad that Conrad and Daddy hadn't seen me. I couldn't do anything right, it seemed.

The interior of the Rover finally sank into my awareness. Tony had packed it with tools and the Rover smelled like... like him, I realized. It didn't smell bad, just male. I rolled my eyes and laughed inside at myself. This was just perfect. I really didn't have the time or emotional energy for this.

Tony glanced at me and smiled before returning his eyes to the road in silence, giving me time to get myself back under control.

By the time we pulled up in front of the chalet, I'd regained enough of my composure to get out of the Rover and wait for Tony to meet me by the door. He had his overnight bag in hand when he joined me.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly.

He made a throwaway gesture. "You've done nothing to be sorry about, so don't worry about it."

I smiled and nodded gratefully. "Come on inside and let's get you settled." I led the way, saw to taking off our shoes and coats, and gave him the same short tour that I'd given Melissa yesterday.

"This is a nice place," he said, looking at the ceiling. "Really well put together."

I stared at the ceiling and it looked like... a ceiling. Leave it to Tony to ignore the decorations and go right to the structure around us. "I should just start calling you Bob Villa."

He laughed. "I can't help it."

With an amused shake of my head, I took him into Conrad's hall and found him an empty room, pointing out everything he needed to know then excusing myself.

I left him to put his things away and went to the bar. From the quiet, it was obvious that neither Conrad nor Daddy and company were here, so I figured I might as well settle in and get ready for them. Times like these made me wish I'd never given up using coke, as much pain and loss as the stuff had caused. I felt the siren's call of the little vial in my room, and it seemed like a really good idea right now. Rod was right, I thought morosely, I couldn't deal with this on my own.

I poured myself a stiff drink and downed it quickly, then refilled the glass. I preferred a good wine over liquor but right now I needed something more. The burn settled quickly in my stomach and I started to relax. I opened the glass doors and stepped out onto the snow-packed deck, taking the bottle with me. The cold burned into me, but I ignored it. I left the lights off and silently closed the door behind me.

The hot tub dominated the deck. I longed to just climb in and soak.

Stepping out to the exterior rail, my bare feet crunched in the snow. I stared into the darkness and just let the cold numb my feet. Sipping my drink, I cleared a spot on the rail and set the bottle down. It seemed impossible, but the snow was falling even harder now.

Even though I could only see the tops of some of the closest trees, they were right at the level of the deck. The ground behind the chalet sloped down steeply for a good ways.

I felt the heat leaching from me and refilled my glass. I knew I should go back inside, but the part of me that didn't care seemed to be in control of my muscles and I stayed there shivering in the snow. Setting my glass down beside the bottle, I cleared a wider area of the rail and climbed up to sit on it, with my legs dangling into the darkness below.

Here, I was alone. Not that I'd been any other way for very long. I emptied my glass and tried to refill it, but my numb fingers couldn't hold the glass and it dropped into the abyss in front of me. It was gone, as if it had never been.

Staring down, I felt a moment of vertigo and gripped the rail below me. I marveled at

how easy that had been. One moment and the glass was gone. It was probably tumbling down the steep slope, unless it had smashed into a tree. I wondered if that would hurt much. Or for long.

My dark ruminations stopped when the door to the house opened behind me. "Regan?" Tony asked.

I thought about just pushing off. A few seconds and it would be over. They could bury me with my mother and no one would care, except for my friends.

Thinking of Gina, I rejected the thought of jumping and cursed my lack of resolve as he walked up behind me.

"It looks like a long way down."

"It is," I assured him.

"Then let me help you back onto the deck. I don't want you to fall." He took the bottle from my hand and set it on the rail, pulling me back onto the deck with absolutely no effort. Standing me up in front of him, he eyed me critically. "And it's too cold out here for you to be out without a jacket or shoes. Come inside and we'll sit in front of the fireplace."

"I don't want to go in," I said petulantly. "I want to stay out here."

"If we stay out here, we need to be warmer," he said reasonably. "Let's step inside and get our coats and shoes."

So, he didn't trust me alone out here. He must have sensed something in my voice. This man was far more perceptive than I cared for right now.

"Let's get in the hot tub," I countered. "It's hot enough to keep us warm." I pulled the cover off the tub. What was I doing?

I saw him grin in the darkness. "For some reason, I didn't think to bring my swimsuit with me."

I grinned back challengingly. "I didn't either. Come on, I promise your virtue is safe with me." Had I lost my mind? Getting naked in a hot tub with a man was just begging to be screwed silly, and I didn't really know him at all. It would never work. Still, part of me

whispered that getting screwed silly had its upsides.

"Regan, you've been drinking and you might regret..."

I cut him off with a laugh, pulling my blouse over my head and tossing it to the side. "I've done so many things over the years that I regret that one more will hardly matter. I'm getting in the tub and you can either join me or go back inside."

He watched me strip and drop my clothes on the deck. I could see the interest in his face even in the dark. He wasn't superman or gay. That was a relief. I grabbed the bottle from the rail and set it on the side of the tub before stepping in. The hot water felt scalding before my body adjusted to the radical change in temperature. I settled into the water and let it flow up to my neck.

With a shrug, Tony disrobed with economical movements and stepped into the tub. His torso rippled with muscle and that kicked my hormones into a higher gear. Or maybe it was his erection. It bobbed as he settled into the water. Definitely not gay, though he sat almost out of reach.

I took a slug of liquor straight from the bottle and handed it over to him. He took a drink and set it beside him.

"I think you're being too hard on yourself, but tonight isn't the right time to talk about this," he said, handing the bottle back over to me. "It's never too late to start again. Who hasn't done something we'd do differently now? You can't change the past, but you can decide to live the rest of our lives differently. Break the cycle."

"That's easy to say," I snorted.

Tony nodded. "And it's the hardest thing in the world to do. It means knowing who we want to be and intentionally making that leap of faith to leave the old us behind forever."

I sat quietly - mulling the magnitude of what he'd said - until he changed the subject to trivial, more mundane things. I gratefully entered into discussing what we liked and what we hated. We talked about food, wine and movies. We passed the bottle back and forth companionably. Inside five minutes, a comfortable sense of familiarity had replaced the tension. The more I relaxed, the more a sense of something being starkly wrong nagged at the back of my mind.

It took me almost an hour to figure out what was really bothering me. When I finally

pinned it down, I was shocked to my toes. Over the years I'd felt a deep sense of attachment to only a very few, select people. These people had become my closest and dearest friends, and it had happened in a matter of hours or days each time. We'd sit and talk and then, suddenly, it was as if we'd known each other all our lives. In each case we'd become lovers as well, usually soon after that.

The thing was that every one of these people who had become first friends and then lovers were women. Until now, I reluctantly admitted to myself. This is what had been nagging at me since I'd met him, but I hadn't been able to see the danger. This was really bad. How could this have happened? I was in my mid-thirties and had never felt this way towards a man, ever. Not even the ones I'd married. I'd long ago decided that while I was bisexual, I leaned more towards women. What the devil was wrong with me? It couldn't be the booze. I'd been as drunk and high on coke countless times. This had never happened before. Now that it had, I had no idea what it meant or what to do about it.

"Is something wrong?" Tony asked. He set the empty bottle outside the tub and stretched his back, causing his chest to ripple. My body reacted in a way that it shouldn't. Heat flashed back through me, and I wanted him right here and now.

Even in the hot water, a chill ran up my spine. I didn't understand what was happening and I needed space. Gathering what dignity I could muster, I stood up and let the water sluice off me. I was a little unsteady but a hand on the side of the tub served to let me regain my balance. Tony looked at me, and I could see the desire in his eyes.

With more strength than I thought I had, I stepped out of the hot tub and started gathering my clothes. "I'm going in and showering." That sounded abrupt and I heard a quiver in my voice that wasn't there very often. Whatever faults I had, lack of self-assurance wasn't usually one of them.

Tony hid the flash of disappointment well. If I hadn't been looking right at him, I would have missed it as he transitioned to a thoughtful nod and masked his initial reaction. I didn't think he was angry, though, like Rod would have been. He was just disappointed. He rose from the tub, grabbed his own clothes, and followed me in. "Good idea. We were going to wrinkle soon."

We went our separate ways and I left my clothes in my room before getting into the shower. I let the hot water run for a few minutes to scrub myself clean and then turned it cold. The icy water shocked my body, and I hoped it would shock some sense into me and quench these feelings. I didn't have any business feeling like this toward a man.

