

# ~ A Saving Solace ~

by DS Bauden

**Disclaimer:** None really necessary, just the latest story to be extracted from my brain. This was formerly titled "Home" for those of you familiar with my work. There will be scenes of a mature nature in these pages, including two women making love. You know the rules - you don't like it, don't read it. Carry on.

**Thank you:** A big thank you goes out to my beta reader, Day, who has slaved over this tale and made it even better. You rock, darlin.' Thank you so much!

A Saving Solace  
[DS Bauden](#)

## Preface

As I sat at my desk, the paperwork threatened to attack me at any given moment. Grabbing handfuls of my auburn hair, I internally screamed my frustrations. This was my least favorite part of the fourth quarter business. Everything had to be submitted yesterday. Supply orders, expense reports, labor disputes... the list went on and on. The thought of truly celebrating any holiday was strictly out of the question. Listening to my own thoughts, I wondered what it was that kept me in the retail world. Much to my dismay, the answer was simple. I enjoyed the interaction with people. As fucked up as some of them were, I really enjoyed it.

There were only a few weeks left until Christmas arrived, bringing forth a whole new dimension of people. People that hadn't left their homes since last Christmas, came out of the woodwork and demanded all sorts of things from retailers. And gave it to them. No questions asked.

So they kept coming back.

Who was I to argue? I got my best stories from this time of year.

*Nice life, Kelly.* The truly annoying little voice inside of me said.

***Hey, who asked you, anyway?*** I challenged back.

*Don't you want something more from your life?*

***I want a lot of things. But one thing my momma taught me was, 'get used to disappointment.'***

And I have.

I've also had a lot to be thankful for. I was given a nameplate on my desk, which read: Kelly Cavanaugh, Regional Director. I worked damn hard for that title. I owned a nice home and a wonderful dog, but yet... the loneliness that greeted me, I'd never get used to.

Walking over to the window of my office, I stared out onto the cold streets of Northshire. My eyes were glued towards the direction of the old Salvation Army building. A new company had taken that spot, but did basically the same thing for people. Helped the needy, fed the hungry, all in the name of caring. How can you not admire that sort of work?

Shamelessly, I had to admit to my approbation of a young woman I'd seen almost everyday on the corner. She sat ringing a bell, silently asking people around her for a few bucks to help. Her beautiful brown eyes had suckered me into dropping a few bills on more than one occasion. I hope she didn't think I was becoming some sort of stalker. Her heart called out to me, and well... I was unable to stop answering. I just wished that I had the courage to say more than hello. Her smile made me speechless and I was forced to simply make my donation and walk away.

Women have more power than they give themselves credit for.

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Six weeks... it's only six weeks. I have to remember that. As cold as I am in the suburbs of Chicago, it's only going to be for six weeks. I hope ForOthers, Inc. realizes how lucky they are, that I'm a nice person. I don't know how many other people they asked before me, but I'm sure they all said no to this particular job. Still, I'm sure I'll see some interesting people during the holidays up here.

The people in this area are pretty stuck up. I usually dealt with people in the city. I know how to deal with suburbanites, I used to be one, but I just don't necessarily want to do it again. It's a whole new world out here. At least the company pays for my commute. I know I couldn't afford to live out here. I'm sure my parents would love to see me now. They could probably see me from their window if they looked hard enough. A gust of wind swept my blonde hair away from my face. Pulling my arms across my chest, I was reminded to wear more underclothes in the future. My eyes watered from the wind leaving me to blink wildly to restore my vision.

Looking down the street, I noticed a familiar patron coming my way. Nice suit. Nice body in the suit.

*Nice everything*, said my irritating inner voice.

***You aren't kidding. Maybe this won't be so bad after all.***

*Won't mummy and daddy love that?*

***Like I care***, I spat back.

*You don't?*

*Do I?*

## **Chapter One**

As the cold winds blew against my face, I was loath to face the realization that my shift still had six hours left. The bell in my hand almost froze to my mitten as the snow continued to fall.

I really hope that next year finds me in a better place. God, if you are out there, please send me to the sun. It's cold out here.

*Clink*

"Thank you, ma'am, happy holidays, " I shivered to the nice patron that dropped some change into my bucket.

God, I remember Christmas mornings in my parents' house. We started the day with a huge warm breakfast. Everything you could imagine was put on our plates, from eggs to pancakes; I never wanted for anything. My parents watched over me and took care of every need I ever had. Who knew my life would end up like this.

It seems like it was yesterday, when in actuality, it's been over five years since I have seen or talked to my parents. I never would've guessed that they were so cold hearted. We've all had our wake-up calls; unfortunately, that was a call I was unprepared to get. I came out to my parents when I was 20 years old. The look in their eyes when I came clean about who I was, was a look I will never forget. If I'd had a knife and had driven it through their hearts, I would have seen the same expression.

I never meant to hurt them; I just couldn't lie anymore. While trying to be honest and truthful with my parents, I never suspected this would happen. Jonathan and Elise McGovern were the two people that meant the world to me. I was their only child in a marriage of 35 years, and still they chose to forget me.

So, here I sit in the cold winter air, earning my living by asking other people for money. It's not that I mind the job; I like helping others. I'll just never get used to it. Every season, it's something else; but I think winter is my least favorite season. I'm sure you can imagine why that is.

Raising my jacket sleeve, I looked at my watch. I knew she would be coming soon; she always did and was always generous. She was by far the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. She had milky white skin, a mane of auburn hair and eyes as blue as the sea.

I see her so often; I figure she must work around here. I wonder what she does for a living? I'd bet she's never had to ask for money in her whole life. Even if she had, I'm sure it was given to

her. Who could deny someone like her?

I know I never could.

Looking past the two taxis lined up on the street, I saw my mystery woman walking towards me. I wonder if she'll speak today. I can see in her eyes that she wants to say more than hello. I wonder if she's as afraid as I am. Our worlds are so different. She's wearing Armani; I'm wearing the blue light special. Who knows? Stranger things have happened. I wouldn't mind getting to know her, either.

*Among other things, my inner voice chirped again.*

***Don't you ever go away?***

*Nope.*

She started walking towards me. Oh, God, I can't breathe. Oh wait, someone called her name. I heard her name; it's Kelly. What a beautiful name, so fitting for her. She turned around to face the person calling out with a large smile. Even without a smile on her face, I thought she was beautiful, but *with* one she is breathtaking. You could tell by her walk that she was a confident woman in control of her life.

With my job, you get to do a lot of people watching. I have learned to pick up on things; someone's expression can tell you so much about their day. The lady on the corner who works in the boutique, for example... to the unobservant eye, you would think she never had a bad day. But, I saw her after those phone calls and after he came in to see her; she hurts inside. I wonder if she knew that I could see through the façade she put on every day. I wonder if she'd even care.

Oh, God, here comes Kelly. She looks like she's gonna throw money into my bucket again. God, I hope that's not all I am to her.

*Jesus, Susan, get a grip on yourself.*

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There she is, just like every other day. I don't know where she gets her motivation. She is out here braving the cold weather without batting an eye. God, I don't think I could do what she does and still feel the way I do. She sees so much on a daily basis. I see a whole different world. She sees the outside world up close and personal. I see the people that come in from the cold. Working retail is no prize, but working outside ringing a bell to make money for the less fortunate... well that takes some balls, I think. I mean, I work for Saks, I have to dress to the nines, I'm sure she has to wear long johns. I hope she's not intimidated. I wonder if she'd like to

have coffee and swap stories sometime.

*Among other things, my annoying voice chimed in.*

***God, don't you ever go away?***

*You know the answer to that question.*

I can see her looking my way. I wonder if she noticed the fact that I walked past her every day after work. Jesus, I feel like a predator. This is absolutely ridiculous. Maybe I'll ask her out for coffee. God, do I need another headache? Shit, Kel, get a grip, it's just coffee for Chrissakes. I needed another lover like I need a hole in the head.

*You need something.*

***Shut up, already. The last thing I need is to have my conscience telling me what I need.***

"Kelly? Kelly!" a voice shouted at me.

I turned around to find a co-worker of mine from a few years ago smiling at me.

"Sheila, how've you been? You liking your position?" I asked smiling back at her.

"I'm loving it, thanks to you and your new promotion," she smiled.

"Yeah, well, what can I say?" I smiled back, pointing towards the store. "Are you going in?"

"Yeah. I thought I'd check out my old haunts for a bit and pick up some tips from the master," she teased.

"Well, don't go recruiting from under my nose. It took a lot of work getting the right people into that store!" I kidded.

"Oh, don't worry, Kel. I promise that I'm here to look, not touch," she said.

"Good. Well, I won't keep you. Thanks for stopping me. I hope you have a happy holiday!" I said cheerily.

"You too, Kelly. Take care. It was good to see you," she replied.

I waved at her departing figure. "You too, Sheila. Bye!"

Well, that was a nice surprise. I hadn't seen Sheila since I took the position of Regional Director. She's a great employee; I wasn't happy to find out that she wasn't going to be a part of my team. She seemed happy, though.

That was a nice distraction. I have to pass the bell girl now. God, I feel like I'm gonna puke. My stomach's in knots. I can't believe I'm feeling like this. I don't even know her.

Before you even chime in, yes, I know I want to.

Oh, God, she made eye contact with me. God, she has beautiful brown eyes. I wonder if anyone's ever told her that. I need to say more than hi... today. I've got to build up the courage and give her the business card that I've had in my pocket for weeks now. I'll give it to her today. What she does with it is her choice. Yeah, I'll leave it up to her. Okay, take a deep breath, Kel. You can do this.

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Oh, God, she's so close! I have to do something.

*Susan, talk to her! Be a big girl.*

***Shut up! I have to do it my way.***

Okay, deep breaths here she comes.

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"Hi," they said simultaneously.

They both laughed and looked shyly at each other.

Kelly got the courage to speak first. "I've seen you here every day ringing that bell. You've got to be cold," she smiled.

"Yeah, but I've got a warm coat, so I'm okay. You come by here almost daily, do you work nearby?" Susan asked.

"Yeah, my office is in the Saks building on the corner." Kelly pointed it out.

"Oh, I see," Susan nodded.

Silence struck the two women, and they stood there and stared at each other for what seemed

several minutes.

"Were you gonna give another donation?" Susan chimed in, directing her stare at Kelly's hand in her pocket.

"Um... not exactly. I was going to give you my card. If you weren't busy after your shift, I was gonna ask you if you wanted to grab a cup of coffee or something to eat. You know, to warm up after being out here all day," Kelly explained with a slight blush to her wind chapped cheeks.

Caught completely off guard by the invitation, Susan replied, "Oh, that would be nice. When would you like to do that?"

"Well, tonight, if you'd like, but if you have other plans then we can make it for another time," Kelly said tentatively.

"Thank you, I'd love to," Susan accepted eagerly.

"When would you like me to pick you up?" Kelly asked.

"I'll be off at 7:00 p.m. I'll be out front of the old Salvation Army building. Does that work for you?" Susan asked.

"Yes, that'll be fine. I'll meet you then," the taller woman replied.

"Great, I can't wait. See you tonight!" Susan exclaimed.

"Can I get your name?"

The bell ringer smiled. "It's Susan."

"It is nice to meet you, Susan, " Kelly said.

"You too, Kelly."

"How did you know?" Kelly asked with a puzzled expression.

"Let's just say I do a lot of people watching here," she returned.

"I bet you do," she smirked. "I'll pick you up around 7:00 then?"

"I'll be there," the smaller woman answered.

"I hope so," Kelly said as she walked away.

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*YES! I did it!*

God, I've never done that before in my life. I cannot believe that I accepted an invitation to have coffee with a complete stranger. My brain must be frozen.

At least she's a good-looking stranger. Mama always said I had good taste. She just never knew I'd have good taste in women; never banked on having a gay daughter. Who plans for that, anyway? Obviously, she didn't.

What am I going to say to Kelly? We have absolutely nothing in common. What? The weather? Oh, God, tell me we'll talk about more than that.

*Clink*

"Thanks, mister. Happy holidays!" I said to the man walking away from my bucket.

Oh, Christ.

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I did it! Way to go, Kel! I'm proud of you. What's great is that she said yes! Woohoo! Now what are you gonna do for the next few hours? You've gotta go home and take a sedative or something. She's not gonna want to see you again if she thinks you're neurotic.

Good idea, no more coffee today.

I'll catch a cab home and try to calm down a bit before our date. Date? Jesus, I haven't had a date in forever. Do I even want a date? I've got some baggage that she doesn't need to deal with. I'm sure she's got plenty of her own shit to deal with. We all do.

"Hey, cabby!" I shouted at the slowing taxi.

*Whoa, next time, don't stand too close to the curb, genius. That cab almost took out your shins.*

***Just get in, shut up, and calm down.***

"Pine and Churchill, please." I stated to the driver.



"Yes, ma'am," he replied as he cranked the arm of the meter.

I sat back and tried to relax as I thought of topics of conversation that Susan and I could talk about.

Susan.

What a beautiful name. She has such a beautiful face. I could look into those eyes forever. I can't wait to get to know her better. Well, you need to come up with something more to say, rather than talking about her eyes all night.

But it's such a nice topic.

Well, I'm sure we'll think of something. With the holidays coming, we'll have plenty to talk about.

I hope.

## **Chapter Two**

Lifting the sleeve of my coat, I glanced down at my watch again, hoping that it has sped up since the last time that I looked down.

6:20 p.m.

God! I can't believe how nervous I am. I just don't want to seem like an idiot. I mean, you look at the two of us and it is quite apparent that we are from completely different sides of the world. At one time, that wasn't the case. I had the clothes, I had money, but my mistake was thinking that it was mine. It was my father's. He was the wealthy one, not me. I'm reminded of that every day.

*Enough of that "feeling sorry for yourself shit," Susan. You've got a date with an incredible woman in forty minutes. Just think about what you're gonna say to her when she comes to pick your ass up.*

***Thanks a lot. When I lose my nerve and can't think of a damn thing to talk to Kelly about, I better have some suggestions coming from you, Bigmouth.***

*Clink*

"Thanks, ma'am. Happy holidays," I chimed.

Just ten more minutes and I can turn in this damn bucket. It was a good day today, actually. People have been very generous this season. I wonder what crawled up their asses to change their minds so drastically. Usually I just get stares, or people walk around me and pretend they

don't see me. It's really ridiculous. It just makes me laugh. Some actually mime having blinders on their eyes, it's just priceless.

*Beep Beep*

Oh, my God! There she is. Look at that car! I know that cost more than what I'll make in five years.

"Hey, Kelly! I'll be done in about five minutes or so." I smiled as I waved.

"Sure thing! I'll go park by the Salvation Army Office. See you soon!" Kelly shouted back through the car window.

God, she's beautiful. Why would she want to take me out? I'm so out of my league here.

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God, she looks so damn cute out there. What I wouldn't give to get her out of the cold. I could get her a job at Saks. She wouldn't have to worry about the cold ever again.

*Yeah, but is that what she wants? You made that mistake once already.*

***Thanks for bringing up such a happy subject. It was only a suggestion. I wasn't gonna offer until I was sure anyway. Get off my back, dammit.***

I gotta find a spot to park. She'll be finished soon. I hope she likes where we're going. I have the biggest desire to wine and dine her.

What is it about her? I don't know what's come over me. I don't think I even care what it is. I just hope whatever it is, doesn't go anywhere soon.

*Knock Knock*

I looked up to find a smiling face staring at me through the window. I didn't think I could move. Her eyes were just so incredible; they left me breathless.

"Can I get in?" Susan shouted through the closed glass.

Oh, damn!

I opened my door and walked Susan around the car. She sat down and I closed the passenger door and ran around to the driver's side. I got in and smiled at my new passenger.

"All done for the night?" I asked quickly.

"Yep, thank God. It was starting to get really cold out there," Susan replied.

"Are you up for some dinner?" I asked hopefully.

"So, you don't want to get coffee?" the petite woman asked nervously.

"Well, we can get coffee, but I just thought you'd like to grab some dinner as well. Maybe get some pie for desert and wash it down with a good cup of coffee. What do you think?" I suggested.

"That sounds really great, but I'm kind of on a budget and I don't really have the money to eat out," she answered, sounding a little embarrassed.

I tried to calm Susan's nervousness. "Hey, I asked *you*, remember? That means that I'm paying. Don't worry about it. Okay?"

"Can I ask you something?" Susan questioned.

"Sure," I answered.

"Why me?" she practically whispered.

I wasn't sure what she meant. "What?"

"Why ask *me* out?" she clarified.

"Why not you?" I asked back.

"Don't answer my question with a question," Susan said, sounding a little unsure of herself. "I really hope that it's not a charity thing, because..."

"Okay. " I placed my gloved finger on her lips to stop whatever was coming next. "What I meant to say was... why shouldn't I ask you out? I saw you, and you interested me. I just thought it would be nice to have dinner together. Don't you want to have dinner with me?" I asked, as I put on my best puppy dog eyes look.

I watched Susan's eyes roll as she caught on to my ploy. "You know, you could probably get away with robbing a bank with that look," she kidded. After thinking for a bit to herself, she looked up. "I would love to have dinner with you," she finally answered.

"Great. There's a wonderful crab house a few miles from here. Do you like seafood?"

She smiled. "I love seafood."

"I figured you for a shrimp lover."

"Hey, that's not a height joke, is it?" Susan asked, mocking anger.

"Not at all," I joked back.

"Good, I wouldn't want our first date to start out on a bad note," she smiled.

*Ok, she said date... need to calm down.*

"Kelly?" Susan brought me back to reality.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" I recovered.

"I asked, if the restaurant had a dress code. I'm not really dressed for an elegant meal." She gestured to her clothes.

"You look great. Don't worry about it. Okay?" I smiled and winked at my dinner guest.

"Okay. Thanks, Kelly," she said to me.

"You're welcome. Now, let's go eat!" I said excitedly as I pulled out of the parking space.

"Sounds good," she agreed.

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Kelly pulled the car up to the crab house, and I was extremely nervous. I know she'd said not to worry about paying for the meal, but I couldn't help it. I could never afford to eat in a place like this. I just hope I'm not just a charity case to her. I couldn't take that. I won't take that shit from anyone.

Not even her.

The engine was turned off, and she smiled as she got out of the car. Kelly walked around to my side and opened the door for me. I guess chivalry wasn't dead yet.

I smiled. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." She smiled back. "Are you hungry?" Kelly inquired.

"Very."

"Good, then let's get in there, because I'm starving!" she exclaimed.

We walked into the restaurant and the maitre d' smiled at Kelly.

"Ah, Ms. Cavanaugh, how nice to see you again," he said with a welcoming smile.

"Nice to see you, too. My regular table available?" Kelly gestured towards a table.

"Absolutely! As soon as you called, we made sure it was ready for you," he sucked up a bit more.

She must tip really well.

"Lead the way, Leonardo." Kelly motioned with her arm.

We walked past several tables, and I watched as heads turned as Kelly walked by. I didn't blame them one bit. She's a knockout.

What the hell was I doing here again?

"Susan?" Uh oh, I definitely missed something. The host sat me in my seat and I looked blankly at Kelly.

"Yes?" I said softly.

"Would you like something from the bar?" Kelly smiled.

"I'm not a really big drinker..." I was stopped by Kelly's smile.

God, how did she do that?

"Come on, it's the holidays. You sure you don't want some eggnog or something?" Kelly teased.

I capitulated. "Well, alright. I'll have a glass of Chardonnay."

"Two, please," she smiled at the waiter.

"Yes, right away, Ms. Cavanaugh," the jittery waiter said as he practically ran to get our drinks.

She really must tip very well.

### **Chapter Three**

Dinner found me transfixed by Susan. I hung on every word she spoke. She talked of many different cities and places she'd gone for her job. She's done everything from feeding the hungry to staffing shelters for the homeless. She's more amazing to me now than ever. I watched as she happily ate every morsel of food in front of her. She had quite an appetite, and a playfulness in her eyes shadowed by a longing, perhaps for a time long gone. I wondered why the sadness plagued her so. Who would cause this woman such sorrow?

"Kelly?" Susan broke my reverie.

"Yes?" I replied with a smile.

"I've had a wonderful evening. I don't think I've enjoyed someone's company as fully as I have tonight with you," she admitted.

"I feel the same way. I wasn't sure if you'd feel comfortable eating with a stranger, but I took that chance. I'm glad that I did," I confessed.

"You weren't a stranger to me, I've seen you almost every day for weeks," the blonde woman challenged.

"Well, I guess that's true in a sense, but we really didn't speak until today," I retorted.

"Well, I've spoken enough for the both of us." She smiled. "Why don't you tell me a bit about you?" the brown-eyed girl asked.

God, what do I tell her about myself that I actually want to talk about?

*Well, that ends this conversation.*

***Oh, shut up!***

"Well, I work for Saks, down from where you work. I've been there a long time," I began.

"That must be why you dress so well." Susan almost blushed.

"Yeah, I have to look the part, I guess," I smirked.

"What do you do for them?" Susan asked.

I shrugged. "I'm a Regional Director."

"Wow, you are in charge of a lot of people then?" she questioned.

"Yes. I have about fifty stores that I'm responsible for. As you know, quite a few employees work in each store, too. It's been quite a challenge." I puffed out my chest with pride. I really

loved my job.

"I bet it has. That's great that you seem to really like your job. I can't say that I always feel that way," said Susan honestly.

"After listening to you speak earlier, I would've thought that you were really happy," I said, confused.

"It's not that I don't like the job, per se; sometimes it just gets to be too much. There's so much sadness in people, especially the ones that I see. The ones that have the courage to keep going are the ones that I hope to model myself after. I really look up to them, if that makes any sense whatsoever." She paused and then started up again. "There was a time when I would have scoffed at people like the ones I work with," she said softly.

That genuinely interested me. "What happened?"

"My life did a one eighty," she said a little bitterly.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be nosy. We can talk about something else," I said as I looked at my watch and realized we had been sitting at this table for almost four hours. "Susan, it's getting kind of late, and as much as I really want our night to keep going, I have an early meeting tomorrow morning," I said regretfully.

"Sure, it's okay. I have to work in the morning, as well. You can just drop me off by my work. I can catch a train from there," she suggested.

I looked at her in disbelief. "Susan, it's after eleven. I wouldn't feel right sending you home on the train at this hour. Let me take you home," I said with concern.

"Well, I live right outside of the city. It'd take you about 30 minutes or so to get there. Are you sure you don't mind?" Susan asked shyly.

"No problem at all," I beamed.

I'd drive all night for you.

*Do I hear warm fuzzy tones coming from you?*

***Oh, fuck off! I'm enjoying her company. A lot.***

*She could be good for you, Kelly.*

***No one should be that good.***

We left the restaurant and headed back to the car. She walked slowly in front of me, and the wind was blowing her scent into my nose. She smelled so good. I didn't want our night to end. I

wanted to get to know Susan more than I've ever wanted to know anyone.

What is it about you?

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

What's wrong with me? I can't stop wanting her to stay up all night with me. I can't believe she offered to take me home. Watching her all through dinner was making me rather twitchy. I can't tell how she feels. Is she looking for a friend? Or a friieennnddd? I am hoping for the latter.

She's incredible.

She seemed so interested while listening to my tale of woe. I don't know if I want to dredge up those feelings again. My parents abandoning me, is just not the kind of talk to precede foreplay.

Did I just say that?

*Yes, ma'am you did. Ho.*

***Am not. She's just causing me to have feelings I haven't had in a very long time. I could use some casual sex in my life.***

*Yeah, because **that's** what you're all about. That damn casual sex girl.*

***Shut up! I know I'm not like that, but I'm feeling things for her that usually take a few weeks to feel.***

*Just admit that you really like her.*

***Yes, I do. Very much. I could get lost in those baby blues.***

The car was so comfortable to sit in. The seats in the BMW were heated and hugged me. I forgot how much I liked those cars. Dad had a couple that I remember really liking. Too bad he loved his cars more than his own kid. I'm pretty sure he made my mom's decision for her. I really thought that we had a better relationship than that. She always said she wanted me to be happy. No one said that being gay wasn't in the equation.

"Where should I turn?" Kelly asked as we hit the split in the highway.

"Take a left and get on Touhy," I directed.

"Okay, just keep telling me when to turn." She smiled that beautiful smile at me.



Oh ,God, I'm so whipped.

"So do you have any plans for Christmas?" the blue-eyed woman asked.

I had no one I wanted to spend the holidays with. "No, not really. You?"

"I usually go to the movies," she admitted.

"Alone?" I couldn't believe she didn't have someone to share the holidays with.

"Yes, alone," she said rather sadly.

"Don't you have any family?" From the expression on her face, I could tell that I hit a nerve with that question. "I'm sorry, you don't need to answer that. I don't mean to pry," I apologized.

"No, don't worry about it." She continued to drive in silence. Finally, she spoke again. "My dad left when I was a little girl, I don't really remember him."

"I'm so sorry, Kelly."

*Nice going, Susan. Why don't you rub some more salt in that wound?*

"Thanks," she said quietly. "My mom died when I was seventeen. I've been on my own since then. I've actually worked for Saks since then," she revealed.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry, Kelly. Remind me to remove my foot from my mouth sometime later, okay?" I mentally kicked myself.

"Hey, you didn't know. Besides, I figured if I told you something about myself, you'd open up a little about what makes you so sad," she said softly.

"Oh..." I didn't know what to say. No one other than Carol really gave a shit about me and my life. "If you turn into the next drive, we'll be at my place. If you'll come up for a drink or something, we can talk more. Okay? I mean, if it's not too late for you?" I added, while pointing towards the parking lot.

"Sounds good to me," she beamed.

I swallowed. "Alright then."

She's coming up... oh, God.

## **Chapter Four**

We walked from Kelly's car towards my building. I never expected to have her here. I hoped she knew what she was getting into. My studio apartment was barely big enough for me. Carol from work found this place for me when I was at my worst. I'll never forget how she found me. It seemed like so long ago.

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*"Hey, you okay?" the large woman asked.*

*"Who are you?" the shivering mouth chattered.*

*Carol smiled. "A friend. Can I get you something to eat?"*

*"Why? What do you want in exchange? I won't do nothing for it. I'd rather starve," the smaller woman spat. "I don't have any friends."*

*"Sure you do. I'm here, aren't I?" Carol attempted again.*

*"So you've said. I also told you, I'm not interested," Susan said rigidly.*

*"Well, there's a group of us willing to give you, and any of your friends around here, some food. We have a van around the corner. It's good and warm too, if you are interested," the larger woman finished.*

*The smaller woman just continued to stare at the older one. "Why are you doing this? You some sort of good deed doer? I'm not a charity case." She eyed the floor of her cardboard home.*

*"I'd never say that. I'm just offering a little Christmas spirit around here. If you're interested, we're right over on Lincoln Avenue." Carol pointed.*

*"Yeah, whatever. Give my best to St. Nick," Susan said bitterly.*

*Carol smiled down at the frail woman in front of her. "See you later, honey."*

*"I'm not your honey," she mumbled back.*

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

"God, I was so mean to her. Hell, I was mean to everyone. I just didn't want anything from anyone. It's how I was learning to live," I said as I finished the beginning of my heart to heart with Kelly on my couch.

"I'm so sorry, Susan. It must've been so lonely and scary out there," Kelly whispered while staring around the small apartment. "Can I ask you a really personal question?"

"You can ask... but we'll see if I can or want to answer it." I was unsure what she wanted to know.

*Like it matters. You'd tell her anything.*

"What put you out there? The streets, I mean. You're so young. I guess I'm just really naïve to the idea of young people living in boxes in the city. You read about this stuff all the time, but... I don't know... I guess I don't know how it all happens."

"Hmmm..." I paused. Did I really want to talk about this? As much as it hurt to bring up, maybe it would make me feel better. "Well, I don't know if this is going to bother you at all, but I'm gay. I've known I was gay since... well, shit, I can't remember a time when I wasn't." I smiled at a grinning, nodding face.

"I can relate. Please, go on," she urged.

"Well, my mom and I had always had a great relationship. Or so I thought. I was nineteen when I kissed my first girl. I was a slow learner compared to some, I'm sure. I had finally found out what all the hype was about," I paused to take a sip of tea that I had made before we sat down. "I mean, I had kissed lots of guys, but there was never any kind of hoopla or fireworks, like people say happen all the time. Nothing. I thought I was defective or something." I chuckled with Kelly.

"Believe me, Susan, I thought the same things. I thought that I just wasn't doing *enough* of the kissing and touching thing. Well, before I knew it, I'd slept with some guy and I *still* had no idea of what pleasure was all about. Coming to terms with your sexuality is a really hard process. I wouldn't go through that hell again if you paid me to," Kelly said matter of factly.

"Yeah, well, neither would I. It amounted to more than that in my case, though. I started seeing this girl named Cindy. She was really wonderful. I thought I'd found the person I would grow old with. We were really good friends first, which made me happy. I'm not the kind of girl to jump in the sack with just anyone," I noted my own disappointment in that last statement. Maybe things wouldn't have been so bad had I just slept around for a bit.

"I can't say that I haven't had one night stands, unfortunately. They don't leave you feeling much of anything, though. I always felt so empty after them," Kelly admitted quietly.

"Do you still do that?" I asked, my interest peaked.

I noticed our bodies were touching slightly as we continued to speak like we'd known each other our whole lives.

"No... um... I uh... let's just say, it's been a while," she blushed.

"It's alright, Kelly," I said as I touched her leg. "Don't be embarrassed with me, I won't tell anyone." I smiled.

"Why shouldn't I be embarrassed with you? We barely know each other and here we are talking as if we've been friends since birth!" Kelly joked.

"I know, it's very odd to me as well," I agreed.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I get off on tangents. Please tell me about Cindy," she urged.

"Oh yeah. Well, we dated for about three months or so. We had it made, for the most part. Her parents didn't care if I slept over there, and mine loved Cindy coming over. That is, until they found out we were lovers." I paused.

Blue eyes widened. "Oh no."

"Oh yes," I finished.

"What happened?" Kelly asked.

"I told my mother and father that I was gay. I knew that I couldn't lie to them anymore. Like good loving parents, they said it was a phase and that I would get over it. Well, I didn't get over it. I told them that it was who I was, and I wasn't going to change. They told me that it was nonsense, and that women of the McGovern family got married, raised their kids, and lived like they did. I told them I wanted all of that. Just not with a man. They weren't very happy at all." I paused and took a deep breath. The feelings running through me were ones I had kept shut away for so long, I had forgotten how much they hurt.

"They told me that something was wrong with me and they would get me some help. My father was just so awful about it. He was so mean to me. He called me a mistake, and said that I shouldn't have been born. All the things that I never expected to hear out of my father's mouth,"

"I'm so sorry, Susan. That must have been so hard for you," Kelly comforted as she put her hand on mine.

"Yeah, well, I found out the true colors of my father that day. I think my mom really wanted to understand. My father wouldn't let that happen. She either agreed with him, or she was no better than I was. It's obvious which choice she made," I took a deep breath, knowing the part of the story that was coming next. "They told me that if I was going to be a McGovern, I would get help, medical help, to heal the homosexual inside of me."

"Oh, Christ!" Kelly blurted out.

"I know. I couldn't believe it either. I was just about twenty years old, I had one year of college under my belt, and I had never had to work a day in my life. I knew I had no options at the time, so I agreed to go away on retreat with a group of other 'people like me' to get the help that I supposedly needed.

"Later that evening, I told Cindy what was happening. I knew she wasn't going to do anything about it; she was scared to death to tell her parents about her, too. We cried and cried, knowing that we would be apart for about six weeks or so. I guess my parents paid for the 'extra cleansing' package." I laughed bitterly. "Then I told my folks that Cindy was gonna sleep over before I went away, and they didn't think twice about it," I shrugged. "Why would they, right? Cindy and I had been friends a long time.

"Cindy came over that night. I had two beds in my room, in case of sleepovers and stuff. Well, we wanted to sleep together in my bed. My parents were supposedly asleep, and I really wanted to hold her. I knew that I wouldn't get to do that for a long time. Well, Cindy climbed into my bed and we started kissing. It got really hot and stuff, and our hands were all over each other. We stripped off our clothes and started to make love. Cindy tended to get a bit vocal when she reached, well, you know." I blushed in spite of myself.

"Mmhmm." Kelly giggled and sipped her tea, almost snorting the liquid out of her nose.

"So anyway, my mom was up watching TV in her room, she heard Cindy moaning and thought something was wrong. She burst into my room and found me on top of Cindy, naked and sweaty and still inside of her!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, Jesus! What a visual!" Kelly nearly shouted.

"Yeah, unfortunately, it was the beginning of the end for both of us." I slumped back on the couch.

Kelly leaned back with me. She turned to face me and placed her hand on my knee. "So, what happened to you?"

"After my mom screamed, my father burst into the room. I told my mom to close the door so we could get dressed, but she didn't, so my dad saw us both naked, too. It was really humiliating," I continued. "She finally closed the door, and Cindy and I were crying because we didn't know what would come next. It was all happening so fast."

"God, I can't even imagine dealing with that." Kelly said sadly.

"Cindy's parents were called by mine. They came to get her, and I wasn't allowed to see her again. *I* was the one who'd changed her. It was all *my* fault, *I* was the perverted one. So my parents kicked me out without any more than the clothes on my back. I had no job, I had no money, I had nothing," I said as the tears threatened to spill. "I went to anyone's house that I

could think of, to see if I could stay with them for a while until I got a place of my own. I thought, 'No problem, I'll just get a job and get my own apartment.' It wasn't that simple. Every house I went to, my friends were either away at school, or their parents called mine to find out what had happened, and then they wouldn't let me stay there either. I was fucked with no kiss. Up shit creek with no paddles. You get the idea,"

"Unfortunately, I do," she started. "I'm so sorry. I wish I could say more. I just..."

"Hey, don't worry about it. I'm still alive, I'm breathing, and feeling pretty good about myself now."

"How? How can you go through that and be alright?" Kelly was genuinely concerned.

*How indeed?*

"Well, after my resources ran out, I started getting into a bad scene: drugs, sex, the usual. I never thought that I'd let someone fuck me for money," I said with disgust. "I didn't have any choices. I couldn't get a real job. I had no clothes other than the ones I'd left with, and I hadn't had a shower in forever. It was hell. Luckily for me, it was summer going into autumn and it wasn't that cold out. I found a group of people that pretty much brought me down to the 'Heights'. It was a place they called home. I never knew why they called it that until I found out what kind of heights their drugs took me to. It was outside of the city and it was pretty safe. We hung out together and tried to take care of each other as much as possible. You'd be amazed how fast all your morals go down the toilet when you are scrounging for food. I stole when I could, from whomever I could."

Kelly sat with her head leaning against the cushions of the couch with unshed tears in her eyes. I heard her snuffle once or twice, but it was very hard for me to look at her as I recounted what had happened. This was the first time I had told this story in over two years. She continued to silently listen as her fingers brushed softly against the fabric on my pants.

"I continued to get high, a lot. It took some of the pain away. Not enough, unfortunately. I started to need more and more to keep the highs going. I'd lied to too many of the people that I was considering my friends, and they sent me away. They told me to get lost and to stay away from them if I knew what was good for me. Needless to say, I didn't know better. I went back begging for a hit... for anything. They beat the shit out of me. I was left to die, bleeding in an alley. Death would've been better than what the next years had in store for me.

"I lived in a cardboard box. I ate only if I could find something. I stood outside in the back of some restaurants and just waited for them to take out the trash. I never thought that I would be eating someone else's leftovers. I grew up in the North Shore for Chrissakes!" I shouted and waved my hands around. "I was a savage, for lack of a better term. I did what I had to do to survive. As much as I prayed the sun wouldn't come up on some days, it always did, much to my chagrin.

"One day, a woman came into view around Christmas time about two years ago. She was from ForOthers, Inc. They had a food van and were driving around giving food to those of us that

needed it or just wanted to eat real food for a change. I was very reluctant to take their offered help, to say the least. The last time I hooked up with anyone, I got the shit kicked out of me. There was no way I was trusting anyone else." I paused to drink my almost cold tea.

"What changed your mind about... um, Carol? Was that her name?" Kelly asked, her eyes pinning me to my seat.

"Yeah, Carol. There was just something in her eyes that told me that she wasn't going to hurt me. She really was there to help. I finally gave in to her kindness. It only took about four weeks. Every day she came up to me and asked how I was and if I wanted anything to eat. She was relentless. I swear she was an angel in disguise. She came to me at a very critical time in my life. Sometime after I met her, I got really sick. I was hit with pneumonia. I thought for sure my number was up. Carol was right there for me. She got me into the clinic right off Randolph Lane, and they let me in, no problem. Normally, they wouldn't look twice at someone like me. Carol said that I worked for her, and they took me in. I was there for two weeks. I couldn't breathe without feeling like I had a brick for a lung. I lost more weight, if that was possible. They were afraid that I was gonna die just from malnutrition. Carol would have none of that. I didn't know why, but she took me in. She cared so much. She took care of me as if I was her own."

Kelly smiled. "She sounds like a wonderful woman."

"Yes, she was. She died last year from a heart attack." I could no longer hold back the tears that had been seeking release all night. "She was overweight and never even saw it coming. Before we could get her some help, she was gone." I started to cry. Kelly reached around me and held me to her. I had my head on her shoulder as she rubbed my head. God, she felt wonderful. I hadn't been held like this for as long as I could remember.

"Shhh...it's okay, Susan. It's okay... I'm right here," she soothed.

"I'm sorry, Kelly." I sniffled back more tears. "I can't remember the last time I felt the need to cry."

"It's all right. You go ahead, I don't mind," she said softly.

I heard her humming as she rocked me gently. I felt myself begin to calm down. I pulled back and wiped my face in embarrassment.

Kelly took my chin in her hands and smiled. "You're a very beautiful woman, Susan, inside and out. Carol saw that, I'm sure of it. That's why she took care of you. She saw what I see," she continued.

"And what is it that you see, Kelly?" I questioned.

"I see a very strong and caring woman who has fought to be the person she is today. You sacrificed your comfortable life to be the person that you knew you were, even though that meant that you were put in death's alley. You fought to stay alive, and you won! She saw the fire in

your eyes that I see. That fire keeps you going, Susan. It's the reason you weren't beaten. It's the reason that you help the people that you do on a daily basis. You are truly incredible," she smiled.

"I can only help the ones that will accept my help. There are so many people out there that are stubborn like I was, and won't take any handouts. Those are the ones I feel for. They are the ones that might not make it. I hate knowing that, and I'll do what I can to change their minds. I want to be for them what Carol was for me. After I was well, she gave me a job with ForOthers, Inc. She worked for them after she had been on the streets, as well. It's amazing how life comes full circle, you know? Knowing that there might be someone out there like I was, that I can help, I can't stop doing what I do," I said as the tears rolled down my cheeks.

"What about your parents? Have you heard from them at all?" Kelly asked, wiping my cheeks with her fingers.

I couldn't keep the anger from my voice. "Fuck them!" I spat. "They kicked me out. They didn't want me. She chose to stay with him instead of helping her own child, just because I was gay! What the hell kind of mom was she?"

"Shh... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that," she said as she pulled me close to her again.

God, she smelled so good. Her arms around me felt as natural to me as my own skin.

*She could be the one that Cindy wasn't.*

I felt her kiss the top of my head and rest her cheek there. I knew that I might have said too much. She was so easy to talk to I couldn't help it. Once I started, I just couldn't stop. I hoped I wouldn't become just a sad story line character to her. I couldn't take that.

*She isn't like that and you know it.*

***How do I know? We just met!***

*Ask your heart. She knows too.*

***My heart?***

*Yeah, you know, that thing that's beating incredibly fast because you're in Kelly's arms.*

***Oh, shut up.***

"Susan?" Kelly said softly.

"I'm sorry, what?" I husked.

"It's almost 3 a.m. I hate to do this, but I really have to get going," she said as she continued to



rub circles on my back.

"Oh, my God. I didn't mean to ramble on the way that I did. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make this out to be the 'Poor Susan Show'."

"Hey, I wanted to know about you. Remember? I asked."

I felt her voice vibrate into my body. I pulled back to look into her eyes, seeing only sincerity and compassion.

"Thank you for sharing your story with me. What are you doing tomorrow night?" Kelly asked.

"Nothing. It's Friday. I'm off all weekend. I usually just do laundry and some errands."

"Not tomorrow. I want very much for you to come out with me again. This time, I'd like for you to come to my home. I'd love to cook for you." She smiled that beautiful smile at me.

I grinned back at her. "You cook, do you?"

"Yes. I make homemade pasta and a killer Alfredo sauce. You game?" She arched her eyebrows and hope filled her eyes.

"I'd love to. But next time it's all about you. Deal?" I asked, hoping she knew what I meant. We untangled and stretched our cramped muscles as we stood for the first time in hours.

