

# ~ The House on Sandstone ~

by KG MacGregor

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Nothing much to disclaim here. This is an original story, though the main characters bear a mild resemblance to familiar faces. The town of Leland, Kentucky, is fictitious. Any similarity to persons living or dead is coincidental.

Thanks to my Sweetcakes for her help and inspiration. I'm always interested in feedback, and you may direct that to [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com).

## Chapter 1

"No, Mrs. Trout, I checked the drawer myself and I went through the closet and the bathroom too. Are you sure you brought them with you to the hospital?" Justine tucked the phone beneath her chin as she typed the complaint into the computer form. "Did you look in your car? Sometimes people get here and decide to leave things... Yes, I'll wait."

In eight more minutes, all the incoming calls would get a recording advising them to call back during office hours. It had been a crazy weekend at Grace Hospital and the complaints department-which consisted only of Justine Hall-was catching most of the fallout on Monday. A full moon had kept the emergency room full of all kinds of foolishness, and there were five babies born on Saturday, a single-day record for Leland, Kentucky. But the biggest commotion happened Sunday morning when Reverend Russell had suffered a heart attack in the pulpit. Practically the whole Presbyterian congregation came in behind the ambulance, filling up the parking lots and the lobbies, blocking the halls, and badgering the nursing staff every ten minutes for updates. The good news was that it was only a mild attack. The bad news was that two of the deacons had gotten into fisticuffs over who was going to get to preach the next week, and that led to a bloody nose and a broken hand.

"You found 'em? That's great! I was hoping... No, it's okay, Mrs. Trout. People have their minds on other things when they're coming to the hospital. These things just happen." In the right-hand column, Justine entered the resolution: *Teeth found in car.*

*Four minutes to go.* Justine wasn't usually a clock watcher, but she had something big planned for later and she needed to get her workout out of the way first. Hopefully, she'd make it to five without... *Rrrrrnnnnngggg! Dang it!*

"Grace Hospital, Patient Services. This is Justine Hall. How can I help you?" She brought up a new form on the computer, then stopped. "No, Trey. If your father says no, then the answer is no... You can ask him to call me and we'll talk about it, but I'm not giving you permission after he's already said you can't go." The redhead rolled her eyes as she listened to the teenager's

argument. "Trey, your father and I both went to college. We are not the two stupidest people in the world...I told you to have him call me. We'll talk about it. That's the best I can do, honey...I love you...I said I love you." Seventeen had somehow gotten to be too old to tell your mother you loved her. "Bye-bye."

Justine sighed in resignation as the red light blinked to announce a message. Technically, it had come before five o'clock; so technically, she should answer it before heading out.

*"Hi...uh, I was calling about my mom's bill that she got today. She was in the hospital last month for a...what was it?...a cardiac catheter thingy. But her bill says she had a...a heart transplant. She, uh...doesn't remember that, and we can't find any really big scars. But if it turns out that's what they did, we can't afford it so they'll have to swap it back. Tell you what, I'll just call back on Tuesday...I hope you enjoyed this little entertainment break."*

In spite of herself, Justine laughed at that one. It never ceased to amaze her how often procedure codes got entered wrong into the system. Whoever was doing that probably had no idea of the confusion and trauma they caused. At least this woman who had called tonight seemed to have a sense of humor about it, and that always helped. Sometimes, people just flew off the handle and ranted until their veins were ready to pop.

With the flip of a switch, Justine turned the phone over to the answering machine. Ten minutes later, she was at the hospital's Wellness Center, decked out in spandex tights and a tank top, and claiming a free treadmill. Her plan was to run four miles here then do two circuits on the weights, her usual Monday-Wednesday-Friday routine. Easing into a steady pace, her mind wandered back to that last phone call and she chuckled again.

"What's so funny?" A thin man slipped onto the treadmill to her right. Like Justine, Dr. Brian Coulter was a fixture at the Wellness Center, serious about setting a good example for his patients.

"Oh, hi, Dr. Coulter. Nothing really. I was just thinking about a phone call I got today."

"How many times do I have to tell you? Call me Brian. We're all friends here."

"I know. It's just that I think it gives patients more confidence to hear everyone address the doctors with authority."

"But we all have to let our hair down sometimes, don't you think?"

Justine hoped that wasn't the case with Dr. Coulter-he sported a world class comb-over that flopped to the wrong side whenever he ran. Still, he was a nice man and a well respected obstetrician. Sometimes, though, he needed a little-

"Say, why don't we go for a drink when we're done here? You can tell me all about what's got your funny bone tickled."

"Dr. Coulter, I'm afraid I already have plans for this evening." *Plans that do not include going out with a married man.*

"Sure...some other time then?"

"I'm afraid I have plans for those evenings also."

"All of them?"

Justine smiled gently and nodded. "And I think it would be best if we didn't have this kind of conversation again. People might overhear and get the wrong idea. And you know how they like to gossip." If anyone in town knew that for a fact, it was Justine. "Besides, Dr. Henderson would probably frown on that kind of socializing among the staff."

Besides being their boss, Jim Henderson was a longtime friend of Justine's late father, and their loyalty to one another was clear to everyone on the staff. Brian was bright enough to take a hint, as he didn't need a dressing down from the hospital administrator.

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"What did they say?" Nadine Griffin stretched across the kitchen sink to open the window a crack. With bread in the oven and stew on the stove, it was stuffy in the small house.

"I got an answering machine. If you want me to, I'll take the paperwork up there in the morning and see if I can get it straightened out." Carly reached for a cookie from a bag on the counter, only to have her hand slapped away.

"You'll spoil your supper. Look at you...you're not eating right. I bet you eat cookies for dinner."

*With cognac*, the blonde woman thought. *And sometimes I top it off with a cigar.*

"Are you sure you don't mind taking care of that bill? I can have your dad deal with it. I don't want you to have to worry about that stuff while you're home." Her daughter hadn't been back to Leland in almost four years.

"It's no big deal. Daddy has enough to do, what with Perry gone to Ohio all week. In fact, I was thinking I might ride with him tomorrow if he had some deliveries."

"Now that's just what I mean. You shouldn't feel like you have to work so hard when you're here. Goodness knows, you work hard enough as it is. Just take it easy and relax for a change."

"I am relaxing. I like going along in the truck. Besides, Daddy has no business trying to haul

furniture by himself. He's sixty-eight years old, for gosh sakes. And so are you. If I want to come home and do a few things to help out, you should let me. It'll make me feel better about having to be gone so much, and maybe we can all think of it as a vacation."

Nadine had to smile at that. It really was good to have Carly home, especially for so long this time-eight whole weeks. And she looked healthier than when they'd gone to visit her in Israel. She was tanned and her blonde hair was short and streaked with a few strands of gray. She'd lost a few pounds since the last time she'd been home, enough to make Nadine think she wasn't getting enough to eat.

"Why don't you call your father and tell him supper's almost ready?"

Carly reached for the phone again, dialing by rote the number at Griffin Home Furnishings. She delivered her mom's message in a commanding tone that brooked no argument and hurriedly set the table. The drive from the store would take her father less than three minutes.

"Listen, before Daddy gets home...Is your heart really okay? I mean, you aren't keeping anything from us again, are you?"

"I'm fine, Carly. I swear, you're just like your father. You'd think I'd been caught lying all my life."

"Well...you didn't tell either of us about that biopsy until it came back negative." That was almost ten years ago, when Nadine's doctor had found a suspicious lump in her breast.

"My heart is...okay, for the most part. I have a small place that's...well, it's not blocked, but it's...kinda squeezed. Dr. Sanders thinks that's what's making me so dizzy when I hurry around too much. He's put me on some medication, and I haven't had any problems since then...if you don't count the headaches. But they're not as bad as they used to be, now that I'm used to the medicine. And I don't have to go back for a checkup until March, so he must not be too worried."

Carly was still skeptical, but what choice did she have if her mom wanted to keep things from her? However, that glitch in the paperwork might be just the thing to get her doctor to talk if there really was something wrong.

Nadine was filling the soup bowls just as the pickup pulled into the drive. In a few minutes, they'd sit down to a Norman Rockwell moment...almost perfect. The only thing it needed was one more person at the table. Somebody for Carly.

"Hey, Daddy."

"Hi, sweetie. It's so good to come home and see your car in the driveway every day." Lloyd Griffin tossed his cap onto the counter and headed to the sink to wash up.

"Hey, won't you get in trouble wearing a Barber cap?"

"No, I've got my Diggers on. You have to cover all your bases." The two competing boot factories were owned by brothers whose bitter feud was one of the best things to ever happen to Leland, Kentucky. Daryl Barber split from brother Wayne to form his own company, hiring away the workers with better wages, only to have Wayne lure them back with better benefits. Nearly every family in Leland had someone who made hiking boots, and virtually everyone in town wore Barber Bucks or DB Diggers.

"That's so silly. I can't believe you go to all that trouble."

"Easy for you to say. Everywhere you go around here, people look at your feet first." Like all the other merchants in town, Lloyd avoided a display of favoritism between the two factories. Some days he wore the flip set, Bucks with a DB cap. Either he wore the two logos together or not at all.

"I should get some new boots while I'm here. Mine got stolen from the hotel room." On her last job, Carly Griffin had lived in downtown Jerusalem, wary of moving into one of the neighborhoods for fear of where the next bomb would go off. She'd had one close call at an open-air market, and that was more than enough to convince her to stay close to the hotel when not on the job site.

The 42-year-old headed one of the Labor Orientation Teams for Worldwide Workforce, a consulting company that specialized in helping industries expand abroad by recruiting and training local employees. After twenty years with the company, she was growing weary of the rotation from one country to another, with only a couple of months stateside in between. Her applications to corporate in Louisville had been ignored for more than ten years; it didn't really pay to be successful in the field abroad because all that got you was another rotation. It was the guys who couldn't hack it overseas that kept getting kicked upstairs.

"I don't want to get in your business, honey, but your mother and I are both glad to have you out of the Middle East, and if you want us to live to be old people, you won't take another job in that part of the world."

"Amen to that!" Nadine echoed.

"I told you both not to worry about me. I was always safe while I was there." *Except for that one time, and you'll never hear about that.* "Our hotel was a long way from the war zone."

When her parents had visited last spring, they could all hear the explosions in the distance, and the sounds of sirens and gunfire were constant through the night. "All I can say is that I'm glad they're not bombing in Madrid."

"This stew is really good, Mama." *Time to change the subject.* Carly wasn't about to mention the Basque terrorists, but she had to admit, she would sleep better on her next job in the Spanish capital than she did in Jerusalem. Still, she wasn't looking forward to another year and a half abroad.

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Justine stepped from the shower and pulled the plastic cap from her head, fluffing the reddish brown hair around her neck. There hadn't been any point in washing it tonight-it was just going to get messed up later when Jon ran his hands through it. She smiled in anticipation of the special evening she had planned. The phone interrupted her dreamy thoughts as she slipped into the plush terry robe.

"Hello...oh, hi JT." Her ex, Jason Thomas Sharpe, Jr. "No, I did not tell him he could go. You know better than that. I told him to have you call me and we'd talk about it...But I have plans tonight, so make it quick." Taunting her ex-husband with these little hints was one of her favorite recreational activities.

Justine had been divorced for six years, and both of their teenage children lived primarily with JT. Over the last three years, she'd lost weight and gotten in shape, and JT's interest in her had reignited-in the form of compliments on her figure or hairstyle; casual flirting; and even once, a blatant invitation to "ride Woody"...for old times' sake, of course. Justine had answered with a promise to tell his wife if he didn't knock it off. She hadn't meant it-she would never insert herself in the middle of their marriage-but JT didn't need to know that. As near as she could tell, she was JT's only extra-marital interest these days, and she seriously doubted he would rise to the occasion if she ever called his bluff. It was possible, she thought, that the 49-year-old man was finally growing up.

"JT, stop talking *at* me and listen. I don't think Trey is old enough to go away for a weekend without adults. Is that what you want to hear?" She waited while the man on the other end of the phone calmed down. "Then hallelujah! It took twenty years, but we finally agreed on something...Listen, I've got to go. I need to get ready for Jon." That would get his jockeys in a knot, she thought.

Checking the clock on the mantle, Justine finished her preparations. Hurrying from room to room, she turned out the lights and set the stereo on soft jazz, adjusting the volume so that it was barely heard. In the den, she pulled the coffee table from the center of the rug to create an open space directly in front of an already roaring fire. One by one, she lit strategically place candles so that they flickered from all around the room.

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"That was delicious, Mama. If there's one thing I miss more than anything else about Leland, it's

your cooking."

Nadine just glowed in her daughter's praise. She'd been setting the table for forty-six years, and Lloyd no longer seemed to notice what was on it.

"Now if you don't mind, I think I'm going to take a little walk through the neighborhood while my dinner settles."

"You're not fooling me! You're going out to smoke one of those fancy cigarettes."

Carly grinned at the face her mother made. "That's right. But at least I don't smoke them in the house." The younger woman pulled her coat from the hall closet and slipped it on, checking the pocket to make sure she had her Dunhill Lights and lighter. She would have a cognac by the fire before turning in. Over the years, that routine had helped her to take the edge off the day and fall asleep without too much tossing and turning.

"The path through the park goes over Stony Ridge to Sandstone now."

"Oh yeah? Maybe I'll check it out." Carly delivered a kiss to her mother's wrinkled cheek. "I won't be long."

Stepping into the darkness on the porch, she filled her lungs with the crisp November air, a welcome change from the dusty haze of Jerusalem. *Yessiree*, this time, she was really glad to be home.

Stony Ridge was a steep hill that divided the homes on Carly's street from the city limits. In the old days, it was symbolic of the chasm between the haves and have-nots. The Griffins were far from poor, but the low margins on furniture didn't afford many luxuries. Nonetheless, they'd been happy in the two-bedroom house on Stony Ridge Road.

The old park held mixed memories for Carly. She'd started coming here almost twenty years ago on her first trip home after going to work for Worldwide on a job in Bolivia. Back then, she'd told her mom that she just needed some fresh air to clear her head; but in fact, she'd hid in the woods like a teenager to sneak a smoke.

That's when she first discovered the houses on Sandstone. From the top of the wooded hill, she had seen the construction underway; obviously, these would be some of the nicest homes in Leland when they were finished, and they were just inside the city limits. When she'd returned a few years later, she'd been amazed at how settled the new neighborhood already seemed. Small children raced on scooters and tricycles on the sidewalk while young mothers congregated with their strollers at the ends of driveways. It was here that Carly first recognized the redhead.

Justine Hall-now Justine Sharpe, according to the newspaper announcement her mom had sent-was one of the women gathered below. Though more than fifty yards away, the tall figure was unmistakable to Carly. She was heavier now than she'd been in high school-quite a bit heavier-and she was obviously pregnant, and due pretty soon. From Carly's position in the woods above,

she watched unseen as Justine left the group, gripping her lower back in noticeable discomfort as she pushed a baby in a stroller up the street toward the large house on the corner.

The moment had been bittersweet for Carly. She'd hoped Justine was really happy and that she'd married a man who would love her and appreciate the wonderful person she was. And she'd been thrilled at the joy Justine must have felt at having children. But a part of Carly's heart had broken that day...the part Justine Hall never knew she held.

Shaking those memories from her head, the blonde woman veered onto the new path that led to her old hiding place on the hill. As her mom had said, it wound down the other side now. A small wooden footbridge forded the creek at the bottom, directly across the street from Justine's two-story home. Unable to resist the urge, she lit another cigarette and started down the hill, stopping when she reached the bridge, her eyes peeled for any sign of activity in the house.

Carly had no idea how long she stood on the bridge, leaning casually against the rail as she smoked one Dunhill after another. Her mind wandered back twenty-five years to their time at Leland High School, and emotions long-buried simmered to the surface. Justine wasn't really responsible for this nostalgic longing; she was merely symbolic of all the times Carly's heart had been awakened, only to be abandoned when she gave in to the pull. It had happened three times in her life. And she wasn't going to let it happen again as long as she was still pulling up roots every two years to move with her job to a new country. That was just asking for trouble.

A pair of headlights startled her, and she realized that she probably looked pretty suspicious out here staring at the house in the dark. The smart thing to do was to head back up the hill and go home, but Carly's feet wouldn't move once she realized that the SUV was turning into Justine's drive. Mesmerized, she watched as a young man hopped out and pulled something bulky from the back, carting it to the front door where he rang the bell and waited. Moments later, a slender woman appeared at the door, plainly visible in her bathrobe from the light from the porch.

It was Justine. And she was more beautiful now than Carly had ever seen her.

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"Where do you want me to set up this time?" The muscular young man indicated his padded folding table. When he'd been here last August, they'd set the massage table in a private area of the patio out back.

"I made a space in front of the fire, but if you think you'll be too warm there, we can put it across the room."

"What's important is that you're comfortable, Justine. I'll set up wherever you like."

"Okay, then follow me. Do you want a bottle of water or something?"

"Sure. Tell you what...I'll get things ready first and you can wrap up in a towel and get situated on the table while I go into the kitchen and get something to drink."

The young man quickly went about his work, locking the table legs, folding the towels, and placing the oil bottles on the hearth to warm. When he disappeared into the kitchen, Justine slipped discreetly from her robe onto the table face down, awkwardly positioning the oversized towel so that it draped the length of her nude body.

Jon announced his return and began to warm the oil in his hands. Starting with her feet, he squeezed and pulled each digit until it relaxed fully. From there, he dug his thumbs into the long muscles of her calf, separating the tightened fibers as she moaned softly in near ecstasy. Bit by bit, he worked his way up the hardened hamstrings, tucking the towel so that one cheek of her buttocks was exposed. Runners like Justine were a challenge sometimes, but as he pressed the trigger points deep in her gluteus, the contractions released.

"Do you stretch these out when you finish running?"

"I didn't today. I tried to squeeze in an extra circuit and lost track of time."

"Cooling down is a very important part of conditioning."

"I know." She felt guilty confessing the lapse to her massage therapist. But then, Justine felt guilty about almost everything. That was her nature.

Jon finished with that leg and moved to the other side, repeating the process one muscle at a time, culminating again in the release of the trigger points in her buttocks. Finished for now with her lower body, he pulled the towel down to her waist and gently began to spread the warm oil across her back.

Justine worked hard to quiet her busy mind. The hectic day, the flirtatious encounter with Dr. Coulter, the call from JT...all of these bombarded her thoughts, but she pushed them away, trying to concentrate on the feel of Jon's hands on her body. This was a physical closeness that she craved...the simple touch of another human being...an affirmation that her senses would respond. With his strong hands, the therapist was moving her body and spirit in a manner that was sensual but not sexual.

"Okay, let's have you turn over now," Jon whispered softly.

Justine had almost dozed off while he kneaded the muscles in her back. She got her bearings and turned, careful to keep herself covered as Jon held the towel in place. She'd been reluctant at first to trust a total stranger with such intimate contact, but Jon had always been the consummate professional. They didn't talk much; instead, he had encouraged her to go to a peaceful place in her mind.

"You're getting nice muscle tone through here," he remarked as he pushed his fingers from her sternum to her shoulder.

"I've been working on that. I'm glad it shows."

"It's very nice...not too pronounced, but definitely firm. Are you working with a trainer?"

"No. I just go to the classes once a week at the Wellness Center. They help us do our workout charts and diets for the week."

"That's a good thing you're doing. This is the only body you're going to get, and it's nice that you take care of it. And when you look good and feel healthy, everything in your life is better."

Justine wanted to believe that, but the facts got in the way. True, she felt better about herself after dropping sixty pounds, and it was nice to be able to tell JT to shove it now that he'd deemed her desirable again. But the rest of her life hadn't exactly followed suit. Her job was a dead end; she could count her real friends on...heck, it was just her therapist in Lexington. And her love life was completely rudderless-she had no idea what she wanted in that department, or even if she wanted anything at all.

But the worst part of her life-the piece that haunted her every day-was that she had screwed up the mother thing big time. Trey and Emmy were fine with JT; he was a good father in spite of being such a snake. And they still loved her, she knew. But losing them had sent her into therapy in Lexington, for which she drove forty minutes each way. That and the medication were all that had kept her from killing herself that first year. With Valerie's help, she'd fought back to wrest more control of her life. Enrolling in the Wellness Center had been the first step.

"Relax, Justine." Jon flattened the creases on her forehead with his thumbs and pushed them outward. "Let it go." From there, his hands wound through her hair, massaging her scalp with decreasing pressure until he finally pulled his fingertips away.

At that instant, a small tear leaked from the corner of her eye and trickled into her ear.

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"Hey." Carly found her mother in the living room hard at work on a crossword puzzle. The din of the TV could be heard from the family room they'd added on twelve years ago.

"Have a nice walk? Or a nice smoke, I should ask." The admonishing tone was the same she always used when referring to her daughter's nicotine habit.

"I had both, thank you." The blonde woman took a seat on the couch.

"Your father's watching TV in the back."

"If that was meant to be a hint, it wasn't very subtle."

Nadine chuckled. She'd always gone off by herself after dinner to unwind from the day. Working at the store with her husband all day, she needed time alone in the evening, a habit that had served their marriage well. "Well, honey, you're more than welcome to keep me company. But this isn't your usual routine."

"I know. I just wanted to ask if you knew anything about...Justine."

The older woman peered over her glasses to gauge her daughter's look. She knew that Justine Hall had been special to Carly back in high school, at least for a little while. That's why she'd sent the wedding clippings; but when she got no response, she assumed that her daughter was no longer interested in keeping up with people from Leland.

"She's divorced now."

A swarm of emotions washed over the younger woman as she digested the words. She was at once saddened that it likely had meant a difficult time for Justine. At the same time, she was oddly satisfied that the marriage hadn't been right for the woman after all. But mostly, she was irrationally heartsick that she didn't know Justine at all anymore, and she hadn't been there to help her through what was surely a difficult time.

"Do you have any idea what happened? They've got a couple of kids, right?"

"There were rumors, but I don't pay much attention to that sort of thing."

"What kind of rumors?"

Nadine had in fact heard several rumors, none of them very flattering for either Justine or JT. "I think there were...other people involved...for both of them."

*Other people....* "So you're saying that they were...having affairs?"

"That's what folks were saying, but like I said, I didn't pay much attention."

"So what happened when they got divorced? I mean, did they get married again?"

"JT got married pretty soon after, I think."

"But Justine didn't?" *Details, Mama. I want details.* "Is she still seeing the other guy?"

Nadine pulled off her glasses and rubbed her eyes. "Honey, I really don't put much stock in gossip, so I don't know if there's any truth to what I heard or not."

"What did you hear?"

"The rumors around town were that Justine had gotten involved with another woman...a doctor's wife."

"Do...is there...?" *What exactly is the question, Carly?* "Did...?"

"I don't know any more than that, honey. Why don't you ask her how she's doing when you see her tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?"

"At the hospital. She's the one who handles patient complaints at Grace."

## **Chapter 2**

"But Monday they're going to tell which one's the father of Courtney's baby. I think it's going to be Juan Carlos, because she went to that art gallery with him when William was out of town."

"Can't you just tape it and watch it when you get home?" Some days, Justine got the most unusual requests.

"We don't have a VCR...do you think the insurance would pay for one? I mean, since this is medical-related and all."

"I kind of doubt that, Mrs. Perkins."

"And you don't think they could wait and take my gall bladder out in the afternoon? It's over at two o'clock."

"The surgeons like to work in the morning, when they're fresh and rested. It's better that way, don't you think?" From her seat behind the high counter, Justine caught sight of a blonde head taking a place in line behind Mrs. Perkins.

"I guess. I just hate to miss it after I've been waiting all this time to find out."

"I tell you what. I'll tape it for you all next week, and when you get out of the hospital, I'll send

my son over to your house with my VCR and the tape. He'll hook it all up for you and show you how it works, and he can come get it when you're done."

"Oh, Justine! That would be perfect. It's *Secret Lives* from one to two, and if you don't mind, go ahead and tape *Central Hospital* after that. And then at nine o'clock on Monday night-

"Mrs. Perkins...it would be much simpler if I just did the soaps, okay? I mean, I wouldn't want things to get so complicated that I made a mistake and missed the very show you wanted to see most."

"I suppose you're right. It's very sweet of you to offer to do this."

"Well I wouldn't want you worrying about Courtney and Don Jose-

"Juan Carlos."

"Juan Carlos...when you ought to be trying to feel better. Surgery's a big deal, and it's very important to get the right amount of rest afterward."

"Thank you, Justine. I guess I'll see you first thing Monday morning then."

"Okay, Happy Thanksgiving."

"You too."

When Mrs. Perkins walked out, the embattled patient services director craned her neck to see who was next. "Can I help you?"

"Hey."

Justine studied the small smile on the blonde woman who suddenly stepped to the counter. It was a very familiar face, but out of context, it was like a dream or something. The hair was different; it was short now, and stylish. Strands of gray made it seem even lighter, but the woman didn't seem old at all, despite the lines of her eyes. "Carly? Carly Griffin?"

"Hi, Justine."

The redhead jumped from her chair and swung open the small gate that separated her office from the waiting area. "I don't believe it! Carly, you look fantastic. I mean it. I know it sounds stupid to say you haven't changed a bit, but...never mind. You've changed a lot. Not that you didn't look good before, but...the years have been really, really good to you. You just look...fantastic!" *Shut up already, Justine.*

Justine was glad for the big smile that now greeted her; subconsciously, she hadn't expected it. Unable to resist, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Carly's shoulders. She must not have made a complete fool of herself, she thought, or she wouldn't have gotten the fierce hug

around her waist in return.

"You look great, too. Better than great, I'd say. If the years have been good to me, I'd say they've worshipped you."

Justine waved off the compliment. "No, no...the years were wicked to me. I just started fighting back is all."

"Well, it looks like you're winning."

"You're sweet, Carly...just like always. So what in the heck are you doing back in Leland? Last time I ran into your mother, you were living somewhere in China."

"Shanghai. That was a few years ago. Then I moved to South America for a couple of years, and I just got back from a job in Israel."

"Israel! My goodness, you do get around." Justine just couldn't get over how good her old friend looked. Back in high school, Carly had worn her hair long, usually in a ponytail. She'd been kind of pudgy back then...and she always wore jeans and work shirts. Now she was trim and...*the word is shapely, Justine*...and she was sort of feminine...but just barely. "You look fantastic!"

The blonde woman laughed and blushed, now unable to meet the redhead's appraising eyes.

Justine finally noticed the Grace Hospital envelope in Carly's hand and suddenly felt like an idiot. This was about hospital business, not about one old friend looking up another. Besides, it wasn't very likely that Carly Griffin would be going out of her way to say hello or anything after all these years, especially after how they'd left things between them years ago.

"Do you have a...is that...can I help you?" Her professional demeanor crept back into place.

"Sure. I called yesterday but I guess it was after hours. My mom was in here last month for a cardiac catheterization, but she got billed for a heart transplant."

"That was you! God, Carly, I should have recognized your voice. And only you would have found all that funny. I swear, you still have that same old dry sense of humor you always had. 'We can't find a big scar.' And what else did you say? We'd have to swap it back? You always did make me laugh." *Shut up, motor mouth.*

"Well, I'm glad I could do that." The big smile was back in place. "So can we get this sorted out? I mean it's just a little paperwork glitch now, but next thing you know, the goons start calling and talking about breaking fingers and stuff."

"Oh, that kind of thing would never-. You were kidding again, weren't you?"

"Hey, you never know who has a cousin who 'knows people'. I just thought it best to get this taken care of before it comes to that."

Justine shook her head and laughed. "A cousin who knows people? This is Leland, you silly thing. Everybody knows everybody. Let me have a look at that. I bet I can fix it in two clicks." Indeed, she pulled up the record and re-entered the code, routing the correction back to invoicing for proper billing. "Okay, I can tell you with some confidence that you can safely ignore that bill."

"They won't come get the house or the furniture store?"

"I don't *think* so, but you should probably put them in someone else's name just to be safe." Now it was Justine's turn to tease.

"Good thinking." Carly buttoned her jacket, signaling her intent to leave. "I guess that's it, then. Thanks a lot."

"It was an easy fix." *Don't let her just leave, dummy.* "So what about your mom? Did everything turn out okay?"

"Yeah, it was alright. Just a little problem. Dr. Sanders gave her some medicine. I talked to him, and he said it was no big deal."

"Good. That's good, Carly...Tell her I said hi, okay?"

"Sure." The blonde smiled again, this time almost sadly, and turned to leave.

*Say something.* "So...how long are you going to be in town?"

Carly stopped and spun around. "Till the middle of January."

"That's almost two whole months! That works out perfect. You can come to the reunion."

"What reunion?"

"Our twenty-fifth, remember? Leland High School...1979...seventeen-year-old stupid people. It's at the Kiwanis Lodge two days after Christmas, on Saturday night. We thought more people might be in Leland over the holidays, visiting family and all. I'm on the committee. Didn't you get the invitation?"

"No, I guess my mail hasn't caught up with me yet."

"But you can come, right?"

"I...don't know. I, uh...might have to go to Louisville right after Christmas for a few days."

Justine noticed the hesitation, and felt suddenly ashamed. Why would Carly want to come to a reunion after the way she'd been treated in high school? Clearly, their juvenile behavior had not

been forgotten. Some of the girls Justine had hung out with had gone out of their way to make fun of the blonde girl back then. Carly was smart, but she didn't take part in the after school stuff, like the clubs or athletics. Instead, she'd gone to work, riding on the Griffin Home Furnishings delivery truck, hauling furniture all over town. One of the girls from Justine's clique-Sara McCurry-would call her Carl, then everyone would laugh at the joke. Carly had always tried to laugh along, but by their senior year, she'd pulled away so much that she barely spoke to anyone at all.

But Justine's shame was for more than that. She hadn't actually participated in the taunting, but she'd never spoken a word in the blonde girl's defense. No, what she'd done had been far worse, because Carly knew the truth. And all of a sudden, it was incredibly important for her to show her former friend that she'd grown up...and to give Carly the respect that she deserved.

"Well if you're going to be in town for awhile, maybe we can...have dinner or something. I'd really like to hear all about how you're doing, Carly. I think it's just great that you're getting to go to all those exciting places." Her voice wavered as she grew more serious. "You always were a better person than all of us put together."

Carly blushed deep red, locking her own eyes into Justine's repentant gaze. Finally, she nodded. "Yeah...yeah, I'd really like that, Justine...having dinner or something...and catching up."

"So...I'll call you, okay? At your parents' house or at the store or something."

"That's good. Either place." She started to leave again, turning one last time. "It's really good to see you again."

"Yeah, you too."

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Carly fumbled with the keys to her rental car, then jumped quickly inside to grab a cigarette from the console. She had smoked two in the car before getting up her nerve to go into the hospital, and would probably have two more before she could gather her wits to drive out of the lot. It was amazing the effect that woman still had on her even after all this time.

Justine Hall was gorgeous at forty-three, far prettier as a mature woman than she'd ever been as a schoolgirl. Not like a model or anything, but she had a very wholesome look that said she was fit and happy with herself. Her makeup was barely noticeable, and her straight reddish hair hung casually just past her collar.

But the nicest thing about Justine today had been her smile. It was genuine, and unless Carly was mistaken, apologetic. It was clear from her comments that her former friend remembered how

they'd left things, and maybe-just maybe-they would be able to talk again after all these years and set things right.

Carly was all for mending the fence with Justine, but she had no interest in hooking up again with the rest of her classmates-that cliquish group of snobs-even if it was just to rub their noses in the fact that she'd outgrown their tiny minds. People like that always had a way of making their petty lives seem grandiose, and she was sure they'd never give her the satisfaction of admitting even to themselves that they had misjudged her.

But Justine was different. Justine had always known the truth...she just hadn't been able to accept it.

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Justine uncrossed her legs only to cross them again the other way. She'd been fidgeting like that for ten minutes already, and Valerie had had enough. Tossing her notebook on the coffee table, the counselor leaned back in the rocker and folded her arms.

"So what's on your mind this week, Justine? It's obvious that you didn't come prepared to talk about your inner calm." Last week, Valerie had helped her put together a checklist of things that would bring more peace and serenity into her everyday life. Justine's task for the week had been to explore a variety of means and select two or three that she might incorporate into her routine.

"I ran into an old friend today...someone I hadn't seen since high school."

Valerie sat quietly, knowing from almost three years of sessions together that Justine would continue without prompting now that she had stated what was on her mind.

"Her name's Carly and we used to be friends. She moved to Leland in the ninth grade when her parents bought the furniture store. She was really smart...and she was funny...and she was always really nice to me. Our lockers were next to each other for four years, and we always got seated together because her last name was Griffin and mine was Hall...still is, I guess...or is again. Anyway, Carly wasn't like all the other girls I hung out with. She didn't dress just so and worry about her makeup or hair...and she didn't talk about boys all the time. After a while, the other girls started to make fun of her...you know, they talked about her clothes and the way she looked. They'd always try to get one of the farm boys to ask her out, just so they could all laugh at both of them. It was mean...and I didn't do it, but I was a part of it just the same."

Valerie could hear the regret in her client's voice, and imagined that seeing Carly today had brought it all back to bear on her. It wasn't clear yet what Justine's role had been, but it was obviously something she would have to work through...another thing she'd have to atone for...another thing she would have to forgive herself for.

"At some point, people started saying that Carly was...a lesbian. And since we were lab partners in chemistry, they started teasing me too...telling me stuff like to watch out and to make sure I always buttoned my blouse all the way up. It didn't bother me at first, but then Carly and I started talking about it one day...."

*"Carly...can I ask you something kind of...personal?" Justine watched as her lab partner lined up all of the equipment they would need for this particular experiment.*

*Every other Friday from four to four-thirty, the pair had the whole lab to themselves, except for an occasional visit from Mr. Prather, their chemistry teacher. The halls were usually quiet by this time, since most of their classmates were at home making preparations to come back in the evening for a football or basketball game. That was Justine's routine as well, but not Carly's. The studious blonde girl didn't seem to have any interest in extra-curricular activities.*

*"Sure...I guess." Justine saw a hint of red that started on Carly's face in anticipation of what kind of "personal" question she might ask.*

*"Does it bother you when people say...that you like girls?" The last words she uttered at barely a whisper.*

*Carly looked her in the eye, obviously wary that if she gave a serious answer, the redhead would laugh and run back to tell her snotty friends. But what Justine hoped to convey was sincerity...and real curiosity.*

*"It bothers me that they have so much fun doing it. It bothers me that they say it like it's something noisome or deranged."*

*Noisome. Justine would look that word up later. "What do...if you...do you ever think about other girls...that way?"*

*Carly had stopped the experiment to give her undivided attention to what was probably the most compelling conversation she had ever had with another soul.*

*"Sometimes...I wonder if maybe they're right. I'm not really all that comfortable around boys. Of course, I'm not all that comfortable around girls either...just some girls. I'm comfortable around you."*

*Justine had almost said the same words back, but Mr. Prather suddenly entered the lab to check on their progress. Thanks to Carly, both girls were going to ace chemistry.*

"So this Carly...you had feelings for her back in high school?"

"I don't know. Sort of...I guess. I mean, I thought she was sort of cute. She always laughed and cut up when it was just her and me. She'd put cartoons and funny quotes in my locker. And after chemistry lab, I'd always give her a ride home. It was the only time she didn't have to go to work at the furniture store right after school."

"So what happened that you became a part of the teasing?"

Justine swung her foot casually, thinking the question might just go away or that Valerie would eventually go on and ask another one before she had to answer it.

"Justine?"

"I kissed her."

Three years of therapy suddenly got convoluted as Valerie processed this new bit of information. Justine had had these feelings and doubts for a lot longer than she'd let on.

"It was a couple of months after we first talked. I brought it up again every lab and we'd talk about it. I finally told her that I found some girls a lot more interesting than boys. And then one day we went into the supply closet to put away all the stuff from our experiment...and it was kind of dark...and I looked at her and she looked at me...we both knew it was about to happen. And when it did, I thought it would be like...okay, so that was different from kissing boys. I figured I'd just try it that one time and see what it was like...you know, get it out of my system. But that's not what happened. It was like all of a sudden, this volcano or something shot up through my whole body. The kiss just got deeper and deeper, and next thing I knew, I had my hand on Carly's breast and everything."

Justine began to frown as she moved her memories from that sublime moment in the chemistry closet to the awful transformation that took place in the weeks that followed.

"By the time I got home that day, I'd already started to worry about people finding out...about people thinking I was like that. I guess I was like that...I just didn't want people to know it, and I figured I could make up my own mind about it. Anyway, I stayed in my room all weekend and made myself sick thinking about it. I didn't want that. I wanted what I'd been taught to expect all my life...to have a husband with a good job...to live in a big nice house...to have children to take care of and to love...the whole family-around-the-Christmas-tree thing. I didn't want to feel that way about another girl, and I couldn't risk my friends thinking I did. So I...pretty much quit talking to her after that. I told Mr. Prather that I had to go get allergy shots on Fridays so he would swap me with somebody else. Even then, Carly was still nice to me. She said one day at our lockers that we should just forget about it...that she didn't want it to ruin our friendship. Instead, I said I'd already forgotten about it...and then I started just being mean...telling her to stop putting things in my locker. I never...made fun of her with my friends...but I never stopped them either."

Valerie looked at the slumped shoulders and sunken face. This was going to be a setback for

Justine. "It's interesting to me that you've never talked about Carly before."

"It made me ashamed to even think about it. It was probably the meanest thing I've ever done to another human being in my whole life."

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Carly ground out the cigarette against the tree trunk and stuffed the butt into her pocket with the other three. Not many 42-year-old women climbed trees, but she was perfectly happy tonight to be the exception. The path through the woods over to Justine's was convenient if she ever wanted to walk down there-if she was ever invited-but when they paved it, they cut the bushes back and now there weren't any really good places where she could sit and watch without being seen. The pine tree was perfect, its thick branches shielding her from view as she peeked through.

*I've turned into a stalker.* Talking with Justine today had awakened so many old feelings...some sweet, some not so easy to deal with. Carly couldn't deny the sense of betrayal she'd felt for twenty-five years, but she would forgive every moment of anger and hurt if it meant seeing Justine smile at her again like she had today.

"So just what the hell are you doing out here, Carly?" she mumbled to herself. "A pretty lady smiles at you and your brain goes on vacation."

Carly knew that Justine was capable of infinite charm and warmth. No secret there. But like their stuck-up classmates, she was also capable of extreme cruelty, which was magnified by the fact that it wasn't Justine's true nature. She'd gone out of her way to act like that back then, and Carly knew why.

In the hours that had passed since seeing her former friend at the hospital, the near euphoria had given way to an almost obsessive introspection. The fact was that Carly had spent the last twenty-five years dealing with the fallout from being treated with such spite back in high school. That single experience had had left an indelible scar because someone she'd trusted had betrayed her.

*Now all of a sudden it's all forgiven because she was nice to you today.*

It occurred to Carly that Justine really didn't remember the specifics of what had happened in high school...or that if she did, she remembered it differently. That, she reasoned, was why the pretty lady could smile like she had today and act like it hadn't happened at all; like surely Carly didn't still have her nose out of joint after all these years.

But there was something that Justine had said that made it seem like she did remember. *You were better than all of us.* Why did she say that? Carly had always known she was better than that

bunch of snobs Justine ran around with, but she'd also known that her friend was different. Even after Justine had stopped talking to her, she never took part in the taunting, because she just didn't have that mean spirit in her.

Carly had always wanted to believe that Justine had pulled away because she was afraid to give in to the idea of liking girls...so afraid that she had to distance herself from it, and that meant putting up a wall between Carly and herself. She'd never felt that Justine had really wanted to be with somebody like her-she'd been such a nerd in high school. People like Justine-their fathers were doctors and lawyers and city councilmen-didn't go for people who lived on her side of Stony Ridge. She'd just been the safest way to test the waters.

"So what the hell are you doing sitting in a stupid tree watching her house like a peeping tom?" The answer to that was simple enough. *Because you've never forgotten that moment, Carly...because you've never had another kiss like that one. And then there was that other item.... Because Justine may have had an affair recently with another woman, and maybe that means there's a chance that the two of you can take care of some unfinished business.*

From her hiding place in the tree, she watched as the dark sedan pulled into the empty drive. Justine got out and walked to the end of the drive to collect her mail, and disappeared into her house.