After I toweled off, I slipped on my robe and made my way back to my room to dress. I was surprised find Tony sitting on the edge of the bed. I was instantly unsure of myself. Was this the play for me that I hadn't thought was coming? He was fully dressed, so that didn't seem likely, but he was a man, after all.

"Your door was open, so I thought I'd just wait for you here. That's a nice piece of art," he said with a nod to the small painting on the wall. It was of a skier taking a slope with a spray of snow rooster-tailing behind her. "Is that you?"

I smiled but shook my head. "No, it's not me. I just saw it in an online auction and picked it up. I don't know him, but the artist does good work. Remember him if you need something. His name is Keven Braddock and he's in LA." I hesitated in stripping off the robe to dress but decided that was kind of idiotic after I'd flaunted my body in front of him already.

I tossed the robe onto the bed and started dressing in something casual. I could feel his eyes caressing me and cursed the flutter in my stomach. He didn't get up and try anything or make any comments. Maybe he wasn't going to try something after all.

He waited for me to dress and then he pointed to the dresser. "Mind if I ask what that is?"

It took me a moment to realize what he was talking about, and then I flushed. I casually put the vial into my pants pocket while I struggled for some reasonable explanation. Then I sighed, damning the feeling of guilt that caused me. I wouldn't lie to a friend like that and this was something that could ruin our budding friendship. Well, maybe it was all for the good if it did. That would at least get me out of the uncomfortable mental place where I'd cornered myself.

"It's coke." There. There it was. I'd done it, now to see where all the pieces landed now that I'd blown everything up. I watched him with what calm I could muster.

His face expressionless, he nodded. "I thought it might be. I heard people talking at the viewing, and one of them mentioned you'd had a drug problem, but he thought you'd kicked it."

The unasked question hung in the air. Was he wrong? I shook my head. "I went through rehab. I don't feel like talking about it, but I haven't relapsed for almost five years."

"Then why relapse now? Is it because of your mom?"

I shrugged and inexplicably felt tired. Pulling the plain wooden chair over, I sat down in front of Tony. "It's hard to explain. I haven't relapsed yet. Or I'm in the process of relapsing. Or I've relapsed but just haven't taken a snort yet." I had to admit to myself that when I hadn't said no, that I'd said yes. I just hadn't gotten up the nerve to snort it yet. That bastard Rod.

"But you want to?" Tony asked quietly.

I nodded slowly. "I'm tired of being down all the time," I said, the tears starting slowly down my face. "I can't handle this."

Tony took my hands in his. "I assume you quit for a reason the last time. Probably because it was messing up your life. Right?"

I laughed mirthlessly. "You say that as if you haven't heard all the rumors. I swear, I *hate* having relatives."

He shot a lopsided smile at me. "I try not to hold past bad behavior against anyone. Glass houses and wrecking balls, you understand. I won't say something stupid like 'it doesn't matter' but in truth, it's not relevant. I've only known you a little while but I can see something worthwhile inside you. Something honorable."

I snorted and shook my head. "You don't have my reputation."

"No, I have my own," he admitted. "But that isn't what I'm getting at. Let me put it this way. Paraphrasing Lois McMaster Bujold, a science fiction author, reputation is what other people know about you. Honor is what you know about yourself. Our stress about it happens when the two aren't the same. Be true to yourself and to hell with what everyone else thinks."

He smiled at my startled expression. "Look, the past is just that: the past. It's the road we walked to get where we are, not who we are. If you don't like where you are in life all you have to do to change is walk away. As hard as that can be sometimes." He pointed to my pocket. "The question I will ask is: will that help you a week from now or hurt you?"

Bowing my head, I swallowed. "When I'm high, I don't feel bad, but it takes over my

life. I'd have to say that coke helped push college and my first marriage to slow destruction. It took me falling apart, and a good friend intervening, to force me to get help. Gina kept at me until I couldn't deny it anymore. Then she stood by me and watched me like a hawk for months."

"That's a real friend," he agreed. "I'm surprised she isn't here now."

"I wish she were," I sighed, looking back into his compassionate eyes. "She's out of the country."

"If you haven't relapsed in five years, where did you get the coke? In town?"

"No. Rod gave it to me."

"Rod?" he asked with a frown. "Your ex-boyfriend? He lives here?"

"God, no," I said with some heat. "He flew in for the funeral. He's staying in the room next to mine."

Tony's eyes hardened. "He came in and just dangles that in front of you at a time like this?"

I shrugged. "Yeah."

With a visible effort, he brought himself back under control. "I don't think you should give up. That's what giving in would be. I don't think you're a quitter, Regan. Since your friend isn't here, let me step into her shoes." His eyes bored into mine. "You don't need that crutch. I'm here for you and I'll stay right here as long as you need me. That's going to tempt you every minute you keep it. Dump it. If you can't do that just for yourself, do it for your friend Gina, and for me. Please."

Indecision tore at me.

Finally, I nodded and dug the vial out of my pocket and tossed it onto the bed beside him. "You're right. Get rid of it."

When he shook his head, I stared in surprise and incomprehension. He picked up the vial and held it out. "You need to get rid of it, I think. Don't let someone else do it for you."

I didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or get angry. "Why?"

"Because if you pass it off to me that's passing off the responsibility for your life to me. I want you to dump it. Take responsibility for your own life."

Taking the vial in my hand, I stood up on unsteady feet. Tony rose with me and followed me into the bathroom where I unscrewed the cap and tried to force my hand to dump it into the toilet. After a moment where I thought I wasn't going to be able to do it, I convulsively dumped it into the water.

"Flush it," he quietly commanded.

With the plunge of the handle, the coke was gone. Numbly I screwed the lid back on the empty vial and clutched it in my hand. Tony pulled me into his arms and held me as I started to weep softly.

"It's going to be okay," he whispered. When the tears finally slowed and my nose completely stuffed up, he walked me back to my room. He pried the empty vial from my hand and set it on the dresser before finding me some tissues.

In companionable silence, he let me dry my tears and regain my composure. I knew he wanted to talk some more, but he didn't rush me. I appreciated that.

The slam of the front door interrupted any further opportunity to talk. I jumped a little, looked at the open door to my bedroom and listened to see who was home. When I didn't hear any voices, I stood up and debated closing the door. I froze in my tracks when Rod appeared at the door and just sauntered in.

"Hey, Babe, I..." he drew up short when he saw Tony standing by the bed. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Tony didn't say anything, but his body language was crystal clear. Gone was the gentle man who had helped me get a grip on my life, and in his place stood an angry man. A dangerous man. His eyes, so soft toward me, were now chips of flint ready to spark a fire. I decided I had to act now before he did something I wouldn't regret.

"His name is Tony," I said with a cold toss of my head. I stood up and pointed to the door. "But I don't recall inviting you in, Rod, so hit the road."

Still glaring at Tony, Rod's eyes flicked around the room and I saw the hidden gleam

when he saw the empty vial. His expression made me look down in shame that I'd almost succumbed to it and to him. "I just came in to talk about the weather, babe. No need to get all huffy. The *snow* has been falling non-stop."

Tony stepped in front of me.

"She said to go," he said flatly. "You can either go on your own or I'll toss your sorry ass out."

"I can handle him, Tony," I said as I gathered my anger. "We're done, Rod. Get out." My stuffed nose ruined my imperious tone.

He smiled knowingly at me and sauntered out the door, laughing. "You know where to find me if you want to talk about the weather."

Tony closed the door behind him and locked it. Then he took me into his arms. "I should've beat the shit out of him."

I smiled. "That'd be a really bad idea," I said. "Daddy likes him. I think Rod is the son he never had. I have to live under the same roof as him."

"No, you don't," he said softly. "Come away with me."

My head came up and I searched his face, trying to decide what he meant by that. Part of me struggled to shake my head and refuse, but another part of me was stronger and melted into his arms and I nodded. "Where will we go?"

His hand tilted my face to look directly into my eyes. "I still have the room I booked for tonight and tomorrow. We can share it." He must have seen the struggle in my heart because he covered my lips with his fingers. "No obligations. I promise that I'll be a gentleman."

A growing part of me didn't want him to be a gentleman, but I was grateful not to have to make a decision right now while I was upset. "Okay. Let me pack a bag."

"I'll be back in a minute after I grab my stuff. Don't open the door unless you hear me outside." For a second I thought he was going to kiss me, and I trembled, but he let me go.