"Deal. It's my turn to share a little bit of me with you. I feel very honored that you shared your story with me, Susan. I'll take this with me to the grave. I won't ever break the confidence that you've placed in me. Thank you for inviting me up. I really had a wonderful time tonight."

"Me too. Thank you for coming here. I hope it didn't feel too cramped for you. There's barely enough room in here for me," I joked, and gestured around the one-roomed space.

She smiled. "It is very homey. There's a lot of you in this little place. I like that. You do a lot with what you are given. That's a rare gift. It's really nice to see."

I walked into the kitchen and rinsed our two mugs out in the sink, then walked Kelly to the door. "You want me to walk you to your car?" I asked.

"Nah, I'm a big girl. Besides, it's cold out there and you're nice and warm in here." She leaned closer and I felt my breathing hitch a bit. She reached out to me and I fell into her arms as if it were out of habit. We fit so well together. It was if we were two halves of a whole. Well, an uneven whole, being that our heights were a bit different. I didn't care, this felt more right than anything I had ever experienced.

We pulled apart and she gave me a lopsided smile. "I'm gonna pay for this tomorrow morning, that's for sure. I think my meeting is gonna be in the Guinness book for 'world's shortest board

meeting," she laughed.

"Yeah, well there's no way I'm gonna fall asleep on the job tomorrow. I'm sure the wind will keep me wide awake!" I laughed back.

"Oh, God. How do you stand the weather?" she asked.

I reached up and pulled up my sweater so she could see my underclothes. "Long john's save my life." I grinned with her.

"I bet they do." We paused and just stared at each other for a little longer. "Well, I guess I should get going."

"Yeah, it's late. Tomorrow night, then?" I asked, trying to hide my excitement.

"Count on it." She winked. "Good night, Susan. Thank you for a wonderful evening."

"I don't know how you could say it was wonderful. I talked your ear off," I quipped back.

"And you have a beautiful voice." She leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on my cheek. "See you tomorrow."

A bit taken aback, I stuttered, "Y..yeah... I'll see you tomorrow. Goodnight, Kelly. Please drive safely."

"You got it. Bye," she waved.

With that, my mystery woman walked down the hall and out of the building. I closed the door and rested my body against it as it shut, drawing a deep breath and sighing contentedly. For the first time in my life I thought I'd found someone to fill the hole in my heart that'd been there since Cindy and I were last together.

*I told you so.*

***Arghh!***

Walking into my bathroom, I started getting ready for bed. I brushed my teeth and washed my face, and smiled at my own reflection. I walked over to the couch, pulled out my bed from underneath the cushions, and threw the blankets on the wrinkled sheets. I grabbed my pillows from behind the couch and flopped my body into bed. As much as I wanted sleep to claim me, I knew it wouldn't come anytime soon. I closed my eyes and said a small prayer of thanks to Carol. She was truly my angel, and she was definitely still working hard at her job.

## **Chapter Five**

"So, after looking at the operational performance for 2000, everyone can see the need for the budgets for 2001 to be increased by 13%." The room groaned. "Is there something wrong, Baxter?" I leaned my tired frame against the wall of the boardroom.

"No. I can see our performance was on an upswing, and we should be able to achieve that goal this year," he conceded.

"Thank you. I had a feeling you would see it that way. We need to make drastic cuts with our labor, as well. We need more productivity from our managers. God knows we pay them better than most retailers; we should at least get our money's worth here. Our turnover was under 30% in 2000, which isn't bad actually, but we should try and get more retention from our floor people, as well. Does anyone have any ideas on how we can obtain a better retention percentage?"

I looked over the table of district managers on my team and saw many faces that I had hired off the street. It's nice to know these guys don't want to work for anyone else. A small, redheaded woman raised her hand.

"Yes, Marta?" I called out.

"I think if we made our bonus program an annual one versus a quarterly one, our managers may want to work longer for a better pay out."

"Very good, Marta. In fact, here is that plan. I'm glad you and I both recognized this. It was something I brought up with my bosses as well, and they liked the idea. So, here you go: annual bonus incentive for 2001 for our store managers," I repeated, passing out the new plans to everyone.

"Please look these over and keep a copy for yourselves. The stores will receive these in their next mail packs. Any questions about this?" Looking around, I saw no hands being raised. "All right, then, this meeting is adjourned," I said, looking up at the clock and noticing it was nearly two o'clock. Nearly famished from not eating, I rubbed my stomach in sympathy.

I hoped that I would wake up for tonight. I was really beat. I remembered when I could pull all nighters one after the other.

*It's your age catching up with you.*

***Thanks, I needed that boost.***

*Any time, babe. I'm here for you.*

***Whatever.***

Gathering my things from the boardroom, I went back into my office. I didn't see Susan this morning. I hoped she wasn't late on account of last night.

*I'm sure she's just as tired as I am. We can make it an early night tonight. I'm finished for today as far as I'm concerned. I need to go the grocery for some last minute items for tonight, and maybe, just maybe, I can catch a nap before I pick her up.*

Looking around one last time, I locked my office, walked through the store, and went outside to catch a cab.

I walked outside to see a shivering, familiar face. Crossing the street into the coffeehouse, I got some warm liquid for the chilly woman. Paying for the hot cocoa, I couldn't wait to give warm wishes to my new friend.

"Hey, I didn't see you this morning. I hope you weren't late because of me," I greeted.

"Hey, how are you?" Susan beamed. Her eyes were a bit dark from lack of sleep, but still had lots of sparkle to them as she spoke to me. "I missed my train by like two minutes. Then it took me forever to get a cab. It's my own fault. I thought my snooze button was a house fly, and I kept swatting it over and over." She smiled.

Smiling back, I replied, "You still up for tonight? We can make it another night if you are too tired. I'd certainly understand if you chose to do that," I said, giving Susan a way out if she wanted it.

"Absolutely not! And miss the story of Kelly Cavanaugh? Not on your life! I wouldn't miss this for anything in the world." Susan stopped for a second. "Unless you are too tired, and *you* want to postpone dinner. That's fine if you're beat. I'd also understand," Susan smiled.

"Listen to us... jeez! No, I want you to come to my house for dinner tonight. If you'd still like to come, I'll pick you up after work. What time do you get off?"

Susan's face took on one of mischief and I hoped I remembered to ask her what she was thinking. "I'll get out of here at around six o'clock tonight. Does that work for you?" Susan asked.

"Six is great for me. I'm gonna head out to the grocery and pick up some last minute ingredients and then head on home. I may even get some time in for a quick siesta," I said with a guilty smile.

"You big cheater! God, I'd give my left eye tooth for a nap right about now," Susan whined playfully.

"I'm sorry, how about some nice hot cocoa for you instead? It'll keep you warm and give you a sugar boost all in one." Handing her the warm cup of cocoa, I had to laugh at Susan's response.

"Oooh!" Susan squeaked. "Thank you so much! God, it's really cold today, this is just perfect. Thank you, Kelly. That was very sweet of you."

"Yeah, well, don't let that get around." I smirked.

"Don't worry." Susan smiled as she sipped her cocoa. "Boy, this hits the spot."

"I'm glad. Listen, I don't mean to run like this, but I've got some cooking to do for a very special friend of mine. I've got to get going," I teased.

"Oooh, a special friend eh? What's she like?" Susan teased back.

"You'd hate her-she's hairy, she drools, and she chews with her mouth open," I explained with a straight face.

"What?" I could tell she was a bit confused. "I don't do that!"

"I know, but my dog, Mattie, does!" I couldn't help but laugh at her incredulous expression.

"You do like dogs, I hope," I continued.

"I love dogs. I had a few when I was living in the great outdoors. Many strays kept me warm at night. I welcome most four legged animals... well, except rats." Susan grimaced.

"Ew, I'm not big on them either. Don't worry. She's a yellow lab that looks nothing like a rat." I beamed. "All right, I'm gonna get going. I'm really looking forward to this evening, Susan."

"Good, so am I," the brown-eyed woman replied.

Until I was able to flag a cab, Susan and I continued with our small talk. Waving as I got in the taxi, Susan winked her response.

Kelly smiled a giddy smile. "Tonight is definitely going to be fun."

## **Chapter Six**

"Pine and Churchill, please," I said to the cabby.

"Yes, ma'am. I know the way. I take you many times before," the foreign man explained.

"Thank you."

I was really nervous inside. I hoped that my house wasn't going to be too much for Susan. She's had such a hard life and my house isn't exactly small. I could fit six of her places into my house. She came from money, though, so hopefully she wouldn't think I was trying to show off. That certainly wasn't my intention.

The cab pulled into my driveway and I got out and paid my dues with a healthy tip for the driver.

"You live so close, miss, why you don't drive to work?" the kind driver asked me.

"You've seen the cars on the street right?" I asked.

"Yes."

"So you've seen the condition of them, then."

"Yes."

"There isn't a parking garage near my office."

"I see," he agreed.

"Well, you don't need to ask me why I don't drive to work then," I smiled.

He smiled back at me and just nodded as I opened my garage with the remote on my key chain and my BMW came into view. "I see your point. I would take a cab, too."

"Good man. Thanks for the ride," I said as I paid him.

"Have a good day, miss." He waved with a wink.

"Thanks," I replied and walked through my garage and into my house.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

"Woof!"

"Hey, girl! How are you?" I said, rubbing Mattie's head. "You have to go out?" I asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

"Woof!"

"Come on, let's get out back," I said, leading my pup to the kitchen's back door.

Looking around my kitchen I noticed, probably for the first time in a long while, how large my home was. I guess after seeing Susan's home the night before, it made me realize how fortunate I really was. Even after Mom died, I didn't have to worry about money. She'd left me some, but I was employed and it just wasn't a problem. I worked my way up the corporate ladder and made a bit more in salary with each rung that I reached. So many people never even make it to the ladder

itself.

I watched Mattie run around without a care in the world; she was beautiful when she ran. I wish I had a dog's life. What could there possibly be to worry about? *When I was going to take my nap?* I think I could handle that.

"Mattie! Stop digging!" I shouted through the screen door.

She looked up at me like, 'oops, busted' and started running back towards the house. "Come on in here, girl." I laughed at her expression. People say that dogs don't have expressions, but Mattie sure does. She smiles, she frowns, and she can even say 'fuck you' with her eyes, if she feels the need. That's usually around the time when I wake her from one of her naps to go out for the last time of the night. That's always amusing for me.

"Good girl, Mattie. Are we gonna have company tonight? I'm gonna introduce you to a wonderful woman named Susan. I think you're really going to like her, Mattie," I continued as I pet my baby. "She's blonde, just like you, and come to think of it, she has dark brown eyes like you, as well. No wonder I'm attracted to her." I laughed as Mattie looked at me, and I would swear she rolled her eyes at me.

"Let's see what we need for dinner, okay?" I asked my tail-wagging friend, and began to inspect my cabinets for the correct ingredients for my Alfredo sauce.

I opened my refrigerator and saw that I needed whipping cream and more butter. Opening and closing three or four more cabinets, I found the pasta maker that my cleaning lady must have hidden on me. I love her to death, but she likes things her way, and sometimes it makes me crazy when I can't find anything.

I wrote down the rest of the things that I needed from the grocery, and grabbed my coat and keys. Mattie's tail stopped wagging when she realized I was leaving again.

I rubbed her head as I spoke. "It's okay, girl, I'll be back in less than half an hour, I promise." I walked into the garage, got into my car, and left for the grocery.

## **Chapter Seven**

Preparing the last of the pasta, I danced around the kitchen. Only thing left was the sauce and that needed to wait until we were ready to eat. I looked up at the clock and saw it was almost five thirty.

"Holy shit! I have to get ready and pick up Susan. Damn, time got away from me," I cursed as I ran from the kitchen upstairs to my bedroom and right to my closet. I pulled a pair of loose fitting jeans and a burgundy V-neck sweater, threw on some socks and my Doc Martins, and ran into the bathroom. I brushed my hair and teeth and applied a small amount of make up. I looked

at my flushed reflection and realized that I was actually nervous about tonight.

***What if she doesn't like me like that?***

*You mean, what if she does?*

***I don't know what I mean, I just know that I want her to spend time with me. I'm comfortable around her. I...***

*You like her.*

***Yes. I like her. So what?***

*So nothing. Just let things go at their own pace. You may find that you want her around for longer than a couple of nights.*

***No more matchmaker talk. I gotta go, I'm gonna be late.***

I sprayed the tiniest mist of Picasso on my neck and ran back downstairs. I clicked off the stereo, grabbed my leather jacket and ran out the door to pick up my date.

*Your date?*

***Yeah, my date. That's enough out of you. I mean it.***

*Oh, yes, ma'am.*

I groaned, knowing that wouldn't be the end of this conversation. I just wish I knew when these talks would end. I got in my car and made my way down the driveway to pick up Susan.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

Driving towards town, my stomach was completely in knots. I was really nervous about Susan hearing my life story. I wasn't really sure how much she'd want to hear. I guessed I'd find out soon enough.

Parking the car out in front of Susan's employer, I saw her shining smile the minute I looked up from the street. Getting out of the car, I walked around to her side.

"Hey," I greeted with a smile.

"Hi there," Susan replied with a large grin.



"I hope I didn't keep you waiting long. I got caught up with dinner preparations. How are you feeling?" I asked.

"I'm feeling much better, now that I have the next couple days off," she beamed.

"I'm with ya there. Are you ready?" I asked, hinting towards the car with my head movement.

"Absolutely! I'm really hungry. I can't wait to eat your masterpiece," she teased.

"Trust me, you'll eat like you've never eaten before." I stopped, hoping that my last statement wasn't completely true. Although it probably was.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Susan said excitedly as she got in my car.

"Me, I guess." I laughed as I ran around the car to the driver's side.

We drove out of the uptown area and back towards my house. Out of the corner of my eye, I quietly watched Susan eyeing the streets we passed. I wondered what she was thinking.

"Penny for your thoughts," I softly said.

"My uh... my parents, used to live around here. I was just wondering if they were still in my old house. I don't know why. I could really give two shits," she said with a bite in her voice.

I think she cares more than she wants to admit. There's plenty of time to explore that. No need to ruin our night. "Oh, really?" I responded lamely.

"Yeah. If you take a right at this next road you'd be on my old street," she remarked sadly.

"Do you want me to drive down that road? We don't have to stop, we can just drive by," I suggested.

Susan was stunned at my suggestion and looked at me with childlike eyes. After we had almost passed the street, I heard her squeak out, "Could we?"

Without screeching too badly, I managed to slow the car enough to make the turn. We drove down a lovely street and I was very impressed with the houses we passed.

"Which one is it?" I asked unsure that she would respond.

"It's 220. The mailbox is the little log cabin on the left."

I heard her breathing hitch as I slowed down a bit more for her to see her childhood home. It was a beautiful house, a borderline mansion. Her folks must have had a lot of money.

"It's a beautiful house, Susan." I turned to find her with tears in her eyes. "Oh, Susan, I'm sorry. If I'd known this would make you cry, I never would've suggested we drive by. I'm so sorry," I said as I took her hand.

I felt her squeeze mine back. "I didn't think I would." She paused. "I honestly didn't know how I was going to react. It's been so long since I've thought about this house being my own, that I don't really know how I'm feeling at all," she admitted.

"I can understand that," I said as we paused a bit longer to take another look.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome, Susan. Let's go home." The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

She didn't seem to hear me.

*Lucky you.*

***Go away!***

*Bitch.*

***Bite me.***

"Kelly?" Susan's tiny voice invaded my sparring match.

"Yes, sweetheart?" I said before I could stop.

I gotta stop doing that.

"I really appreciate you taking me there. I've wanted to see the house for a while. I just didn't have nerve to go back. I guess I was just afraid I'd see one of my parents and go off the deep end again," she admitted.

"Hey, don't worry about it. If I can help you work through that at all, please know that I'm here for you," I said earnestly.

"Thank you... thank you for being my friend." She smiled, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

"You're very welcome. Now let's go eat!" I said excitedly.

"I'm all for that. Drive on!" Susan gestured with her hands.

We drove the next couple of miles hand in hand and in comfortable silence. I knew the rest of the night would be much easier for us after we got out of this car. Food was always something I

could make people smile with. I couldn't wait to see her expression when she took her first bite.

*Bite of what?*

Oh, for the love of Mary...

## **Chapter Eight**

We pulled up slowly into my driveway and I could feel the tension in Susan had subsided some. I was grateful that our little trip down memory lane wasn't too upsetting for her. I would've felt like total shit for upsetting her like that. Turning off the engine, I faced my guest. "You ready to meet the other woman in my life?" I smiled.

She looked at me for a second with uncertainty and then smiled back. "Yes, I forgot for a second who you were speaking of. I can't wait to meet... Mattie was it?" Susan hazarded.

God, I love a woman with a good memory.

*You just love a woman with big...*

***Don't say another word.***

"Yes," I smiled back. "Her name's Mattie. You've a good memory."

"Yeah, well, I do my damndest." She fluttered her dark brown lashes at me and I almost sighed out loud.

"Let's go in, shall we?" I suggested.

She smiled at me. "Lead the way."

Stepping out of the car, I walked around to her side. She started to get out and I reached for the door handle. "Hey, I got it." I smiled sweetly at her surprised expression.

"Thank you, kind lady." She bowed as she stood from the car.

We giggled and headed towards the door leading into the house. I opened the door and the wonderful smells from my kitchen filled her nostrils.

"Oh, that smells heavenly."

"I'm glad you think so. I can't wait for you to taste it," I said excitedly.

I heard the 'clickity clack' of Mattie's nails on the wood floor as she approached happily. She saw that I'd brought company and her tail started flailing around.

"Hey, girl! I told you I had someone I wanted you to meet!" I said in my mommy voice as I pet my pup behind her ears. "Susan, this is Mattie. Mattie, say hi to Susan," I introduced.

"Hey there, girl. Your momma's told me all about you. I'm so glad to meet ya," Susan said as she let Mattie sniff her out. As soon as Mattie felt that Susan was all right, she rubbed against her as if she were a cat. Susan smiled and crouched lower to pet Mattie. This was not a smart move on her part. Mattie thought that anything on the floor was fair game, so Susan went down and was assaulted by a wet, slimy tongue that unfortunately wasn't mine.

I can't believe I just thought that.

*You know you meant it, too.*

***Go away!***

"She's beautiful, Kelly." My guest smiled at me. She was clearly enjoying the attention. I think they both were.

"Thank you. You hear that, you big lug? She likes you. I guess your kisses helped," I smiled at the two girls, hoping against hope that I too would get the opportunity to also kiss that beautiful face.

*Oh yeah, you're in trouble.*

***Stop!***

I cleared my head and remembered the sauce that needed to be made. "Would you like a tour of the kitchen? There's some wine in the refrigerator," I offered.

"That'd be lovely, thank you. Come on, girl, let's go see what your momma has conjured up in that kitchen of hers." Susan smiled as Mattie stayed at her side.

Traitor.

*Yeah, but look who she gave you up for.*

***True. Now go away. Please?***

*Fine...*

We walked into the family room and I watched as Susan looked around with appreciation in her eyes. The sunken room was my favorite part of the house. I had my entertainment center in there

and a large leather pit group that allowed me many nights of utter bliss in its comfort.

She smiled. "This room is beautiful, Kelly. I bet you spend most of your time in here. God knows I would."

"Yeah, it's my favorite room in the whole house. I've spent many nights on this couch. It swallows you up before you even have time to put up a fight." I laughed.

Susan smiled brightly at me in return. "So what can I help with? Is dinner nearly ready? It smells just wonderful," she commented.

"Well, I just have to finish my sauce, and the pasta is in its warmer, so I guess if you'd like to toss the salad, we'll be all set."

"I can do that. But first, how's about that wine you told me about." She waggled her eyebrows, and I was unable to resist the laugh that came out of my throat.

"You looked absolutely adorable when you did that," I said, hoping she wouldn't be offended or embarrassed.

Shyly she replied, "Thanks."

I could see her face flush and her smile broadened. My heart lurched with emotion at this display, and I hoped that I could make it through dinner without choking or being busted for staring too long at my guest.

Susan tossed the salad with ease and I finished with the rest of the preparations. I strolled into the dining room to put the finishing touches on the ambiance for the night, then poked my head back into the kitchen. "Shall we eat?"

"Please. It has been torture for me to wait with all of this food around me." She giggled and I couldn't help but giggle with her.

I watched her go towards the kitchen table, but I stopped her and motioned towards the dining room right behind me.

"I thought it would be nicer to eat in here." I paused. "I hope you like it," I said as I bit my lower lip in anticipation.

I watched her face as she slowly walked towards the dining room doorway. A small gasp escaped her lips as she saw the candles burning on the table, set intimately for two.

"Wow... Kelly, this is beautiful. You didn't have to go to so much trouble... just for me," she said meekly.

I walked up behind her and whispered in her ear, "But I wanted to do this... just for you." "I

gestured at the table. "Please, take a seat." I felt a tremor run through her body as I placed my hands on her shoulders to show her to her seat. Whether it was voluntary or not, I was glad to know I wasn't the only one with that feeling racing through my veins.

We sat down and she immediately dug into the pasta. I watched her face as she seemed to savor her first bite with much passion. It was thoroughly arousing to watch her eat like that. She closed her eyes and groaned with pleasure.

"Oh... my... God... I have never tasted anything like this before. Oh... Kelly..."

My heart was racing as I heard her moaning my name like that. "So... you like it?" I joked, knowing full well what the response was gonna be.

"Like? Oh, nononononono... it's way beyond that point. This is just obscene! This is the best pasta I've ever eaten. God, it just melts in your mouth. Do you make this sauce from scratch? This is no sauce mix... I could tell that in a heartbeat..." Her body and voice were getting extremely animated as she described the food I'd made for her while she continued to eat with gusto. Seeing her this comfortable and open was something I could really get used to.

## **Chapter Nine**

Dinner filled us completely and we sat with our empty plates in front of us for several minutes, waiting for it to start digesting.

"Oh, I can't move! I can't remember ever enjoying a meal so thoroughly before. I have to say your gift for narration is exquisite," I joked.

"I'm sorry, Kelly. I've always had the gift of gab, especially when something affects me deeply. That food was incredible. Thank you again for going to so much trouble," she said, looking deeply into my eyes.

I grinned. "You're welcome, Susan. I'm just glad you liked it so much. I would've been afraid to ask you out again if you thought I would poison you with my culinary skills."

"No way, that was terrific. Would you mind if we went into the next room to sit for a bit? I'm feeling a little overstuffed," she asked with a grin.

"Sure, I'll turn on the stereo and we can just relax with some music or whatever," I suggested.

Susan smiled as she stood. "That sounds great. Should I worry about your music choices?"

"No, I think you'll be all right. I have a large variety, so if you'd feel better, you can pick the selection," I offered.

"Oh, no, I trust you. You go ahead. I think I need to visit the restroom, though. Could you give me directions?" Susan teased.

"Of course. Go down the hallway, and it's the second door on your left. I'll be in the family room," I replied, as I started removing the dishes from the table.

"Oh, please, Kelly, let me help you clean up," Susan asked.

"Absolutely not! I'm not cleaning; I'm putting dishes into the sink. That's all, I promise. I'm too full to do anything else," I laughed.

"All right, I'll see you in a bit."

I smiled. "Okay."

Watching Susan walked down the hallway, I just continued to smile. I was really enjoying myself. It'd been a while since I spent an evening with someone when I was thinking about more than just sex. Allowing myself to feel *anything* was more like it.

After taking the last of the dishes and depositing them into the sink, I walked into the family room and crossed down to the stereo to decide what to listen to. I was a fool for the classics and old jazz. I hoped she liked them as well.

I turned on the stereo and then stretched out on the leather sofa. I threw my feet up on the coffee table, feeling the food work its way through my body. I was full and very sated. Susan returned from the bathroom and found me with my eyes closed and resting, with Louie Armstrong coming from the stereo. He sang of green trees and red roses. What a wonderful world indeed.

"I haven't heard this song in so long. My parents loved old jazz," she said with a small smile.

"It doesn't bother you, does it? I can change it if you'd prefer," I offered.

"No... it's fine. It just took me by surprise to hear it," she said as she sat next to me on the sofa.

Her knees parted briefly and her leg touched my own. I didn't move and neither did she. I felt more comfortable with her than I had in many years. How does one person, who was no more than a stranger to me before yesterday, control my emotions on such a deep level? I hadn't felt this open and content with people I've known for years!

"So, how long have you lived here, Kelly?" Susan asked as she turned her head to look at my face.

"I've lived here almost two years. I moved here after I got my promotion to Regional Director," I explained.

"How exciting for you. You must really love what you do to take it to the level that you're at,"

she stated.

"Yes, I do. I've always loved working with people. Retail gives you more than one opportunity to do that," I chuckled. "I like the interaction. The perks in this position are pretty good too." I waggled my eyebrows. I hoped that didn't sound like bragging. I didn't invite her here to do that at all.

"I can see that. This house is beautiful. I could bathe in the sink in your powder room," she laughed. It seemed as though she was okay with that comment. I needed to make a mental note to watch what I said about money.

"I think I'd pay to see that," I said out loud before I could stop myself. I had no idea what to expect as her reaction.

"Would you?" Susan asked in a deep tone with her eyes focused on mine.

I found it very sensual. "Indeed I would," I said, not looking away at all. I matched the sensuality, and saw her face redden as she turned away.

"So, how about telling me a bit more about you?" Susan requested, no longer meeting my gaze. The coloring of her face had gone back to normal.

"Ah yes, this was the Kelly show tonight, right?" I laughed quietly.

"Yes, that was the plan. I think I shared enough with you last night to warrant some insight into your life. What do you think?" She gazed timidly into my eyes.

I nodded slowly and thought about where to start. Leaning over to grab my wineglass off of the coffee table, I took a sip to moisten my suddenly dry mouth.

"Well, what part would you like to know about? My mom's death? My dad's departure? My love life or lack thereof? Well, actually, I used to have a string of love lives, perhaps you'd like to hear about that one? Pick a topic, any topic," I said a little too playfully.

She looked up into my eyes and took my hand in hers. "It hurts you a lot to talk about those things doesn't it?" Susan's eyes were burning into me. I couldn't look away.

"Yes..." I whispered. "How did...?" I knew she was perceptive, but come on.

"Anyone that makes light of things that serious tends to have a lot of pain behind the smile they show," she spoke softly.

God, she's amazing. It's no wonder I'm drawn to her.

*She's got your number all right.*



"Well, I guess I can give you a bit of all of that. It all pretty much makes me who I am today." I rubbed her fingers softly. I threw some perception back at her. "You are very strong willed, Susan. Not many would call my bluff like that. You didn't even flinch."

"I'm used to people with sadness in their lives. I see it every day, Kelly. And just like them, I'd like to do whatever I can to help you, if you want me to, that is." She offered services I wasn't exactly sure I needed.

"What makes you think...?" I started.

"That you need help? I'm not saying that you do. I'm just offering an ear and perhaps a shoulder. I bet you haven't entrusted your heart to many, especially not about subjects like these," she guessed.

"There was one..." I began. I couldn't believe I was talking about this. I swore I would never breathe her name again.

Susan's grip tightened around my fingers and I was helpless to fight off her gentle gaze.

"We met at a work conference about seven years ago. Her name was Julie Adams. We both worked for Saks and were both climbing the same ladder of success. We clicked immediately. We spent so many hours just talking after meetings and such. We even stayed a few extra days in the hotel just to hang out and talk. I thought that I had truly met the other half of my soul. I know now that I was severely mistaken." I paused to drink another gulp of wine. "I opened up to her more than I had with anyone in my life. I told her things that no one else knew. I told her about my mom, my dad... she even held me as I cried when retelling these stories. God, what a fool I was," I said bitterly.

Susan's eyes never left mine. "What happened?"

"She fucked me, literally and figuratively... and yes, in that order," I said bitterly.

Susan flinched. "I'm sorry, Kelly. How um... did she..?" Susan began.

"The figurative part?" She nodded. "Well, after we'd become lovers, which was only four days after meeting, we knew our relationship was going to be hard, because I lived here and she did as well. There were work ethics that were being compromised since we were heading towards the same ultimate goal. I told her that I didn't want to sever what we'd started, so I'd keep my mouth to myself, so to speak, and she agreed to do the same. Hell, I was in love with her! There wasn't much I wouldn't have done for her. Well, the company wasn't very open about the 'gay element' working for them at the time, so we were discreet and pretty much kept our relationship a secret. I'd have her over to my house every once in a while, but she said she had a roommate that was against the whole thing, so we never hung out at her place. She would just come over when her coast was clear, and we'd make the most of our time together.

"We were together almost a year when our next conference came up. I'd asked to be roommates

again. People used to do that all the time with people they knew within the company. Nothing's worse than spending four days with a complete stranger in a hotel room. But she was unsure of whether we should or not." Susan managed a tiny grin. "So, when I arrived in Seattle and walked into my hotel room, I was surprised when I found someone else there and not Julie. I looked at this woman and asked where Julie was or was there a mistake, blah blah blah, and she said this was her room assignment and we were in fact roommates.

"I went down to the concierge of the hotel and asked which room Julie was staying in and if she'd arrived yet. She hadn't, so I waited in the lobby for her to arrive. About an hour or so passed and I was getting very hungry and antsy, so I decided to get something to eat in the restaurant of the hotel until she arrived.

"I walked into the bar area and I saw her on a bar stool. I started to approach her until I saw a man walk up to her and kiss her quite passionately." I paused as I felt the same lurching in my gut as I did back then. Susan's fingers caressed my hand as I tried to compose myself. "I looked at her with disbelief in my eyes. I thought I was gonna throw up. I didn't quite know what to do. I watched their exchange a little bit longer and left the bar area altogether."

"Did she see you?" Susan asked softly.

"No, she was a little distracted at the time," I answered. "I didn't say a word to her until later that night. There was an awards ceremony that evening. She showed up dressed to the nines walking on the arm of the same guy from the bar. She was beaming until she saw me staring at her. She just took one look at me and winked," I said, feeling the emotions begin to build.

"She winked at you? What the hell was that about?" Susan asked, a bit annoyed with that revelation.

"At first I wasn't sure what it meant. Later in the evening, I found out full well. For that last year I'd been coaching her on her job skills, and did everything I could for her. I was so over my head in love, I couldn't see the daylight in front of me. She really wanted to move up in the company, and I was gonna do everything in my power to help her achieve that. These award ceremonies were to show new talent or up and coming promotion opportunities, and so forth. I'd been up for the regional position and I knew it. They announced their candidates for the position, and I wasn't on the list, but Julie was,"

"No fucking way! I can't believe that!" Susan almost yelled.

"It's true. Not only did she use me for my knowledge to move up in the company, but also she'd been lying to me for the entire year about her marital status. The guy on her arm was her husband. He had come to escort his lovely, *successful* wife to this dinner. It was the only event when the company allowed spouses to come along. It all became clear to me why we could never hang out at her place, or God forbid, pick her up from her home! I never once stepped foot into her home!" I spat.

"Jesus! I can't believe her!" Susan yelled with me.

"I'm not finished, though. The worst thing about all of this was, she lied to our vice president and said I'd been hitting on her to get where *I* was. It wouldn't do to have a gay Regional Director, you know." I silenced Susan's outrage with a finger on her lips. "They believed her on top of all of that. I'd been their slave for almost five years, and yet they believed this woman who'd been with us for only two years, because she had what I didn't; she had an acceptable social lifestyle.

"I couldn't believe she had done this to me after everything we'd been through. I never thought I'd want to hear the words I love you ever again. She hurt me so badly on so many levels with those words, I just didn't know what to do next." I sighed and collected myself while wiping the now falling tears from my face.

"Here..." Susan handed me a Kleenex from the box on the end table.

"Thanks." I blew my nose and took a deep breath.

"How could you work for a company that showed you no support whatsoever? You knew that's not what happened," she said.

"Yes, but I wanted to have them hear me out before I made my final judgment. Luckily for me, Julie fucked up big time before I had that talk with my supervisors. I was gonna go under the lamp with Human Resources, too, because hitting on co-workers is not allowed, especially if it's an unwelcome advance. You know, the old sexual harassment?" Susan nodded. "Well, luckily for me, Julie let everyone know that she was a liar, so I never had to take a stand on that," I continued.

"What happened?" Susan asked, truly involved with my tale.

"Well, the next week we were supposed to submit our figures and plans for the upcoming year. I had implemented a plan in my area that was going to be considered for the company's use. It's a huge deal if corporate chooses one of your ideas to roll out within the entire company. I knew that my plan had a great chance of becoming that next "new idea." Well, when it came time to send in my plan, I had; and the next day, my boss called me across town to talk about it. I was really excited, so I sped right over there to see if my labor plan was gonna be considered. I sat in his office and he sat at his desk with an indifferent expression on his face.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

*"Jack? Is there something wrong?" Kelly asked.*

*"Yes, Kelly, unfortunately something is very wrong," he finished.*

*"Well, what is it? We don't pull punches with each other, what's going on?" Kelly asked bluntly, as she always had with him.*

*"Someone has told me something very unnerving about your labor plan," he said, steeping his fingers together.*

*"What do you mean?" she asked, getting a bit upset at what was sounding like an accusation.*

*"My sources tell me that you stole this idea from another leader in our division," he stated clearly.*

*"What?! You cannot be serious, Jack!" Kelly's temper was rising quickly. "You've known me for five years! I've done nothing but help this company out whenever possible. It's bad enough I got passed up because of some lies, but now I'm being accused of stealing my own idea? I just want to get this straight," Kelly spat back at him. "Whose idea is this, supposedly?"*

*"That's precisely what I'm talking about. You're angry with Julie since we decided to go with her instead of you. Now you've stolen one of her ideas to make yourself look better!"*

*Who's dick is she impaling herself on now? Kelly thought to herself. I think I'm looking at her latest victim.*

*"Jack, can I ask you a question?" she asked.*

*"Of course." He smiled fakely.*

*"Where are the plans we sent you? Are they still on e-mail, or have you printed them out?"*

*"I haven't printed anything. I wanted to get down to the bottom of this before I gave anyone a hard copy of the proposal," he explained.*

*"Where is Ms. Adams now? Is she close?" Asking smugly, Kelly knew she was going to have fun with this one.*

*"Actually, she's in the building. I brought you both here to question you about this whole thing," he answered.*

*"Good. Bring her in here. Now," she demanded.*

*His eyes went wide with question. "What?"*

*"I said bring her in here now. I think I'll have your answer in a few minutes if you'll do me the courtesy," Kelly responded sweetly.*

*"Fine." He reached to his intercom and asked his secretary to ask Ms. Adams in.*

*Shortly thereafter, Julie strode cockily into his office and sat next to Kelly without even looking in her direction.*

*"Hi, Jack, you wanted to see me?" Julie smiled innocently.*

*"Yes. I wanted you both here to get to the bottom of this," he stated flatly, though his eyes said otherwise.*

*Bastard, Kelly thought.*

*"Fine. What would you like to know?" Julie smiled.*

*"Well, first off, I want to know how you know that Kelly stole this idea from you and not the other way around," Jack said with a smile.*

*"Well, I just figured my numbers would speak for themselves here. My costs have gone down considerably with this plan of mine. How else could this have happened?" she innocently responded.*

*"How about my coaching you for the last year? How about that Julie! You'd never be where you're at right now if I hadn't helped you over the last year!" Kelly continued to plead her case. "My numbers are better than yours are anyway!" she finished, knowing she was going to get nothing for her troubles.*

*"Oh, Kelly, come on. A few helpful tips don't change things the way my labor development plan affected things. It's bad enough I had to deal with all of your advances during..."*

*Kelly had had quite enough. It was time to pull her trump card. "Jack? Let me ask you one question. What is my signature on any document that I send you via e-mail?" she watched Julie shift uncomfortably in her chair.*

*His eyes got wide like saucers once it sank in what she was saying to him.*

*"Print them," she snarled.*

*Jack turned to his computer and brought up my file and then brought up Julie's. He printed out both documents and instantly Kelly knew she had won.*

*"What do you see, Jack?"*

*Come on, I need to see her God damned face! Kelly thought triumphantly.*

*"Yes, Jack, what do you see?" Julie said, very nervously.*

*"Kelly's watermark," he said, defeated.*

*"Her what?" Julie shouted.*

*"My watermark, you lying piece of..." Kelly stopped her words before she couldn't contain all she wanted to say to Julie. She threw the document in Julie's face and watched her stare at the page, knowing she was soon going to be out of a job. "I put a watermark on every document I send so that there's no mistake of who it belongs to. When you so lovingly stole that file from my computer, you took it in all its glory," Kelly gritted through bared teeth. "I hope you had your fun at the top, or should I say 'on top'?" she whispered the last part in Julie's ear with as much controlled anger as she could conjure up.*

*Redirecting herself to Jack, Kelly said, "I demand that a full investigation take place. I'll be calling Human Resources immediately to start the hearings," she turned her head to look at the forlorn face of Julie. Nothing made her happier than to see justice happen at her own hand.*

*"Bitch," Kelly whispered.*

*"I will call a meeting first thing in the morning. As for you, Ms. Adams, you are suspended until further notice. You may leave," he said as she stood without saying a word and quietly left the room.*

*"Yes!" Kelly muttered, mentally pumping her fist.*

*\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\**

"I can't believe she did that to you. She really wasn't a nice person," Susan added as I finished my walk down memory lane.

"Yeah, she was a peach all right. Best thing was that the company didn't approve of Jack's involvement with Julie, so he was let go as well. His position came open, so there was a Regional Director's chair up for the taking. I didn't get it, though," I explained.

"What? After all of that crap you'd gone through, they didn't even have the decency to promote you?" Susan asked excitedly.

"No, but I got a full apology from the vice president, the president, and all of my colleagues that had known that I would never behave in that fashion. And, this time I knew the person they did hire for the job, and she was more than qualified for the spot. I worked very closely with her and I learned a whole lot more than I thought I'd needed to. They were right in not promoting me at the time; I really wasn't ready. I stayed in the field for another few years, and doing this job now, I know it was wise of them to wait. All in all, it was a very good learning experience for me. I learned a whole lot about my peers and how not to give away my heart. It hurt too badly when it was broken," I whispered.

Susan took both of my hands in hers and raised them to her lips and gently kissed my knuckles. "I'm so sorry that happened to you. There's been no one since Julie?" Susan asked gently.

"Well... that leads into a different tale. I've had plenty of companionship, let's just leave it at that. We talked about one night stands last night, right?" I gazed into her eyes.

"Yes, I remember. Is that what your life turned into? Nights filled with faceless, nameless bed mates?" Susan asked with a sad grin.

It sounded better the way she said it. Most everything did.

"Yeah, it's been that way for several years now. I just can't give my heart away again... I can't..." I stuttered, knowing if we talked about this anymore I would start crying wholeheartedly.

"I know it's hard, believe me. My own parents turned their backs on me. My heart hasn't quite healed from that experience, either. I really am so thankful we've become friends, Kelly. I feel so safe when I'm with you. I haven't felt safe in a very long time," she said gently as she squeezed my hands, keeping them in her lap.

The speakers started filtering in one of my all time favorite songs. The violins began, and I instantly knew I wanted to hold this woman in my arms.

"Would you dance with me, Susan?" I asked as I raised myself off the couch, lifting her gently towards me.

She smiled uncertainly and nodded as I led her into the open area of the family room. I held one hand and placed her other one on my shoulder, while mine went instinctively around her waist. I looked into her dark brown eyes and felt myself falling.

*At Last...*

We swayed to the music and slowly began a tiny circle around the room. She felt so nice in my arms. After a bit, I pulled her closer and she immediately embraced me fully.

I felt her hands gently rubbing my back as I did the same. Her scent was intoxicating. I wasn't sure if it was the clouds I was walking on or what, but I knew something had changed between us.

Susan and I were gliding across the floor as if we'd danced a thousand times before. Etta James was singing my emotions, causing my breathing to hitch. I knew the person in my arms would never hurt me the way I'd been hurt before. I knew with all of my heart that I'd finally found what I was looking for.

*At last...*

[Continued in Part 2](#)

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~ A Saving Solace ~  
by DS Bauden

**Disclaimer:** None really necessary, just the latest story to be extracted from my brain. This was formerly titled "Home" for those of you familiar with my work. There will be scenes of a mature nature in these pages, including two women making love. You know the rules - you don't like it, don't read it. Carry on.

**Thank you:** A big thank you goes out to my beta reader, Day, who has slaved over this tale and made it even better. You rock, darlin.' Thank you so much!

A Saving Solace  
[DS Bauden](#)

**Chapter Ten**

At last, indeed. God, I hadn't felt this way in... well, I can't remember it'd been so long. Kelly crawled into my heart so quickly I didn't even have time to tack up that 'Keep Out' sign. Not that I would've.