Stubbing out her last cigarette, Carly carefully navigated the willowy branches back to solid ground and headed down the path back to her house.

*She isn't going to call, you know. She was just being her usual charming self.*

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"Okay, relax."

After Trey left three years ago to go live with his father, Justine had fallen into the habit of talking aloud through things that worried her as she went about her household tasks. It was a practice that had driven her daughter to distraction.

*"I don't want to be inside your head, Mom. It isn't a very nice place."*

"You invited her to dinner and she said yes. If she's still upset about everything after all this time, she'll say something and we'll talk about it. I'm not afraid to talk about it now. And I'll apologize and ask her to forgive me."

The redhead gathered the trash throughout the house to set out on the curb, not even cognizant of the fact that she kept going into the same rooms over and over to empty the cans. This could take

all night.

"She looked so good today. God, she was nice! Heck, I'm the one that needs to bring it up, not Carly. She won't, because she's not like that." Finally, she hauled the plastic bag out the kitchen door to the large trash bin, completely forgetting to drag it down the driveway for collection. "And I should tell her everything. She deserves to know the truth. And if she decides never to speak to me again...well, I won't blame her one bit."

Justine had stayed a little later with Valerie tonight to discuss this new development...or rather this old development that she'd conveniently left out of every conversation she'd had with the therapist about her attraction to women. All talk of her "inner calm" had been tabled, to say the least. Right now, she had no calm to speak of; her innards were in knots.

Justine's struggle with sexual issues was not the primary reason for her weekly appointments in Lexington. Her biggest challenges were reconciling the enormous guilt that plagued her in virtually every aspect of her life-her relationship with her mother; the failure of her marriage; but most of all, the loss of her children. She was a cosmic mess, an emotional weathervane torn between doing what she needed to do for herself, and what was expected of her by everyone else. Working with Valerie for three years, she had begun to give herself permission to pursue some of the things she needed in life. But her children's needs always took precedence, not just because they were kids and she was responsible for them; but because doing right by them was the only way she could be truly satisfied with herself.

And now, the therapist was clearly frustrated with her, having assumed that all of the issues were already on the table. But as they went over what Justine had related in her story of Carly Griffin, she acknowledged that her history with her old high school friend was not insignificant to the person she was today.

She needed to confront this part of her past, giving a lot of thought to how she wanted it resolved. Was it really fair to beat herself up over how she'd acted twenty-five years ago? Teenagers did a lot of stupid things; Carly would understand that, even though she had been more mature back then than their peers. Valerie had advised Justine to openly accept responsibility so that she could move on, but to think carefully about rekindling the friendship if it meant taking on the old guilt.

Justine drew a hot bath and pulled off her clothes. Easing into the tub, she tried as she did every night to empty her head of troubling thoughts, symbolically washing them from her body with a soapy cloth. There was always the bottle of capsules in the medicine cabinet if she couldn't calm herself enough to sleep-Valerie had said she shouldn't feel guilty about taking them when she needed them-but to Justine, the dependence on the sleep aid was just another surrender to her loss of self-control.

### **Chapter 3**

For the fifth time, Carly walked down the hall to the full-length mirror on the end wall. The black slacks definitely looked better than the tan with her black zippered half boots, and the ivory cashmere pullover was a nice contrast. At her mother's suggestion, she'd taken off the t-shirt underneath because it was too prominent at the open collar of the polo-neck sweater. With her favorite jade pendant from Shanghai, she felt dressed up, but not overly so. This outfit was probably best for what Justine had suggested: driving into Lexington to eat at one of the nice steak restaurants.

Leland had steak restaurants too, the kind where you picked up a tray and walked through the line to get your drink and silverware and to place your order. There were all sorts of fast food restaurants, pizza parlors, a couple of barbecue places, and a fish camp. These places tended to focus more on expedience than atmosphere. Justine thought that if they were going to have a chance to talk-really talk-it would be nice to have a little more privacy and decorum.

Carly had been surprised on Friday when she'd returned from a run on the delivery truck with her dad to find a message from Justine. She returned the call and they made the plans for Sunday afternoon. Justine would drive, and she would swing by and pick her up at-

"Carly? Justine's here."

From her bedroom window, she could see the sedan pulling into the drive. She was surprised when Justine got out of the car and started up the sidewalk; for some reason, she had expected her to just wait in the driveway. Carly grabbed her billfold and hurried to the living room where her mom had already opened the front door.

"Justine! How nice to see you again."

"Hi, Mrs. Griffin. It's nice to see you too. I've been meaning to get by the store to see about ordering one of those new recliners for my mother. She saw one on TV that stands you up when you push a button."

"Oh yes, we have a few of those. They come in a lot of nice colors and fabrics. And they're very nice for older people."

"That's just what my mother needs-her very own electric chair."

"Hi, Justine." As their guest had been talking, Carly had been measuring her attire against that of the stylish redhead. Justine wore navy slacks and heels, with a white silk shirt that buttoned up the front, its collar ruffled and standing up around her neck. Her leather coat was chocolate brown, beautiful with the auburn highlights in her hair.

"Carly...hi to you too. That's a beautiful sweater. I bet you didn't find that in Leland."

The blonde woman chuckled. "St. Tropez. I vacationed there a couple of years ago."

Justine shook her head in awe. "It just amazes me that you've been to all those places. I can't wait to hear about it. You ready?"

"You girls have fun."

"Thanks, Mrs. Griffin. Oh, and I want to apologize for that little mishap with your bill last week."

"No problem at all. You should have seen the hideous sofa I got one time when I flipped the numbers on an order form." Leaning in, she whispered, "Margie Helton loved it!"

"No accounting for tastes, I guess. I'll see you again soon, okay? I mean it about coming in to order that chair."

Justine and Carly stepped onto the porch as the older woman closed the door behind them.

"Wait, I better get my coat." Carly went back inside to the hall closet, pulling out a black leather jacket similar to the brown one her companion wore.

"Carly?"

"Yeah, Mama?"

"Have fun tonight, sweetheart. Listen, I know you and Justine have some...hurt feelings and the like to work out, but..."

"But what?"

"I think Justine's had a hard time, especially these last few years. If you ask me, I'd say she really needs a friend."

Funny...Carly had sensed the same thing.

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Carly slid into the front passenger seat of the dark blue Acura TL, at once impressed with the fresh smell of the tan leather. "Nice car. Is it new?"

"I've had it about a year and a half. When my son got his driver's license, my ex and I agreed that he should drive a hand-me-down instead of a new one. I don't see any sense in spoiling kids with new cars. 'Course, boys that age would rather walk than drive a ten-year-old Park Avenue, so I

let him trade it for a used Volkswagen and I ended up with a new car...and a new car payment to go along with it."

"It's hard to believe you have a son old enough to drive."

"Oh, yeah. Trey turns eighteen in January. Emmy was sixteen last July." Keeping one hand on the wheel, Justine fumbled in her purse for her wallet, opening it to show off her photos. With a click, a tiny spotlight lit the space on the passenger side.

"Wow, he's handsome, and she's a doll." To Carly, both teens had the best of their mother's features, her thick reddish-brown hair and sterling blue eyes.

"Thank you. I think so too, but I'm biased."

"They really are. So what are they like?"

"Well...they're very bright. In fact, they both know everything, or so I'm told."

"Oh, that sounds familiar."

"You think?"

"I think."

Justine chuckled. "Trey's a lot like his daddy. They both like sports...and teenage girls."

Carly found herself nodding absently until she realized the implication. Before she could respond, the proud mother continued.

"He gets pretty good grades, and he's been accepted already at UK. He thinks he wants to study law like JT. That would suit him. I've always said he'd argue with a signpost."

"He sounds like a typical teenager to me."

"He is. He's a good kid."

"And Emmy?"

Justine sighed. "Emmy's...special. Not that Trey's not special, he is. But Emmy is one of those rare kids who sees things other kids don't see. She's compassionate and empathetic...kind of soulful, if you know what I mean. There were times that it was hard for me to know which one of us was the mother."

From the wistful tone, Carly felt like she was getting an intimate glimpse of Justine Hall, her remarks as revealing as any she might share. She was settling into a comfortable familiarity with her old friend when the subject was abruptly shifted.

"So did you have a nice Thanksgiving?"

"Yes. My mom cooked a big dinner and we stuffed ourselves 'til we were sick. Then we watched the Bengals get killed by the Titans and it depressed us all so much that we ate again."

Justine laughed. "Yeah, Trey was glued to that as well."

"So your Thanksgiving was nice?"

"We spent it with my mother," she groaned.

"Gosh, you make that sound like so much fun."

"Oh, it was. Did you ever meet my mother?"

"She came into the store once, I think. She had us order a love seat, but when we delivered it, she didn't like it."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"It happens sometimes. We kept it in the showroom for awhile and somebody bought it." Carly remembered another detail-that Mrs. Hall had thrown a fit to have her non-refundable deposit on the special order item returned-but there was no point in bringing that up with Justine twenty-six years after the fact.

"Well, that sounds like typical Marian Hall to me. And I bet she embarrassed herself so bad that she's never been back in."

"I wouldn't know."

"Trust me. She won't go to half the stores in town because she's shown her tail too many times with that temper of hers. She makes either me or Mary Beth do most of her shopping so she won't have to show her face. Of course, she says getting out's too hard on her, but she can go to that country club every single day for lunch."

"Your mom sounds like a real piece of work."

"She is. And I think my kids are confused about whose mother she is, the way she goes on about how much she misses having JT at all the family things. She asked me this year how I'd feel about inviting him and J2 for Thanksgiving dinner, and I told her she could have him or me."

"J2?"

"Never mind...long story." Justine wheeled off the two-lane highway onto Interstate 75. They'd be in Lexington in another half hour. "Anyway, before she could answer, Trey told her that they

were going to her mother's house in Frankfort, so I never got to hear which one of us she'd have picked."

"Surely...."

"Not surely."

"So how's Mary Beth?" Carly remembered that Justine's sister was a freshman when they were seniors.

"Mary Beth is just fine." *Perfection personified.* "She's married to Bucky Ball. You remember him, don't you?"

That didn't compute at all. "She married Bucky?"

"He got his teeth fixed."

"Why didn't he get his name changed?"

"Well, his real name's Herman."

"Bucky Ball...Herman Ball...It's a toss-up."

"You think that's bad, how would you like to be Mary Beth Hall Ball?"

Carly snorted.

"Anyway, they have three little boys that I like a whole lot. The boys come to visit me sometimes when Mary Beth's at the end of her rope."

"Are you and Mary Beth close?"

"Not especially, but that's not really her fault. I guess I was always Dad's favorite and when he died, she didn't want to share Mom."

"I heard about your dad. I'm really sorry." Dr. Gordon Hall had kept a family practice in Leland for over forty years. He'd been struck by a car when he stopped on the side of the road to help a stranded motorist. Practically everyone in town had known him, but Carly had met him only once, when she'd fallen off the back of the delivery truck, and her mother insisted that she be examined for injuries. She remembered him as a very nice man, even more so because he was Justine's father.

"Thanks. It's been nine years and I still miss him like it was yesterday." The driver's mood had gone somber.

"I'm sure it was a very hard time for you."

"It was...but I had JT...and the kids...and they were all supportive through everything." Justine let out a half chuckle. "JT could be a real rat, but I've got to hand it to him. He always comes through when it really matters, even now."

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"This is a nice place." Carly admired the ambient setting of the college-town restaurant, obviously a favorite watering hole of the sophisticated faculty and staff.

"It's one of my favorites." Justine had been here with JT for their tenth anniversary and more recently, on a couple of dates with Mike Pritchard. The last time she'd been here was about four years ago, and she'd spent half the night eyeing the beautiful blonde at the table directly behind Mike. That was her last date with a man, the night she realized that for all his good qualities-he was handsome, interesting, and kind-she was never going to be sexually drawn to him or any other man like she was to that total stranger at the table behind him.

"Do you come to Lexington a lot?"

"Pretty often...once a week or so," assuming that her visits with Valerie should count. "I thought this would be a good place for us to talk."

Carly picked up on the nervousness in Justine's voice, and remembered her mother's words about Justine needing a friend. A real friend would lay to rest any worries about slights of the past.

"Listen, Justine...I was really glad that you wanted to get together again after all this time. Of all the people in Leland, you've always been...pretty special to me, even when we weren't close. It means a lot to me to have a chance to be friends again." *I forgive you.*

"Oh, Carly." Justine tucked her hair behind her ear on one side, hoping to mask the swipe at the tear that had gathered in the corner of her eye. "You were special to me too. I was...so immature and...scared about stuff."

"It's okay. It's all forgotten. Let's just go from here, okay?"

Justine shook her head. "No, I have to say this first. I'm...really sorry for how I acted back then. You didn't deserve-"

"Justine, we were just teenagers. It was a confusing time for all of us. I was scared about things too." Carly reached across the table and touched her fingers lightly to the other woman's wrist. "Fortunately, we outgrew all that, and now we really do know everything, instead of just thinking we do."

The redhead smiled at that. The blonde had always been quick to ease things with a joke. "Look at you, Carly. Look at all you've done with yourself. The rest of us leaned on each other so much we didn't know how to act on our own. We went off to college and didn't have all our little friends to copy anymore. And you went off on your own and took the world by the tail." Justine wasn't going to contrast that with her personal failures. This was Carly's moment. "I'm just so proud of you...so proud of all the stuff you've done."

"Thank you. But most of it was luck. I got recruited by Worldwide Workforce during my senior year at U of L. To be honest, the only reason I've been able to hang with them so long is because I don't really have any ties that keep me from going from one project to the next, wherever they want to send me." Carly was sure that's why some of the others she worked with were given stateside jobs. "So I suppose I've had a pretty successful career, but some people wouldn't consider that a successful life."

Justine couldn't help but reflect on the irony that she had been voted Most Likely to Succeed, and her life was an absolute mess. "Well it is if you're happy. We all grew up thinking-I guess I should speak for myself-I grew up thinking that I had to have somebody else in my life to complete me, otherwise I'd be a colossal failure. Instead, I find out that I can live just fine without a husband...especially the one I had. It was like it was all a false promise, that you needed this and that to be happy. It just wasn't true."

Carly had been waiting for a segue to ask how her friend was really doing, but the somber tone suggested that she needed to tread carefully. It was clear that Justine was uncomfortable talking about herself.

"But I don't want to talk about that depressing stuff. I want to hear about all these exciting places you've been to and what you've seen. You know, I wanted to write to you the last time I talked to your mom, but I just didn't know where to start."

Carly took a lot of pleasure in hearing this. Over the years, she'd written half a dozen postcards that never made it into the mailbox. "I wish you had. I would have been thrilled to hear from you."

For the next two hours, Carly brought Justine up to speed with what she had been doing since she left Leland.

"Okay, let me see if I've got this straight: First, you went to...Bolivia, then to India, then Bangkok. In Bangkok, you got promoted to team leader because your boss had a heart attack."

"While with a prostitute. Don't forget that part."

"Right. And then next you went to...Estonia. Where exactly is Estonia?"

"It's in northeastern Europe, near Finland. It's colder than a witch's tit."

Justine laughed. "Okay, and after that, you went back to Bolivia, then to Peru, Johannesburg, Shanghai, and Israel."

"Nicely done, Miss Hall. You win the kewpie doll." Carly had shared the details of her job and how she'd lived among the locals in most of the places where she'd worked.

"So where do you go next?"

"Madrid. There's a Japanese computer company that wants to open a technology plant to service Europe. Madrid's labor costs are lower than most European capitals, and it has a large university enrollment. It should be a pretty smooth job...at least not as challenging as competing for textile workers in Bangkok, or high-tech types in Shanghai."

"I can't believe how much you know about so many different things, Carly. I bet you'd have been a success at anything you wanted to do."

"It's been a fun job for twenty years, but I have to tell you, I am getting a little tired of the transient life."

"It has to be hard to pick up and move every couple of years. But what would you do if you weren't a team leader?"

"Well, there's probably going to be an opening soon for a project coordinator. If I got that, I could live near our headquarters in Louisville most of the time, but I would have to travel to all of the sites about once or twice a year. That's a grueling job too, but at least I'd get to have a home life."

"So is that what you're looking for...a home life?"

"Not...anything in particular. I just need a change is all."

"I guess that means coming back to Leland to run the furniture store isn't in your immediate future." It was said as a joke, but Justine liked thinking that Carly might one day come back to town.

"No, I don't think so. My cousin Perry will probably take over the store in a couple of years when Mama and Daddy retire. He's worked there ever since they bought it. He likes it. I think doing the same thing every day would make me insane."

"Well I can vouch for that." The redhead bobbed her head and rolled her eyes comically.  
"Because I'm certifiable!"

They both laughed as they stood up to leave. Carly realized with disappointment that Justine had effectively managed to deflect all conversation from herself, and she was none the wiser about how Justine's well-planned life had gone so wrong. As they buckled their seatbelts for the ride home, she casually broached the subject.

"So we've spent the whole night talking about me, Justine. What have you been up to for the past twenty-five years?"

The redhead smiled softly, but Carly could tell even in the dim light of the dashboard that it was forced. Her mom had been right; this woman really needed a friend.

"I'm afraid my life has been pretty boring compared to yours. You know most of it already. I got married, had a couple of kids, got divorced. I've worked at the hospital off and on for about fifteen years." Her clipped response made it clear that she didn't wish to elaborate.

*Why won't you talk to me?* Carly admitted to herself that she hadn't exactly been forthcoming either, dodging Justine's question about "special people in her life" with an explanation of how her job kept her on the move. If they were going to be real friends, she needed to put her cards on the table too.

"You know, you asked me a question earlier, and I didn't exactly give you the whole answer...kind of like you just did me." Carly smirked when her companion glanced her way. "You asked me if there had ever been anyone special in my life, and I said that my job made it hard to sustain any kind of...romantic relationship, and that's true. But there have been a couple of special people in my life over the years. In Bolivia, there was a woman named Isabel; and then in South Africa, there was another named Alison."

Carly's heart skipped a beat while she waited for an acknowledgment. Several seconds passed before Justine spoke.

"So...I always wondered."

"What do you mean you wondered? You ruined me for guys with that kiss in the chemistry closet!"

After almost twenty-six years, the kiss was finally mentioned out loud.

"I...I did not! Are you...? You're pulling my leg." Justine swatted at Carly's leg when she saw the evil grin.

"Well...it's partly true. I mean I guess I was born this way, but I might never have known if you hadn't attacked me that day."

"Carly Griffin, I did not attack you! It was mutual, as I recall." Justine squirmed a bit in the driver's seat.

"That's what I thought. I just wanted to make sure you remembered it that way too."

"Why, you little sneak!" The driver relaxed visibly. "You're just doing all this to make me blush."

"But you do remember it."

"I remember...that it was...quite nice, actually."

"Yes, it was. But it obviously didn't have the same effect on you that it had on me."

"Says who?" Justine squirmed again, but gave her companion a playful smirk of her own.

"Well, well, well...now there's a story I'm going to have to hear."

"Oh, no! I haven't had nearly enough wine to tell that story."

"Why don't you pull into Pete's when we get back to Leland, and we'll remedy that?"

"Ha! You're forgetting that it's Sunday, Miss World Traveler. You can't buy alcoholic beverages on Sunday in Leland."

*Now that's a real shame*, Carly thought. But now that they'd laid it out there that they wanted to be friends again, she was pretty sure she'd hear the woman's tale when she was finally ready to share it.

"So why don't you tell me all about Isabel?"

"Isabel...Isabel Rosas Paz. She worked at the Labor Ministry, and we got to be friends when I first moved to Bolivia. The hotel all of us were staying in caught fire and we had to move out on account of the smoke damage. She offered to have me stay with her in her apartment."

Justine drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, growing impatient for more of the story.

"It was a small apartment." Carly grinned. "I started out on the couch in the living room. That lasted...two or three days. Being my usual irresistible self, I was soon invited to share the bedroom."

"Your usual irresistible self, huh?"

"Yeah, you know how it is. People can't keep their hands off me."

"I know what you're doing. You're trying to make me blush again, and I'm not going to give you the satisfaction this time, Carly Griffin." Instead, she smiled playfully. "So tell me more about Isabel. How long did you live together? What happened to her?"

"It's an interesting story, actually...kind of happy and sad at the same time. We were both kind of surprised that things took that turn. Neither of us had ever been with anybody before-I mean if you don't count our brief groping encounter." That earned her another light smack on the thigh. "But it was just...natural, you know? She was really sweet, and funny, and cute. And Catholic,

so she had the guilt thing going. We were both so deep in the closet we had to keep moth balls in our pockets."

Again, the driver squirmed uncomfortably. She could write the book on that guilt thing.

"We had a really good year together. And then it ended when my job wrapped up. I wanted her to come with me, at least back to the states for a while, but she couldn't do that. That would have been like announcing to her family that we weren't just roommates, and hell, her brothers might have killed me."

"That's so sad! So you had to leave her."

"Yeah, we traded letters a few times, but after awhile, it just sort of trailed off. Then I got back to Bolivia about eight years later and looked her up. I didn't tell her I was coming. I got the biggest kick out of walking into the Labor Ministry just out of the blue. She went crazy...jumping up and down and getting so excited. I knew from our letters that she was married and had three or four little kids, but seeing her again brought it all back...for me, anyway...not for her. I was happy for her-she got what she wanted out of life-but it was hard to accept that the door was really closed. There hadn't been anybody else in all those years in between."

"You must have really loved her."

"I did. I still do in a way. We usually trade cards every couple of years now. I think there are some people that you come to love in life that are always going to matter to you. Isabel's one of those people for me." *And you're one of those people for me, Justine Hall.* "She and I even got to be friends again, so it a good ending. She's got...let's see, at last count it was seven kids. Life worked out for her, and I'm glad she's happy."

"You were right. That is both a sweet and a sad story...but it's mostly sad. I mean, because you loved her and you had to leave her, and...you couldn't just come out and be yourself. You had to hide."

"Yeah, hiding everything was hard. It was easier with Alison, because she was out already. In fact, I met her at a gay bar in Johannesburg. We'd been seeing each other for about six months before she moved into my apartment. There was a time that I thought Alison and I might make it. When the job in South Africa ended, she got a visa to come with me to Shanghai. I even got her on with my company as a payroll clerk. That took some doing, believe me."

"You hired her to work for you?"

"Not exactly. She was part of the overall team, but not the management team. One of the other guys supervised her, so I hardly ever saw her at work. But when I say that it took some doing, what I mean is that I had to come out to my boss. I had to call in a favor, because he didn't want to approve it without somebody higher up signing off on it, and I didn't want the whole damn company to know my business."

"But you got him to do it."

"Yeah, and he pretty much read us the riot act about not letting people find out. I mean, China's a communist country. They throw you in jail for stuff like that, and we could have gotten our whole contract yanked."

"That's unbelievable."

Carly shrugged. "It's reality. But it turned out that it didn't matter in the long run. Alison hated being there. She didn't like the food, or the weather, or the crowds. She hadn't traveled much before, and she just didn't know what to expect. It was too hard for her to live there, so after just three months, she went home."

"Oh, Carly! That must have been awful."

"Well...it probably worked out better that way for everybody."

"So you didn't get your heart broken that time?"

The blonde woman chuckled. "Hardly. It probably isn't fair to Alison to say this, but she wasn't...all that lovable once she got out of her element. And we were in pretty close quarters, even for Shanghai. Our apartment was one room, eight by twelve. Every breath she blew out, I drew in. I tell you, when things aren't good anyway, living on top of each other makes them that much worse."

"Eight by twelve! I can't believe two people could live in a place that small without killing each other."

"No kidding. Anyway, after she left, I was so happy to be able to double my living space that I hardly missed her."

"Aw, I bet it hurt just the same."

"A little. I guess what really hurt was that she didn't try harder after all the hoops we had to jump through to be together...but, like I said, she got to a point where she wasn't really very lovable." As an afterthought, she added, "I probably wasn't very lovable by that time either."

"But you were still irresistible, right?"

"But of course." Carly was surprised to see that they were already on the outskirts of Leland. The drive home had taken no time at all. And Justine had shared very little about herself. "So when do we get to do this again? And I'll drive so you can drink plenty of wine. That way, I don't have to do all the talking."

Justine smiled as she turned onto Stony Ridge Road. "There really aren't many nice places to eat in Leland, you know." And she couldn't afford to be treating at a place like that on a regular

basis, but she'd insisted on picking up the check tonight since it had been her invitation.

"Where we eat doesn't matter to me, Justine. I just want to go somewhere we can talk some more. It's been nice catching up."

Justine pulled into the driveway of the small frame house. "Same here, Carly. It's been a long time since I just went out and had a good time...you know, with a friend."

That news wasn't surprising. Justine hadn't spoken at all of a social life. And if there was any truth to what her mother had heard about involvement with a doctor's wife...well, most of the folks in Leland weren't going to be friends with somebody like that.

"Then let's do it again. If you can think of another nice place in Lexington, we'll go. My treat next time, though."

"Or maybe we could just... you want to come to my house for dinner one night?"

"I'd like that, but only if you let me bring dinner. You treated tonight so it's my turn."

"That's silly."

"Pizza."

"Vegetarian."

"Extra cheese."

"On half."

"And wine...lots of wine." Now that she knew what it took, Carly wanted to loosen that tongue.

"You got yourself a deal. What about Wednesday, around eight?"

"I'll be there." The blonde was almost giddy as she opened the door. "Red or white?"

"Red. And you better not let me drink too much. I have to be at work the next morning."

"That's going to depend on whether I get the whole story, Miss Hall. That's what you said."

Justine smirked. "Thanks again for going with me."

"My pleasure." Carly waited for the car to back out, waving one last time at the pretty redhead. While she wished she had learned more about Justine tonight, she was glad that their first meeting had been mostly lighthearted and fun. They were opening up with one another just fine, and it was just a matter of time before all the mysteries were revealed.

If you're only looking for the sex scenes, you might try [Part 2](#).

[The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive](#)

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~ The House on Sandstone - Part 2 ~

by KG MacGregor

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Nothing much to disclaim here. This is an original story, though the main characters bear a mild resemblance to familiar faces. The town of Leland, Kentucky, is fictitious. Any similarity to persons living or dead is coincidental.

Thanks to my Sweetcakes for her help and inspiration. I'm always interested in feedback, and you may direct that to [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com).

**Chapter 4**

"Saturday...Saturday was a good day." In fact, the whole week had been pretty good, Justine realized as she recounted all that had transpired since her last session. "Trey came by at seven-thirty in the morning and we went running up at Prince Lake. We did about eight miles up that logging trail, and we talked about stuff. I think it's really starting to hit him how much things are going to change next year when he goes off to school."

"Tell me what was good about that, Justine...that time with Trey."

The redhead smiled wistfully as she recalled the feeling. "I just...I don't know, he was talking about how hard it was going to be to be away from Melissa next year. She's going to Georgetown, and he's worried she'll meet somebody else and not be happy with him anymore. He even said he'd been thinking about going to Georgetown instead, but I think I've talked him out of that. JT'll have a cow if he doesn't go to UK."

"It's a big transition for him."

"Yeah...underneath all that bravado, he's so insecure about that girl. He's always been worried

about what she'd think, ever since they were in the eighth grade. To be honest, I'd like to see him meet somebody else at college. I just hate to see him so serious about somebody at seventeen when he has no idea what else is out there." In Justine's mind, Melissa Chandler had always held too much sway over her son's decisions. "Anyway, it was really nice to have him talk to me about stuff like that. It made me feel like his mother."

"You are his mother, Justine." Valerie's smile seemed to be congratulatory, as though she were extremely pleased with her client's revelation. "But I know what you mean. You deserve a real pat on the back for that, don't you think?"

Justine looked at her quizzically.

"You just told me that you went running with your seventeen-year-old son-eight miles. How many mothers can say that?"

It was true. Just three years ago, Justine couldn't have imagined this kind of lifestyle for herself. She'd envied her friends who had given birth and returned almost instantly to their trim figures. Her first pregnancy had added thirty extra pounds, and Emmy had left her with thirty more. She had tried to get into the fitness club scene...the aerobics, the spinning, the jazzercise. But she'd had no success when her kids were little, and after the divorce, her day-to-day responsibilities had grown to encompass all of her time. Only when her children had gone to live with JT had she finally begun to make the time for herself. In fact, the Wellness Center was part of the plan to put more routine in her daily life, a plan designed to keep her from wallowing in her depression.

"So what else happened this week?" Justine had already been through the Thanksgiving tale with her mother and sister's family. All in all, that had gone better than expected.

"JT dropped Emmy off on Saturday afternoon and we looked through all the catalogs for Christmas gifts. I took her out to Goody's and bought her some jeans and a top. I get the feeling she's having a little trouble with J2, but I don't think it's anything serious. She's just being a teenager, trying to look out for her turf and all."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Emmy's always been pretty good about doing her part when it comes to chores and such. But I think she feels like she's being called on to do a little more than her share around the house because she's a girl."

"I can see where that would cause a problem."

"Yeah, but she doesn't want to make waves, because that causes problems for her father. And she doesn't want to make trouble for Trey, but she's disappointed in him for not stepping up to help her out."

"So you talked to her about it?"

The redhead shrugged and sighed. "No, mostly I just listened."

Valerie knew how hard it was for the mother to hold her tongue when her daughter talked. One of their problems together had been her overbearing nature, always feeling like she needed to give her daughter advice on everything from how she should dress to who should be her friends. "Did that go okay?"

"I guess. She asked me a couple of questions, and I made a suggestion or two, but I said I had faith in her to handle it. And I told her I'd talk to JT if she wanted me to, but that otherwise, I wouldn't say anything. And that's what she wanted...for me not to say anything."

"So it was a good day. You got to spend time with both of the kids." Valerie was pleased to hear that Justine had not only gotten through the holiday without a lot of stress, she'd actually had a pretty fulfilling week. The more time she spent with Trey and Emmy, the happier she was. And with all the activities around the holiday, it looked like Justine hadn't worried too much about what had been bothering her so much last week-

"And then on Sunday night, I had dinner with Carly."

Valerie cocked her head and looked at her client with interest. Unconsciously, she began rocking in her wooden chair and started a new page in the yellow tablet.

"I called her and asked her to dinner and she said yes and we came up here to Morton's. We talked...it's all okay. Carly's...she's just a really good person and she made it easy for me to apologize for everything."

That wasn't enough, Valerie knew. Justine didn't always accept forgiveness, even when it was sincerely given.

"And then on the way home she told me that she was a lesbian. I told her I'd always wondered and we joked about it...but I couldn't tell her about me. I started to, but she probably would have made me pull over and let her out of the car once she heard how crazy everything got."

"Justine?" The counselor's tone was mildly admonishing.

"Sorry." They had agreed that using the word "crazy" to describe circumstances and events in her life was unhealthy. "But I told her I'd tell her all about it ...if she plied me with enough wine."

Valerie had to laugh at that. One of Justine's loudest complaints when she'd begun her therapy was that she'd had to give up her nightly glass or two of wine on account of the risks of interaction with the medication she was taking for her anxiety and depression. Once she'd gotten out of the habit-and once she'd started focusing on exercise and losing weight-she no longer craved it every night, but she'd insisted last week that it belonged on her list of things that might bring her "inner calm."

"We had a really nice time."

The therapist twirled her pencil casually, knowing that Justine would say more.

"She's...her life's been so interesting. She's lived all over the world and seen so much. And she knows about prejudice firsthand, a whole lot more than I do. She had to leave behind someone she loved because of what others might think about it...and she nearly always had to be secretive."

"You know a little something too about the secretive part, don't you?"

Justine nodded. "But at least I didn't have to hide the fact that I loved somebody. That must have been awful...to have feelings like that and not even be able to tell people, or to always have to be careful not to show it. I mean what if all that time I'd lived with JT, we'd to try to make people think we were just friends?" Now remembering the last three virtually platonic years of their marriage, it suddenly seemed like a bad example. "On second thought, it probably would have been harder to convince people that we were friends at all."

"So how did it make you feel to be with Carly?"

As expected, the redhead balked at the question until the little voice inside her head reminded her that she was after all in therapy to talk about herself. "It was nice. I like her...I mean...I...like her."

"You mean you...like her."

Justine nodded nervously. "Carly said something...something that sounded like it could have come right out of my mouth. She said that there were some people in your life that you were always going to care about, no matter what happened. Of course, she was talking about Isabel, a woman she used to be in love with. And I came this close..." she gestured with her index finger and thumb, "to telling her that she was one of those people in my life...one of those people who was always going to matter to me."

Valerie touched her foot to the floor, causing her chair to rock again. Falling in love could be good for Justine...or it could send her spiraling out of control.

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"See, that's where the computer store moved to." Perry Jeffries pointed out the grand opening sign to his cousin. "They closed that one out on the bypass when this spot opened up."

"What used to be here? Shoes or something, right?" Carly flicked her ashes out the corner of her window. It was chilly; the forecast was calling for snow flurries starting tonight with an

accumulation of up to two inches by morning.

"That's right. It was one of those casual shoe stores, but they couldn't do any business after Barber and DB Boots both opened up outlet stores at the plants."

Carly chuckled at the synchrony of her cousin's attire, the reverse of what her dad had worn. Perry had on his Bucks today, but under his jacket he wore a DB t-shirt from the summer softball league. He was average height and built like a brick wall, thanks to over thirty years of moving furniture. His light brown hair was flecked with gray, and he had a neatly trimmed brown and gray beard.

"I need to get some Diggers like Daddy's-Oh, look! You finally got a coffee house downtown. Leland, Kentucky enters the twenty-first century."

"Yep, we got those four-dollar coffees too. I tell you, we're getting to be just like New York City. Pretty soon, you won't be able to tell us apart."

"Maybe we'll stop in there on the way back in and get one."

"Phfft! I got no use for a four-dollar coffee. They don't even give free refills." Perry turned the truck out toward Branch Fork, an unincorporated area of Leland County.

"How many stops are we making?"

"Just two. We'll drop these bunk beds over in Cedar Hills first." Cedar Hills was a newly developed housing tract that appealed especially to young families. Lots of places like this were springing up around the county, a testament to the success of both of the rivaling boot factories, and Leland's position as a bedroom community for Lexington's University of Kentucky faculty. "You don't have to help, you know. I've gotten pretty good at doing this on my own, but I appreciate you riding along."

"I don't mind helping if you need me. I'm not as strong as I used to be, but I can still hold my own." Besides, riding in the panel truck with Perry was just like old times, though both had aged twenty-five years.

"I bet you can."

"So tell me about Debbie. Where'd you meet her?"

Perry's new girlfriend was a divorced mother who had moved to town to get her son out of the clutches of a gang in Louisville. Carly had already gotten the lowdown on Debbie Claxton from her dad, but she wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth.

"Where do I meet anybody? I delivered a dinette to her apartment."

"Love at first sight?"

Perry laughed sheepishly. "Yeah, pretty much. She was having some trouble getting the cable to work right with the VCR and her son's video game, so I played with it for awhile. We talked and had a Coke. I stopped by a couple of days later to make sure everything was still working."

"Couldn't get her out of your head, huh?"

"Something like that. She came down from Louisville because Kevin-that's her son, he's thirteen-got expelled from school for having a knife. She either had to put him in private school, which she couldn't afford, or move to another district."

"What kind of work does she do?"

"She works at Barber Boots. She's a bookkeeper."

"So is it serious?"

"It could be...it'd be nice if we could get a little more time together with just us. Kevin's alright-most of the time, anyway-but he stays up till ten every night, so we don't get much time alone."

"Sounds like you need to get away with each other."

"Yeah, but she doesn't really know anybody here to look after him. His father's up in Louisville, and he couldn't care less."

"You get along with him okay?"

"Mmm...pretty good. They're a package deal, so I work at it. I don't think he liked me much at first, but we went fishing a couple of times-just me and him-and that was alright. He knows the score, and it don't seem to bother him anymore." Perry turned the truck into the subdivision.

"These are pretty nice houses." The new homes were attractive, but on postage stamp-sized lots with high wooden fences sealing the back yards from one another.

"Let's see...1356...here we go." Perry pulled forward then backed into the two-car driveway. "Two-story. On second thought, I'm glad you're with me."

Carly chuckled and flung the creaky door open. "I knew you'd appreciate me."

When they'd finished the setup, Carly got back into the truck to wait while her cousin wrapped up the paperwork. As they'd slid the top mattresses into place, she'd felt a twinge in her lower back, a reminder that she was not only a lot older than the last time she hauled furniture, but also dreadfully out of shape. About the only exercise she got these days was what she squeezed in on the weekends, usually a stroll through an open air market or a museum. The demands of her job left her tired at the end of the day, and her idea of relaxation was not getting all sweaty at a gym.

"Okay...just one more stop," Perry said as he hopped into the driver's seat and picked up the clipboard. "We got a washer going to Lakeside Drive. Can you read that number?"

Carly rolled her eyes and grabbed the clipboard. Her close-up vision wasn't any better than his, but he didn't want to have to dig in the glove compartment for his reading glasses. She pulled hers from the pocket of her jacket and studied the invoice. "Six-eighteen. A JT Sharpe, Jr." *Shit!*

Lakeside Drive was the main corridor into the Lakeside subdivision, a cluster of houses like those on Sandstone where the newly-moneyed families lived. There was no real lake to speak of, but the developers had widened a section of Katie's Creek to give the landscaping some flair. It would have been prettier without the obtrusive red sign listing all the things one couldn't do in the water.

The driveway at 618 was cluttered with cars, including a lime green Beetle that immediately brought to mind Justine's son Trey.

"Great. We're going to have to bring this across the yard." Perry parked the truck as close as he could and tucked the clipboard under his arm. "You wanna go ring the doorbell while I put it on the dolly? Maybe somebody'll get the brilliant idea to move all those cars."

"Sure." Carly was hesitant, but intrigued about the chance to get a glimpse into how JT and his new family lived. From the front porch, she could hear raucous laughter and shouting, and was ringing the doorbell for the third time when it was finally opened by a woman of about thirty. "Hi. Griffin Home Furnishings. We have a washer." The new Mrs. Sharpe wasn't exactly a teenager, but Carly immediately understood why Justine had made the crack about her ex. This lady was petite, with short wavy dark hair and brown eyes. Looking past her into the formal living room, Carly saw five or six teenage boys, a deafening video game their apparent focus. She immediately recognized Trey from the picture she'd seen.

"Thank god! Can you bring it in around back? The laundry room's got a door to the outside...that way you won't track in."

Carly bristled at the gibe but agreed nonetheless when Mrs. Sharpe indicated the sidewalk on the other side of the driveway. She was about to return to her cousin when she heard the woman call to someone upstairs.

"Emmy? Can you come down here and take Alexandra? I need to meet these delivery me-people."

*If she'd have said men, I would have found a way to track mud from one end of that house to the other.*

Perry wheeled the dolly to the edge of the drive, where Carly guided him carefully through the maze of cars. For some reason, she wasn't at all surprised that no one had come to meet them at the back door. Finally, the woman arrived to let them in.

"Sorry... Emmy! Please come get your sister." A small child of about five stood in the doorway that led into the main part of the house, humming loudly and wearing a pair of adult athletic socks on her hands and forearms. The reason for the strange attire became obvious when she lifted her wrist to her mouth and began to bite, prompting her young mother to reach for her arm. "No, honey. No biting."

Moments later, a jean-clad teen entered and swooped up the child. "You know, Trey was a lot closer, and he's not busy with his homework." Despite her unconcealed irritation, Emmy made a wide-eyed happy face for her sister.

"Trey's friends are here."

"Trey's friends are always here," she grunted, disappearing back into the house with the little girl in her arms.

As Perry disconnected the broken washer, Carly removed the tape and packing from the new one. The whole switch took less than five minutes, and soon they were headed to the county dump where they would unload the discard.

"Did you see that little girl?" Perry asked.

"Yeah."

"What do you think was wrong with her?"