After he left, I locked the door and started packing. I debated what to take and decided

just to take what I needed for a few days. Screw the rest. My motions were wooden at first, but as I packed I gained resolution, and my actions became faster and firmer.

I was still gathering my makeup when I heard a knock at the door. I dropped my bag, and my heart suddenly pounded.

"Regan," Tony called through the door, "open up."

I unlocked the door and stared at him accusingly. "You scared the hell out of me!"

He laughed. "Sorry. Are you ready?"

"Give me a second." I picked my bag back up, swept my makeup inside, and zipped it. "Now I am."

He didn't waste time asking me if I was sure. Good. When he started out, I followed him. The great room showed no sign of Rod, so either he'd left again or was in his room. Even better. I briefly wondered where everyone else was as we put on our outerwear. Then I decided I really didn't care.

The only cars outside were Tony's Land Rover and a rental Mercedes I assumed was Rod's. There was still no sign of Conrad or Daddy. Excellent.

A few false turns and half an hour later, we were at the Doubletree. I looked over the lounge. It wasn't the Waldorf, but it would do. I followed him to the room when he was done and it looked adequate, if small. It would be fine for sleeping. Then it hit me. The room was a single. I turned to look at Tony with a quirked eyebrow.

He shrugged and set his bag on the floor. "I expected to be alone when I reserved it. Don't worry; I'll sleep in the chair." He gestured at the uncomfortable-looking padded chair in the corner.

"If you say you'll behave, I believe you," I said with a shake of my head, setting my bag on the low-slung dresser. "The bed is big enough for both of us to sleep without trouble."

"I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable," he said quietly, opening the bag and moving his clothes and gear into one side of the dresser.

"That's sweet, but I won't. If I do, believe me, you'll know it." I unpacked and loaded my half of the dresser with clothes.

After we'd hung up the clothes that needed hanging and put our toiletries into the bathroom, I sat on the bed and wondered where this unexpected relationship was going. Then I shook my head. No, there was no relationship. None.

"Hungry?" Tony asked. "We can order room service."

"Not really," I said, "but don't let me stop you if you are. I'm all worn out."

"Then let's just get some sleep," he suggested. "I'll ask for a wakeup call while you get ready for bed."

I brushed my teeth and weighed my options. Part of me still wanted to go back into the bedroom and slake the growing lust I was feeling. If it had been a woman instead of Tony, I would have indulged, but I still felt held back. Staring at myself in the mirror, I shook my head. If I gave in to my desire, it would be for more than a piece of ass, and I still couldn't believe I felt this intensity in such a short time. I needed to sleep on it.

When I was done, I let him have the bathroom and pulled out a long tee shirt to wear over my panties. I turned off all the lights except for the lamp by my side of the bed. I settled in between the sheets and listened to him brush his teeth. This domestication came from out of nowhere and made me feel something I hadn't felt in a long time. Lonely. I sternly pushed back the feelings of warmth that his ordinary preparations for bed had raised. How had he managed to get through all my defenses with such ease?

I was still stewing in that hot soup of emotion when Tony came out of the bathroom in a pair of tight briefs and an undershirt. Somehow, the sight of him like that was much more erotic than seeing him naked. I smiled and patted the bed beside me without a word.

When he was under the covers, I looked into his eyes and slowly leaned forward until our lips touched, and I kissed him softly for a moment. If he'd have kissed me back and wanted more, I would've given myself to him, but he let me pull back without acting on the arousal I could see in his eyes.

"Thank you," I whispered and turned out the light.

The warmth of his body next to mine relaxed me in a way that I never would've

imagined, though it also kept me awake long past the start of his soft snores, thinking - debating with myself. A smile crept across my face.

I was thinking about him and wondering exactly what I had thanked him for when sleep took me.

Chapter Four: A leap of faith

I woke up slowly, luxuriating in comfortable warmth. Then I realized I was half-sprawled across someone. A man - Tony - my suddenly awake brain informed me. His scent filled my senses with my face buried in his hair, my lips brushing his neck.

The rest of my body began reporting in and the news went downhill from there. My thigh was resting on an obviously aroused cock and his arm was between us, cupping one of my breasts through my tee shirt. Unconsciously I began gently moving myself against him. Then my forebrain caught up with my hindbrain and froze my hips. This was *not* what I wanted.

Liar.

I lifted my head a little to look at his sleeping face. I wanted to kiss those soft lips again and I couldn't keep fooling myself about not wanting him. Now, with that out of the way, I just needed to decide if I would give in to my desires or not.

I was still wrestling with myself when the phone rang. Tony's eyes popped open and we stared at each other from a few inches away. I could see his eyes flicker with surprise at the sudden realization that I was lying mostly on top of him. Then the alarm as he realized that he had a nice morning erection rubbing my inner thigh and my breast in his hand. I felt my nipple stiffen against his palm through the cloth of my tee shirt.

The phone rang a few more times while he got his brain in gear, pulled his hand away from my breast, and answered the phone. A murmur told me it was our wakeup call. When he hung up, I started to swoop in to take a kiss but he beat me to it, kissing me softly and pulling back from me.

"Sorry," he said, rearranging his briefs as he stood up. "I didn't intend to grope you." He looked embarrassed and I realized that he took his promise to behave very seriously.

"We were asleep. You didn't do anything I'm objecting to," I said softly. I took a deep

breath and let it out slowly. "Tony, I want you. And that scares me."

The spark in his eyes was impossible to miss. "Don't be scared. The feeling's mutual. However," he said regretfully as he climbed out of bed, "we have to get a move on or we'll be late."

With a nod, I slipped out of bed. "Do you want to shower first?"

"We could shower together," he suggested softly, pulling me closer with a hand on my hip.

"Not and get to the funeral home on time," I said, regretfully. "Go shower."

I brushed my teeth and sat on the toilet listening to him shower while pummeling my brain on how to proceed. The speed and force of my emotions were making me feel out of control again. I probably shouldn't have told him that I wanted him. That gave him power over me and I didn't know if any man could be trusted with that kind of control.

Tony turned off the shower and climbed out with water streaming down his body. His wet hair clung to his neck and shoulders and he looked like some kind of Greek god. The Regan of twenty years ago would have thrown him against the wall - at least she would have if he had been a woman - funeral service be damned. But I'd learned to restrain myself. Most of the time. Restraint still didn't stop the wave of lust that rolled up my body and lit me on fire, though.

Pulling my eyes from Tony, I stepped into the shower. The ritual of washing myself brought me some control and I felt much better by the time I climbed out and dried off.

Tony was putting his tie on when I came in and laid out the dress I'd picked for the funeral. I sat down and reached for my makeup, but stopped when I saw how badly my hand was trembling. If I tried to apply makeup while I was shaking like this I'd look like an extra from a slasher movie. I couldn't look like that in front of Mother. I couldn't disappoint Daddy.

Tony put his hands on my trembling shoulders. "You can do this," he said. "Take one step at a time and put one foot in front of the other."

I smiled wanly and nodded. "It's going to be the hardest thing I've done in a long time, but with you behind me I might live through it."

He kissed my cheek and backed off. "Get dressed and we'll go. Are you hungry?" I shook my head and slipped into a fresh bra and panties. "Not really."

He left me in silence to apply my makeup and dress. The familiar rituals calmed me and I felt almost human when we walked out to the car.

Mourners packed the funeral home. The service didn't start for half an hour, but now we had local notables and family friends to add to the volatile mix of relatives and me. I probably should've been here earlier. I'd no doubt hear all about my failings before the service ever got underway. At least after the funeral, I would only have to deal with Conrad for one more day. Once the lawyer read the will, I could be on my way back to LA. I glanced at Tony and realized that I might not be heading to LA just yet, but I'd still be away from family.

Conrad was waiting for me. Someone must have tipped him off that I was here, and he was ready to plaster me before I even had a chance to catch my bearings.

"It's about time you decided to show up," he said, staring down his nose. "You should have been here over an hour ago to meet the family. And where's my SUV?"

I didn't even slow down and he had to leap aside to avoid me bouncing him into the wall. "Yesterday you told me to be less involved. Really, Conrad, for once in your life, show some spine and make a decision. Which is it? You've been hogging the limelight and I'm happy to let you have it. Choke on it. As far as the SUV, I left your stupid toy here in the parking lot."