*Nor would I have let you. Kelly's the one for you, Susan.*

***You may be right. I don't think I've ever felt this safe and right with any other person.***

Looking into the bluest eyes in the world, I most definitely had missed a question.

"I'm sorry, Kelly. What did you say?" I stuttered.

"I asked if you would like to sleep here tonight. I have a guest room that you are more than welcome to sleep in, unless you'd be more comfy at home," she shyly asked.

She is absolutely beautiful. I can't feel my tongue.

"I... I would... um..." I couldn't believe I couldn't form an answer.

"Hey, forget it, I was just wondering. I don't want you to be uncomfortable in any way. I can take you home, Susan." She looked like a child being reprimanded.



"Kelly, wait. I didn't mean to act like that. I wasn't going to say no." Catching her surprised expression, I nodded and continued. "Really. I guess the offer kind of took me by surprise; I wasn't expecting it." I took her hand in mine as we headed back to the couch and turned the music down. We sat down and I kept her hand on my lap inside my own. "I'd rather stay here anyway. I'm sure your bed is gonna be much more comfy than my sleeper sofa."

Her face blushed. "My bed?" she asked softly.

"Oh crap, I didn't mean yours, per se, I just meant..." I could feel my face getting hot and bright red with each passing second. "I just meant here, with you, or, I mean, in your house... Ugh!" I put my head in my hands. I was just going to be quiet for the rest of the night.

Her light chuckling made me look up into the most stunning face I'd ever seen. She had a smile that could brighten the dullest of days. "My God, you're beautiful, Kelly. I know how often you've probably heard that in your life, but it's the God's honest truth." I felt my hands sweating in my lap; I knew she could feel my nervousness as well.

"Yeah, I suppose I've heard that a time or two, but quite frankly, it never really mattered to me how people saw me. Not until now." She paused to turn and face me. "You make me care about how I look. I want to be this way for you. Who wouldn't want to be beautiful for you?" Kelly asked sensually as she stroked my cheek with her knuckles.

My heart beat faster with each word and each stroke of her softness against my face. I dove into blue pools and before I knew it, our lips came together in a brush of tenderness. It was a short, chaste kiss, but what followed packed a whole lot more. We kissed again, this time more passionately and with an urgency that couldn't be denied. Our tongues danced with their own private rhythm to music all their own. As we parted I could see the smoldering desire in her eyes.

My lips were still tingling from the contact. God, she was good at that.

"Wow, that was... incredible," she whispered in my ear.

My body broke out into gooseflesh instantly. "Yeah... it was," I was very pleased to have formed a coherent sentence.

She nuzzled against my neck and tenderly kissed my jaw line. "You don't have to stay, if you don't want," she said again in a very low, sexy voice.

"I want," I said, my own tone low. I wasn't sure how much I wanted or even what in fact I did want; I just knew I wanted to stay here tonight.

"So do I," Kelly agreed as she continued her assault on my ears. My toes curled in response.

Our lips met again and with each passing moment, I could feel my body getting more and more out of control. My heart was racing faster than it ever had in my life. I wanted to possess her with

my body. My hands wrapped around her waist and I pulled her harder into me. I felt her groan into my mouth, and that sparked an intensely arousing wave in my belly that could've shaken all of China.

"Oh, Kelly..." I sighed. "You feel so incredible." My body was on fire.

I felt her hands start to roam down my sides and I could feel her outlining the sides of my breasts. I arched into her touch instinctively. Our bodies shifted so that most of her was lying on top of me. She placed her arms just underneath my shoulders as I felt her leg slide in between my own.

"Ohh..." I gasped.

"Mmm," Kelly groaned into my ear as she began to slowly move against me. My legs involuntarily wrapped around her probing thigh.

I could feel my center throbbing from needing her there. Oh, this was amazing! This was heaven! This was... too soon! I don't think I'm ready yet! Dammit! My thoughts were heavily racing through my head, stealing all of my pleasure away. Damn them.

"Wait!" I gasped, breaking our connection.

"Is everything all right, Susan?" The concern that I saw there was enough to melt my heart.

"I'm sorry, Kelly. As much as I want this with you, I don't think that I'm ready to jump right now... I'm so sorry," I looked away from her eyes. I couldn't bear to see the disappointment they were bound to show. I could feel the stinging of tears welling in my eyes.

"Hey..." she whispered as she slowly turned my head to face her. "Baby, if you're not ready, then we'll wait. I'm very pleased that you stopped me. I would never want to make love with someone unless they really wanted to. Especially not with you, Susan, I know how much you've been through. I never want you to feel pressured by me, for anything. Especially this." She kissed me gently on the lips.

I smiled into deep blue orbs. "Thank you, Kelly. You're so wonderful to me. What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"I should be the one asking that question." She smiled and started to raise her body off of me.

"Wait..." I exhaled as she stopped and looked at me, confused. I swallowed nervously. "Can I have one more kiss?" I wasn't sure she'd want to. I hoped she wouldn't think I was just teasing her, but I needed to feel her again.

"You never have to ask that, Susan. I'll kiss you whenever you want." She smiled and slowly brought her lips down against mine in a soul searing, heart stopping kiss that took my breath away.

"Wow... I can't wait for stage two," I breathed out, hearing Kelly chuckling as she sat up. I sat up and ran my hands down my top to straighten it and I felt her breath in my ear.

"I can guarantee it'll be worth waiting for," she whispered, sending gooseflesh down my body.

*I don't doubt that.*

***You can say that again.***

## **Chapter Eleven**

My heart was jumping by leaps and bounds just thinking about the contact Susan and I had just shared. I couldn't believe what had almost happened. In a way, the bad side of me really wanted it to happen. The grown up and more responsible and caring side was glad we stopped.

God, I wanted her.

I still want her.

Bad.

"Would you like some more wine?" I asked her, trying to break the frustrated tension that hung between us.

"I'd better not." She looked up shyly at me. "How about some tea?" she suggested and stifled a yawn.

"Sure, I can do that. Besides, I think we still have some talking to do." I couldn't believe I'd just said that.

She smiled. "Yeah, I was hoping you'd continue. I just didn't want to push anymore tonight."

"Don't worry, this will give me something else to do with my mouth," I replied with a wink as I got up to go into the kitchen.

I heard her laughing at my retreating form and I took a deep cleansing breath as I entered the kitchen. I knew the rest of the evening wasn't going to be nearly as fun as what it could've been. What was it my grandma always said to me?

*There's always gonna be time for that later.*

I smiled at her words. I needed to call her. Her advice was so priceless.

"You want some green tea?" I shouted into the family room.

"Yeah, that'd be great," I heard her respond.

I put the water on the stove to boil. Even though I had most amenities known to a kitchen, the teakettle should always make water for tea and the coffee maker should only heat water for coffee.

Call me strange.

I wasn't sure if I was ready to talk about the loss of my mom yet. That pain was still pretty raw. I knew that Susan would hear that story one day, I just wasn't sure I wanted to go down that road tonight. I'd already spoken of Julie, which I really hadn't thought would happen ever again, but there I was spouting away like there was no tomorrow.

Susan was so comforting and understanding about that whole situation. No wonder she can help people. She had the softest eyes, telling you that you could trust her. It's unavoidable, she'd listen and she'd care. She'd make you feel as if she were there with you through it all. That's a heart you don't find in many people. It's a heart I hope to have one day soon.

Aw hell, who am I kidding? She already has mine. I just didn't think that I'd give it to her so quickly. Who knew that she'd have such an effect on me?

*You did, ya big idiot. You knew that from the first moment you heard her ring that bell.*

***Yeah, well, shoot me.***

*Don't tempt.*

I sat and argued with myself until I heard the squealing of the teakettle. I put the kettle and cups with the tea on a tray and headed back into the family room.

"Here we are..." I stopped short when I looked down into the face of an angel.

Susan had drifted to sleep on the couch with Mattie happily curled below her feet. My heart couldn't take much more in one evening. This woman had officially turned me into a marshmallow.

I didn't care one bit.

I turned around and brought the tray back into the kitchen. I returned and decided that I should put my charge to bed, but I didn't want to wake her. God, she looked so at peace. I'm sure she didn't always look like this while she slept. If she slept at all on the street, that is. I only pray that I can keep her face looking like it does right now.

Mattie looked up at me and thumped her tail against the couch. "Hi, sweetie. Did we wear out

our guest?" I asked her as I scratched behind her ears. She rubbed harder against my hand and into the couch. She really thought she was a cat. I laughed at her actions and gave one final scratch before waking Susan.

Leaning down, I brushed a few stray hairs out of her face. My fingers caressed her cheek and I felt her move into my touch. Even asleep she responded to me. She was truly a find. I guiltily continued my touches until I felt my own body announce its fatigue. I covered my mouth as a yawn escaped and cupped Susan's cheek with my hand while attempting to wake her.

"Susan, sweetheart, wake up. It's time to go to bed," I said softly.

Nothing.

Oh boy.

"Susan? Wake up, honey," I said a little louder, as I moved my fingers across her cheek tenderly.

She stirred and smiled into my touches.

"That's it. Wake up, baby. I'll put you to bed in a much softer place. I promise you'll find it much more comfortable," I continued.

"Mmm... I like it here. S'warm..." she mumbled softly. Her eyes flickered then opened fully. Those beautiful brown eyes were staring at me. First they were uncertain of where they were and looked a little scared.

"Shhh..." I tried to sooth her panicky eyes. "Hey, sleepyhead. Let me show you to your room,"

"Oh, Kelly, I'm so sorry. I can't believe I fell asleep! I'm so embarrassed!" she said, rubbing her face with her hands.

"Hey, don't worry about it. I told you, this couch has no shame," I chuckled.

"You weren't kidding. It totally sucked me in." She smiled a sleepy grin and yawned.

"Well, as comfy as this couch is, it doesn't hold a candle to the bed. Come on, I'll show you the way." I lowered my hand for her to grasp. She took my hand and I guided her up onto her feet. She stretched while I turned off the lights and the stereo.

"Are you sure it's no trouble for me to stay here, Kelly?" Susan asked.

"I wouldn't have offered if I didn't want your company. Besides, it'll be like a slumber party. God knows I haven't had one of those in years!" I chuckled.

"Slumber party, eh? Well, the ones I went to always had all of us sleeping in the same room and laughing and talking until dawn." She smiled in memory.

"We could do that if you wanted. I mean if you want to share a bed with me," I said, watching for her reaction.

None came for a long heartbeat.

"Well, if you promise not to steal all the covers, you've got yourself a deal," she replied sleepily, trying to stifle another yawn.

"Well, from the looks of you, dawn is out of the question, but it'll still be nice to sleep with you. Ahh... if... if you're all right with that. I mean, I don't want to scare you or make you uncomfortable. We've already talked about this, so I do mean sleep when I say 'sleep with you,'" I reassured her. "I'd just really like to hold you tonight," I confessed.

"I'd like that too, Kelly," she admitted shyly. "Very much."

"All right then. Let me get Mattie outside one last time, and then I'll show you where my room is. Okay?" I smiled.

She winked at me. "Sure thing."

I let Mattie out and she decided to cooperate for me for once. Nighttime is her time for mischief. I never expect her to come in until half the yard is dug up. I guess she figures I can't see her in the dark. Luckily for me, she did her business and made her way back to the backdoor without tearing up the lawn.

"Good girl! You deserve a treat for that," I commended as I walked to her cabinet and pulled out a treat.

She eagerly took the rawhide and trotted towards the stairs leading to my bedroom. She had a tendency to prance when she got a treat. She knew she'd done something right to get it, and she'd be damned if she wasn't going to show it off.

I took Susan's hand and led her towards the stairs leading up to my room. Walking hand in hand, I had never felt so content in my life. She was filling a gap that was so huge for so long. I don't think I could ever convey to her how precious she had become to me. I don't think I could find the right words.

We walked into my room and I watched as her eyes scanned the room with approving eyes.

"Kelly, this room is beautiful! God, my whole apartment is as big as your room!" Susan chuckled.

"I'm glad you like it. I hope..." I looked at her and took both of her hands as I faced her. "I really hope you know that I didn't bring you here to um... show off or to brag. I know you've had a hard time and..."

Susan placed her finger on my lips to stop my ramblings.

"Kelly, I know you're not like that. I can tell. I've been around enough people that think their shit doesn't stink, but believe me; they aren't even in your league. You invited me here to see you, not your possessions. For that, I'm grateful, because I've had such a wonderful time tonight. I haven't danced in ages. In forever, I think. I think the last person I danced with was my father..."

She paused and I heard her deep sigh.

"Anyway, thank you for starting to say what you did, even though it wasn't necessary. You're not a fake, Kelly. You're an incredible woman, and I'm really proud and honored that I can call you friend."

I didn't know what to say. She was amazing! All I could do was inch closer and pull her into my arms. Our bodies fit together so well; it felt so right. I rested my chin on the top of her head and took a deep breath. Her hair smelled like sunshine. That analogy made me smile in reflex. I could only imagine one other person smelling like sunshine, and that was my mom. I wondered if she'd sent her to me.

*Was she a gift, Mom? If she was, I really can't thank you enough. God, I miss you.*

My eyes shed tears that I had no control over. I felt so vulnerable around Susan, but I'd never felt safer. I knew she'd never hurt me and I could trust her with anything or anyone. She heard me sniffle and slowly pulled out of my embrace.

"Kelly?" She looked up and noticed my tears. "Sweetheart, why are you crying?" she asked as she brushed away a few tears with her thumbs.

"I'm sorry, Susan. I was holding you and I um... smelled your hair. It smelled like sunshine." I smiled a watery smile. "My mom was the only other person that I can say that about. I guess it just sparked something inside of me and I was missing her. It happens every once in a while. She was the world to me," I explained in almost a whisper.

"Oh, sweetheart, I can totally understand that. Never apologize for missing your mom. And even though you haven't told me much about her, I know that you loved her very much." She pulled me against her again. "You can cry on my shoulder whenever you feel like it."

"Thanks, I really appreciate that. I haven't had anyone that I could share this with, other than my grandmother. It's nice to talk about my mom with someone else. I'd like to tell you more about her one day. I know she would've liked you a lot."

*Like I do.*

"Do you see her often? Your grandma?" she asked.

"I see her every once in a while. We've kind of drifted apart. She and I used to talk a lot. She lost a lot too when Mom died. Maybe it hurts her too much to see me, I honestly don't know. I don't like to push her. She's such a sweet lady, though. Funny as hell, too." I smiled in memory of her quick humor and one-liners.

"Kelly? Can we continue this, there?" Susan pointed to my bed shyly. "I'm a little chilly."

"Yeah, sure. Let me get you something comfy to sleep in." I smiled and walked over to my armoire and opened my pajama drawer. I pulled out a pair of my flannel bottoms and a long sleeve T-shirt. "Will you be warm enough in this, or do you want something else?"

"Oh, that's fine. I may even be a little too warm in that, but let's give it a shot," she grinned.

"I have boxers, too, if you'd rather," I offered.

"You know what? I like that idea better. I never could understand pants in bed. My sheets would always wrap around my clothed legs and I'd feel like I was trapped." She grinned and shrugged. "Thanks." Susan said as I handed her the clothing.

"Sure. The bathroom's in there." I pointed to the door. "And there are new toothbrushes in the cabinet. Feel free to use whichever color you like," I offered.

"Again, thanks, Kelly. Your hospitality is absolutely wonderful." She stood on her tiptoes and kissed my cheek before she sauntered into the bathroom to get ready for bed.

I grabbed another pair of boxer shorts and a short-sleeved T-shirt to wear to bed. I couldn't wear anything too warm at night or I'd get nightmares. Who knew why this was, I just didn't want to fuel my overly active dreamscapes. They were scary enough on their own.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

God, this bathroom is three times the size of the powder room downstairs! I couldn't believe my eyes. Kelly indeed had quite a house. This place was just incredible. The bathtub had whirlpool jets and looks like it could seat at least four. Wow, not even my parents had a tub like that one.

I opened the medicine cabinet and found several toothbrushes, and indeed they were in different colors

Have lots of overnight guests, Kelly?

*Oh, jealousy isn't a good look for you, darlin'.*



***I'm not jealous! Besides, she said she had quite a checkered past. I also believe she said that those days were over. Maybe she's just planning ahead so she doesn't have to rush out to buy a spare!***

*Are you trying to convince yourself or me, Suz?*

***Oh, shut up, please?***

I took the wrapper off the toothbrush and found some toothpaste. I looked at my reflection as I cleaned my teeth, and I began to giggle at my appearance. Kelly's clothes were at least three sizes too big for me, but they smelled like her, therefore, it was all good.

I spit the last of my toothpaste down the drain and wiped my mouth on the towel hanging on the rod next to the vanity. I felt my heart go out to the woman in the next room. She must've loved her mom a great deal. I wonder if she'll tell me what happened.

*Don't push, Susan. She'll tell you when she's ready. You've worked through a lot of your issues, and maybe she needs a bit more time before she can tell all.*

***For once, you're right. Thank you. Now goodnight.***

*Goodnight, Susan.*

I walked out of the bathroom to find Kelly pulling up her boxers and smiling shyly at me. Her gaze burned my flesh as I felt her taking in my body.

"Wow, you look absolutely adorable. You look better in my clothes than I do."

"Yeah, but I bet you look better out of them." Hearing myself say that out loud, I felt my ears turn red. I couldn't believe I'd said that. I know my eyes looked like wide, cartoon-like saucers.

Kelly's chuckling was her only response as she walked closer to me. Her head leaned closer to mine and she whispered softly, "I doubt that very much. But ohh... I can't wait to find out who's right," she purred in my ear as she made her way into the bathroom. I felt her eyes on my back and I slowly turned around to see if I was right. I saw her wink at me with a smile before she closed the door.

She's going to kill me. She's definitely going to kill me.

"Whoa..." I breathed out. "This is gonna get more and more interesting, isn't it, Mattie?" I whispered to the dog, which was looking at me with the chewed rawhide sticking out of her mouth. Her tail thumped against the bed and then she went back to work on her treat.

"Thanks, pal. You've been very insightful," I snickered at the beast on the floor.

I heard the water running in the bathroom and decided to get into bed. I was starting to feel chilly

again now that the heat flashes had died down a bit. I walked to the bathroom door and knocked quietly.

"Hey, Kelly? While laying on your bed, which side do you sleep on?" I asked through the door.

"The right," she mumbled through her toothpaste filled mouth.

"Kay, thanks."

I walked to the left hand side of the bed and turned down the sheets and comforter. I climbed into the cool sheets and felt more at home in this bed than I did in the one at my own house. Her scent was everywhere and it was such a comfort to me. I decided that I liked that.

A lot.

## **Chapter Twelve**

I came out of the bathroom to find my guest snuggling into my blankets on my bed. It warmed my heart to see her in my bed. Not to mention other parts of my anatomy. Susan looked up at me and smiled. I couldn't help but smile back. "Comfortable?" I had to ask.

She smiled at me sleepily. "Oh, Kelly, I can't tell you the last time I've laid in a bed this comfy. It's heaven. Thank you for asking me over."

"You're welcome, darlin'. I just didn't want our night to end so soon. Even though the rest of our time will probably be spent sleeping, I didn't want to say good-bye just yet," I confessed.

"I know what you mean. I've had such a good time tonight. Thank you again," Susan said.

I rolled back the sheets and blankets on my side of the bed and got in. I wrestled playfully with Susan a bit for the covers, and then settled comfortably on my left side to look at her. She'd done the same onto her right side, and we just stared at each other for many moments. It seemed like time was going so slowly. I took in every feature on her face, from the tiny freckles on her nose to the chicken pox scar next to her right eye. At least it looked like a chicken pox scar.

Reaching up, I gently caressed her face in wonder of what this girl's childhood had been like. It had to have been so different from the life that she's used to at present. I just couldn't believe that someone's parents would actually throw out one of their own because they didn't agree with their sexual orientation. I was very lucky in that respect. My mom and I had a very close relationship, and I knew I could tell her anything and everything. So when I went to her when I was fifteen and told her I didn't think I liked boys "in that way," she just smiled at me with open arms and said, "I love you, Kelly, no matter what." She was really something.

"Hey, you all right?" Susan said, startling me a bit.

My fingers continued to caress her, and I outlined the small scar next to her eye. "Where'd you get this from?" I asked carefully.

"Chicken pox. Six years old," Susan confirmed.

"That's what I thought. I have a similar one next to my eye. See?" I said as I pointed to where I thought the scar was on my face.

"Wow, look at that. We're twins," she giggled.

"Oh, God, I hope not. What we did downstairs wouldn't be too welcome in most families," I joked.

"Ew, Kelly!" Susan laughed as she swatted my shoulder.

"I'm just kidding," I laughed back and grasped her retreating hand, interlacing our fingers. Taking a deep breath, I looked up at Susan. Her eyes were incredible. They've seen so much more of this life than I ever hope to. They've seen places I'd only heard horror stories about. I felt so incredibly blessed that I'd never had to go through any of the things that she had. I hoped that I never did. I caressed the palm of her hand with my thumb.

Susan caught me staring and just smiled at me. "Something on your mind, Kelly?"

"Well, actually, I'm hoping that we can postpone the remainder of our 'heart to heart' for another day. I don't know if I'm quite up to going into another story tonight." I gave a small sad grin to my new friend.

"Oh honey, you don't have to tell me anything if you don't feel up to it. If you decide one day that you want to share that part of your life, then of course, I'll be more than willing to listen. Please don't feel pressured into telling me something you aren't ready to share. I would hate that." Susan held tight to my hand. "Let's just take this slow. Let's find a pace that we're both happy with and go with it. No pressure?" She smiled in hope.

"No pressure," I gladly agreed. Relief instantly flooded my body and I squeezed her hand. I guess I really wasn't ready to reveal too much too soon. I just wanted her to feel that I'm willing to be an equal part in all of this. Whether it's emotionally or not. God knows I have some baggage that I carry around every day. I know she took a risk when she came out to dinner with me, and especially last night when she shared so much of herself to almost a complete stranger, without batting an eye. I guess she felt the connection as much as I did. God knows I've never had it this strong with anyone before.

"Can we snuggle?" I asked in an almost childlike voice.

"Of course we can snuggle. I was hoping you'd want to," she admitted.

I leaned onto my back and felt the bed shift as Susan rolled closer to me. Finally her head rested on my shoulder and her arm wrapped securely around my waist. My arm instinctively wrapped itself around her shoulders and held her close to me. "This feels so nice," I cooed, and began rubbing her back.

"I have to agree. Your arms feel great around me," she said as she snuggled impossibly closer to me.

I'd never felt more secure. Or more cared for.

### **Chapter Thirteen**

I can hear her heartbeat racing with every breath she takes. At least I'm not the only one who's nervous. I hadn't been in another person's arms since Cindy. God, it's been a long time. This felt too good to be true. I don't think I'll ever forget the sound of Kelly's heartbeat. It's so strong. I love the way that she holds me. Her hands rub my back so soothingly.

*I'd bet they'd feel great on other places, too.*

***Quit that!***

*Just thought I'd keep you posted on my thoughts.*

***Well don't!***

*Nite, babe*

***Go away!***

If I never heard my shadow's voice again, it'd be too soon. If I could just get over my fears, maybe she'd go away. Who knows?

"Susan?" Kelly whispered.

"Yeah?"

"Are you still sleepy?"

God, she's so cute.

"Yeah, I am. Being all cuddled up like this makes me feel so safe. I could stay here forever," I said before I could stop myself.

Hell, who was I kidding? I didn't want to stop myself. This was where I wanted to be. I'll be

damned before someone's gonna take that from me again.

"I'm glad you're comfortable," she said softly into my hair. "I haven't felt this good in a long time."

"Mmm," I murmured into her. "I know the feeling."

"Good night, darlin'" Kelly said quietly.

"Sweet dreams, Kelly," I said as I slowly looked up into dreamy blue eyes.

"You, too," she said as she leaned closer.

Her kiss was soft and warm and it tingled my body completely. I moaned unintentionally into her mouth. Her body coiled like a snake ready to pounce and she deepened the kiss. Our tongues met again and we tasted the fresh toothpaste between us. She was so good at this kissing thing. My body really wanted to sink into her fully. I felt my lips being nipped as our kiss slowly came to an end. "Whoa," I breathed.

"Yeah," Kelly agreed.

I smiled at her. "You are so good at that."

"I'm glad you think so. You're quite gifted as well. My body thanks you, too. It's trying really hard to betray my head," she giggled.

"I know the feeling," I mumbled. "I'm sorry..." I started.

She placed her fingers across my pouting lips. "Shhh, don't go there. I told you I'd gladly wait to make love with you. I just thought you'd like to know what my body thinks of you, too."

"It's nice to know. It really is. It's been so long since I've wanted anyone to feel these things for me. I'm so glad you do, Kelly. You are such an incredible woman. Thank you for approaching me yesterday. I don't know if I would've had the nerve to have gone to you. It's hard to tell what kinds of reactions people like me will get," I sadly said.

"God, it has to be so hard for you. I'm so glad your friend Carol brought you back from the street."

"Yeah, she was the greatest woman I've ever known. She really brought me back to life. I was so dead inside; I never thought I'd make it back to reality. I thought the rest of my life was gonna be as it was in my own little world out there." I sighed, thinking back, thanking God I was warm, clothed, fed, and cared for.

"Susan?" Kelly started. "What are your plans for Christmas? I know I told you that I go to the movies, but I'd love some company this year. What do you think? It's getting closer, and I

thought we could spend it together," Kelly bit her lip anticipating my response.

"Well, actually, I am heading a food drive for the shelter. We do it every year; it's something I like to do. It reminds me of Carol, now that she's gone. It kind of brings me closer to her in a way. She did it for me and I really like giving some of that back," I said proudly.

"You need any help?" Kelly asked.

I looked up at smiling eyes. "Are you serious?"

"Of course I am. I wouldn't offer something like that if I wasn't serious," she explained unnecessarily.

"Kelly, I'd love that!" I hugged her tightly. "You are an absolute Godsend! Thank you, you don't know what this means to me."

"I see your face shining like I've never seen before. I have a pretty good idea what it means to you. I also know what you mean to me. There isn't much I wouldn't do for you." Kelly grinned shyly.

"Thank you. Thank you so much," I breathed into her chest.

Her arms held me firmly against her. I knew without a doubt, that Kelly Cavanaugh was going to make it impossible for me *not* to fall in love with her.

"You're welcome, baby."

"Kelly?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I ask you something?" I said quietly.

"Honey, you can ask me anything you want," she reassured.

"Why don't you have a Christmas tree?" I felt her giggle under me.

"Funny you should ask me that. I have an artificial one that I keep in my garage. I haven't put it up yet, because I wasn't sure I wanted to. I never really celebrate Christmas with anyone, so I guess I figured, why bother?" she said matter of factly.

"Well, I'd love to help you decorate it," I said, a little too excited. "I haven't decorated a tree in a long time. My parents always had a huge nine or ten foot tree in the living room. It was always so magical to me. Bing Crosby would be crooning in the background, and we'd dress the tree as a family... God I miss that," I sighed.

"You miss doing the tree?" she asked, sounding a bit confused.

"No, well, yes, but what I meant was, I miss having a family," I said sadly.

"I can be a part of your family, Susan. All you have to do is say the word. I know what missing family is all about. My mom was my world," Kelly began as she started running her fingers through my hair. "Even though it was just my mom, grandma, and myself, it was so special for me. I knew if I needed anything, they were there. If I was sick, my mom would take care of me. Even if I only needed a hug, she was there for me. And if I needed a good kick in the ass, they were *both* on me faster than lightning. Believe me, that happened way too often for my liking." Kelly chuckled along with me.

"I bet you were something else when you were younger," I giggled.

"You have no idea. I had so much energy when I was a child. My mom went to a preacher because she thought I might be possessed or something!" Kelly laughed.

I was shocked. "No way! Are you serious?"

"I'm very serious. She was a very religious person. She was a hard core Catholic woman up until the day she took her last breath," Kelly said sadly. "God, she was a fighter."

I didn't want to push anything with Kelly about her mom. I knew she would tell me the whole story when she was ready. I would take these bits and pieces, though. It made me believe that she was starting to trust me. That in itself was good enough for me.

"Anyway, I'd love to decorate the tree with you this year, Susan. It'd be great fun, I think. It's been a while since I've had anyone other than Mattie to enjoy it with," Kelly said wistfully.

"I'd love to. Thanks for asking me," I smiled.

"You're welcome, darlin'," Kelly reached back and clicked off the lamp which rested on her night table.

The moon was shining through the windows as the wind blew outside.

God, I'm glad I'm in here. The memories of freezing my ass off weren't far enough away yet. Kelly kissed the top of my head and settled down for a comfortable slumber.

"Night, baby," she said into my hair.

"G'night, Kelly." I turned my head and kissed her neck.

I snuggled deeper into my human pillow and happily let sleep take me.

## Chapter Fourteen

*"Are you sure, Gram? I mean, could they be wrong?" Kelly asked hopefully.*

*"No sweetie, they've confirmed it with the tests," Connie said sadly.*

*"Is Mom there? Can I talk to her?" Kelly inquired.*

*"She's sleeping, dear. She's had quite a day. We'll be flying back tomorrow. She's going to need you to be strong for her, Kelly. The doctors told me about this illness, and I'm gonna be honest with you, honey, it's going to get really hard on the both of you," Kelly's grandmother explained. "She's eventually going to lose all of her muscle control. Slowly but surely this disease will take all of her abilities away from her. Everything from her ability to walk, to eat, and she may even lose her ability to talk."*

*Kelly was crying on the other end of the phone, and couldn't seem to stop the tears. "Is she going to be in pain, Gram?"*

*"I don't know, sweetheart. They seem to think that part of the mind goes too, so she may not be aware of it. Sometimes they are completely lucid, though. It's hard to say. Everyone reacts differently. We'll just have to wait it out. We won't know until it happens." Kelly's grandmother sighed sadly. "She's strong, Kelly. The Lord will take care of her."*

*"How long, Gram?" Kelly sobbed into the phone. "How long does she have?"*

*"They say anywhere from two to five years. Again, it really depends on how badly it affects her. She could live longer or shorter. Only time will tell us that." Connie paused. "Listen, I'm going to get back to your mother. Try to pull yourself together for her. She needs you to be strong. For the both of you. I know you can do it, sweetie. I love you," Connie finished.*

*"I love you, too, Gram. Thanks for letting me know. At least we understand why she's been acting so differently. God! This is so not fair!" Kelly screamed.*

*"I know, baby. I know. Shhh... We'll be home tomorrow. Will you be okay? Why don't you call a friend to come over to stay with you tonight." Her grandma suggested.*

*"No, Gram, I don't want anyone around me right now." Kelly took a deep breath, stilling her tears briefly. "All right, Gram. Take care of her and I'll see you guys tomorrow," she sniffled.*

*"All right, dear. Bye."*

*"Bye, Gram." Kelly dropped the phone onto the coffee table.*

*Tears and anguish filled Kelly with every breath she took.*



*"WHY? Why, God dammit! Why her? Why'd you have to do this to her?" Kelly screamed up at the ceiling. "She's a fucking saint! She's been the kindest person to everyone! Everyone loves her. She's never done a cruel thing to anyone or anything in her whole life. Jesus..." Kelly collapsed on the couch and wept until she passed out.*

*\*~\*~\**

*Kelly peeked her head inside her mother's room. Normally at this hour, her mother would be resting. "Mom? Are you awake?" She looked down at her sickly mother and felt her heart constrict painfully. There she was, lying in the hospital bed the hospice had given them to use until her passing. Her frail form was curled on her side, with a catheter tube running down the length of the bed and into her body. Her breathing was shallow, but she was still alive with Kelly and her grandmother.*

*Dorothy's eyes slowly opened and looked a bit glazed over. They slowly moved around until they rested on her daughter, who was silently watching her. She made a slight noise to let Kelly know she knew she was there.*

*"Hi, ma," Kelly started as she ran her fingers through her mother's fine hair. "How was your nap?"*

*Her mother raised her eyebrows, trying to communicate with her only daughter.*

*"I hope I didn't disturb you too badly." Kelly took a deep breath. "Mom, I really wanted to talk to you." The tears had begun to roll down Kelly's cheeks. She reached down to her mother's bed and held one of her hands. She felt a slight pressure in her grasp, making her smile sadly. "Oh Mom, this is the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I know I've only been around for seventeen years, but I think I've seen more in the last two years than I ever want to again. I know that soon we're gonna be apart, and I think that maybe this is the best time for me to tell you all that I wanted to. Somewhere inside of you, I know that you can hear me, and you can understand what I'm saying. I really hate that guy that comes in here and pretends like you don't know what's going on. I know you do!" Kelly paused to catch her breath.*

*"I just wanted to let you know, that I think you're the most wonderful woman that God put on this earth. You've been the best mom and the best friend anyone could ask for. You've gone out of your way to keep food in my mouth, clothes on my back, and you kept me in better schools than most kids go to. You let me go the popular school, just because I asked to go there. I could've easily gone to Winston High down the road, but no, I wanted to go to South with all my friends. You never even said a word when you had to work longer hours to make sure I was able to go there. You drove me every single day, too. I don't know of anyone else that didn't have to take the bus to school." Kelly wiped her nose and eyes with her drenched Kleenex. She could feel her mother's hand tighten ever so slightly in her grasp. Kelly knew her mother could hear every*

*word she spoke.*

*"You did so much for me, Mom, in the short time that we've been together. I'm truly blessed that I had you in my life. Even though my father, whose worthless ass I could kick right now, is nowhere to be found, he gave life to me and therefore brought me to you. That's the only thing I could ever thank him for. Lord knows he doesn't deserve shit from anyone." Kelly felt her mom tighten her hold a bit more. "Sorry, I know you hate when I curse." Her grip loosened up. "I don't want to waste my time talking about him anyway. This is all about you, Mom. The words, I love you, don't mean nearly enough to me right now. I wish you could see inside of me to know how much you mean to me, Mom. You're my life; you've always been there for me. Even when I told you that I was gay when I was fifteen. I thought for sure you'd disown me or beat the tar out of me until I changed my mind, but you didn't. You opened your arms to me and told me you loved me, no matter what. I will always remember that day, Mom. Always."*

*Kelly began to cry in earnest and had to try to calm herself to finish what she needed to say. "I hate with all that I am to see you like this. You were such an independent woman. You've never asked for anything in your whole life. Now you can't. What kind of divine love is that? Why did God do this to you? You've gone to church almost daily since I was born. Is this the gratitude He shows you? I don't nor will I ever understand the justice in all of this. You serve Him, so He knocks you down with a fatal illness that has no cure? What the hell is that? I know you've served God your whole life, and I know you told me that you thought He chose you because He knew you were strong enough to handle it. Well, I don't buy it! You're too good of a person for this to happen to. I just don't understand that kind of love." Kelly stopped to sob against her mother's side. "I'm so sorry this happened to you, Mom. I'm so sorry..."*

*Her mother made a vocal sound and Kelly got closer to her mouth so she could listen better. "What, ma? I didn't hear you."*

*"Laaa you," her mother's voice stretched.*

*"I love you too, Mom," Kelly sobbed.*

*She walked around to the other side of her mother's bed, climbed into bed with her mom, and held her spooned tightly against her. They lay there together silently crying until they both fell into a restless sleep.*

*\*~\*~\**

*Kelly watched as they took the oxygen away from her mother's nose. She didn't want any respiratory help once her lungs began to fail. Her mother had slipped into a coma and was breathing in quick, short gasps. The nurse was watching as Kelly and her grandmother waited for the inevitable. Dorothy's breaths evened out, until finally, she took one last breath then was*

*taken silently into the heavens. The color faded from her cheeks, as did the warmth from her skin. Kelly hung on to her mother during the whole process. She sobbed endlessly until she heard the word Coroner. She looked up into the dark, loving eyes of her grandmother and wordlessly asked for a few minutes alone with her mom.*

*Connie rose and took the nurse into the kitchen to give her granddaughter the privacy that she too would ask for shortly.*

*Kelly clung to her mother's nightgown and rested her head on her mother's chest. She heard nothing beating or moving inside, finalizing everything in her own mind. She cried and murmured words of love and longing, until she finally said good-bye.*

*One of the nurses from the hospice was called and even though it was the middle of the night, came right over before the Coroner arrived. Pat was Dorothy's favorite nurse and vice versa. She wailed into Dorothy's lifeless body. Seeing Pat hunched over her mother sent a wave of new tears down Kelly's face.*

*The doorbell rang and she knew it was the coroner's office to pick up her mother's body. She didn't want to answer the door, believing if she didn't let them in, her mother wouldn't leave. Realistically, she knew better, and opened the door to find two pairs of warm comforting eyes.*

*"Miss Cavanaugh?" Kelly nodded and let the two gentlemen into their home. "We're so sorry for your loss. Is she in there?" Kelly nodded dumbly and watched as her grandmother readied her daughter for removal.*

*Kelly heard the words "expire" and "patient" in the same sentence. She'd never heard someone's death referred to as them expiring. It was a world of language she never wanted to learn.*

*They wheeled her mother's body out of her room on a gurney. It wouldn't have been so bad, but her mother's remains had been put in a body bag. She took one final look at her mother's form being wheeled out of her life and collapsed into the waiting arms of her grandmother.*

*"No! I can't believe she's gone, Gram. No! Mommy! No!" she continued sobbing.*

*\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\**

I felt movement under me, and I started to wonder where I was. I heard Kelly moaning in her sleep and it started to get louder.

"No..." I heard Kelly whisper. "No..." she repeated.

"Kelly?" I hoped she wasn't one of those people that couldn't be woken from a nightmare.

"Kelly, honey, it's okay. I'm here with you. Everything's fine." I tried to soothe her back into consciousness. I held her close and caressed every body part I could reach.

Kelly jerked awake and clutched at me desperately. She was crying.

"Shhh, baby. I've got you," I said as I rolled to my back, taking her with me. Kelly's head rested on my chest and I could feel her tears soaking through the material of my shirt. I ran my fingers through her hair and lightly scratched her scalp. "It's okay now, sweetheart. No one can hurt you now," I soothed into her hair.

I heard her sobbing quietly, unsure if she was really awake or not. "Kelly? You want to talk about it?" I asked.

She just shook her head like a small child. My heart broke for her at that moment. It was obvious by her reaction to the dream that it must have been about her mother. I held her closer and rocked her with all the will and strength that I had. I may not like my mother, but at least she hasn't died. Not that I know of, anyway. Kelly was only seventeen, I think she said, when her mother died. It must have been cancer or something. I hated not knowing. At least I could try to help if I knew what I was talking about. This patience thing was truly virtuous.

I felt her sobs lessen with every deep breath she took. She raised her head and softly kissed my cheek.

"I'll be right back. I just need to use the bathroom for a second," Kelly said quietly.

"Are you going to be all right, honey?" My heart was breaking at the sound of her saddened voice.

"Yeah... I just um... I haven't had a dream like that in a long time." She sighed and got up off the bed and walked into the bathroom.

I heard the faucet turn on and the splashing of water. I could only assume she was rinsing off her face. I would just have to wait until she was ready to talk about it.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

That was a bad one. I hadn't had one of those dreams in a long time.

I rinsed my face off with cold water, trying to shut out the images of my mother on her deathbed. The straining of her last breath would always be a visual I could've lived without. Although, being with her during her last moments on this earth made it as good as it was going to be. I'm glad she didn't die all alone. She didn't deserve to go that way. When it came to her dying, it was

the only thing I was grateful for.

Poor Susan. I don't think she was expecting our first night together to be quite like this. Hell, I had no intention of this happening. The peace that she gave me is just so reminiscent of my mom. It simply brought it into my subconscious, I guess.

I looked at my reflection and saw red puffy eyes staring back at me.

*She'll help you through this. You know she will. Let her in, Kel.*

***I will, but not tonight. I just don't have it in me tonight.***

I used the toilet and washed my hands and face one more time. I brushed my teeth again for good measure and went back towards my bedroom.

The light on my nightstand had been turned on, and Susan and Mattie were nowhere to be found. My heart was racing.

"Susan?" I called out to her.

"I'll be right up!" I heard her shout from downstairs.

I heard the whistle of the teakettle and it brought a smile to my face. She is really something. I don't know what I did to deserve her, but I'm thankful.

Thanks, Momma.

I heard the padding of several feet heading my way. I sat on my bed and was greeted by Mattie and Susan, who was carrying a tray that had our tea from earlier in the evening.

"Hey." she smiled at me.

"Hey." I smiled back.

"I thought you might want something warm to drink to try to help you fall back to sleep. I saw that there was no caffeine in this, so I made the tea you brought out earlier. You think you could handle some?"