"I don't know... maybe she was autistic or something." The low opinion she'd had at first of the seemingly spoiled suburban mother had been mitigated by the obvious challenges this woman faced with caring for a child with special needs. People like that needed all the support they could get.

Carly picked up the clipboard and slipped on her glasses. At the bottom of the paperwork, the customer had signed her receipt: *Justine Sharpe*.

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Justine squinted to read the closed-captioning on the TV news channel. A story about a bombing in Jerusalem had captured her attention, and she was unaware that she'd already completed her four-mile run. *That's right where Carly was!*

From the corner of her eye, she saw a heavysset woman take a seat on the window ledge, apparently waiting for the next open treadmill.

"Here you go. That's a great top, Frances. The lines really show off how much you've slimmed down." Her compliment was rewarded with a shy smile from the older woman, who had joined the Wellness Center soon after double-bypass surgery. One thing Justine had learned early on in her quest for fitness was how important it was to get encouragement from others.

Wiping her face and neck with a towel, the redhead hopped off and took a long pull on her water bottle. Dutifully, she completed her two circuits on the weight machines and began stretching to cool down. It was ten after six, and that gave her plenty of time to get home and shower, find something nice to wear...even fix her hair a little. Carly wouldn't be there until eight.

Justine was faithful with her workout regimen, not allowing anything to interfere, even dinner plans with Carly Griffin. When she'd first adopted this routine, she'd given herself permission to miss a few workouts for one reason or another, and she found right away how easily she could fall out of the habit. No, she needed the rigid commitment, not just for the fitness benefits, but to avoid the guilt that always ensued when she skipped it.

Still sweating when she walked through the glass doors toward the parking lot, she pulled her collar up against the chill. A light dusting of snow covered her windshield, though it hadn't yet begun to stick to the ground or the street.

An hour and a half later, Justine stood in her bathroom, applying the final touches of mascara and blush. She'd dressed tonight in her favorite jeans, the ones that hugged her hips and showed off her flat tummy. A tight-fitting red sweater completed her outfit, a look Emmy had said made her appear younger than her forty-three years. *Nothing wrong with that.*

After much discussion, she'd left things with Valerie that "liking" Carly that way probably wasn't a good idea. There were too many complications...not the least of which was the fact that the woman was going to be leaving the country again in just a few weeks. Besides, her relationship with Emmy and Trey was the best it had been in over three years and she wasn't about to rock that boat.

*So why am I standing here in front of the mirror primping?*

Next, she did a quick tour around the house, just in case her guest wanted to look around. Justine was kind of a neat freak-emphasis on the freak part, according to Emmy. Everything had a place, and within those places-the drawers, the cabinets, the closets-order was the rule. She'd cut the kids some slack to get them to visit more often, fighting herself not to go into their rooms to tidy up. Their compromise was to limit food to the kitchen and den, and to place their dirty laundry in the bathroom hamper. Justine topped that off by keeping their doors closed when they weren't there.

Passing through her own bedroom one last time, she crouched down to look under the bed. She was practically compulsive about storing her vibrator on the top shelf of the closet, but she'd gradually given herself permission not to get up and do that every time before she went to sleep. Still, it would be awfully embarrassing to have her company find it poking out from under the bed because she'd forgotten to put it away.

Justine hadn't been this nervous since that night in Cincinnati at the lesbian bar almost two years ago. Back in the kitchen, she reached into the cabinet and took down two plates for their pizza, and two wine glasses. A corked bottle of California red sat in the pantry, and it seemed like a good idea to take the edge off with...oh, a half a glass or so before her guest arrived.

## Chapter 5

"I didn't hear your car." The redhead had practically jumped out of her skin when the doorbell rang just as she was peeking out the beveled window that lined the front door.

"That's because I walked." Carly turned and pointed to the footbridge across the street. "That path leads right up to the park, and our house is just a few doors down."

The redhead shook her head in amazement. She'd never been all that good with spatial relations, but it was just ridiculous that she hadn't realized the proximity of the Griffins' house.

"I guess I forgot that went up to Stony Ridge. The county just built that path a few years ago so people could take their kids over to the park. 'Course, my kids were too big for playgrounds by then."

Carly presented her hostess with a bottle of red wine. "I hope you don't mind. I ordered the pizza before I walked out and they're supposed to deliver it here."

"That's fine. Let me get a corkscrew. We can eat in the dining room...or in the kitchen...or if you want, we can eat on the floor in front of the fire. It's cold outside."

"Tell me about it! They're calling for two inches of snow tonight." The flurries were just starting to stick.

"Then let's sit in front of the fire."

When they'd opened and poured the wine, the women went into the den and Justine pulled the coffee table back, dropping several pillows from the couch onto the floor.

"This is very nice, Justine. You have a beautiful home."

"Would you like to see the rest of it?"

Carly followed her from room to room, impressed with the warmth and simplicity of the décor. Oak baseboards, window frames and wainscoting contrasted against the dark carpet to give the whole house a homey feel, but without the usual knick knacks that personalized an abode. Like

JT's home, this one was smartly furnished, though the second Mrs. Sharpe seemed to have more formal tastes.

"I'd show you the upstairs, but that's the kids' rooms and my office, and I wouldn't dare open the door to any of them."

The guest laughed knowingly as she followed Justine to the basement, a recreation room that opened through sliding glass doors into the back yard. "This is where the kids spend most of their time."

They climbed the steps again and wound through a hallway to the back of the house.

"And this is the master suite."

Carly shivered as she recognized her own fascination with the room. *This is where Justine sleeps...right there in that bed.* The king-sized bed was covered in a rich comforter set of dark teal and gold; mirrored closets lined the far wall; and bedside lamps cast the room in a soft inviting glow. *Inviting?*

Her prurient thoughts were vaporized by the sound of the doorbell.

"That's our pizza. Let me get it," Justine insisted.

"No! It's my treat. You bought dinner the other night." Carly was already pulling the cash from her hip pocket.

"Okay, but you go on in the den. I'll get it and bring it in with some plates." Justine snatched the bills from her hand and took off for the foyer.

*Well that was weird.*

Moments later, the redhead deposited the pizza box on the coffee table, dashing back into the kitchen for the plates and the bottle of wine. She had polished off her first glass...her second glass actually, if you counted the one she drank before Carly had arrived.

The pizza was tasty, and just as they'd expected, Carly ate the cheesy side while Justine avoided the extra fat and calories. Conversation was casual...Justine talking a little about her job, and Carly recounting her earlier back pain from lifting the mattress.

"You should be more careful. Back pain's nothing to fool around with." A part of Justine was tempted to offer a backrub, but that was just asking for trouble.

"Oh, and you'd never guess who we delivered a washer to today."

"I have...no...idea."

Carly was amused to notice that her hostess was mildly tipsy. From what Justine had said the other night, that might make this evening's conversations more revealing than when they'd gone to dinner.

"We took it to a Justine Sharpe on Lakeside Drive."

The redhead scrunched her lips dismissively. "J2."

"Yeah, I get it now. The other night you said it was a long story."

"You know...I couldn't believe that old slime ball. I was sitting there with the lawyers signing papers, and I got to something that said...I'd return to the use of my maiden name...and I said 'Uh-unh, JT.' I didn't care nothing about his stupid name, but my kids are Sharpes. I wasn't going to have my name be different, so I crossed it out." She smirked with annoyance as she told the tale. "And his lawyer got him on the cell phone and next thing I know, he's throwing in another twenty thousand dollars, and I wanna know why he thinks his name's so special. So I made his lawyer hand me the phone. That's when he told me about...her. I didn't care, but it's kind of tacky to go getting your girlfriend in the family way when you're still married to somebody else."

"What a jerk!"

"Nah, it turned out alright. I made him put up twenty thousand for each of the kids in a CD. And when he and J2 got married, I forwarded all my old junk mail to her." Justine snickered as she tipped her glass and drained it.

"Then I guess it's handy that he just happens to like women named Justine."

"I guess...but his first wife was a Pamela. She's the one that put him through law school."

"Wow, he really is a slime ball."

"Yeah, but he's not so bad if you aren't married to him."

Despite the words, Carly heard the melancholy in her friend's voice. She wanted to ask about Trey and Emmy, and to say that she had see them today too, but she sensed that their absence in this home was probably the source of Justine's sadness. "I should have gotten another bottle of wine," she said as she poured the last few drops into her hostess's empty glass. Carly found herself taken in completely by the redhead's glowing cheeks.

"I may have a teensy bit more...There might just be an open bottle in the pantry." Okay, she knew for a fact that there was an open bottle in the pantry, but it seemed more dignified to be coy about it. And after three and a half glasses, her words were slightly slurred.

"Do you like cognac?"

"I can't say as I've ever had the pleasure of...imbibing in cognac." Justine's tone was exceedingly

formal.

"It's a special brandy...a nice after dinner drink. Goes good with a cigarette."

"A cigarette! Don't tell me you smoke cigarettes." Justine crinkled her nose.

"I do. Isabel used to say that it made me very...sexy."

The word hung in the air as both women found themselves locked into a spontaneous stare down.

"And what does cognac do?"

"Cognac...makes me relax."

*Relaxing is good.* Although Justine had to admit, she wasn't nearly as nervous as she'd been before Carly had arrived. There was that anxious moment when the pizza man came. Thank goodness she'd headed that off. *What if that delivery boy had seen her here? What if she'd answered my door? It would be all over town tomorrow.*

"What do you say I run back over the hill to Stony Ridge...have a cigarette or two...and come back with a bottle of Hennessy's Very...Special...Old...Pale cognac?"

Justine hung on every word, mesmerized by the pink lips from which they flowed. Her own mouth opened to answer, but nothing came out.

"Okay?"

The redhead could only nod.

"So...I'll be right back...and when I get here, we'll decide if you've had enough wine to tell me any secrets...deal?"

Justine scowled. Yep, she'd had enough wine to talk...and probably too much to know when to shut up. *But Carly's been so nice....* "Okay, deal."

Her guest was gone for about twenty minutes, during which Justine found it incredibly important to comb her hair and reapply a light coat of lip gloss. There was no need for the blush-the wine was doing wonders for her color, but her eyes had taken on a glassy shine. *I better go easy on that cognac.*

Carly returned with her bottle of Hennessy's and two brandy snifters, the smoky aroma of her Dunhill faintly present. Justine helped her out of her snow-covered jacket and hung it on a hook behind the door, leading her back into the kitchen.

"Cognac is nice when it's slightly warm. That's why the glass is made this way, so you can hold the bottom of it." She filled both glasses with warm water, then wiped them dry.

"Fascinating." Justine was beginning to find cognac quite sexy.

Carly handed her a glass and led them back to the now roaring fire. "This is kind of strong at first, so you'll want to sip it."

"Mmmm...it's nice. But you're right about it being strong."

"It just kind of creeps into your bones and turns you into jelly." Carly settled back against the pillows on the floor, stretching her legs out in front of the fire. Justine sat across from her, resting her back against a stuffed leather chair, their legs now side by side.

*God, she's sexy!* Justine wanted to creep all over Carly's bones right now. The blonde woman looked so...so...irresistible sitting there with her hair damp and askew from the light snow, her tight black jeans, and that pullover. Too bad she hadn't worn something to show off a little of that cleavage. Justine had peeked at that cleavage back when they were in high school, and for a fleeting second, she remembered squeezing-

"So tell me what you've been doing for twenty-five years. How has life treated you, my friend?"

A typical flippant response came to mind, but since Carly's voice was so sincere, it made Justine want to open up a little. She hadn't talked much about important things with anyone other than Valerie. "Not so good sometimes. I'm...things are a little better than they were, but..." She shrugged, the words trailing off.

"Do you want to tell me about it? You don't have to if you don't want to." The blonde woman reached over and laid her hand on Justine's knee. "I just want to know how you're doing, and how I can be your friend."

Justine blew out a resigned breath through closed lips, the accompanying raspberry almost comical. "There really isn't all that much to tell. I moved back home when I finished up at Georgetown and went to work at the hospital." Georgetown was Georgetown College, a small liberal arts college about fifty miles from Leland. "When I first started there, I was in charge of raising money for the foundation...you know, for new equipment and all. And I met JT." She chuckled softly. "He was handsome, and funny.... He'd been at Cobb & Finger for a couple of years."

"That's a law firm, right?"

"Yeah. Now it's Cobb, Finger & Sharpe. Anyway, we got married and I got pregnant pretty soon after that. But then I miscarried after fourteen weeks. That was a really sad time for us. I don't think I realized until then just how much I wanted to be a mom." Even after twenty years, the memory of that loss was enough to evoke fresh tears. Justine wiped her eyes, smearing her mascara at the corners. "But then Trey came along, and he was healthy, and Emmy was born eighteen months later. I don't think I've ever been as happy as I was when they were little. JT doted on both of 'em. We built this house and settled in...it all should have been just perfect."

Justine hated to sound so pathetic, but after hearing about Carly's exciting life, her own seemed so dismal.

"So what happened?"

The redhead laughed cynically and shook her head. "What didn't happen? Let's see...to start with, I swelled up like a blimp when I was pregnant with Trey. And after I had him, all that extra weight just stayed there and then I got even bigger with Emmy. I looked awful. I'd show you a picture but I sat here one night and burned every dang one of them."

"I can't imagine you not being beautiful, Justine...no matter what." Carly remembered that glimpse she'd gotten of Justine from afar when she was pregnant with her second child.

"Aw, you're so sweet to say that, but I sure didn't feel beautiful." She smiled at her guest, reminded once again that Carly had always treated her with special kindness. "And I heard about it from everybody...my mom, my sister...even the kids said their friends teased them about their mother being so fat."

Carly's heart went out at that. It must have been terrible to feel like her own children were against her. "What about JT?"

"Not JT so much, but then he wasn't paying all that much attention to me by that time anyway. Right after Emmy was born, I found out from Aaron Cobb's wife that he was having an affair with some paralegal at work. She was about twenty...and JT was thirty-four. I lit into him, but the truth of the matter is that I really didn't care, at least not all that much. I mean, nobody wants their husband running around with somebody else in front of the whole town, but I didn't feel like being much of a lover myself when I looked the way I did."

Carly took the empty snifters and poured another inch of the amber liquid into the bottom. The guilt she felt about getting her friend drunk was offset by her satisfaction that Justine was finally loosening up.

"So that's how it was...for most of the fourteen years we were married. I went back to work when Emmy started school. Things started to look up there. We got a big campaign going to build the new wing. We were throwing parties at the country club, and people were getting behind it. I have to hand it to JT. He might have been a snake, but he was always right there with me when I needed him to be, coming to all the parties and helping to make sure his important clients were there."

Justine closed her eyes and sipped her cognac. The next part of her story was going to be hard to tell. It was this that had cost her practically everything that was dear in her life. Everyone in Leland had passed judgment, but something told her that Carly Griffin wouldn't.

"And then I...then I met Petra Yager."

This was undoubtedly the woman Carly's mother had heard about.

"Petra was married to a surgeon who was doing a rotation here from the med school at UK. They were originally from Germany, but he was hoping to be able to stay in this country. They were a popular addition to the fundraising parties, on account of being from somewhere else and all, and one day Petra offered to help me out with one of the parties. So after that, we started spending a whole lot of time together, talking about fundraising ideas, and working on projects and such." The redhead took another sip of brandy and blew out a loud breath before continuing. "Petra was just about the most beguiling woman I'd ever met. She was exotic and captivating...and so, so sensuous. And she just found me fascinating. I knew-we know these things about ourselves-" she slurred, shaking her finger as though to admonish her guest, "that I was flat out playing with fire. But I couldn't stop...I didn't want to stop. So there we were one night at that party at the country club...must have been two hundred guests...and Petra just looked so...sexy! She had on a..." Justine shook her head in confusion, her words coming slower and slower, "I don't remember...but like I said, she was really sexy."

Carly couldn't have moved if she'd wanted to. Her friend had leaned forward and practically pinned her against her pillows as she spoke, her voice a loud whisper as though the walls had ears. From the dreamy expression on Justine's face, it was apparent that she had taken herself back to that night.

"I went in the kitchen to get the awards we were gonna give out, and she followed me. I'd been looking at her all night, and she'd been looking at me...like she could just...eat me up. '*Mein schatz*.' That's what she said. It means sweetheart or something...I looked it up. And then she kisssssed me."

"Kissed you?" Carly became vaguely aware that she was...aroused. And she was jealous as hell.

"Kisssssed me. And you know exactly what I did when she did that." It was not a question.

"What did you do?"

"I-it was a blue dress with spaghetti straps, I remember now-I put my hand on her breast...and I squeezed it." Justine made a gripping motion with her free hand, using her other to raise her glass once again. Squinting as she leaned forward again, she added, "Just like that time I grabbed yours. It's like the nerves are all...connected." *Because they are.*

Carly's mouth had gone dry as she found herself sitting up, now only inches from Justine's lips and that searching hand. In about two seconds, they were going to have a very similar experience. Nearly breathless, she asked, "And then what happened?"

"And then JT walked in with Sara McCurry and Aaron Cobb."

And tonight, six years later-and without even being present-the threesome had managed to shatter what might have been another electric moment for Justine. Instead, the blonde woman's jaw dropped in disbelief as she slumped backward onto the pillows. "You mean Sara McCurry

from high school?"

"The same. You remember the three ways to spread gossip? Telephone, telegraph...."

"And tele-Sara."

Justine's slow, emphatic nod underscored her inebriated state. "And by the next day, everybody in town had heard about it... 'cept by that time, the story had us with half our clothes off rolling around on the floor, and some people were even swearing up and down that they'd seen pictures."

"What'd you do?"

"I stayed in bed for a week with the blinds closed and the phone off the hook."

"And JT?"

"JT laughed his hind end off. But Aaron Cobb was his law partner, and after a while, Aaron thought all that gossip might be bad for business... what with one of the partner's wives practically scandalizing the whole community. So after a month or so... JT said he thought we ought to go ahead and get divorced. There weren't any hard feelings or anything. Heck, we got along better after all that than we did before. I guess the pressure was off, and it gave him an excuse to move on without looking like the sleaze bucket he was." The redhead polished off the last of her cognac and clumsily set the glass on the coffee table.

"And what happened to Petra?"

"Petra!" The accompanying laugh was decidedly insincere. "Petra was sent back to Germany to live until her husband got his green card. They couldn't afford to be seen as undesirables."

Carly knew from her experience with Isabel what it was like to be forcibly separated from someone she cared about. "That must have been awful for both of you."

"Nah." Justine waved a hand in front of her face. "It's not like we were in love or anything... more like in lust. I mean, she was nice and all, but it was ...purely physical."

"And all you did was kiss?"

"I grabbed her breast!" Justine was indignant that Carly would overlook such an important detail.

"You really like that, don't you?" Now it was Carly who was whispering. She had pulled herself up to a sitting position, again only inches from the redhead's face.

"No, I love that!"

"What do you love about it?"

"I love the way...it fits in my hand." Reaching out, she covered Carly's breast and gave it a gentle squeeze, not taking her eyes from her next goal, the pink, pleading lips. "I love how it makes me feel...to be able to do that."

"Oh, my...."

Justine crushed those lips with her own, pushing Carly back into the pillows as she crawled over to completely cover the other woman's body.

## Chapter 6

*Oh my god!* Twenty-six years of lustful longings were finally rewarded when Justine's long tongue invaded her mouth. Carly would have responded in kind, but she was too busy trying to get her twisted leg out from underneath her before the other woman's weight snapped it in two.

"Unh!" She finally wriggled it free, only to have Justine draw back.

"Sorry...I-"

Carly cut her off by pulling her forcefully back down for a second searing kiss. *No, no, Justine. Please don't ever be sorry for this.* The luscious lips were every bit as nice as she remembered and then some. This was the horizontal version of what had happened in the chemistry closet, but this time around it was two women who knew what they wanted. This wasn't practice...it wasn't exploration...it was desire, and it was pouring out of both of them. Every nerve in Carly's body came to life when she felt the taller woman's thigh settle at the apex of her legs and she couldn't stop herself from surging upward.

"God, Carly...you're just as hot as I remember. I've wanted to do this for almost thirty years." Justine thrust her hand beneath the pullover in search of that breast in its naked form.

Carly matched her move by tugging at the bottom of the red sweater. Justine leaned back and pulled it off in one fluid motion, tossing it onto the couch. "I hope you don't mind a few stretch marks," she mumbled. "Now you."

*A red bra!* Carly was so captivated by the sexy sight that she forgot that she'd been given a command. Her impatient hostess pushed her top all the way up with both hands and buried her face into that elusive cleavage, unaware that she had covered Carly's face with her sweater in order to gain access to the prize. Carly was flailing frantically to get her arms out of the tightly-cuffed sleeves so that she could pull the sweater from where it had gathered around her head.

Justine was oblivious to Carly's predicament, drawing the breasts together so that she might feel

them on both sides of her face. The blonde woman was proving every bit as irresistible as she had playfully implied. Justine pushed the wire-rimmed bra up as well, freeing the beautiful breasts but worsening her captive's plight.

This was about as clumsy an experience as Carly could remember, but what did she expect? She herself was half drunk, and Justine surely wasn't accustomed to the ass-kicking qualities of Hennessy's VSOP. They probably shouldn't even be doing this, but which one of them was going to stop? *It sure as hell isn't going to be me.*

Finally, Carly freed her hands and pulled the sweater from her head. The first thing she saw was the redhead's mouth closing over one of her nipples as long fingers pinched the other. Instinctively, she lifted up to unhook her bra, which by this time was rolled up as high as it could go, the underwires digging into the soft tissue of her armpits. She twisted and grimaced, unable to reach the clasp.

"Undo me!"

Justine quickly complied, tossing the bra aside as she returned to suckle a breast. "God, this is nice."

*I can't believe we're doing this. I bet this is where the word 'titillation' comes from.* Carly wove her hands through the thick red hair, guiding the lips from one breast to the other. Just when she thought she'd go crazy with the frenzied state of her nipples, she felt the redhead's hand slipping under her waistband.

"Wait!" Carly needed a little more control here, or she was going to climax in about fifteen seconds and that would be all she wrote. Awkwardly, she tried to sit up, which caused Justine to lose her balance and roll backward onto the floor, where she banged her elbow on the corner of the couch.

"Ow!"

"Sorry...I just..." the blonde continued to struggle, "...you were driving me crazy."

"Good, that's what I was going for." Justine was breathless, and had already started to pucker her lips in anticipation of returning to her feast.

But Carly wasn't ready to concede her fate. She too wanted access to what she knew would be a gorgeous body, and besides, she had this little...inconvenience.

"I want to see you."

Without a moment's hesitation, Justine lost the red bra and kicked off her shoes. In no time, her jeans were off and added to the growing pile of clothes. Carly too had unfastened her jeans, and was still considering her options when the eager redhead started tugging them down her thighs.

"Wait!" This time, her command had no effect, and the result was a tangle of jeans hopelessly stuck over Carly's zippered half-boots. The more she struggled, the tighter they got, until Justine freed them with a mighty yank, nearly pulling the blonde woman's feet off in the process.

The fire crackled only a few feet away, but it wasn't giving off nearly as much heat as the frolicking pair on the floor. Both women now were down to their panties and socks, and once again, the redhead crawled to lie directly on top, her tongue already searching for the hot mouth as her hands roamed up and down the smooth warm skin.

"You're so hot, Carly." Justine reached again to the other woman's waist, but she was thwarted once more when Carly grabbed her wrist firmly.

"No...I have my period."

The redhead's first reaction was confusion, then colossal disappointment. *No!* "I don't care."

"I care. I don't...it's...personal."

Justine groaned in frustration.

"But I can still touch you," Carly added hopefully, sliding to the side to allow the redhead to lie back on the pillows. "Let me show you how good I can make you feel."

Carly shifted onto her side and began to trail her fingertips over Justine's nude torso. Her first good look at the woman's breasts made her want to attack them with the same fervor her own had received, but she held back, fighting hard with the cognac in order to savor the experience. When she finally closed her lips over a rigid nipple, she got a delightful surprise.

"Oh, God...that feels so good."

Justine's eyes were closed and she'd raised her arms above her head in complete supplication. Her open mouth gave the appearance of unbridled bliss.

Carly moved to straddle her, and using both hands now, stroked the shapely woman's sides from her hips to her elbows and back. She marveled at the deceptive softness of the sculpted muscles. But most of all, she liked the sounds-the moans, the hisses, and the barely intelligible words-her touches evoked.

"Mmmm...oh, yesssss."

Carly slipped her fingers under the waistband of the red panties, pushing them down to reveal a full, reddish-brown bush. *I can't believe I'm doing this!*

Justine raised her hips to allow the panties to be discarded, and instinctively opened her legs to receive whatever else her lover had in mind.

"Take me, Carly."

*Oh, my god!* In her twenty-six years of fantasizing about Justine Hall, she'd never imagined a body so inviting, a smell so sweet, or woman so wanting. Carly slipped her fingers into the wet folds and was immediately rewarded.

"Oh, yessss...I love that! Go inside."

Carly did, sliding two fingers inside the warm wetness.

"More...fill me up." Justine's hips had begun to undulate in the rhythm of her lover's strokes. "That's it...now fuck me."

*Oh, god...that almost did it right there.* Her own hips were rocking reflexively against a pillow, but Carly shifted so that her center made contact with Justine's well-toned thigh. In and out she pumped her hand, her own moans now mixing with those of her lover.

"You're so good, Carly. That's so nice...I love your hand inside me...fucking me...it makes me wanna come so bad." Justine had thrown one arm over her face. Her hips climbed higher to deepen the thrusts. "Oh god that's so good, Carly...oh god that's good...oh god...oh!"

And with that, both Carly and Justine exploded in a million pieces.

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A long arm snaked from beneath the blanket, slapping aimlessly in the direction of whatever contraption was making that ungodly noise. A dark head followed as a hand finally made contact with the snooze alarm.

Justine felt as though she'd been trampled by horses, most of which had galloped on through her mouth. With colossal effort, she dragged herself to a sitting position, swinging her feet from underneath the covers to find the floor. Staring back at her from the mirrored closet was a beast of a woman. Even from here, she could see streaked mascara and matted hair, and the red eyes glowed like something out of a horror movie. She was nude, except for the dark blue socks. She hadn't slept a whole night in the nude since before her first child was born.

She had no recollection whatsoever of going to bed the night before. In fact, her last clear memory was...she and Carly were talking about...no, she and Carly were.... Images of beautiful naked breasts suddenly filled the space behind her eyes, accompanied soon after by a vague recollection of... "Oh, my."

To her horror, a pile of something beneath the covers behind her shifted. Still focused on the

mirror, Justine leaned slowly to the side to discover that something lay beyond her in the bed. That something was a someone. And if her memory served her correctly, that someone was Carly Griffin.

And with that realization, Justine was going to throw up.

Her stomach roiled as she stood, a hand going up at once to prevent her head from falling backward off her neck. Gingerly, she stumbled to the bathroom and closed the door.

"You've really done it now, Justine," she groaned into the mirror as she took stock of her puffy face. She turned on the water in the shower, adding an extra twist to the hot valve in hopes that the steam and heat would clear her head and cleanse her wicked soul.

"What did you think you were doing?" she asked herself as she stepped under the near scalding spray. Bit by bit, the water and soap restored her senses, only serving to illuminate her growing guilt. After all these years of wishing she and Carly had just gone ahead and done it all, they finally had. If that had happened back in high school, all the questions that had dogged her would have been answered with crystal clarity. There would have been no JT in her life...but also no Trey and no Emmy. It was way too late to be second-guessing all that. She'd chosen the kids then, and she was choosing them again now. She didn't have a place in her life for Carly Griffin. There was a price to pay in Leland for such things.

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"You'll feel better after you get something in your stomach." Nadine set a plate of country ham and eggs in front of her daughter.

"No thanks, Mama." Carly made a face and pushed the plate toward her father's chair. Right away, her dad took a seat and popped the runny yolks with his fork.

"Mmmm...runny yellows, just like I like 'em. Nadine, we got any of that cottage cheese left?" He dipped his toast into the center of the egg and raised the dripping crust to his mouth.

Carly grimaced at the combination. She'd never known her father to eat such things at breakfast.

"I was going to throw that cottage cheese out. It's got a little mold on the top, but I can scrape it off if you want me to."

"Naw, that's alright. Just bring me some ketchup."

"You want a beer?"

"Sure. That'd go good."

Nadine plucked a cold one from the refrigerator and set it in front of her husband.

*My father is having a beer with breakfast?* Carly was ready to gag when she finally realized her parents' game.

"Oh, you guys are hilarious." She grabbed her coffee cup and walked out, trying in vain to tune out their knee-slapping laughter.

She'd tried to slip in unnoticed just after dawn, but her mother met her at the back door, unable to resist pointing out that she looked like something the cat dragged in. Carly astutely observed that they didn't have a cat, but her mother replied that she didn't want one if they were going to drag in things like that.

There was no sympathy for the younger Griffin. Instead, her parents had conspired to make her morning even more miserable than it already was.

And there was no denying that it was a miserable morning. She'd awakened in Justine's bed dressed only in her panties and socks with no idea on earth about how she'd gotten there. She had vague memories of some of the things they'd done on the floor in front of the fire. Two vivid reminders of their exuberant frolic were the rug burns on her knees.

*I finally had sex with Justine Hall and I barely remember it.*

But the worst part had been the demeanor of the woman who had been her passionate lover only hours earlier. Without the cognac, Justine obviously didn't find her all that attractive, and she'd been very anxious for Carly to leave before the neighbors were out and about. They'd shared an awkward hug at the door, but Justine hadn't even met her eye, and the smile that Carly had enjoyed of late was gone.

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Justine was being very careful to hold her head as still as possible. She feared that even the slightest movement would cause her brains to fall out, and that the sight of them on the floor would make her throw up.

The redhead had never been much of a drinker. She'd always appreciated the relaxing qualities of a glass or two of wine, but a handful of dreadful hangovers in college taught her the value of avoiding having too much to drink. And if those hangovers in college had been dreadful, the one she was having right now might kill her outright.

"Good morning, Mr. Newton. What can I do for you?" Harold Newton ran the local fish market, the odor of his clothes an unfortunate reminder of that.

"I was in here on Saturday to get my hand sewed up. I nearly hacked it off with the electric saw when I was cutting some frozen salmon steaks."

Justine looked away as Harold began to remove his bandage. "If you're having a problem with your wound, you'll need to go back to the emergency room. I'm sure they can help you."

"Well, I aim to do that, but I wanted to make sure that they don't mess up and bill me twice for this, 'cause I figure I already paid for it once, and if they didn't do it right, I shouldn't have to pay again. When somebody brings back a fish and it's slimy or diseased, I don't make 'em buy a new fish."

The thought of slimy fish threatened to push Justine over the edge. "Mr. Newton, it's very important that you get your injury taken care of first. Sometimes, a wound can get worse if it's allowed to get wet or dirty-

"Well, I have to work for a living. And see, that's what started it. On Monday, it got all red and the skin around it turned yellow...you know, crusty."

Justine really didn't need to hear this.

"And then by Tuesday, it started leaking a little runny blood. Hurt like a son of a gun."

The redhead's stomach lurched in agony at the mental image Harold described.

"And it oozed all day yesterday," he finished unwrapping it and laid it directly in front of Justine. "Then this morning, I got up and there was this big ole pus ball."

*Oh, no.* "Mr. Newton, you're gonna have to..." she pushed up from her desk and began walking backward to the file room, "...go on down to the..." she raised her hand to her mouth and mumbled the last of her message, "emergency room."

Now racing around the corner, she stuck her head in the trash can and tossed the acids in her stomach. Why on God's green earth did Harold Newton have to pick today of all days to come in here with the nastiest infection Justine had ever seen?

After the night she'd had, she deserved her body's revolt. Life was all about balance. If you're going to eat chocolate, there's going to be a consequence, whether it be extra pounds or extra miles on the treadmill. And the going rate for half a bottle of cognac seemed to be a stomach lining. But the jury was still out on what she'd have to pay for her roll on the floor with Carly Griffin.

Peeking around the door frame, Justine was immensely relieved to find that Mr. Newton had apparently taken his "big ole pus ball" down to the emergency room. She returned to her desk

and rummaged in the drawer for an antacid.

*What am I gonna do about Carly?* She felt awful about the way she'd practically thrown the woman out this morning. And the irony of it was that she'd wanted her to go before the neighbors got up, but when the people on her street left for work this morning, they were bound to notice the tracks in the snow. The footprints led one-way from her front door right up the hill to Stony Ridge, so anybody with half a brain cell could put together the fact that she'd had company overnight. And if they happened to have a whole brain cell, they'd remember who Justine knew that lived over on Stony Ridge. Heck, by four o'clock this afternoon, the whole town would know that Carly Griffin had slept over, and somebody would be saying that they had seen the pictures.

"Calm down, Justine," she told herself, grateful to be getting a break from the usual stream of patient complaints. At least that part of her day was going okay...but there was still that balance thing, and that meant she'd probably get slammed as soon as the snow let up.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the phone.

"Good morning, Patient Services. This is Justine Hall. May I help you?"

"Hey, Mom."

"Emmy? Is everything alright?" It was highly unusual to be getting a call from her daughter in the middle of a school day.

"Yeah...well, mostly."

"What is it? Are you at school?"

"No, they canceled school on account of the snow. I'm at home with Alex."

"Just the two of you?" Emmy was about the only one other than J2 who could handle the little girl's special demands.

"Yeah, J2 had to run out and get some medicine for Alex's hand. That's why I'm calling. She should've been back by now. Dad's in court." Both Emmy and her brother had taken to using the moniker their mother had coined. Their stepmother took it in stride, except for a time or two when it slipped out of JT's mouth.

"Well, honey, I'm sure she probably just stopped to run a few errands. Are you and Alexandra okay?"

"She's really agitated. I think her hand hurts a lot. She got to it last night and it was bleeding all over the place this morning."

"Did you get the bleeding stopped?"

"Yeah, and it's wrapped up nice and tight. But I think it hurts her. She's crying and waving it around. I just wish J2 would get home with the medicine."

Justine heard the worry in her daughter's voice. It wasn't fair to ask a sixteen-year-old to take that on without some help. She didn't fault J2, though; it wasn't like her at all just to dump this on her stepdaughter. There had to be an explanation. "Alright, honey, here's what I want you to do. Call down to the drugstore and see if J2 picked up the medicine. Then call me back on my cell phone. If she hasn't gotten it, I'll go by and pick it up and bring it on over."

"Thanks, Mom. I knew I could count on you."

That simple statement brought an unwelcome rush of tears to Justine's still-red eyes. "You can always count on me, honey."

Justine left a message for Dr. Henderson that she had an emergency and posted a sign on the door directing inquiries to the administration offices on the second floor. She reached the parking lot to find another inch and a half of snow on the ground, with it still coming down. They were going to get socked with this early winter storm.

Her Acura handled well in the snow, but just to be safe, she pulled off the road right away when her cell phone chirped. "Hello?"

"Mom? I did what you said. Trudy said J2 picked up the medicine over an hour ago, and that she was in a hurry to get it and get home."

Justine heard the shake in her daughter's voice. "Don't worry, Emmy. The roads are a mess out here...she may have gotten stuck or something. I'm going to head over to the drugstore and see if I see her car somewhere. You keep this phone on, you hear?"

"Okay. Call me if you find her."

"How's Alexandra?"

"I can't get her to stop crying."

"Okay, honey. If I don't find J2, I'll come on over and sit with you until she gets home. Either way, it won't be much longer, okay?"

"Okay. Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome. You're always welcome."

The redhead reached the drugstore and looked about for J2's white minivan. Only a few cars were parked on the street in front, none familiar. Heading out of downtown in the direction of Lakeside, Justine maneuvered carefully to avoid a minor accident, noting with relief that neither

of the cars involved was someone she knew. As she drove further from downtown, the roads got slicker from lack of traffic; and sure enough, she finally came upon the vehicle she'd been searching for. From the looks of things, J2 had slipped off the shoulder while rounding a curve. The van was hopelessly stuck in the ditch.

Justine activated her emergency flashers and pulled to the edge of the road, careful not to go over too far, lest she wind up in the ditch herself. With a quick peek inside, she determined that J2 had abandoned the vehicle, probably to continue homeward on foot. Returning to her car, she resumed her search.

Around the next curve, she saw a small figure plodding in the snow up ahead. Justine tooted the horn as she began to slow down, realizing for certain that this woman was J2, and that she wasn't at all dressed to be out walking in this kind of weather.

"Get in," she said through the now-open passenger window, pulling alongside the shivering woman.

J2 didn't have to be asked twice. Hurriedly, she opened the door and slid into the bucket seat.

Justine rolled up the window and turned the heater on full blast.

"What in the world are you doing out in this weather in that flimsy jacket? And where are your gloves?"

J2 wanted to be irritated at the motherly questions, but the woman had a point. "I hadn't planned on being gone that long. I was just running to the drugstore and back."

"Are you alright? You weren't hurt or anything, were you?"

J2 shook her head. "No, I'm fine. I appreciate you stopping. What are you doing out this way?"

"Emmy called me at work. She was worried, and she said Alexandra was crying."

"Poor little thing." J2 looked as if she was going to cry, too. "Thanks for coming all the way out here, Justine. That was a nice thing to do."

"It was nothing. I know you'd have done the same thing if Emmy had called you and needed something."

The pair drove on in awkward silence until they reached the big house on Lakeside Drive. Justine pulled into the drive, expecting just to drop her passenger and head back to work.

"Do you want...to come in for coffee or something?"

"I don't want to be any trouble. It sounds like you've already got your hands full today without having to play hostess too. But I wouldn't mind saying hi to Emmy."

J2 nodded. "Sure."

Justine was no stranger to her ex-husband's home. She'd been here lots of times before Trey started driving to drop the kids off to visit their dad...and then later to pick them up to come visit her. For the most part, the adults involved got along pretty well. There weren't any childish jealousies to deal with, despite J2's involvement with JT while he and Justine were still living together as man and wife. Justine herself had admitted that she didn't understand JT at all; so if that was the line he was feeding his mistress, who was she to argue?

"Look who's here, Alex! Who's that?" Emmy met them at the front door with her sister in her arms. She was clearly relieved to see the reinforcements arrive.

J2 scooped her small daughter up and disappeared into the bathroom to apply the medicine.

"Thanks, Mom." The teenager gave her mother a welcome hug.

"It was no problem. You did the right thing to call." She explained how she had found the van on the side of the road and its driver walking home.

"So what'd you do last night?"

The question startled Justine so much that she couldn't answer.

"I called about ten-thirty to tell you to look outside at the snow, but nobody answered."

"I...I must have been in the shower or something." Now she remembered. The ringing phone had awakened them and they'd stumbled into the bedroom to finish their night of sleep.

"I thought you always showered in the morning."

"Yes, I meant bath...sometimes I take a bath at night to relax...you know, after running."

"But...you have a phone in the bedroom. Didn't you hear it ring?"

"Obviously not." Justine's voice was sharper than she'd intended. "I guess it was when I was running the water or something. I had the door closed to keep the bathroom warm."

"Oh, I guess that makes sense. Boy, it sure is tough trying to keep up with all you grownups. I tell myself I have to cut the apron strings, but I worry every time you guys go out there on your own."

"You're such a nut, Emmy Sharpe." Justine pulled her daughter into another hug and kissed her forehead. "So where's your brother today?"

"He took off early. As soon as they announced that school was closed, he headed over to Josh's

to play video games. He said he didn't want to wait too late to go in case the roads got worse."

"Josh...?"

"Josh Roberts. You know, he lives about six houses down from yours."

The implications of that little tidbit washed over Justine and her hands started to shake. "Do you know what time he left?"

"It was a little before seven, I think."

*Oh, god, that was close.* Carly left about seven-thirty. That meant Trey hadn't seen her; nor had he seen the footprints.

"I was going to ask him to drop me off at your house, but when Alex got up crying, I decided to stick around here in case J2 needed any help. Good thing, huh?"

"Yeah...that worked out really well." Justine considered fainting. Had it not been for that poor little girl in there with the bleeding hand, her daughter would have walked in on her and Carly. That possibility was almost more than she could stand. "Listen, I've gotta go. Love you."