The expression on Conrad's face left no doubt I'd confused him, so he switched tactics. "I don't want him here," Conrad said, sliding back in front of me and walking backwards. "He threatened one of my guests, and he has no business here while I'm burying my wife. He goes. And you're lying because my SUV certainly isn't in the parking lot."

I stopped and made him walk back to me when he didn't stop when I did. "Well then, we're even; I don't want you here, either," I assured him. "Once again, you think you're in control of me and my friends. Disabuse yourself of that idea right now. I do as I damned well please; and no one tells one of my friends that they have to leave my mother's funeral." I stepped up into Conrad's face and forced him back a step. Inside, a quiet part of me marveled at my reaction. Margot called me "the bulldog" when one of my friends was threatened. Again, it illustrated to me how Tony defied all my

expectations and fit into my life anyway.

Thinking of Tony, I lowered my voice so as not to give Conrad another scene. "Rod was being an ass and deserved to be thrown out of my room," I continued without pause. "And if you don't want to be thrown into a hearse, you'd better get out of my way. If I make a stink and someone calls the police, I may not get my way, but I will guarantee you a three-ring circus that'll make you wish you'd never been born. As for your SUV, maybe it was towed, or better yet, stolen. I say 'good for the crooks' though it can't be worth much, as cheap as you are."

His face paled as he snarled and dithered.

Before I could see if he had a pair or not, Daddy stepped into the hall with Melissa beside him. Daddy was frowning like a thunderhead, and Melissa was shooting cold daggers at me with her eyes. I guess she'd hoped for a late-night meeting with Tony. She was ambitious; I had to give her that.

"Young lady, I am shocked at your behavior," Daddy growled. "I don't know what you're thinking, but threatening a guest of mine is inexcusable. So is running off to have an all-night orgy with a man you just met the night before your mother's funeral." He shifted his gaze to Tony. "I shouldn't have expected any better from the likes of *you*. Leave. You're not wanted here."

Tony didn't seem at all bothered by Daddy's disapproval. Or Conrad's. He looked at me and raised an eyebrow.

I shook my head. "He stays. Whether or not I slept with him is my business, Daddy. I don't tell you or your wife who you can or can't sleep with, so I'd appreciate the same courtesy. What happens in Vermont stays in Vermont, you know, unless the two of you would like to change the rules?"

Melissa flushed and her cold eyes heated with rage.

Daddy's expression didn't change. "Don't try to change the subject. We're speaking about you and your unacceptable behavior."

He didn't seem surprised when I said Melissa cheated. Interesting, but irrelevant.

I smiled sweetly. "But Daddy, I'm just being a good little daughter and following in your footsteps. All I've ever wanted was to be like you. If you don't want your philandering

or your wife's sleeping with people like Rod to be brought up, then leave my sex life out of this."

"I don't sleep around, and neither does Melissa," he said in an almost apoplectic rage.

His denial about his own behavior fell flat for anyone who knew him. As for Melissa, who knew what he believed? A better question was who cared?

"You've pushed me as far as I'm willing to go." He leaned in and I had to force myself to stand my ground. "That trust fund of yours and the settlements from those men you used and dumped might keep you in a comfortable house, but I know you want more. You want to be rich. I know your mother left everything to Conrad. If you continue to humiliate me this way, I'll cut you out of my will, too." His voice dropped to a harsh whisper as he wound down.

This wasn't the first time he'd played this card to good effect. I felt my heart rise into my throat. He thought using his money as a threat was what would motivate me. He never seemed to get that it was his approval that made me do what he wanted. I had to make the choice now between pursuing a relationship with a man, one that would probably end in disaster, and making Daddy happy.

Daddy's hard glare told me I didn't have the luxury of time, either. I had to make that decision right here and now. Should I follow my heart or my mind? Was there really a choice? As always, he held all the cards.

Then I remembered what Tony said yesterday. The past defined us, but we could choose to break the cycle. If we were willing to accept the pain and start again. Karma or redemption? Right now, I was at the cusp of two very different futures. One with Daddy's approval and one without any close family at all. I took a deep breath and made the most important decision of my life.

"Take your inheritance and shove it, Daddy. I never wanted your stinking money. I wanted something you can't give me. Come on, Tony." My voice was astonishingly level and somehow I wasn't shaking like a leaf.

Daddy looked stunned and Melissa looked triumphant as I pushed past them and into the funeral home. Conrad looked gay but that was probably natural. Now I noticed all the people around that had been staring at the confrontation, and I couldn't decide if the fact it would spread like wildfire was good or bad.

I went to the front row and sat down with Tony next to me, staring straight ahead.

What had I just done? Was I right? Wrong? Stupid? All of the above? I felt my breathing start to speed up and the tears threatened to overwhelm me.

Tony took my hand in his, and I looked at him through my unshed tears. "I'm so proud of you," he said quietly.

I stopped a maniacal laugh in my throat through brute force. "I've just walked away from the only family I've ever known."

He nodded. "Just like I did. Now you don't have to fit into the mold of what they expect and demand. You can be who you want to be now."

That brought a small smile. "I already have a reputation for doing what I want in spite of the consequences."

"I didn't say free to do what you want, Regan. That's not the same thing as being free to be who you want to be."

I pulled a tissue from my purse and wiped my eyes. "I guess I don't understand the difference yet."

"We've got years to figure that out," he said confidently.

"We? Planning on being around for a while?"

"For a while," he agreed with a smile.

Conrad came up and sat stiffly down the bench from me as the minister walked up to the podium to start the funeral. I finally noticed that I hadn't seen Rod. I worried about where he was and what he was doing when I couldn't see him.

Nothing could be done about that now. Giving my attention over to the service, I ignored Conrad, though I felt his gaze on me several times.

I cried through the funeral, but it went as well as that kind of thing can go. Many people got up and spoke about all the good things my mother had done, and how she had blessed the people around her. Some of it was real, but the rest of it was well-meaning

tripe and posturing. All too many people said the right thing only so they could be seen doing it.

Near the end, I stood up and made my way to the podium, cutting off Conrad before he could walk to the microphone for the final eulogy. Conrad sat back down abruptly and glared at me.

Since I'd decided before the funeral not to speak, that must have surprised the minister but he took it in stride. I suppose he'd seen it all at these sorts of things. Looking out over the crowd, I felt the rising tension. They expected something bad to happen. I imagine that meant that word of my telling Daddy off had already made the rounds.

I smiled at Conrad and then at Daddy for a moment. Then I focused on the crowd as a whole. "Everyone's spoken about all the good works my mother did in her life, but I don't think they've touched on the core of who she was. Let me tell you about my mother. She was a flawed woman."

At the swift inhalation of breath, I smiled a little deeper. "Yes, flawed. As flawed as we all are. Some more flawed than others." I spared a glance at Conrad without being obvious about it. "In spite of *her* own flaws, she loved *me* in spite of *my* flaws. She loved me, and I love her, still. Maybe that seems a little off topic from all the grand stories here this morning, but it's what's important to me. Despite our personal failures, we could love one another in our own ways. I'll miss you, Mom."

Wiping my face, I resumed my seat. Tony slid an arm around me and held me reassuringly close while Conrad walked stiffly to the podium and made the most pompous speech, seeming to focus more on him than her. Typical.

The minister closed the service and thanked everyone for coming. That seemed to cut loose the crowd and I again broke the rules and walked to my mother's casket one last time. I kissed her face and whispered goodbye. Then I walked out with my back straight and my head held high.

Outside, I'm sure Conrad would have done something nasty if I'd bothered to stop and try to speak to him. But I blew past him without pausing. Daddy and Melissa were already in the parking lot and he stared at me for a moment before deliberately turning his back and climbing into his car. Melissa's grin was predatory as she followed him. I tried to pretend it didn't hurt as Daddy turned his back on me.

"Come on," Tony said, leading me to his Rover through the dispersing crowd. People

avoided me as if I'd caught the plague. "Time to go get roaring drunk."

"That sounds like a grand idea," I agreed with a sigh. "Drive on, MacDuff." I was glad I wouldn't be flying back to Knoxville for the burial. After all that had happened, I just couldn't bear to go and see her put in the ground. I just couldn't. Perhaps that is why she insisted that her will be read here tomorrow morning. Maybe she knew me better than I knew myself.

Stopping on the way back to the hotel, I managed to find a bottle of François Villard St. Joseph Blanc 1996 and Tony snagged a bottle of Basil Hayden's Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey. That beat the hell out of the crap in those stupid mini-bars.

When we made it to our room, we saw the light blinking on the phone. "Get that, will you?" Tony asked as he set the bottles on the counter.