Susan's beautiful face lit up when I nodded. She handed me a cup of tea with the tea bag's string resting over the brim and onto the saucer. I bobbed the bag up and down until I got the water to my desired color and flavor, pulled the bag from the cup, and rested it on the saucer. Taking my first small sip, I felt the warmth of the liquid flow through my body, giving me solace.

"Thank you, Susan. This is exactly what I needed," I said graciously.

"I'm glad. I know when I've had a bad dream or I can't sleep that a nice cup of tea usually does

the trick. I'm glad that's the case with you, too." Susan smiled into her cup.

"I'm so glad you're here," I said quietly. Reaching for her hand, I led her to the bed to sit next to me. "Thank you for being here."

She smiled softly at me. "There's no place I'd rather be right now."

We drank our tea, then sank into the warmth of the linens on my bed. I held Susan in my arms and breathed in her scent. My voice was heavy with emotion. "Good night, baby."

She squeezed my mid section and kissed my clothed breast. "Sweet dreams."

I truly hoped my dreams were over for the night.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

Christmas Eve arrived before I knew what hit me. This time of year is always so damn busy, I never have time to do anything except work. All I did was check on the stock levels in each store, make sure each schedule had been made properly, and call my managers to make sure they didn't have any needs that hadn't been met yet. Only two more weeks of this and it's over, and I can get back to my regular life.

With Susan.

Susan.

What a difference a name makes. I just hear that name and my face lights up, regardless if it's indeed *my* Susan that's being thought about.

*Your Susan?*

***Oh, hush!***

*You've come a long way, Kel.*

***Don't jinx it!***

*I have NO intention of doing that. She's the best thing to happen to you.*

Don't I know it.

Our time together had been wonderful. The last couple of weeks had been kind of quiet, though. I knew the reason and I hoped she wasn't feeling left out. It's impossible to get in touch with her since she has no phone. That just gives me a reason to see her every day. I didn't see her this

morning, though; I was running late. Perhaps she was, as well.

I am anxious to spend tonight with her. We are going to decorate the Christmas tree that had been lying dormant in my garage forever and a day. I can't wait to watch her face light up when we turn it on for the first time. That was always my favorite part of tree trimming. You got to see the finished product: tinsel glistening against the ornaments that reflected the light from the thousands of strings of lights you wrapped around the branches.

This was definitely going to be a night to remember.

Not like the weekends haven't been wonderful. They truly have been some of the best that I can remember. Even though my nightmares continued, Susan was so incredible. She has such a huge heart; I can't imagine hurting her, ever.

*You hope you don't hurt her.*

***You're right... I hope I never do.***

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

God, it's freezing out here today. I cannot wait until I can stop with bucket detail. It's not that I mind; I'm just frozen like a Popsicle. Only a few more weeks, then it's paperwork month. Oh joy. It's better than being out here, though.

Tonight is going to be so much fun. I haven't decorated a tree in years. I hope I don't break any of her family's ornaments. I'd never forgive myself. I have dinner duty tonight. I'm going to make her spaghetti. It's really the only thing that I can cook well. I know how to make anything from a box, but I wanted to cook Kelly a real dinner to celebrate our first Christmas together.

God, she's incredible. She makes me feel so special and so beautiful. I'm the luckiest woman on the planet. I'm completely smitten with her, I forget my name while looking into her eyes. It's an abyss I'd fall into without hesitation... every time.

*Clink*

"Thanks, ma'am. Have a happy holiday!" I shivered.

I'm so sad her nightmares have hit her so hard. I feel so bad for her. I know she sleeps badly the rest of the night. I can feel her under me, trying not to wake me with her restlessness. I'm quite a light sleeper, so that doesn't work at all.

For either of us.

When morning comes, I'm never sure what to expect. Some people will hide in their shells when they think you've seen too much. Not Kelly. She is sweet and kind, even though I know she was tired as all hell. I know I was.

Saturdays have been spent just hanging out and watching movies. I could get used to watching movies like that. Her family room is a theater all its own! I could really get used to that way of living again.

*Don't get too comfy.*

***Oh, now you don't like Kelly?***

*No, I'm just playing devil's advocate. I know she won't hurt you, at least I hope she won't. Just make sure you don't take her for granted. There aren't many people out there that would've approached you like she did.*

***I know that! Jesus! Go away! Kelly isn't like everyone else!***

*Hey, I'm just trying to protect you.*

***No, you're my fears trying to rebuild themselves again. Well, just stay out, because I haven't got any room in here for you anymore!***

Thank God my break's coming soon. I need to put on a second pair of long johns.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

I'm sitting in my office on Christmas Eve, trying to put out every damn fire that my managers have thrown at me. I'm gonna kill them, I swear to God. Not *everything* is an emergency! I should be out on the sales floor today with our customers-I love that part of the job, not stuck in here on my phone!

I'm almost done. One more call and I'll go out there.

*Until the next page comes.*

***Arghh!***

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*



"Can I help the next guest in line, please?" Therese said with a smile.

A short, dark haired, unshaven man, dressed in black, walked up to the sales counter holding a fur coat which he slammed down on the counter.

"I WANT A NEW COAT! THIS ONE HAS A RIP IN IT, AND I SPECIAL ORDERED IT FOR MY WIFE FOR CHRISTMAS! I DON'T HAVE ANOTHER THREE WEEKS, EITHER, SO DON'T EVEN START SUGGESTING THAT!" he shouted loudly at the saleswoman.

She tried to placate him. "Sir, please calm down, and I'll help you as best as I can."

"Don't tell me to calm down! I waited three weeks for this coat and it's fucking ripped! I want a new one and I want it NOW!" he exploded.

"Could I see your receipt, please?" Therese asked politely.

"HERE!" The man threw the receipt at the nonplussed woman.

"Sir, let me look this up on the computer and see if we have another one in stock. I'll just be a moment," she smiled.

"You'd better have one. This is bullshit!" he cursed again.

"Sir, I'll ask you once again to please lower your voice. There are children nearby that don't need to hear that," she said calmly as she typed information into her computer.

"Whatever!" he said indifferently.

"Well, I'm sorry to tell you that we are out of stock on that item. I can look..." She stopped when the man in front of her interrupted her.

"I TOLD YOU I DIDN'T WANT TO HEAR IT! I WANT A NEW COAT FOR MY WIFE, AND I WANT IT NOW!" he bellowed again.

"Sir, I can't give you what I don't have. I'm very sorry. I will call around to other stores..." Her eyes went wide when she saw the knife in his hand.

"I'm not gonna tell you again. I want that coat for my wife and you're gonna get me one or I'm gonna hurt you," he snarled.

Kelly heard the shouting from her office and came out to see what the problem was. She saw the man holding a knife up to her employee and immediately ran to her aid. She raced behind the counter and tripped the silent alarm for Security to come.

"Hi there, I'm Kelly. How can I help you today?" Kelly smiled innocently.

"Look! I bought this coat for my wife... I had to fucking order it and it's ripped! I can't give her that! I want a new one, but Miss High and Mighty back there won't get me one, so I'm gonna take it out of her ass!"

"Now hold on a minute. You're not going to hurt anyone. I will find you what you want. Just give me a chance to call some other stores...." She stopped when she saw the man grab the woman behind him and place the knife at her throat.

"I'm not waiting anymore. I want something done, and so help me, I'm gonna get what I want!" he screamed into his victim's ear.

The small woman in his grasp started crying desperately for help.

"Shut up, bitch! Not one more word, or I swear I'll gut ya like a trout," the deranged man hissed.

The frightened woman looked up at Kelly, who was staring into her eyes trying to calm her. Kelly saw the security guards approaching, and she quickly moved in front of the armed man, hoping to keep him distracted long enough for the guards to act.

"What are you, fucking stupid? I should just kill *your* ass while I'm at it," he said, taking a swipe at Kelly.

The security guards watched Kelly and made their move as the armed man blindly lunged for her. Kelly sidestepped the man's attack and watched as the security guards jumped on him, disarmed him, and handcuffed his hands behind his back.

Kelly immediately went to the woman hostage to make sure she was unharmed. "There's, call the police!" Kelly shouted.

"We already did. They should be here in a couple minutes," the burly security officer explained.

"Good." Kelly sighed. "Ma'am, are you sure you're okay?" Kelly wanted to make sure she was fine. "Is everyone okay?"

"I'm fine, young lady. We all are, thanks to you. That was either the bravest or the stupidest thing I've ever seen anyone do. He could've hurt you," she said in an awed voice. She continued to watch the security guards hold down the belligerent customer. He was straining for release to no avail.

"Nah, he was too upset to be accurate," Kelly smirked at the woman. "I'm glad you're all right, though. I'd never have forgiven myself if something had happened to any of you. Once you walk in through those doors, you're all my responsibility," she explained.

"You must be the manager here, then?" the woman inquired.

"Actually, I'm the regional manager for this area. This just happens to be the base store where my office is located. I'm glad I was here to help," the blue-eyed woman said, trying to downplay her heroics.

"You're a hero, is what you are, Miss... Kelly did you say your name was?"

"Yes, ma'am, Kelly Cavanaugh," Kelly said. "I feel awful that this happened. Please let me know if there's anything I can do for you."

"Don't worry about it. Unlike a few people I could name, I'm not going to sue you or anything because of this. You've already done quite enough. You saved my life. No one's ever done that for me before. Thank you, Kelly Cavanaugh."

Kelly blushed at this woman's outpouring, "You're very welcome," she smiled.

Kelly saw the police enter the building and rolled her eyes when she saw a camera crew for Channel Four News right behind them.

*Oh, Christ, here we go. Merry Fucking Christmas!* Kelly thought to herself.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

Susan watched as the police cars screeched around Lawrence Avenue towards Saks. The sirens on each car were blaring loudly. She saw the Channel Four News truck right behind them. All of the vehicles raced up to the Saks building and stopped. Several people got out and ran inside.

*Jesus! What's going on in there?* Susan thought to herself as she felt her throat constrict.

"Oh, my God! Kelly's in there!" she shouted, and grabbed her bucket and ran for her office.

Susan dropped the bucket off with the woman at the office and said she had to leave. The woman at the desk looked bewildered at the whirlwind that was Susan. She assigned another person to the post and waited for the explanation that she knew would come from the loyal employee.

"I've got to get to her," Susan panted as she ran towards Saks. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost her, too."

Susan ran until she got to the front door. The police were bringing out a scary looking man, so she had to wait for them before she could enter. She looked through the windows, frantically searching for any sign of Kelly inside. Her eyes were filled with tears and her heart was thumping rapidly in her chest. She turned to one of the officers exiting the site.

"Officer, I have to get in there. My partner works in there! I have to know if she's all right," she tried to say calmly.

"No one's been hurt as far as I know, Ma'am," the young officer said.

"Can I please go inside? I really have to find her. Please?" Susan pleaded.

"Let me make sure you can go in." The officer turned and spoke with what Susan suspected was his superior and he returned to her shortly. "He says it's safe for you to go inside." he smiled.

"Thank you!" Susan exclaimed.

She ran inside the doors of Saks, beyond anxious to find Kelly. She headed directly towards the group of people with the camera crew.

"Kelly!" she cried.

She looked around and finally saw what she was looking for: a tall, auburn haired beauty that had climbed into her heart faster than the speed of light.

"Oh, Kelly!" she cried, and ran towards her.

Kelly saw the teary eyed woman running at her as she was answering questions for the Channel Four News. She smiled and turned towards her to absorb the impact of Susan's body against hers, then held the woman against her.

"Oh, Kelly, I was so worried!" Susan cried.

"Hey," she soothed. "I'm fine, sweetheart, I promise."

Susan held very tightly to Kelly until she was certain she was fine. "What happened? Why are the police in here? I saw them dragging out some scary looking dude. Did he do something?"

"Yeah, He was a bit unhappy with a gift he'd gotten for his wife, and he snapped. It happens this time of year. Not usually so extreme, but still..." Kelly smiled.

"What did he do?" the brown-eyed woman asked.

"He pulled a knife on one of my customers." She paused, unsure if she should tell the whole story. "Then he um... tried to stab me," Kelly said quietly, hoping Susan wouldn't freak out. The camera was still facing in their direction.

"What?" Susan cried. "Did you get hurt?" she asked again, this time trying to take a full inventory of all of Kelly's parts.

"Susan, I'm fine. Please, believe me. Besides, I think we've given them quite enough news

already." She blushed at Susan who finally realized this was being captured for the world to see.

"Oh, screw them," she said as she leaned up and kissed Kelly solidly on the mouth. "I'm just so glad you're all right."

Kelly laughed at Susan's antics. "Me too, darlin'. Me too." She brushed her fingers down Susan's cheek. "Let's get out of here. I've had enough of this for one Christmas Eve. What do you say? Can we start celebrating early?"

Susan couldn't deny that hope filled face any more than she could live without breathing. "Okay, let me just finish up at the office and let them know that I'm leaving. I have an emergency to take care of," she winked. "Besides, we'll be there most of the day tomorrow. They'll be okay without me for a few hours."

"Great. Let me just grab my briefcase from my office and I'll be ready," Kelly said.

Susan smiled. "Okay, come to the office and I'll be there."

"All right, sweetie. I'll see you soon," she promised.

"Kelly... I... Bye," Susan stuttered as she waved. *I love you*, she thought to herself not being able to say the words.

"Bye," Kelly answered as she watched her friend walk towards the exit.

"Miss Cavanaugh, who was that?" the journalist asked.

With a look of awe on her face, she stared at the retreating figure. "Only the most wonderful person who's ever walked into my life. Are we finished?" Kelly asked, now filled with anxiety to get out of there.

The reporter smiled. "Yes, thank you, Miss Cavanaugh. Merry Christmas to you."

"Yeah, you too," Kelly said absently and headed towards her office.

"Wow, did you see that?" the cameraman asked the journalist.

"Oh, yeah, a Christmas story for the New Millennium," she smiled. "Tell me you got all of that," she said sternly.

"All of it," he said proudly.

"Good man."

## Chapter Seventeen

God, I'm so glad to be out of there. That was as close to being killed as I'd like to come. I sure hope Susan's all right. She had such a distressed look on her face when I first saw her. Aw, hell, I'd be just as upset if our roles were reversed.

*All right, Kelly, tonight is going to be fun. Let's not think bad thoughts any more than we have to. I'm sure Susan's gonna want the whole story, but after that, it's all about celebrating your first Christmas together.*

***Thank you. Yes, it's going to be great. I'll hold onto that thought.***

Wow, our first Christmas together.

I couldn't believe I was sharing a holiday with someone this year. It'd been so lonely without my mom. My grandma came the first few years after my mom passed away, but I think it's just too hard for her. I buried my mother; she buried her daughter. I'm a reminder of that, I think. Hell, I don't think I could bury my own child.

I pray I never do.

It's always so hard for me this time of year, though. In four days it will be the anniversary of my mom's death. At least I got one more Christmas from her before she left. It was always such a special time for us.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

*Sleigh bells ring  
Are you listenin'?  
In the lane  
Snow is glistenin'.  
A beautiful sight  
We're happy tonight  
Walking in a winter wonderland  
"Isn't this great, Momma?" Kelly asked as she placed the tinsel on their artificial Christmas tree.*

*Her mom glanced quietly at her daughter from her wheelchair. Kelly could see a little of the woman she knew as her mother staring back at her. Her grandma sat on the couch, coaching Kelly on where to put the rest of the tinsel.*

*"Honey, there's a blank spot towards the back. Can you get it?" She winked.*

*"Sure, Gram. I got it." She walked over to the bare part of the tree and placed some tinsel, as well as rearranging the ornaments to fill the area better.*

*"Perfect," her grandmother beamed.*

*Her mother peeped, letting Kelly know that she agreed. Pat, her mother's nurse, rubbed Dorothy's shoulders with affection.*

*"It's a beautiful tree, Dot," Pat smiled.*

*"I have to agree. Must be the trimmer," Kelly said confidently.*

*Her mother peeped again at the statement.*

*Kelly smiled lovingly at her mother. "So, Mom? Do you want to put up the last of the tinsel?" the teenager asked.*

*Her mom reached for Kelly's hand and she placed the tinsel over her mother's arm. Pat wheeled her mother closer to the tree and watched as Dorothy tried desperately to loop the tinsel onto the tree branch. Kelly watched painfully as her mother continued to try to get her hand to cooperate. Dorothy had lost her abilities in her right hand, but still had some movement in her left.*

*With a victorious gleam in her eye, her mother placed the last piece of tinsel on their tree.*

*"Oh, Momma, that's beautiful! This is the best tree we've had yet!" Kelly's face was as bright as Christmas lights.*

*Kelly saw the first smile from her mother in days. Her heart flooded, as did her eyes. She looked away so her mother wouldn't see the sadness that prevailed.*

*They all knew Dorothy didn't have much time left. She could barely keep anything in her stomach. Her body would purge anything it was fed. Her breathing had become increasingly shallow, and she needed more sleep now than she ever had.*

*Kelly moved to change the record. She found one of her mother's favorite Christmas songs.*

*It's the most wonderful time of the year  
There'll be much mistletoeing  
And hearts will be glowing  
When loved ones are near*

*It's the most wonderful time of the year  
Andy Williams sang in the background as Kelly composed herself. She took deep breaths and told herself that she needed to show her mom that she'd be all right. She thought her mother stayed around because she was worried about her. As much as Kelly didn't want her mom to leave her, she wanted her to be at peace.*

*Kelly moved to sit next to her grandma on the couch. Pat wheeled her mom close to them as they all looked at the tree.*

*"Ready?" Pat smiled.*

*"Do it!" Kelly shouted.*

### ***Click***

*The tree lit up brilliantly when Pat flicked the switch. All four of them just stared at it, lost in their own thoughts. Smiles were wide, even on Dorothy. Kelly leaned over to her mom's wheelchair and reached for her hand. Dorothy grasped Kelly's hand with as much strength as she could muster. Connie reached over the chair and placed her arm around her daughter's shoulders.*

*"Picture time!" Pat shouted as she walked to the kitchen table to grab the camera.*

*The three women looked up at Pat and put on their best smiles. As the flash went off Kelly sobered, knowing this was the last Christmas she would have with her mother. She leaned over and placed a kiss on her cheek. "I love you, lady," she rasped as she felt her hand being squeezed slightly.*

*\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\**

Tracing the picture of the three of us with my fingers, I waited for Susan to change clothes. I kissed the photo and returned it to its place on the mantle of my fireplace.

"Penny for your thoughts," Susan chimed, startling me for a moment.

"They're not worth that much sometimes," I said blankly.

"Honey, what's wrong? Are you still reeling from today?" Susan asked tenderly.

"No, just feeling a bit sad, I guess. I promised myself I wasn't going to feel that way this year, but it always hurts so damn much," I said, trying to swallow the emotions I could feel building. I reached out and handed Susan the picture.

"Is this your mom?" she asked in a childlike voice.

"Yes, it was the last picture we'd taken together. Christmas Eve, eleven years ago. She died four days later," I said gravely.

"Can I ask you what she died from?" Susan asked softly.

"ALS," I answered stiffly.



I watched her brows furrow and I figured I should just get it out in the open. She deserved to know the truth. She'd earned that trust and then some.

"Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis or Lou Gehrig's Disease. It's a gradual, fatal, neuromuscular disease that attacks nerve cells in the brain and around the spinal cord. Basically, the motor neurons die and can't send signals to the muscles. The brain just stops working in that way. The muscles get no nourishment, so they turn to mush. All voluntary muscle movements are affected and the person eventually becomes completely paralyzed. The lungs give out, and that's what actually kills them. They suffocate, and then die. It's just brutal," I said hoarsely.

"Thanks for showing me the picture. She was very beautiful, just like her daughter." She handed the picture back to me.

"Thanks," I said, feeling the tears brim in my eyes.

"I think I have a good idea about why you don't like to celebrate Christmas. I'm so sorry, Kelly," she said as she looked so compassionately into my eyes.

That was all it took, I felt the floodgates open and suddenly Susan's arms opened wide.

"C'mere," Susan whispered.

I fell into her arms and began to cry. I hadn't felt this out of control in years. It'd been over a decade since her death and I still had a hard time. I guess I always would. After several moments I stood straighter and wiped my eyes. "I'm sorry. This is supposed to be a fun night for us. Let's start that fun, shall we?" I asked, sniffing.

"Yes, let's. I'll get dinner started, and you go turn on the tube or something until it's ready," she directed.

"Are you sure I can't help?"

"You can help by eating everything on your plate. How's that?" She smiled such a beautiful smile, and I knew I couldn't deny her.

"I'll be in here until you call then," I acquiesced.

"Good girl." She winked and patted my behind as I turned towards the couch. She smiled at me and walked towards my kitchen, where she stayed to fix dinner.

## **Chapter Eighteen**

God, how awful for her. I'd only heard bits and pieces about that illness. How does a seventeen year old girl watch her mother die like that? How does anyone watch someone they love die at

all?

Jesus.

I turned my thoughts to my spaghetti. I needed to make the best damn pasta I'd ever made. I wanted this night to be special, now more than ever. I hoped once we started trimming the tree, we'd both fall into a fun rhythm and begin to make new and happier memories. I'd do everything in my power to make this a special time for her again.

For both of us.

I'd found some eggnog at the grocery. God, I haven't had that in ages. I hope she likes it, too. I could get used to working in this kitchen. She has every amenity I've ever seen! I bet she's used every appliance in here, too. The way she's cooked for me, I'd bet my last dime on it.

"Ten more minutes!" I shouted into the family room.

"Thanks!" I heard her call back to me. I smiled in response and stirred my sauce a little more.

I took a spoonful into my mouth for a taste and hummed in pleasure. It'd been a while since I'd cooked this for anyone. I think Carol was my last taker. She was such an amazing woman. I feel her presence with me every once and again. I know she'll always be a part of me.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

*"Hey, you still up?" Susan asked from the sleeper sofa.*

*"Not anymore. What's the matter, darlin', can't sleep?" Carol asked from her bedroom.*

*"No. I could never sleep the night before Christmas. I guess I'm wondering what my parents are doing," Susan admitted softly, staring at the small tree in their living room.*

*"Get your butt in here. This old bird can't hear you all the way in there. If you wanna talk, then assume your position," the older woman chuckled.*

*Susan was already three steps into Carol's room before she finished. "You sure you're not tired?" Susan said as she snuggled into Carol's bedding.*

*Carol turned to face her bedmate. "What's on your mind, kiddo?"*

*Susan was on her back with her hands behind her head, looking at the ceiling. "Do you think they still think about me?" she asked shyly.*

*"I can't answer for them, darlin', but I know that if you were my kid, I'd be sick over not knowing where you were," Carol said honestly.*

*"If I was your kid, you'd never have tossed my ass out in the first place," the bitter woman spat angrily.*

*"You're right, my dear. You're absolutely right on that," Carol said as she fingered Susan's pillow-smashed hair. "They had their reasons, though."*

*"Their reasons were bullshit, Carol, and you know it! How could they throw away their own child because they didn't agree with her sexual orientation? That is just ludicrous! I would never do that to my child. It's not like I invited them into my bed, for God's sake!" Susan cried. "It was a mistake the way they found Cindy and me. I never meant for them to see me that way. I never meant to hurt them."*

*"Shh, honey. No one can explain that except for your parents. They must've grown up believing that. Some people just can't deal with change," she explained softly.*

*Susan began to cry in earnest. "Why didn't they love me enough to keep me?"*

*"I don't know, honey. I just know that I've been blessed to have you in my life. You're such a strong woman, Susan. You've come so far in such a short amount of time," Carol soothed. "When I met you, you were so full of piss and vinegar! I couldn't get anything nice to come out of your mouth for weeks." The woman chuckled in memory.*

*"You had such a tough skin when we first met, I thought I'd never get in. I'm so glad I kept at you, darlin'." She turned to lie on her back. Susan soon followed her movements until the larger woman was cradling her.*

*"So am I. I was so angry all the time. I'd forgotten how to feel anything else. You came along and changed all of that. Thank you for letting me feel loved again." She snuggled deeper into the woman. "I wish you were my mom, sometimes."*

*"I'd be the luckiest woman on this planet if I had a daughter half as wonderful as you, darlin'," she sighed, feeling the tears come to her own eyes. "Thank you for letting me in."*

*Susan smiled. "Thanks for knocking."*

*"Merry Christmas, Susan," Carol softly whispered into Susan's hair.*

*"Merry Christmas, Carol," she said, and giggled to herself at the way that sounded.*

*"Ha, ha, very funny. Now go to sleep," Carol mumbled.*

*"Yes, ma'am." Susan smiled. "Good night."*

"Good night, darlin'."

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

I wiped my eyes at the memories flooding through my brain, just in time to hear the bell on the stove ring. God, she was special. If she hadn't found me, I shudder to think where I'd be right now. Certainly not in here. And certainly not with the beautiful woman that's waiting for me in the next room.

I'm feeling pretty darn lucky right now.

Thanks, Carol.

"Hey, Susan! Come quick! We're on TV!" I heard Kelly shout.

I raced into the living room and saw the five o'clock news.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

*"Kelly Cavanaugh, Regional Manager for Saks Fifth Avenue, an up-scale clothing chain, spread a little bit of her own Christmas cheer today when she saved a woman's life right here in her own store." The interviewer turned to face Kelly.*

*"Miss Cavanaugh, can you tell us what happened today?"*

*"Well, I was in my office when one of our customers came in and was unhappy with a purchase. He kind of got out of hand with a sales clerk and another customer."*

*"Can you describe what happened?"*

*"After he had shouted his unhappiness with the product, he pulled a knife from his pocket and pointed it at one of my employees," Kelly began.*

*"Then what?" The interviewer shoved the microphone back into Kelly's face.*

*"At that point I'd come out of my office to find out what the shouting was all about, and saw him pointing his knife. I tried to intercede and help with the transaction, but he got impatient and*

*grabbed the woman in line behind him and put the knife to her throat. I'd called for Security and when I saw them arriving, I made a move to distract him; which is when he tried to take a stab at me. The guards jumped him, and the rest is history," she smiled shyly.*

*"Oh, don't let her fool you! She's a hero!" a woman in the background cheered as the camera focused in on her. "She saved my life as well as everyone else's here today. Kelly Cavanaugh is a hero."*

*The camera panned back to show Kelly's flushed face and then focused on her turning towards Susan who was running towards her and crying out her name.*

*Susan ran into her full tilt as the camera continued to roll. "Oh, Kelly, I was so worried!" Susan cried.*

*"Hey," she soothed. "I'm fine, sweetheart, I promise."*

*The camera cut to Susan's kiss on Kelly's lips, then Susan's voice was heard. "I'm just so glad you're all right."*

*Kelly laughed. "Me too, darlin'. Me too." The camera and the viewing audience watched as she brushed her fingers down Susan's cheek. "Let's get out of here. I've had enough of this for one Christmas Eve. What do you say? Can we start celebrating early?"*

*Cut to:*

*"Okay, come to the office and I'll be there."*

*"Alright, sweetie, I'll see you soon."*

*"Kelly... I...Bye," Susan stuttered as she waved.*

*"Bye," Kelly answered as she watched her walk towards the exit.*

*"Miss Cavanaugh, who was that?" the journalist asked.*

*With a look of awe on her face, she stared at the retreating figure. "Only the most wonderful person who's ever walked into my life." A beat. "Are we finished?"*

*"Yes, thank you, Miss Cavanaugh. Merry Christmas to you."*

*"Yeah, you too," Kelly said as she walked away.*

*"A Christmas story for the New Millennium. I'm Tina Simkins reporting. Back to you, James."*

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

Kelly turned down the news as we looked in awe at each other.

"I can't believe they showed me kissing you on national television!" I exclaimed.

"Me neither!" Kelly smiled. "You looked pretty good, I have to say."

I felt my face flush in embarrassment. "Thank you. You're not so bad yourself, Miss Hero."

She modestly changed the subject. "So, how's dinner coming?"

"A couple of minutes and it should be done," I smiled. I had so much energy all of a sudden from the news broadcast. "God, I want to call someone to see if they saw us on TV!" I shouted.

"Well, I'm sure plenty of people saw it. Besides, it had a happy ending. What better story can you tell on Christmas, right?" Kelly beamed.

She looked more beautiful to me at that moment than she ever had. I knew without a doubt that Kelly and I had a future. A very happy and loving future. At this point, I could've forgotten about the newscast. The whole known world could've seen us for all I cared. I just wanted to spend Christmas with the woman that had stolen my heart.

"Let's eat!" I exclaimed.

"I'm right behind you," Kelly smiled.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

*"...I'm Tina Simkins reporting. Back to you, James."*

The TV was muted as a hand covered the mouth that hung agape. Hazel eyes filled with tears as the realization hit like a ton of bricks.

"Oh, my God... Susan..."

[Continued in Part 3](#)

## ~ A Saving Solace ~

by DS Bauden

**Disclaimer:** None really necessary, just the latest story to be extracted from my brain. This was formerly titled "Home" for those of you familiar with my work. There will be scenes of a mature nature in these pages, including two women making love. You know the rules - you don't like it, don't read it. Carry on.

**Thank you:** A big thank you goes out to my beta reader, Day, who has slaved over this tale and made it even better. You rock, darlin.' Thank you so much!

A Saving Solace  
[DS Bauden](#)

### Chapter Nineteen

My mouth began watering just from the aroma as she set my plate down, and the reality exceeded even the expectation. Dinner was fantastic. Susan was an incredible cook. I'd never eaten spaghetti that tasted anything like that before.

God, I could get used to seeing her at my table every day. At my table, on my table, under my table...

*Getting a little ahead of yourself, aren't you, Kel?*

***I don't think so. Why do you ask?***

*You guys haven't even, well, you know, done the world's most favorite horizontal activity.*

***What, fly like Superman?***

*Oh, very cute, Kel. You know what I mean.*

***Yes, I do. That's not the most important thing, though. Although, the way she makes me feel when we kiss, I know there won't be any problems in that department.***

*Maybe not for you.*

***What are you implying? She won't enjoy making love with me?***

*I'm just saying, don't set your expectations so high. Dinner's one thing, but that next step is*

*another.*

***A girl can dream, can't she? Don't rain on my parade. This feels more right than anything else I've known. I'm not going to hurt her, dammit. She's got a heart of gold, and I know she'd hurt herself before she'd hurt me.***

*Okay, if you're sure.*

***I am sure. I've got this under control. Beat it.***

*Yes, mistress...*

***Smart-ass.***

Susan finished up with the dishes, much to my dismay, and finally joined me on the couch.

"Thank you again, sweetheart. Dinner was fantastic. It was the best meal, I've had that I didn't cook myself." I chuckled and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

Susan smiled and turned a light shade of red. "I'll take that as a compliment, I guess."

"You're blushing. You are so beautiful when you do that," I said honestly.

"Thank you," she replied, her features turning ever darker. She smiled shyly. "I told you that I didn't have enough money saved to buy you something, so I figured I could cook you a wonderful meal and just be with you. Merry Christmas, Kelly."

"I couldn't have asked for a better gift. I would put you on the top of my tree if I could. You're my angel, Susan. You really are," I whispered.

"That is the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me," she said as her eyes shone with unshed tears.

"Yeah, well, I've only just begun," I smiled, as our eyes locked in an intense stare.

"Yeah, you and the Carpenters," she joked.

"Are you ready to start the tree?" I said as I elbowed her slightly.

"You bet!" Susan exclaimed as she wiped her eyes.

"Great." I stood. "I brought down all the decorations from the attic. I swear one of the boxes actually groaned when I opened it. It's been a long time since I've pulled them out." I pointed to the many boxes sitting on the floor next to the tree.

"I know, honey. I'm so sorry Christmas has been so hard on you," she soothed.



"Thanks. This year, I think, will be a little easier." I caressed her cheek with my thumb. "Thank you for being here." I pulled Susan into a tender embrace and our bodies melted together. Her head fit so perfectly under my chin. She looked up at me with those big brown eyes, and my heart felt like it would explode. She has filled that part of me that has longed to feel this for so long. I lowered my head and our lips met softly. Her taste was nectar from the gods. I'm sure that goes for other regions of her body as well.

God, she makes me so crazy! I'm so turned on from her kisses I could just swallow her whole.

One kiss turned into several. I could feel her pressing her hips into me. I lowered my arms and caressed her lower back, pulling her gently against me. Our breathing escalated in about two seconds, and I knew that shortly we were going to spiral towards the point of no return.

"Mm..." She moaned into my mouth, sending jolts of electricity throughout my body.

"Oh, baby," I whispered as our lips separated.

She moved her assault to my neck. My hold tightened around her as she continued to press herself against me. Her hands had strayed lower down my back and were now kneading the muscles in my butt.

I started to kiss her neck in kind, and felt myself start to lose control. I knew I couldn't take much more of this. I also knew if we continued with this, there was absolutely *no way* the tree was getting done tonight. If anything was getting trimmed, it was going to be me!

"Susan?" I croaked.

No reply, just murmurs of pleasure.

Not good.

"Susan, honey... we need to stop. I... I can't take much more," I husked out finally.

She pulled back and her face was completely flushed with arousal. Her eyes were focused on mine, and it looked as though I was going to be her next meal. I was excited yet a little nervous with this. A few moments passed as we held each other loosely, and our passion slowly began to simmer down.

Susan's forehead was resting on my breastbone. She was trying to get her breathing under control. "God, Kelly. You make me so crazy!" she said, frustrated.

"I was just thinking the same thing a few moments ago." I smiled and kissed the top of her head.

She took one last deep breath and looked up at me with a beautiful smile. "Let's do this thing! We have unfinished business for later." She winked and walked to the corner of the room to get

to the boxes.

"Oh, God..." I breathed as I followed in her footsteps.

This is going to be the fastest tree trimming the world has ever seen.

## **Chapter Twenty**

I think I'll stretch this decorating out as long as I can. I want to see how excited I can get Kelly. I want to try to take away all the bad memories she has and start fresh with our own.

Kelly's the best damn kisser in the world I just know it. I could kiss her all the time. I will tonight. I really think I'm ready for her. I want to love her so badly that my body is literally shaking right now. Just those few minutes with her have made me a walking hormone.

I looked at the boxes she had pulled down from her attic.

*Holy cow, she has a lot of decorations.*

It would even compete with my parents' collection. This was going to be a beautiful tree.

This was going to be the best Christmas ever.

I could see her watching me and trying to be subtle about it. She's so damn beautiful. I'm the luckiest woman on this planet. I smiled at her to let her know she'd been busted. Her eyes grew wide and she tried to look away. I took her hand in mine and led her to the boxes.

We needed to start this now, before I lost all conscious thought.

"So, where would you like to start?" I asked, looking at all the decorations.

She looked me up and down, and I knew we weren't thinking on the same level at all. "Well, I could think of a few places I'd like to start on, right now."

I was very pleased with her reaction. "The tree, Kel!" I cried with mock outrage.

She laughed, cleared her throat, and then looked at the tree seriously. "Well, you should start with the lights first, then the ornaments, then the tinsel," she smiled. "At least, that's how we've always done it."

"Well, lucky for you, it's the same where I came from, too. Do you have a topper for the tree?"

"Yes, actually. I have a smaller version of you; I have an angel," She dug through a couple of boxes until she found what she was looking for. "It was from my childhood. My mom loved this

thing," she whispered as she touched the angel reverently.

"It's lovely, Kelly. I know your mom would be happy that it's making an appearance this year," I said guardedly. I wasn't sure if I should assume anything about her mother.

"Yeah," she breathed. "I think you're right. I think Mom's gonna be happy that I'm dressing the tree with someone special this year, too."

"Good, I know I am," I said with a grin.

"Me, too." She looked deep in thought, then back at me. "Would you like some music to go with our festivities?"

"Sure! I love the classic carols. Do you have Bing Crosby or Nat King Cole? Those are my favorites," I said, sounding like a child. I was actually excited about trimming the tree, even more than before.

"I think I can accommodate you," she smiled, and flipped through her enormous CD collection and pulled out three. She placed the CDs in the player and closed the drawer. Within seconds, the room filled with wonderful sounds, and memories began to invade my brain.

I always loved Christmas with my folks. I was immediately thrown into a memory of my parents and me trimming our tree together: we were laughing and singing without a care in the world. Who knew our lives would change because I didn't want to hide who I was?

*How could they forget me so easily? I'll never understand that.*

"Susan? Can we make a pact right now?" Kelly said seriously.

"Sure," I said with skepticism.

"Tonight is our night. No more sad thoughts or dwelling on things we can't change. Okay? Let's just enjoy each other and create some new magic. I think we both need that desperately."

I knew I had tears in my eyes again, but I didn't care. She must've seen me drift off. Damn. "Deal. I like that idea very much, Kelly," I agreed. "Now, let's get to work."

Bing crooned some of my favorites and Nat followed shortly behind. I watched as Kelly wrapped the lights around the tree, branch by branch, with a practiced hand.

"I think I know what duty you had," I said brightly.

"Yeah. I was the only one that could wrap the lights up on top without falling off the ladder. I've grown quite fond of this, actually. You have to have the lights just right, otherwise the whole tree is off, you know?" she explained, as she continued to wrap string after string of lights around the branches.

I smiled at her as I watched her dim the overhead lights and squint at the illuminated tree. It was an old trick to make sure there were no blank spots on the tree.

"You *are* a master, aren't you?" I teased.

"You hush. Just you wait, you'll see what a beauty this one's going to be," she said with a smile.

"I see a beauty all right. But she's not green and prickly," I shot back.

Kelly smiled such an amazing smile at me that it took my breath away. It never ceases to amaze me how gorgeous she is. I could stare at her all night. Perhaps I will, just to make her nervous. She'll try to figure out what I'm thinking, I'll bet. I hope she knows how much she's come to mean to me.

"Okay, I think we're ready for the ornaments," Kelly announced.

I walked towards the boxes and took out a couple of crystal ornaments. They were just stunning. There was one of the Virgin Mary holding a tiny Jesus. I don't know much that wouldn't be beautiful after being carved out of crystal.

"These are gorgeous, Kelly. Are these new, or have you had them a while?" I asked.

"That particular one is old. I think it belongs to my grandmother. Which reminds me, I called her the other day to see what she was doing tonight."

"Really? How is she?" I asked, very pleased she had contacted her.

"She's doing okay. There's still such a distance between us that I really hate. We used to be closer. I just wish we had that again," Kelly said with a sigh.

"You will, honey. How can she resist you? I know I can't," I stated honestly.

I moved to the tree and hung the ornaments that were in my hand. I turned to Kelly and willed her to see the passion that was in my heart. I think she actually felt it. We each took one step closer to each other, then our bodies crashed together.

Our mouths met harshly and we began to suck wildly on each other's lips. The wet smacking sounds drove my hunger to an even higher pitch. I wanted her so badly. I knew we had to finish this tree, though.

Before I knew what was happening, Kelly's tongue rushed past my lips and she began to drink from me. Her tongue was soft yet determined in its exploration. I felt the fireworks go off once again, and my body was humming Kelly's tune. We both need this so badly. And we would have it.

"God, I want you... so much..." Kelly husked into my mouth.

"I'm yours, honey... no one else's..." I whispered back.

Her kisses slowed to tenderness, and then she pulled her head back to look deeply into my eyes. My words began to sink in as she swallowed a few times before speaking. "Do you mean that?" Kelly said, sounding like a small child who was amazed by a gift.

"I do, Kelly. I'm yours if you want me. Forever, if you'd like." I almost whispered the last part. I wasn't sure if I'd asked for too much.

"I'd like that very much, baby. *So* much..." she growled, as she picked me up and held me tightly against her.

We giggled as she spun me around the living room. I'd never felt so light-hearted. I'd known this woman for so little time, yet she filled a gap in me that I thought would always be empty. It's funny how things happened.

Kelly put me down shortly after that and we finally finished putting all the ornaments and tinsel on the tree. It was just gorgeous. Kelly took the last strand of tinsel and draped it over her mother's picture on her mantel. My heart ached for her. I knew this had to be so hard.

"Merry Christmas, Momma," she whispered, as she kissed the photo again. She turned to me as if to explain, even though it wasn't necessary. "The tinsel was her favorite part of the tree. She always did the tinsel. We covered her casket with it during the funeral." She paused and took a much-needed breath. "God, I miss her, Susan."

"I know, honey, I know. I also know that she's here with us, right now. She only left the physical world." I tried to lighten her mood. "I think God took her then so she could watch over you now. Maybe she can watch you better this way." I could tell that she was thinking about what I'd just said.

"Do you really think so? For the longest time I could never come to terms with why He'd taken her. Susan, she was the most beautiful person on this earth. She did everything for everyone, without hesitation. She was such a good person. She even went to church every flippin' day! I was so angry with God that I stopped talking to Him altogether. I couldn't believe He'd taken someone that had shown such love for Him." She started to pace around while she spoke.