"Love you too, Mom."

Justine backed out of the driveway and barreled down the street, the Acura fishtailing across a slick patch of ice. When she reached the entrance to the subdivision, she pulled over onto the shoulder and groped in her bag for her cell phone. Hands shaking furiously, she dialed the number.

"Valerie Thomas," the voice answered.

"I need to see you."

"Justine?"

"Yes. Valerie, please let me come."

"Justine, we're supposed to get eight to ten inches of snow today. I don't think you should be out driving to Lexington in that."

"Valerie, I don't care. I just...I have to talk."

"Okay, we can talk. But I don't want you driving. Are you in your car right now?"

"Yes."

"Then I want you to go home. When you get there, fix yourself some hot cider or tea, and get a

fire going. Then I want you to call me."

That was better than nothing, Justine conceded. Besides, it really was stupid to be out driving in this stuff if you didn't have to be. "Okay, about a half hour from now?"

"I'll be waiting. Be careful, Justine. No matter what's going on, you need to concentrate on the road."

"Right." Justine made a quick check in the vanity mirror to see how much she'd aged in the last ten minutes.

Here's a tip on raising kids: The Gypsies won't take them if they haven't had their shots. <g>

[Continued in Part 3](#)

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## ~ The House on Sandstone - Part 3 ~

by KG MacGregor

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Nothing much to disclaim here. This is an original story, though the main characters bear a mild resemblance to familiar faces. The town of Leland, Kentucky, is fictitious. Any similarity to persons living or dead is coincidental.

Thanks to my Sweetcakes for her help and inspiration. I'm always interested in feedback, and you may direct that to [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com).

Chapter 7

Carly fumbled in her pocket for her lighter, glad for the chance to get out of the house. It had been almost a week since she'd seen Justine, the promised "I'll call you" never materializing. Stopping in the street, she cupped her hand and lit the Dunhill, drawing the smoke deeply into

her lungs.

As if on automatic pilot, she trudged to the top of the hill to look for signs of life at the house on Sandstone. Over the weekend, the Volkswagen had been there, and Carly had glimpsed Justine going in and out a couple of times with both of her kids. That was as good a reason as any for Justine not calling, but she had to admit she was growing a little anxious about it all.

Carly had been beating herself up all week about things getting so far out of hand last Wednesday. Justine had probably had some time to think about it, and maybe she was angry at her for bringing over that bottle of cognac, and then taking advantage of the situation. And the worst part was that Carly kept asking herself if indeed that's what she'd done. *But Justine's the one who started it. She said she'd wanted to do that for nearly thirty years. Maybe it was Justine who took advantage.*

On and on she went with her circular arguments. Maybe Justine was just self-conscious about it. Maybe she thought Carly would think less of her or something. If that were the case, all she needed was some reassurance.

The snow was gone. In fact, the temperatures had reached the upper sixties over the weekend, though the town of Leland was now completely decorated for Christmas. In the big house on Sandstone, a tree stood in the front window, its lights twinkling in celebration. That had gone up sometime on Saturday when the kids were visiting.

Carly ground out her cigarette with the heel of her brand new Diggers and started down the hill toward the footbridge.

*You have to stop stalking this woman, Carly.* And she would, just as soon as she went down there and delivered the gift she'd wrapped. It was one of the ornaments she'd bought in Bethlehem just before she came home. She knew at the time that they'd make nice Christmas gifts. They also made a great excuse for getting yourself invited in.

Stepping onto the porch, Carly pulled the wrapped box from her pocket and held it in front of her, thinking it would be best if Justine saw it right away. Nervously, she rang the bell and stepped back to wait. As she expected, the light came on several seconds before the door was opened, robbing her of the chance to witness Justine's initial reaction to her presence.

"Hi. Yeah, it's me." *Awkward, huh?* "I, uh, waited until it got dark."

"Carly...come on in." Justine stepped back to allow her guest to enter.

"I brought you a present." Carly gestured behind her. "I sometimes walk through that park at night when I sneak off to smoke, and I noticed you have a tree up. It's really pretty from up there."

"Thank you." The redhead led her guest into the living room to get a close up view of the enormous evergreen. "The kids helped me put it up over the weekend."

"You did a great job. This is an ornament, by the way. I didn't want to spoil the surprise, but that's why I came down...on account of you having your tree up. Go ahead and open it."

Justine pulled off the ribbon and carefully broke the taped seal.

"Yeah, I didn't figure you for a ripper, so I was careful to get it just so." That earned her the first smile from Justine, but it was a small one.

"Oh, Carly...it's beautiful!" She held it out and studied the unfamiliar script. "What does it say?"

"It's in Hebrew. It says Bethlehem. That's where I got it."

"You're kidding! So now I have a Christmas ornament from the birthplace of Christ. That's just so...."

"Corny. I know. But I thought it was pretty."

"It is pretty. And it's not corny, it's...very nice. Thank you for thinking of me. This is such a special gift." Justine cleared a prominent position on the tree at eye level to display the ornament. "There."

Both women stood for a minute, looking silently at the shimmering tree.

"So Justine...can we talk?" If either of them got any more nervous, somebody was going to wet their pants. "You know, about last week...and this week...and next week?"

The redhead nodded nervously and gestured toward the sofa.

*It's so formal in here.* This was the rarely used living room, and while not as elegantly appointed as J2's, it was far less inviting than the den they had been in the other night.

"So how are you feeling about...last week?"

"I'm alright." Her grim tone didn't convince anybody.

"Yeah, me neither."

Justine looked at her in confusion.

"I'm feeling kind of embarrassed about it all too."

The redhead nodded and looked at her folded hands. "I feel like a...slut."

"No, Justine." Carly scooted over on the couch, a move that prompted the redhead to lean back ever so slightly. "You're not a slut. Please don't feel that way. It was just the alcohol, taking away

our inhibitions." She wanted to tell Justine that it was more than that for her, but the other woman didn't seem to share that sentiment. "I think maybe we both just needed...to be with somebody."

The blonde waited for a signal that her argument was getting through, but Justine continued to stare at her lap. When she did finally lift her eyes, the look was tentative.

"Maybe so, but it still wasn't right, Carly...at least not for me."

Carly sighed in agreement. "I know. It's not the way I would have chosen for it all to happen...but I won't lie to you. You've always been special to me, Justine. Being close to you like that...it was nice...kind of amazing, actually. I just wish I could remember it all a little better." That was meant to lighten the mood, but when Carly saw the reddening face, she worried that she was only making things worse. "Justine, don't you see? We're all grown up now, and we know who we are. There's nothing to be afraid of anymore. I know we may have rushed things a little, but-

Justine snorted. "You don't know anything about my fears, Carly. This is Leland, Kentucky we're talking about. We aren't free to choose things like that here."

"So what if it's Leland? I've been all over the world, Justine, and there are lots of places that are tougher than Leland. Hell, I told you, in Shanghai, they would throw you in jail for that kind of thing. But in places like this, all it takes is standing up to people, showing them that you're not afraid of their bigotry. Live your life the way you want to."

Justine shook her head fervently. "You don't get it. I don't give a...damn what people think about me. Even if I did, it's too late to do anything about it. People don't forget juicy gossip."

"So let 'em talk! What's the big deal?"

Abruptly she stood up and whirled to face her startled guest. "The big deal? The big deal is that six years ago, that one little incident-that 'living my life the way I wanted to' as you call it-cost me both of my kids!"

The blonde woman was shocked both by the rising ire of her friend and by the revelation that a stupid little kiss at a country club-a kiss that got blown way out of proportion-had caused this much trouble for her.

"They took your kids away for that?"

"Nobody took my children! It was much worse than that, a thousand times worse. Trey and Emmy chose to leave because of me...because of that." The blue eyes were filled with angry tears. "So don't think you can just come in here out of the blue and tell me how I should live my life."

Carly sat stunned at the vehement outburst. The redhead immediately turned away from her and

wiped her eyes, clearly uncomfortable with the emotional display.

"I'm sorry, Justine. I didn't know."

"No, I should be the one apologizing. I...didn't mean to yell like that. None of what happened was your fault." Justine walked back over and sank down on the couch. "We're working it all out. They both come over now, a lot more than they used to. I just don't want to do anything that's going to change that."

"So that means you can't...." *You can't be who you are.*

"It means I just don't have a place in my life for that part of me. It's a choice, Carly. I want my children, every minute I can have them. And what we did the other night puts all of that at risk."

Now it all made sense...the underlying sadness, the evasive manner, and the guilt. Justine had lost the dearest thing in her life, all because she'd given in to her desires for a fleeting moment.

"I understand." Carly had no answers for the pain or frustration. "It really must have been terrible for you."

"It was...harder than losing my father. And I'm so glad he wasn't alive to see that." Justine sighed deeply and pushed another tear away. "It didn't happen right away. They lived here with me for two years after the divorce and everything was fine. Then Trey started the ninth grade at Leland High School and discovered that he really liked girls a lot. I tell you, your whole life changes when your kids find out about the hormone thing." Justine managed a small chuckle.

"Yeah, I know mine changed when I found out about it. But then I had to figure out why everything was so convoluted."

"Tell me about it. I'm still trying to figure it all out." Justine pulled a leg up onto the couch and turned sideways to face her guest. She found it surprisingly relaxing to actually confront what had happened the other night. "Anyway, I got called to the school one day because Trey had gotten into a fight and was being suspended. JT and I both had to go talk to the principal, and it turned out that our son went after this other boy because he'd asked Trey how his mom liked his new girlfriend. That's when he asked if he could go live with his father."

"Why didn't you just say no? I mean, couldn't you talk with him about ignoring that kind of stuff?"

"It wasn't that simple. Nothing's all that simple with teenagers. Trey had started going steady with Melissa Chandler. She's Walton Chandler's daughter. You remember him?"

"The name's familiar. He was a few years ahead of us, right?" As she recalled, the Chandlers were one of Leland's "old money" families; their wealth was rumored to have come from moonshine sales during prohibition.

"That's right. JT handles a lot of his legal business. Anyway, I think Melissa was putting some pressure on him too. A teenager's whole life revolves around his peers, and it was asking a lot of him to put up with that kind of stuff. The first thing I did was tell both of my kids what really happened. Now that's a pretty humiliating conversation to have to have with your fourteen-year-old son and thirteen-year-old daughter. It's bad enough when kids come to realize that their parents actually did the deed, but imagine having to hear from your mom that she got caught feeling up another woman." Justine shuddered visibly at the memory.

"That must have really been something."

"Oh, it was. I never told either of the kids what their father was up to all this time. I mean, it really doesn't make any sense to try to make him look bad...it's not like it's going to make me look any better. Besides, they'll probably hear about it eventually anyway, if they haven't already."

"But even if they do, it won't carry the same stigma as you and Petra."

"Exactly."

"So how did they react? When you talked to them, I mean."

"Trey didn't take it very well, even after he found out that it wasn't as bad as what everybody was saying. JT and I both asked him to stay here, but he just couldn't handle it. He'd gotten so he wouldn't even come out of his room, he hardly spoke to me, and then he brought home the worst report card he'd ever had. So as much as I hated to, I let him go."

"And Emmy?"

Justine sighed deeply, and her eyes clouded up with tears again. "After Trey left, I got...kind of depressed." *Understatement.* "I was so afraid of losing Emmy too that I couldn't bear to let her out of my sight. And I was always...god, this is embarrassing."

"Justine, it's just me here. I'm your friend, and I'm not going to judge you."

"I know...I know, Carly. It's just hard to talk about my mistakes out loud, unless I'm paying somebody seventy-five dollars an hour to listen, anyway. That's a secret, by the way. I can't believe I just told you that too."

"And I didn't even have to give you anything to drink."

"No more plying me with alcohol!"

"No more alcohol," the blonde agreed, crossing her heart with her fingers. This was good, Carly thought. They seemed to have crossed a barrier somehow, and Justine was finally opening up on her own. Carly ached inside to hear of all the things her friend had gone through. It was worse that she'd apparently had to do it all on her own. "And your secrets are safe with me."

"Okay, where was I?"

"Emmy."

"Oh, yeah. With Trey gone, I turned all of my attention to my daughter, just what a thirteen-year-old girl wants...not. I nearly smothered her, offering to take her and all of her friends places just so I could go with them. I listened to the same music. I tried to talk like she and her friends did. Believe me, if my mother had done the kinds of things I did to Emmy, I would have run away from home."

"A little too cool, eh?"

"That was about when JT and his wife realized that something was wrong with their little girl, Alexandra. Emmy started going over there a lot more to help J2. She's really just an amazing kid." Justine shook her head in awe of her daughter. "Anyway, Trey had promised when he left that he'd stay here every other weekend, but it was more like one night a month. And I started getting more and more anxious and depressed about it all. Instead of backing off and giving them some space, I started pressing both of them to be here more. So it all came to a head on my birthday. I cooked a special dinner for all three of us because they'd both promised to be here, and then...stuff came up and they both just...forgot. I came apart, Carly."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I flipped out. I called over to JT's and told Emmy to come get her stuff. Told her she could just stay with her father. Then I called Trey on his cell phone and told him he wasn't welcome here anymore either. And then I started throwing things. I broke picture frames...dishes...a lamp. I went up to their rooms and emptied their dresser drawers over the rails. The next day, JT came over sometime in the afternoon and I was still in bed. I think Emmy had probably come by in the morning and found the place in such a wreck. Anyway, JT...took me up to Lexington and put me in the hospital. I stayed there for nine days."

Carly's heart was breaking at the awful story, which her friend related like a confession. But why was she acting like it was all her fault? It was terrible that her own children had been so thoughtless on their mother's birthday, especially knowing how important it was to her.

"And when I got back home, Emmy was...living with her father. They didn't come over for a long time, and when they finally did, I felt like I wouldn't ever be able to make it up to 'em. I was just so...ugly that night. But ever since then, I've been walking back...a step at a time."

"None of that was your fault, Justine. It's awful that you were left on your own like that, especially on your birthday."

"It wouldn't have mattered. It would have happened sooner or later anyway. I was just an emotional mess."

"You seem pretty strong to me now. That's what I see in you, not somebody who's fragile anymore."

Justine shrugged. "I don't know if strong is the right word, Carly. I think the whole town still thinks I'm crazy."

"I don't think you're crazy, Justine."

The redhead sighed. "I appreciate that. But you weren't here. I think I really went off the deep end, and that's what everybody remembers."

"But you've gotten better."

"I'm a lot more disciplined than I used to be, about everything. I joined the Wellness Center at the hospital and I finally lost all that weight I'd been carrying around for fifteen years. I run about eighteen miles a week, and I eat better now. I've been seeing a therapist ever since I got out of the hospital...I'm down to just once a week. And I hardly ever take the medication anymore...unless I have trouble sleeping for a few nights in a row. Then I have to, or I start to get edgy about stuff."

*God, this woman's been through hell.* "But you're in control of your life now, right? And you're seeing your kids again."

"Yes, and that's why I'm so...worried about..." she hesitated, unable to meet Carly's eye. "It's not just because I'm afraid of losing them. I just...can't go back to that time again. I can't bear to think of losing it like that again." Justine surprised her when she reached out and took her hand. "Can you understand that?"

*Yes...no! Answer the lady.* "I can see why it would scare you." *But I don't want you to pull away.*

"I wouldn't survive it again, Carly. I know it."

The women sat in silence in the twinkling lights, the blonde woman trying as hard as she could to think of something to say that would combat the fears. It was terrible that the punishment for such a small indiscretion had been not only the loss of her kids, but the near loss of her sanity. But now that the crisis was past, didn't she deserve to have a life too?

"I want to be your friend, Justine." *I want to be your best friend. I want to be the one who knows your secrets, and the one you turn to for support.*

"I could really use a friend. But I'm..."

"I won't push the other..." *But I won't resist you if you do.*

"But it doesn't matter, Carly. People are going to jump to that conclusion about us anyway."

Carly's brow furrowed in confusion...or was it dismay? "So what does that mean?" *You can't possibly be thinking what I think you're thinking.*

"It just means that I'm scared. I don't want to give people a reason to start wagging their tongues, because the next thing you know, Trey and Emmy are going to hear about it at school."

"So where do we go from here? Does that mean we have to sneak around just to be friends?"

Justine looked as though she might cry from the frustration of it all. She couldn't meet Carly's eye when she answered, ashamed already of her words. "I just...Carly, I just can't risk it."

"So that's it?" She couldn't keep the edge out of her voice. "We just forget about even being friends? What about when we went out to dinner and you said yourself that our friendship was special." Carly had played that over and over in her head, liking very much that Justine Hall thought that about her.

"I'm so sorry."

Carly stood abruptly and pulled her jacket closed. "I can't believe you're doing this again."

The redhead shook her head, the tears finally spilling forth.

"And you know it's wrong, just like it was then. Look at yourself, Justine. You know it's wrong."

Justine turned away to hide her tears, but it didn't matter. Carly had gone.

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Valerie peered over her glasses at her client, worried that the fallout from Justine's talk with Carly Griffin yesterday would compound the stress that already surrounded her Christmas holiday. After their phone conversation on Friday, Justine had done exactly what she'd planned to do: tell Carly everything that had happened and how it had turned her life upside down. Justine had been sure that once Carly knew the whole story, she'd understand what was at stake and why they couldn't be friends after all. "So how did it make you feel when she reacted like that?"

"Awful.... She had every right to be angry. From where she's standing, it's no different from the way I acted back in high school. You'd think I'd have learned a lesson about that after twenty-six years."

"What lesson is that, Justine?"

"Just that...other people's feelings matter. Carly never did anything to deserve being treated this way. She's been nothing but kind to me. But I was afraid of people finding out about me back then so I pushed her away. And I've felt bad about it for almost thirty years, but now I'm doing it again."

"So if it makes you feel bad, are you still certain it's the right thing to do?" Her client needed to reach a solution that minimized her feelings of guilt.

"Valerie, the stakes are a lot higher this time. Back then, all I had to worry about was whether or not girls like Sara McCurry would still be my friend...or if I'd get a prom date...or if my dad would be disappointed in me. This time, we're talking about my kids...and we're talking about me going bonkers again."

Valerie let the "bonkers" remark slide this time. They needed to focus on getting Justine to a place where she could be comfortable with her children and with herself, a delicate balancing act. "What would Trey and Emmy think of Carly?"

"I think they'd like her just fine...but they'd be suspicious about...you know, whether we were just friends or something else."

"What would make them suspicious?"

"Well..." the redhead blew out a breath. Valerie made her work hard sometimes. The challenge wasn't so much the exploration of her feelings and motivations, but having to put them all into words. Too often, the picture she painted of herself wasn't one she liked very much. "Carly isn't married, obviously, and she sort of...looks like a ...."

"Like what, Justine? Like a lesbian?"

"Kinda..." she admitted sheepishly. "I mean, she wears her hair really short-I like it that way, though. I think it makes her look kind of sophisticated. And she doesn't wear makeup or anything, but she doesn't need it like some people. I guess the big thing is that she sort of...carries herself...masculine-like."

"Does that bother you?"

Justine thought hard about the question. "Maybe a little...because that's what made people talk about her back in high school. But I like the way she looks. I think she's attractive."

"Is that what you're afraid Trey and Emmy will notice? That their mother thinks Carly Griffin is attractive?"

*That's pretty much it in a nutshell.* "Maybe...I think it would bother them a lot."

The counselor glanced at the clock, noting that their time was almost up. It would be a long week for Justine if she didn't leave with a plan for pulling herself up out of this morass of guilt. "And

this attraction you feel for Carly...Are you satisfied to let go of it?"

*No.* "I feel guilty about treating her this way...but at the same time, I don't want to do something that's going to cause trouble for Trey and Emmy."

"Let me ask it a different way. Will you be happy breaking off your friendship with Carly as long as it means that things will continue as they are with your children?"

Justine had all but given up on being happy. She was just trying not to be miserable. "I wish I didn't have to choose."

"Then maybe it's time to stop looking at this as an either/or proposition." Valerie had been working for two years to get to this point with Justine Hall. The woman needed to learn to accept herself. Only then would she lay to rest her guilt. "Why don't you try that idea on for a couple of days, and see if there might be a way to have both."

"But I-"

"Just think about it."

Justine didn't really have to think long. She wanted both, and the first step was letting Carly know.

## **Chapter 8**

Carly scooted forward on the truck's bench seat so she could press the clutch all the way to the floor. The grinding of the gearshift as she moved from second to third was embarrassing!

"Jeez, Carly! You're going to burn the clutch out and drop the transmission right here in the middle of the street," Perry groaned.

"I can't...it's too..." She continued to wrestle with the gear, but by the time she got it into third, she had lost speed and now the truck was sputtering for life.

"We can't pull the seat up any more. My knees are already in the dashboard." He shifted awkwardly to prove his point. "Boy, I would've thought you'd have gotten better at this since high school."

"Jerk! Just for that..." She slammed it back into second and the truck lurched forward, bringing both of his knees up sharply against the glove compartment.

"Ow! You did that on purpose."

"That'll teach you to make fun of my driving." Their banter was familiar. It was exactly like it was twenty-six years ago when Perry had taught his younger cousin to drive the delivery truck. The time spent apart hadn't changed the genuine affection each felt for the other; nor had it taken the edge off their relentless teasing. "You know, they make these with automatic transmissions. I don't see why you had to get the only three-speed on the lot."

"Because it's...more fun to drive," he said defensively. "Who wants a truck that drives itself?"

"Fun to drive? Perry, a Porsche is fun to drive. Hell, even a Volkswagen Beetle is fun to drive. But a furniture delivery truck?"

"Hey, we have to take our pleasures where we find them."

Carly shrugged in defeat. "Can't argue with that. So what are we taking-"

Perry's cell phone interrupted her question and she settled into the drive while he answered it.

"Hello...hi there yourself." His smile gave away the identity of the woman on the other end. "What'd he do?"

Carly tapped his arm and pointed at the upcoming street, eliciting a nod from her cousin.

"I tell you what let's do instead. I'll get a movie or two and bring it over...No, not for Kevin, for us. No reason we should be punished because he's being a jerk. He can just stay in his room."

This time, Perry tapped Carly on the arm and pointed to the house they were looking for.

"Yeah, hon...I think that's a pretty good idea. We just can't let him think he's in charge, you know?"

Carly backed the truck into the drive, coming to a stop right next to the sidewalk that led to the front door.

"Okay...I'll see you at seven...yeah, KFC sounds good to me." Perry snapped his phone shut, his mouth already watering at the thought of crispy fried chicken.

"What are we delivering?"

"Just a mattress and box springs. I can get it by myself if you want to wait in the truck."

"I can help."

Between the two of them, they had the new bedding in place and the old bedding loaded for disposal in under ten minutes. Now they just needed to make a quick trip out to the landfill.

"So it sounded like your Friday night plans got torpedoed," Carly started. She didn't want to be nosy, but Perry had told her all about Debbie and Kevin so she didn't feel like her cousin would mind.

"Yeah, we were all going to go see that new James Bond flick, but Debbie got in from work and Kevin sassed her when she told him to turn off the video game and finish his homework. So instead, we're going to watch a couple of videos while Mr. Attitude sits in his room."

"Why don't you just go to the movies without him? He's thirteen, right? That's old enough to be home by himself." No way would Carly blow off a date on account of a bratty kid.

"Well..." Perry drew the word out. "Kevin's not a very mature thirteen. And when he's in a mood, believe me, you don't want to leave him there by himself. He's liable to burn the house down, or call China for a couple of hours...I wouldn't put anything past him."

"Still, it's not fair that he ruins your time with Debbie."

"Well, see, that's the thing. He's not going to ruin our night, because we're still going to be together and have fun. If we went out and left him at home, next thing you know, he starts acting up every time he doesn't want to go with us."

"Won't he just sulk and make your night miserable?"

"He might. But he's going to have a fit when he comes out of his room and his Play Station's not there. I'm going to keep it at my house for a few days until he shapes up."

That made a lot of sense, Carly thought. Kids needed to learn their place...be seen and not heard...speak when spoken to...all that. She hadn't been around children very much, and frankly, couldn't understand the appeal. "That sounds like a plan. You can't let kids have everything they want. Hey, that means you and Debbie are going to get some time together, doesn't it?" The blonde wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

"Yeah, a little. But we'll probably let him come out and watch the second movie with us."

"Won't that defeat the purpose? I mean, you're supposed to be punishing him, right?"

"Yeah, but you can't just...I don't know...you can't just be tough all the time. He needs to know that even when he screws up, we still care about him."

"Forgive me, but that doesn't make any sense. I don't know how you're ever going to get him to toe the line if you give in to whatever he wants." Carly noted her cousin's questioning look.

"Course, I don't know anything about kids."

"It's not that he gets everything he wants, Carly. But kids have to get the stuff they need, you know? And if me and Debbie are going to have any kind of future at all, then we need to make him feel good about me being around. The last thing I want is for him to feel like he's being sent

to his room because me and her want to be alone, or he's gonna resent the heck out of it...you know what I mean?"

Carly nodded in understanding. *When did Perry get to be so smart about kids?* "Sure."

They pulled into the landfill and deposited the old mattress and box springs. Perry took over the driving for the trip back to the store.

"You know, Per...I think it's pretty cool, this Debbie thing. I mean, it sounds like you must like her an awful lot to work this hard."

"I do, Carly. If things...well, when things settle down with Kevin, and maybe when he gets just a little bit older...I'm gonna..."

"Pop the question?" she asked excitedly. Her cousin blushed so deeply she could see it through his beard. She'd love to see him happy again. He'd been married in his twenties, but it only lasted a couple of years before his wife decided that she needed her mother more than she needed him.

"I really love her."

"Perry, that's great! Now I really can't wait to meet this lady."

"I tell you what. Why don't we go out to the steak house tomorrow night...all four of us?"

Carly hesitated for just a second, realizing that she had no other commitments. She really did want to meet Debbie, and she wanted a look at what this terror Kevin was like. The steak house would be good, because dinner would only last an hour, two at the most. That would get her out of having to stick around too long in case the kids turned out to be a brat.

"Sure. Let's do it. Why don't I meet you guys there at, say...six-thirty?"

"Good deal. Let me talk to Debbie tonight and I can let you know for sure tomorrow." Perry cut through the alley to pull up to the back of the store. "I'm going to head on home. Thanks for your help."

They parked and Perry hopped into his pickup, waving to his cousin as he disappeared down the alley on his way home. She entered Griffin Home Furnishings from the back door and went straight to the office to see if her mom was ready to head home a few minutes early. But the elder Griffin was with a customer. *A customer with an achingly familiar voice.*

"Which one would you get, Mrs. Griffin? The leather or the fabric?"

"Well, I like the leather one, because a lot of people spill things when they're trying to get used to going up and down. Of course, it's more expensive. But I think your mother would like the leather one more." Nadine looked over her shoulder to see the source of the footsteps. "Carly, look who's here."

Carly wanted to be angry and cold, but the nervous smile on the redhead's face wouldn't let her. Hell, just seeing Justine softened her heart; there wasn't anything Carly could do about it.

"Hey." She ambled over to where they were looking at the automatic lift recliners, the ones Justine had mentioned to her mom the night they'd had dinner in Lexington. "Finding what you need?"

"I think so. I sort of wish I could find one that would stand her up with a little more force," she snickered.

Carly chuckled knowingly, remembering that Justine and her mom had their issues. "Better yet, maybe there's one you can control from across the room...one that sits her down and stands her up whenever you want."

"Now you're talking."

Nadine fought hard to suppress her own laugh. She remembered Marian Hall's temper, and knew the lady could be a pain in the patoot. But as a mother herself, she felt obligated to stick up for the absent woman. "You're both wicked. Carly, I better not hear you talking about me like that."

"Don't worry, Mama." She leaned in close and lowered her voice, but it was still loud enough for Justine to hear. "I'm very careful to keep my scheming ways quiet."

Nadine smacked at her daughter and turned back to her customer. "Do you want me to write this up, or would you like some more time to decide?"

"I'll take this one. Go ahead and write it up and I'll let Mom know how much it is. If it works out, I'll even be there when it's delivered so you won't have to listen to her complain."

The older woman chuckled and disappeared into the office to write up the order, leaving Carly and Justine alone in the showroom. Awkward silence followed as they studied one another for a clue about what had changed since Carly had left the house on Sandstone, angry and frustrated.

"Forgive me...one more time...please." Justine finally found her voice.

"Why should I?" Carly had to put up at least some semblance of a fight.

The redhead sighed deeply. "You shouldn't. I'm such an ass, Carly." She shook her head.

"Okay, you're forgiven."

"I am?"

Carly nodded. No matter how hurt she was, she had no defenses against Justine Hall. It had always been that way. "But I have to warn you, next time, I'm not going to be so easy."

Justine couldn't believe the way her apology had been so readily accepted. But then again, this was Carly Griffin, and she'd always been just about the nicest person Justine had ever known. "I hope there isn't-"

"No, next time, buying a recliner from my mom isn't going to do it. You're going to have to buy a dining set or something. And after that...a whole living room suit. And the time after that-"

"Carly...I promise I'm going to stop...acting crazy one of these days. I've been working on it for awhile-you know, I told you I was seeing a therapist. I know it's hard to believe sometimes, but it really is helping me." She whispered the last part and looked toward the office door. "Anyway, I'm my own worst enemy sometimes when it comes to making mountains out of molehills."

Carly didn't need any explanations. Justine really was forgiven, and she already felt giddy at the thought that they were okay again...whatever okay was. At the very least, they were talking again.

"I really am sorry," she said again sheepishly.

"It's over," Carly assured. "So listen, I need to run my mom home when she finishes with your order. You want to meet for a coffee or something after that? I wouldn't mind trying out the new coffeehouse up the street."

Justine scrunched her face.

"Don't tell me you don't like coffee! Everybody likes coffee."

"No, that's not it. I love coffee. It's just that...well, it's Friday, and I have to go to the Wellness Center and do my workout." She didn't miss the disappointment in Carly's face, and she didn't want Carly to think she was just blowing her off. "But what about tomorrow?"

"I can't. I just made plans to meet my cousin and his new girlfriend for dinner."

Nadine came out of the office with the paperwork for Justine to sign. "We can deliver this tomorrow if there's going to be someone at home."

"If you can give me some idea what time, I'll be there myself."

Carly hadn't decided until right that minute that she would ride along with her cousin on Saturday. "What about afternoon...say around three o'clock?"

"You're going to bring it?"

"Sure. That's what I do for fun when I'm in Leland." Carly grinned.

"Okay. Three o'clock is good."

Nadine disappeared again to take care of the delivery paperwork.

"So...do you have plans for Sunday?" Justine wanted something firm to plan for, and once they'd made a date, she could stop worrying about it...making the date, that is. Then she would start worrying about actually going, obsessing over what to wear, how to act, and what to talk about.

"I hear the new James Bond movie is worth seeing."

*A movie is a great idea*, Justine concluded. She wouldn't have to worry about a lot of conversation. "Or there's that new romantic comedy with Sandra Whatzername."

"So how about a double feature? You can watch my thrilling spy movie with me and I'll watch your silly comedy with you."

Justine smirked at Carly's assessment of her tastes, but all in all, it sounded like a good plan. "Why don't I check the movie times and call you?"

"So does a double feature mean we have to go to Lexington?" It didn't matter to Carly one whit, but she knew from Perry that the Bond movie was at the theater here in Leland. But if Justine wanted to keep their friendship out of the public eye, it would say a lot about the course she wanted things between them to take.

"Leland has a new eight-screen cinema-plex. We can go there...unless you want to go to Lexington."

"No, Leland is fine. I was just thinking that you might...you know...rather be somewhere else."

*Carly understands and she's trying to help*. The recognition almost brought tears to her eyes. "No, we're going to stay here in town. It's a movie, for goodness sake. Two friends ought to be able to go to a movie without stirring up a hornet's nest. And besides, it's time I started dealing with...that other stuff, too."

*Two friends...That's what Justine wanted*. The blonde woman smiled. "So it's a date, then. And you'll call me about the time."

Justine cringed inwardly about the word date, but she wasn't going to make a big deal out of it. "I'll look up the movie times in the paper when I get home and I can tell you when you bring the chair tomorrow."

"That'll work." Carly walked her to the front door and flipped the sign over to say that Griffin Home Furnishings was now closed. "You know, it means a lot to me that you came by today."

"And it means a lot to me that you were so...well, you're always..." Justine stumbled for the words, finally just leaning forward to place a grateful kiss on the startled woman's cheek.

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Justine clicked the dial down to 6.2 miles per hour. She usually tried to run at 7.5, a nice clip for her long legs; but she and her son had another date tomorrow morning to do the logging trail, and she wanted to save something for that.

Valerie was right about what running with her son did for her self-esteem. It wasn't just the affirmation that she had lost all that extra weight and gotten into shape. It was the pride she'd picked up in Trey's voice that time she'd heard him tell his friends that they ran together, and that she pushed him harder than any of those guys on the track team did. That probably wasn't true, but it was nice that her son was saying such nice things about her to his friends. In a lot of ways, she felt like the damage from three years ago had been mostly undone...except, of course, that she'd missed having him at home all this time.

She was taking a big chance getting close to Carly Griffin again, but she'd thought about it a lot-*okay, obsessed about it*-and she felt sure that her new friendship could be easily rationalized.

If either one of her children had a problem with Carly, she'd say that the woman was a high school friend, home only for a short while. Heck, Christmas was such a busy time for everybody, they might not even know that their mom was spending a lot of time with someone. And if they did notice, she'd say...that they didn't get to see each other a lot because of Carly's job, so they wanted to spend as much time together as possible.

It wouldn't be like the thing with Petra, because that wasn't going to happen again. The night she'd spent with Carly was a mistake. They were both drunk and things got out of hand.

Justine reddened as thoughts of that night rushed to the surface. She was still fuzzy on all the details, but bits and pieces came back at the oddest moments. Like now, she had a sudden flash of pulling one of Carly's hard, pink nipples into her mouth. And she remembered what it felt like when the woman had slipped inside her...and how frustrated she'd been that she hadn't had the chance to reciprocate.

The runner nearly stumbled off her treadmill as her concentration wandered. Getting a grip on the vivid images that invaded her head, she remembered her resolve. What she and Carly had shared that night wasn't real; they were drunk.

Even Carly had admitted that they lost control that night. Of course, she said other things too-that she'd enjoyed it and that she'd always wanted to be with her that way. Though Justine didn't want to dwell on it, she too had felt more than just drunken lust that night, and the aftereffects of pushing Carly away had left her feeling like she'd given up more than a friend. But after they talked a few days later and she explained everything that had happened, Carly said she understood. She was willing to keep things on a friendship level, and that was something else

that Justine could feel good about.

For several years now, the redhead hadn't enjoyed a close friendship with any of her old classmates, or the mothers in her own neighborhood with whom she'd shared the child-rearing experience. After the incident at the country club, even her three best friends-Charlene, Vicki, and Sharon-began to decline her invitations. It was Char who spelled it out for her. No one wanted to become fodder for the rumor mill; no one wanted to run the risk of being linked to Justine Hall "that way".

In the short while she'd been seeing Carly, Justine realized how much she missed the companionship of her women friends. And if she were honest with herself, she missed that other kind of companionship, too. But that didn't really matter. It wasn't like she and Carly were headed for that kind of relationship. What they'd done was just...physical.

Pre-programmed for the desired distance, the treadmill began to slow automatically.

*Wow, those four miles sure went fast!* Now, she'd do the weights and some cool-down stretches. And then a quiet night at home was just what she needed. She'd build a fire, get a book, and go to bed early. No more worrying.

*Thank you, Carly Griffin.*

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"I'll get the dishes tonight, Mama. Go on in and read your paper."

The Griffins were probably the only family on Stony Ridge Road that got the *New York Times* every day. Nadine loved the crossword puzzle, but the main reason they subscribed was for the international news coverage. Their interest in world events had grown dramatically when Carly started working abroad. Not only were they interested in keeping up with happenings where she lived, they also followed news from all the places they'd visited with their daughter. Almost every year, the Griffins turned the furniture store over to Perry for two weeks and traveled abroad. Outside of Carly, they had probably visited more places in the world than anyone else in Leland, Kentucky.

"What are you going to do tonight, Daddy?"

"I don't know...see what's on TV, I guess."

"Don't let him fool you, honey. He knows what's on TV every night on every single channel. It's like living with a *TV Guide*." Nadine didn't share her husband's interest in the tube, but didn't begrudge it either. It's what gave them each their private time.

"Could I talk you into taking a little walk with me after I get the kitchen cleaned up?" Carly needed to talk with her father about a couple of things that had been on her mind.

"Are you going to give me one of those fancy cigarettes?"

"Lloyd Griffin! You'd better not let me catch you smoking one of those nasty things. You'll be sleeping on the couch." She meant it.

Lloyd chuckled. He'd given up smoking almost twenty years ago, but he still rejoiced in tormenting his wife with the possibility of taking it up again.

"I'm sorry, Daddy, but there's your answer. You may not have one of my fancy cigarettes. But maybe we'll have a brandy together when we get back."

Nadine snorted and turned toward her daughter with a menacing look. "It's taken me forty-six years to get him just the way I like him, and you come in and ruin all my hard work. I'm warning you-if he gets a taste for brandy and cigarettes, he's going with you to Madrid."

That got a laugh from both Carly and her father. In the time they'd been joking in the kitchen, she'd gotten the dishes stowed in the dishwasher and the counters and table wiped down. Only minutes after that, father and daughter stepped out into the chilly December night, where Carly reached at once for her Dunhill Lights and lighter.

"You're going to have to give up that habit one of these days real soon, Carly. You know it isn't good for you."

"I know. I only have about five or six a day, though."

"My doctor said that even one was bad for me, and that my lungs wouldn't heal until I quit smoking completely."

The woman sighed, not wanting to get into a debate like this with her dad. She had other things on her mind.

"Have you and Mama set a timetable for having Perry take over the store?"

"Well, we haven't exactly picked a date to walk out the door, but I'd guess it's going to be in another year or so."

"Why not now? You and Mama are both sixty-eight, and I'm worried about her heart. Aren't you?"

"Of course I am. But she says she's fine to work, and I don't want to tell her what to do...as if I could," he chuckled. "You know, I always hoped we could pass the store on to you, Carly."

"Oh, no you don't. Perry's been working there for thirty-one years. He knows the business through and through. And he likes it."

"I thought you liked it too. You've always worked down there when you come home, and you act like you're on vacation. Why would you do that if you didn't like it?"

"Because I like being with you and Mama when I'm home, and that's where you are. And I like riding with Perry. It gives us a chance to talk and catch up with each other. Besides, if I didn't come down to the store, what else would I do by myself all day?"

Lloyd shrugged, tugging up the collar of his barn jacket. "I know, sweetheart. I'm just trying to figure out what it would take to get you to come back to Leland. But I know you have a job you like, and-

"Actually, that's not really true anymore, Daddy." Carly took a deep drag and stubbed out her cigarette on the pavement, pocketing the butt for when she reached the trashcan at the park. "To tell you the truth, I've gotten kind of tired of moving around so much. I guess the novelty's worn off. It's not an adventure anymore; it's...it's hard. I get more homesick now, and all the people I used to like working with are either back in Louisville at corporate or they went to work for somebody else. All the new guys are right out of college...kids. Sometimes, I feel more like a babysitter than a supervisor."

"Sounds like you need a change, Carly. You sure you don't want to run a furniture store. I can get you a real good deal on one."

The blonde woman laughed at her dad's persistence. "I'm really sorry, Daddy. It's just not something I want to do. But Perry does, and that's what we were talking about, not me."

"Your cousin's ready whenever we are. He says he's saved a lot of money and he's talked to the bank, so I don't think he's going to have any problem when the time comes."

"But that's my point, Daddy. I just wish you and Mama would quit putting this off. It's time for ya'll to let go of all that responsibility, especially with Mama's heart thing."

"What would we do all day?"

"Heck, you could go fishing. You could take up golf or something." Her dad made a face at the mention of what he thought was a silly game. "Or you could buy a Winnebago and see the country."