I dialed the desk and asked for any messages. The perky female voice that answered set my teeth on edge, but I just asked for the messages.

"No messages, ma'am. We had a package delivered for your room," she said.

"A package?" I asked, surprised. "What kind of package?"

"It looks like a box of clothes," she said cheerfully. "A man left it for your room this morning."

"I'll be right there," I said and hung up before she could respond. "I think we need to shift hotels."

Tony shrugged. "That's fine. You go get the package. I'll pack and pick you up in the lobby in ten minutes. Just check us out."

With a nod I left him packing and walked to the office. The woman looked just as disgustingly perky as she sounded.

I presented my ID and room key and she handed me a cardboard box.

I took it and opened the lid to glance inside at the contents. It looked like my clothes and small personal effects. On top was an envelope with my name on it. I tore it open and scanned the short note.

Neither you nor your friend is welcome in my home any longer. Don't come back to my property. - Conrad

I crumpled the note. "We're going to be checking out early."

Unperturbed, the cheerful clerk nodded and processed us out. I stepped outside and went through the box in detail while I waited for Tony. Under all the clothes was another of Rod's vials. I gritted my teeth in rage, poured it onto the ground, and scattered it with my foot. Then I crushed the vial under my shoe. That asshole.

A minute later Tony pulled up and I climbed in. "Where to?" he asked.

"The Hilton," I said. "If I'm going to be disowned, I can at least celebrate in style. And they have rooms with a Jacuzzi tub."

He shook his head and smiled at me. Without another word, he drove to the Hilton.

The Hilton and I had a real history. If you looked at it from the right perspective, that history was both good and bad. At least one incident had been both at the same time.

I shook my head and scattered the gathering thoughts. Tony was right. The past was the past and I couldn't choose to undo those long ago events, even if I'd wanted to. To be honest, considering how blissfully happy Gina was now, I wouldn't change that night one bit, even though I regretted the pain I'd helped cause that night.

In the end, that strength and independence of Gina's was worth all the pain she'd endured, even if I was sometimes mystified at her taste in husbands. Still, he made her happy and if that's what she wanted, it's what I wanted for her. I didn't have to understand. I just needed to love her. I did envy the happiness she'd made for herself, though.

A glance and a smile back at Tony reinforced how life sometimes took a left turn and tossed all our plans and expectations on their heads. Maybe I needed to reevaluate my opinion about Gina's husband, since I had to re-examine everything in my life. Even knowing Tony as little as I did, he and Gina's husband seemed to have a good bit in common. They were both in good shape, but more importantly, they had a similar strong self-assurance. I found the similarities a bit disconcerting and just a little bit ironic.

With a laugh that drew a surprised look from Tony, I walked quickly into the lobby and straight up to the desk clerk.

"I need a suite with a Jacuzzi," I said, sliding my ID and credit card over.

An hour later we were safely ensconced in a nice suite and sitting naked in the Jacuzzi, sipping on our drinks. Well, he was sipping and I was closer to gulping. I expected him to tell me to slow down or something, but he didn't. After the first glow hit me, I slowed down and watched him from beneath my eyelashes.

"Aren't you afraid I'll drink myself into a stupor?" I asked.

"I wouldn't say 'afraid', but I am worried about it," he admitted.

"Then why aren't you stopping me?"

He smiled and shook his head. "If anyone deserves to get falling down drunk tonight, it's you, and I won't stop you. If you do, I'll make sure you get safely to bed, so don't worry about it."

"Does that involve more gentleman-like behavior?"

"Yep," he said, sipping his drink. "I won't take advantage of you while your defenses are down."

I set my wineglass on the side of the tub and slid over to him in the hot water. Surprised, he barely had time to set his drink down before I was sitting in his lap and pulling his arms around my waist. I ran my hands across his chest, feeling the hard muscles under soft skin.

"Well, my defenses aren't down right now, or at least they're up as far as they need to be. So, what if I want you to take advantage of me?" I nipped his earlobe gently. "What if I want you to make love to me right now? I don't understand why I feel so close to you, much less so quickly, but I don't want to fight it anymore. Do you want me, Tony?"

A slow smile spread on his face as I felt him rise to the occasion until he was firm against my thigh. I moved and allowed him to unbend himself. Then I rubbed myself against his erection. His eyes lost focus a little at that, and he pulled me against him

and kissed me deeply.

I melted into him as the emotions that I'd been holding in check were suddenly rushing through my mind. This was like making love to Gina or Margot, but somehow not quite the same. I kissed him back with an ardor that surprised me. I was suddenly hungry for him in the worst way.

The world shrunk to just the two of us as his hands found my breasts. The sweet mixture of pleasure and pain when he bit my nipples made me gasp. I felt so hot inside that the hot tub felt cool.

He stopped me when I reached down to guide him inside me. "No, let me make love to you."

Surprised and confused, I nodded and stood up uncertainly. He pulled me out of the tub and dried me thoroughly. The soft caress of the towel drove me crazy, and he seemed to know right where to touch me.

He dried quickly, led me slowly into the bedroom by the hand and sat me on the edge of the bed. I watched him curiously to see what he had in mind.

Taking my face in his hands, he kissed me slowly and deeply. I felt that kiss down to my toes. Then he let his lips travel all over my face and neck, kissing and gently nipping my skin. Gasps and moans escaped my lips as he continued his slow torture.

His hands cupped my breasts. He licked and nipped my neck, his hands gently squeezing and twisting my nipples in ever-growing sharp twists. He quickly discovered that I liked my nipples treated roughly.

My eyes watched him lustfully and I tried to pull his head back up to kiss me. That got his hands to capture my wrists and hold them pinned at my sides.

"Oh, no," he whispered hungrily. "I'm going to kiss every inch of your body before we make love. No shortcuts." That fired a jolt of pure lust through my body. I was instantly drenched inside. When he let go of my hands, I forced them to remain at my sides as he resumed his slow progress.

I was breathing heavily by the time his mouth captured my right nipple. I sucked in my breath, and my back arched convulsively. He licked, bit, and sucked it until my hips were thrusting rhythmically. I moaned at every gentle nip of his teeth. I don't remember

tangling my fingers in his hair but this time he didn't complain. The sensations had far surpassed anything I'd ever felt with a man before, and I began to think I was going to come just from his lips on my breasts.

Groaning, I again tried to fight him for control. I wanted him inside me and I wanted it now!

He easily pinned me back on the bed. "No, no, no," he grinned. "That gets you two minutes in the penalty box."

"God," I groaned in frustration. "How can you stand this? Fuck me, Tony. Please, fuck me!"

"Good things come to those who wait," he teased. "Patience is a virtue."

I almost screamed, but he only laughed and went back to kissing my inner arm, working slowly toward my wrist. With my arms trapped in his hands I couldn't even touch myself. I writhed, attempting to rub against him for relief. Tony laughed and didn't cooperate.

By the time he was working his way down my stomach, I was sure that I was going to die. It felt like I'd been on the brink of a massive orgasm for hours. Every minute was the most exquisite torture. As he kissed my inner thigh, I felt the moisture of my arousal run down my ass. I could only imagine the massive wet spot.

Then he started away from my sex and down toward my knee and I did scream. "Oh, God!"

Tony laughed and kept kissing, licking, and nibbling me very, *very* slowly. He made me bend my knee and kissed all the way down to my feet, licking and sucking the arch of my foot. It was so close to tickling that I almost kicked him, but it was also erotic in a way I'd never imagined. When he sucked my toes and gave each one a miniature blowjob, I felt it all the way up my spine and my eyes closed in pleasure.

He repeated that fantastic performance on my other foot, and started back up my other leg. I knew what was coming now, and I was so ready that I just knew I was going to cream all over him at the first touch of his lips on my sex. Inch by torturous inch, he covered the distance, seeming to slow down as he came closer to his goal. By the time his nose touched my pubic hair, my hips were thrusting uncontrollably and I was urging him on with soft groans and moans.

He settled between my legs and blew softly on my pussy. He pushed me to the very brink of orgasm without having touched my sex even once. As he leaned forward, I tensed in anticipation, the moment drawing out almost painfully. Then, all of a sudden, he rolled me onto my stomach. "Time for the back half," he said in that infuriatingly cheerful voice.

I lost it. I completely lost my marbles right there. I begged. I pleaded. I threatened. I insulted. All that got me was more time in the penalty box. Remorselessly, he started at my neck and worked his way down my back. Goosebumps covered every inch of me, and I felt like I was floating.