This was the first time she'd really opened up about this. I'm glad she trusted me enough to share it all.

"My anger finally went away, but I was such an angry person for such a long time. I think that's why I slept with so many strangers, I just wanted to feel something else. Anything else. I wanted instant gratification, and I got it. I feel bad for some of the women I slept with, though."

"Why? I can't imagine you were mean to them," I questioned, stopping her pacing.

She came to me and took my hands in hers. She looked down and her blue eyes burned into my soul, and I knew she could never harm anyone.

"No, I wasn't mean, but some of them wanted to pursue relationships. I wanted no part of that. I didn't want to love, because that would only mean it would hurt again the day that I lost it. I felt that loss with Julie. You're the first person I've wanted in my life since her. It scares me to death, though, Susan. You have to know that."

"I think I have a good idea. What we have is very strong and it scares me too, Kelly. I've never felt for anyone, what I feel for you. We've only known each other really for, what, a few weeks, right? But it feels like I've known you my whole life!" I nearly shouted. "I know you're scared, but I'm right there with you, honey."

The grip that was holding my hands loosened a bit as she snuck one arm behind my back. We turned so her arm held my waist and I was leaning into her body. I rested my head on her chest as we stared at our first Christmas tree.

"You do a pretty good tree, Miss Cavanaugh," I said as I smiled into her chest.

"Thanks, darlin'. It is a pretty one."

We waited a few more seconds for the music to shut off and then the only sound to be heard was Mattie's panting from the couch. Kelly turned to face her pet and called to her, "What do you think, Mattie? Should we keep her?"

Mattie's tail thumped wildly against the cushions on the sofa.

"I think so, too," Kelly said as she kissed the top of my head.

"So, should I assume that I'm in?" I teased.

"You?" Kelly's eyebrows shot up. "I was talking about the tree!"

My feigned look of injury couldn't have held water if it needed to. Those baby blues were too much for me. They were dancing with such love and mischief in them. I can't imagine being with anyone else.

"There's one more thing we need to do," she whispered.

"Oh, yeah. It wouldn't be complete without it," I smiled.

"Would you do the honors? I'll hold the stool for you."

She could've asked for anything right then and the answer would have been yes.

"I'd love to, Kelly. Thanks," I beamed.

I reached higher than I thought practical, and rested the angel on the top of the tree. I plugged her in and she lit right up, adding the right touch to make this the perfect Christmas tree.

"How's that?" I asked Kelly's upturned face.

"Perfect."

"I think so too," I said as I started to climb down.

I missed the next step down and started to fall. Well-built arms immediately shot out and caught me before I hit the floor.

Thank God for strong women!

"God, I'm sorry!" I shrieked. "Thank you. You're my hero."

"It was no problem. You're a lightweight," she chuckled as she cradled me against her.

I nestled into her embrace for a few moments and sighed loudly. "I feel so safe here, Kelly."

"I feel safe with you here, too. If I could, I'd hold you all day. Just like this."

She kissed me gently on my lips and moved us to the couch. She sat us both down without changing our positions; I sat cradled in her lap with my head against her chest. Her arms wrapped around me protectively, and I knew there would never be another place that would feel like this. I would never have to look again.

Thank God.

"It really is beautiful. I'm so glad you convinced me to do this. Thank you, Susan."

"It was my pleasure. I really wanted to do this with you. I'm glad you let me in. We both have a lot to be thankful for, don't we?"

She nodded. "Which reminds me..." she said as she gracefully tipped me off her lap and got up and went into the kitchen.

She came back with a wrapped gift. I was assuming it was for me.

"Kelly, I thought we said no gifts."

She put her finger to my pouting lips before I could continue. "This is more than a gift. Please, just open it." She sat down next to me and anxiously waited for me to open her gift.

Muttering softly to myself, I took the lightweight gift into my hands and instantly turned back into a child. I shook the box, hoping to guess what was inside. It'd been too long since I'd opened a Christmas gift. I put my ear to it and smiled.

"Well, it's not ticking, so that's a good thing."

"Just open it!" she cried.

"Fine, be a spoiled sport," I grumbled playfully.

I reached to the side of the box and tore open the tape and wrapping. I pulled out the box and saw a cellular phone in my hands.

"Oh, Kelly... this is too much... please...I can't..."

She interrupted me. "Susan, please. Like I said, this is more than a gift. This is a safety thing for me. You don't have a phone at your place and frankly, it makes me crazy!" she laughed. "There were so many nights I wanted just to talk to you, and I couldn't. I hated waiting for you to get to work. Even then we could only talk for a couple of minutes. You use public transportation every day, and anything could happen to you. This way I'll know you're safe all the time. Please, just take this. Please?"

Her big blue eyes were staring at me with such affection that I didn't have a chance in hell at denying her.

"Thank you, Kelly. I just could never afford one of these. No one would've called, so I didn't think to bother."

"Well, it's paid for, and you have a year of service and about a million minutes; so, you'd better use them all on me!" she joked.

I reached over and threw my arms around her. I started to cry before I could stop myself. "Thank you so much," I sobbed. "You are so good to me. Thank you so much."

I continued to sob into Kelly's arms for several moments. She rocked me slowly, and I felt myself begin to calm. My head raised from her shoulder and she wiped my tears with her hands. She reached behind her and grabbed the box of tissues off the table. She gestured for me to blow my nose. I did as she requested, and she continued to wipe my nose for me. She took another tissue and wiped my face, clearing away all evidence of any sadness.

"Ahh, there's my girl," she said as she finished her task.

"I'm so glad that I'm your girl. I've never felt so cared for."

"I do care for you, baby. Very much."



She held me close and softly brushed my cheeks with the backs of her knuckles. Her fingers reached further back and began to massage the back of my head. Tingles went through my body as she lightly scratched my scalp.

"I'll give you six hours to knock that off," I giggled.

"I think I have six hours. In fact, I do believe, I have all night."

"Lucky me," I whispered to Kelly as her face got closer to mine.

"Funny, I was thinking the exact same thing," she said, closing the distance between us with a gentle kiss to my lips.

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

My heart was beating triple time, feeling Susan in my arms. She felt so good against me. Susan was making the most sensual noises against my neck. Between her quick breaths and her deep sighs, she was truly going to drive me insane. She could call the little men in white coats; I couldn't have cared less. A "Susan-jacket" was my idea of absolute pleasure. She could wrap herself around me any time she wanted.

There doesn't seem to be any hesitation from either one of us tonight. I know I'm more than ready to show her how deeply I care for her. I'm pretty sure she's feeling the same for me right now. I'll know soon enough.

I continued my assault on her neck as she purred happily into my ear. "Baby?" I said huskily.

"Yeah?" Susan sighed into my ear sending jolts of desire throughout my body.

"Can we move this into my room? As much as I like playing pretzel on the couch with you, I don't know how much more my back can take." I smiled gently, hoping I wasn't presuming too much.

"I think I'd like you right over there," Susan said with a hand gesture as she wriggled her way out of my grasp and off the couch.

She reached down and grabbed my hand. I watched confused as she led me towards the fireplace and in front of the tree. She turned out the lights in the room, leaving only the tree and the fire in the hearth for light.

"Stay..." She smiled. "Don't move. I'll be right back," she said seductively as I felt the air leave my lungs.

This was really going to happen. Tonight. Holy crap!

She walked over to the couch and grabbed two pillows along with the blanket that was draped along the back of the couch. She took her booty and positioned it on the floor.

"Sit," she gently commanded.

I eagerly complied. I sat on the floor with my elbows resting behind me. Watching Susan in the firelight, I knew I'd never seen anyone more beautiful in my life.

"Are you ready for me? Because I don't think I can wait for you anymore," Susan whispered sexily.

I know I gulped audibly, but I didn't care. "Yes." I nodded as I spoke my monosyllabic word. It was the only word that I could make come out of my mouth. I don't think she had any idea what power she held over me at that moment.

"I'm glad," she said with a saucy smile.

Susan began to slowly undress before my transfixed eyes. She watched me closely for any sign of reluctance. I watched mutely since my brain had shut down.

"I want you to know how much I want you, Kelly," she whispered as she began to unbutton her blouse. I watched as her fingers mastered each button with excruciating slowness.

"I don't think I've ever wanted or desired anyone like I want you right now," I confessed honestly. "Please come down here." I reached up to take her hand, but she refused my request.

"Soon, my darling, patience is a virtue." As my eyebrow raised, she started to sway her hips as she pulled her shirttail from her jeans. I knew that I was in deep trouble.

And Susan was her name-o.

She slipped the blouse off of her shoulders and I watched as it tumbled onto the floor. Susan stood before me in jeans and her bra.

I don't think I'll ever recover from this torture.

I couldn't wait to feel her skin on mine. She knew she was getting to me. I could tell from the expression on her face. She was confident and in control-a deadly combination, or so I was beginning to think.

She moved her fingers to the button on her jeans. She undid the one fastener and slowly slid the zipper down its serrated path. She brought both of her hands inside her waistband and slid the material down her hips and thighs. I think she heard my gasp, because she smirked at me with unbridled lust in her eyes. She knew she had my number, and I was in no shape to argue.

She raised one leg to grasp at the ankle of her pants to release her leg from its hold. She followed suit with her other leg, leaving her practically naked in front of my widening eyes.

"You are so beautiful, Susan," I breathed out.

"Thank you, sweetheart," she said as she knelt in front of me at last.

I sat up and let my eyes travel over her underwear-clad body. She was more shapely and stronger than I could've imagined. Her sandy blonde hair was brushed away from her sculpted face by my trembling hand. It felt like silk against my fingers. Her shoulders and midsection were strong, but with a feminine softness. I wanted to touch her so badly, but I wanted to make sure she wanted that.

This was her show, after all.

"Do you want to touch me, Kelly?" Susan had to know that this was a no-brainer of a question. Who wouldn't want to touch her? My God!

"More than anything," I said with hooded eyes.

"You have to pay a toll first."

My eyes opened a bit at the request, but I would've offered anything at this point and she knew it.

"Whatever you want is yours," I said honestly.

"Your sweater. Off. Now." Susan commanded, and no sooner had the words come from her than my sweater had been removed, leaving me in my bra and slacks.

Somehow, I never imagined myself in the submissive position that I found myself in right now. It was completely different for me to be in this role. I had always controlled the situations when I was with other women. Then it dawned on me that Susan wasn't at all like the other women that I'd slept with. She was more than that and always would be. If she were like them, I never would've fallen in love with her.

*Love? Did you say love?*

***Yes, I did. Holy crap! I'm in love with Susan McGovern!***

My heart began to beat wildly at my inner discovery. I found my hands unbuttoning and unzipping my pants hurriedly. I never wanted to do anything so much in my life.

"Slow down, sweetie. We have all night, remember?" Susan cooed softly at me.

I blushed like a schoolgirl. I was so out of control it was making me dizzy. Susan had me wrapped so tightly in her web, and I was sure she didn't even know she'd spun one.

"Let me get those," she said softly as she leaned over me to pull down on the waist of my pants. "Lean back, honey. It's okay, I've got you."

I leaned back and watched as Susan slowly pulled the clothing down my legs; her eyes never leaving mine.

"God, Kelly, you are the most gorgeous woman I've ever laid eyes on."

My cheeks got red with that compliment. She knew my buttons and she was pushing them in all the right places. She reached for my hands and situated us so we were kneeling in front of each other. I held her face with my right hand as she did the same with mine. We stared deeply into each other's eyes and brought our faces even closer. I searched her face one last time looking for any reservations or doubts.

I found none.

Leaning forward, I captured her lips with mine. Her kiss was soft and unprobing. We relished the feeling for many moments. The softness of our lips just tasting each other was making me thirsty for more of her. I gently slid my tongue to her lips and laved the texture that I found there.

Her mouth opened wider, accepting me fully within her. She tasted wonderful. Our kisses became hotter with each moment that passed. Lips and tongues sought out the others, trying to satiate the need that was growing by leaps and bounds.

We took turns taking off the remainder of our clothing, leaving nothing but our nakedness between us. We brought our bodies together and my eyes rolled into my head. She sent chills through my body. Her warm, smooth flesh against mine felt like everything I thought it would and more.

Heaven was just around the corner; I just knew it.

I began to kiss her cheek and then down to her ear. Feeling her grip on me tighten, I breathed softly against her neck. Nipping and sucking the soft skin I found there sent goose bumps down her body.

"Mmm..." she sighed into me.

"You make me so crazy, baby. Do you have any idea?" I said hoarsely, not expecting an answer.

I felt more than heard her reply when her warm tongue trailed down my shoulder and over my collarbone. My body was on fire because of her. She was inflaming me to heights that I'd never felt before. I couldn't help the sighs and moans that were coming from my mouth.

I tilted my head back to give her more access to my body. She took full advantage as she slid her tongue lower to capture my right nipple in her mouth, swirling her tongue over the sensitive peak

and wrapping her arms tightly around me.

"Oh, God..." I sighed heavily.

I could feel my body begin to tremble with need. A need to be one with Susan. I brought my hands up to stroke her breasts as she continued to love mine with her mouth. Finding her right nipple, I began to play with it between my thumb and forefinger while caressing the other with my palm.

"More..." she breathed into my flesh.

That was all the encouragement I needed.

I eased Susan down onto the blanketed floor and laid on top of her. I placed my thigh between her legs and groaned at the unbelievable sensations it caused. My skin was tingling from just the contact of her body against mine. I leaned into her, pressing my leg against her warm, wet apex. I watched her rapture as she moaned softly. Our eyes locked, intensifying every emotion we were feeling.

My eyes never left hers as I took one of her nipples into my watering mouth. Her eyes stayed with mine then watched every movement of my tongue. I was spellbound. She brought her hand into my hair and began urging me on. I sucked harder on the erect flesh, which brought a louder response from my lover. Her breathing increased, as did mine. I was getting so aroused by observing her while I loved her breasts. I bit down tentatively, awaiting her response, and wasn't disappointed.

"Oh, God yes," she moaned. "Harder."

I could feel my hips begin to thrust harder against her as I suckled her nipples with every ounce of passion I was feeling. I switched breasts often, trying to give her as much pleasure as possible. The thrusting of her hips was in synch with my own. I could feel the sweat begin to form and roll off of my back. Our fingers intertwined as she held my hands with a strength that surprised me.

My body slid lower until my sex straddled her thigh. Our bodies were moving as one as our passion intensified. I could feel her wetness against my own leg, which ratcheted my desire even higher. I wanted to love her with my mouth; I needed to taste her release. I could feel our souls melding from the sheer intensity.

"Turn over, baby," I whispered.

She nodded and I lifted myself slightly to give her room to roll onto her stomach. I moved up to her neck and began to lick slowly down her spine. Her body arched in response to my actions.

"Oh, Kel... you feel so good," she murmured into the pillow.

She grasped the edges of the pillow as I followed her spine down to her buttocks. I kissed each

cheek reverently, feeling more love for Susan with each stroke of my tongue. I knelt between her legs and gently spread her cheeks.

Her breathing hitched as she felt the tip of my tongue run the along the crease of her buttocks. I tongued each of Susan's orifices tenderly but thoroughly, and felt Susan's hips grind into the floor in response.

"Please..." she begged throatily.

I lifted my head from my task and teased Susan. "Please what?"

"Please go inside of me, Kelly. I want to feel you deep inside of me," she answered huskily.

"Anything, baby. I'll give you anything you want," I whispered truthfully.

Bringing my fingers down to her wetness, I found her opening and drove two fingers deep inside, causing her to scream out.

"Yes!" Susan cried.

She raised herself to her knees and I wrapped my left arm around her waist. I began to match the thrusting of my fingers with the movement of her hips. I prolonged the actions of my fingers and took great pleasure in hearing her calling my name. The sound of her voice was bringing me close to my own release.

Without disturbing the rhythm we'd created, I swung myself onto my back, turning so that my head was between her legs. With my unoccupied hand I pulled down on her hips, bringing her swollen clitoris onto my mouth.

"Jesus!" Susan whimpered at the contact.

I began to bathe her clitoris with wild abandon. My tongue and fingers worked in tandem, sending Susan into oblivion. I could hear her breathing quicken with each thrust of my fingers. I could taste her impending climax.

"Omigod!" Susan groaned as she started to buck against my face.

I moaned loudly as I felt my own orgasm crest along with Susan's.

Our bodies continued to thrust blindly until we could no longer move. I laid there kissing the insides of Susan's thighs until I'd worked myself out from under her. Her body collapsed onto the floor with an ungraceful thud. I crawled up next to her and spooned myself against her side.

Kissing her cheek and ear I began to speak from my heart. "God, I love you. I've never met anyone that makes me feel the way you do."

Susan rolled over on her side to face me. She stared into my eyes as her own began to well with unshed tears. "Oh, sweetheart," she breathed. "I love you, too."

My heart melted at her admission as we reached for each other. She rested her head on my chest, and I held her as tightly as I could without hurting her. Her leg was thrown over my own, and her arm grasped my waist as if she were going to fall off of me.

"Easy, baby. I'm not going anywhere, I promise," I whispered into her hair. I rubbed her back tenderly as I felt her grip loosen. I peppered her head with many kisses, trying to convey everything that I was feeling. I could feel her sobs as well as her tears on my bare chest. "Shh... what's wrong, baby? Can you tell me?" I soothed.

She moved her head so her face was looking squarely into my own. Brushing away her tears with my thumbs, she searched my face for any insincerity in my words. I knew she wouldn't be able to find any. Finally, I'd found someone to spend my life with. Someone that would guard my heart as if it were her own.

Susan looked into my eyes with watery affection. "If someone had told me a year ago that my life would be like this, I would've told them they were crazy. I never imagined myself being this happy ever again. Sometimes I wonder when I'm going to wake up from this wonderful dream. Things like this only happen in dreams and storybooks," she sniffled.

"Well, if this is a dream, then I don't want to wake up, either. I never thought I'd find anyone as wonderful as you. I'm so glad I was wrong. You are the most incredible woman I've ever met." I placed my fingers over her lips to stop any kind of rebuttal. "Before you even say anything; it's true. I love you; and I never thought I'd find anyone who I'd want to say that to ever again."

Susan took my fingers from her lips and kissed them one by one. "I was only going to tell you that I love you, too. I've never had this much love in my heart before. I just hope it doesn't go away."

"Me too," I agreed.

"Say it again, Kelly. Tell me you love me again, please?" Susan asked.

"I love you, Susan. I love you with all that I am."

"I love you, too, so much. Thank you for loving me. I can't imagine my life without you," she said, looking as if she were going to cry again.

"I know the feeling. Every thought that I've had in the past weeks has been about you. Anytime I think about something that I'm going to do or need to do, you're in the picture as well. I hope to have you by my side for a long time, Susan. I mean that."

"I'll be here as long as you want me."

"Good. I like you here."

Our embrace became more relaxed as we caressed each other gently. I felt goose bumps rise on her cooled skin and knew we needed to get into the warmth of my bed.

"Are you ready for bed? I'm getting kind of chilly," Susan confessed.

"With you by my side, I'm ready for anything," I said with a smile as I kissed her forehead.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

After turning the lights off and closing the doors of the fireplace, we walked arm in arm up the stairs towards Kelly's bedroom. My body was still reeling from what we'd shared downstairs. I knew making love with her was going to be special, but I had no idea how much so.

I will never feel as loved with anyone else again. I know that I've found the other half of my soul in Kelly. We just fit so well.

"You want to wash up first or shall I?" Kelly asked.

"I'll go first. I have to pee anyway," I said sheepishly.

"Okay, darlin'. I'll be waiting for you when you get out," she whispered as she leaned in and kissed my lips.

I walked into the bathroom and looked at my reflection in the mirror. I wasn't sure if I was looking to see a change, but I knew I felt different. I was loved like no other tonight. I felt like the luckiest person on the planet. Nothing would change my feelings for Kelly. We were in this for the long haul.

This I knew for certain.

I used the facilities and brushed my teeth before returning to her room. I found her lying on her bed, wearing nothing but a smile.

"Penny for your thoughts," I giggled.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure you can guess what I'm thinking right now."

"Yeah, I think I can. It's probably what I'm thinking right about now."

"Well, hold onto that thought until I get back," Kelly said as she got up and walked towards me. She leaned down and kissed me deeply before going into the bathroom. The door clicked shut and I felt my heart jump once again. This woman had a hold on me that could challenge a vise



grip.

I hopped onto the large bed and assumed my position under the covers. The scent of my lover was everywhere, sending fresh chills down my body. It was something I was growing to love more and more with each day that passed. She had such a clean, fresh smell all the time. Such a change from the people I usually hung out with.

Who'd have thought my life would end up like this? I know I never thought I'd be this fortunate again. Never in my wildest dreams did I think a woman like Kelly could ever love me.

*Boy, am I glad I was mistaken. I can't imagine my life without her now.*

I heard the water from the faucet turn off a second before I heard the door open. My naked, beautiful lover walked to me as if she were on the hunt. I felt like prey under her smoky gaze. I knew I was powerless to look away, and had no desire to do so.

Her long frame found its way into the bed beside me. She clicked off the light on the nightstand and shifted closer to me.

"Miss me?" Kelly purred as she brought her hand to my breast and squeezed lightly.

"Oh yeah..." I whispered, not being able to keep the desire from my voice.

"I'm glad. I really want to make love with you again. I don't think that I'll ever get enough of you."

"Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere any time soon," I said as I grasped the hand that was rubbing my breast. I squeezed gently letting her know I was all for another round of loving with her.

"I like how you think," she growled playfully, as she tugged a little on my breast.

"I like how you feel," I countered.

"Well, I *love* how you feel," she challenged again.

"Yeah, well, I love you," I said with the winning blow.

In the darkness, she chuckled into my ear. "I love you, too."

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart," I whispered.

"Merry Christmas, baby," Kelly said as she moved her body on top of mine.

Her kisses told me that we weren't going to be sleeping any time soon, but I wouldn't have had it any other way. I was starting to think that 'dreams coming true' wasn't such a load of shit

anymore. I had my proof right here in my arms.

Right where she belonged.

### **Chapter Twenty-Three**

As I opened my eyes in the early dawn light, I felt a warm, pleasant weight on me. I wondered how I managed to sleep with Kelly resting almost fully on top of me during the night.

Strong ribs I guess.

Her breathing was deep and even, telling me she was still asleep. This allowed me some unguarded time to watch her. God, she's gorgeous. And she loved me.

Me!

She loved me. She told me so herself. How lucky was I to have a beautiful creature like Kelly, want someone like me? Words weren't enough to convey what I was feeling. I stroked my fingers down her naked back and felt her nuzzle deeper into me. Her soft sigh of contentment almost melted my very soul. It also cemented the fact that last night really had in fact happened.

*So, this is what love is all about?*

I was wondering what all the fuss was about. I thought I was in love with Cindy, but this was completely different. I knew I'd found my life partner. God, it felt good.

I took a deep breath and felt Kelly shift again. This time I locked eyes with sleepy blue ones and smiled softly.

"Good morning, sunshine," she whispered.

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart," I said with a tiny smile.

Kelly moved up slowly until I felt her soft lips capture mine in a tender, loving hold. Our lips melded and allowed us to express once more, how much love we had for each other.

We broke apart and Kelly gave me a slow grin that made my heart swell.

"Did you sleep all right?" she rasped in her sleep-filled voice.

"Like a baby." I couldn't keep the smile off my face.

"You're my baby," she stated in a childlike voice.

"I hope so."

"You *are* so." She sealed her testimony with another searing kiss that curled my toes.

God she had a knack for that.

My stomach took that moment to make its emptiness known, which elicited a throaty chuckle from my lover.

My lover. Wow, I loved the sound of that.

"Three guesses, and the first two don't count," I teased.

"Hmmm... I'll guess that... you're... I don't know... hungry?" she joked.

"Give that woman a prize!" I said, in my best game show host voice.

We giggled and began to wrestle under the covers. She pulled me on top of her and I felt her fingers brush errant strands of my hair behind my ears. Kelly said nothing as she gazed deeply into my eyes. "God, you are so beautiful, Susan."

I swallowed convulsively as I nodded trying not to cry.

*I will not cry. I will not cry. I will not cry.*

I tried to think that mantra, but felt the tears betray me. As a rebellious tear ran down my cheek, Kelly gently brushed it away with her thumb.

"I love you," I choked out before I rested my body against hers. I felt her hands stroke my back, and then tighten into a strong hold.

"I love you, too."

After a while, we broke apart and got dressed to go eat breakfast. I felt like I could eat the house, I was so hungry. Today was going to be a long day, too. As much as I enjoyed going to the kitchens, it would always be an ugly reminder of what my life had been.

I walked downstairs with Kelly and Mattie and sat down at the kitchen table.

"You gotta go out, girl?" Kelly said, smiling widely at her pup.

Mattie's tail wagged frantically as she waited for her mistress to open the back door. Kelly let her out and watched her as she ran through the backyard.

"She's so pretty when she runs." She looked over at me and had such love in her eyes.

"Yes, she is," I agreed. "So, what's for breakfast? Would you like me to make something? I can make eggs or..."

"Not so fast... It's a Christmas tradition that I make omelets and sausages for Mattie and myself; but since you're here with us this year, I'll just have to make more."

"Well then, by all means, cook away," I said as I gestured to the stove.

Kelly playfully smacked my thigh as she passed me. "You're lucky you're sitting on what I wanted to slap."

"Ooh, I'm not so lucky, then. I'd like it if you smacked my ass." I laughed at Kelly's reaction.

"Are there... um... some things you like that you didn't mention last night?" Kelly asked with wiggling eyebrows.

"You'll just have to wait and see, dear chef."

"Oh, now that's something to look forward to." She smiled that toothy grin at me and I knew she was serious.

Lucky me.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

We slowly made our way down to the church where Susan and I would be helping the hungry for most of the day. This was our second venture to the church today. It was really nice to attend Mass with someone on Christmas this year. I was just happy that Susan wanted to go. It made the day even more special for us.

This was going to be an experience for me, since I'd never done anything like it in my life. It was going to break my heart to see such destitute people, but on the other hand, it was always good to have a reality check. Susan's really an amazing person. She had such a beauty inside of her I didn't think she knew was there. It takes a very special person to do what she does.

"I've um... got some questions, if you'd be kind enough to help me out," I said, looking at Susan and the road.

"Sure, honey. What about?"

"About the soup kitchen and such. Is that okay?"

"Shoot. I'll be more than happy to answer them. You're so great to come with me today," Susan beamed at me. I couldn't help but smile back. I had a surprise for her that I knew she'd love.

"Okay, first of all... do they really still call them soup kitchens? I thought that was an old term, but I want to make sure I don't insult anyone."

"Yes, it is an old term, but most everyone knows what it is. I guess they kept it for that reason alone."

"I see, now what about food vans and such. I remember you telling me about Carol coming to you out in the streets on Christmas."

"Yeah, she did, bless her soul. God, I miss her..." Susan stared blankly at the road. "Oh... sorry, sweetie... um... oh yeah... food vans... Well the church has rented one that we will use later in the day. They usually have warmers for the food and shelves all built inside the back. It's a great way for us to get to the people that don't venture out of their 'homes.'"

I imagined Susan and Carol's meeting for the first time. Just picturing her out there sent sadness through me. I won't ever let that happen to her again. No way. I would work fifty jobs if I had to, to keep her from that place again.

"Anything else, honey?" Susan asked, recalling me from my thoughts.

"Umm... I guess I wonder why they do the cafeteria style versus just handing out Styrofoam containers with food already in them."

"Well, we use the cafeteria method to serve the food to keep costs down. The plates or trays we can wash and reuse. They're made of plastic, so no one can harm anyone else if something were to happen, and believe me, something always does."

"What do you mean? What happens?"

"Well, I remember hearing about an addict who caused a big scene a few years back. Generally, they're not allowed if they're using, because things like that can happen. Apparently, this guy fooled someone into believing he was straight and broke a glass or a plate and threatened to cut another person if he wasn't given money or something for drugs. The poor guy he attacked got stitches in his neck, too."

"Wow, that's horrible!" I couldn't believe that. I guess I was more naïve than I thought.

"Yeah, it was bad. So, we try to keep everything to a minimum so that the people that do accept our food will be able to eat in peace. That is our main purpose."

"Did you ever eat at one of these?" I wasn't sure if she wanted to talk about her experience, but I really wanted to know.

"Well, like I told you before, it took a lot for me to even accept food from Carol, who actually took food *to* people. I was one of the proud who didn't like to accept assistance, so, no, I didn't. I thought it made me stronger, knowing I could survive on my own." She looked out the side window and sighed deeply. "It was really stupid to think that way, though. I could've died out there, with no one to blame but myself. I'm so thankful Carol found me."

"So am I, darlin'. So am I." I laced our fingers together as we drove the rest of the way to the church in comfortable silence.

When we arrived at St. Mary's Church, there were quite a few people already waiting to get down to the basement. That alone made me happy about what I'd arranged. Susan was going to be so excited.

"Why are you smiling like that, Kelly?" Susan eyed me warily.

"You'll see, baby."

"Okay. You never cease to amaze me. Why should now be any different?"

"Exactly. Come on, let's go inside."

I directed Susan with my hand at the small of her back. We walked into the church just as Reverend O'Malley finished rearranging the altar from the last Mass of Christmas Day.

"Kelly!" he said with a large grin on his face. He walked from the altar to greet us.

"Hello, Father O'Malley, Merry Christmas. How are you?" I asked, extending my hand to him.

"Good, my dear, thank you. Merry Christmas." He looked over at Susan next to me. "This must be the woman you told me about. Susan, is it?"

Susan's eyes widened at his knowledge of her name. "Yes. Merry Christmas. It's good to meet you. Miriam spoke highly of you at the office. Thank you for allowing us to use the basement this year."

"You are very welcome, Susan. Miriam is a sweet lady and a wonderful parishioner. We've known each other for several years."

Susan nodded and smiled at the friendly priest. "She mentioned you've known each other a while."

Father O'Malley gestured to the basement door. "Well, let's get down there. There is quite a bunch already."

"Really? I thought we told everyone 2 p.m.?" Susan asked, surprised.

"Oh, we did. I guess this year, they didn't want to miss the spread." Susan was confused as she looked at Father O'Malley, then at me.

We walked downstairs and I watched with anticipation as Susan's eyes opened wide as she looked around the tables.

"How did we afford this?" Susan asked quietly, noticing the warming units on the tables with all kinds of foods over them.

The volunteers were everywhere; and people were sitting at tables, eating quietly.

"Why don't you ask her?" Father O'Malley asked Susan, pointing at me.

"You?" Susan choked back a sob as she looked into my face. She wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tight. "You are the most wonderful woman I've ever met. Thank you, Kelly. How did you do this?" she mumbled into my chest.

"Well, most of the volunteers work for Saks. I asked some of my employees if they'd help out on Christmas for a few hours. I knew the ones I'd asked wouldn't mind at all. But as far as the food went, I just went to a few restaurants until I found the best deal." I smiled at Susan as the tears streamed freely down her cheeks. "I just think that Christmas should be happy for everyone. At least, as much as possible for the circumstances of their lives."

"Thank you so much. You have no idea what this means to them... and to me."

"I think I do." I leaned down to her ear. "I love you, baby."

Susan wrapped her arms around me one more time and then walked towards the tables to greet everyone. This was turning into one of the best Christmases of my life. I watched my girl interacting with everyone, and I felt a tear sneak down my own cheek. It would only take one other person being here to make this day perfect. I knew she was smiling down on me right now.

Merry Christmas, Momma.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

We were able to send some people off with extra food since Kelly had purchased too much. God, she was incredible. What an amazing gift she'd given these people. I'm so damn lucky. I don't know how I became so fortunate, but I didn't want to jinx it by asking too many questions.

Even the press showed up again. The same woman that had interviewed Kelly at Saks the day before was here interviewing the town hero once more. Kelly refused to take more credit than

necessary, of course. But I could tell she was happy with what she'd done. How could she not be? I was more than happy to sing her praises, though.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

*"Miss McGovern? Can you add anything about this joyous occasion?" the newswoman, Tina Simkins, asked.*

*"Yes. Kelly Cavanaugh has proved once again that she has a heart of gold. I unfortunately have lived the life that most of these people are living now. I would've been much better off had someone donated money for food like this every year. This is a wonderfully selfless thing she's done, and I hope everyone watching would follow her example. She's made this a very happy holiday for everyone here," Susan concluded, as she looked at a blushing Kelly with love in her eyes.*

*"Indeed she has. The Christmas spirit is alive and well here in the town of Northshire, and the St. Nicholas responsible is once again Kelly Cavanaugh. I'm Tina Simkins, reporting from St. Mary's Church. Back to you, James."*

The interview went until a little after five o'clock and ended just in time for us to get into the van to spread more Christmas cheer throughout the homeless community. I was proud of Kelly, and I wanted to make sure the rest of the city knew just how proud I was.

## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

*"...I'm Tina Simkins, reporting from St. Mary's Church. Back to you, James."*

The television clicked off as the tears streamed down Elise McGovern's face. Seeing her daughter twice in two days, she finally took the step she'd been hesitating over for years.

"Oh, Susan, I'm going to get you back, I promise you. I won't give up on finding you this time."

Mrs. McGovern walked into her kitchen and opened the cabinet containing her phonebook. She leafed through the pages until she found the listing for Saks clothing store.

"General information... Store hours... Shoes... Accessories... Regional Office... Yes, that's what I need," she said to herself.



She nervously picked up her phone, keeping her finger on the number in the phonebook. As she dialed, she felt her heartbeat increase tenfold. The number she had dialed began to ring, and she began to fidget and pace through her kitchen. The answering machine clicked on, as she knew it would.

Click. "Hi, you've reached the office of Kelly Cavanaugh, regional manager for Saks. I'm either on the phone, or away from my office at this time. Please leave me your name, a number where you can be reached, and a brief description of the reason you are calling. Thank you, and have a wonderful holiday." Beep.

Elise paused, not knowing how to start off her message, but finally opened her mouth to speak just as the machine switched off.

"Dammit!" the woman screamed, angry with herself for hesitating. "This is your daughter, Elise McGovern! Don't make that mistake again."

She redialed the number and waited for the message on the machine to finish.

Beep

"Hello, Miss Cavanaugh, my name is Elise McGovern. This is going to seem very strange, but I saw you on the news over the holidays and you were with a woman I believe to be my daughter, Susan. I... I would really like to talk to you, so if you could please call me when you get this message, I'd appreciate it more than you know. My number is 487-555-7820. Please feel free to call me any time day or night. Thank you again, Miss Cavanaugh. Merry Christmas."

Elise exhaled loudly as she rested the phone's receiver in its cradle. "Oh, please call. Please," she whispered as she rested her face in her hands.

## **Chapter Twenty-Five**

I drove the van into the heart of the homeless community. Kelly looked around in disbelief as some of the makeshift homes were shown to her for the first time. Boxes and Styrofoam crates sheltered the people in the alleys, while others lay deathly still in doorways of the closed businesses in the neighborhood.

"Jesus..." I heard Kelly breathe.

"Gives you a whole new appreciation for the life you have, doesn't it? And I don't mean that in a snarky way, either."

"I know, baby. But, yes, it really does." She took my hand in a firm grip. "It just tears me up to picture you out here."

I put the van in park when we got to the alley. I turned a little in my seat to look squarely at Kelly. "Don't then. I'm right here with you now. Just imagine me in your arms, like we were last night," I said with a bit of desire in my voice, and Kelly looked at me intently with want in her baby blues.

She leaned over in her seat, grabbed the back of my neck, and kissed me hard. I was relieved that we were stopped because I knew if we hadn't been, we would've crashed. I sank into the kiss she was laying on me, and before I knew it our tongues met in a rhythm that was nothing short of erotic. I could feel my arousal building, but remembered where we were and pulled away breathlessly.

"Kelly..." I exhaled. "We need to stop before we end up doing something in this van that we really shouldn't. Well, not here anyway," I said, with hopes of continuing our kisses after our mission was over.

She rested her forehead against mine and breathed in my air trying to control her own need. "You're right. God, I just look at you and I want you so badly, Susan. I can't help it." Kelly smiled sheepishly.

"It's quite all right. I love that you want me as much as I do you. Perhaps we'll finish early enough to play a little later on."

"Oh, I think that's my new mission," Kelly chuckled.

"Good." I squared my shoulders and took a deep, cleansing breath. "All right. What we'll do is take turns taking the food out to the people, while the other stays by the van in case others show up. Does that sound good?"

"Sure, it sounds fine. We'll be safe enough, right?" Kelly sounded a little unsure of herself.

"We should be. I can't promise anything, because I know what it's like out here, but I'm pretty sure we'll be fine. If not, we do have the intercom thingy." I gestured at the two-way phone we had in the van. Father O'Malley had the other one, and knew that if he heard from us he was to call the police.

Kelly laughed at my description. "It's not a thingy, it's a Nextel phone. It's like a walkie-talkie. They are the best things ever to have been invented. I'm just glad I bought a set. I'm gonna give you one when I'm in the office. That way I can talk to you whenever I want."

"Maybe you're not so selfless after all, Miss Cavanaugh." I smiled as I crossed my arms over my chest and squinted my eyes.

"Not when it comes to you, darlin'. I'm extremely selfish when it comes to you." She leaned over and kissed me again. This time it was a chaste kiss that told me she was ready to start working.

"Come on, let's go." She opened her door and got out into the cold winter air.

I got out of the van, walked around to Kelly's side, and opened the side door. We'd packed the warmers with containers filled with food for anyone we could find. The shelves we'd stocked with more containers to replace the ones we handed out. There was plenty to serve about fifty people or so. I hoped that was enough.

"Okay, I'll make the first foray into the alley. Stay here and give containers to anyone that may wander to the van. Most people expect to see us this time of year."

"All right, but take the phone with you. If you run into trouble, please call Father O'Malley and yell loud enough for me to hear you."

"Kelly, I'll be fine." I knew she wouldn't let it rest, so I took the phone that was held out for me. I hoped I wouldn't need it. There was always an element of fear while doing this, though.

"I love you," Kelly said as she turned to hug me.

"I love you, too. You've made today very special for me. I can't thank you enough for what you did for these people." I couldn't contain the pride in my eyes.

Kelly blushed a little at my compliments. "It was my pleasure. It really felt great to do something for them. I'm glad it made you so happy."

We pulled from our embrace and Kelly loaded me up with as many containers of food as I could carry.

"I'll see you soon," I said as I walked towards the alleyways that I used to call home.

"Be careful," Kelly called after me.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

I waited by the van and handed out several containers of food to people that approached. They had such gratitude in their eyes as I gave them the food. I just couldn't imagine living that way-not knowing where your next meal was coming from.

I leaned inside to move some of the containers from the shelf into the warmers. When I turned around, there was an older, scraggly looking man in front of me.

"Ah!" I hollered in surprise. "I'm sorry, you snuck up on me and I didn't hear you." The man didn't respond and was a little too close for my comfort. "Would you like some food? I have some for you, if you want it."

"You think you can come 'round here, all high and mighty, doing your duty for us unfortunates?" he spat angrily.

I didn't know what to say. "No, not at all. We just want to spread some Christmas cheer and give you some good nourishment. You don't have to take it, but it's here if you change your mind."

He looked me up and down, giving me the willies all over. "I know what I want and it ain't in them boxes." He leered at me while licking his dry lips, making me want to vomit.

"Look, buddy, you've got about two seconds to turn and walk away if you don't want what I *am* offering. Because what you want, sure as hell ain't on the menu." I stood to my full height and could tell he was debating what to do next. I looked down and saw his hand in his coat pocket and the protrusion coming from it.

"I don't think you get it. This ain't a request."

He aimed his bulging pocket at me and I began to rapidly sort through my options, which weren't very many. I tried to talk him down. "Whoa, okay, buddy. Calm down for a second there. Is that any way to treat a lady?"

"No, but I's gonna show you." He grabbed his crotch and moved his hand around in a circle and groaned. "Oh, yeah..."

*Nice going, Kel. Wrong choice of words there.*

"Look, I don't... um..." I saw Susan coming towards the van and her expression changed from happiness to fear when she saw the confrontation. "I um..." I looked back to Susan, and she motioned for me not to look at her.

"What! Come on lady, I don't got time for this. Let's go!" he yelled. He grabbed my forearm with his free hand and started to pull me away from the van.

"Now put your hands up nice and slow, mister. I really don't want to hurt you," Susan hissed in the man's ear as she poked the phone into his back. He immediately raised both hands over his head, letting the comb fall out of his fist.