"Can you seriously see your mother and me driving around the country, cooped up together in a box on wheels all day and all night?"

Carly thought seriously about it for a second, knowing her parents' need for private time. Maybe if they each had their own, or if they took turns.... "Okay, no. But maybe you could work part-time for Perry. Or you could volunteer. You could start a vegetable garden. There are dozens of

things you can do to stay busy."

Lloyd turned over the possibilities in his head. "If you don't want the store, Carly, how come you're so interested in us giving it up?"

The daughter's eyes clouded with tears. "Because I'm worried about Mama. I know what she says about feeling all right, but I can see a change. You're with her all the time and you can't see the difference like I can. You guys were just in Jerusalem last May, and I can't believe how much she's gone down since then."

"What do you mean? What is it you see?"

"Daddy, she looks so tired. She's moving slower now, and...."

"Well, honey, you just said it yourself. We're not young anymore. That stuff happens to people when they get older. I don't get around as well as I used to, and if I have to move something heavy, it wears me out."

"Then don't do it anymore!" It was that simple, as far as Carly was concerned. What worried her most, though, wasn't that her mom had slowed a step. It was her overall demeanor. "Mama doesn't seem...very happy this time. I think she's worried, and I think she needs something to take the pressure off. But she's not going to give it up unless you do."

Lloyd scuffed his feet on the pavement, angry that he hadn't seen for himself his wife's decline. If what Carly was saying was really true-and he couldn't deny that Nadine had been spending more time by herself, a sure sign that she was worried about something-then maybe it was time to let Perry take the reins. "And you're sure you don't have any interest in running a furniture store?"

"Not even a little bit."

Her father sighed heavily. "Okay, I'll talk to her. If she's ready, we'll call it quits."

Carly's heart swelled with love and admiration for her father. Lloyd Griffin was lots of wonderful things, but right this minute, he was the man who loved her mother more than anything else in the world, and that made him Carly's hero. She slipped her hand into his calloused one and squeezed hard. "Thanks, Daddy."

They had finally reached the park, and she tossed the Dunhill butt in the trash. She'd have another on the way back, knowing that would trigger another scolding.

"So is anything else on your mind?"

"Nothing as important as that."

"So what's up with you and Justine Hall?"

Carly was stunned that her father would bring up the subject of Justine. "Nothing, really. It's nice to see her again."

"She's a nice lady." Lloyd and Nadine knew about their daughter's orientation, but she'd never talked much about the women in her life. It was probably hard for her to even have a girlfriend, what with her moving around so much. But he'd been interested in the fact that Carly was spending time this visit with Justine, especially after she'd stayed out all night last week. "You remember Horace Ingle?"

"The school bus driver?"

"That's him, but he hasn't driven a bus for...twenty years or more."

"What about him?"

"Just that I always think of him when I think of Justine. Horace was a friend of her daddy's, Dr. Hall. Not like a social friend or anything, but Horace taught Gordon how to turn wood, and those two men got so they'd spend their nearly all their Saturdays together in Horace's workshop. Anyway, when Gordon got killed, Horace came to the funeral home. Justine was the only one in her family who talked to him. Everybody else acted like he wasn't good enough to be there, but she hugged old Horace and cried with him...took out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes. I tell you, it dang near made me cry to see it."

Carly relished the story of her friend, the one who didn't seem to mind having a friend who lived past Stony Ridge.

"And then there was that time Perry and me took two or three rooms full of furniture over to that big house of hers. When we got done bringing it all in, she asked us to move it around a little for her, but then she called us into the kitchen and gave us both a big old piece of cake that she'd made. I mean, we just sat there at her kitchen table like old friends, talking and laughing about stuff. I tell you, there aren't many people in town who'd treat workmen like that."

"Justine's always been nice to people."

"Well, I think the thing about Perry and me was because she knew I was your daddy. But that thing with Horace...it was real touching."

*Yeah, it sure was.*

"So...did your mama tell you about Justine getting involved with that woman?"

"Yes, and so did Justine." Carly knew where her father was headed with this. "It wasn't like everybody said, though. People turned it into a big scandal because they like to gossip."

"But is she...you know?"

"Are you asking me if she's like me, Daddy?"

"Well...yeah."

"It's kind of hard to say. Things are pretty complicated for her. She's got a couple of teenagers that got the Dickens teased out of them at school on account of that thing with that doctor's wife. She doesn't want anything like that to happen again."

"That's a shame. She's too nice a woman to be by herself."

Carly couldn't agree more. "We're going to the movies on Sunday. But I don't think we'll be more than just friends, Daddy. I know you like Leland, but it can be a pretty small minded place, and Justine has to live here. I don't care what people think about me, but I don't want to cause her any trouble."

That was too bad, Lloyd thought. He rather liked the idea of his daughter finding somebody as nice as Justine Hall. Anything that would keep her coming back home to Leland was all right with him.

## Chapter 9

"Uh-oh, this is that crazy lady's house," Perry groaned as he pulled in front of white-columned home on Main Street.

"She's not crazy. She's just mean. I have that on her daughter's authority," Carly offered. She was pleased to see the blue Acura in the driveway.

"You mean Justine or Mary Beth?"

"Justine. I think Mary Beth's the favored daughter. Justine has fallen from grace."

"On account of kissing that woman?"

*God, did "all over town" literally mean all over town?* "Nah, I think it was more that Justine was her father's favorite."

"Well, she's my favorite too. I don't care what she did. She's always been nice to me. I tell you, I took a bedroom suit out to Mary Beth and Bucky's once, and I thought that woman was gonna tear me a new one for bringing the wrong footboard. I mean, I apologized and told her I'd go back to the store and get it right then, but she still let me have it."

"Sounds like she takes after her mother."

"Well, then I ain't looking forward to this one bit."

Carly chuckled. "Justine said she'd meet us here. If we have to put up with her mom, at least one person will be nice to us."

Perry pulled the truck into the drive and they both got out.

"Go on and ring the doorbell. I'll bring it up on the dolly."

Carly headed to the front door. She'd never been to this house before, not even when she and Justine were friends in high school. From what she knew now about the Halls-Marian and Mary Beth, anyway-she suspected that kids from Stony Ridge wouldn't have been made to feel very welcome here.

Before she could ring the bell, the door was opened by Justine, whose smile lit up the whole house.

"Hi, Carly."

"Hi, yourself." The blonde woman couldn't help but appreciate the redhead's casual look. She had on those jeans she'd worn the night they'd eaten pizza at Justine's house, but this time, she wore a royal blue sweater that made her eyes shine like stars. "We brought your electric chair," she whispered.

"Good. Now did your mother say if she spilled something liquid and then pressed a button...?"

"You're evil."

Justine dropped her jaw and laid a hand across her chest feigning innocence. "Moi?"

Perry joined them on the wide concrete porch with the recliner. "Have you decided where you want this?"

"Don't bring that ugly chair in here!" Mrs. Hall yelled from beyond the entry.

"Can you put it up on the roof?" Justine whispered.

Carly and Perry both had to turn away to conceal their laughter.

"Mom, I told you, this chair is exactly what you need. It takes all the work out of standing up and it helps you sit without landing so hard."

"But it doesn't go with anything."

"It's leather, Mom. It goes with everything. We can put it in the family room in front of the TV."

The only other thing in there is the couch, and it's got brown in it, just like the chair."

"I don't need that. I'm not some...old woman."

"I know, but that's not why you need it. See, this is gonna make your legs and hips feel stronger, and people at the club are gonna say, 'Look at that Marian Hall. Where does she get all that energy?' Isn't that what you want, Mom?" Justine shot a look back at Carly and Perry and rolled her eyes, causing both of them to have to turn their heads again to hide their giggles.

Marian shuffled into the foyer to get her first look at her new chair. She was secretly thrilled at the prospect of not having to struggle anymore to sit or stand. They'd ruined her hip with that replacement, she was convinced. Never mind that she'd broken the joint cleanly when she'd twisted getting out of her old recliner.

"Well, you might as well go ahead and have them put it in there. I'll probably have to pay for it anyway now that they've brought it out here. I don't know why you do business with Griffins."

Carly bristled. If Marian Hall said one word about her mom or dad, she wasn't going to be responsible for her actions.

"We do business with Griffins because they're honest and decent people, and they have the best selection of furniture in Leland." Justine motioned Perry and Carly down the hall to the family room, mouthing a silent apology for her mother's nonsense. "Mom, do you remember me talking about running into a friend of mine from high school, Carly Griffin?"

"Is she one of those Griffins?"

"Yes, she is. And this is Carly right here." The redhead motioned for her friend to step forward.

"Hello, Mrs. Hall. You have a lovely home."

Marian already knew that. "Are you a...why, I didn't realize you were a woman! I thought you were both men." She turned to look at Perry. "He's a man. He's got a beard."

"Mom! Of course, she's a woman." Justine was embarrassed beyond measure at her mother's spitefulness, especially when she saw her friend's reddening face.

"So where do you want this?" the blonde asked, all business now.

"Put it in that corner by the lamp. There's a plug over there." Justine led the way, still mortified by her mother's rudeness.

Perry and Carly lifted the chair off the dolly and positioned it by the lamp, careful not to scuff the floor. Perry explained how the controls worked and Marian tried it out, delighted to have her very own automatic recliner. She would be the envy of her friends.

Carly picked up the loose wrapping and started back out to the truck with Justine in pursuit.

"Carly, I am so sorry. I just don't know why she has to be so mean."

"That's okay. I guess it's confusing for old people...you know, to see women wear their hair short and dress like men. They didn't do that in their day."

"You're being far too kind to her. I wear shirts and jeans sometimes too, and so does my daughter."

"Nobody's ever going to mistake you for a man, Justine. Not with a face as pretty as yours."

The redhead blushed at the compliment, but she still hated what had prompted it. "Carly, look...for what it's worth, I think you're as cute as you can be. I mean that. I wouldn't say it if I didn't."

Now they were both blushing, and they needed a way out of this conversation.

"So do you still want to go to the movie tomorrow?"

"Of course I do. The one I want to see starts at two-thirty. Then if we feel like seeing another, that stupid old spy movie is at five."

Carly smiled at the gentle gibe. "So what if I pick you up at two?"

"I'll be ready."

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Carly pulled her compact rental car into the crowded lot at Steer Masters, squeezing between a pickup truck and a Cadillac that was parked over the line. Perry's truck was parked close to the door, so they must have gone inside to wait, she figured. Saturday night was a busy night at the steak restaurant, and the line would be long.

She was nervous about meeting Perry's new girlfriend. She wanted to make a good impression, especially since it looked like Debbie and her son might be joining her extended family one day. That meant seeing them at holidays, and maybe even at the store if Perry took it over.

Tonight, Carly wore her nicest clothes, the same outfit she'd worn the night she and Justine had gone to Lexington for dinner. The jade pendant seemed a little out of place for the local steakhouse, but the ivory pullover looked dressy enough without it.

When she and Perry had finished their deliveries today, Carly went home and stood in front of the mirror for twenty minutes, looking at the image Marian Hall had thought was a man. For the first time since high school, she was self-conscious about her appearance, and that made her angry. She'd never given a damn about what other people thought of the way she looked, but that remark from Justine's mother hit a nerve. It was one thing to be mistaken for a teenage boy, but something altogether different to be mistaken for a man.

"Look at you! Don't you clean up well?" Perry met her just inside the door. "If I'd known you were going to get all spiffed up, I'd have worn my tuxedo."

Carly jabbed an elbow in her cousin's ribs. Now she felt embarrassed for being overdressed.

Perry noticed his cousin's reddening face and realized his mistake. "You look nice, Carly. I hope you didn't let that crazy woman's nonsense bother you today."

"Don't be silly. I just wanted to look good when I met your future wife."

"Shhh. Don't go saying that out loud. What if she says no?"

"She isn't going to say no, you goof. You're a catch...even if you are a smart aleck."

Perry led her through the crowd to a woman who waited with a young boy on a wooden bench. "Debbie, I want you to meet my cousin, who just happens to be one of my favorite people. This is Carly Griffin."

Carly stuck out her hand. "It's nice to meet you. Perry talks about you all the time. I mean, all the time!"

The three adults laughed.

"And this is Kevin." Perry gestured to the boy, who sat sulking next to his mother, obviously wishing he were anywhere else but here.

"Hi, Kevin. I hear you're a master at videogames."

"Not anymore, I ain't," he scowled.

*Oops.* She'd forgotten that his Play Station was on vacation at Perry's for now. *Not a good start at all.*

"Shall we get in line?" Perry broke the tension, and Carly surged ahead to put some distance between herself and the surly lad. The four of them studied the menu on the wall, each ordering a steak with a baked potato. Carly carried the tray with her iced tea and silverware to a freshly wiped booth at the back of the restaurant, where she was joined first by Debbie.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought up the videogame. Perry told me that he took the Play

Station over to his house last night."

"Oh, don't worry about it. Kevin's just in one of his moods. He'll get over it."

Just then, Perry and Kevin joined them, the son sliding in next to his mother.

"Do you play videogames?" the boy asked. It was apparent that he'd gotten a scolding from his mother's boyfriend about his rude remark.

"No, I'm afraid not. I just don't have the eye-hand coordination it takes to be good at it. I usually put my quarter in and before I can even figure out what the object of the game is, everything fizzles out and it flashes 'Game Over'."

Kevin laughed at her pitiful assessment. "Not me. I can pick up any game and get the high score in just a few tries." As they waited for their steaks, he regaled them with his video heroics.

Carly caught on that this was important to the kid and that he was trying hard to impress her. Though she had almost no idea what he was talking about most of the time, she fed him the intermittent "wow" or "that's really something" to demonstrate that she was suitably amazed.

"Perry tells me that you work for a company that sends you all over the world." Debbie took the lead in the conversation when their food arrived and Kevin began to eat in earnest.

"Yeah, I just got back from Israel, and next month, I'm off to Madrid."

"Is that in Germany?" the boy mumbled with his mouth full.

"No, it's in Spain. You're probably thinking of Munich."

"Yeah, I get those two confused."

"It sounds exciting to travel like that. You must think we're a bunch of hicks here in Leland."

"Oh, no. I grew up here. I think Perry's a hick, but everyone else is pretty normal." That brought an appreciative laugh from everyone, especially Kevin. Since Perry was the person they all had in common, he was fair game. "I invited Perry to come visit me when I was living in Shanghai, but I think he got worried that he wouldn't be able to find anything to eat."

"I didn't want to eat no cats, or eyeballs, or raw fish. I can get raw fish right out of the Barren River."

"Eww, I can't believe you're talking about that when I'm trying to eat my steak." Debbie struggled to cut her sirloin. "And speaking of steak, I think they cooked mine too long. It was supposed to be medium but it's just as tough as it can be."

"Here, honey. Why don't we trade? Mine's done just the way you like it." Perry showed her the

juicy pink center cut, which she eagerly accepted.

Carly knew it was true love right then. Her cousin couldn't stand meat that was overcooked, and here he was trading a perfectly good steak for a hunk of shoe leather. Only a man in love would do that.

Throughout dinner, Carly wove in and out of the conversation, realizing that she genuinely liked Debbie and even Kevin. But mostly, she just enjoyed seeing the simple dynamic of two people in love. The best part was the laughter, and Carly was really glad to see that the thirteen-year-old was a big part of it. It was obvious that the youngster looked up to Perry, even if the laws of adolescence held that grownups weren't supposed to be cool.

Carly was willing to bet her last dime that Perry and Debbie would be married within a year if her parents turned over the store. And after seeing the three of them together today, that idea made her immensely happy.

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*Another nice Saturday*, Justine thought as she stepped from her bath. Thanks to her kids' efforts to spend more time with her, it had easily become her favorite day of the week. This one had been almost perfect.

She'd started out by going on an eight-mile run with Trey, during which they talked about the things he wanted to accomplish before finishing high school. The honor roll, another letter in track, a community service project at the hospital that Justine would help to arrange...these were his goals, and the mother couldn't help but be proud.

Though she would have preferred more time with Trey alone, he called two of his friends to join them for breakfast at the drug store counter. That pretty much killed the rest of their serious conversation, but it was nice to get an affirmation that he wasn't ashamed to be seen with her. And it was also nice that Trey and his friends had finally outgrown their need for public burping contests.

Right after breakfast, she drove over to JT's and picked up Emmy, who had a surprise request for the day. She wanted to practice driving.

Unlike most teens, who counted the hours until they turned sixteen, Emmy hadn't shown much interest in getting her license, though she had her learner's permit. As they drove along the back roads toward Frankfort, Justine learned why her daughter had been reluctant to enter this phase of independence.

*"I know this is really selfish, Mom, but I'm afraid that when I get my license ..., " her chin quivered and her eyes began to mist.*

*"What is it, honey?"*

*"I'm worried that Dad and J2 are going to ask me to do even more stuff for Alex." Ashamed of her admission, the teenager couldn't hold back the tears.*

*"Alex?" Justine anxiously looked ahead on the country road. "Honey, pull over up there."*

*Emmy turned the Acura into the gravel parking lot of the Hope Eternal Baptist Church and put the car in park, engaging the emergency brake like she'd been taught in her driver's education class. "I love her, Mom. Really, I do. But they never ask Trey to help with her. It's always me, and if I start driving, they'll probably want me to start taking her places, and-"*

*"Emmy, listen to me. I know you love your sister, and she loves you too. I can see it on her face whenever you're there."*

*"I know I should-"*

*"Sweetheart, listen." It nearly broke Justine's heart to see her daughter so torn with guilt. From her own sessions with Valerie, she understood how it could rule your life, but she also knew a little about how to fight it. "Alex is going to need a lot of help in her life, and I won't tell you that you shouldn't help out whenever you can. But she isn't your primary responsibility. At your age, you should be learning to be responsible for yourself."*

*Justine rustled through her purse to produce a tissue.*

*"But J2 can't handle it all herself. It's too hard. Alex can't be left alone...ever!"*

*"I know that. But what you already do to help J2 is enough, maybe even more than they have a right to ask of you."*

*"They don't ever ask Trey for anything. He just gets to hang out with his friends or go off whenever he wants to."*

*The mother was ashamed to hear that her son was shirking his duties at home. "Emmy, tell me this, honey. Are you more upset because your father and J2 are asking you to do too much, or because they aren't asking Trey to help?"*

*"Both...I mean, I wouldn't have to do so much if Trey helped out a little. Kelly came over so I could help her with algebra and Trey wouldn't even watch Alex for a little while. And then J2 says, 'Oh, your brother isn't as good with her as you are.' So just because Trey doesn't even try, they push it off on me."*

*Justine hated to see her sixteen-year-old daughter saddled with so much responsibility at home, especially at a time when she should be more concerned with having fun and enjoying her high school years. And though she usually bit her tongue when Emmy came to her with problems, this time she felt that she had to speak up.*

*"Have you talked to your father about this?"*

*The teenager shook her head.*

*"Then I think I should."*

*"No! Can't you just tell Trey that he has to start helping out?"*

*"It's not that simple, Emmy. If your father and J2 aren't after him to help out more, I have to wonder why. I can't just jump in the middle of things when it comes to taking care of Alex. She isn't my child."*

*"But Dad's going to be disappointed. He's going to think I don't love Alex."*

*"No, he isn't. He knows better than that."*

*The tears were coming harder now. "Mom, please don't tell Dad. I wouldn't have said anything if I'd known you were going to tell him."*

*Damn! "Sweetheart, listen to me." Justine reached over and took her daughter's hand. "Most of the time, the talks we have stay between you and me. And believe me, I feel very lucky that you and I can talk about so many things. But this kind of thing is different. This is where I have to be the mother, and I have to do what's best for you. You are my responsibility, and I won't have you feeling like this if there's anything I can do about it. Can you understand that?"*

*Emmy sniffled and nodded without looking up from her lap.*

*"Your father makes good money. He can afford to hire someone to help out with Alex. Now that doesn't mean you won't have to jump in from time to time to lend a hand, but you shouldn't feel like you have to be on call every day. It's not fair to expect you to give up things you have every right to enjoy. And you know what? I bet your father and J2 don't realize how much they've come to depend on you and what you're missing out on. And as soon as they do, they'll make it right."*

*"You don't think they know?"*

*Justine could see the look of relief on her daughter's face as she contemplated this new perspective.*

*"No, honey. They'd never put you in this kind of position if they knew what it was doing to you. And they know you love your little sister. Anybody with eyes can see that."*

*"When will you talk to him?"*

*"We'll set something up today. I don't want you to worry about this anymore."*

*"Thanks, Mom." Emmy leaned across the seat to embrace her mother.*

*As usual, the simple gesture triggered a surge of emotion in the older woman, and she clung to her daughter as if her life depended on it.*

When the two returned from their drive, Justine was able to have a word with both JT and J2, especially since Emmy offered to take Alex into the other room to play. As she suspected, they weren't at all aware of the burden that was falling to the teenager, and they promised to see about getting some professional help at home. As for Trey, that too was as Justine imagined. Her son had been left with the responsibility of taking care of his little sister on a few occasions, but hadn't proven himself dependable. They couldn't afford to take a chance on Alex's care, so they'd fallen out of the habit of asking him for help. However, now that JT's eyes were opened to how his daughter felt about her brother having less responsibility, he promised to even things out at home.

Getting that resolved for Emmy gave Justine a real sense of accomplishment today. She still needed to talk with her son about stepping up for Alex. Even though the disabled child wasn't hers, she wanted her son to be the kind of young man who would do the right thing.

Wrapping the terry robe around her, Justine sat down at the vanity and turned on the Hollywood lights. This was her Saturday night self-indulgence routine. First, she looked hard at her hairline to see if it was time to call Wanda. Being a redhead required vigilance. She could last another week, but she wanted to be sure and get in before Christmas so she'd look nice at the reunion.

Next was the facial, a muddy green cream that she spread all over her face and left until it cracked, cleaning and tightening the pores to keep the wrinkles at bay. While she was waiting for the mixture to dry, she gave her hands a paraffin treatment to keep them soft and young-looking. These extravagances-the hair salon, the facial, and the occasional manicure and pedicure-were gifts she started giving herself when she began to lose weight and firm up. Looking good did a lot for her self-esteem.

Treating herself at home to these little luxuries had another very important benefit. It took her mind off the fact that here she was-alone again on a Saturday night. And since she was trying so hard to focus on relaxing things, she turned her thoughts back to how well her day had gone.

Any day that Justine did right by her kids was a good day, and this one certainly qualified. If that had been all there was to this Saturday, it would have been enough. But she'd had another high point-seeing Carly Griffin.

Justine caught herself smiling as she thought of the blonde woman. Regardless of her mother's

rude remark, she'd thought Carly looked great today. She had on jeans that showed off her rear nicely...and a work shirt that was opened at the top to reveal just a little of that wonderful cleavage. Justine's thoughts wandered to that cleavage, which she'd seen up close and personal.... "Now get hold of yourself, Justine. Carly Griffin is just a friend."

Her ablutions completed, she turned off the lights at the vanity and walked back through the house one more time to make sure the doors were locked and the fire had burned down. When she reached her bed, she folded back the covers and stood for a moment while her mind rationalized her desires. It was Saturday, a night for relaxation, for decadence. She walked over to the closet and reached high to the back of the top shelf, pulling down the shoebox that held her vibrator. She hadn't used it for several weeks, but tonight, she wanted a release.

On her way back to the bed, she stopped to pull a gown from the top drawer. *On second thought*.... She dropped it back into the drawer and removed the terry robe, tossing it onto the end of the bed as she turned out the light and climbed nude into bed.

With one knee bent, she made a tent of her comforter, allowing her to move the vibrator easily underneath the covers. She turned it on to its lowest setting and began to dance its head around the apex of her thighs. Steadily, her breaths grew deeper as she darted it across her sensitive center.

Carly Griffin had touched her there...*yes, right there!* She remembered it vividly now. She'd been so wet, and so open. Carly had taken her...deep and hard.

She pinched her nipple, the one Carly had wrapped in her lips as she stroked her in and out.

Justine clicked the button to the highest setting, but this didn't come close to what Carly had done for her...*with her fingers deep inside...so deep inside*. "Come on Eveready, don't fail me now," she pleaded, pressing the vibrator hard right onto her clitoris. From deep within, she felt it building as her buttocks tightened. Then like a rocket, she ignited and thundered upward off the bed, exploding in a sudden burst of fire that left her nerve endings screaming in retreat.

Somehow, she had the wherewithal to turn the vibrator off.

"Look what you do to me, woman, and you're not even here."

"That one'll burn your clit off." - Samantha, on *Sex in the City*, advising a customer in Sharper Image.

[On to Part 4.](#)

## ~ The House on Sandstone - Part 4 ~

by KG MacGregor

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Nothing much to disclaim here. This is an original story, though the main characters bear a mild resemblance to familiar faces. The town of Leland, Kentucky, is fictitious. Any similarity to persons living or dead is coincidental.

Thanks to my Sweetcakes for her help and inspiration. I'm always interested in feedback, and you may direct that to [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com).

### Chapter 10

Carly buttoned the sleeves of the fitted blue shirt and turned sideways to see it from several angles in the dressing room mirrors. It hugged her torso and flared into a bold collar and cuffs. It was decidedly feminine-maybe a little more than she liked-but it went nicely with the tight black pants she'd picked out, and she wouldn't have to buy new shoes.

It wasn't a familiar look for Carly, but since her usual attire had drawn that rude remark from Marian Hall, she wasn't going to suffer that humiliation again...at least not here in Leland, and not in front of Justine. The only nice outfit she'd brought home was the ivory sweater that she'd worn twice already. The rest of her belongings were in storage, ready to be shipped to Madrid. Not that she had a lot of dressy outfits among those things. It just wasn't her habit to dress up, even for work.

Carly added the blue top to the "buy" pile and reached for the striped sweater. She was alone in the fitting room, since most of the frenzied shoppers in the department store were buying Christmas gifts for others instead of clothes for themselves. Thank goodness for the holiday and the Lexington Mall's extended hours. This way, she would have something new to wear this afternoon to the movies.

"Ew!" The striped sweater made her boobs look enormous. On the other hand, the striped sweater made her boobs look enormous. With a sly grin, she tossed it into the "buy" pile too. No problem with showing off her assets, especially those that she thought might get Justine's attention.

The blonde knew she was just playing games in her head when it came to Justine. Her friend's fears had been real, and Carly wasn't about to do anything that might cause more anguish than the woman had already been through. But there was something fun about knowing that she could

tease a little, and she loved imagining that she could push a button or two in Justine Hall.

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"You look nice, sweetheart." Nadine met her daughter in the hallway, surprised at the new look. Carly not only wore brand new clothes, but she also sported just a tad of makeup-some foundation with a hint of eye shadow. With the dark green slacks, striped sweater, and gold hoop earrings, she was much more dressed up than usual. "Is all of this new?"

"Yeah, I wasn't expecting to go out so much, and I didn't have a lot of stuff with me."

Nadine knew that was part of it, but the touch of makeup-something she'd seen only once or twice on her daughter before-was for Justine Hall. She was thinking her husband had been right about Carly, that she had feelings for their neighbor on the other side of Stony Ridge. Nothing would make her happier than to see Carly fall in love with someone as nice as Justine.

"What are you girls doing?"

"We're supposed to see a couple of movies. Maybe we'll get a bite to eat later."

Nadine chuckled. "Well I won't bother to wait up this time."

"Mama! Justine and I are just friends." Despite the easy rapport with her mother, Carly blushed. "I told you, we polished off a whole bottle of brandy that night, and I'm not sure I could have made it back over that hill, let alone find the right house. What if I'd stumbled into the Hankins' house?"

"Lord have mercy! Eugene would have gotten after you with his shotgun."

"No kidding! And then he probably would have mounted my head over his fireplace." Both women laughed at the image, remembering their neighbor's collection of grotesque hunting trophies.

"So how is Justine?"

"I think she's doing okay, Mama. You were right, though...she really has had a hard time." Carly pulled her coat from the closet. "I was meaning to ask you...How did you know that?"

Nadine shrugged. "You hear things...and I used to see her picture in the paper all the time, smiling at this or that for the hospital. And now it's like...well, she lost that job on account of people didn't want to give money to the hospital anymore. Seemed silly to me."

Until that moment, it hadn't occurred to Carly at all that Justine had lost her job too, on top of all the other stuff that happened. *No wonder it all hit her so hard. It hit her everywhere!*

"Seems silly to me too, Mama. But I really think she's doing better now."

"You two have fun tonight. You know, you can ask her over any time. She'll always be welcome."

Carly smiled at her mother and gave her a quick hug, understanding that she'd just been given approval for anything she wanted to pursue with Justine. It wasn't something she needed, but it was nice to have it just the same.

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Carly had been looking forward to the afternoon, but she was surprised to find herself practically elated at being with Justine again. And the best part was that she got the same impression from Justine. The redhead went on and on about how nice Carly looked, and she was almost sure that she saw Justine admiring her profile in the striped sweater. "Look! They're also showing *Creepy Sleep*. Now wouldn't you rather see that than a mushy romance?"

"No! A horror movie's the last thing I want to see. My son and all his friends will go see that a half dozen times, and then they'll talk about all the gory details of how the blood splattered and came out of the woman's eyes."

"And that doesn't appeal to you?"

Justine shot her an incredulous look. "Don't tell me you really like that stuff."

Carly shrugged. "I do appreciate a good scary story, but I'll admit that slasher movies aren't my thing either."

The two women entered the theater and waited for a moment while their eyes adjusted to the dim light. The horror flick and the James Bond feature were the major draws, so only a few moviegoers speckled the rows.

"You don't really hate romantic movies, do you?"

"No, I don't hate them. But to tell you the truth, I find it kind of hard to relate to them sometimes. They don't really show...romance as I know it." The blonde regretted her answer as soon as she said it, knowing that Justine would want an explanation. For Carly, the very definition of romance had Justine Hall in it. Fortunately, she was saved by the previews of coming attractions.

Two hours later, the friends emerged from the theater, the taller of the two sniffing into a tissue.

"I'm embarrassing you, aren't I?"

"Excuse me. Have we met?"

Justine laughed at that comeback. "Tell you what. If you're still up for that stupid old spy movie, why don't you go on and get the tickets. I'll get us some popcorn and pull myself together."

Carly headed back out to join the line at the box office.

"Carly?"

She whirled around to find the source of the unfamiliar voice.

"Carly Griffin, I thought that was you." A woman stood beside the line, apparently waiting for someone to buy her ticket. She was slender and sharply dressed, and she wore a generous supply of lipstick and blush.

"Sara?"

"That's right! Sara Rice. I was Sara McCurry back in school."

*Sara McCurry Rice.* That was too much, and Carly had to fight to keep from laughing out loud. Of course, there probably weren't more than a dozen people in Leland who ever ate Thai or Indian food, so she was probably the only one who got the joke.

"Hello, how are you?"

"I'm good. You look really good, Carly. I hardly recognized you."

*A backhanded compliment if I ever heard one.* "This really is a surprise. I don't usually see anyone I know when I'm in town." *And why are you being so polite to me all of a sudden?*

"Where are you living now? Your mother said you were somewhere overseas. Did you join the army or something?"

Sara was joined by a heavysset man with thinning hair. His cologne nearly knocked Carly over from six feet away.

"No, I-"

"This is my husband, Bob. He's the president of the Leland County Bank, in case you ever need a loan or anything. Bob, this is Carly...is it still Griffin?"

"Yes, it's still Griffin. Pleased to meet you, Bob." Carly hadn't wanted to shake his hand, but she

couldn't ignore it when he stuck it out. Now she'd probably smell like that cologne.

"You're coming to the reunion, aren't you? It'll be fun. Tommy Hampton was in the army too, so ya'll are gonna have a lot to talk about with each other. I think he was a sergeant or something."

"Can't wait." There never was any point in trying to have a real conversation with Sara McCurry. She was too busy trying to think of what to say next to process what anyone else said.

Carly got the tickets and went back inside, pointing out Justine to the attendant so that the young man would know they both had paid. She joined her friend just in time to pick up one of the sodas. Justine had gotten a large popcorn to share.

"Where in the world did you go? Good lord, you smell just like Bob Rice."

"That's because I just had the pleasure of smearing his hand all over mine."

"You saw Sara?" The taller woman visibly stiffened.

"Sure did. But don't worry. I'm sure she's forgotten it by now, and I think they went into the movie we just came out of."

"What did she say?"

"Gibberish. She thinks I'm in the army."

"The army?"

"Yeah. Think I could rent a uniform to wear to the reunion? I don't want to confuse her by showing up in street clothes."

"Does that mean you're going to go to the reunion?" Justine was clearly excited by the prospect.

"I'm thinking about it." The saleslady in Lexington had talked her into trying on a dressy pantsuit that would be nice for a party, and Carly had thought at once of the gathering of her classmates after Christmas. Maybe she would show up after all, if for no other reason than just to be in the same room as Justine.

They shuffled into the growing crowd, finding two seats on the side near the aisle.

"I really hope you do come. It'll be fun."

"Can I bring my Hennessy's?"

"As far as I'm concerned, you can pour the whole bottle in the punch bowl. The folks here could use some loosening up."

The previews started up again and they settled in to watch the second feature. When another two hours passed, the two friends exited the theater, both glad for the chance to stretch their legs.

"Now wasn't that a lot more exciting than the first one? It had everything-explosions and car chases and spy gadgets...even a few scantily clad nubile bodies." Carly lowered her voice for the last part so that only Justine could hear.

"That part was...okay."

"Okay, huh?" She watched the redhead fight back a smile. "Admit it. You liked it."

"I liked it."

"Especially...?"

"I think the costume designer did an adequate job."

"And the casting director?"

"Satisfactory as well."

Their teasing conversation was interrupted by a loud ruckus near the men's room. A small crowd had gathered around the entrance, where the female manager was demanding that a group of teenage boys present ticket stubs for the next feature or leave the theater at once.

"What's your problem? We were just taking a piss. Is that against the law or something?"

The red-faced manager stood her ground, asking again to see his ticket.

"I don't have to show you nothing," he growled, "bitch."

"That's one of Trey's friends," Justine whispered as they drew closer. "Oh, my goodness! That's my son."

Sure enough, Trey emerged from the men's room with three other boys. Leading the way, he threw a box of popcorn to the floor, scattering it all around as he shouldered past the woman.

Justine was immediately angry and embarrassed, and she stepped forward to intercept her son.

"What's going on, Trey?"

The boy was clearly startled by his mother's sudden appearance, and he looked around to see his buddies make a hasty retreat to the exit. "I was...we went to see a movie and then we went to the bathroom."

Justine looked at the manager for confirmation.

"These boys went into the men's room after the first movie and then slipped into another show without paying. When I saw them all go in again, I asked them to show me their ticket stub."

The son looked away ashamed as his mother tugged him to the side. "Is that true?" she whispered harshly.

"Mom!"

"Answer me."

"We just sneaked into a movie. It's not like we hurt anybody."

"It's just like stealing, Trey. You know better than that."

Justine looked back over her shoulder, relieved to see that the crowd had moved on. A boy of about fourteen was sweeping up the spilled popcorn, and the manager had moved to stand near the exit, clearly waiting to making certain the young scofflaws left the theater.

"Trey Sharpe, I want you to go apologize to that boy who's cleaning up your mess. And then I want you to go pay for the movie-"

"I don't have any more money."

Irritated beyond measure, Justine ripped open her purse and pulled out her wallet, handing her son a ten dollar bill. "You will pay me back for this out of your allowance." She stood and watched as her son did exactly as he'd been told, then followed him out into the rainy December night.

"Great! Now my ride's gone," he scowled.

Justine was sorely tempted to make her son walk, but she knew he'd just whip out his cell phone when she was gone and have his friends come back for him. They'd all have a good laugh and tease him about his mother catching him, then plot what to do next time to make sure they weren't caught. That wouldn't do.

"I'll take you home." It was then that she remembered Carly, and that they'd come in her car. "Don't move a muscle," she told her son sternly. Briskly, she walked to where Carly waited in the rain by her rental car.

"I wish I'd thought of that," the blonde woman said when her friend arrived in a huff. "Who knew we could have saved eighteen dollars by hiding in the ladies' room?"

Justine rolled her eyes. "I've never been so humiliated in my life...well...not for a long time. Listen, I need to ask a favor. Could I talk you into dropping this...hoodlum at home?"

"Are you going to cuff him and sit in the back seat with him?"

"If I had handcuffs, I'd clip him to the bumper."

"I'm happy to drop him off, Justine. Go on back over there and I'll pull up."

She swung the car through the lot and stopped in front of the teenager and his mom. It was obvious that their argument was continuing. Both opened the car doors and climbed in, the youth in the back behind Carly.

"I can't believe you embarrassed me in front of my friends like that."

"Embarrassed you? How do you think I felt having my friend witness you acting like a jackass? This is Carly, by the way, a friend of mine from high school. Carly, this is my son, Trey. I wish you could have met him under more pleasant circumstances."

No way did Carly want to be in the middle of this. "Hi, Trey. So, uh...where do you live?" She knew exactly where he lived, but thought it best that he not know that.

"Lakeside," he muttered.

The threesome drove without a word through downtown, where Carly turned out toward the subdivision. Uncomfortable with the extended silence, she wanted to ask Trey if *Creepy Sleep* was any good, but figured that would only get a rise out of Justine. So they continued until they reached Lakeside Drive and Trey pointed to the house where his father lived.

"Excuse me one more minute," Justine said as she got out with her son and closed the door.

"Trey, I know you're angry with me right now. But I hope that when you think about this, you realize that what you did was wrong."

"Mom, the other guys don't have a lot of money. The reason I didn't have any was because I bought everybody drinks and stuff. I was just sneaking in with them because otherwise, I'm the geeky friend."

"Trey, that's wrong and you know it. But I can forgive the sneaking in the movie part a whole lot easier than I can overlook the way you threw that popcorn on the floor. That was just plain mean, and I know you weren't raised that way."

The boy looked away. "I...I'm sorry."

"That's what I wanted to hear. And I don't ever want to hear about you sneaking in the movies again. If you and your friends don't have enough money, you need to find something else to do. And if they insist, then you need to find new friends. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Trey nodded solemnly.

"Now would you be so kind as to thank my friend Carly for a ride?"

The teenager opened the passenger door and stuck his head inside. "Thanks a lot for the ride. Sorry I was such a pain."

"It's all right. Maybe we'll meet again another time."

"Sure. So long."

Justine got in and Carly backed out the driveway.

"I thought you handled that pretty well."

"I still can't believe my own son did something like that."

"It's not a big deal. Lots of people sneak in the movies, and I don't even think they realize it's the same as stealing."

"I was madder at him for how rude he was to that manager."

"Well, I think you proved your point. And it looked like he was seeing the light by the time you got finished with him. Tough love and all."

"Lord, it took me a year of therapy to get so I'd tell them no when they asked for something. I was scared they wouldn't come over at all if I didn't give them everything they wanted."

"That must have been hard."

"It was, but you know, Valerie-that's my therapist-helped me understand that I can't ever stop being their mother. No matter what, I'm still supposed to teach them right from wrong, and help them make the right decisions. I just can't believe that Trey's nearly eighteen and he's pulling stuff like that."

"Well, like I said, I think you handled it right. I believe he learned his lesson."

"I hope so, because we aren't going to have much more opportunity with him. He'll be gone and on his own before we know it."

"So you want to get something to eat?"

"What did you have in mind?"

*Thud!* There was something about the way Justine had uttered that simple little question that sent Carly's thoughts to something very intimate. Shaking her head, she tried to concentrate on the subject at hand. "Um...what are our choices?"

"Pizza...the steak house...fast food...the drug store closes at six on Sundays."

"What about that new coffee house? Maybe we can get a muffin or something."

"Nah, they're not open at all on Sundays." Justine checked her watch. It was already after eight.  
"Well, I know a house on Sandstone where we could get a grilled cheese sandwich."

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"It was fine, Justine." The redhead congratulated herself as she got ready for bed. "Two friends went to the movies and had a little bite to eat." As she took stock of the day, she was almost overwhelmed at everything that had happened. She and Carly had gone out together where people could see them, and she hadn't worried the whole time about what others would say. She did, however, catch herself looking around the darkened theater to see if there was anyone she knew, or if they stood out...two women together. That was paranoia, she knew, and she was working on keeping that tamped down.