His teeth on my ass while his hands squeezed my butt cheeks made me start grinding into the bed. He had to pull one hand back to pull me away from the promise of gratification. That precipitated a war for control of my hands again that I quickly lost.

"You're almost there," he encouraged me, his warm breath flowing along the crack of my ass. "Just a few minutes more..." Then he gently spread the globes of my ass and ran his tongue along my rosebud. Lightning flashed through my brain as he proceeded to give me the rimjob of my life. I'd usually been the giver of anal pleasure and now he was driving me totally crazy with it.

I was almost too incoherent to feel it when he flipped me back over and onto my back. Then he buried his face between my legs and split me with his tongue while two fingers plunged inside me. I thought the world had ended. I don't know how long he had kept me on the brink of orgasm, but that pushed me over like a barrel over Niagara Falls. I was unstoppable and he rode me in a frenzy of licks, sucks, and plunging fingers. One after another, the orgasms rolled over me and through me like an electric current as I writhed under his glorious torment.

Groggily, I focused on Tony's grinning face that seemed to be floating over me. I blinked and stretched languorously. "Dear God," I whispered. "What did you do to me?"

"I like to call that 'around the world in eighty minutes,'" he said, kissing me softly. His face was thoroughly drenched with my juices.

"If I had any energy left, I'd hit you for torturing me like that, you bastard," I said with a sigh.

"You'd better have some energy," he smirked, "because the main event is about to begin."

I grabbed him by the hair and pulled him on top of me, luxuriating in the feel of his body against mine. Then, I rolled him onto his back and broke our kiss. "After you calling all the shots, I think I need a little cowgirl action. Lie back like a good boy and let me have my way with you."

With a laugh, he surrendered and put his hands behind his head. "I'm yours. Do your worst."

Hungrily eyeing his cock, I decided I wanted a little taste of him first. Just enough to get him all wired to go crazy when I was ready to fuck him silly. And I could get some more of that talented tongue of his. I wasn't ready to say he ate better pussy than Gina did, but he certainly knew his way around one.

With a quick twist, I slid on top of him and ground my pussy in his surprised face while I used my hand slowly to jack his cock. "Get back to licking me while I warm up the quarterback." My eyes grew heavy lidded as he wrapped his arms around my ass and dove in tongue first. Oh, yeah, this man would go far.

Licking my lips, I lowered my face to his cock and took the head of it into my mouth. His masculine taste exploded across my tongue, and I gloried in the velvety warmth of his cock. I wrapped my lips around him and felt his pulse in the most intimate way imaginable. His heartbeat thundered inside my mouth.

When he started thrusting his hips, I used my hands to foil him from fucking my mouth. This was payback. I was going to torture him and then fuck him after he lost his mind. Slowly, I built my tempo until I was taking half his length at each plunge at the same rate of thrust he was trying to use on me. As his oral technique suffered, I knew I was having an effect on him.

As his precum became abundant, I pulled him out of my mouth and began jacking him off. Every few jerks I'd lick his head completely. This was when I discovered that instead of being the expected chore, going down on him was exciting me far more than going down on men had in the past. Even the taste of his precum was exciting.

Taking a deep breath, I changed my plans and plunged my mouth down on his cock, inhaling and trying to suck him deep into my throat. I wanted to caress him with my throat muscles. I'd never been fond of giving head so, of course, I choked a little and

backed off to use my lips and tongue. Maybe Gina could give me some pointers.

Tony must have liked it, though. I thought he was going to throw me off with the thrusting and it made me feel very pleased with myself. I started sucking him as if I meant it. Usually, having a man come in my mouth was a gift to him, but this time I greedily wanted to treat myself.

I barely had a moment's warning when he arched wildly and his cock began swelling in my mouth. I pulled back until only the head was in my mouth and used my hands to stroke his length as he came. As his come exploded across my tongue, I exulted. At this moment, I wanted his come in my mouth more than I'd ever wanted anything before. One swallow and then another, and he trailed off into mild twitches and moans.

But I wasn't done with him yet. It was payback time for earlier. Even as he collapsed, I licked him clean and spun over him again. Before he knew it he was balls deep inside me, and I arched my back and groaned at the ceiling. My strap-on wasn't even in his league. It was good, but a real man was much, much better. I hadn't been with a man at all since my last divorce and I'd almost given up on anything but women; but now I felt more alive than I had in years.

Leaning forward, I let my hair cover his chest. Then I started grinding myself against him, bouncing slowly. I could tell it was a rough transition for him. He was probably sensitive, and here I was forcing him to ride out that feeling. What a bitch, I thought with a grin. I was impressed that he didn't complain.

For a while, we ground together and I started having a string of small orgasms while I rode him. That urged me on to a faster pace and soon I was bouncing up and down so hard that I would've been afraid the bed would collapse if I'd had the attention to spare.

At what I thought was the height of those orgasms, Tony rolled me over and began thrusting himself deeply into me. Then I discovered I only thought I knew how intense it could get.

I clung to him, unable to do anything but scream and writhe with my sex jerking up to meet his fevered thrusts. My mouth locked to his and I tried to suck his tongue down my throat while he built to a crescendo on top of me. My entire body spasmed and I locked my legs around his waist, moaning his name into his ear while I held him.

He pinned me to the bed with an incredibly deep thrust. I felt him swell inside me, and then his cock convulsed as the hot, wet sensation of his come filled me. I squeezed him

repeatedly with my internal muscles, milking him with the velvet glove of my pussy.

A hot, sweaty tangle of limbs, we collapsed together and whispered to each other. It didn't take me long to get that this was more than hot sex. I loved him. That emotional connection to him was there in a way I could never have dreamed of with a man. I loved him. I'd thought I'd thrown my life away, but I'd only just found it.

I finally realized that he was telling me something repeatedly. "I love you." I knew men used it as a way to get what they wanted from women but this time I somehow knew deep inside that it was real.

"I think I love you, too," I whispered dreamily back, shocking myself. My mouth seemed to have developed a mind of its own. What the hell was I saying?

I lay there thinking about it as he drifted off to sleep beside me. I finally decided that I'd just have to trust my instincts and let sleep drag me into the most wonderful dreams.

Chapter Five: Karma

When we woke the next day, we made slow and gentle love in the morning sunlight. It was *so* unlike what I normally associated with sex. It was a slow, sensual, ever-deepening closeness; not a mad rush for pleasure. Oh, make no mistake, the orgasms were there for me, but the real treasure was the developing feelings between me and the man - the *man* - who was making love to me.

Afterward, lying in his arms, I felt more at peace with myself than I think I'd ever felt. I didn't want the moment to end. I wanted to lay there with him forever; but, that wasn't in the cards. I sighed and nestled closer to Tony, shielded and safe in his arms.

"I don't want to go," I said, "but I need to. I need to finish this."

He kissed my nose and pulled my head to his chest. "I'll go with you. And if Conrad starts something, I'll stuff him in a trash compactor."

I laughed. "You'd ruin the trash."

Reluctantly, I got out of bed. We showered together, and a little fooling around almost got us sidetracked.

As we dressed, I watched Tony, openly admiring his body. He just grinned at me.

"What do we do now?" I asked, a little afraid of the possibilities. "Can you go to LA or will that ruin your work?"

"I have a really good relationship with the company, so I can take a leave of absence to go to LA. We'll figure it out there," he said reassuringly. "There's no need to rush. Let's take this one step at a time and do this right."

Grateful, I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding. "That makes me feel better." I gave him a soft kiss. "Thank you."

He grinned and swatted my ass. "Get dressed and let's go. Finish this so we can start the rest of our lives." I felt dizzy at the implication of his words. With a smile, I dressed and we left.

The offices of Dugan and Reynolds looked suitably posh for Mother to retain. With her, appearances meant everything; and this place screamed money and influence. Creamy marble and expensive wood dominated the hard surfaces and over-stuffed leather furniture graced the wide open space.

The receptionist, a young woman in a designer blouse and sweater, gave Tony a discreet once over and smiled at us. When I identified myself, she showed us into a conference room.

I sat and twirled slowly in one of the executive chairs, feeling my uncertainty creep back up on me. Why the hell was I even here? Conrad was just going to make a sweep of Mother's possessions and gloat. Part of me still regretted losing that much money, but I was growing more used to the idea; it didn't hurt quite the same way now. Honestly, I was more irked that Conrad was going to get his way than anything else.