"I...I...I...didn't mean no harm! Don't shoot!" He stood with his hands up and eyes wide as Susan walked around to face him. "It's only a comb! "

Recognition dawned on Susan's face as she looked at the man in front of us. "Switch? Is that you?"

The man looked at Susan with curious eyes until finally his recollection set in. "Little Ray? Holy Sweet Mother o' Jesus!"

Susan nodded as she embraced the man in her arms. He hugged her back for a long time, while I sat back and stared with my mouth open. "I thought you was dead, Little Ray. I haven't seen you in so long."

I watched in awe as the two friends reunited. Susan finally pulled away from the man.

"Switch, what are you doing, bothering this lady friend of mine? I don't remember you being like that."

"I didn't mean nothing by it, ma'am, really. I didn't know you was friends with Little Ray." He looked back at Susan with shame in his eyes. "Time's is rough these days, Little Ray. I dunno what come over me." He looked back to me. "I'm sorry if'n I scared you."

I shook my confused head and smiled at him. "Don't worry about it. But I wouldn't recommend doing that again. You could get killed that way."

"What happened to you, Little Ray?" Switch said, holding Susan's hand.

"I got out, Switch. I met a woman a couple years ago who offered me some food. After a while I got really sick, remember? " Switch nodded. "Well, she came back and saw how sick I was. She brought me to the clinic and told them I worked for her, and they kept me for a couple of weeks until I got better. I got pneumonia and almost did die, Switch. Anyway, Carol took me in and gave me a job. Now I've got my own place and I work for a living."

"You's lucky, Ray. But I knew you was different than ol' Switch. I been out here for twenty years now. This's my home and always will be." He shook his head in acceptance of his life. "This ain't no place for a soul like yours, Little Ray."

The two hugged again and I offered Switch a container of food, which he took this time. We offered him a seat in the back of the van to eat his Christmas dinner.

"I'm sorry, Kelly. Let me introduce you to the man that was my guardian for a while when I was out here. Switch, this lady here is my partner, Kelly."

We shook hands, and Switch smiled at me for the first time without lust in his eyes. "Nice to meet you, Miss Kelly. Little Ray always liked the ladies. I see she got herself a good one."

"Thanks, Switch. I feel pretty lucky myself." I gazed at Susan and felt the love she was sending. For her, I tried to make conversation with Switch. "So, um... you took care of her out here?"

"I tried to. I finds her one day curled in some box over in that alleyway." He pointed nonchalantly away from us. "She was cryin' her eyes out. Thought I was the devil himself," he chuckled. "After that we was like peas in a pod. I'd tell her stories, and she told me what she was gonna do when she got out." He looked up at Susan and smiled. "I'm so happy you did, Little Ray."

"Um... can I ask why you call her that?" I asked, hoping I wasn't getting too personal.

He smiled when he looked at me. "She was my little ray of sunshine in 'is dark place." Susan went to him and hugged him again. "You always was my Little Ray, and you always will be."

I felt my heart break for him. I could tell that they had shared quite a bit in the time they had together and that he still loved her very much. How could he not?

Hell, she was my sunshine, too.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

This would always be remembered as my favorite Christmas. First, Kelly sponsored the food drive, and then seeing Switch again brought me over the top. This would always be a very special day for me.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?" I asked Kelly, who was very quiet as she drove us home.

"Yeah, I'm just thinking about the day. So much to take in, you know? I mean, what would've happened if it wasn't a comb in Switch's pocket? What if it was a knife? What if you hadn't known him?" Kelly paused and took a deep breath. "I can't believe you made it out there for so long. I wouldn't have lasted a day." Kelly shook her head and tightened her grip on the steering wheel.

"Honey, don't do that. Just know we were fortunate that things worked out the way they did. He *did* have a comb and I *did* know who he was. And we are both safe and sound. Don't worry about the what ifs, they'll make you crazy."

"You're right. But when I saw you come for him... God!" Kelly shook her head. "You're right! That'll make me nuts. Okay, so um... tell me, do you plan on seeing Switch again?" Kelly tried to change the subject a little.

"Oh, yes! Now that I know he's still around, I'm gonna visit him. Sadly, I'd forgotten all about him. I don't even think I mentioned him to you before, I'm sorry." Kelly looked at me with a question on her face. "Don't worry, I'll go during the day." I saw the relief flood her expression and knew I'd settled that issue. I shrugged airily.

"I'm glad you said that. I got worried for a second."

"I could tell. Don't worry, I'm not willing to play that game again any time soon." I patted her thigh gently with our entwined hands.

We finished the rest of the drive back home in silence. We held each other's hand and just let ourselves feel. It was so nice to be able to do that with someone. We'd both had incredible days, though for different reasons. All I wanted to do now was snuggle up with Kelly and let her hold me until morning. I knew she had a big day at work tomorrow, being the day after Christmas. I could tell she was dreading it.

We entered her home through the garage and were greeted by a hungry Mattie.

"Hey, girl!" Kelly cooed as she stroked the happy animal. "I bet you gotta go out, huh? We were gone a little longer than I'd planned." Kelly opened the back door for Mattie and watched as she ran into the backyard.

"I'm going to change into my sweats, if you don't mind. I want to be comfy and just cuddle with you on the couch. Does that sound okay?" I asked a smiling Kelly.

"That sounds wonderful. I'll make us some tea." She leaned in and kissed me gently, and I sighed deeply when it ended.

"Hurry back."

"I will." I ran upstairs and into Kelly's bedroom. I could hear her letting Mattie in and the sounds of the can opener opening Mattie's dinner. Kelly began to sing *The Christmas Song*, and I hummed along with her as I got changed.

I used the bathroom and trotted back downstairs to find Kelly had lit the tree, started a warm fire in the heart and had tea ready for us on the coffee table. She was sitting on the couch with her legs pulled under her and her head resting on her arm that was along the back of the couch.

"Hey there, sexy," I said in a hushed voice. "You waiting for someone?"

"Yeah," she said as she reached for my arm. "You." She pulled me onto the couch with her and held me in a long embrace.

I rested my head against her shoulder and pressed my cheek to her breast. She cradled me like an infant and I felt so incredibly loved.

She leaned down and kissed my head. "I love you, so much. I can't tell you how good it feels to say that to you." She kissed my forehead.

I looked into her dark blue eyes and pulled her head down into a long, fiery kiss. I heard her moan as I used my mouth to suck on her tongue. She glided her fingers through my hair as she explored the depths of my mouth. I could feel her desire building with each passing moment. I knew there wasn't going to be much talking tonight.

I didn't really care. My body was hers, and she could take it any way she wanted. And I knew tonight, she would.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

*Beep beep beep beep...*

I slammed my hand down on the snooze button of my alarm clock, hoping not to wake Susan. She felt so good snuggled into my body. Her thigh was thrown over my legs and her head rested on my chest. I could still smell our essence from last night. God, she was insatiable. My body has that hum going this morning, reminding me that it was put through my paces only a few hours ago. I lost count after three orgasms. Susan was an aphrodisiac to me. All I have to do is think about her and I'm aroused as all get out.

God!

I yawned and involuntarily began to stretch. Susan moved to hold tighter to me. The grip on my waist tensed then eased after a few moments. Today was my least favorite day of the year. I got the nastiest calls on this day, the *Return Day*, or 'the day after' as I like to refer to it.

I managed to wriggle out of Susan's grasp and headed to the bathroom. I needed a shower and caffeine, in that order.

I took a shower, threw on my robe, and went downstairs to make some tea. I wanted to check my voicemail before I got into my office. I liked to be forearmed on days like today. I let Mattie outside and watched as she ran around the back. The teakettle was still on the stove from last night, so I added fresh water and set it to boil.

Sitting at my kitchen table, I waited for the shrill cry that would signal the water was ready. I picked up my phone and dialed my office number. Grabbing my planner, I jotted down some notes from the messages I'd heard.

"Tina needs new fixtures...Ralph needs employees... Yeah, like I can fix that... Marta needed to see me..."

I broke the tip off my pencil and stopped writing as I heard the woman's voice on the machine.

Susan's mother wanted me to call her? Oh boy. This could get sticky.

I wrote her number down in my planner just as Susan came in to the kitchen.

"Good morning," she whispered as she kissed my cheek. "Whatcha doing?"

I closed my planner and hung up my phone and tried not to panic. The teakettle whistled and its shriek almost knocked me over. I was panicking big time.



"Uh... I was checking my um... voicemail to get a head start on the day... Do you um... want some tea?" I stammered badly, taking the pot off the hot stove.

"Kelly? What's wrong, honey?"

"Nothing... nothing. I just got a message from my... boss, and she's going to be coming in to check on the stores next week. That's all. I always get a bit rattled when she calls."

"Ah, I gotcha... Let me take your mind off of her for a few minutes," Susan husked sexily, and I had to stop her gently before I passed out from hyperventilation.

"As much as I'd love to, I really have to get going soon. Will you uh... need anything today? I'm really jealous you don't have to go back to work until tomorrow."

"I wish you could stay home today too, sweetheart. But no, I'll be fine. I'm actually going to lounge about, if that's okay."

"That's totally fine. My house is yours, you know that," I said, sounding more like myself. The shock of hearing her mother's voice was slowly dissipating. I crossed to her and gave her a large hug and kiss. "Mmm... good morning."

"That's better. I was beginning to wonder who you were earlier. You were so jumpy."

"I know, I'm sorry. You surprised me just as I finished with her message. I got spooked is all. Don't mind me, I think it's because someone's been keeping me awake long past my bedtime the past few nights. I might be a little sleep deprived."

"Oh, poor baby." She kissed me gently. "Okay, scoot. I'll get Mattie in and fix your tea while you get dressed."

"Thanks, darlin'." I kissed her again and quickly made my way upstairs into the bathroom where I promptly threw up. "Oh, God..." I rested my head against the toilet bowl and tried to calm my nerves.

## **Chapter Twenty-Seven**

After role-playing my call to Mrs. McGovern over a hundred times in the car, I walked into my office with a tumultuous headache; and it was only 8:30 in the goddamned morning. Not a good way to start December 26.

I looked to my phone and the message light was already flashing. "Jesus, I just cleared them!" I collapsed into my leather chair, rested my elbows on my desk, and put my head in my hands.

"God, this is going to be a long fucking day," I grumbled.

The phone rang, and I considered whether or not I should answer it. I wished I had Caller ID on this phone. I knew I had to answer it, I just didn't want to.

"Good Morning, Saks Regional Office, this is Kelly, how may I help you?" I cheerfully answered.

"Hi there, sexy."

I felt my insides shift at the sound of Susan's husky voice. "God, I'm glad it's you," I sighed. "How are you? Do you miss me already?"

"I'm missing you terribly, and you've only been gone about twenty minutes." I could just picture the pout on Susan's luscious lips.

"Mmm, I wish I was home. My head is killing me. I'm starting to see little birdies floating around my head," I chuckled mirthlessly.

"Honey, are you okay? You looked awfully pale when you left here."

"It'll pass. I just gotta get going and I'll be fine. Don't worry."

"If it involves you, I'll always worry, just know that right now." Susan's voice was calming my head.

"Thank you, baby. I hope you have a nice day. You're not upset that I didn't take you home are you?"

"Oh, right. Leaving me here in this delicious house with food and a television and whatever else at my disposal... Yeah, Kel, I'm really pissed."

I heard her chuckle. "Okay, I just wanted to make sure. Eat whatever, watch... you know whatever and... God, listen to me... just act like it was your home too, okay?" I stuttered.

"Thanks, sweetheart, I will. Thank you for your hospitality. I'd much rather be here than in my box of an apartment. I will have to go back tonight, though, I'm running out of undies." Susan whispered the last part in such a cute voice, I couldn't help but laugh.

"Okay, okay. I'll get you back there. Then we'll have to see about getting you some things that will stay at my place. Okay? I mean... that's not too much too soon is it?"

God, I sounded like such an idiot!

"No, honey. We're fine. I promise, if I was uncomfortable, I'd let you know. Frankly, I love the attention," she admitted.

"Good, I love giving it to you," I replied softly.

"Good."

"Okay, baby, I gotta run. I should be home around 5 or 5:30. Okay?"

"Okay, honey. I love you."

"I love you, too. Talk to you later."

"Bye."

"Bye, baby." I hung up the phone and felt tons better. I knew I still had to call Susan's mother, and I'd have bet a million bucks that Susan would kill me if she found out I did.

*Why me?*

The afternoon arrived without much angst from customers. There were the usual *"I'm not satisfied with my service. What will you do for me?"* sort of calls. I expected those, and just laughed at the ridiculousness of those people. They asked for so much, sometimes it made my head spin.

I looked at my watch and found it was already 2 in the afternoon. I still needed to eat lunch, but the call to Susan's mom was becoming a huge weight on my shoulders. I sighed loudly into the air as I reclined in my chair with my hands behind my head and finally decided to call her.

I opened my planner to get her number and dialed the number she'd given. As her phone began to ring, I felt my nerves kick in once more.

"Hello?" I heard her say. Her voice sounded very much like Susan's.

"Um... hi, Mrs. McGovern?"

"Yes?"

"This is Kelly Cavanaugh; you left a message on my machine regarding your daughter, Susan. The woman on the news with me." I swallowed audibly.

"Oh, my God, yes. Then, she *is* my daughter?"

"Yes, they're the same person."

"Thank you for calling!"

I could hear the relief in her voice. "You're welcome. What can I do for you?"

"Well, Miss Cavanaugh, I'm sure that Susan has told you about our... uh... situation."

"Yes, she told me what happened. What does that have to do with me?" I wanted her to squirm a bit. I wasn't so sure I wanted to risk hurting Susan without knowing just what her mother wanted.

"I know I have absolutely no right to ask anything of her, but I really would like to see her." I could hear the strain in her voice. "I'd like to meet with you and talk about this rather than talk over the phone. Is there some place I can meet you?"

"Well, I'm in my office today. Would you be able to come to Saks? My office is within the Lawrence Street store."

*What am I doing?*

"Of course. It's only a few miles from my home. I can be there in fifteen minutes, if that's okay with you."

"Yes, that would be fine. Just go to any of the counters and tell them you have an appointment with me. They'll direct you to my office."

"Thank you, Miss Cavanaugh, I really appreciate it."

"I'll see you soon, then."

"I'll be expecting you. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

"Oh, Kelly. I hope you know what you're doing." I said into my hands as I hung up the phone.

I busied myself for the interim until I heard a knock on my door. Opening it, I found one of my employees, Therese, and a woman who had to be Susan's mother. They looked so much alike, it was uncanny.

"Kelly, this woman has an appointment with you?" Therese questioned.

"Yes, thank you, Therese." Therese smiled and walked away, leaving me with Susan's mother. "Mrs. McGovern?"

"Yes, Miss Cavanaugh. Thank you for seeing me." We politely shook hands.

"You're welcome." I gestured to my office. "Please, come in and sit down."

"Thank you." She looked around the office as I watched her closely. The resemblance between her and her daughter was remarkable. She noticed me staring at her and I flushed in embarrassment. "Pardon me for staring, but you look so much like your daughter. It's really amazing."

"I'd hoped she'd look more like me. Her father had some traits that just wouldn't have looked good on a woman," she said with a smile, which I returned easily.

"Well, now that we're here, what can I do to help you, ma'am?" I leaned forward on my desk and laced my fingers together. I held my intimidating pose for several moments, waiting for her to start. She began to fidget with the strap on the purse in her lap.

"Well, as I started telling you on the phone, I'd really like to see my daughter. I was hoping that perhaps you could help arrange a meeting."

"Well, I can't guarantee that she'd want to see you or her father. I'm not sure if you have any idea where she's been for the last five years, but it hasn't been a pleasant life for her. In fact, I'd say she's come back from living in hell." I really wanted to make sure she knew I wasn't happy with what she'd done to the woman I've grown to love very much.

"No, you're right. I don't know where she's been, but believe me I've been looking for her. I'd given up all hope until I saw her on the news." She began to cry.

*Oh, no. Why did she have to cry?*

I leaned over my desk to my box of Kleenex and handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said as she wiped at her eyes with the tissue.

I remained unbending, even though I was starting to feel bad for her. "Mrs. McGovern, Susan has been through hell and is now finally piecing her life back together. She's become a damn fine woman without any help from you or her father."

"I know... I know..." she sobbed. "It was my fault... I couldn't fight him... He... he was so... well, I just never could stand up for myself... I dutifully stood by his side and it cost me my daughter... I was so selfish... I miss her so much... God, I'm so sorry," she sobbed desperately, breaking my heart.

"All I can do is ask if she'll see you both. I can't promise anything. She's a very special person in my life, and I won't do anything to hurt her, ma'am. Not even for you," I warned.

"You and she are... together, then?" she questioned through her tears.

"Yes, Susan is my partner. I love her very much. She is one of the most incredible women I've ever met."

"I'm glad she has you," she sniffled. "It won't be me and my husband, though. It'll just be me. Jonathon...he uh... passed away last January."

Oh, God.

"I'm very sorry, Mrs. McGovern. Can I ask what happened?" I asked with a soft voice.

"Heart attack. He worked himself to death," she said very flatly. "It's all he really cared about. His job... his status... money... I was such a fool to honor his lack of humanity... Miss Cavanaugh..."

"Please, call me Kelly."

"Thank you. Kelly, I'm not at all proud of the woman I was, but I've never stopped thinking about Susan, not for one day. She is my only child, and I love her very much. I didn't have much when I married her father, and I was afraid of losing everything by going against him. If I could go back and change how things went, I would in a heartbeat."

"I'm sure you would, ma'am. Well, like I said, I'll ask Susan if she'll meet with you. That's all I can do."

"Kelly, thank you. You have no idea what this means to me. I've been separated from my daughter for far too long."

I thought about being able to spend even one more day with my mother and my eyes welled with tears. "Yes, I think I have a good idea of what you're feeling. When would you like this meeting?"

"Whenever she'll see me."

"Okay, I'll talk to her for you."

"Thank you, Kelly. Thank you for meeting with me. You've given me a ray of hope that I've not had in years."

"You're welcome, Mrs. McGovern."

"Please, Kelly, call me Elise. Mrs. McGovern was my mother-in-law, and I never really liked that woman." She chuckled, trying to lighten the mood.

It was easy to see where Susan got her sense of humor. I couldn't help but smile at her.

"All right, Elise. I'll call you after I talk to Susan."

"Thank you, again."

"You're welcome. I'll walk you out; I need to grab some lunch anyway."

"That'd be great."

We both stood, and I walked her over to the door. I opened the door to find Susan standing on the other side, just about to knock. Her face changed from joyous to shock when she saw the woman in my office.

Under Susan's scrutinizing stare, I was extremely uncomfortable all of a sudden. She looked back at the woman in my office who hadn't moved since she saw Susan.

"Mother?" Susan choked back a mix of several emotions.

Her mother took a step towards her. "Yes, Susan, it's me."

Susan's expression became one of anger. "What do you want?"

Elise's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Susan. I've been looking for you for so..."

"Don't!" Susan growled, then turned to me. "What are you doing, Kelly? Trying to rip my heart out?"

I attempted to calm her. "No, baby, please. She called me after seeing us on the news. She's been looking for you."

"Whose side are you on? That woman kicked me out and left me to die!" Susan angrily pointed at Elise, who had begun crying in earnest.

"Please, come in here." I gestured to my office. "Please." I pleaded with her with my eyes.

She sighed heavily and walked past her mother and me and stood in the far corner of my office.

"Susan, I'm so sorry. Please... can I have a few minutes to talk to you?" her mother begged.

"Why should I give you anything? You just stood there and said nothing while Daddy threw me out. You did *nothing* to help me."

Elise sobbed as I watched the two uncomfortably. "I'm sorry, Susan... I'm so sorry," Elise kept repeating.

The silence was killing me. The way Susan was staring at me, I felt like I had betrayed her. The only sound in the last few minutes was Susan's mother crying. This day just wasn't getting any better. My headache had now returned in full force.

## **Chapter Twenty-Eight**

What the hell did Kelly think she was doing anyway? How could she? I wasn't ready to see my mother.

I didn't want to see her. But now here I was. Sitting in Kelly's office having a fucking stare down with Kelly *and* my mother. I just came to have lunch with her, for fuck sake! I thought I'd surprise her by taking a cab in, and then hang out at ForOthers until she was ready to go home. Well, it looks as if the person surprised here was me.

Fuck.

I looked at the woman who had given me both life and death, in a manner of speaking. God, she looked much older than I remembered. Her face was very drawn and her hair had grayed. I wonder how Daddy was.

No!

I didn't want to talk to either of them. I made it out of hell without them, and I didn't need them now.

"I don't need you," I gritted out. I started to pace in the back of the office like a caged animal. Kelly's eyes hadn't left mine since we'd walked in here. Even when I wasn't looking at her, I could feel the heat of her stare. Why had she done this?

Dammit, I wasn't ready for this!

I heard my mother's voice talking to me. "Please, Susan. All I'm asking for is a little time to explain things to you. Please."

I looked up at her face and felt the tears she was crying. I knew those tears quite intimately since I'd cried plenty of them myself. Why did I still have to care?

I could feel my resolve cracking. I guess it would do me good to finally find out what the hell happened five years ago. Why did they decide that social status was more important than their child? Why was it so easy for them to toss me out like the trash? Why did they never look for me? I think I wanted to know. So, yeah, I'd give her the meeting... for me... not her, but for me.

"Fine. When?" I was curt and to the point.

My mother and Kelly both looked surprised that I'd made that decision. I eyed them, waiting for an answer before I changed my mind.

"How about tomorrow night?" my mother suggested.

"Fine. Where and what time?" I crossed my arms over my chest.

"Well, you could come to the house if... if you wanted. How about, around seven?" The uncertainty in her voice was good for me to hear. I wanted her to feel like I'd felt the last five years.



"Fine, I'll be there."

"I'll take you if you want," Kelly offered quietly. Our eyes stayed locked on each other and remained that way until I heard my mother speak again.

"Thank you, Susan. Thank you so much." She looked at me with such relief in her eyes. "You have no idea what this means to me." She looked at Kelly and me once more. "I'll see you tomorrow at the house around seven, then." She wiped her eyes with a tissue and left the office.

Kelly and I were left alone and I had no idea what to say to her. I was so angry with her for stepping in where she didn't belong.

"Susan... I'm sorry that it happened this way. I wanted to talk to you first before you saw her. I had no idea you'd be coming here." She was always so genuine when she spoke.

"Yeah, well, I guess we're even, because I never in my wildest dreams ever expected to see my mother coming out of your office." I just stared at her, not really knowing what else to say. I just needed to get out of there and be by myself. "I'm gonna go home," I said quietly as I moved towards the door. Kelly reached for my arm and I pulled away.

Kelly attempted to stop my hasty exit. "Susan, please... I'll take you. Just give me a couple minutes."

"No." I looked at her concerned face. "I really just want to be alone right now." I could see the hurt in her eyes, but right now I couldn't think about that. I had so much else to think about. "If you want to drive me tomorrow, that's fine, but I can't guarantee that the mood I'll be in will be light and cheery."

"I don't care about that. I just want to be with you. Please."

I nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

"Okay."

I watched her swallow convulsively. I had to get out of there.

"I am so sorry," she choked out.

"That seems to be the word of the hour, doesn't it?" We shared another glance and I watched as the tears began to spill down her cheeks.

I definitely had to leave, and fast. I looked at her solemn face once more, then left her office and headed towards the train station. Tomorrow was going to be one hell of a day.

I made my way to the station in time to catch the four o'clock Metra to take me home.

Home.

*Jesus, what did that word mean to me? Oh, Carol, I wish you were here right now. I'm so confused. I thought I'd found everything in Kelly; now my mother has come back into the picture and thrown a monkey wrench at me. What could she possibly say that would change the way I feel about them? I have no idea what to say to my father without spitting in his face. And why didn't he come with her?*

*God, please give me control over my actions tomorrow night. I just don't know what I'm doing anymore.*

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

I checked my clock again. This time it read three forty-five. I wasn't going to be able to sleep, no matter what. My head was filled with much too much to relax. Tonight, I was going to talk to my parents.

My parents. That's a funny term to use. Aren't they the ones that were supposed to love their children unconditionally? Ha! That was a laugh.

Even though, I was still angry with Kelly, I was glad she'd be going with me. I hated going to bed without her. My sofa bed wasn't even in the same category as her bed, or her arms. I threw the bedclothes aside and began to pace in my apartment.

"Dammit! Why did she have to do this? If I'd wanted to see my parents, I'd have called them myself. Now I'm going to my old house to listen to their reasons for kicking me to the curb."

I walked over to the window and peered out at the night sky. The stars shone brightly above, as if they hadn't a care in the world. What I wouldn't give to trade places with just one of them.

I fell onto my bed with a thud and groaned in frustration.

"Just a few hours of sleep. That's all I'm asking for," I pleaded. "How about thirty minutes?"

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

God, I miss having her here.

I knew this was going to lead to problems. I should've just told Susan about her mother's call yesterday when I heard the damn message in the first place. Now I'm in bed, alone, and I can't sleep because I know that she's hurting, but she won't even talk to me. I don't know what I was expecting when I called her tonight. I guess something other than the cold shoulder she gave me.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

*"Hello?" Susan answered in a not so friendly tone.*

*No one else would be calling her. It hurt to realize she didn't want to talk to me.*

*"Hey, baby, it's me."*

*"Hello."*

*The silence was deafening.*

*"What are you up to?"*

*"Oh, nothing much. Just trying to figure out what to say to my parents now that you've brought us together again."*

*Ouch. "Susan, your mother called me. She asked me to call her back, so I did." I wasn't much convinced by my own argument.*

*"So you've said. Don't you think you could've let me know that she called you before you called her back? Did you ever think about that?"*

*"Well, they say hindsight is 20/20." That wasn't a smart thing to say.*

*"Your boss isn't really coming is she?" Susan's voice was so flat.*

*Fuck. "No, she isn't."*

*"I didn't think so. After seeing you with my mother, it kind of made sense to me why you were so edgy around me this morning."*

*"I'm sorry," I said again.*

*"What exactly are you sorry for? You keep saying those words, but I'd like to know what it is you are apologizing for."*

*"For everything. For not telling you that your mother called. For meeting with her before you had a chance to tell me if it was all right or not."*

*"How about lying to me?"*

*"Yes, that too. Baby, I just wanted to help."*

*Susan became silent again. I didn't like it when she was quiet. I just didn't know what she was thinking. All I knew was that she was pissed.*

*And pissed at me, in a big way.*

*"Just do me a favor: in the future, when you want to help me, just think about the consequences before you do anything, all right? I was nowhere near ready to deal with this yet."*

*I felt like a child being scolded. Jesus, I made a fucking mistake!*

*"I won't make decisions that involve your life like that again, I promise. Just, please forgive me. I hate feeling like this." I could feel my voice starting to crack from the emotions wrenching my heart.*

*"I gotta go to bed, Kelly. I have a lot to think about... Good night."*

*"Goodnight... sweet..." Susan hung up. "...dreams."*

*\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\**

That was one of the worst phone calls I'd ever had. I guess I didn't realize the impact this would have on her. I was stupid to do this.

Stupid!

I rolled over again and tried to get comfortable. It was four in the morning, and there was no way I was going to sleep any time soon.

Oh fuck. Me and my big mouth.

## **Chapter Twenty-Nine**

Kelly picked me up at six forty-five. I knew she'd left work early, as I had, to get ready for the meeting with my parents. She pulled up in front of the office and waited for me to get in the car. I opened the car door and sat inside the warm vehicle.

"Hi," Kelly greeted.

"Hi," I said back. "Are you sure you want to come with me? I don't think this is going to be a very happy occasion."

She took my hand and kissed my knuckles. "I want to be there for you, Susan. You can still be mad at me, but I want you to know that I'll be there if you need me. Okay?" Her blue eyes pleaded with my heart and won.

"Okay," I said quietly as I squeezed her hand.

We drove the rest of the way to my parents' home in a more comfortable silence this time. I was extremely nervous, and I could tell Kelly was too. We pulled into the driveway and turned off the engine. Kelly squeezed my hand once more and got out of the car. She came around to my side, opened my door for me, and offered her hand.

I took her hand and stood taking in the view of my childhood home for the first time in five years, not counting our drive by a few weeks earlier. I could feel my legs turn rubbery, and Kelly steadied my stumble with ease.

"Are you sure you're all right? We can tell her another time, sweetheart."

I shook my head. "No, I want to get this nightmare over with. Once and for all." I felt the strength return to my body and walked with confidence to the front door.

Kelly was soon next to me as I rang the doorbell. Within a few moments, my mother answered the door.

"Hello, Susan. Thank you again for meeting with me."

"Mother," I said with a coldness I'd forgotten I had.

"Hello, Kelly," she said to my partner.

"Good evening, Mrs. McGovern," Kelly greeted.

"Please, come inside." My mother stepped aside and allowed us space to walk into the foyer of the house.

"May I take your coats?" my mother asked politely.

"We won't be staying long. Where's Daddy? Is he waiting to jump out at me before he tells me

what a disgusting person I've become?" I asked, looking for the angry, disappointed glare I remembered so clearly from our last good bye.

Mother looked at me strangely and gestured to the living room. "Won't you sit down, and I'll get us some tea."

I felt Kelly's hand at the small of my back as we walked into my living room. The furniture was all the same. The neutral tones that covered the walls, the grand piano in the corner, the grandfather clock, they were all the same as they were when I left. My parents never could get into change, of any kind, apparently.

Mother went into the kitchen and I heard her getting tea for us. I could feel the tenseness of Kelly's muscles through her touch. At least I wasn't the only one uncomfortable with this. I couldn't wait to see Daddy's face when he saw my girlfriend sitting in his living room, holding my hand.

Bastard.

Kelly looked down and offered me a smile. I nervously smiled back as I waited for my mother to return.

"Are you doing okay?" Kelly whispered.

"Peachy," I said sarcastically, and then apologized when I saw the hurt on her face. "I'm sorry, I'm just really nervous."

"It's okay." She squeezed my hand again as my mother entered the room with a tray.

She put the tray on the mahogany coffee table and began passing out saucers and cups. She was fidgeting with them. Apparently, we were all a little nervous.

I heard her take a deep breath, and then she looked at me. She took a Kleenex out of her sweater pocket as the tears began to fall.

"Susan, before you say anything at all, I just want you to listen to me for a few seconds so I can get out what needs to be said." We exchanged looks. "Okay?"

I nodded, but couldn't keep the indifferent look off my face.

"Okay... when your father and I first met, I was poor, with practically nothing to my name. As you know, my mom passed away when I was young, and I pretty much had to rely on my own devices to survive."

"Well, we have that in common now, don't we?" Kelly looked at me and I put my hands up.

"Sorry! Please continue."

"Anyway, your father had his own business, he was handsome, and he took care of me. When we were married I knew I'd never have to worry about anything ever again. I lived my life in his shadow. I played golf with the other wives of the club, I went to the restaurants he liked to eat at, I even went to his church because I didn't want to stir the waters, so to speak. We lived this life for a long time, until you were born.

"When you were born, everything changed for me. I finally had something that was truly mine. I don't mean a possession, but I'd created you and you counted on me for everything. To eat, to sleep, to be warm... You get the idea. Well, everything was great until..."

"Until, I wanted to be something you both weren't: my own person."

"Yes. You went against everything that was taught to me. I was taught that men were with women, women were with men, and that was it. Anything else was an abomination. End of story."

"Yeah, end of story," I mumbled.

"But it wasn't!" my mother exclaimed, surprising me. "I envied you so much, Susan. You wanted to live a life that *you* wanted, not some life that was already drawn out and just waiting for you to be inserted into the picture. You wanted Susan's life. I was so incredibly jealous that you had the will I could only dream of having."

"What do you mean? You had everything, Mother. What didn't you have?"

"I didn't have a voice of my own." I watched as the tears poured down her face. Kelly's eyes were welling with tears as well. "Your father had an image to uphold. He had the club, his clients, and his high society friends. All of which ruled his life. He didn't care what I wanted. He gave me what he thought I should have, and I was supposed to be happy with that."

"And you weren't?" I was stunned by her admission. She had never seemed unhappy when we were younger.

"Not until you came into my life. When we spent time together, it was real, more real than anything I'd ever had." I felt the tears begin to well in my own eyes. "You were my friend as well as my daughter, Susan. I knew what we shared was genuine and not fake like my other friendships. That's why it hurt so much when you were gone."

"Then why the hell did you let him get away with it?"

"I was afraid of losing everything I had."

"So you settled for the material things in your calculated life, while you turned your back on the one thing that made your life real and whole?"

"Yes," she said as she hung her head in shame.

"Why, Mother? Why didn't you stick up for me? Why didn't you just tell Daddy that I wasn't wrong? Why did you let him throw me away like that?" I started to scream. "Why, Mama? Tell me!"

"Because I was a coward!" she cried out. "I knew as soon as I stuck up for you, your father would turn away from me just as he had from you. I was selfish and scared, and I let him run my life." She began to sob, which set off an anger in me towards my father.

"Did you ever tell him that? Does he know how you feel? Does he know how he kept you imprisoned in your own home?"

"No, I never told him," she sobbed quietly. "By the time I got up my nerve, it was too late." She looked at me and I felt a kick to my gut.

"What do you mean, too late? Mama, where's Daddy?" I looked at her and she wouldn't meet my gaze. "Where is that bastard? He needs to know what he's done to me *and* to you. Stop hiding from him, please. Where is he?"

"Your father's gone, Susan."

"What do you mean gone? Where'd he go?"

"He's dead, honey."

Kelly's hand tightened around mine as I heard my mother's words. "Dead?" I whispered in surprise. "When? How?" I asked dumbly.

"He died last winter of a heart attack. I buried him in All Saints Cemetery on January 12th." Her gaze was soft, but her pain was so evident. The pain wasn't for him though, it was for me.

I sat dumbstruck. My father was dead.

My father was dead.

I launched my body off the couch and ran towards the foyer and out the door. I didn't know where I was going, but I knew I had to get out of there.

"Susan!" Kelly shouted from the doorway.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*



Oh, God!

I knew she was going to take this badly, but I had no idea it would be this bad. I could do nothing as I watched her leap from the couch and dash out the front door. Her mother and I quickly followed to the door, but she was well on her way down the street by the time we looked out. Her hurt would carry her feet pretty far, I was certain; I was also certain that I didn't want anything to happen to her.

"I'll be back," I told her mother as I ran to my car to search for Susan.

I drove slowly through the neighborhood looking for her. She couldn't have gone too far. I looked through the dark streets, hoping to find her. I picked up my cell phone and dialed her number, willing her to pick it up. I heard it ring several times and almost hung up before I heard her answer.

"Susan! Honey?" I heard her gasping for breath. My heart broke hearing her sobs.

"Baby, talk to me. Where are you? Let me come and get you."

I waited a few more minutes but she didn't speak. "Susan? Can you hear me?" I wondered if she'd hit the talk button by mistake.

"He's dead, Kelly," she sobbed. "My fucking father's dead!"

"I know, sweetheart. I'm so sorry." I waited a few seconds and asked again. "Honey, where are you? Let me pick you up before you catch cold out there."

"I'm on Stevens. I'm walking towards St. Mary's."

"I'll be there in two minutes, baby. Just be careful and don't walk in the street. I don't want anyone hitting you by accident."

I turned the car around and headed towards the church, when I quickly spotted her small form walking along the side of the road. "I can see you, baby. I'm just about behind you."

She turned around and saw me coming and ended our connection. I tossed my phone onto the passenger seat and pulled over to pick her up. Putting the car in park, I flew out of the car to her, wrapping my arms around her as she collapsed against me. I held her close as she wept bitterly about her father's passing. I cooed softly in her ear, letting her know I would do anything I could to make this better. I wasn't sure what I was going to do, but I'd be damned if I didn't do something.

Susan pulled away from me and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her coat. "I'll never have closure with him, now. I'll never know anything about what happened... how he felt, what he thought... nothing." Her expression hardened and her voice held no emotion. "He'll never know what he put me through."

She turned and went to the car and I followed to make sure she got in. I closed her door as she got inside, then went around the driver's side and sat down. "Do you want to go back to your mother's house?" I asked.

She shook her head frantically. "No, I can't see her any more tonight." Her stare was straight away and very distant.

"Okay. Let me call her to tell her you're safe." I got no reply from Susan, so I picked up my phone, dialed her mother's number, and told her I would be taking Susan back to my house.

After we said our good-byes, I closed the connection and turned to Susan, who hadn't moved since she got in the car.

"I'm taking you back to my house, okay? I don't think you should be alone right now."

She said nothing as I turned the car around. I drove the rest of the way home asking Susan questions that she didn't answer. She just stared through the windshield at the road. I knew she was probably in shock and just needed some time to let this absorb.

As I pulled into the garage, I tried to gauge Susan's mood. Would she want to go to bed right away, or talk, or watch television, or just sit and do nothing? I had no clue what I was doing, I only knew my love was hurting and I had to do what I could to help her.

We walked into the house and Mattie greeted us as usual. Surprising me, Susan got down on her knees and hugged Mattie close. She wept into Mattie's coat as the dog just stayed close, feeling her pain. I knelt down next to them and waited to see what would come next. I rubbed Susan's back as she cried into my pup.

"Let's get your coat off, honey, okay? You're gonna get too warm in here."

She mechanically pulled away from Mattie and shrugged out of her coat. I grabbed the garment and stood, walked into the kitchen, hung her coat on a chair, and added water to the teakettle. I knew some warm tea would feel good going down.

Susan was still on the floor petting Mattie who graciously accepted her attention. She stopped rubbing Mattie's tummy and looked for me. "Kelly?"

I came out of the kitchen and back into the hallway by her. "I'm right here, baby."

"It won't always feel like this, right?" Her voice sounded so childlike it broke my heart all over again.

I shook my head. "No, baby. Every day will get a little bit easier. It'll never fully go away, but today is probably going to hurt the most." I reached over to her and she molded her body against me. As her sobs lessened, she stood up and walked into the living room and sat on the couch.

"I'm making some tea. Do you want some?" I asked, hoping to get something into her stomach. I doubted she would accept any food at this point.

She nodded mutely and leaned back against the couch cushions. This was definitely going to be a long night.

[Concluded in Part 4](#)

### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ A Saving Solace ~

by DS Bauden

**Disclaimer:** None really necessary, just the latest story to be extracted from my brain. This was formerly titled "Home" for those of you familiar with my work. There will be scenes of a mature nature in these pages, including two women making love. You know the rules - you don't like it, don't read it. Carry on.

**Thank you:** A big thank you goes out to my beta reader, Day, who has slaved over this tale and made it even better. You rock, darlin.' Thank you so much!

A Saving Solace  
[DS Bauden](#)

### Chapter Thirty

Kelly watched over me most of the night. I had no control of the tears anymore. I watched television shows one after the other without recalling one thing that I'd seen. My body felt so numb from everything I'd heard tonight, I wasn't sure how much more I could take. In the short space of two days my lover lied to me, my abandoning mother re-entered my life, and I found out my father was dead.

I wanted to be dead.

It was too much to take in. Kelly stopped asking questions because I kept snapping at her. It came so naturally that I couldn't stop it. I know she's hurt, but she hurt me, too. I may be acting selfishly, but right now, nothing else mattered. I watched a movie once where a battered child asked someone if life was always this hard. If I were to answer that question tonight, I'd have to say, 'Yes, it's always this hard.'

Kelly asked me if I wanted to go to the cemetery tomorrow to say good-bye to my father. I suppose it wasn't a bad idea. I could see his grave and find some kind of closure there. I didn't know. I was just so tired I couldn't even think straight.

*I'll just close my eyes for a little while and I'll feel better when I wake up*, I thought to myself as I felt sleep pull me under.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

Susan passed out on the couch. When I couldn't wake her, I carried her to my bedroom. She struggled only a little as I placed her on the bed. I heard her murmuring, but had no idea what she'd said. I took off her shoes, but left her clothing on so I wouldn't disturb her. I draped the blankets over her sleeping form and turned out the light.

I quickly changed for bed and got under the covers with her, moving a bit closer to her to feel the warmth that I'd missed so desperately last night. I felt her roll over towards me and instinctively wrap herself around me. I knew she wouldn't have done it if she were conscious. She had every right to be angry with me.

Tonight I would just hold her gently as we surrendered into sleep; I knew once morning came, she would be a different Susan.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

The sun pierced the darkness that had held me asleep for several hours. My body still hurt, but I felt more rested. I turned to find Kelly still asleep next to me. I studied her face and wondered what she dreamt while she slept. I don't remember one dream I had last night other than Kelly sweeping me into her arms and taking me to bed. Looking down at myself, I decided that actually did happen while I was watching through a sleep-induced haze.