There had been that one little moment when Carly mentioned running into Sara, but since the local gossip hadn't really seen them together, she wasn't going to have to deal with the rumors. Of course, for a worrier like Justine, a close call like that caused almost as much anxiety as if they'd actually run into the woman face to face. "But it didn't happen," she told herself aloud.

And then there had been the thing with Trey. The irony of that whole scene was that she would have been beside herself with anxiety had she and Carly just run into him under normal circumstances. But the trouble he'd made at the theater had so occupied her emotions that she forgot to be concerned with what her son might think at seeing her out with a woman. And if Trey was bothered by it, he sure hadn't let on. Of course, he had been more worried about saving his own tail at the time.

And then she and Carly had come back to the house. They hung out in the kitchen and talked about the day, and then Carly had dropped a kiss on her cheek and was gone, just like that. Justine raised her hand to touch the spot where the blonde woman's lips had been. It hadn't been like those air kisses she used to trade with her friends. It was firm, and her lips had rested there for a second or two. It was nice.

Valerie was going to be proud of her for having such a good week. She'd been an emotional mess lately, but now she was starting to feel like she was back in control.

## **Chapter 11**

"Morning, Daddy." Carly poured herself a cup of coffee and took a seat opposite her father at the kitchen table. "Who won the game last night?" She was only asking because she'd found him sound asleep in front of the TV when she'd gotten home just before ten.

"I don't rightly know." He looked up to see the sly grin on his daughter's face and realized that he was being tweaked. "You must not have had a very good time last night. Your head isn't in a bucket this morning."

*Touché.* "As a matter of fact, I had a very good time...and I remember every minute of it," she added with a wry grin.

Nadine joined them at the table. "Your daddy and I talked about the store yesterday."

"And?"

Lloyd smiled at his wife and took her hand. "We've decided that we've got better things to do with our time than hang around a furniture store."

"Aw, that's great news!" Immediately, she got up and gave each of her parents a big hug. "So have you told Perry?"

"Not yet. We thought we'd tell him when we close the store on Christmas Eve. We'll all come over here for lunch afterwards like we usually do."

"So what's your timetable?"

"We'll hand him the keys just as soon as he gets things taken care of at the bank," Lloyd answered. "I might work with him a little bit to help him out, but it'll be his headache instead of mine."

"And he'll be signing your paycheck instead of the other way around," Carly added. "Do you have a lawyer that can draw the papers up?"

"I guess I ought to call Aaron Cobb. Shouldn't be much to it."

"Probably not, but this is a pretty big deal, so you want to make sure all the details are taken care of."

"I'll give him a call this morning when you and Perry go out. You're riding on the truck today, aren't you?"

"Sure." Carly still hadn't stopped smiling. "I'm really glad you guys are doing this. You've worked hard for a long time and you deserve it, both of you."

"And you're sure you don't want to run a furniture store?" Lloyd had to ask one more time.

"Positive."

"All right. Well, I ought to get down there and open up. I'll see ya'll in a little while."

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Perry pulled the truck into the alley behind the store, their morning run finished. They had only one delivery in the afternoon, and both of them would spend the rest of the day in the warehouse taking inventory. He slung his arm around his cousin's shoulder. "So what do you say we go get a couple of those four dollar coffees?"

"I thought you didn't want to get hooked on that."

"Consider it a Christmas present."

Carly still hadn't made it to Leland's new coffee house. "All right. Let me stick my head in the door and tell Mama."

Ten minutes later, the pair walked into Daniel's Coffee Stop and joined the line at the counter. "This is a nice place, Perry. I never expected a place like this in Leland."

In the short time it had been open, Daniel's had already become a trendy gathering place for downtown workers. There were small tables along one wall, where a wooden bench ran from the back of the store to the front. On the opposite wall, a fire roared in a large stone fireplace. In the front by the sidewalk, bay windows on either side of the entrance held tall tables and stools. The floor and wainscoting were knotty pine, and the walls were painted a warm blue, with murals that reminded her of a turn of the century mercantile.

"They do a pretty good business. Debbie likes those cappuccinos."

"Ah, I was wondering how long it would take to bring the conversation back around to Debbie," Carly teased.

"She liked you. She thought you were real nice. I should have set her straight, and told her what a cruel woman you can be."

Carly laughed and chucked her cousin's arm. "I liked her too. I thought you guys made a really nice couple."

"What did you think of Kevin?"

"He's an all right kid. He really looks up to you."

"Oh yeah? How can you tell?"

"Well, he ordered the exact same thing you did; he even got his steak cooked the same way. And just about every story he told started with 'Perry and me' this and 'Perry and me' that."

"He was good yesterday. I know he was just trying to get his mom to tell me to bring the Play Station back, but I guess that was the idea all along."

They stepped up to the counter and gave their order to a man about Carly's age. This was Daniel himself, according to his nametag, and it was obvious to Carly that he wasn't from Leland. The first clue was a gold stud earring, not exactly a popular fashion among Kentucky men. The second clue was his Boston accent, which Carly recognized from one of the men she had worked with in Jerusalem. And if she had to bet, she'd lay odds that Daniel was gay.

*So how does a gay man from Boston end up running a coffee house in Leland, Kentucky?*

"You want to sit over by the window?" Perry pointed to one of the tall round tables.

"Sure."

"So you really liked Debbie?"

"I was a little concerned when her eyes turned yellow and those long teeth came out. But other than that, yeah, I thought she was pretty nice."

Perry rolled his eyes. "A person just can't have a serious conversation with you, can they?"

Carly leaned against the back of her stool and folded her arms. "Okay, I'll be serious. I think Debbie's a great girl, and I thought the two of you both looked like you belong together. And I don't know what you're waiting for, you big chicken shit."

That brought a fat grin to her cousin's face. "So you think I should go ahead and ask her?"

"Yes." *Especially since you're going to be a business owner soon.* "I think you ought to give the lady a ring for Christmas."

Perry blushed and nodded. "Yeah, I think so too."

Carly lifted her ceramic mug in a toast. "Congratulations, Perry. I really mean that."

"Thanks." He drank the last of his regular coffee. "Being in love is just about the nicest feeling in the world. I wish you could find somebody and settle down, Carly."

Though they were as close as siblings, she had never talked to Perry about her sexual orientation.

As much as she liked her cousin, she'd kept her private life to herself because he hadn't seemed very open-minded about that sort of thing. It wasn't anything specific; she just had a feeling that he wouldn't be very accepting. The last thing she wanted was a rift in the family. It was enough for her that her parents knew; it just wasn't anyone else's business. "Eh, love will come along if it's meant to."

"Yeah, but you can do things to hurry it along. I've got a friend I go fishing with who's a really nice guy. He's a little bit younger than you, but-

"Oh, no. Thanks, but no thanks."

"I know, you're probably more interested in a guy who's been to college, or somebody who's traveled a lot like you have."

"Actually, Perry...." *What the hell. Just tell him.* "I'm really not all that interested in guys."

"Yeah, but-" All of sudden, he got an inkling of what she meant. "You mean...?"

"I like women, Per. I've just always been like that."

"Naw! No way, Carly. You're pulling my leg."

"Really, Perry. I'm serious. Mama and Daddy know. I told them about twelve years ago, but I've just never told anybody else."

"That's not right...I mean, I believe you think you are...like that, but I don't think so. I've known you for thirty years, Carly."

She nodded in agreement. "I know it probably seems weird, but I figured it out a long time ago. And I just never told people because I figured most of them wouldn't like it very much."

The bearded man had grown agitated with the conversation. "You're not like that, though. You just haven't met the right guy...a guy that treats you right and...knows what to do, and all."

Carly sighed. She was deeply disappointed in her cousin's reaction, and more than a little irritated at his response. "Do you have any idea what a ridiculous cliché that is? Every lesbian on earth hears that she hasn't met the right guy yet...like he can come along with his little 'magic wand' and make her fall in love with it. It's insulting."

"Well, have you..." he lowered his voice, "Have you ever had a man...you know?"

"That's none of your goddamn business." Carly had had enough of this. "You can accept it or not, Perry, but it's not going to change. I happen to like who I am."

Perry shook his head adamantly. "I just don't think you are, Carly. I think you're wrong."

"And I think you're a pigheaded bigot."

The two stared coldly at one another for a good thirty seconds before the man finally got down from his high stool.

"I'm gonna head on back to the store. I can handle the next run by myself."

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"I know, Mrs. Harper. It looks like a four-dollar aspirin on your bill. But there's a whole lot of other stuff behind that. We have to cover the cost of having a nurse on duty all the time to administer medicine. We can't just have people deciding for themselves what pills to take, and a lot of people would forget to take stuff if we didn't have the nurses there to remind them." The Four Dollar Aspirin was Grace Hospital's most common complaint.

"That's right. So we have to spread out the cost to all the patients who get medicine. If something should go wrong, you always want to have a highly trained nurse right there to deal with the emergency."

Justine smiled her greeting to the man who stepped up to the counter. She held up a finger to let him know that she'd be just another minute.

"I'm so glad you understand, Mrs. Harper. We're really lucky that so many of the patients like you are intelligent enough to see that they aren't just paying for something little like an aspirin, but for the security of having a top-notch hospital right in their own community... You're welcome. Thank you for calling, and merry Christmas."

"Hi, Justine."

"Hi, Wendell. What can I do for you?" Wendell Kruecke was the director of the Grace Long Term Care Center, known by everyone in Leland as "the nursing home".

"I was wondering if you might be able to help me out next Friday night-not this week, but the next. We're having a little Christmas party for the residents and I need somebody to play the piano. I remember once that you did that for us."

"Oh, I don't know, Wendell. I haven't played in years."

"That doesn't matter, Justine. Heck, half of the residents don't hear all that well, and the rest of us sing so badly that we'll drown you out."

"I tell you what. Let me ask my daughter if she can help out. She can play a lot better than I can."

But if she can't do it, I will."

"That'd be just great. This is something everybody looks forward to. All the families come, and we sing carols and have refreshments. The kids from the day care do a little Christmas program."

"That sounds so nice. Do you need any other help? My son needs a community service credit to graduate, and he asked me if there was anything up here at the hospital he might do."

"We could definitely use some help decorating. Is there any chance he could come that afternoon?"

"I'll ask him, and I'll try to be there too, if things aren't too busy here."

"And I hope you can all stay for the party. We need a few people to sit with the ones who don't have any family there. Would you be willing to do that?"

"Oh, I know I could. And after Trey helps with the decorating, I bet he can too."

"Boy, I sure am glad I stopped in here. I had a long list of favors to ask, and you just took care of most of them."

"I'm glad to help. And it's a good thing for the kids to do...you know, helping out others that are less fortunate."

"Then I'll see you a week from Friday."

"Okay, see you then."

Justine watched the nursing home director leave, already feeling good about her offer to help. That kind of thing put you in just the right mood for Christmas. Now, she just had to get the reinforcements lined up. She dialed the number at JT's.

Emmy quickly agreed to help out by playing the piano, and promised to practice at home. Trey was more slippery, but Justine reminded him that he needed the credit for school, and they had already talked about him doing a project. This would probably meet that requirement, and Wendell would be more than happy to write a report for Trey's guidance counselor. Reluctantly, he promised to be there at three to help her decorate, and to stay through the evening to keep one of the residents company during the party.

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"You know you're going to be up until Thursday." Daniel slid into the empty seat where Carly

sat drinking a triple shot of espresso. The lunch crowd had cleared out, and the owner was making the rounds to pick up the empties and wipe off the tables.

She smiled gently and nodded. "You're probably right."

"That's the problem with the Bible Belt. There's nowhere to go to get a shot of Jack Daniels in the middle of the day."

*That's only one of the problems with the Bible Belt.* "You have a really nice place here, Daniel. I'd have never guessed a real coffee house would have caught on so well in a place like Leland."

"Well I'd like to think it's because we're more than just a coffee house."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, we're a...community house. We're a place to gather and talk about the important things that affect our lives. And we also just happen to have the best coffee in Kentucky."

"I have to agree with that." She finished her cup and set it back down. "I'm Carly Griffin. My mom and dad run Griffin Home Furnishings down the street."

"Daniel Youngblood. I moved here from Boston last summer. Pleased to meet you."

"What brings you all the way to Leland? Are you settling here, or is this part of your coffee empire?"

"Now that's what I like. Somebody who's not afraid to think big."

"Hey, Kentucky Fried Chicken started about fifty miles from here, and I've eaten that Original Recipe all over the world." She told him about her job, and explained that she was visiting Leland for a couple of months before her next post in Madrid.

"Can I get you another? How about a decaf?"

"Nah, I know when to quit. I've probably already burned a hole through my stomach anyway."

"Don't let that get out. It would be bad for business. I'd offer you a muffin to soak up the acid, but we're sold out."

Carly liked this man. Leland could use an influx of new people and businesses to drag it out of the Dark Ages. "So really, how did you end up here, Daniel?"

"I...came down with a friend of mine. His mother died a couple of years ago, and now his father's going down. He wanted to come back here and be with him, and take care of him for awhile."

*Yeah, Daniel was gay.* "Quite a change from Boston, isn't it?"

"You know, I thought so at first. But the longer I stay here, the more I think that people are just people, no matter where they are."

"But what about that Bible Belt thing? There's more to that than just not being able to get a drink in a bar. I mean, people aren't as accepting here if you're...different. At least that's been my experience."

A subtle look of understanding crossed the man's face. They were now on the same wavelength, Carly was certain.

"Well, you're right about that. But for the most part, I think people feel better about themselves when they like people, and when they treat other folks well. And I try to do things with that in mind."

"So what about your friend? What kind of work does he do?"

"He's an artist, a painter."

"Oh yeah? What does he work in?"

"What does he work on is a better question. He uses oils, water colors, acrylics...everything. But he paints on different surfaces, like newspaper, corkboard, wood. He did the murals, in fact."

"Wow, he's good."

"Well, yeah...until you go pull out your favorite jockey shorts and they've been painted with...Never mind, that's far too personal." Daniel laughed and blushed a bit.

"Yeah, usually when a guy starts talking about his jockey shorts, it's time to hit the road. So, I guess your friend is from Leland?"

"Yes, he is. Rich Cortner. Do you know him?"

"Richie Cortner? Sure, I know him. We went to high school together. In fact, Richie was in my class."

"Richie? Oh, that's good. I'm going to enjoy calling him that."

"Yeah, I remember Richie. He drew all the cartoons for the school newspaper. He was good even back then."

"Rich is very good. He's had six showings in Boston, and he did a west coast exhibit a couple of years ago. We really liked it out there. That might be where we go when we leave here."

"It's nice out there. And Californians love their coffee." Carly appreciated at once that Daniel had lapsed into casual conversation; he was, clearly comfortable talking with her about his plans for the future with Rich Cortner.

"They sure do. That's when I first decided I was going to open a coffee house. No more suit and tie for me."

"What did you do before?"

"Would you believe I used to be a corporate lawyer? Acquisitions. It was dog eat dog, and at the end of the day, I felt like a bone. But this...this is fun."

"You've done a really good job here."

"Thanks." He stood up to continue his cleanup. "So now that we're best friends, I hope I'm going to get to see more of you."

"Yeah, I'll be back. This is going to wear off on Thursday, right?"

"Right. But if you want to try out the homemade muffins, you're going to have to get here before ten."

"I'll try. Say, is Richie-I mean Rich-planning on coming to the reunion? It's our twenty-fifth, you know, and it's two days after Christmas."

"He hasn't mentioned anything about it, but to tell you the truth, I don't think he has a lot of friends from high school."

"Yeah, I can relate to that. But I think it's time to go back and shake 'em all up a little."

"You're a brave one, girlfriend."

"We'll see." Carly pulled on her jacket and headed for the door. "So tell Rich I said hi. I hope I get a chance to see him."

"I hope you do too. I'll tell him about the reunion. Maybe the three of us can get together for dinner or something while you're here."

"That would be fun. So long."

Only an hour ago, Carly was miserable about the way Perry had acted, and she'd been quick to blame not just her cousin but the whole mindset of a place like Leland. The town was pretty well insulated from gays and lesbians because most of the ones who had grown up here-the Richie Cortners and the Carly Griffins-had found it easier to live their lives somewhere else. Those who couldn't-the Justine Halls-suffered the wrath of the small minds in town.

But meeting Daniel Youngblood had given her something to think about. Was it possible that the folks in town could accept him for who he was? Did people really want to feel good about the way they treated others, or did they need to put others down in order to feel superior? Carly had always thought the latter was true, but what if Daniel was right?

## Chapter 12

"I could get spoiled by having you at home, you know." Nadine clutched her purse as she readied to exit the car. "It's been nice not having to go in with your daddy every day at the crack of dawn."

"Well just think, Mama. Pretty soon, you won't have to go in at all."

"I bet I won't know to do with myself. So what are you going to do today?"

"I think I'll head over to Daniel's for coffee. I'll be in a little later. You want me to bring you anything?"

"Lord, no! You're not getting me hooked on those things."

"You sound just like Perry." Carly hadn't seen much of her cousin for three days, both of them going out of their way to avoid being in the store at the same time since their argument on Monday. The more she thought about the way he'd responded, the more hurt she was. People who loved you weren't supposed to just forget that all of a sudden like it didn't matter.

"Is there something going on with you and Perry?" It wasn't hard to notice that the two were steering clear of one another.

Carly sighed and turned off the engine. "He was wanting to fix me up with one of his fishing buddies, so I finally told him...that I didn't like guys that way. He thinks it's because I just haven't met the right one yet."

"Sounds like your daddy and me. Didn't you just tell him it didn't work that way?"

"Yeah...but he's pretty sure that he's right and I'm wrong...and he made me so mad when he kept saying it that I called him a bigot...a pigheaded bigot, to be specific. That's when he said that he didn't need any more help on the truck."

Nadine knew that her daughter was hurting, and like any mother, she wanted to help. "You want me or your daddy to talk to him?"

"Nah, no sense in dragging you guys into the middle of this. Besides, I want him to be able to

accept it because it's me, not because of you. And if he can't, then he's not the person I always thought he was."

"Honey, you know who Perry is. He's just never had to deal with this kind of thing before. He loves you, and when he thinks about it, that's going to be a whole lot more important than whatever he thinks about...homosexuals." Despite her steadfast acceptance of her daughter's sexual orientation, Nadine had never grown completely comfortable with the terminology.

"I hope you're right, Mama. It's one thing to have strangers look down on you. It's different when it's people you care about."

"Perry isn't going to look down on you, sweetheart. He just needs to try it on, and turn it over in his head a few times. Your daddy and I had to do that too. You remember how that was."

Carly had been thinking about that these last few days, the way they had both been hopeful that she was just going through a phase. Despite her insistence that it wasn't the case, they weren't ready to believe it. It was only after they saw how much their denial upset her that they all sat down to talk about it some more. Carly explained that she'd felt that way as long as she could remember, and that it had taken her a long time to quit trying so hard to feel things that just weren't there. She didn't choose to be this way; it was just who she was.

"Yeah...well, I wish he'd hurry up. This is a drag."

"Mmmm...men are a little slower on the uptake. You'd know that if you'd lived around one as long as I have."

Carly chuckled. "Yet another reason to like women, huh?"

"I can see where it would have some advantages."

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Justine struggled to balance the heavy shoebox as she fumbled in her skirt pocket for the key to her office. There was an unwritten rule that said if your right hand was free, the key was in your left pocket, and vice versa.

"Let me give you a hand with that, Justine." Dr. Jim Henderson, the hospital's chief administrator, suddenly appeared out of nowhere to take the box from under her arm. "Goodness gracious! Are these all suggestions? We can't be doing that many things wrong."

"That's exactly what they are, Jim. But just because somebody makes a suggestion doesn't mean it's a complaint. Some of these are compliments." When she took over as director of patient

services, Justine placed several suggestion boxes at strategic locations throughout the hospital, thinking that if she could identify small issues early on, they wouldn't escalate into bigger problems. The hospital's lawyers-Cobb, Finger & Sharpe-thought it was a great idea.

"What do you do with all of those? I know you bring some of them up at the staff meetings, but I had no idea you got that many."

"I enter them into a database. Sometimes, people will say how nice one of the nurses was, and I'll make a couple of copies and send one to personnel and the other to the nurse."

"And what about when they complain about somebody?"

"Well now those... You know how it is, Jim. Some people just like to complain about stuff. Remember when my mother was here?"

"How could I forget?" Marian Hall had driven them all crazy when she'd broken her hip.

"If I get a few complaints about the same person, I'll sometimes go let that person know. But if it keeps happening, I figure a supervisor ought to look into it and I send it over to personnel."

Dr. Henderson smiled in appreciation. He considered Justine Hall to be one of his most valuable employees. She was a team player, and she understood people. She'd been a fabulous fundraiser before that unfortunate incident at the country club, and when she'd come to him a year later saying she just wasn't having much success anymore, he had refused her resignation, talking her into taking this job instead. He never once regretted his decision. "You know, Justine... you really are doing a great job in this position. That's why I stopped by. I wanted to let you know that I submitted a request for a five percent raise for you next year."

"Five percent! Jim, that's very generous. But I thought three percent was going to be the max."

"It is...but I have some discretion, and you've saved the hospital so much money with your ideas...and in a couple of cases, you even headed off a lawsuit. I thought it was time we thanked you for that."

"Thank you very much, Jim."

"No, thank you, Justine. You've made a real difference here."

She knew that. From the very first day she'd taken over this post, she had made it her mission to keep problems from reaching the second floor...specifically, to keep them from reaching Dr. Jim Henderson. It was hard work, and the rewards weren't as public and prestigious as they'd been in her old position, but Justine was grateful for the anchor this job had given her over the last five years.

Dr. Henderson left her office just as the phone rang.

"Grace Hospital, Patient Services...Hi, JT." She dumped the contents of the box onto her desk as she booted up her computer. "No, I think that's fine. In fact, I think it would do her good to get out with her friends for a week." Emmy wanted permission to go with the youth group from church on a skiing trip to West Virginia the week after Christmas. "But it's not the same thing at all. Trey wanted to go without a chaperone. This is a church thing..." She listened as JT related their son's outburst at what he thought was favoritism, since he hadn't been allowed to go away for a skiing weekend with his friends.

"JT, do you think something's bothering Trey? Lately, he's been so...I don't know what, just...unreasonable." She was willing to bet that her son hadn't mentioned the incident at the theater to his father. "Why don't you have a talk with him and...No, I think it's more than senioritis. I just can't put my finger on it." She tucked the phone under her chin and clicked the icons to bring up her suggestion database. "Okay, let me know what he says, and...maybe you and I ought to get together on Saturday and talk about the kids...No, you know, there's a coffee shop downtown now...Daniel's, that's it. Why don't you talk with Trey first and let me know what works for you."

Justine knew that she'd have to tell JT about what happened at the movie theater. If the shoe had been on the other foot, she'd want to know about it. She also wanted to hear how Emmy was doing...really doing. And she had a proposition that JT and J2 might like.

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Daniel's was packed mid-morning when Carly finally made it into the shop. A quick check of the display case confirmed that the wonderful homemade muffins were nearly gone.

"There aren't any clean tables," a woman whined to her friend. "I don't know how they're going to stay in business if they don't keep the place straightened up."

Carly shuffled to the front of the line and found Daniel working steadily at the cash register, serving the pastries, and filling orders for American coffee. His helper, a pregnant woman of about twenty, was swamped with orders for lattes and cappuccinos.

"Good morning, Daniel." Stretching across the counter, she grabbed a wet towel. "I'll wipe down these tables."

"You're hired! The pay's crappy, though." The customers at the front of the line laughed.

Carly went first to the two women who had complained about the dirty tables, seeing to it that they had a clean place to sit. She continued around the room, collecting discarded newspapers and ceramic cups. When she had a full load, she handed it off to the owner and went back for more. Fifteen minutes later, the chaos was back under control.

"Thanks, girlfriend. You saved our butts. Name your reward-it's on the house."

"No way! I'd rather see you guys make a profit. That way, I know you're going to be here the next time I get back to Leland."

"We'll have to see about that," he answered cryptically.

"I'm going to head on out, Daniel," his employee called as she took off her apron. She came in early six days a week and helped through the morning rush. The rest of the time, Daniel ran the shop on his own.

"Thanks, Nolene. I'll see you tomorrow." The owner finished wiping down the counter and turned to his favorite customer, who had dropped by every morning since they first talked on Monday. "You want the usual?"

"Of course." The morning rush had cleaned out the muffin display.

"What size?"

"You have to ask?"

Daniel chuckled and selected the largest cup. "I saved you a cranberry muffin. It's in the back." Carly helped herself while he made her latte. Moments later, he was joining his new friend at the table by the bay window. "I meant to tell you, Rich said to say hello. I wish you could have seen his face when I called him Richie."

"Well, if his memory's any good, he could just call me Carl and we'd be even."

"He told me they used to give you a pretty hard time in high school. He was surprised you'd even consider going to the reunion."

"I haven't made up my mind for sure. I really don't have many good memories of that time, but I'd sort of like to show people that I rose above it all, and that I wasn't the loser they thought I was. Maybe a few of them have grown up and turned into nicer people." She took a drink of her latte and looked into her new friend's kind brown eyes. "That's probably asking a lot of people here, I guess."

Daniel shrugged. "But that's usually how you get something-by asking for it. Sometimes you just have to confront people's fears and prejudices and force the issue. I don't mean get in their face or anything-especially in a town like this. But you can't take on all the shame they want you to wear."

"You make it sound a lot easier than it is, though. I know a woman here who's been through hell. She faces these people every day, and she's one of the nicest people I know. But they still judge her."

The store owner nodded grimly. "And sometimes, it doesn't matter what you do. But at the end of the day, the face looking back at you in the mirror is the one you have to answer to. I'm just not willing to give those people that kind of power over me."

"Have you and Rich had any trouble since you've been here?"

"Not really. I had a bunch of high school kids come in here one day and unscrew all the caps on the condiments. They sat there laughing at people when they went to use stuff. I figured it was just teenage mischief until I went over and told them to hit the road. They made sure to yell 'faggot' a couple of times on their way out."

Carly couldn't help but wonder if that group of teens had been Trey Sharpe and his friends. The scenario Daniel described was eerily similar to what had happened at the theater.

"But that was all. There were a bunch of people in here when it happened. If it bothered anybody, I never heard about it. It sure hasn't hurt business."

"I can see that."

A new wave of customers walked in and Daniel got up to hurry behind the counter before she could ask him why he'd been so noncommittal about the store being here the next time she came back to Leland. Carly finished her coffee and checked her watch. Perry would be out on his run by now. That meant she'd have the warehouse to herself to work on the inventory. She took her large mug back to the counter. "See you later, Daniel. Have a good one."

Stepping out onto the sidewalk, Carly drew in a deep breath of winter air. What Daniel had said about having the courage to show your true self to people sure rang true, but it was hard to tell people who had known her for so long that they didn't really know her at all. By hiding for so long, she'd made herself a prisoner.

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"You aren't planning on getting me drunk again, are you?" Justine opened her door to find her shivering friend holding another bottle of what she now referred to as Very Evil Old Pale cognac.

"I'll try to show a little restraint," Carly promised feebly. "Thanks for inviting me over." They had touched base a couple of times since Sunday just to check in, but as the afternoon passed without a resolution to the problem with Perry, Carly was feeling down in the dumps and wanted to talk with somebody.

"I got a set of those brandy glasses at the mall in Lexington. I'll get us a couple. You go on in the den and make yourself at home."

Carly found a warm fire crackling, and the couch had been pulled closer to the hearth. A paperback novel lay on the end table, its back folded open to mark the page. The blonde woman took a seat at the far end of the couch, setting the bottle by the hearth to warm.

"I heated these glasses like you showed me last time." Justine produced two snifters and sat down on the couch midway between where Carly sat and the other end. "So what's going on? You sounded so down on the phone."

Carly poured the cognac and told the story of Perry, and how she'd decided today that she would apologize to him first, but he saw her coming and took off.

Justine was stirred by the sadness in Carly's voice, and when she reached out her arms to offer comfort, the blonde woman dissolved into unexpected tears in her embrace. She'd never seen Carly this vulnerable, and she tightened her grip to pull her even closer. "I'm so sorry. I know how it must hurt."

"How can somebody who's supposed to love you all of a sudden not want you to be happy?"

"Perry wants you to be happy. He just wants you to be happy with a man, 'cause that's what he's comfortable with. He doesn't understand."

"But he shouldn't have acted like that. Nothing I said mattered."

"He just didn't want to hear it, Carly. And I guess he thought if he raised those doubts, you might really consider it."

"That's stupid."

"Of course it is."

Carly disentangled from the long arms and sat up, wiping away the remnants of her tears. "Sorry, I didn't mean to blubber all over you."

"That's all right. Friends do that for each other." Guiltily, Justine admitted to herself that she'd been glad to have Carly in her arms, for whatever reason. It felt nice to hold her close like that; under other circumstances, it might have been more than just a comforting embrace.

Carly reached for the bottle and popped the cork off the top. "I know I said I wouldn't get you drunk, but I think I'm going to have one more. You gonna join me?"

Justine sighed. "You know, I promised God I'd never drink this stuff again if he let me survive the last time."

"It's not the same bottle."

The redhead chuckled and held out her glass. "If I ask for more of this, you have to tell me no. I have to go to work tomorrow."

"It's a deal." Carly poured their drinks and settled back onto the couch. "What do you think I ought to do about Perry?"

"I think you'll feel better if you talk to him."

"I just can't believe he thinks I could be happy if I found the right guy."

"I think my kids are probably the same way about me."

"Did you ever talk to them about it? I know you told them about Petra, but have you ever told them that you might...like women?"

"Are you kidding? I didn't even tell myself that until about a year ago. I wanted to believe that it was just Petra...that it was because it was taboo, and that's what made it so exciting."

"What happened to change your mind?"

Justine sighed. "Valerie's helped me see a lot of stuff in therapy. She asks a lot of hard questions. And then she encouraged me to...go out and meet some other women."

"Oh yeah?" For some reason, it hadn't occurred to Carly at all that Justine might have been with other women. The very idea made her irrationally jealous.

"Yeah, she thought I ought to go out to a club or something and see how I felt being around that sort of thing. So I went up to Cincinnati one weekend to a lesbian bar. It was a disaster." Justine wasn't so sure she wanted to tell this story. "But you didn't come over here to hear about all that. We need to figure out how to fix things with your cousin."

"I'm going to talk to him again, like you said. I need to apologize for what I said...maybe try again to make him see that I've already worked through all the doubts. I really am happy with who I am."

"Well you should be. I think you're a wonderful person, Carly Griffin. You're just about the nicest person I know." Nice didn't begin to describe what Justine was feeling right now about the blonde woman. She didn't know if the cognac was again to blame, but being with Carly and talking like this felt great.

"I feel the same way about you, you know." Carly was keenly aware that her emotions were creeping toward the danger zone, the place where her feelings wandered beyond the boundaries of just friendship. Justine was so beautiful...But her friend had made it clear that she wasn't interested in that kind of relationship; she wasn't going to risk alienating her kids again. Carly

needed to move this back to safer territory before she gave herself away and ruined everything.  
"So am I going to get to hear about what happened in Cincinnati?"

Justine visibly shuddered. "I've tried to purge it from my memory, but it's no use. I doubt I'll ever set foot in another lesbian bar."

"Now I know I have to hear it."

"I don't think I was ever so nervous in my life. I found this site on the internet that listed the clubs and all in the Cincinnati area. This one was just for women, so I decided I'd go see what it was about. When I found the place, I sat in the parking lot for over an hour trying to get up the nerve to go in. It was in a strip mall, and it had the neon beer lights in the window. There were all kinds of women going in there...some of them were kind of pretty, but they were a lot younger than I was. I sure wasn't looking for anything like that."

"What were you looking for?"

"Nothing in particular...I just wanted to see how it felt to be around a group of women like that. I thought maybe it'd be nice to talk with somebody."

"So did you meet anyone?"

"Not exactly. I went in and looked around. They had a little dance floor, but there wasn't anybody dancing. Most of the people were gathered around the pool tables in the back. So I went up and sat at the bar. Before I knew it, this woman was leaning over me, offering to buy me a drink. She was...not my type, so-

"Wait-wait-wait-wait! What do you mean 'not your type'?"

"She was...kind of..." Justine searched her vocabulary for the right word. "She came on really strong."

"Strong?"

"Yeah, forceful...you know, a little too sure of herself. I was put off by it. It was a lot like getting hit on by a man. I guess I expected something a little more graceful from a woman."

"No kidding. So what did you do? Did you tell her to beat it?"

"No, it got worse, if you can believe it. I was looking around trying to figure out how I was gonna get my tail out of there-alone-and the next thing I know, this other woman comes over and the two of them get into it about whose new girlfriend I am."

"God, you must have felt like a cavewoman."

"Something like that. Anyway, they decided to settle it by shooting pool, and I excused myself to

the ladies' room. The bartender had seen the whole thing and she was kind enough to show me the back door. So I slipped into the alley and had to walk all the way around the building to get back to my car."

Carly laughed. She would love to have a night out with Justine. And she'd make damn sure that everybody in the joint knew that this lovely lady was hers. "Would you ever go back?"

"Not on a double dare!"

"What if you went with me?"

"Well, now that...Are you asking me out?"

"Maybe. Depends on whether you'd go or not."

Justine and Carly gazed at one another for a long moment. Carly's eyes were playful, and the redhead was hesitant to answer, not wanting to seem overly eager in case the offer wasn't serious.

"Or we could go somewhere else," the blonde continued. "I know a place in Louisville where they have a DJ. It's a nice crowd...or at least it was a couple of years ago when I went."

Carly was indeed serious, and Justine felt her mouth moving well before her brain fully processed the question. "Okay." *I can't believe I just said that.* She would fret about it later, but going out dancing with Carly was definitely something she wanted to do.

"How about tomorrow night?"

"Okay." *It's got to be the cognac.*

"Why don't we drive up and have dinner somewhere? We can go to the club about ten or so. That's when the action picks up."

"Okay." *There must be at least a million other words in the English language, Justine. Is that the only one you're going to use?*

Carly couldn't believe the turn of events. She'd come over tonight to vent about her cousin, and little by little, her conversation with Justine had grown deeper and more revealing. In her wildest dreams, she wouldn't have guessed that the night would have culminated in a date to go dancing.

Setting her empty glass on the end table, she stood and reached for her coat on the chair. "I guess I should be getting on home. Forty-two years old and my mother still waits up for me."

"Hah! I'll trade you mothers any day."

"No thanks."

Justine handed her the Hennessy's bottle and walked her to the door. "I'm glad you came over, Carly. It makes me feel good that you're comfortable enough with me to talk about things on your mind. I hope we don't ever lose that again."

The sincerity in Justine's voice gripped Carly's heart, and she reached out to take the woman's hand. "We're not going to lose it, Justine. I promise." The redhead pulled her closer and for the briefest moment as their eyes locked, Carly thought they might kiss. Instead, Justine wrapped her in a strong hug. When she felt the long arms go limp, she stepped away and smiled.

"I'll call you tomorrow to firm things up. Thanks for letting me cry on your shoulder."

"Anytime." *Anytime at all.*

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"Now don't be acting like you don't really want to go. At least your mouth had the guts to speak up, even if your brain flew right up the chimney." As was her practice, Justine deconstructed her evening as she got ready for bed. The relaxing effect of the cognac was keeping her anxiety at bay for the most part, but she needed to work through it in her head so it wouldn't come crashing down on her tomorrow.

She really wanted to go.

The idea of dancing with Carly brought a surprising smile to her face. Justine had tried for days to let her feelings about the blonde woman settle into friendship-a familiar friendship, but friendship nonetheless. But every time she saw Carly, something stirred inside her that took her to another place, a place that made her body hum and her heart race.

"Why are you holding back like this, Justine? You're not going to have a better chance to be close to somebody you care about and not have to worry that your whole world's going to fall apart."

Carly was safe. She understood why Justine had to be discreet. And she was leaving Leland in less than a month. They could enjoy one another without any strings attached.

"But that's not fair to Carly. That's just using her."

*But it's not using her if you have feelings for her.* And Justine definitely had feelings for her.

The redhead finished washing her face and tossed her clothes into the hamper. When she returned to her bedroom, she didn't hesitate, walking straight to the closet to take down the trusty

shoebox.

"You like her. So deal with it."

And now...Justine Hall will speak on the subject of self-gratification. Let's all give her a BIG HAND! Hehehehehe

## Part 5

### The Athenaeum's Scroll Archive

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## ~ The House on Sandstone - Part 5 ~

by KG MacGregor

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Nothing much to disclaim here. This is an original story, though the main characters bear a mild resemblance to familiar faces. The town of Leland, Kentucky, is fictitious. Any similarity to persons living or dead is coincidental.

Thanks to my Sweetcakes for her help and inspiration. I'm always interested in feedback, and you may direct that to [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com).

### **Chapter 13**

"Grace Hospital, Patient Services. This is...Hi, sweetheart. What's up?" Justine spun in her chair to check the clock on the wall. It was unusual for her daughter to call during school hours, but she could tell from Emmy's cheerful voice that nothing was wrong.

An elderly man and woman walked through her door. The Patient Services Director smiled an acknowledgment and motioned for them to come to the counter.

"That's fine with me if it's okay with your father." Saturday afternoon was their usual time together, but Emmy had been invited to go with Kelly and her mom to the Lexington Mall. She

wanted to know if she could come by on Sunday instead. "Honey, I need to go. I have people in my office...Okay, I'll see you at church."

"Good morning. It's Mr. and Mrs. Oates, right?" Justine had seen these two at Grace Hospital before. Raymond and Ginny Oates ran a small farm in Branch Fork, and he'd been hospitalized last year for a hernia. More recently, she'd seen them when they came in October to visit their grandson, a seven-year-old who died of leukemia. The old couple was dressed in farm clothes; he wore bib overalls and a flannel shirt, she wore a corduroy jumper over a high-necked sweater. Their woolen coats were threadbare in places and their boots worn and dirty.

"That's right," the kindly old gentleman replied. "My wife and I have something we'd like to do, and we weren't sure who we needed to talk to about it."

"Well, I'll help you if I can. If not, then I bet I can find someone who can."

The old man cleared his throat and reached into his pocket, pulling out a crumpled piece of blue paper. "Our grandson was in here last July...he had leukemia."

"I remember that, Mr. Oates. His name was Raymond too, wasn't it?"

The man and his wife both smiled softly, pleased that she remembered the little boy. "That's right. They took good care of him, but...there just wasn't anything they could do about the leukemia."

"I'm so sorry. I can only imagine how hard Christmas is going to be for your family this year."

Tears rolled down Ginny Oates' cheeks as she nodded sadly.

"We just wanted to let the folks here know how much we appreciated everything they did." Raymond unfolded the blue paper, which proved to be a personal check. "We don't have a lot, but we wanted to give something to help the hospital with the children's ward...since it's the season for giving and all. We thought maybe they might get some new toys for the playroom or something. Whatever ya'll think is best is okay. We just wanted a way to say thank you."

Justine took the proud man's check and turned it over. In a shaky hand, Raymond had made the check out to Grace Hospital, in the amount of seventy dollars. The memo line said simply "For little Raymond". Her own eyes filled with tears at the tender gesture.

"Why don't you come upstairs with me? I'd like to introduce you to Dr. Jim Henderson. He's the head of the hospital and he's going to be so pleased that you've decided to make this generous gift." Justine knew that the gift should go to Paul Brewer, the man who had taken her place as Director of Development. But Paul was a glad-hander, always schmoozing with the "big money", and he wouldn't appreciate what a gift like this meant to the givers. Seventy dollars was a lot of money for the Oates family, and they deserved to be treated like the king and queen of Kentucky. Jim would do that.

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"You're not running off to get coffee today?" Nadine was surprised when Carly followed her into the store.

"No, I need to talk with Perry. This has gone on long enough."