Right on the stroke of ten, the door opened and an older man in a tailored suit walked in with a large folder in his hand. He had that distinguished look that control and power brought to a man, and he used it well to hold himself apart from us even as he shook our hands.

"Good morning. My name is Orin Reynolds and I'll be handling the reading and execution of Mrs. Masterson's will."

I grimaced as he said that. Having Mother even attached to Conrad's name irked me.

As Mr. Reynolds sat down, he opened the folder revealing papers and three DVDs. "Miss Thomas, Mister Masterson, please allow me to express my condolences for your loss. I never met..." He dragged to a halt as I held up my hand.

"I'm sorry, but there's been a misunderstanding," I said. "I'm Miss Thomas, but this isn't Mister Masterson. This is my friend Tony Di Ricco. He's here for moral support."

The lawyer apologized for the mistake and closed the folder. "I hope you'll understand, but we need to wait for Mister Masterson, since both of you are required to be present for the reading of the will."

"My mother left a video for us?" I asked, hearing the tremor in my voice. I'd expected the dry reading of what went where and perhaps some words from on high about how I should do better in the future. How would those words change if she only could see me now?

The lawyer nodded. "I can't go into the specifics just yet, but she did leave a personal message to be played to both of you."

Tony held my hand under the table and we waited. And waited. And waited some more. To the point that Mister Reynolds excused himself and made some calls. The receptionist got us some coffee while Tony and I spoke quietly as we waited.

It was almost eleven when Conrad sauntered in with the frowning lawyer behind him. Conrad seemed unnaturally cheerful and didn't acknowledge us in any way, not even to protest Tony being there. That was so out of character that it set off my asshole warning system. I didn't know what his game was, but there was something going on. His perfunctory apology satisfied no one, and was just another reason to dislike him.

The lawyer opened the folder, pulled out one of the DVDs and slid it into the player below the recessed television at the end of the room. "Mrs. Masterson left her final will verbally on this recording. It was witnessed by the staff of this firm. Her written will also specifies the same wishes. She didn't have to make the recording," he assured us, "but insisted on doing so. It was made less than a month ago, right here in this room."

When the picture came on, Mother was sitting in a chair in front of the same paneling I could see to my left. She looked like... Mother: proud, powerful and supremely self-

confident. The fact that she was wearing the same dress she chose to be buried in was enough to creep me out completely. Tony noticed, and slipped his arm around me.

God, she was so young! The pain of losing her hit me all over again. She was only in her sixties. She should've had decades of life left. It was so unfair.

"Obviously, I'm dead," my mother said from the TV. "I know that I have breast cancer, and that it's going to kill me, probably within a few months." If that news bothered her, she didn't choose to share the emotion with us.

"I could've let everyone know, but I didn't want to start a three-ring circus in my final days. I wanted to die in peace. Hopefully, I did so." She smiled a small smile. "You know me, though; I just couldn't resist controlling the chaos I'm leaving behind."

That was the truth. I snorted, which earned a sharp look from Conrad.

"My will is short and sweet," she continued. "Regan." I sat straighter and then smirked at myself - I still jumped at her call. "I know we've had our disagreements over the years. I'm not the least bit sorry for that." She nodded her head forward. "What I am sorry for is that we weren't closer than we were. Despite my disapproval of your lifestyle, I want you to know that I do love you, and I'm sorry that we never had the chance to grow closer. That is the one regret I have in this life, and the one way I've failed you."

Tears filled my eyes. The lawyer had to stop the video while I regained my composure. She could have called me any time to ask me to come, and we could have talked. Or maybe we couldn't have. Perhaps it had been too late. Perhaps we were so alike that it had always been too late.

When I was able to continue, the lawyer started the video again and Mother continued. "That said, I hope that one day you will get your life under control and find someone that makes you happy. A *man*. Really, Regan, you *need* a good man in your life." With one word, she conveyed her subtle disapproval of all my bisexual antics. Another thing she never understood about me.

"Speaking of good men, that leads me to Conrad," she continued. He sat up straighter and looked expectantly at the screen. "Not to confuse you with a *good* man, though you are a man," she said with a sniff.

I expected some reaction from him, but Conrad's smirk at me was hardly keeping with

the tone in Mother's voice. This just wasn't tracking.

"I know that you've slept around on me, but at least you were discreet about it," she continued. "Because it's a good idea, I've decided to go with your advice in regards to Regan." I stiffened in my chair and Conrad's expression became almost gloating. What advice, I wondered in growing dread.

Mother cut off my internal questions and delivered her pronouncement. "Regan, some of your behavior recently has worried me. I've been afraid you've fallen back in with bad companions. Let me be blunt, dear. I'm afraid you've started taking drugs again." She stared solemnly out of the screen as I gaped in shock. "Conrad convinced me that if you had, I shouldn't support you in destroying yourself and, for once, I agree with him."

I glared at Conrad. Tony had to pull me back into my seat as I tried to get up to smash his smug face. He'd set me up! Conrad and Rod had set me up!

Unaware of the unfolding drama in the room, Mother continued to speak. "Your inheritance is dependent on a clean drug test to be administered here and now. I hate being firm with you, but if you fail this test or refuse to take it, you will inherit one dollar and nothing more."

The lawyer ejected the DVD and put it back in its case. "I have a nurse in the building and she has a testing kit."

I stood up and glared at Conrad. "Fine, let's get this farce over with."

Tony rose to his feet and stopped me, earning a confused look from the lawyer. "I don't trust Conrad. I think I should take the test first, just to make sure there's no funny business. I *know* Regan's clean, and so am I."

Surprised, I looked at Conrad. Could he fix this, too? Probably. The lawyer was offended that Tony questioned his integrity. Too bad for him. I sided with Tony and the lawyer relented. Conrad sat back, still looking very pleased with himself.

Ten minutes later, Tony was back with a woman dressed in scrubs. He just grinned and gave me a thumbs up as the nurse gave the lawyer the same information in a hushed tone.

"Piece of cake, sweetie," Tony whispered in my ear. "Go in there and settle this once and for all."

I kissed his cheek and nodded. "I'm ready." I followed the nurse to a restroom and she locked the door behind her.

Reaching into a box, she pulled out a small plastic cup and handed it to me. "I'm sorry, but I have to see you fill the container," she said apologetically.

That made me smile. I'd probably had more women look at my pussy from far closer than she could guess. "No problem." I quickly filled the cup and handed it over. While she ran her test on my sample, I sat back on the toilet and finished.

By the time I emerged from the stall, she was cleaning up. She smiled. "All clear, Miss Thomas."

"Thank you," I said with a bit of relief. At this point, I didn't want to care about getting Mother's money, but part of me still did. Even if the lion's share still went to Conrad, so be it. I guess I couldn't change everything about me overnight. I followed the nurse back to the conference room and glared at Conrad as I sat down. I thought the peacock was going to explode with excitement.

The lawyer nodded to the nurse and she walked out with a smile directed at me. As soon as I closed the door, he smiled at me.

"Congratulations, Miss Thomas. All clear, as you no doubt expected."

Tony squeezed my hand and said nothing. His smile was worth all this to me.

Conrad leapt to his feet with a screech. "What? Impossible!" He grabbed the table and glared at me. "She fixed the test or paid off the nurse. Call in someone else to do the test. With witnesses!"

The lawyer's smile at Conrad seemed to have a hint of malice under the professional veneer. "I'm very sorry you feel that way, Mister Masterson, but your wife's instructions on this matter are crystal clear, and she left the final authority with me. Nurse Granger and her firm are above reproach. The results stand. Now, if you will resume your seat, I will select the appropriate clip to close out Mrs. Masterson's statement."

"The appropriate clip?" Tony asked.

"Indeed," the lawyer replied. "Depending on the outcome of the test, there were two

closing videos. I am only authorized to play the one dealing with a clean test result. The other will be destroyed by me immediately following the signing of the papers." He slid the second DVD into the player and started the video.

Part of me was still very angry with Mother for doubting me, but I had to admit that she probably had good reason. My track record was long and distinguished. I watched her appear and nod at me through the screen.

"I'm sorry I put you through that, Regan, but I had to be sure." She actually did sound a little sorry, and I felt my anger toward her melting just a little. "I'm proud of you for staying clean. Now you need to work on getting the rest of your life in order. Say 'yes, Mother,'" she said with a smile.