I looked at the clock and it showed nine o'clock. Rubbing my eyes, I stretched and swung my legs over the side of the bed to stand. I heard Kelly move, and her yawn told me that she was awake as well.

"Good morning," she said quietly.

"Hi," I said back.

"How are you feeling?"

I shrugged noncommittally at her. "I really don't feel anything," I replied honestly.

"I can understand that," she said somberly, and walked into the bathroom.

When she returned from the bathroom, I agreed to go to the cemetery. What was it going to hurt, right?

Right?

It couldn't hurt any worse than it already did.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

As we made our way through the cemetery, I matched Susan's pace as it slowed. I could feel the trepidation going through her. This place probably wasn't somewhere she'd visited too often, whereas I came here all the time. For some reason, I felt my mother was closer here. Anytime I would find myself in a bad way, I'd just sit next to her stone and talk to her. It always seemed to calm me. I spent many afternoons just sitting next to her grave. I know she knew I was there.

I even felt the hugs she sent.

If there was a way to lessen Susan's pain, I'd do it in a heartbeat. Finding out the man you once called Daddy, the man who turned around and sent you away because you were gay, was the man you just found out was dead... well there's no way to prepare for that. It had been surprising that she'd agreed to the meeting at all, and the shock of hearing of her father's death was just too much. I'd never seen someone run so fast. I loved my mother like no other and it killed me when she died, but Susan was facing demons I couldn't even fathom. My mother never sent me away, and I never knew my father, but Susan and I were definitely even where pain was concerned. I just hoped she could see that and come to me for comfort.

I hadn't seen her head lift since we exited the car. She just stared at the ground as we walked through the wet grass. I knew she was still mad at me. I hoped that one day soon it'd blow over, though. I had hoped that by seeing her mother, things would get better for her.

Boy, did I blow it.

We followed the map the caretaker had given us until we reached her father's headstone.

*Jonathon Edward McGovern*

*April 5, 1940 - January 10, 2000*

*Father-Husband-Friend*

I watched the many expressions that washed over Susan's face as she read the stone's inscription. I wanted to reach out to her, but waited for an invitation. "Susan?" I attempted.

"I want to be alone," she said stiffly.

"Baby, are you sure? I know what you must be going through," I consoled. I took a couple of steps towards her, only to have Susan stop me in my tracks.

"Don't!" she growled, and extended her arm out with her palm facing me. "Don't you come near me! You have *no* idea what you've put me through!" Susan shouted. My eyes widened in shock, as I was completely flabbergasted at her outburst. "We said we loved each other! That means I'm supposed to be able to *trust* you. You had *no right* to go behind my back! Wha.. wha... what was it, your good deed for the year? Help the poor homeless worker reunite with her long lost family? Well, happy fucking reunion, Kelly!" Susan screamed, her red face filled with rage and betrayal.

I tried to cutoff her ranting. "I made a terrible mistake and I'm sorry, but Susan, you can't believe that..."

"I can't believe what? That you weren't doing your duty for the community? To make yourself a better person? You take a young girl under your wing... invite her over for dinner... seduce her with your money... fuck her... make her believe you loved her... help her feed other destitute people at a soup kitchen that you personally funded out of the goodness of your heart... then go one step further and reunite her with her parents that threw her away like garbage?" Susan accented these points by poking me in the chest with each accusation. "What's not to believe? You hear about shit like this all the time. I just never thought I'd see it coming from you." Susan's breath was labored as the tears ran down her cheeks.

My own eyes filled with unshed tears as her words struck me like slaps in the face.

"You know I didn't do all of that because of some need to fulfill a civic duty. It's crazy to even think that!" I stopped to take a deep breath and looked into her eyes. "I *do* love you, Susan... and I know you're upset. Believe me, I know what you're going through." I tried to calm her down with softer words.

"You don't have a *clue* of what I'm going through! You weren't thrown out of your own home by the people you loved the most. You didn't have to sleep in shit with rats for three years, not knowing where your next meal was coming from." Her voice was low and accusatory while the tears stained her face. "You didn't get raped because you had shoes that fit some guy that was

passing through the alley. I had NOTHING left in me, Kelly, NOTHING! That life took everything from me when I was only twenty years old! How the fuck could you possibly know what I'm going through?"

I felt my anger reach its limit and couldn't stop the words that flew from my mouth. "How could I possibly know, huh? Let's see, you had nothing at twenty? How about being fifteen and watching your mother, the one person you loved more than life itself, deteriorate into nothing before your eyes without being able to do anything! How about trying to feed her because she can't do it for herself because her arms don't fucking work and then turning around to find that she's vomiting everything you'd just fed her all over herself because her stomach won't digest anything anymore! OR how about having to wipe her ass because she'd shit her pants because her whole fucking body was breaking down more and more with each day! " I glared icily into her eyes through my tears and tried to control my shaking body. "How about watching as her last breath was taken from her body, turning her the ugliest gray you've ever seen... You're right, Susan, I don't have a FUCKING clue what you're going through. I'm just an asshole, right? A fucking bitch with no heart, just a lot of cash doing my civic duty? You know what, Susan..." *Fuck you!* I couldn't bear to say the rest, so I ran towards my safety zone-away from Susan and her father's grave.

"Kelly!" I heard her scream, but I couldn't stop. I just kept running until I knew she was far from sight. I hadn't hurt this much since my mother left me. I knew what abandonment felt like, no matter what she fucking thought.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

"Kelly!" The scream ripped through my throat as I fell to the ground. "Oh, God, what have I done?" I cried miserable tears with my face in the wet grass. My whole body hurt from our exchange. I'd never meant to say all of that. God, it just hurt so much to see... to see...

I looked up through the angry tears in my eyes and glared at my father's headstone. I felt the rage within me as it tore through my chest.

"YOU BASTARD!" I sobbed as I turned on the ground to kick his stone. "You will not take any more from me, DO YOU UNDERSTAND! You took everything from me before, but no more, Daddy. I won't allow you to take Kelly from me, too. You won't win this time!"

I would die first.

I choked back the sobs that desperately sought release. I had to find Kelly. That was the only thing I was sure of at the moment.

"Kelly!"

## Chapter Thirty-One

I sat on my mother's stone for at least a half an hour after our confrontation. I couldn't believe what had happened. I just wept as I stroked the cement engraving of my mother's name.

*Dorothy Ruth Cavanaugh*

*September 24, 1955 - December 28, 1990*

*Mother - Daughter - Friend - Angel*

"What I wouldn't give to have you with me right now. I need you so badly," I sobbed. "What do I do now?" I was crying so hard I couldn't think clearly.

I felt like the last few weeks didn't matter. My love for Susan didn't matter.

Nothing mattered.

*How could Susan think so little of me? How could she think so little of what we'd shared?*

My mind was racing a million thoughts a second. The tears hadn't stopped since I'd started to run to my safety cocoon. I couldn't breathe; I felt like someone had knocked me down, picked me back up, and then knocked me down again at least a thousand times. My heart was hurting beyond words. I never would have thought I'd be capable of being so cold towards her. God, I loved her with my life! I laid so much of myself out there for her. For what? She turned around and stabbed my heart in places I didn't even know existed.

This is why I stopped extending myself. This is why I stopped dating. This is why I didn't share my mother's pain with her. I knew this would eventually happen.

*That's all women do to me: they love me, and then break me. I just can't do this anymore.*

"I just can't," I whispered through my tears

My phone rang again, or I should say vibrated, against my hip. I contemplated not answering it considering my state of mind, but I knew that I probably should. I reached through my layers of clothing to pluck it open and answer. I wiped my eyes and stared at the number in confusion. Expecting it to be Susan again, my mind was dismayed by new possibilities. I took in a much-needed breath then hit the talk button. Nothing could have prepared me for this.



"Hello?" I answered shakily, and then heard their greeting. "Yes, this is Kelly Cavanaugh."

I listened to the voice on the other end, and my heart stopped cold.

"What room is she in?" I closed my eyes in silent prayer as the tears rolled down my face. "ICU #4? Okay... yes, thank you for calling."

I quickly closed the connection and looked down. "Oh, Momma." I sadly shook my head and ran to find my car.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

Walking around for nearly an hour, I couldn't find Kelly anywhere. I knew she was hurting, and I desperately needed to find her, to apologize. I was so wrong in yelling at her the way that I did. I had no idea she'd been through such hell with her mother. If she had told me, I might not have reacted the way I had to her.

Who was I kidding? I was out of control. Plain and simple. Now I've wounded the woman I supposedly loved with all my heart. I never knew such cruelty could be directed towards her from my own mouth.

*God, I am such an asshole.*

"Kelly!" I shouted again, hoping to find her. I was certain I should have found her by now. I thought she'd have gone to her mother's grave. The caretaker I found on the grounds was kind enough to show me where her plot was. But here I was, and Kelly was nowhere to be found. I looked down to the engraving on her mother's stone. The date of her death brought a new realization to me.

December 28th.

*Jesus, that's today!*

I'm even more of an asshole now. I'm sure she was feeling incredibly sad and vulnerable with this being the anniversary of her mother's death. And I added to that nice, excruciating pain. I can't imagine how she feels right now.

*Nice going, Susan.*

No wonder she wanted to come here today. This revelation brought on tears, and I felt about two inches tall. I wouldn't be surprised if Kelly never wanted to see me again.

*I think I've just fucked up the best thing that's ever happened to me.*

"God, Kelly, I'm so sorry. I had no idea," I whispered to myself sadly.

The rain had begun to fall and the temperature was starting to chill my bones. Kelly was here somewhere; of this I was certain. I swear I could feel her. But I knew that I had to leave and find a way back home soon

I reached in my pocket, again tracing the antenna of my cell phone with my finger. I tried calling Kelly's phone, but there was no answer. Pulling it out, I began to dial a number I never thought I'd ever dial again.

"Hello?"

I almost hung up when I heard her voice. I took a deep breath and spoke. "Mother?"

"Susan?" she asked with a quiet tentativeness.

"Yeah," I answered, then stopped, trying to figure out why I was calling her. I knew why.

"Honey, are you all right?" I heard her voice again and it brought a well of tears to my eyes.

"Oh, Mom, I really screwed things up," I started to say as the emotion clouded my voice.

"What? Honey, where are you? Can I pick you up somewhere?"

There was another pause as I tried to collect myself enough to answer. "I'm at the cemetery," I said through my tears. "Kelly um..." I couldn't stop myself from crying. My heart was breaking with each and every moment away from her. "Kelly and I had a fight and uh... I... I can't find her!"

"Shh, honey, it'll be okay. Stay where you are, and I'll come and get you. The weather is going to be awful the next few hours. I don't want you getting ill." The maternal instinct in her took over, even though we'd been practically strangers for five years.

I couldn't stop myself from accepting her offer. "I'll be by Dad," I informed her, knowing she'd know where to find me. My eyes scanned the cemetery, looking for any sign of Kelly and finding none. "Thanks, Mom," I said into the phone and then we said our good byes.

I clicked off the phone and began to walk towards my father's grave. I couldn't help but worry for Kelly. Even if she had left, her emotional state was nowhere near what it needed to be to drive safely.

"I'm so sorry!" I screamed into the now raging storm. The raindrops had already thoroughly soaked my hair, and the sky didn't look like it was going to calm any time soon. I knew that this

was one storm that was going to need a very large rainbow.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

I waited for my mother by the side of the road. I had no idea what kind of car to expect, so when I saw headlights approaching me, I hoped it was her.

Thankfully, it was.

The black Acura made its way slowly towards me, as if not to splash, and stopped. I saw my mother's face and she waved me inside. Grabbing the door handle, I quickly opened the door and got inside the warm automobile. As soon as I sat down I realized how wet I was and cringed outwardly. "Oh crap! I'm sorry. I'm going to ruin the leather!" I said through chattering teeth, wiping away my unstoppable tears.

"Nonsense, it will dry," she replied, patting my forearm. "And so will they." She pointed to my tear soaked face and gave me a warm sincere smile, which of course, set me off again.

She immediately reached over to her glove box and pulled out some Kleenex for me. I gratefully accepted the tissues and dabbed my eyes and cheeks. She turned in her seat to face me and stroked my arm with her hand. "Wanna talk about it?" she asked gently.

"Can we go home first?" I answered automatically.

When no answer came, I looked up to find a confused look on my mother's face.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Whose home do you want me to take you to? Mine or yours?" she asked wistfully.

"Yours, please. If that's all right."

"Of course it's all right. It will always be your home, Susan," she said with as much love as she could muster. I could feel the tears threatening again and could only answer with a nod of my head.

She turned back in her seat and put the car in drive. Our trip back to my childhood home was very quiet. She gave me the space and peace that I needed to think about what had happened today. I was very grateful for that. She always knew when I needed to just think. I'd missed this part of our relationship. No one knew me like she did.

*You were always an introverted child, Susan.* I remembered her saying that more than once in

my life. I guess some things never change.

We pulled into the driveway and I watched as the garage door opened, welcoming us back home. It had been too long since I felt like this. I felt like there was hope for my mother and me. I still had so much to talk to her about, but for right now, I'd let her take care of me. I think she and I needed this more than we'd ever say aloud.

My mother's touch drew me back from my thoughts. "You coming? Or do you want to stay in here for a little longer?" She smiled.

"No, I mean, yes. I've got to get out of these clothes." I shook my coat as I got out of the car, spraying the rainwater onto the floor.

"I kept everything of yours, honey. I'm sure you can find something warm to wear upstairs," she said as she opened the door leading into the house.

The smell of my old home warmed me instantly. I knew things were going to be hard and slow going, but I had hope again. I nodded to myself and walked into the family room. The same furniture rested on the same carpeting my parents had had since I was in high school. I shook my head and grinned at my mother who was watching me with interest.

"What?" she asked with a curious smile of her own.

I looked around the room again. "It's just that everything is the same as it was when I left or um..." I paused, not wanting to be so harsh with her anymore.

"You can say it, honey," she said with shame. "When your father and I kicked you out."

"Yeah," I breathed out and closed my eyes against the memory of that night.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

*"Get out of my house!" Susan's father screamed.*

*"You're kicking me out?" Susan asked incredulously. "I'm your daughter!"*

*"You are **no** daughter of mine! **My** daughter isn't queer! **My** daughter isn't a freak! **My** daughter isn't an abomination to God!" he spat, within inches of Susan's face.*

*"You're right. Your daughter isn't any of those things. I am a human being who happens to love another woman." When Susan's father turned a deaf ear to her, she began to show her anger. "I'm sorry, Daddy! You can't change who I am!"*

*"No, I can't. But I don't have to look at you, either. You disgust me!"*

*Tears were streaming down Susan's face as she looked to her mother for support. "Mama? Are you going to let this happen?"*

*Her mother looked at her feet, not meeting her daughter's eyes.*

*Jonathon McGovern didn't wait for his wife's answer. "Your mother is just as disgusted as I am! Don't look to her for salvation, because you won't find any here!" he continued to rage.*

*"Mama, say **something!**" Susan pleaded with her mother as her father grabbed her arms and moved her towards the door.*

*Elise McGovern never looked up from the floor. Susan could see the tears soaking through her mother's blouse. "Please, Mama! Don't let him do this!"*

*Her mother turned and walked into the kitchen. Away from her daughter. Away from her cowardice.*

*"Don't even think about coming back or I'll have you arrested for trespassing!" Jonathon screamed.*

*"Daddy, no! Please!" Finally, Susan was shoved out of her home. With one final breath she called out to the one person she had always counted on. "Mama!"*

*Elise shook with sobs as she heard Susan's last call to her. She heard the front door slam and knew she would never see her daughter again.*

*\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\**

"That was the worst day of my life, Susan," Mother said to me. "I never thought I'd turn my back on my own flesh and blood. I can never ask your forgiveness."

Our family room was quiet as I listened to my mother's quiet voice. I knew she was sorry. I just wished that he was.

"You'll find dry clothes in your closet. They should still fit you. I don't want you to catch cold in those wet things. I'd like to talk..."

"We'll talk more. I'm just going to go upstairs and change then, if that's all right?" I looked into my mother's sad eyes and she nodded. "I'll be right back."

I walked through the foyer and up the stairs leading to my old bedroom. The same floorboards creaked as I made my way down the hallway. The bedroom door was slightly ajar, so I pushed it open to reveal my room. It hadn't changed one iota in five years.

The same pictures still hung on the walls. The two twin beds had the same sheets and comforters on them. I walked towards my closet and opened the sliding door. I reached instinctively to the switch just inside the doors to turn on the light. I grabbed a sweatshirt and a pair of jeans from the shelves, turned the light off, and closed the door.

I removed my wet clothing and hung them on my desk chair. I fit easily into my old clothes, with a little room to spare. I sat on my bed for a moment absorbing all that had happened in the last 72 hours. A wonderful Christmas spent with the most wonderful woman on the planet. A reunion with the woman that allowed her husband to disown me. Visiting my father at his gravesite. Screaming vicious words at the same woman who had made passionate love to me only days before. Now I was sitting on my bed in the home I wasn't welcome in for five years. My body turned to jelly and I found my head on my pillow.

I sobbed endlessly for several minutes as I tried not to think about how badly I hurt Kelly. She meant well, I know she did. God knows I know that. I just let my emotions take over, and then BAM! I lost complete control and now probably Kelly, too.

*Why did life have to be so hard?*

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

*Why did life have to be so hard?*

I looked at the still form that was my grandmother. She was seventy-four years old, but her face was so pale and looked so much older than I remembered. I tried to imagine her face without all the tubes running through her. When I looked at her, all I saw was my mother.

Dying.

My grandmother was dying. She'd had a stroke and her neighbor, Sally, had found her in her apartment. My grandma was a stickler for punctuality, so when she didn't come over for lunch, Sally knew something was wrong.

*If you're late, I won't wait,* she'd always say in her singsong voice.

"What I wouldn't give to hear your voice now," I said through my tears. I took her hand in mine and sat in the chair close to the bed. "I love you, Gram." I kissed her hand and rested my cheek

on it.

It must have been the toll the day had taken, because I didn't realize I had fallen asleep. I woke to the loud beeping of the monitors and felt the weight of something on my head. My grandmother had put her hand on my head while I was asleep. The sound of feet approaching quickly took me out of my slumber-like trance.

"Code blue!" I heard one of the nurses cry out. She looked at me and took my arm. "Miss, you'll have to leave, now. I'll let you know something as soon as I can, I promise." She escorted me gently out of the area.

I looked back at my grandmother and saw them trying to revive her. I knew they wouldn't be able to. This is what she'd wanted since the day my mother left her. I was incapable of stopping it. No one should have to bury a child. I can't even imagine what that felt like. I couldn't fathom living day to day after losing my child. Apparently Gram couldn't either, and after eleven years to the day, she finally got her wish.

I mutely walked into the waiting room waiting to hear the news that I already knew in my heart.

My grandma was gone.

"We did everything we could for her. I'm sorry," the doctor finished as I stared into his sympathetic eyes.

"I know you did. I'm just glad I got to see her one last time," I said quietly, almost to myself.

He put his hand on my shoulder, gave it a light squeeze, and then quietly walked away. I sat back down and stared dumbly at the walls of the waiting room.

Alone.

## **Chapter Thirty-Two**

I hung up the phone after speaking with the funeral director at Scott's Funeral Home. He was such a nice man. I wondered if I could ever do that kind of work. It took a very special person to run a funeral home. They help us all say one final goodbye to the people we've loved in our lives. They make that last visit as painless as possible. I really admired that.

"One last call to make and I'm out of here," I said to myself, pinching the bridge of my nose to ward off the migraine I knew was coming.

I picked up the phone and called my boss to let her know I was taking some time off. "Shannon? Hi, it's Kelly."

"Hello, Kelly. How are you?" she said cheerfully into the receiver.

"I'm not well, actually. My grandmother passed away yesterday, and I'm going to need some time off." I said as I fiddled with the paper on my desk, trying hard not to cry again.

"Oh, Kelly. I'm so sorry," she said with genuine regret.

"Thanks," I replied.

"You take whatever time you need. I'll have Brad watch over your market until you get back. Don't worry about anything, okay?"

"I'll do my best." I paused and took a breath. "Thanks, Shannon. I really appreciate it."

"You bet. Again, please know how sorry I am. When you get a chance, can you let me know where the services are? I'd like to send something.

My eyes welled up at her kindness. "Thank you, Shannon. I'll send you an email before I leave today."

"You're at the office? Go home, Kelly. Whatever you're doing can wait until you get back." When I didn't respond, she repeated herself. "I mean it, Kelly. Go home. Please."

"I will," I acquiesced.

"Take care of yourself."

"You too, Shannon. Bye."

"Bye."

Hanging up the phone, I collected my belongings. I looked at the paper on which I'd been writing and sighed. "You'll never forget about her, so stop trying," I said to myself as I grabbed the piece of paper, crumpled it, and threw it towards the trashcan. I missed the can, but left it on the floor, not wanting to waste any more energy on it.

Or her.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

I had fallen asleep and woke to feel my mother's touch on my head. She was stroking my hair as she sat next to me. She was humming a tune she used to sing to me when I was a child. It always



had a calming effect on me, and today was no different.

I groggily looked into her loving eyes. "Must have fallen asleep. Sorry, about that."

"Oh, honey, don't apologize. You obviously needed it," she said as she continued to play with my hair. "You know, I've missed this... missed you."

I looked into her guilt-ridden eyes and realized that my hell had been out in the streets, while she'd never left hers. Not long ago I would've been happy to know she was hurting as badly as I had. Now, I wasn't so sure I'd want anyone to feel that way. I sighed in contentment. "Me too, Mama. Me, too."

I closed my eyes and just let her try to free the demons she'd been keeping inside herself for so long. I wasn't sure why I was so readily allowing her to touch me. I wasn't sure about anything at this point. All I knew was that I'd hurt the woman who I'd thought would spend the rest of my life with me.

Hurt her badly.

I hadn't left a message when I called her cell phone. In hindsight, I wished I had. My heart began to race, not knowing how much time had passed since I'd heard her voice. "What time is it, Mama?"

"You slept through to tomorrow, honey. It's a little after ten."

I sat up abruptly and noticed that I was in the clothes I'd changed into, but under my covers.

My mom put a calming hand on my shoulder. "When you didn't come back down last night, I came in and found you asleep on top of your bed. I maneuvered you under the covers, but obviously you were too wiped out to remember," she explained.

I rubbed my eyes in disbelief. I'd never slept so long before. "I have to find Kelly, Mom, I do. I said some awful things to her. Things I shouldn't have ever said, least of all yesterday."

"What was yesterday?" she asked.

"The anniversary of her mother's death," I said regretfully.

"I see," she said, without commenting further.

"Would you mind if I borrowed the car? I'm sure she's at the office. I won't be long, I promise."

"On one condition," she started to negotiate.

"Yes?"

"You take a shower and come downstairs to eat some breakfast. You haven't had an ounce of food since God knows when. I might not have seen you in the last few years, but I sure remember how you can get if you haven't eaten," she smiled playfully.

"You've got a deal." I smiled at her as she stood to leave me to shower. "Mom?" She turned to look at me with a questioning glance. "Thank you for coming to get me yesterday. It meant a lot to me." I could feel the emotions building again as my eyes teared up.

"You don't have to thank me, sweetie," she almost whispered, then looked me in the eye. "Thank you for calling me. That meant the world to *me*."

I stood up and did something I hadn't done in five years. "Can I hold you?" I asked in a very childlike voice.

She stretched out her arms and I fell into them desperately, hugging my mother for all I was worth. She wrapped her arms around me very tightly. I could feel her heartbeat racing right along with my own. I had truly missed this feeling. I wasn't going to let it go for anything in the world.

We parted and had watery smiles for each other. She squeezed my forearm and walked out into the hallway, closing my door on her way out.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

I showered, dressed, and ate before my mother gave me the keys to my father's old BMW. I wondered why she hadn't sold it, but she said she liked the car too much to get rid of it. Looking up at the convertible top, I couldn't have agreed with her more. I backed out of the driveway and made my way towards Saks. I wasn't sure what kind of reception I was going to get, but I was going to do my damndest to let her know how sorry I was. I didn't care if she punched me square in the face. She was going to hear me out.

I pulled into a parking spot on Lawrence and went into ForOthers. I entered and saw Miriam at her desk. "Hi, Miriam," I said as she looked up from her paperwork.

"Hey, stranger. How are things going for you? Any better?"

"Well, I've had the most traumatic last few days. I know I didn't really tell you much when I called, but I was really out of it."

"You wanna talk about it?" she asked.

"Well, I do, but I can't at the moment. I came in here to see if you guys can do without me for a little while. I really need some time off."

Miriam looked at me with wonder. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Yes. Just say you'll give me this time, and I'll be okay in a couple of weeks."

"You know I wouldn't deny you anything. From the looks of you, something big must have happened."

Looking down, I noticed the clothes I was wearing. Designer clothing. Something I'd not worn in a long time. "Yeah, I stayed at my mom's last night."

Her eyes got wide. "You're kidding! Susan, that's great!" she cried. "Is everything going okay?"

"Well, it's going to take a lot more time for us, but Mom and I have always had a closeness that even our past couldn't take away. I did find out my father died in January, though."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry," she started to say and I raised my hand to stop her.

"Don't be sorry. The only thing you should feel for my father is pity... I won't miss him."

*I'll miss the man who used to be my daddy.*

Looking down at my boots, I realized I'd been here longer than I wanted to be. I had to get to Kelly. "Hey, I really have to get going. Thank you for the time off. I really do appreciate it."

Miriam came from around her desk and enveloped me in a hug. "You're welcome, honey. You come back when you're up to it. We'll be here." She smiled as she pulled away from me.

"See you later," I said, and left the building.

I walked down the sidewalk towards the Saks building. My stomach was in such knots, I thought I was going to throw up. Taking a deep breath, I walked into the store, immediately spotting Kelly's favorite employee, Therese, behind a counter sorting ties. She looked up and saw me and gave me a very friendly smile.

"Hi, Therese. I was looking for Kelly. Is she in?"

"Mmm... I haven't seen her in a while. You can go back and check, though. She looked pretty beat, I know seeing you will cheer her up." She winked at me.

I challenged her knowledge of our relationship. "It will, huh?"

She rose right to the challenge and knocked me on my ass. "I was there, you know," she said, chuckling. My face instantly blushed remembering the kiss I had given her on a very live newscast. "Don't worry about it. You guys look good together."

"Thanks, Therese." Now I knew why Kelly liked her so much. I walked towards Kelly's office and found the door closed. I knocked after a few moments of trying to calm my nerves. Hearing no response, I knocked again. I finally grabbed the doorknob and found it unlocked.

"Kelly?" I said as I entered the office. There was no sign of her or her belongings. Obviously, she had left for the day. I turned to leave, and a balled up piece of paper caught my eye. Instinctively, I picked it up to throw it into the trashcan, when I saw my name written on it. Curiosity got the best of me, and I carefully uncrumpled the piece of paper. I saw my name written a few times on the page, but what I also found shattered my heart.

### Untitled

I'm looking in a mirror  
Where a window used to be  
Instead of looking outside  
All I see is me  
I stare at my reflection  
And I begin to cry  
What used to give me inspiration  
Won't look me in the eye  
<  
How did this change abruptly  
I begin to question now  
One day I'm feeling more than loved  
Today I wonder how  
I'm trapped inside my anguish  
It's trapped inside itself  
I know I can't endure more pain  
Release me from myself!  
  
Please hear me as I whisper  
Please hear me when I pray  
Please free me from this hellish ache  
That fills me now today  
I've plunged into this new abyss  
That plagues me with despair  
Erase this fragrant memory of  
The sunshine in her hair.

As the tears rolled down my face, I was startled by Therese's reappearance. "You find her?"

Wiping my eyes, I folded the piece of paper up and put it in my pants pocket. "No, I think she's gone for the day.

"Was the door unlocked?" I nodded. "Well, we should lock it when you leave, because she would freak if she realized she left her office open all night."

"Good idea." I motioned her towards the door. "I'm done, we can go."

"All right. If I see her, I'll tell her you were looking for her."

"Thanks."

Therese locked the door handle and pulled the door closed. "You guys have plans for New Years?"

That question brought incredible sadness to my heart. "I don't know yet. Haven't really talked about it."

"Well, if I don't see you, have a happy New Year."

"You, too." I waved at her as I tried to exit the store nonchalantly. I ran to the car and got in and just stared out into the street. I pulled Kelly's poem from my pocket and reread it three more times.

*God, she's devastated. I have to find her.*

I turned over the engine and put it in drive. If she wasn't home when I arrived, then I was going to wait for her.

*All night if I had to.*

### **Chapter Thirty-Three**

I saw a black BMW convertible in my driveway as I drove closer to my house. I had a feeling it was Susan. I had so much going on in my head, I wasn't sure what I would say at this point. I really didn't want to see her, even though I really wanted to see her.

*How's that for a paradox?*

As I drove into my driveway, the driver of the BMW opened the door of their car. It was in fact, Susan.

"Dammit," I said, shaking my head in disbelief.

Susan looked up at me and waved with a small smile on her face. The headlights of my car were the only things to highlight her expression. I hit my garage door opener without acknowledging her wave. As the door slowly opened, I felt her eyes burning me with the fierceness of her stare. I used every Jedi mind trick in the book not to look at her.

And failed.

Seeing her questioning brown eyes, I knew it was going to be a much longer night than I'd bargained for. I just wanted to sleep. I'd met Sally at her apartment earlier in the evening.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

*Kelly pulled up to her grandmother's building and parked the car in her space. Connie's space was always empty since she never owned a car. She much preferred public transportation. Somehow Kelly didn't blame her.*

*She buzzed Sally's apartment and her grandmother's friend met her at the door. Sally Jenkins was a forty-something woman with short, deep red hair and beautiful green eyes. Her small frame was filled up completely. Kelly's grandma had always tried to get her to lose some of that weight. Said she didn't want to lose her to a "heart attack or some such nonsense." Sally was the only one Kelly knew of that she'd connected with since she lived there. Her grandma and Sally had been friends for at least six or seven years. She had a softness and warmth about her that always made Kelly smile.*

*"Hi, Kel." She leaned closer and hugged Kelly tightly in the foyer.*

*"Hey, Sally. Thank you so much for everything you did for her. She loved you very much," Kelly said as she held her.*

*"You are very welcome. Connie was a sweetheart, and I'll never forget her. She brought such color into my life," Sally continued, as they walked towards her residence. "She had a story to tell for everything."*

*Kelly smiled in remembrance. My grandma always did have a way with words. I remember having a hard time in History class. I couldn't remember what happened during what wars and who signed what. She would somehow turn a situation around and put it into the present and use names and places I knew, just so I'd understand it better. God, I'm going to miss her. She turned her focus back to Sally.*

*"That she did, Kelly." Sally motioned for Kelly to enter her place when she opened the door. The taller woman walked into Sally's living room and took a brief glance around. It was quite charming. There were lots of knick-knacks and family pictures throughout the room. "You know, I don't remember if I've ever been here," Kelly commented.*

*"Mmm..." Sally thought for a moment. "I think you have, but it was a long time ago. Probably when I first moved in if I recall correctly."*

*Kelly nodded her agreement as Sally walked into her kitchen area. "Would you like some coffee or tea or something?" she asked politely.*

*"Just some water would be great," Kelly answered.*

*"You got it." She grabbed a glass out of her cabinet and filled it with water from the dispenser against the refrigerator. "Best damn thing I ever bought. I hate tap water from this place. Tastes like you're sucking on a nail." She handed a thirsty Kelly the glass.*

*"Well, that can't be good," the auburn-haired woman said with a grin, taking a sip from the glass.*

*Kelly stared at the floor, not knowing quite what to say. They sat in silence for a few moments, and then Sally asked, "Would you like to go to her place? I have a key." She pointed to her key ring hanging on a hook by the door.*

*Kelly's head instantly popped up. "Would you mind?"*

*"Not at all, honey." She went to the hook and grabbed the key ring. Kelly set the water glass down on the coffee table and walked over to her, then Sally handed her the key. "You go. I'm sure you'd like some time alone in there."*

*Kelly leaned over to her and hugged her tightly. "I know why Gram always thought so much of you, Sally. Thank you." Kelly's eyes watered.*

*They separated and Sally's eyes were full of tears as well. "She was like my own grandmother. I never had one of my own, but I was honored to have her step in. I know how sad she was since losing your mother. I don't think she ever bounced back from that." She raked her fingers through her short hair. "She talked about your mom all the time. Losing her killed something inside of her. I wish I would have known her before she got so sad."*

*"So do I, Sally. It feels like we knew two different women. I knew her before Mom died, and you knew the woman she became afterwards." Kelly stood and pondered that thought for a bit until she felt Sally's hand on her arm. Kelly looked into wet, caring eyes, and fell into her arms again and wept.*

*Sally rubbed her back and head, whispering sweet words. "It's okay, honey. Let it out." Kelly cried for a long while as she held tighter to Sally. The tears felt like they wouldn't stop. She felt Sally crying right along with her. They'd both suffered a great loss in their lives, so Kelly let her have her tears, too. Kelly was first to pull away and begin to wipe her eyes. My heart is completely broken. I am amazed that I have blood flowing through me at all. Kelly thought.*

*Kelly fiddled with the key ring she'd been given. "I'm gonna go next door now, if that's okay."*

*Sally nodded. "You go and spend whatever time you need to there. I'll be right here if you need me."*

*Kelly leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Thanks, and if it gets too late, I'll just give the key back to you tomorrow."*

*"Okay, honey. Take care."*

*"You, too."*

*She walked out of Sally's place and down the hall to her grandmother's. Kelly took a deep breath and put the key in the lock. Turning the doorknob and opening the door, her grandma's scent instantly greeted her. She had that scent Kelly thought everyone's grandmother would have. The smells combined from the cooking, cleaning, and fragrant plants but with every window nailed tightly shut to ward off any unforeseen chill. The images of her doing all of those things made Kelly smile. She refused to let anyone do anything for her. "As long as I'm able to walk, I'm able to clean my own damn house!" Kelly heard the memory in her head as if she were standing right next to her grandmother. I never offered to get her a cleaning lady again.*

*Kelly clicked on the light switch and looked around her grandmother's home. She noticed nothing out of place from the last time she was there. All of her pictures were still on the windowsills; all of her planters were hanging from the ceiling. Everything that was her grandma was right there in that apartment. She walked towards the couch and sat down and leaned her head back against the cushions. She sighed quietly as the tears began to cascade down her face again.*

*"Oh, Gram, I'm gonna miss you so much." She felt her chest grow tight and then fill with extreme warmth. Kelly smiled through her tears, feeling the hug that was sent to her. Whether it was from her grandma or her mother, she'd never know. She absolutely knew that they were together again.*

*And they were happy.*

*"One day we'll all be together again. You can count on that."*

*She leaned forward and rested her head in her hands and continued to cry. Kelly knew it would take a while before that urge would go away. She welcomed the cleansing. She rested her head in her hands for several moments, trying to collect herself. Kelly knew her grandma was in a better place now. She was with the daughter she could never say good-bye to. That knowledge alone helped her greatly.*

*As she sat there feeling the acceptance of her passing, Kelly's mind once again went to Susan. "What is going to happen with her? I know I love her, but she obviously doesn't know how she truly feels towards me. Otherwise, how could she have said all those things to me? They say that people say things in anger that they don't really mean. Well, those feelings came from somewhere, so there had to be an ounce of some truth in there. God, if she had all of that bottled up inside her, do I even want to know the stuff she didn't say? God, I hate mind games."*



*She looked at her watch and noticed it was almost ten. She was so tired and only wanted to go to sleep. She rubbed her eyes and took another look around. She knew the next time she came there she'd be cleaning the place out. I want one more memory of the way it used to be.*

*Kelly rose from the couch and made her way towards the door. "I'll be back, Gram," she said as she opened the door and walked into the hallway. She put the key in the lock and secured the deadbolt. As she walked down the hall towards Sally's place, Kelly noticed the light that was under the door had gone out. Sensing she'd gone to bed, Kelly kept walking until she reached her car. This night was almost over and she could almost feel the sheets of her bed on her skin.*

*Kelly shivered in anticipation.*

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

Pulling into the garage, I got out of my car. I turned towards the driveway to find Susan waiting patiently for me by her car. Taking a deep breath, I walked over to her.

"Been waiting long?" I asked, sounding a bit harsher than I had intended.

"A little while," she said, leaning against the car. Somehow I didn't believe her.

I looked at her and the car. "Yours?"

"My father's, actually. My mother didn't want to part with it," she explained.

"What do you want, Susan?" I asked, wanting to cut to the chase. I was fucking tired and I had no idea what was in store for me with her here.

"I want to talk, Kelly," she started.

"What, like yesterday? I'm not up for another shouting match with you. I'm tired and the past 36 hours have been beyond shitty, so if you don't mind, I'd like to go inside my house and go to bed. Go home, Susan." I started to walk past Susan and she grabbed my arm. I didn't turn around to face her, but I heard her voice behind me.

"Home? I don't even know where that is anymore. So much has happened to me, even in the last couple days!"

"I suppose that's my fault, too?"

"Please, Kelly. I don't want to fight. I want to apologize for my horrific behavior yesterday." At this admission I turned around and looked into sad, guilt-ridden brown eyes. "I went to find you

today at your office, but you had left already," she continued without releasing my arm.

"Yeah, I had some things to deal with today." I didn't offer anything about my grandma. I felt mistrust for Susan right now, and I knew I couldn't share anything too personal at the moment.

"Kelly, please talk to me. I know I was out of control. I didn't mean the things I said to you. I swear to God, I didn't." I could feel my teeth begin to chatter and my legs were feeling very cold.

"So, you're sorry. Well, I'm freezing. Now that we've established that, good night." I tried to pull free from Susan and go inside, but she wouldn't release me. I was unable to listen to her words tonight. All I heard were the words she'd shouted the day before. The anger that I'd felt yesterday was still very fresh in my heart. "Susan, I really don't want to get into this right now. Let me go."

Her eyes pleaded with mine to believe her words. "I can't," she choked out. "Kelly, I love you!"

"You sure have a fucked up way of showing it." I pulled my arm free. "Now if you don't mind, this civic minded person wants to get inside her civic house and sleep in her civic bed. Alone."

With those words, Susan crumbled to her knees and began to weep. She looked up at me with tear-stained cheeks and begged me to listen. "Kelly, I'm so sorry! I freaked out at seeing my dad's grave. I didn't know what I was saying. Please... you... you have to know that! I can't lose you! Please don't leave me!" she cried out between sobs. My resolve was shattering as I listened to her wailing. "I love you," she wept again.

I felt a knot in my stomach and tried to walk away, leaving her in the same anguish I felt yesterday.

But I couldn't.

The tears rolled down my cheeks before I could stop them and my arms reached out to pick Susan off the ground. She saw my arms open and she lunged right into them, clinging to me like a lifeline. She was trembling terribly. Her sobs were long and heartbreaking. Holding her close to me, I kissed the top of her head; her hair still smelled so damn good. I closed my tear-filled eyes and wanted to believe her. I knew she hadn't meant those things she'd said. She was filled with all kinds of raw emotions that she was unable to deal with. Above everything else, I knew deep down she was grieving for a man that had died long before his heart attack.

I knew that feeling all too well.

"It's okay, baby. I'm right here," I whispered in her ear. "Come on, let's go inside." I felt her nod into my chest, but she didn't let go. We walked clumsily through my garage and into my house. I closed the garage and the door leading into the house. Mattie met us with a happily wagging tail.

Susan turned in my arms and looked down. "Hey, sweetie." She reached down and petted my pup, much to Mattie's delight. We walked into the family room and sat on the couch. Her hold on me didn't slacken at all, and I relished the feel of her in my arms again. I had missed holding her

like this. I knew we had a long night ahead of us, but the outcome was a lot more appealing to me.

A *lot* more appealing.

## **Chapter Thirty-Four**

Kelly's arms were so warm around me. I never thought I'd be here again. I just hoped she could forgive me. Holding her tightly, I continued to cry into her chest. She held me close and rubbed my neck and arms. She was such a loving woman.

*How could I have said that she was doing this out of some sort of duty? How could I have even thought that?*

I knew we were in for a long talk tonight. I just hoped that she was up for it. I had so much apologizing to do. I really prayed that we could work through this.

Pulling back from Kelly's embrace, I looked into her watery eyes. "Thank you, Kelly. Thank you for talking to me. I know seeing me probably wasn't first on your list for the night."

She looked down at me as the tears continued to fall down her beautifully sculpted face. "No, it wasn't. I really wasn't expecting you at all." Silence came between us for a few moments. "Now that you're here, we do have a lot to talk about."

"Yeah, we do," I agreed. "Please, if you'll allow me to go first?"