Carly stopped just inside the doorway, where her father and cousin were pulling together some of their floor models that they'd sold at a discount yesterday to reduce their year-end inventory. Nadine made eye contact with her husband and tipped her head toward the office, where they disappeared and closed the door.

"Perry, I-"

"No, Carly." He dug his hands into his jacket pocket and looked at the floor. "I need to go first... 'cause I have to apologize."

"Me too, Per. I shouldn't have called you that. I just-"

"No, you were right. Well... I hate to think I'm really a pigheaded bigot, but I sure was acting like one. I've been going over it and over it in my head, and I got no business judging you like that. You ain't just my cousin, Carly. You're one of my best friends."

"You're one of my best friends too." Carly walked closer and saw the look of shame on his bearded face. "I know I threw you for a loop, telling you that out of the blue. I should have told you a long time ago, but... I've never really had anybody special or anything, and it just never came up."

"Well, I just want you to know that... whatever you wanna do is all right with me. All I want is for you to be happy, and if a woman's gonna make you happier than a man, then so be it."

"Thanks. I want you to be happy too." There wasn't really anything else they needed to say. The fence was mended, and from the looks of things, there was a lot of furniture scheduled to go out today.

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Justine settled into a comfortable pace, already sweating from her warm-up mile. It had been

tempting to blow off her routine today, but she doubted she'd have time to run tomorrow, and she'd have just paced the house for an hour if she'd had the extra time.

Carly had called after lunch, confirming their plans to go to Louisville tonight, and offering Justine one last chance to back out. The redhead tried to sound nonchalant, but inside, she was bubbling with excitement. If she'd had more time, she'd have gotten nervous. Instead, she'd watched the clock all day in anticipation.

*I will not drink too much tonight!*

In the weeks since she and Carly had been together, Justine had managed to piece together a lot of the details from their drunken night. Every time something flashed in her head, it caused a shudder, a blush, and then a lapse in concentration. Even as she ran, she reached forward to brace herself on the crossbar, her rhythm fluttering just enough to threaten her balance on the rapidly moving belt.

Justine was beginning to accept the fact that her feelings for Carly were past the realm of friendship. Valerie had encouraged her to think about it, and that's what she'd been doing. In fact, the more she dwelled on thoughts of the two of them together, the more she accepted-and welcomed-the idea. But she didn't want a repeat of their inebriated frolic. No, if she had another chance to be with Carly, she wanted all of her faculties intact. And next time, she wanted what she'd been denied before-to touch Carly the way Carly had touched her.

*Do it, Justine. Tell her that it's what you want. You know it is. Nobody has to know about it.... Valerie was right-you can have this in your life. If you're not willing to take a chance for Carly Griffin, then you might as well give up love for good, because you're not going to feel this way about anybody else.*

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"How did you ever find this place?"

Carly drove through downtown Louisville, pointing out the women's bar as she headed toward a parking garage. They'd eaten at Ruby Tuesday's-Carly's treat, since she'd done the inviting this time-and at a quarter to ten, were energized for a couple of hours of dancing.

"The concierge at the Marriott told me about it. I usually stay there when I have to be at headquarters for a few days." On the way from the restaurant, Carly had shown her friend the offices of Worldwide Workforce.

*What were you thinking, you fool?* They were barely out of Leland before the blonde woman realized how difficult the night was going to be. Justine was being so charming and sweet, and

Carly was ready to throw out her promises to try to keep things between them at a friendship level. Her natural inclination was to flirt like crazy, but she was fighting it because Justine had made it clear that she didn't want to go there. It wouldn't be right to put pressure on her after she'd promised that she wouldn't.

The women approached the entrance and Carly dug into her hip pocket for her wallet.

"I should get this. You got dinner."

"No, I invited you. No arguments." Casually, Carly placed her hand in the small of Justine's back, guiding her toward the glass door. Lively music greeted them as they entered, and their eyes struggled to adapt to the dim light.

"This is a lot nicer place than the one in Cincinnati." The redhead smiled broadly in anticipation of their evening.

Carly leaned in to be heard above the din of the music. "If you take my hand, people will think we're a couple and maybe they won't try to fight over you this time." As she spoke, she wrapped her hand around Justine's, and was pleased beyond measure when the other woman entwined their fingers. But again, Carly reigned in her emotions, reminding herself that this wasn't actually a date, no matter how good it felt to be out with Justine.

"They can fight all they want. I'm leaving with you."

The two worked their way through the crowded room, finding a couple of tall stools at a counter that wrapped its way around the perimeter of wall. The music was invigorating, as were the lively couples that packed the dance floor.

"I probably should have told you that I'm not a very good dancer, but I was afraid you wouldn't come." Carly wasn't an awful dancer, but she was usually self-conscious about her style when she saw younger women dancing suggestively. It looked hot when they did it, but she was pretty sure she'd look ridiculous trying to imitate something like that.

"I haven't been out dancing in years, so I'm kind of out of practice myself. But I'm willing to give it a try if you are."

That was Carly's cue to toss out her reservations. If she didn't dance with Justine tonight, someone else probably would. And she might have to hurt somebody if that happened. She tossed their coats over the bar stools and took the taller woman's hand again.

Assuming a confidence she didn't really feel, Carly led Justine onto the floor and turned to face her dance partner. The women easily picked up the beat of the unfamiliar tune and soon worked their way to the center of the floor. For one song after another, they stayed out there, at times touching hands, but mostly dancing face to face to watch the other's body sway in rhythm to the music. As a techno song wound down, Carly was about to steer them back to their seats for a breather when a popular tune rejuvenated the crowd. En masse, couples herded onto the dance

floor, packing all of the dancers close together.

Justine moved into Carly's personal space and rested her hands on the shorter woman's hips. The blonde returned the gesture, feeling the curve of Justine's waist through her tailored shirt. As they moved together to the music, her thighs brushed against Justine's and she was glad that the dim light concealed the flush she felt. Already warm from dancing, this new physical closeness raised her body temperature even further as she thrilled at the contact.

*Chill! We're dancing...that's all. You've done this with virtual strangers and it doesn't mean a thing.* For what seemed like the hundredth time tonight, Carly reeled in her racy thoughts. Justine was by far the most beautiful woman in the place, and she could feel dozens of eyes on them. Possessively, she pulled her partner closer as the dance tune ended and a slow lover's ballad began.

The taller woman lowered her head and murmured, "This is nice."

Carly shivered as Justine's warm breath tickled her ear, making her want to lose herself in the embrace. But it was no use pretending that any of this was real. Justine didn't really want this...That's what she'd said.

In an effort to regain control of her senses, Carly leaned back a little, but didn't let go. She studied her companion's face, trying to interpret the expression. Justine's eyes were closed and her brow furrowed slightly in what seemed to be concentration. Under other circumstances, she'd have said it was a dreamy look.

She was startled when Justine suddenly opened her eyes, her face breaking into a warm smile as the music stopped.

"Where did you go just now?"

"I was..." Justine was caught completely off guard with the question. She had been focused on the gliding sensation of Carly's hips, imagining some other things they could do that would produce that same movement. "I was just listening to the music and trying to think where I'd heard it before." She hoped Carly wouldn't ask her any more about the song, because she'd completely forgotten what it was.

"It's a popular song, I think. I don't really listen to music very much. It's hard to keep up with stuff when I'm out of the country." Carly led them to their stools, noticing that a lot of the women were heading out to a large patio to smoke. "Would you mind if I...?" She gestured toward the door.

"You want to go out in the freezing cold to indulge in your nicotine habit?"

"I won't if you don't want me to." Carly was dying for a cigarette.

"I don't want you to, Carly. It's bad for you, and I care too much about you to see you get sick

from it. But if it's something you really want to do, I won't nag you about it anymore."

*Huh?* "Never again?" Alison berated her every single time she lit up for almost two years straight.

"No, you have to make your own decision about something like that. You just asked me if I minded, and I told you the truth."

"Okay...well, maybe I don't need one as bad as I thought." *Maybe I'll just quit. I've been meaning to anyway.* "You want a beer or something?"

"Sure."

Carly grinned and headed toward the bar. *Damn, how am I going to drink a beer and not have a cigarette? I can't believe I just said I wouldn't smoke.*

As she waited for her order, she turned back to look at her date...*er, companion.* Justine looked gorgeous tonight...absolutely gorgeous. She had on tight black hip huggers with a wide leather belt and a fitted white shirt. The shirtsleeves were rolled to three-quarter length, and her jewelry-bracelets, a necklace, and dangly earrings dressed up the casual look. It wasn't a typical look for a 43-year-old woman, but Justine pulled it off-in spades!

Dropping a ten on the bar to cover their beers and a tip, Carly turned back toward their spot on the far wall. She could see Justine talking with someone-laughing-and she picked up her pace to return to their seats. As she got closer, the other person came into view. She was an attractive woman, mid to late thirties, and her long blonde hair was pulled into a braid that went down the center of her back. Carly slipped in behind them just in time to pick up the conversation.

"Yeah, I ran the Chicago Marathon last year. I tell you, it's true what they say about hitting the wall." The interloper sipped her beer. "But I could just tell you were a runner. You have that look."

Justine shrugged. "I don't know about the look. I've never run a marathon, but I'd love to try it sometime. The most I've ever been able to manage was about twelve miles. It took me two days to get over that."

In addition to giving up cigarettes forever, Carly decided right on the spot that she would take up running as well. It was never too late to adopt a healthy lifestyle.

"Can I buy you a drink?" the woman asked.

"Here you go, sweetheart." Carly jumped between them and handed Justine an icy bottle. She was immensely relieved when the redhead smiled.

"We were just talking about running." Justine wrapped an arm around Carly's waist.

"Hi, I'm Jeannie. I bet I'm in your seat."

Carly smiled sheepishly. *You can have the seat, girlfriend. I've got this woman's arm around me now.* "It's nice to meet you."

"Well, I'd love to stay and chat, but there's a woman over there by the bar that hasn't shot me down yet."

All three women laughed amiably, and Jeannie took her leave.

"Sorry if I interrupted anything. I thought you might want to be rescued, since you had such a hard time in Cincy."

"I don't think I needed to be rescued, but I didn't come here with Jeannie."

"Well, they don't have a pool table, but I could have arm-wrestled her or something."

Justine laughed and tightened her grip. "There's no contest tonight, Carly."

Carly felt her knees go weak.

The redhead took a long pull of her beer and set the bottle on the counter. "You up for more dancing?"

"Sure." *Looky, ladies...she's with me.*

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Justine couldn't remember when she'd been so frustrated. It was almost two a.m., and theirs was the only car on the road. "I had a really good time."

"Me too."

They'd both said that about three times, and the redhead was devoid of all trivial conversation topics. The only thing she really wanted to talk about was why Carly had rebuffed her flirtations over and over again. Carly's behavior tonight was so confusing. They'd danced close to each other, and even held hands when they were back at their seats, but she was beginning to think it had all been for show on Carly's part so the other women would leave her alone. Twice, Justine had pulled her into an amorous embrace on the dance floor, only to have Carly go stiff and pull back.

*You told her you weren't interested in a romance. Now she probably thinks you're nuts because*

*you can't figure out what you want. One minute, you're telling her you can't have a relationship; and the next minute, you're running your hands up and down her back; grinding your hips into hers; and whispering in her ear.*

And it wasn't like Carly hadn't responded. *She did! I could feel her holding my waist, caressing me through my shirt. Or she'd run her fingers over my hands and forearms. And then BAM! She'd just stop and pull away.*

Carly had feelings for her-she'd said so! *But what if she's changed her mind?* Justine felt sick at the thought, and sighed deeply.

"Are you okay?" Carly asked.

"Yeah... a little tired, but I'm okay. I had a really good time."

"Me too."

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Carly locked the kitchen door and leaned against it. Despite the late hour, her senses were alive-excited and frustrated at the same time. All night long, she'd battled to keep her feelings in check; and at times, it was like Justine was intentionally tormenting her. The smiles, the suggestive way they danced, and the proprietary way Justine had draped her arm around Carly's waist or shoulder at every chance.

*Are you trying to kill me, woman?*

Carly didn't know what to make of Justine's demeanor tonight. When they first set out on the hour-long drive to Louisville, Justine was definitely excited, but Carly attributed that to the fact that they were going out to a lesbian dance club. She never once imagined that Justine's excitement had anything to do with her. But when they got to the club-especially after that first slow dance-Carly began to feel like Justine's focus was more on her than on their environs. Even when they stopped dancing to watch the other couples interact, Justine sat behind her on a stool and pulled her close. She'd wanted to just fall back against her chest and burrow into her embrace.

Carly would give almost anything in this world to keep that feeling-if Justine Hall's heart was attached on the other end. But it wasn't; Justine only wanted to sample the lesbian lifestyle...to see if she was comfortable. Even if she was, she didn't want to try this on for real.

*Damn! A cigarette sure would taste good right about now.*

## **Chapter 14**

"Carly?" Nadine navigated the crumpled clothes in the floor, careful not to step on anything.  
"Carly?" Gently, she shook her daughter's shoulder.

Sleepily, the blonde woman raised her head to see who was making so much noise in the middle of the night. "Mama?"

"Honey, can you get up and take me in to the store? I guess your daddy didn't realize how late it was when you got home, and he went on without me about an hour ago."

Carly suppressed a groan. "What he doesn't realize is that I'm old now and it takes me days to recover from being out half the night."

"You can come home and go back to bed if you want to. We don't have many deliveries today."

"What time is it?" Carly sat up and swung her legs out from under the heavy blankets. Her parents kept the heat turned down at night, so the house was always cold in the morning.

"It's almost eight."

The blonde rubbed her hands vigorously through her hair, pushing it every which way. "Can you wait for me to take a shower?"

"You're not gonna go back to bed?"

"Nah, I'll go down to Daniel's and get a shot of jet fuel. Do you guys need any help today?"

"I don't think so. But if you want to, we could go to Lexington to the mall this afternoon. I need to get your daddy some socks and a few shirts he can wear when he retires."

"That's right. All his shirts have 'Griffin Home Furnishings' on the pocket."

Carly stood and grabbed her robe. "Give me fifteen minutes. Okay?"

"You want breakfast?"

"I'll grab something at the coffee house."

Twenty minutes later, Carly was dressed in jeans and ready to go, her hair still damp from the

shower. They parked behind the store and the blonde woman headed up the street to Daniel's. Her friend worked frantically behind the counter to serve the weekend crowd, apparently by himself today. She hurried to the front to see how she could help.

"Carly! I need your help."

She scooted behind the counter and waited for instructions. "Where's Nolene?"

"Her doctor put her to bed for the rest of her pregnancy. I need a new helper. You interested?" As he talked, he started to work on the espressos and lattes.

"Hey, I'm on vacation!" Nonetheless, Carly washed her hands and turned back to the counter. "Anyone here want just regular coffee?"

"That's my girl!" Daniel grinned from ear to ear. "There's a button on the cash register that says coffee...then you touch size...and total."

"Okay, but if you're short at the end of the day, it's not my fault." She turned to face her first customer before adding, "And if you're over, I get half."

Patiently, he walked her through the amount tendered process and in no time, the pair was clearing out orders in tandem.

"What can I get for you?" At the counter was a man dressed in khakis and a long sleeved polo shirt. He looked fleetingly familiar.

"Aren't you Carly Griffin?"

"I sure am."

"Adam Nixon. We went to high school together."

"Oh, yeah! Adam...we had physics together...and trig...and-"

"And Mr. Bailey's homeroom. Where have you been? I didn't know you were still around here."

"I'm just visiting for a little while. I work for a company in Louisville."

"You've been in Louisville all this time? I get up there for work every now and then. How do you like it?"

"I don't actually live there. They send me overseas to work on projects."

"No kidding...Oh, I just want a large coffee. Leave some room for cream, please. Are you coming to the reunion?"

"I think so." Carly handed Adam the coffee and took his money. He stood to the side to allow the next person to step up.

"So what kind of work do you do overseas?"

"I'm a labor coordinator. I help companies that want to set up operations in other countries. I recruit and train their workforce."

"That sounds cool. So have you lived...like, everywhere?"

"Pretty much. South America, South Africa, the Middle East, Asia. I'm headed to Spain in about a month."

"Spain? Wow, that's something. Listen, I gotta run. I'm supposed to be getting a Christmas tree today. But I want to hear all about those places the next time I see you. Are you working here while you're in town?"

Carly looked over at the harried owner and smiled. "That depends on whether or not poor Daniel can find someone to work for him. I guess I'll help him out until he gets somebody else."

"I come in here every day, so I'll see you on Monday. So long."

Carly plugged away at the counter, trying to remember any interactions she'd had with Adam Nixon back in high school. He played sports, so that meant he was probably considered popular. He dated one of those girls that ran around with Justine and Sara, but she couldn't remember the name.

Adam was really nice today. And despite Sara McCurry's usual air-headed manner, even she had been nice to Carly last week at the movies. Maybe the brats from high school really had grown up in the twenty-five years she'd been gone.

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Justine swung into the coffee house, her eyes immediately drawn to the murals on the walls. The lunch crowd was gone, and the store's proprietor was busy cleaning the fireplace.

"Good afternoon. What can I get you?"

"Hi, there. You're not closing, are you? I'm supposed to meet somebody here in a few minutes."

"No, I'll be open for a couple more hours."

"That's great. I guess I'll have...a latte...decaf...with skim milk."

"Coming up. Go ahead and have a seat."

Instead, Justine walked along the wall studying the mural. "This is very good. Was it done by somebody local?"

"Yes, in fact it was. Rich Cortner."

"Richie? I didn't know Richie was still around Leland." Justine turned to study this shopkeeper. He wasn't from around here. He had an accent and he wasn't wearing camouflage pants. The latter was a dead giveaway.

"You're the second person this week who's called him Richie. You must have gone to school with him."

"Yeah, we were in high school together. I hope he's coming to the reunion."

"He's thinking about it."

The bell on the door rang as JT burst through, huddled in his overcoat. "Sorry I'm late." At forty-nine years old, JT's face was lined handsomely and his brown hair was sprinkled with gray.

"It's okay. I just got here."

Daniel deposited the latte on the table where Justine had draped her coat. "Can I get you something?"

"Sure. Double espresso...five sugars."

"You getting ready for a pole vault or something?" She'd always been amazed to see her husband dump so much sugar into his coffee.

"Coffee's just a sugar-delivery system." He removed his coat and folded it over a chair. "I talked with Trey. I see what you mean about his attitude. Something's going on, all right, but he didn't say anything."

"Did he tell you about seeing me at the movies last week?"

"You mean about getting caught trying to sneak in? Yeah, he mentioned that. He said it was Brock's idea, though. He just went along with it so the other guys wouldn't get caught."

"Is that all he said?"

"Pretty much."

Daniel interrupted them for a second to place the drink in front of JT and pick up a ten dollar bill from the table.

"Keep it."

"Thanks. If you guys need anything else, give a yell."

Justine dug in her purse and pulled out a five. "Here you go."

"I'll get it, Justine. It's just a coffee."

"I'd rather pay for mine, JT," she insisted sternly. They'd had this conversation before, and she was determined to assert her independence from this man.

"So is there more about the movie?"

Justine went on to tell him how their son behaved. "I was just very surprised. I've never known him to treat other people like that. If he's just doing that because of his friends, I'd rather he got some new friends."

"Did you see who the other boys were?"

"There was Josh Roberts...and Daryl Farlowe...and one other boy besides Brock."

"That was probably Dickie Underwood. Those guys are over at the house nearly every day playing video games. Maybe it's time to start putting some limits on that."

"Won't Trey just go over to one of their houses?"

"I've been trying to give him more to do at home. But he's a senior. This is a big time for him. He's got track and the Key Club. And Melissa." JT grimaced. He liked the girl almost as much as Justine did, and that was just barely.

"But he's also about to turn eighteen, and he'll be off on his own next year. I'd like to think when he leaves for college, he'll be ready to be his own man." Justine couldn't help but remember how she floundered in college without her friends around. She knew from experience how bad it was to let your peer group rule your life.

"I'm more concerned about his grades. Did he tell you that he's getting a D in physics and C's in English and calculus?"

Justine was aghast. "JT! Doesn't he know that UK can rescind his acceptance if his GPA falls?"

"He told me not to sweat it; he said all the kids were getting bad grades and the principal would do something about it after everybody complained."

Two young women entered the store, obviously fresh from their workout. Both were dressed in exercise tights with heavy fleece tops and cross trainers.

"Well, I can see where that might be the case if it was just one teacher, but three? I find that pretty hard to-" Her ex-husband had twisted in his chair to gaze at the ladies' shapely behinds as they walked by. "JT Sharpe, shame on you! I hope your son hasn't inherited your carousing gene."

"I don't mess around anymore, Justine. I just look." He said it almost wistfully.

Justine wasn't sure if JT had straightened up on his own or if he'd been read the riot act by his law partners or his wife. In any case, after Alex was diagnosed as autistic, JT gave up his wandering ways. She was pretty sure that he only flirted with her because he knew there wasn't a chance in hell she'd ever say yes; but she wasn't going to test that theory by calling his bluff.

"How about wiping the drool off your chin and finishing this conversation?"

JT obediently turned back around, folding his hands and giving her an indulgent look.

"The last time Trey got bad grades was... back when he was having trouble with the boys teasing him. You don't think that's happening again, do you?"

"No, Justine." JT's tone was reassuring, and he added to its sincerity by placing his hand on top of hers. More than anyone, he knew the anguish his ex-wife had endured. Despite their divorce, he loved her as the mother of his children, and he hated how badly she had been hurt. When she finally told him a couple of years ago that she was pretty sure she was a lesbian, he hadn't been surprised. They were close-physically close-during the first few years of their marriage, but when it slipped away, it seemed she never really missed it. He'd often wondered if the weight gain had been her way of ending their intimacy. "Trey's proud of you. Every time he walks by me, he pokes me in the stomach and says I need to come running with you guys on the weekends."

The redhead blushed, enormously pleased to hear that her son admired her efforts at being fit. Dropping the weight and taking up running had turned her life around. *And of course, there was the therapy.*

"So there must be something else going on. I tell you, we need to keep an eye on him, and if he's going to bring home bad grades...well, maybe it's time we reminded him that his little green VW's in my name."

"I'm with you on this, Justine."

"Good." That was all of the unpleasant business. Now for the good stuff. "Is Emmy doing okay now?"

"Yeah. We got a helper for Alex...She starts on Monday. We really had no idea Emmy was

feeling so much pressure about her sister."

"Emmy keeps things inside. She worries so much about disappointing people. I just can't understand that, JT...how she got to be so sensitive."

"Maybe we doted on her brother too much...Who knows? But she sure is a special kid. And Alex loves her to pieces."

"We did not dote on Trey! But I think it's really sweet that Alex and Emmy love each other so much. You know, if it's all right with you and J2, Alex is welcome to come over with Emmy anytime." Justine thought if she could lend a hand, then that too would take some of the burden from what her daughter saw as her duty to her sister...not to mention that she also might see more of Emmy that way.

"That's nice of you to offer, but Alex doesn't always do so well in new places." Right away, he saw the disappointment in Justine's face. "But I'll talk with Justine-J2-and see what she says."

Justine nodded and smiled. "So what are ya'll doing for Christmas?"

"Justine's parents are coming down from Frankfort. I guess we'll just open presents and eat ourselves half to death. How about you?"

"I'm supposed to go to my mother's, but if I were to get an invitation from...oh, I don't know, Ted Bundy, I'd probably consider it."

JT laughed in sympathy. The best part of being divorced from Justine Hall was that his presence was no longer required at Marian Hall's ritual holiday dinners. The matriarch had taken a strong liking to his new wife, though, and had made it clear that they were always welcome in her home.

"You can always tell her no, you know."

"Do you have any idea how long she'd make me pay for that?"

"From beyond the grave, knowing Marian."

"Exactly. I think we're supposed to eat at six, so I'm going to ask Trey and Emmy to come for that. Does that work all right for you?" They had a formal custody agreement that spelled out who was where for which holidays right down to the hour, but they'd never even looked at the court's calendar. Instead, they always coordinated their plans so that the kids could take part in everything.

"Yeah, that works." JT stood up and reached for his coat. "Listen, I've got to run. Justine wanted me to go by the grocery and pick up something for dinner."

Justine tried not to laugh out loud. "Hot dogs or hamburgers?"

"Hey, I think I'm offended." He wasn't really. She knew him pretty well. "I was thinking I could find a couple of frozen pizzas."

"That's the JT Sharpe I know and love."

Her simple statement brought a soft smile to his face. "I love you, too. So keep me posted on Trey and Emmy, and I'll do the same. And I'll talk with Justine about letting Alex come over. You sure you want to deal with that? She can be a handful."

"JT, I've dealt with you. I think I can handle a five-year-old."

"I'm sure you can."

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Carly dug into her coat pocket and wrapped her fingers around her Dunhills. *Just one...It's not like you promised not to or anything.* She was taking the familiar walk through the park over the trail atop Stony Ridge. Justine had called only an hour ago to ask her over for a casual dinner, a surprise invitation given that they'd seen each other only last night.

Carly still didn't know what to make of Justine's flirtatious behavior at the dance club. All day long, she'd been trying to put their night out in its proper perspective. The dance club in Louisville must have seemed like a candy store to someone like Justine, who'd been hungry to taste the lesbian nightlife. *And when in Rome...well, you do as the lesbians do.* Holding hands, dancing close, standing with their arms around each other were all things they shouldn't do in Leland, especially if there were consequences for Justine's children. So the bottom line was probably that Justine had wanted to feel like a lesbian last night, so she'd acted like one. Obviously, the redhead had no idea of the torturous effects her behavior had on Carly.

When she crested the hill above the park, she was surprised to see a car pulling out of the driveway, a silver Mercedes, and a man was driving. *Is that JT?* She waited at the top of the hill until it turned the corner away from Sandstone, then made her way down and across the street to the porch.

As soon as she saw her host's panicked face, Carly knew something was amiss. Justine held the door and motioned her inside, stepping close as she helped the blonde with her coat.

"My daughter's here," she said in a low voice. "I wasn't expecting her, but her friend got sick and JT just dropped her off."

"Do you...want to take a rain check or something?" That would be awkward, having to go back

home and see if her mom and dad have saved any leftovers.

"No, I had the table set, so she knows I was expecting somebody."

"Okay." Carly tried to think of some way to set her friend at ease. "It'll be okay. We can talk about high school and the reunion. I'll be careful about what I say."

Justine visibly relaxed, a faint look of shame crossing her face. "Thank you." In a louder voice, she said, "Why don't you come in the den and meet my daughter?"

Carly pushed her hands into her pockets shyly and followed Justine into the den. The teenager was stretched out on the couch, her long legs draped over the back. The TV was on the country music channel.

"Emmy? I want you to meet a friend of mine from high school. This is Carly Griffin. Carly, this is my daughter, Emmy Sharpe."

Both women waited nervously as the tall teenager stood up and came around the couch. Carly was amazed at how much Emmy looked like her mother, especially the way Justine had looked in high school. Her hair was a little lighter, but her blue eyes were perfect replicas of her mother's, as was the shape of her face.

"Hi, Emmy. It's nice to meet you."

"Yeah, same here... You look familiar."

"Probably the wanted poster in the post office."

Emmy smiled, but her mind was stuck on placing this new person.

"Carly has a very fascinating job that takes her all over the world. She hasn't spent much time in Leland since we all went off to college."

The girl's face lit up. "Now I remember you. You delivered our washer...the Sharpe house on Lakeside, about two weeks ago."

Carly nodded. "That's right. Good eye." She was careful not to admit that she recognized Emmy too from that day, or she'd probably have to explain why.

"That is a really fascinating job. Do you deliver washers all over the world?"

Carly smirked. She appreciated a smart aleck. "Well, we don't just do washers. We do other appliances too, and sometimes bedding."

Justine sighed, not grasping that her daughter and friend were on the same playful wavelength. "That's not her job, silly. She just helps out with deliveries when she's in town because her

family owns Griffin Home Furnishings."

"I was kidding, Mom."

Justine saw Carly's twinkling eyes and realized that her friend was teasing as well. "Oh...well, since you two are already such good friends, you'll excuse me to get dinner on the table."

"Do you need any help?" Carly and Emmy offered their services in tandem.

Justine had set the dining room table for herself and Carly. "Emmy, set another place for yourself, and-"

"Why don't we eat in the kitchen?" the teenager said as she passed the dining room. "It's so formal in here."

"Because we have company."

"Carly won't mind. It's...friendlier."

"She's right. And that way, Emmy won't have to carry things so far when she cleans up the kitchen." The blonde woman grabbed the teenager's shirt as she went by and pulled her backward, stepping in front to lead the way into the kitchen.

"And we should use the everyday dishes, because Carly's not used to eating off the nice stuff."

Justine whirled around and looked at the two as if they were from Mars. Both stopped dead in their tracks and pasted sweet smiles on their faces, batting their eyelashes innocently. "Emmy, set the table. Carly, open the wine." She watched as her daughter's eyebrows arched. "Two glasses." Eyebrows down.

Dinner was a continuation of the playful exchange, but Carly and Emmy soon allied in making Justine the object of their mischief. She didn't care, though. She was delighted to see two of her favorite people clearly enjoying one another. The three joined forces to load the dishwasher and retreated to the den, where Carly answered a barrage of questions about all the places where she'd lived and worked.

"Mom, is it all right with you if I stay the night?"

Justine was surprised by the request, but pleasantly so. "Of course. You're always welcome to stay here, honey. This is your home too." Emmy was lounging on the couch again, her head in her mother's lap. Justine trailed her fingers through her daughter's hair. "But you should go call your father and tell him." She nudged her to sit up. "Go on. It's getting late."

When she'd first planned this night, Justine hoped to have the chance to talk to Carly about how she was feeling. Instead, they had enjoyed a relaxing evening with Emmy, and after the first few minutes, there wasn't even any anxiety about what her daughter might think about her mom

having a friend over for dinner.

"I should head on home. We have a couple of refrigerators to drop off in Bangkok tomorrow...and we need to beat the traffic."

"You think you're so funny." Emmy swatted at the blonde woman as she walked by.

"Let me know if you want to drop out of school or anything. I can get you work riding on the truck."

"Don't encourage her," Justine chided, standing up to walk Carly to the door. Emmy disappeared into the kitchen to make her call as they stopped in the foyer for Carly's coat. "You were great with Emmy tonight."

"She's a good kid, Justine. I can see why you're so proud of her."

"Thank you. Thank you for everything." Justine leaned in to plant a quick kiss on Carly's cheek.

Carly smiled and squeezed her hand. "Thanks for dinner. I'll see you soon...I hope."

"Definitely." *Definitely.*

## **Chapter 15**

"But we still haven't had a chance to talk about anything, so I don't know where it's all going to go." Justine couldn't suppress the smile as she told Valerie about her week. Her night out with Carly at the club was a major event, and the dinner on Saturday night with her daughter and friend had left her feeling on top of the world.

Valerie was pleased...proud, in fact. After three years of sessions, Justine Hall was suddenly knocking down one wall after another, thanks to her emerging feelings for Carly Griffin. There was still Trey, and Justine would undoubtedly face a few problems eventually when the kids had to deal with the issue of their mother's sexuality. Heck, teenagers didn't want to confront things like that even if their parents were straight. But Justine was a lot stronger than she'd been three years ago, and her children were older and more mature.

"Where do you want it to go, Justine?"

"I...I think I'd like to...well, I know I'd like to..."

"Explore the sexual part?"

"Definitely that." She nodded quickly and blushed, not looking up. But I've been thinking about...more than that."

Valerie chewed her pencil and waited.

"I've been wondering about...the possibility of having...a real relationship with Carly. But she's only going to be here another few weeks, so I'm not sure if it's realistic to even think about something like that."

"Are you looking to experiment here...try things out maybe?"

Justine blew out a breath of mild frustration. "I'm not...really...This isn't about wanting to try something anymore. I think I might be falling in love with Carly."

Unconsciously, the therapist pushed against the floor with her toe, causing her chair to rock softly.

"You're surprised." Justine read her perfectly.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you always start to rock whenever I say something you didn't expect."

Valerie rested her foot on the floor, bringing the chair to an abrupt halt. "Always?"

"Pretty much." She could see the concern this revelation brought, and gave a reassuring smile, not unlike the thousands Valerie had given her through the course of her therapy. "It doesn't bother me. If anything, it's nice to know that I can still shake you up after all this time."

The therapist shook her head to dismiss the thought. She would have to squelch that habit. "How do you feel about falling in love, Justine?"

"Like everybody else, I guess. There's no other feeling like it. I just...want to be with her all the time, day and night. I want to know everything there is to know about her. And I want her to feel the same way about me."

Valerie folded her tablet and set it on the table with her pencil. "You know, over these last couple of weeks..., *since you first ran into Carly*, I've started to notice some changes in you, Justine... good changes. I get a sense that the things you're experiencing now are significant...and that they'll affect you for a long time...."

"There's a but, isn't there?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. I'm not telling you that you should slam on the brakes or try to control your feelings in any way...but I want you to be cautious. I think it would be unwise to rush into anything without thinking it through. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Justine nodded. "I don't even know if she feels the same way."

"If you and Carly keep spending time together, I'm sure you'll find out eventually."

"Let's just hope it's what I want to hear."

"I hope it is too. But if it isn't, I want you to keep something in mind, okay? You are a strong person. You've been through a lot these last few years, and you've pulled out of it. No matter what she says, or what she feels, it isn't going to change the strong person you are."

The redhead nodded grimly. She didn't want to think much about Carly not returning her feelings. "She came with me today...if you want to meet her."

"She's been outside all this time?" Valerie's office was over her garage in a residential neighborhood. If Carly was waiting in the car, she was probably freezing!

"No, she needed to run over to the mall and pick up some presents. We talked last night-that's become our new thing, talking on the phone late at night-and she said she needed to make one more shopping trip, so we came together and we're supposed to go somewhere nice for dinner."

"Justine...I don't know how to break this to you, but...it sounds to me like Carly feels the same way."

The redhead let a hopeful smile escape.

By now, the therapist was intrigued enough to accept the invitation. "Do you think she's out there now?"

Justine looked at her watch. "Probably. I told her to be back at seven-thirty."

"Well, let's go."

The two stood up and put on their coats. The temperature had been up and down over the last week; right now, it was below freezing and threatening to snow.

"There she is." Justine spotted the rental car at the curb. When they reached it, she opened the passenger door and leaned in. "You wanna meet Valerie?"

"Sure." Carly hopped out and came around.

The counselor reached from her pocket to shake Carly's gloved hand. "Valerie Thomas. It's really nice to meet you."

"Carly Griffin. Nice to meet you too."

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Justine asked.

"Sure did. My Christmas shopping is officially finished."

"I envy you," Valerie interjected. "Justine, I hope you have a really nice holiday. Thank you very much for the leather folder. I'll probably be using that when you come back after the New Year."

Without reservation, Justine enveloped her therapist in a strong hug. "Merry Christmas, Valerie."

"You too, Justine."

Carly held the door while the redhead got in and got settled. When the door clicked shut, she turned back to Valerie and extended her hand once again, this time removing her glove. With her back to Justine, she mouthed a silent "thank you", bringing a knowing smile to the therapist's face.

*Oh, yeah, Justine. I'd say Carly probably feels the same way.*

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"I'll get dinner this time because you got it the other night," Justine announced as they opened their menus.

"Nope. You cooked on Saturday, so it's my turn again; and when it's my turn, we go out. Believe me, you don't want to be forced to eat my cooking."

"I'm sure you're not that bad."

"You'd be surprised. In all the places I've lived, the only time I had a real kitchen was with Isabel, and she was the cook. All the rest of the time, I made do with a hot plate or eating out."

"Then maybe we shouldn't eat out so much. We should have gone back to my house so you could have another home-cooked meal." *And a fireplace...and pillows on the floor.* After talking about it with Valerie, Justine was emboldened to push forward and find out if Carly shared her feelings.

"I like going out with you." The blonde said it casually, without even looking up from her menu. "I'm used to eating alone. It's nice to have company for a change."

Justine tried not to show her disappointment at Carly's remark. "Well, I hope I'm good company." *And not just a warm body sitting across the table.*

"I'm sorry...I didn't mean that the way it came out." Carly dropped her menu and gave her friend a warm look. "What I meant to say was-"

"Chardonnay?"

*Arghhhh!* "That's mine."

The waiter deposited their drinks and took their order, but by the time he left, the personal tenet of their conversation was lost.

Carly didn't want to say what she was really thinking-that she would rather be out with Justine Hall than with any other person in the world. That would just lead to an uncomfortable moment for both of them. "I like this place. It's elegant, but it's also kind of relaxed."

Justine, on the other hand, was dying to hear what exactly Carly had meant to say, but when it was clear that her friend had moved on, she decided instead to go ahead and say what she had rehearsed at home. Unknowingly, Carly had just provided the perfect segue. *Here goes.* "I find it easy to be relaxed when I'm with you, Carly."

That brought a smile to the blonde woman's face. "Me too. I guess it's easier to loosen up when we're not in Leland. I remember one time when Isabel and I went to Buenos Aires. All the restaurants and clubs were so festive...a couple of women in love just faded into the background. It was nice to be able to relax and not worry who was going to walk in and see us holding hands or whatever."

*Isabel.*

"It was just the opposite in Shanghai, though. Alison and I had to be careful all the time. I remember once when we...."

*Alison.* If one wanted to kill all hope for a romantic moment, trotting out the old girlfriends would do the trick.

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Carly peered at the lighted porches, looking for 415 Hinkle Lane. She was pretty sure she remembered which house belonged to Rich Cortner, but the neighborhood had changed a lot in twenty-five years. The number above the door confirmed that her memory was correct and she pulled into the driveway behind a battered pickup truck and a brand new Mini Cooper with Massachusetts plates.

The front door opened and Daniel came out to wave her in. Taking her coat, he explained,

"Dinner's ready. Rich is upstairs putting his dad to bed."

"How is he?"

"Not good. We've had the hospice people in this week. They did an evaluation, and told us it wouldn't be long...maybe a couple of weeks or so."

That would be after Christmas; but Carly hated to think about someone losing a loved one during the holidays. "I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't think so. It means a lot to Rich to have you come over."

Just then, the artist rounded the corner at the bottom of the stairs and headed into the kitchen. Carly recognized him easily, though he'd filled out from the skinny boy he'd been in school. He had been cute back then, but as a grown man, he was incredibly handsome.

"Carly, it's good to see you again."

"You too, Rich."

The two shared a light hug and got reacquainted while Daniel put the finishing touches on their dinner.

"Daniel says you've been a lifesaver down at the shop." Carly had helped out every morning this week, coming in at eight and staying until ten.

"You know, I'm having fun. Everybody's really nice...once they get their coffee, that is. Some of them can be pretty grumpy before that."

Rich laughed. "Yeah, that's what Daniel says."

"Listen, I'm really sorry about your dad."

"Thanks. He's not really aware of much anymore. And he's not in any pain...at least not right now."

"That's good."

"You know, when I left Leland, I swore I'd never be back. But it's been pretty nice to be here after all that time away."

"Really? I felt that way about it too when I left, but it's always good to come home and spend some time with my folks."

Daniel brought in the plates and the three of them took their places at the dining room table.

"I was expecting things to be like always, but it's changed. The jobs are good and people are prosperous. They have parks and a community center, an adult theater group." Rich saw his guest's eyebrows go up. "Not that kind of adult theater."

They all laughed.

"But it's still kind of conservative," she added.

"Yeah, but so is the rest of Kentucky...and a lot of other places. But it doesn't feel so...oppressive anymore. Have you been to the drug store downtown?"

Carly shook her head.

"There's a gay flag sticker in the window, right there beside the one for United Way."

"You lie."

"Seriously. I couldn't believe it," Daniel added. "I'm going to put one in my window too."

"You're not worried about getting a rock thrown through it?" she asked.

"Not really. Most people don't know what it means, and by the time they figure it out, they'll realize that they've been in and out of the store a hundred times and it didn't kill them. But if somebody does throw a rock, I'd like to think that there would be people here that would speak out about it."

"In Leland?"

"Tell her the other thing, Rich."