I shook my head at her reproach, but said, "Yes, Mother."

"Let's finish this, shall we?" she asked. "Conrad, here is where I deviate from what we discussed." Conrad sat bolt upright. "To my daughter, Regan, I leave the chalet that I know she loves so much."

Conrad seemed to be choking on something but I barely heard him. My heart was soaring. The chalet meant more to me than I'd been willing to admit. It was a part of me after all these years.

"Seeing as I've already made all the charitable contributions in this life that I care to, that leaves the remainder of my assets, including my home in Knoxville that I share with Conrad."

At that, Conrad sat forward. It was disappointing, but I wasn't going to lose sleep over him getting what he'd schemed over so long. In the end, it was more than Daddy's fortune, since Mother had socked it to him in the divorce, but I had all I wanted. Her love and the chalet would be just fine.

"Those assets," Mother continued blandly, "also go to my daughter, Regan, except for Conrad's inheritance of one dollar. And don't bother challenging it, Conrad. I have video of your infidelities, and our pre-nup is crystal clear on this point."

She sat serenely with her hands folded on her lap as Conrad began shouting and pounding things. I could only sit there and blink stupidly at the TV. What did she say? I felt like I was having an out of body experience - to which I'll admit to some familiarity. From the blinking of Mother's eyes, I knew the video wasn't paused, so she was just

waiting for the scene to calm.

With shouted threats of lawsuits and appeals, Conrad stormed out of the conference room and left us in relative peace. Mother sat quietly for another half-minute before continuing.

"Well, I'm betting Conrad has left. No doubt in quite a temper," she said dryly. "He never was as smart as he thought he was. Regan..." I swallowed and waited. "The last thing I'll leave you is a piece of advice. Don't make the same mistake I did. Don't mistake existence for life. Find someone you can love. Forget what anyone expects of you. To hell with them. Find someone that you actually love and stay with them," she grimaced in distaste, "even if it is a woman."

I laughed and hugged Tony to me. If only she were here! As sad as it was, her passing had made me see exactly what she was telling me.

"I love you." She smiled affectionately and the screen went dark.

The lawyer rose, pulled out the DVD, and handed me both the ones that we'd viewed. "The unviewed disc will be destroyed after you sign next to the arrows on these papers." He also took one of the two papers from the folder before calling in his secretary to witness. I suppose those papers would've given Conrad his heart's desire.

Tony stood and put his hands on my shoulders while I signed the documents. It was odd how you could throw your life away and find it anew.

The lawyer handed the unneeded DVD and papers to his secretary to destroy. "If you'll excuse me for a moment?" At my nod, he followed her out, quietly closing the door behind him.

"I never could have made it through this without you," I told Tony. "And I'd have slipped and given Conrad everything he wanted if you hadn't been there."

He kissed my neck. "All I did was help you help yourself. It was your strength that beat him. That beat both of them."

That made me feel even better.

When the lawyer returned we shook hands and I asked him please to see to locking the bank accounts and securing all of Mother's - my - properties from Conrad, both

physically and legally. Tony and I will take care of evicting Conrad from the chalet ourselves.

Sitting in Tony's Rover after we left the lawyer's office, I tried to get my bearings. The events of the past hour or so were still too overwhelming for me to deal with, so I decided to focus on the here and now. We'd best go to the chalet and see to throwing out the trash. And see about calling a locksmith.

"Let's go deal with our unwanted house guests," I told Tony. His answering grin was almost shark-like, and he drove there quickly.

The driveway had Rod's rental and Conrad's SUV in it. I wondered briefly where he'd found it.

I climbed out with a shrug. No matter. It would be a pleasure to throw Rod out, too. I went through the front door and heard Conrad shouting in the great room. They must be arguing. Perfect. I went up the stairs quietly with Tony beside me.

Rod was standing in the center of the room with his arms folded, staring coldly at Conrad. Conrad was pouring himself a drink and hurling invectives at Rod.

"If you call me incompetent one more time," Rod snarled, cutting Conrad off in mid-curse, "I'll stuff that damned bottle up your ass. It's not my fault she didn't use the coke."

"But you swore she did," Conrad protested, his back still to all of us. This was interesting stuff indeed.

"I said she seemed to have taken it," Rod sneered. "The fact that you're idiot enough to count on assumptions isn't my problem. I'm only here to give her payback for dumping me in the first place. What happens to you is your problem."

"You *gentlemen*," I said in a clear, firm voice that yanked both of their eyes immediately to me, "and I use that term very loosely, are on private property." Conrad dropped the bottle and it shattered loudly in the sudden silence.

While Conrad looked like a mouse staring at a snake, frozen in fear, Rod just smiled. The same smile of his that he always used when he'd gotten away with something.

He sauntered over to stand in front of me. The arrogance of his stance stood my teeth on edge, but I didn't want to argue. I just wanted him gone.

"Looks like you came up roses again, babe."

"Get your things and get out, Rod," I said frostily. "Now."

His grin raised my hackles. "What you want is really no skin off my nose. You should know by now that I don't do what you tell me. "

As the rage toward Rod flared up inside me, I had even less warning than Rod when Tony's arm shot past me and a hard-knuckled fist exploded against Rod's nose. I swear I could see it flatten and twist in slow motion as blood squirted from it. Rod flew back and crashed into a coffee table on his way to the floor. That *had* to hurt. Rod struggled to get his feet under him and shot a murderous glare at Tony.

I wanted to kick him while he was down, but he was back on his feet too quickly.

"I suppose you think I deserved that," he sneered at me. "Fine, you keep on believing that."

Tony advanced on Rod, his expression promising pain. Rod backed up, holding up one hand. "This is Conrad's problem, not mine. I'm leaving because my business here is done."

Part of me was very disappointed. I really wanted to see Rod pay, but people like him never did. At least I was through with him once and for all. Good riddance. Tony followed him out while I glared at Conrad.

"You can leave under your own power right now and I ship your crap to you, or we toss you out, too," I said serenely. "Please make me throw you out. Pretty please?"

"Or you'll have that muscle-bound oaf hit me?" he sniffed. "This isn't over by any means. I've already called my attorney to get the will overturned. You may have..."

Even as I stepped up to him, I wasn't sure what I was doing. The impact of my knee into his crotch was almost as much a surprise to me as it was to him.

Conrad's eyes bulged and he collapsed in a heap, groaning and writhing.

I stepped back, stunned at my own actions. I didn't get into fights. That was so not me. I firmly suppressed the satisfaction I was feeling.

Tony walked back up the stairs, dusting his hand off in a metaphorical gesture. "That's it for him, he took off like..." He stopped, staring at us. I tried not to look smug. "I see you and Conrad have finished your little talk." He grinned at me with an expression that just oozed approval. "Let's see him out."

Tony grabbed Conrad by the collar and pulled him to his feet. I followed them as he frog-marched the unresisting Conrad to the driveway. Then he stuffed him into that crappy white SUV of his. I suppose I could've made him walk and kept the car, but it hardly seemed worth the trouble.

Conrad was coordinated enough to get it started and drive away. That was enough for me.

I turned to Tony and pulled him into my arms. "I can't imagine karma bringing you into my life, so it must be redemption."

He smiled at me. "It *is* our redemption and their bad karma coming back to roost."

We'd melted together and had only just begun kissing when my cell phone rang. I groaned theatrically and pulled it off my belt. "Regan."

"Oh, my God," Gina said into my ear. "Regan, I'm so sorry! I just heard the news! I'll be on a plane as soon as I can. Are you okay? Where do you want me to meet you?"

I smiled at Tony while he held me. "Gina, calm down and take a breath. It's okay. I'm doing fine. Don't cut your trip short. Come see me when you get back and we'll talk then." I kissed Tony on the lips softly. "I have the most amazing thing to tell you, but it can wait. I'll see you then. Call me." Then I hung up before my stunned friend could ask me questions I wasn't ready to answer yet.

Tony whispered in my ear. "You love Gina?"

I looked into Tony's eyes with a smile. "Yes, I love her. I love Margot, too. I can't wait for you to meet them." Exploring the similarities and differences of loving a man would be interesting. I couldn't wait for them to meet Tony.

"Let's call the locksmith and arrange for a caretaker for the chalet. I know of a young soon-to-be mother that would be *perfect* for the job."

Tony kissed me thoroughly and led me back into the chalet. The sound of the door closing behind us reminded me that in life, when one door closed, another opened.

The End? No. The Beginning.