Kelly nodded as we pulled apart from each other. We turned on the couch to sit sideways in order to have a clear view of each other. Taking her hands in mine, I hoped she believed the words that would soon come from my heart.

"First, you need to know how sorry I am for what I said. I know you didn't lure me into your clutches or your bed only to procure a medal from the mayor. It was out of my mouth before I could stop it. When I saw my father's gravestone, I got so angry." I squeezed her hands as I spoke. "I got angry because I will never be able to resolve anything with him now. He'll never know what happened to me because of his bigotry. He'll never know the hell he put my mom through, either."

"But what did that have to do with me? Was it that you were still angry about me meeting with your mother?" Kelly asked softly.

"I guess so. I was angry that you didn't tell me she called you. You lied to me about it to boot. I don't know if I was ready to see my parents, but I would've reacted better if I'd had a say in the matter. You went behind my back to decide MY future with MY parents. That was wrong," I said sternly, looking into her eyes.

Her head bowed looking at our hands and then she looked back at me. "And I *apologized* for that over and over. I had NO idea your mom was going to call me. I can't be held responsible for her seeing us on the news, Susan."

Kelly's words were getting heated. I knew I needed to calm the waters a bit if I wanted to get anywhere tonight. "I know that, honey, I really do. I just wish you would've told me about it, so I could've prepared myself. Seeing her in your office was the *last* thing I ever expected to encounter." Watching me wipe my eyes with the sleeve of my coat, Kelly reached behind her to give me some tissues from the end table. "Thank you," I said, blotting my eyes.

"I didn't expect her there, either. When I called her back, she asked to speak to me in person as opposed to talking on the phone. Believe me, had I known this was going to happen, I never would have agreed to it," Kelly explained more gently this time. "I know I should've told you. You don't know how sorry I am for that."

I sat and listened to her explain and tried to put myself in her shoes. Would I have said anything if our roles were reversed? Maybe not, knowing the angst I felt for them at the time. Maybe she was just trying to protect me. I mechanically slipped my coat off and rested it beside me on the couch.

"I see the engines going in your head, what are you thinking about?"

Smiling at Kelly, I replied, "I was just wondering what I would've done if I were you in that situation. After realizing how hostile I got from just talking about them, I think I would've done the same thing."

Kelly's eyes widened. "You *would* have?" she exclaimed incredulously.

"Yeah." I nodded. "Now that I've had the time to think about it, I know you were just trying to protect me. I know I overreacted. You were only being the middleman, and you would've told me about talking with her after you found out what she wanted. Right?" I questioned.

"Absolutely! You know I wouldn't have sent you to the front lines without a damn good weapon." She smiled softly at me melting my heart once again.

I smiled gently back at her. "I know that now. I was just really freaked out, for lack of a better phrase. When you and I went to my mother's house the other day, it was like I was watching everything through someone else's eyes. It was so surreal for me to be there again, a place I wasn't welcomed in for five years! Once I was seated in my living room and my mom told me how unhappy her life was because of my father, I realized I wasn't the only one he'd hurt. I started to actually *feel* for her again; and it was something other than hate." Kelly rubbed my wrists gently with her thumbs as I began to recap the last few days.

Taking a deep breath, I felt the pain of the next thoughts through my head. "Then she told me he was gone. My brain went dead, Kel. I was so angry that I couldn't even think straight. I had to

get out of there before I blew a gasket. As soon as I started running, I knew everything would be different. It's like this coldness came over me. I was so pissed that he was dead!" Kelly's eyebrows rose with my voice. "I know it sounds kind of whacked, but I wanted him to know what he'd done to us." I paused to collect myself before I started crying again. "He needed to know the monster he had become; and that he was no longer the man I used to call Daddy." My voice dropped in register with my last remark.

Kelly continued to stroke my wrists with her thumbs. She held an extreme sadness in her expression. I knew she was hurting for me, for herself, and for us. "Kelly, I'm sorry about yesterday. I know what a difficult day that must have been for you. It took me a while to put together that it was the anniversary of your mother's death. I felt like the worst person on the planet once I saw her stone."

Her eyes met mine for a moment. "You saw her stone?"

"Yeah. I went looking for you after you ran away. I must have walked around that cemetery forever before I found a caretaker to show me your mom's plot. I had hoped you would be there, but you weren't. I saw that the grass was disturbed, so I had a feeling you'd been there before me."

"Yeah, I was there." Kelly looked like she was fighting with something before she continued. "I um... I got a call that uh... made me leave." She paused again and started crying.

My heart flooded with sadness and I threw my arms around her. "It's okay, sweetheart. Whatever it is, we'll get through it," I soothed as I stroked her back. "I'm never leaving you, Kelly. I promise."

She pulled back from me abruptly. "You can't make that promise, Susan. You can't! Death takes whomever it Goddamn wants to, whenever it wants to! Don't tell me you won't leave me; you don't know that for certain. No one does." Her voice sounded so haunted, it scared me.

I knew her pain had to stem from the call she'd gotten. "Kelly, what happened? Who called you?"

Kelly turned and rested her back against the cushions of the couch and stared off into space. I gave her space to get out whatever it was she needed to tell me.

"The saddest part about the call is that I'm not sure if I can tell you about it." My eyes registered shock, I'm sure. I knew they felt about a mile wide. She kept her eyes straight ahead, but her tears continued to fall endlessly. "What happened yesterday hurt me more than I can tell you. I hadn't had anyone, anyone that mattered, in my life for a long time. I also hadn't trusted anyone with my heart until you. You shattered it yesterday, Susan. You may have hurt badly, but you crossed a line. You said things to me I *never* thought I'd hear. *Especially* not from you." Kelly turned to face me. "You turned the love we shared into something dirty and calculated. You didn't even think about the effect you might have had as you ripped my heart out, did you? I was just someone to wipe your soddened boots on, wasn't I? Well, guess what? I will not be a doormat for *anyone*, Susan, not *even* you."

Staring through my tears at Kelly, I saw the hurt in her eyes. A hurt that I had put there. Her heart was filled with such pain, I wasn't sure if there was any room in it for forgiveness. "Can you ever forgive me, Kelly? If I could change everything that happened yesterday, I would. I'd do everything differently. I swear to God, Kelly! I can't apologize enough for the things I said. All I can promise you is that I won't treat you that way again. It wasn't your fault that my father kicked me out. It wasn't your fault that he died without knowing how I felt. It wasn't your fault that I hadn't tried to see him before now. None of that was your fault, yet I treated you as if you were him. I wanted to hurt him, but you were the one who was there. So I hurt you instead. I'll never forgive myself for the way I treated you, Kelly. I acted without thinking, and I'm truly, truly sorry for that. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Kelly blinked away her tears and rested her head against the cushions again, sighing deeply. "I know."

We sat in silence for several minutes, not quite knowing what to say. A whimper from Mattie got my attention and I got up to let her out. Kelly gave my hand a light squeeze as I passed her to open the back door for the dog.

"Come on girl, let's get you outside." I opened the door and let her out. My arms wrapped around my upper body as I watched Mattie run around the backyard. For several moments her grace calmed me.

"My grandma died," I heard the small voice say behind me.

I turned around slowly, not believing I'd heard correctly. Looking at Kelly's forlorn face, I knew I'd not misheard her. "Oh, my God, sweetie. When?" I immediately was kneeling before her, taking her hands into my own.

"Yesterday," she whispered hoarsely.

I drew her to me and pulled her into a strong embrace. "I'm so sorry, honey. I'm so, so sorry," I whispered to her over and over as she cried out her grief. I couldn't believe this was happening to her.

*And on the same day as her mother. God, how awful.*

Kelly clung to me; fresh sobs continued to come from within her. I knew she was crumbling inside and could do nothing about it. I held her for a long time, waiting for her spasms to lessen. When they finally did, I pulled slowly from our embrace and peppered her face with tiny, loving kisses.

"I can't say it enough. I'm so sorry about your grandmother."

She looked at me with watery eyes and forced a pained smile, "I really wanted her to meet you."

I stroked her cheek with the back of my knuckles. "She knows me now, honey."

"I suppose. It's just not quite the same, you know?" Kelly sounded like such a young child as she spoke.

"I do, sweetie, I do." I looked at her, my eyes trying to convey the love I had for her.

"I love you," she said before she embraced me again.

My heart skipped several beats, knowing how hard that has been for her. "I love you, too, Kel. More than I can ever say."

She pulled away from our embrace and cupped my face gently with her hands. Her eyes locked on mine with such intensity I thought I would combust. Kelly's lips devoured mine before I knew what was happening. Her kiss was demanding and strong. Her tongue bathed my own with dominating strokes. I knew she was looking for a connection. I needed this like I needed air. We needed this so we could believe in us again.

Rising from my kneeling position without breaking contact, I climbed into Kelly's lap. She grasped onto me with zealous passion. Her fervor excited me incredibly. I returned her heated kisses tenfold. She rolled us into a laying position, peeling her coat off as we sunk into each other. More articles of clothing were shed from us both. I couldn't get close enough to Kelly. I was bursting with such desire, I felt faint. I wanted to feel her skin against my own. Once we stripped off our clothing and kicked off our shoes, we began an age-old rhythm of love and passion.

I heard Kelly groaning in my ear while she moved against me. The sounds she was making, made my toes curl instantly. Her thigh moved deliberately between my legs, and I moved mine between hers. Our movements were rough, synchronized, and incredibly hot. Her hand found my left nipple and began to tug and twist it between her thumb and forefinger. I was so close, but I didn't want to come until Kelly was ready.

I grabbed onto her hips to urge her to move faster against me. I wanted to feel all of her passion. I needed all of it. She looked down into my eyes and I could tell she was just about there. We drove into each other, desperately seeking release. The sweat began to drip onto me from Kelly's shoulders and arms.

"Come on, sweetie, I know you're there," I said to her seductively. "I'm right there with you." I watched as her face began to contort from the pleasure racing through her. "That's right, honey. Let go. Let me feel you."

"Oh, fuck..." Kelly whimpered as she thrust blindly into me. We crested together and screamed out our gratification, continuing to move until the spasms left our bodies. Her forehead rested on my shoulder as she kissed me softly around my collarbone and breast. "I love you so much, baby."

I held tightly to Kelly so she wouldn't see my tears again. We'd cried way too much this night already. "I love you. No more fighting, I promise," I managed to say as I recovered from my intense orgasm. "I hate feeling like that."

"Me, too." I could feel her body slow down as our breathing came back to normal.

Our lips came together once again; this time was gentler and much softer. We parted and stared into each other's eyes until a soft bark was heard from the outside porch. Kelly buried her head into my chest and began to chuckle. She kissed me again and started to get up.

"I'll get her." She pulled herself off of me and walked her beautifully naked body to the back door. Mattie came bounding inside, shaking her coat free of the frozen rain that had begun to fall. Kelly shrieked and jumped away as the icy droplets hit her exposed skin.

Sitting up, I chuckled as I watched the interaction between human and canine. They were a precious duo, and I hoped to see more of them on a daily basis. I had forgotten how long 24 hours could be. I knew I would do anything to prevent a separation from Kelly. Once was enough for my lifetime.

Kelly walked over to the couch and gathered our clothing. "Do you think we could continue this upstairs?"

That was music to my ears. "Absolutely. I need to call my mother first and let her know I'll be staying here. " I paused to clarify Kelly's offer. "I am staying the night, yes?"

She leaned over me and gave me a soul filled kiss. "Definitely."

I could feel the goose bumps start to dance all over my body. "Let me make that call before you make me forget."

"Forget what?" she asked, as she pinned me to the couch with another searing kiss.

"Mmmm..." I sank into her kiss, then pushed her back when I realized I'd been had. "Go on. I'll meet you upstairs," I said breathlessly.

She pecked my lips again and smiled saucily at me. "I'll be waiting."

I watched the sway of her gorgeous ass until she walked out of sight. "Jesus," I breathed out. I picked up the phone and called my mother. I knew she'd answer. I'd called from Kelly's driveway earlier telling her the situation.

After letting my mom know my whereabouts, I shut off the lights and went upstairs to make up with my girlfriend. I was compelled to show her exactly how much I had missed her. It was going to take some convincing on my part.

I had a feeling she was going to like my version of reparations.



## Chapter Thirty-Five

As I rested my head on Kelly's chest and listened to the slow, steady beating of her heart, I realized how close we had come to losing this. All of this. But after last night, I knew we'd be all right. Okay, very all right. We were great together, that was for sure. Much better than being apart. Even though we'd only been together a few weeks, I knew that neither of us had ever had anything as special before. Our connection was one that I knew I wouldn't find with anyone else. We were soul mates, nothing less. It would take a force greater than either one of us to pull us apart. I felt very safe knowing that.

A smile came to my face as I felt Kelly stir beneath me. Her hand unconsciously started to rub my head in slow circles sending gooseflesh down my body. A simple touch, an act of tenderness, is what made me love Kelly so much. She did those things, and so much more, without even realizing she's done them. I was such a fool. Never again would I risk losing her... never ever again.

"What are you thinking?" I heard her hoarsely ask.

"I'm thinking about how lucky we are to have this again." I smiled and inhaled Kelly's scent from the blankets wrapped around us.

Her arms drew me even closer to her. I felt her kiss the top of my head. "Thank you for coming over last night."

"You're welcome."

Not speaking, we lay together for several moments simply enjoying the feel of each other. In point of fact, we hadn't spoken much after we had come upstairs the night before, either. Kelly had given me far better things to do with my mouth. I smiled at the memory of our lovemaking, and the gooseflesh rose again at my recollection.

"Are you cold?" Kelly asked, gathering more of the blanket around us.

I shook my head against her chest. "No, just thinking about last night. It was fantastic, Kelly. I don't know about you, but I've never felt like that before."

I felt Kelly's chuckle rumble through her chest, and she kissed my head once more. "No, I can honestly agree that no one has ever made me feel what I felt last night."

Turning to look up at her, I locked on to her gentle eyes. Our lips met softly as she caressed my cheek with her thumb. As we drew apart, she stared into my eyes and I felt whole once more. She smiled softly and pulled me down onto her chest, cushioning my head with her breast. Her tender touches against my back and shoulders made me sigh with contentment. I felt my body

relax fully into hers, and knew I'd be asleep within minutes. It was still early; we still had a few hours to kill.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

By the time Susan pulled out of my driveway, my heart felt so much lighter. The weight of the world didn't feel so heavy anymore. I still had my grandmother's funeral ahead of me, but with Susan at my side, I felt like I could get through anything.

I was happy to hear that she and her mother were doing so well. We both knew there was a lot that needed to be discussed and worked out, but there was something that wasn't there before...hope. We had hope. It was a word that had been so foreign to me for such a long time. It's in my vocabulary once again, and I truly believe it will remain there. I still had a bone to pick with God about some things, but all in all, having hope alone was a miracle to me.

As I sat on my couch flipping through channels on TV, I marveled at how much we'd shared in the few weeks we'd known each other. It felt like we'd been together for years. I can't say that about many people. Even though we'd hurt each other, there was a bond between us that couldn't be broken.

Tomorrow was New Year's Eve. A new year. I needed a new year, because this one was really starting to wear on me.

Big time.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

Mom was sitting on the couch waiting for me as I entered the family room. She smiled at me, and I couldn't help but return the gesture.

"I take it things are okay between you two?" she asked.

Not hiding my excitement, I plopped onto the seat next to hers and beamed. "We're going to be just fine, Mom. We have such a strong connection it would take hell freezing over to pull us apart."

She reached for my hand and I let her take it. "I'm so happy for you, sweetie." The look on my face must have mirrored my doubt, because she was quick to add, "I truly mean that."

Looking into her eyes, I saw nothing but sincerity. "Thank you."

We exchanged smiles and I leaned into her, resting my head on her shoulder. She reached up and stroked my hair. I sighed in response. "I've missed you so much, Mom. I really hope this is a new beginning for us. I missed having my best friend around."

I felt my mom's breathing change and knew I'd struck a chord. Turning my head, I noticed a tear rolling down her cheek.

Brushing it away, she said, "Susan, if I have to pay with my soul in the afterlife, I will do everything in my power to make it right between us. I won't lose you again, to anyone." She slid her arm around me and held me tightly.

After several moments, I pulled back and looked at my mother. For the first time, really looked at her. She'd aged so much in five years. Wondering what she'd been up to, I voiced my question aloud. "So tell me, what have you been up to while I've been away? I mean, besides losing Daddy."

Her face registered a brief moment of pain, but changed into a sad smile. "After your father passed away, I tried to live the life I'd denied myself for so long. I took an art class, did some sculpting, and whatnot. It gave me some of the peace I'd been looking for."

"Mom, that's great. I'm so glad that helped."

She smiled in agreement. "It did. When he died, all the chains melted away and I was free to do what I wanted. I had freedom! For the longest time I'd had no idea what that was. Now I just take things day by day. If I feel the need to do something, then I do it. If I want to laze around all day, then by God, I do it," she said with a confidence that surprised me.

Her expression was one of deep warmth and love. "Finding you has been the greatest thing of all, though. I prayed that I'd find you again, but I'd lost hope of that long ago. Then I saw you and Kelly on the news, of all places. Sucking face, I might add," she teased and nudged me.

"Mom!" I cried, feeling a blush creep across my cheeks.

"What?" She raised her eyebrows in question. "Don't you kids call it that anymore?"

"It's not that, you just surprised me, is all."

She patted my shoulder and continued. "Anyway, after all of that, here we are; and I couldn't ask for anything more." She looked at me with such love in her eyes it made mine water. "Thank you for coming back to me."

Overflowing with emotion, I opted not to say anything, but rested my head again on her shoulder. I felt her breathing become more rapid and knew she had more to say. "What is it,

Mom?"

"Will you tell me what it was like for you... out there? I want to know - I need to know."

I raised my head again and looked into her determined eyes. "It's not a pretty picture. Let me simply say I wouldn't wish that life on anyone and leave it at that, okay?"

"No!" she exclaimed, startling me a little. She took a deep breath and composed herself before speaking again. "No, it's not okay, Susan. It was my cowardly behavior that put you out there in the first place. I want to know what happened to my baby. Please, Susan, please tell me."

Seeing the sad but unwavering expression on her face, I knew there was no way I could satisfy her without telling her the truth. The whole truth. "Well, if you let me grab something to drink first, I'll tell you. It's going to be hard on me to relive some of that again."

"I'm so sorry..."

"I know, Mom, I know." I kissed the side of her head and walked into the kitchen that I knew so well. I grabbed a glass and filled it with water, then returned to my mom who hadn't moved from her place on the couch. Sitting back down and taking a deep breath, I began to tell my mother of the nightmare that had been my life.

A couple of hours and five glasses of water later, I had told my mother more than she could've possibly expected to hear. I truly doubt she had been prepared to learn what her little girl had had to do to survive. Sometimes, *I* still can't believe I'm here. There were many times I thought death was imminent, with me staring at its ugly face so many times I thought for sure I was next. But Carol had made sure my number was nowhere near up. And I had shared it all with my mother. Her tears never stopped from the time I started until at last I ran out of words. She went to the bathroom to wash her face and try to compose herself.

*God bless you, Carol. I hope you know how much I miss you.*

Mom returned a few moments later, looking a little less pale. "You feeling a little better?" I asked gently.

She nodded and sat quietly on the couch. "I had no idea people could live through things like that." She looked at me with respect and awe. "I'm so grateful you made it out of there alive and back to me." She shook her head over and over. "I can't believe I abandoned you to such a place. Could you ever forgive me?"

That was the million-dollar question. A few weeks earlier, I would've answered it quite negatively. Now, I wasn't eager to be mean, nor was I wanting to push the dagger deeper. I knew that she didn't have it in her to protect me back then and I also knew she was devastatingly sorry. The retelling of my tale probably hurt her more than I could imagine. What mother wants to hear about the hell she put her own child through? She deserved an honest answer. "I'll tell you this much, Mom... And I'm going to be completely honest with you."

"Okay," she said softly.

"If you'd asked me that question a while ago, I would've told you to go straight to hell." I watched as she flinched at my brutal honesty. "Now that I'm here with you, and have heard of your own hell that daddy so nicely provided, well, I can't feel that anger anymore. I will never forget what happened to me, because it's made me the woman I am right now... but I can forgive you, Mom. It just might take me a while. I don't want any secrets or pain between us anymore. I just want you to promise me one thing."

Her eyes met mine, waiting like a puppy, wanting to please me regardless of what I asked.

"Anything, Susan."

"Promise me you'll never turn your back on me again." The tears rolled down my face as the truth of my own words hit my heart. "I couldn't bear to lose you again."

Mother reached across the empty cushion and grabbed onto me with a vise grip. "Oh, sweetheart, I promise you, I will never let anyone take you from me again. Nothing but death can take me from you. And even then, I'm not so sure," she sobbed into my shoulder as we rocked away our pain.

Having my mother hold me again gave me peace. A peace I never wanted to leave again. I pulled away and just looked at my mom for the longest time, remembering her from my childhood, and how happy we were in this house. I looked around the family room and felt more warmth spread through me. It was so beautiful here. It made me not want to return to my hole-in-the-wall apartment. Ever.

My mother looked at me with concern. "What is it, honey?" she said, her voice matching her expression.

"I was just thinking about how happy we were when I was a kid. This house is in all my memories of my youth until that awful day. I loved it here."

"Well, sweetie, you know you are welcome here anytime you want. You could even..." She stopped and looked away.

"What were you going to say, Mom? Remember, no more secrets, okay?"

She cleared her throat and clasped my hands. "What I was going to say was that you could move back here if you wanted to. I mean, I know we've only just begun to work everything out, but I think it would be great to have you here with me again."

My eyes teared up again as I listened to her heartfelt offer. "My lease isn't up for a few months yet, but if things continue like this, I would love to move back here with you."

"You just say the word, sweetheart. This home will always be yours."

"Thanks, Mom. That means the world to me." I reached over and hugged her tight.

We would've stayed like that longer, but the ringing of the phone startled us. She pulled slowly from me and reached for the cordless phone on the coffee table. Clearing her throat, she answered it.

"Hello?" She listened to the caller's voice and smiled. "Hi, Kelly... No, we're fine, just catching up... Yes, she's right here, hang on a moment." She passed the phone to me, and I couldn't help the excited grin that formed on my face.

"Hi, honey," I greeted.

"Hey, baby, how are things going with your mom?" she asked in a deliberately light tone.

"Things are fine... a little hard for Mom right now since she just heard an unabridged version of my time away from home." I gave my mom a comforting glance and grasped her hand.

"God, I'm sure that was hard for her to hear. I know just from the few things I've heard, how awful things were for you."

"Yeah, her pallor kind of scared me at first, but she washed her face and came back from the bathroom looking much better."

"That's good to hear. Listen, we haven't talked about this, but tomorrow is New Year's Eve. Would you and your mom like to have dinner with me to celebrate the New Year? I'm thinking of having Sally over, too."

"Sally?"

"I'm sorry, I guess I didn't mention her. She was my gram's neighbor and good friend. She found Gram... um...after her stroke." Her voice sounded like it was beginning to cloud with emotion. "So um... I got to thinking that maybe we could all use a bit of family right about now, and um..."

*God, she's adorable!*

"We'd love to!" I cut off her nervousness with my confident answer. I hadn't asked Mom, but I was sure she'd want to participate. "I think it's what we all need right about now, " I mimicked her words.

"Are you making fun of me?" she teased.

"Absolutely not!" I feigned outrage.

"Good, then come to my place around five."

"What should we bring?"

"Just yourselves. You know how much I love to cook," she said with a smile in her voice.

"I do, and I remember how well you cook, too. I can't wait to see you." I said the last part in a whisper, watching my mother leave the room.

"I can't wait to see you, either." "I miss you," I whispered again.

"How much?"

"Very much." "Can I see you tonight?"

"Well, Mom and I aren't doing anything except chatting, maybe watching a movie or something. Why, what did you have planned?"

"Well -"

Hearing the doorbell ring, I cut her off. "Hang on a second, someone's at the door."

"Sure."

"Mom? You want me to get it?" I called to her. Not hearing an answer, I called out again, "Mom?"

"Susan, hang up the phone," I heard my mother say from the other room.

"Why?" Confused, I walked towards the front door, only to find Kelly holding the cell phone to her ear and my mother smiling back at me.

"Because it's a waste of my minutes when I can talk to you face to face," Kelly said, ending our phone connection.

Lunging at her and hugging her with enthusiasm, I said, "You think you're so funny."

"I know I am, but looks aren't everything," she said into my cheek.

I pulled back, staring at her like she had two heads. "You aren't the least bit funny looking, Kelly. I'll have you know I have excellent taste!" I mocked indignation, only to have her laugh at me.

Mom cleared her throat, pointing at the still open door. "Can I close this now? I'm not heating the neighborhood, you know."

Our faces flushed at her comment, and we both walked into the foyer of the house.

"Would you like to eat with us and maybe watch a movie?" Mom asked, smiling at Kelly.

"If I'm not imposing, I would love it." Kelly paused for a moment and looked back and forth between my mother and me. "I don't really want to be alone."

My mother reached up and lightly grasped Kelly's arm. "You can stay as long as you like. This is more company than I've had in a long time."

"Thanks, I really appreciate it." Kelly's eyes were red rimmed. She looked as if she had been crying.

"Are you okay, honey?"

She sighed deeply, and Mom took that as her cue to leave us alone. She smiled warmly at us and put out her hand for Kelly's coat. Kelly happily shrugged out of her coat and gave it to my mother to hang in the hall closet. Mom looked at us one last time and strolled into the kitchen.

I laced my fingers with hers and gestured with my head to the stairs. "Wanna go up to my room? Um...my old room?" I corrected.

"It will always be your room!" Mom shouted from the kitchen.

"Boy, the walls have ears!" I countered, hearing a chuckle from the other room. Looking seriously at Kelly, I said, "Come on, let's go talk upstairs. You can get a visual from the stories I've told you about this place."

Kelly nodded and followed me up the stairs. She paused to look at the family pictures on the walls, smiling at each one. "You were such a cute baby!" she cooed at my six-month-old picture.

"Were? Oh, the cruelty of some people," I said, pretending to be hurt. Grabbing her hand, I led her into my bedroom.

Looking around, Kelly's smile increased when she saw the twin beds I had spoken of. She sat down on my bed and bounced a little on the mattress. "So, this is the bed where it all happened, eh?" She winked at me when she realized I caught her Cindy reference.

"Yep, the very same. Jealous?" I wiggled my eyebrows at her.

"Of a memory? Not even close," she whispered, pulling me into her lap.

Humming softly with happiness, I accepted the tenderness Kelly was offering me. It was bliss to be in her arms. The arms around me tightened, and I could hear and feel her breathing pattern change. "Honey, what is it? I can tell from your eyes you've been crying. You don't hide your emotions well, sorry to say," I said softly.



Childlike, Kelly sniffled quietly and shrugged her shoulders. "I thought I did an okay job masking my feelings until recently. I'm breaking down in front of everyone these days!" I looked at her lost expression and waited for her to continue. "When I saw Sally yesterday, I totally broke down at her apartment. I don't cry in front of just anyone, Susan; but there I was in Sally's arms, crying like a little baby."

Putting my fingers gently on her lips, I began to convince her otherwise. "First of all, you are *my* baby; and I love that fact. Secondly, sweetheart, you just lost your grandma, for Christ's sake! I know how much she meant to you. If you *weren't* upset by this, I'd be more concerned about you. It's only natural to cry when you lose someone you love, especially on the anniversary of your mom's death. I mean, come on! There's only so much one person can take! I'd have lost it for sure!" I ran my fingers through her silky hair, calming her frazzledness. Her head rested on my breast while I continued to console her. "I'm sure Sally understood; she loved your grandma, right?" I felt her nod against my chest. "See? Don't worry about that stuff. You've heard the phrase, 'Don't sweat the small stuff,' right? Well, here it is again," I answered without waiting for her response.

Kelly's head came up and our eyes locked together. A small smile made its way to Kelly's lips. "I love you so much, baby. I hope you realize how much."

"I do, sweetie, I do." We hugged again and stayed that way for a few moments. "So, guess what? After talking with my mom, she said I could move back here whenever I wanted."

Our bodies separated enough for her to look at me squarely. "Are you ready for that?"

"Honestly, I think I am. I know in my heart that we'll be fine. And God knows this place is heaven compared to my apartment. But unfortunately, the lease isn't up for a few months, so, I guess I'll just stay there until it's up."

"Could you get out of it? I mean, if you wanted to."

Shaking my head, I replied, "I don't have the money. There is a penalty; and they keep my deposit if I break the lease. I'm not in a position to do that." She smiled goofily at me. "What?"

"Honey, if money is the only obstacle, don't you think we could get around that?"

"Meaning..."

"Meaning, if you wanted to come home, I'm sure your mother or I could figure out a way to get you here sooner. If that's what you wanted, of course," she reiterated.

"No way, Kelly. I don't want you doing anything like that. We're talking a couple thousand dollars. I'll stay there until it's up. I've been there a while already, it's fine."

"You deserve more than fine, baby." I started to protest, but she silenced me with her fingers on my mouth this time. "I'm just saying, it can be a reality if you want it to be. There... I'm done"

now," she said with a nod.

"As much as I appreciate the offer, I'll wait it out."

We grinned at each other until my stomach growled loudly. Kelly laughed heartily when she heard the sound. "I guess that answers my next question."

"Which was?"

"Are you getting hungry, because I'm famished and would love some dinner."

I smiled back at her. "Yes, I am hungry, thank you very much! Let's go harass Mom into ordering a pizza!" I said excitedly.

"You're on!"

We shared a tender kiss and made our way down to the kitchen.

## **Chapter Thirty-Six**

Pulling the bread out of the oven, I checked the time on the wall clock, 4:50. "They should be here soon, Mattie!" I said in a singsong voice to my dog, who was happily thumping her tail on the linoleum floor.

I rested the pan on the stove to cool before I removed the loaf. Lasagna had always been one of my favorites, so I was hoping it would work for the rest of the clan. I placed the pasta in the warmer on the dining room table and looked out the snow-bedecked window. I was saddened that Sally had made other plans and couldn't come out tonight, but she was spending the holiday with her family.

*I guess we all had the same idea.*

The doorbell rang, and Mattie barked and ran to greet her friends at the door. Wiping my hands on a dishtowel, I walked to the foyer to open the door. The snow had been falling at a rapid pace. At least four inches of snow had fallen in just a few hours, and it showed no signs of stopping. Opening the door, the first face I saw was my angel's. With snowflakes adorning her head and shoulders, Susan looked up at me, staring all of the love out of herself and into me. For this one moment in time, I felt complete. No troubles, no fears, no pain. I felt only love. This woman was the reason for all of this. Never again, would I let her out of my life.

Pulling her to me, I squeezed gently. Inhaling her scent, I whispered quietly into her ear, "God, I missed you last night."

Pulling out of my embrace, Susan smiled at me. "You could've stayed over, you know. Mom said

it was okay."

Smiling and waving at Susan's mother who was walking towards us, I replied. "I know, but Mattie is here, and I had a whole lotta shopping to do today. Thank God I got it done before all this snow dropped."

Nudging Susan aside playfully, Elise stretched up on her tiptoes to give me a hug. "Happy New Year, Kelly."

I returned her hug enthusiastically. "Happy New Year, Elise." Realizing my manners were still on the snowy stoop, I offered them the warmth of my home. "Please, come in and out of this wet stuff."

"Thanks," they said simultaneously, then laughed at themselves.

"You're just in time. I just took dinner out of the stove," I said, my stomach growling at the smells wafting in from the kitchen.

Both women took deep breaths and hummed happily in unison, "Mmmm."

I looked at them with a crooked grin on my face. "Are you guys linked tonight, or what?"

They both answered, "Looks like it!" They both leaned down to take off their shoes, bumping into each other as they hunched over.

I rolled my eyes as the women laughed again. Taking their wet coats and gloves and hanging them in the closet to dry, I led them into the family room where Mattie would no longer be denied. Barking at her new best friend, Mattie looked at Susan pitifully.

"Oh, yes, my girl. How are you, sweetie? Were you a good girl, keeping mommy company last night?" Mattie shamelessly rolled onto her back with Susan taking the hint to scratch her tummy.

"She's a pleasure hound, what can I say?" I said, laughing at the display.

"Just like your mommy, right?" Susan cooed at my pup, making her wriggle with joy.

"She's beautiful, Kelly. Is she a golden retriever?" Elise asked, also smiling at her daughter's antics with Mattie.

"Yellow lab, actually. She's really a great dog."

Susan returned her attention to Elise and myself. "So? I remember hearing something about food."

This time, Elise rolled her eyes. "That's my girl. Always thinking with her stomach first."

"Damn right. You of all people know what I'm like when I haven't eaten."

"Don't remind me."

The subtle banter between mother and daughter brought a melancholy feel to my heart. I missed that part of my relationship with my mom.

*I hope you and gram are whooping it up tonight, Momma.*

Feeling a warm hand on my forearm, I looked into Elise's comforting eyes. "They're both here tonight, Kelly. You can be sure of that."

Swallowing the lump of emotion in my throat, I replied hoarsely, "I know. I'll never stop missing them. Mom especially. She loved celebrating the holidays."

We all exchanged sad smiles and, deciding to change the mood, I suggested we go and sit. "If you guys take a seat in the dining room, I'll bring the rest of dinner out."

"Can we help with anything?" Susan chimed in.

"Nope. Just show your mom the way, and I'll be in shortly."

"Okay," she agreed, standing on her toes to give me a tender kiss, then leading her mother to the dining room. Realizing I hadn't opened the wine, I called after Susan, "Baby, you can do something for me, actually."

"Sure, honey."

"Will you open the wine on the table? The corkscrew is next to the bottle."

"You got it!" she said with a wink.

Watching Susan escort her mother into the dining room, I sliced the loaf of bread, and placed it into a linen covered basket. The lasagna was on the table, as was the wine, so all that was left was the bread and myself.

Walking into the dining room, basket in hand, I saw my new family patiently waiting for me to join them. "Here's the last of it. Let's dig in!" I said with a toothy smile.

As I walked around to my seat, Susan stood and pulled my chair out for me. "Paybacks for our first date."

I smiled in memory of our first night together. Complete strangers breaking bread, sharing heartfelt memories for the first time. It seemed to me that ours was a predetermined reunion of souls. How else could I explain our bond?

"Why, thank you, Milady," I said, pulling my chair closer to the table.

"It looks and smells wonderful, Kelly," Elise complimented, Susan nodding along in agreement.

"Well, I've always loved a good lasagna, so I hope you both do as well."

"One of my favorites, too. Let's tear into it!" Susan said excitedly.

Laughing, I handed her the serving knife. "Would you care to do the honors?"

"Absolutely!" she cried, almost ripping the knife from my grasp.

Serving huge portions to all of us, Susan sat down and filled my glass with the Merlot I'd selected for dinner. Holding her glass high in the air, her mother and I mimicked her actions. "To old and new friends... new relationships and reconciliations," Susan began.

"Hear, hear!" Elise and I started to toast, but were stopped by Susan's hand.

"Hang on, I'm not done yet." She took a deep breath and a flush suddenly colored her cheeks. Filled with emotion, she stood and continued. "The similarities between you two are endless. I love you both more than I can say, and sadly, I almost lost you both. Mom, I did lose you when our lives were ripped apart by hatred and fear. Daddy acted out and did what he thought was best. Unfortunately, his best wasn't good for anyone but him. I lost my mom and my best friend the day he kicked me out. Now that we're together again, nothing will ever come between us. I feel sorry for anyone that even tries. We'll work this out and we'll be stronger because of it. I love you, Mama." Susan leaned down and kissed her mother tenderly on her cheek. Wiping the tears from her eyes, Elise stood clumsily and leaned over to hug her little girl. The sounds of small cries filled the room, with Susan and her mom locked in a tight embrace. Sniffing as they pulled apart, Susan's mother handed her a napkin to wipe her tears. Looking over to me, Susan's moist eyes locked with my own. "Your turn," she choked out.

"Be gentle," I teased.

Clearing her throat, she captured one of my hands with one of her own. "Kelly, you are my heart and soul; and I will never be as grateful as I was the day you walked up to me. You've changed my life. When we met, I was a scared, tattered, and lonely young woman. I had a little voice in my head that would always be at war with me over any decisions I made. I was self-conscious, and I felt absolutely no self-worth. In the short time we have known one another, you've calmed my soul and eased away my fears. Rejection had always been in the forefront in my life. Being away from real relationships and love for so long had really taken its toll on me. When you wanted to take me out, I was terrified that it was tainted by some reason other than just you finding an interest in me. Now, before you think anything else, that was before I knew the woman that's in front of me. People used me for whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, then discarded me like trash." Susan's mother continued to cry softly during Susan's toast. My throat was constricting with so much emotion, I wasn't sure I would be tear-free by the time she was finished.

"You came along on your white charger and rescued me from a world that I never thought I'd escape again. You freely opened your heart and showed me everything you had to offer. I would've been a fool not to accept such a gift. I'm so glad I'm not a fool." Looking over briefly at her mother, she put down her glass and took her mother's hand, linking us all together. "You brought my mother back to me. You didn't think of anything or anyone but me and my happiness. Bringing her back to me was taking a huge risk, since you didn't know how I would react. Sadly, I reacted rather badly. I know now, in my heart, you did it out of love for me; and I will never be able to thank you enough. I know how much you miss your mom, and if I could bring her back to you, I would without hesitation. Instead, I offer to you the only thing I am able- me, Susan McGovern; and I promise you, that I will take good care of your heart from now on. I will love you for as long as you'll have me; and so help me God, I promise never to hurt you like I did at the cemetery. You are the most precious gift I have ever received, and I swear... I *swear* that I will treasure you until the end of our days," Susan choked out the rest of her toast. I jumped up to embrace the woman that had stolen my heart completely. I sobbed into her, feeling so much inside of me.

"Thank you, baby. Thank you so much," I managed to squeak out. Looking over at her mother, I saw that she hadn't stopped crying. "Come here, Mom," I said, extending my arm out for her to take. Stepping into our group hug, Susan's mother held tightly to us. "Boy, when I asked you both over for dinner, I had no idea we'd be having a crying fest!" I cried out through my tears.

Taking a cleansing breath, Susan's mom spoke softly. "I am so glad you are a part of my little girl's life. I know you will keep her safe and loved forever. I'm thankful you have found each other. It's pretty clear that the fates knew what they were doing when they matched you up. I have never met two people that were more deserving of each other than you. Thank you for loving my daughter so much that it brought her back to me, Kelly."

Kissing Elise's forehead, I replied, "You don't have to thank me. It is my pleasure to love her. I pledge to you both, that I will continue to do so every minute of every day, until I am no longer. Even then, I have a feeling we'll meet up again, one day. Like you said, the fates have a way of making things happen. I'm just grateful that I was on the receiving end of their offering to the love altar." We all chuckled at my lame attempt to be witty.

"Oh, that was bad, sweetheart," Susan groaned, sniffing away her tears.

"See what you have to look forward to? Years and years of my *glorious* sense of humor."

Trying to break free of our circle, Susan teased, "You sure it's too late to run?"

Pulling her back to me, I replied, "Yes, I'm very sure." Looking down at our cooling plates of food, I tried to resume my role as hostess. "If we're done snotting all over each other, I'd love to eat now."

Smacking me in the stomach, Susan cried out, "Eww! Kelly, that's gross."

"Just another of my wonderful qualities. All for you, baby. All for you." I kissed the top of her head and we all sat down in our seats to eat.

Finally.

\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

Dinner was wonderful, once our emotions were, at long last, under control. Susan's mother was charming and funny and all the things I saw in her daughter. It was easy to see whose side of the family Susan took after. Our time together passed quickly and before we knew it, Father New Year made his entrance precisely at midnight.

Champagne flutes in hand, our glasses clinked in sync with the chimes on the clock. We toasted the coming New Year and prayed for a better time for us all. We sat in the family room with a warm fire blazing in the hearth. The snow had prevented Susan and her mother from leaving, which was totally fine with me. I loved their company, and knew it was something I would enjoy more and more with each passing day.

The light snores coming from the small body nestled beside me, told me Susan was down for the count with her mother right alongside her. Looking to the mantle of my fireplace, I saw the picture of me with my mom and grandmother. Saying a silent prayer of love and thanks to them, I felt the warmth of the hugs they sent from above. I knew the pain of losing them would lessen with each day. Hell, Gram's funeral might even be bearable with the love and support I was receiving from Susan and her mother. Life goes on when we least want it to. It's the hardest lesson I've had to learn. Wanting to shrivel up and wait for my time to come will never again be in my thoughts. That was a Kelly who was young and looking to find redemption for a wrong she couldn't right. I have finally found a calm within myself, and with that came a love, a peace, and a place to call home.

The End

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