"When we first got here, we were at the hospital waiting for Dad to be released. The nurse on his floor was Darlene Johnston. You remember her?"

"Yeah...she was a cheerleader." *And she was one of the uppity girls from Sara McCurry's clique.*

"She recognized me, and came over to where we were sitting and started talking to us. She went on about how glad she was to see me again. The girl never said six words to me for twelve years of school."

"Sounds like the other day when I ran into Sara McCurry. You'd have thought we were best friends."

"That's what it was like. And then I introduced her to Daniel, and I thought, what the hell, so I said he was my partner. She didn't bat an eye, and the next thing I know, she's asking him all about the coffee shop."

Daniel nodded to confirm his partner's story. "And now she comes in every morning at six o'clock on her way to work, and she always asks how Rich and his dad are doing."

Carly shrugged. "I guess people can change."

"Daniel said you knew somebody in town who had some trouble."

"Yeah, but she has a couple of teenagers, and I guess the rumors got around the high school and they gave her kids a hard time about it. And she lost her job. Now, she's just pulled back. She's afraid to even have a life."

Rich shook his head. "You can't let people do that to you...because if you give them that kind of power, they'll use it. But if you just go ahead and live your life like it's no big deal, guess what? It's no big deal. It's not like we're the only gay people in town."

"True." Justine said there was group of lesbians that played in the sports leagues around town, but that wasn't her thing. "But if people were more visible, there would be more opposition, don't you think?"

"Nobody's saying your friend has to stage a one-woman parade down Main Street. But she ought to be able to have a life. It's not like she's going to be stoned to death," Rich argued.

"He's right. They probably whisper about the two sissy boys who live on Hinkle, but we can deal with that."

"So you guys are going to drag Leland into the Age of Enlightenment, eh?"

Rich cast a sidelong look at his partner. "I don't know that we're going to be the ones doing that, but I think it can be done. Let me put it this way...I don't think Leland, Kentucky is the armpit I used to think it was. I can see why people like my parents liked living here all these years."

Carly would have given anything to have Justine with her tonight so she could hear from Rich how the people in town had changed. Maybe things weren't really as bad as Justine thought they were. Sure, there were a lot of guys like Perry who weren't ever really going to understand gays and lesbians, and they probably wouldn't accept them. But people like Rich and Daniel weren't asking to be deacons at church or to sit on the school board-all they wanted was to make a living and be able to come home at the end of the day to someone they loved.

If they could have that, Justine could have it too.

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"Again?" Nadine couldn't help but eavesdrop when she and her daughter were cooped up in the office together.

"What can I say? I'm a popular dinner companion." Carly snorted as she hung up the phone. "You know, I bet I've gone out to dinner more times in the last week than I did in all my high school years combined."

"What's turned you into such a social butterfly?"

"Mostly Justine. That was her just now. She fixed a pork roast in the crock pot and offered to share."

"When are you going to ask her over to have dinner with us?"

"Oh right, I can see it now. Instead of knives and forks, I'd set the table with hammers and chainsaws."

"Lord help us... but I'll do the cooking if you want to ask her over sometime."

"Okay, I'll run it by her and see what she says." Carly looked at the wall clock anxiously, then back at her mother.

"I guess you're about ready to close up and go home then."

"I need to take a shower."

"And put on something pretty with a little makeup."

Carly blushed. It was humiliating to be forty-two years old and have your mother teasing you about going out on a date. "She makes me wanna do crazy things, Mama."

"Then do crazy things, Carly." *Fall in love good and hard, and stay here in Leland with us.*

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"I'm falling in love with you, Carly. It's like you touch parts of me that no one's ever touched before. I know you have to leave soon, but I want to be with you and share this for as long as we can." Justine pulled the red sweater up over her head and tossed it onto the bed. "My whole body comes alive just from being in the same room with you, and I feel like I'll just die if I can't touch you."

She folded the sweater and placed it back inside the drawer, selecting the black v-neck instead.

For a moment, she was tempted to lose the bra, but she knew better than to underestimate the power of black lace.

"I'm falling in love with you, Carly," she started again. "I know I said I couldn't do something that might come between me and my kids, but I can't stand the thought of you coming through my life again like this and me not grabbing onto the best chance I'll ever have to be happy and whole."

She groaned aloud. "That's pretty dramatic, Justine. Why don't you just get a chain and a padlock and wrap it around her when she walks in the door?"

Justine was growing frustrated at her inability to move forward with Carly. There were moments when they talked on Tuesday night at dinner that she thought the other woman might feel the same way. But every time Carly got close to revealing herself, she would make a joke or abruptly change the subject.

All of that was going to change tonight. They'd have a casual, quiet dinner, after which they'd relax in front of the fire. They'd sit close... and Justine would reach out, pushing back a lock of hair or trailing her fingers across Carly's cheek. Something would spark and they would kiss. There would be no need for words...her lips on Carly's would say it all....

The sudden sound of the doorbell brought her back from her dreamy state, and she hurried to greet the object of her imagination, checking her look in the hall mirror one last time as she went by. As always, the first sight of Carly Griffin made her heart jump.

"Hi." Carly presented a covered plate.

"Hi yourself. What's this?"

"It's half of an apple pie. Mama says it's to thank you for feeding me so much, but I think she also wanted it out of the house so she wouldn't be tempted by it. It's very good."

"I bet it's wonderful. But she doesn't have to thank me for feeding you. Heck, you hardly eat enough to keep a bird alive." She handed the pie back to her friend as she hung up her jacket.

"You know how moms are. If your kids were always going to somebody else's house to eat, what would you do?"

Justine nodded in understanding. "Send food."

"Dinner smells great."

"I hope you're hungry. I've got-"

*Rrrrrnnnnngggg!*

"Excuse me just a second." Carly followed her through the house with the pie as Justine took the call in the kitchen. "Hello... You mean now?" *It has to be a cosmic conspiracy!* "I have company. Carly's here for dinner... Yes, honey, I'm sure she'd do that." She looked pleadingly at her guest. "Okay, see you in a few minutes."

"Was that Emmy?"

"Yeah, she was calling from the car. Her brother's going to drop her off on his way over to his friend's house."

"You don't sound very happy about that."

"It's not that." But she couldn't hide the disappointment in her voice. "I was just looking forward to being with you tonight...so we could talk. Instead, you get to help entertain my daughter again."

"I don't mind. I like Emmy. I'm just worried that it might be a problem for you...you know, for me to be here again. I can just eat and run if you want. Heck, I can even tell her I have a date or something."

"No! It's bad enough that I can't just talk to them about everything and have it be okay. I'm not going to ask you to lie too. Besides, she was glad you were going to be here because she wants to ask you some questions about China for a report she's doing."

"Okay, but I'll do whatever you want. I know you don't want your kids to get the wrong impression, so I'll play it however you think is best."

If there had been any doubt before about whether or not Justine was falling in love with Carly, it was answered now for sure. There didn't seem to be a selfish bone in this woman's body. Carly always put her own needs aside, at least where Justine was concerned. That realization made the redhead reach out for a hug, which her friend stepped into eagerly.

"You are so sweet." Justine inhaled deeply to draw in Carly's fresh fragrance. "Hey!" She leaned back and looked at the blonde woman in surprise.

"What?"

"You don't..." She sniffed again. "You don't smell like smoke. Usually, I can pick up a trace of cigarettes, but not today."

"You're just now noticing that? I'll have you know I haven't had a cigarette since Saturday afternoon."

"You're quitting?"

"I'm trying," the blonde said with trepidation. "You said you didn't want me to, and my mother's

been after me to quit too." The vow to start running too hadn't taken shape as planned, but Carly rationalized her lack of resolve to not having the proper shoes. Not smoking was the least she could do, and her mom said it was the best Christmas present she could have received.

*Oh, yeah...I'm definitely in love.* "Carly, I am so proud of you. You deserve a special treat. Whatever you want, just name it!"

The very thought of how Justine might reward her caused Carly to blush, a reaction that didn't go unnoticed by the hostess. A horn in the driveway bought Carly the reprieve she needed to gather her wits before she said exactly what she wanted from her beautiful friend.

"That's Emmy." Justine hurried to the front door, stepping onto the porch in time to shout a reminder to her son. "Don't forget, we have to be at the nursing home at three o'clock tomorrow to decorate." He waved from the driver's seat and backed out of the driveway just as Emmy pushed into the house.

"He's impossible, Mom!"

"What? What's he done?"

"He wouldn't even give me a half a minute to call you from the house to see if it was okay to come over. He just said, 'If you're coming with me, you better get in the car, or I'm leaving without you.' He's such a brat!"

"It's okay. I told you that this is your house too. You can come over anytime you want."

"I know, but why does he have to act like that? He's just so full of himself. I bet he didn't tell you that he and Dickie Underwood got in trouble for smarting off to Miss Berkley."

"No, he didn't tell me, but I'm sure I would have heard about it eventually. You shouldn't be telling on him, though." Miss Berkley taught physics, where Trey was on a par to get a D this semester.

"I know. But it's all over school 'cause Dickie said she couldn't get laid for free."

"That's awful! What did Trey do?" Justine knew she shouldn't be pumping her daughter for information about her son, but she couldn't resist.

"He didn't say anything, but he was laughing, and he high-fived Dickie. Trey's got detention for a whole week after we get back from vacation. Dickie got suspended."

Justine's blood was boiling. "Does your father know about this?"

"No, Dad was in Frankfort all day. This just happened fifth period."

The mother sighed and shook her head. "They should have called me." The two walked into the

kitchen.

"Hi, Carly." The teen went right to the cabinet and took down three plates. "This must be your lucky day. You get to have dinner with me again."

"Oh yes, thank you Lord Jesus for answering my prayers."

A lively dinner followed, and once again, the teasing repartee between Carly and Emmy kept Justine entertained. When the kitchen was clean, all three settled in the den to talk. As promised, Carly told them all about Shanghai, providing as many details of her daily life and the local culture as she could remember, while Emmy took notes for her report.

"Can I stay again tonight, Mom?"

"Don't you have school tomorrow?"

"Just for half a day. I already have clothes here, and I brought my book bag."

"It's okay with me, but you need to call your dad again. Was Trey supposed to pick you up?"

"Not unless I called him."

Carly stood up to take her leave, looking out the window to the back yard. "Look, it's snowing."

"I heard we're supposed to get three to five inches tonight," Justine said.

"Maybe there won't be any school tomorrow!" Emmy shouted from the kitchen.

The hostess walked her guest to the front door and helped her into her leather jacket. "Are you working at the coffee house tomorrow?"

"Just a little while in the morning. You doing anything tomorrow night?" She hadn't even left, and already, Carly couldn't wait to see Justine again. This was nuts.

"I promised Wendell Kruenke I'd help with the Christmas party out at the nursing home. The kids'll be there too."

"I think Perry's planning to go to that. His grandmother's a resident out there."

"I'll be sure to say hello. Emmy's playing the piano and we're going to sing Christmas carols."

"That sounds nice." Carly wanted a hug, but the teenager emerged from the kitchen to say goodnight, and the opportunity was lost. "Maybe I'll see you over the weekend."

"Goodnight, Carly," Emmy offered. "Don't bust your...tail...on that hill."

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you? I bet you'd laugh your...tail...off."

Justine couldn't resist jumping into the wordplay, but she made a show of covering her daughter's ears. "You two are behaving like a couple of...asses."

Carly laughed and stepped off the porch into the powdery snow. "Thanks again for dinner."

"Tell your mom thanks for the pie." Justine watched from the doorway as her friend carefully picked her way up the hill. When Carly disappeared over the ridge, she went in search of her daughter. "Emmy?"

The light was on in the girl's upstairs room. Justine called her again and she appeared on the landing.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean is there a reason you don't want to be at your father's house?"

"You said I could stay...that this was my home too."

"It is, and you know I love it when you stay here. What I want to know is if you're staying here because you want to be with me, or if you're staying here because you don't want to be there." Justine knew that her daughter was especially sensitive to other people's stress, and she had a feeling something was amiss at home.

Emmy started to speak and then stopped, a sure sign to her mother that she was trying to think of a way out of this conversation.

"Come down here, please."

"Mom!"

"Never mind, I'll come up." By the time she reached the top of the stairs, Emmy was near tears, her shoulders slumped in defeat. "What is it, honey?"

"I shouldn't say anything," the teenager mumbled, her bottom lip quivering.

Justine wrapped her arm around her daughter's shoulder and steered her into the bedroom, where they sat side by side on the bed.

"Dad and J2 are fighting."

Now the mother understood why her child was reluctant to speak. Not carrying tales between the two households was an unwritten rule.

"Honey, married couples do that. It's part of all relationships. Some people even say it's healthy to fight every now and then."

"She's hardly talking to Dad, and even when she does, you can tell that she's mad at him for something."

"Whatever it is, I'm sure they'll work it out. They love each other...and they both love you." Justine didn't want to be in the middle of this, but she needed to be sure that whatever they were fighting about didn't involve Emmy or Trey. "Do you know what the problem is?"

Emmy shook her head. "They don't talk about it in front of us, but I can hear them arguing at night."

"Have you talked about it with Trey?"

"Yeah, but he doesn't know what it is either. He never hears anything because he's always wearing those stupid headphones."

Justine was relieved to hear that Trey didn't know anything about it. That meant that it probably wasn't about him, even though his recent behavior certainly warranted some concern.

*Alex! What if they're fighting because of my suggestion to have Alex come over with Emmy sometime? JT said she probably wouldn't want to do that. God, I hope I didn't cause all this trouble.*

"Honey...do you think this has anything to do with your little sister?"

"I doubt it. Dad usually goes along with whatever J2 says when it comes to Alex." But as she considered the possibility, she became alarmed. "Oh no! You don't think they're fighting because of me, do you?"

"No!" Justine went on to explain that she offered to have them both come over to give JT and J2 a break, and that she hoped J2 hadn't gotten upset with her for butting in.

"I don't think she'd get upset, Mom. I just...think she'd call every ten minutes to see if Alex was okay. They've lined up a helper to come over a couple times a week starting in January."

"Well, honey...if it ain't you...and it ain't me...then I guess we ought to stay out of their business. They'll work it out. Okay?"

The teen nodded grimly.

"You want to stay over here next week when you're out of school?"

"Can I?"

"Are you kidding? I'd love that. Just clear it with your father." As far as Justine was concerned, she could stay there every night. Of course, that might cramp her plans for Carly Griffin.

"Can I ask you a question? It's kind of...well, you don't have to answer it if you don't want to."

Panic gripped her stomach and she held her breath, fearing the worst. *What am I going to say?*

"Do you like J2?" Emmy couldn't read the look on her mother's face, so she tried to clarify. "It's weird sometimes to think that she's closer to my age than she is to Dad's."

Justine could feel her heart rate slow to its natural rhythm. "I like J2 just fine. We probably won't ever be close friends or anything, but I think she's been good for your father. And I especially appreciate that she's made a nice home for you and your brother."

"You don't...hold it against her for marrying Dad?"

The mother held up her thumb and forefinger so that they barely touched. "Not even this much." She laughed at that, and her daughter followed suit.

"I think it's nice that you and Dad are still good friends. Most of my friends' parents who are divorced hate each other."

"Well, we weren't meant to stay together, but we'll always have you and Trey to remind us that there was a time that we did something right."

As they shared a loving hug, Justine basked in knowing that this was the kind of moment that mothers lived for.

Another child-rearing note: Don't worry about your teenager's peer group. They deserve each other.

## [Part 6](#)

# ~ The House on Sandstone - Part 6 ~

by KG MacGregor

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Nothing much to disclaim here. This is an original story, though the main characters bear a mild resemblance to familiar faces. The town of Leland, Kentucky, is fictitious. Any similarity to persons living or dead is coincidental.

Thanks to my Sweetcakes for her help and inspiration. I'm always interested in feedback, and you may direct that to [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com).

## Chapter 16

Justine stretched high on the step-stool to hook the blinking light strand around a nail in the corner of the large day room. Minute by minute, she was growing increasingly annoyed at the conspicuous absence of her son, who had promised to be there over an hour ago. Calls to his cell phone went unanswered, and she was having difficulty concentrating while plotting his demise.

"You shouldn't be up there, Justine. We can do without the Christmas lights. It's not worth you breaking your neck." Wendell was struggling himself, trying to guide a load of folding chairs through the door on a cart with an errant front wheel.

"We can't have a Christmas party without Christmas lights, Wendell. If I could just...get this to..." The instant she got the strand looped around the nail, the nail itself pulled from the wall, sending the lighted string to the floor and shattering several bulbs. "Dang!"

"Come down from there. We'll have to do something else."

Justine wasn't ready to give up on her decorating plan, but they were desperately in need of reinforcements. She called the Sharpe home and Trey's cell phone, but again her efforts were fruitless. Next, she called the most dependable person she knew.

"Carly? It's Justine." Just hearing the other woman's voice had a calming effect. "I'm at the nursing home, and we need some help. My soon-to-be-grounded-forever son didn't show up, and we've got to get...That's right...Carly, you're a lifesaver. See you in a few."

Fifteen minutes later, Carly arrived with her cousin Perry, and an adolescent boy Justine didn't recognize. Right away, they pitched in to help with the chairs, lights, and decorations, and in no time, the day room was transformed into a party room.

"Just what we needed-muscles!" The redhead squeezed the bicep of the grinning lad as he carried

an armload of folding chairs. "Can you set those up in a semi-circle around the piano?" She showed him what to do and he set to work.

"Kevin, when you're finished, how about giving me a hand with these speakers?" Perry was trying to mount the speakers from his portable stereo to the wall so they would be out of the way.

Carly was again in awe of how well her cousin was bonding with his soon-to-be fiancée's son. If Kevin was a troublemaker, he was hiding it pretty well. "Hey, Justine?" She held up the strand of twinkling lights. "I got all these fixed. Where do you want them?"

"Good for you! I need to hook them up there in the corner, but first, I've got to put in a bigger nail."

"I can do that."

The taller woman winced. "I don't think you'll be able to reach it."

"A dagger!" Carly clutched her chest in mock pain.

"You can hold the ladder for me, though. That's a good short person job."

"That's right...twist it, why don't you?" Nonetheless, Carly took her position at the ladder and immediately began to give thanks for whatever part of her genetic pool had enabled her to enjoy this glorious view of Justine Hall's rear end. She could vaguely remember getting a peek at its naked state when the phone rang that night they'd passed out on the floor and they got up to stumble into the bedroom. It was fine...mighty fine.

"Oh, Miss Griffin?" When the redhead saw what had her friend so occupied, she almost wished their situations had been reversed, but Justine was infinitely pleased to know that Carly was enjoying the view.

"I'm sorry...What was it you wanted?"

"I said, the nail's ready. Will you hand me the lights?"

"Sure." Carly tried to pretend that she'd been watching Perry and Kevin, but she knew she'd been caught.

"It's looking mighty fine, Justine!" Wendell stood in the center of the room with his hands on his hips.

For a moment, Carly feared that the nursing home director had also caught her staring at Justine's butt...until she realized he was talking about the room.

"We're almost done, Wendell. Thank goodness Carly and Perry and...."

"Kevin."

"...and Kevin got here to help. Emmy said she'd be here at six to warm up. What time are the residents coming in?"

"They're serving dinner at five, so it'll take about an hour or so after that to get everyone cleaned up. The families usually get here about six. Will you and your friends be able to stay for the party?"

Justine climbed down from the ladder and dusted her hands on her slacks. "I will, and I think Perry was going to come back to be with his grandmother." She turned to Carly. "That's Mrs. Coppins, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Arlene Coppins was her great-aunt.

Wendell continued, "Could I ask one of you to sit with Mrs. Adams tonight? Her daughter called from Cincinnati and they aren't going to be able to make it on account of the snow."

Carly looked at Justine, only to find a hopeful look on her friend's face. "I guess I could. I should get home so I can change."

"I have to do that too." Justine looked at her watch and shook her head. She wasn't going to have time to get in her workout. "If you want to, you can leave your car and ride with me. I'll bring you back."

"I rode with Perry, so that'll work out. Let me tell him."

A few minutes later, the two women walked through new fallen snow to the blue Acura. The roads were mostly clear, but with the temperature falling, they would likely turn slick soon after dark.

"You and your cousin really saved the day, Carly. I don't know what we'd have done without you."

"You'd have figured out something, I bet. The Justine Hall I remember never gave up until she got what she wanted."

"I don't know about that these days," she said seriously. "Ever since my breakdown, I try not to push people anymore. I hope you didn't feel like I pushed you into coming over today to help out."

"I didn't feel pushed at all." *I wanted to be with you all day...so I could stare at your gorgeous butt.* "This will be fun; it's a good feeling to do something nice for other people. I probably wouldn't have thought of it on my own, so I should thank you for including me."

"Carly, you always think about other people. You've been that way as long as I've known you."

She turned the car down Stony Ridge Road. "Heck, you learned those lessons a long time before the rest of us."

"You know what, Justine?" *I probably shouldn't tell her this.* "The reason I used to do things for other people was to get them to like me. When I figured out that some people weren't going to like me no matter what I did, I quit." The Acura pulled up in front of the small Griffin home. "But then I realized that I didn't like that either, because I didn't like myself. My friend, Daniel...I think he's on to something. You know, he said you just have to be the kind of person that you would like, and if other people can't deal with it, that's their problem."

The redhead looked at her solemnly, feeling those old pangs of guilt about how she and her friends had treated Carly back in school. "I think Daniel's on to something too," she said quietly.

Carly sighed, irritated that she'd taken what had started as a compliment and turned it into a condemnation of Justine and her friends. "Anyway, that's a long way of saying that I liked saving your day, and I'm going to have fun at the party tonight because I like doing nice things...and...because you're going to be there." Carly raised her voice with excitement as she moved to get out of the car. "So pick me up at a quarter to six, and let's give my mother a little more to gossip about with my dad."

Justine laughed and shook her head as her silly friend disappeared inside the white frame house. Carly Griffin was exactly as she had once described herself-irresistible.

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Justine rolled out of bed, dreading what she needed to do today. JT had called her first thing to say that Trey got in last night after midnight. He told his father that he'd intended to go to the nursing home, but that Melissa had insisted at the last minute that he attend a party at the Chandler's home in honor of her aunt's birthday. He seemed sullen, and was clearly surprised that his father had waited up.

Things were about to get pretty ugly for JT Sharpe, the Third.

Justine slipped on her heavyweight fleece and laced up her running shoes. The logging trail would be treacherous today from yesterday's snow, but the track at the high school would be clear. She wasn't even going to count laps today; she'd just run until her legs gave out. That's the kind of outlet she'd need after having it out with her son.

Twenty minutes later, she stood at the foot of Trey's bed, while JT waited out in the hall.

"Are you going running with me this morning?"

"Mom?" The teenager rolled over, very disoriented at hearing his mother's voice in his bedroom. "What are you...?"

"I asked if you were going running with me this morning. In other words, are we going to have this conversation here with your father or out on the track with just you and me?"

"If this is about that party, I already told Dad-"

"This is about everything, Trey." JT stepped into the room and took a position beside his ex-wife. "It's about how you still don't do your fair share of work around here. It's about getting a D and two Cs."

"I told you they were singling us out because we're all athletes. They think we're just a bunch of dumb jocks."

Justine was starting to understand the pattern. "It's about how you acted at the movies last weekend, and how you got detention for smarting off in Miss Berkley's class."

"Emmy has a big mouth."

"And it's about you blaming everybody else when you're the one that's messing up."

"Why is everything my fault? I can't believe you'd take everybody else's word for it but you won't take mine."

"Where were you last night, Trey?" she demanded angrily.

"Everything I do isn't your business!"

In a flash, JT was on his son, yanking him out of bed in his underwear to stand before both of them. "Which one of your friends are you going to blame that smart mouth on?"

Justine turned away while Trey pulled on his jeans. All three of them were shaking with anger.

"Trey, I was counting on you last night. You promised to be there, and when you didn't show up, I had to call on other people at the last minute to come and do what you were supposed to do. If they hadn't dropped what they were doing and come to help, the folks out at the nursing home wouldn't have had much of a Christmas party."

"But you got it all done, so what's the big deal?"

Justine knew her son wasn't dense; he was just being antagonistic. What she didn't understand was why. "The big deal is that I expected you to come. I went out of my way to arrange for Mr. Kruenke to give you school credit because you asked me to, and then you didn't even bother to call. I was embarrassed."

"That's what you said at the movies too, Mom...that I embarrassed you in front of your friend. At least now you know what I felt like when they teased me at school."

His words struck his mother like a slap in the face. *Why is he throwing that in my face again after all this time? He had to know how much that would hurt me.* Justine whirled and walked out before she said something she could never undo.

JT watched her leave and turned toward his son, his brown eyes pinning the boy in place. "That's one of the meanest things you've ever done, Trey. And I've never been more ashamed of you than I am right now."

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Carly entered the coffee house through the back door, stopping to hang her coat and scarf in the employee closet. She'd been back here years ago to deliver the beautiful teak desk that still stood in the corner, but it hadn't been a coffee house then. Before it was Daniel's, this space had belonged to Rich Cortner's father, who operated a small office supply store. When a series of strokes left Mr. Cortner disabled, Rich came back to town and sold off the inventory to make room for his partner's business venture.

Saturday morning was the busiest time of the week. Though she usually only stayed until ten, she thought she would stick around longer today, maybe just to help get through the lunch crowd. When she walked out behind the counter, Daniel was already "in the weeds", his term for being swamped.

"I can help the next person," she announced, tying the long green apron over her jeans and Oxford shirt. For the next two hours, they worked methodically, her taking orders and cash, him making the drinks. They had barely had a chance to say hello, and Carly was startled when she finally noticed Daniel's bedraggled look.

"Hey, is everything all right?"

"Oh, we had a hard night. Rich's dad was having trouble breathing and we had to call the paramedics. They hooked him up to oxygen, and it looks like he's going to need that from now on."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thanks. Rich is taking it pretty hard...you know, seeing his dad take another step down. The man's only seventy, and up until just a couple of years ago, was still going to work every day."

"It just reminds us how quickly things can happen. I sure am glad my mom and dad have decided

to retire, so they can have some time to relax. It's long overdue."

"So what's going to happen to the store? You going into the furniture business?"

"Not me. They're going to turn it over to my cousin, Perry. He's been planning on it and saving for a long time."

"That's good...you'll keep it in the family."

"Yeah, which means Daddy will probably keep going to work every day because it's all he knows how to do."

Daniel chuckled. "What about your mom?"

"I think she was looking forward to being retired until it sank in that it was going to be permanent, and not just a vacation. She's starting to think she won't even have a reason to get out of bed."

"She'll be surprised how many things she finds to do. Look how many things you found."

*No kidding!* Between Justine and the delivery truck and the coffee house, this time at home had flown by. It was only three more weeks before she was due to leave for Madrid. That was a depressing thought, but she didn't have time to dwell on it, as the next wave of coffee drinkers swarmed into the shop.

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The lone figure rounded the turn at the far end of the track, determined to push herself to the point of exhaustion, to a place where she could collapse and forget the pain in her legs...and in her heart. Leaning over the chain link fence near where she'd parked her car was JT. She'd seen him pull up and park seven laps ago, but she wasn't yet ready to stop, not while she could still feel.

Justine picked up her pace, still waiting for a sign that her body was ready to surrender. She'd lost count long ago of how many times she'd circled the quarter-mile track, but an hour and a half at this pace meant she was close to the twelve-mile mark.

She could see her ex-husband huddled in his coat with his collar pulled up. He was freezing, but he obviously planned to wait until she finished...or died.

*That's enough.* She slowed to a walk, stretching her arms behind her to begin her cool down. "Walk with me," she shouted as she reached the place where he stood.

JT opened the gate and jogged onto the track. "I don't know how you do this, Justine. It's amazing."

"Nah, it's just conditioning...and craziness."

"It's not crazy."

"Thank you, Valerie." She'd told him about her therapist's admonitions.

"I talked with Trey after you left. He didn't mean what he said."

"Sure he did. What I want to know is why he said it...more specifically, why he said it now."

"I don't know, Justine. He wanted to hurt you because you were hurting him."

"I was hurting him?"

"That's what he said. He says that he knows he's screwing up, that things really are his fault, but he doesn't know how to stop it. He says that sometimes he feels like things are just out of control. I think all the changes with graduation, and Melissa going off to Georgetown...that stuff's just getting to him. Anyway, the more we piled on this morning, the more frustrated he got, and he just blurted that out to get you to back off. He didn't mean anything by it."

"JT, I'm seeing somebody...a woman." She turned back to face him when she realized that he'd stopped in the middle of the track. "But Trey couldn't possibly know about it for sure, because I haven't even told her yet."

JT looked at her in confusion.

"That sounded kind of silly, didn't it?"

The man cocked his head in amusement. "Not for you, Justine."

She answered his smart remark with a punch in the arm. "It's Carly Griffin. Her family owns the furniture store. We went to high school together, and I've had a crush on her about as long as I can remember, even when I was married to you." She added that last part just to tweak him for all the running around he'd done while they were together. "But I told her everything that happened, and that we couldn't see each other, because I didn't want to risk having something come between me and my kids again."

"So...are you seeing each other or aren't you?"

"Sort of, but it's complicated. She's playing it cool because she doesn't want to cause me any problems, and I'm playing it cool because...well, because I'm a chicken."

"What are you afraid of?"

"What am I afraid of? JT, where have you been for the last three years?"

"Justine, I think the kids might be past all that. If you've met somebody you like, you shouldn't have to hold back on account of them."

"That's easy for you to say, JT. You ran around on me for ten years, and the kids never once held that against you." As soon as she said it, she felt terrible. There never had really been any hard feelings between them, and the last thing she wanted was to hurt him. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. None of this is your fault."

"It's okay." He looked away, trying to act as though her remark hadn't bothered him. It was true that he'd never been taken to task by the children for his part in their divorce.

"I guess I just did to you what Trey did to me."

"Justine...it wasn't fair the way everything happened. You were a great mother, and you still are."

She nudged his arm with her shoulder, right where she'd punched him earlier. "You're a great dad, JT. And you've been a good friend to me, too. I don't know what I'd have done without you."

After all the things they'd been through together-losing their first baby, raising two wonderful children, their infidelities, and Justine's breakdown-JT felt like he owed her his friendship. She probably knew him better than anybody, and she'd always accepted him and forgiven him his lapses. Nothing would make him happier-nor alleviate his guilt more-than to see her fall in love with someone who would love her back. "So where do you think things are going with this woman...Carly?"

She started walking again to loosen her stiffening calves. "I don't know. She works overseas, and she won't be here much longer. But if we could find a way to have something...I'd like that."

"Do you want me to talk to the kids? I think they'd handle it okay. Both of them are a lot more mature than they were back then."

"I don't know, JT. Like I said, Carly's leaving soon. It might be better just not to say anything." *No sense rocking the boat.* "Heck, it might not even amount to anything. Why put everybody through something that's not going anywhere?"

"Well, let me know if I can help. But don't give up on the idea just because you're worried about how they'll react."

As they finished the cool down lap, she hooked her arm in her ex-husband's and walked him to his car. "Thanks for coming to find me."

"I was worried about you. I imagine Trey will come around in a couple of days."

"Yeah, well...he hurt my feelings."

"I know." He laid his free hand on hers. "Make him grovel."

"You know I won't do that. But he needs to start paying more attention to how he makes people feel. Folks remember that kind of thing about somebody."

"Sometimes I think that Emmy got the sensitivity for both of them."

"I know what you mean. By the way, did she say anything to you about staying with me this week?"

"No, she didn't mention it. But I'm not surprised...that she didn't say anything, I mean. We haven't exactly been the Brady Bunch at the dinner table this week."

"Yeah, she told me things were kind of...tense at home."

"Did she say anything else?"

"She said you and J2 were fighting about something, but she didn't know what it was." Justine could see that the man was anxious to hear what she knew. "JT, you know I don't pry into your business with your wife. But it was bothering Emmy, and I wanted to make sure it didn't have anything to do with her or Trey."

"It doesn't."

"Fine." *And you better not be poking another paralegal.*

JT stared out over the track to avoid making eye contact with his ex. "It's really personal, Justine."

"I said it was fine."

"Justine wants me to have a vasectomy so she can quit taking the pill."

The redhead couldn't get her hands to her ears fast enough to keep from hearing that. "La la la la...this isn't my business, JT."

"I know she's right, but it's-"

"Please don't tell me this. This is between you and your wife."

"But who else am I going to talk to? You already know how shallow I am...and you can imagine

how I feel about having somebody get that close to me with scissors." He winced as the image filled his head.

Justine shook her head and sighed. JT wasn't going to like what she had to say about it. "Do you two want to have any more children?"

"No. The doctors think the autism is genetic, and we don't want to risk that."

*And you're nearly fifty years old, Stud.* "Then stop being such a baby. Do it for Justine and show her how much you love her."

"You're supposed to be on my side!"

"Sorry, but I'm with J2 on this one. And you know she's right."

JT's shoulders slumped in defeat. "Damn."

"And we never had this conversation. Understand?"

"Oh, definitely." A vasectomy was nothing compared to what J2 would do to him if she learned that his former wife had been the one to sway him on this. He got into his Mercedes and closed the door, rolling down the window to say goodbye. "Oh, by the way...Justine said it was okay for Alex to come over sometime with Emmy, if you're still sure you want to do that."

"Great. We'll do it after the holidays, okay?"

"Sure. And good luck with your friend. I hope that works out the way you want it to."

"Thanks." Justine smiled as she watched him pull away. JT Sharpe was a pretty good guy...for a snake.

## **Chapter 17**

"Okay, then you open the air valve by turning this knob." Daniel buried the steamer into a stainless steel pitcher of cold milk. "When it starts to froth, you know it's hot enough. Leave it in another few seconds and you'll get more foam."

Carly was bored with the cash register. She wanted to learn how to make the coffees, since Daniel seemed to be having more fun. "Don't they make thermometers that you can stick in the pitcher?"

"Yeah, but that would be cheating. Do you want to be a coffee artist or a robot?"

"Well, since you put it that way...."

Daniel finished the coffee order and handed it to the waiting customer. The wave of customers they'd just served was probably their last rush for the day. "Here you go. Why don't you make one of the coffees you like? Start with the espresso."

Carly walked through the process slowly, measuring and packing the coffee, and positioning the cup beneath the spout. As the water streamed through the press, she filled the pitcher with milk. "Okay, I just open the air valve...." The milk made a whirring sound until it began to froth, at which point the whir changed to a whoosh.

"Don't forget to-"

*Oops! Too late.* She removed the pitcher before closing the valve and sprayed milk all over herself and everything within five feet. Lucky for Daniel that he was out of range.

"That's okay. Everybody does that the first time. But nobody does it after they have to clean up the mess."

"Gotcha!" She finished making her coffee and began to wipe down the machine and the counters. "Did anybody call about the ad in the paper?"

"Yeah, but so far, it's just school kids, and they want to work in the afternoon and on weekends. The hours aren't convenient for most people. I've had a couple of moms call, but they don't want to work on Saturdays. I might have to hire two people just to cover all six days."

"At the rate your business is growing, you might have to hire two people anyway."

"From your lips to my financial planner's ears."

"You're gonna get rich, I tell you."

"Well, somebody is...."

*There he goes again. Why does he keep-?*

"Hey, Carly!" Perry burst through the door, his smile as wide as his face.

"How are you doing, Per?"

"Got something to show you." He fished a small box out of his pocket. "Tell me what you think."

Carly opened the box to find a small diamond solitaire, set in gold. "Wow! For me?"

Perry shook his head and sighed. "You drive me crazy! It's for Debbie."

"Well, I think she's gonna love it."

"You don't think it's too little, do you?"

"Naw, it's perfect. You can get her a nice wide band to go with it. It'll look great!" It was obvious to Carly that her opinion mattered a lot. "So when are you going to ask her?"

"I was thinking I'd do it on Christmas Eve...you know, after Kevin goes to bed."

"That'll be sweet. Can I be there too? I'll hide behind the couch."

"I don't care if everybody's there. All that matters to me is whether or not she says yes."

"Perry, Perry, Perry. Have a little faith, man. What woman wouldn't want you? Take a shower; shave that scraggly beard off..."

"My beard's not scraggly!"

"She's going to say yes. She practically swoons whenever she looks at you." Carly turned to her friend. "Hey, Daniel, think you can manage?"

"Yeah, thanks for staying so long today. I'm going to figure out how to pay you, even if I can't get you to take any money." All he had budgeted was minimum wage, and that was insulting to a person like Carly. She'd already told him she was just doing it as a favor.

Carly turned back to her cousin. "So I'm done here. You got any more deliveries today?"

"Are you kidding? You should see the business they're doing down at the store. I've probably got two runs this afternoon, and full days on Monday and Tuesday."

"Well, let's go." She dropped her apron in the bin and grabbed her coat, stopping at she reached the front door. "Hold on a sec, Per." Turning back, she took just a moment to give Daniel her best wishes for Rich's father. "You guys hang in there this weekend, and call me if you need anything."

On her way out, Carly added Daniel to the growing list of things that had made this trip home different from her earlier visits...better. To a lot of people, going in to work six days a week at a coffee house without even getting paid might seem like a pretty stupid thing for somebody to do during a vacation, but Carly was having fun. In just the few days she'd been helping out, she'd run into dozens of people she had known from school, or from the years of delivering furniture all over Leland County. And they had all been nice, genuinely nice.

For the first time since she'd left this town twenty-five years ago, Carly reconsidered her long-held belief that there was nothing for her here in Leland. She'd been content to see her family when they traveled the world to be with her on vacation; but on her brief visits home, she rarely

left the house or the store. This time, though, her old beliefs and her new feelings seemed out of whack.

And it wasn't at all unpleasant.

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"Mom?" Emmy knocked again on the bathroom door. She could hear the jets running in the hot tub.

Justine sank deep into the pulsating water, the pile of bubbles growing higher from the powerful jets. Her legs, hips and back were screaming for relief from her punishing run. *What were you thinking, Justine?*

"Mom?"

"What? Come on in."

Emmy tentatively opened the door a crack. Seeing her mother submerged beneath the bubbles, she entered the steamy bathroom. "Are you going to fix dinner?"

Justine was so exhausted from her day that she hadn't even thought about eating. And of course she'd have to fix dinner-Emmy's friend Kelly was here for the day and it wouldn't do to ask the girls to fend for themselves.

"Yes, honey...I'll fix something." *What's in the freezer? Frozen stuff.* "Why don't you have a look in the freezer and see if there's something you want? I'll go to the store if I need to."

"Okay. Will you call Carly and see if she'll come over too?"

"You want Carly to come to dinner?"

"Yeah. See, you know that report I had to do on China?"

"Uh-huh."

"Kelly has to do one on Peru, and Carly said the other night that she lived there too."

"Ah." *Thank you, Kelly.* "Why don't you call her? Her number's in the book under her daddy's name...Lloyd Griffin, on Stony Ridge Road." *Or you could just dial \*6 on the memory dial.*

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Justine sat mesmerized in front of the fire as Carly told the girls yet another funny story about her misadventures of living abroad. Kelly had gotten all the material she needed for her report on Peru, but Carly went on to add tales of how she'd butchered the language and made a fool of herself over the local customs.

"By the time I got to Johannesburg, I was afraid to leave my apartment."

"But at least you spoke the same language."

"That's a matter of opinion. If you ask them, the English we speak in Kentucky is another language entirely. And there's nothing worse than hearing your accent mocked by a foreigner."

Justine studied her friend, noticing again the lines around her eyes that crinkled when she laughed. She had those wrinkles too, but she'd always thought them unsightly. They sure weren't unsightly on Carly. Nothing was.

"Are you going to get an apartment in Madrid?"

Emmy hadn't meant to throw a wet blanket on their conversation, but her mention of Madrid deflated Carly's good mood. The labor coordinator was due to leave again soon, and she wasn't ready. Now that she'd gotten a taste of it, Carly envied the daily routines that most people in Leland seemed to take for granted. All she had to look forward to for the next two years was change...and solitude. And the latter was what she dreaded most.

"I don't know what I'll do in Madrid. We usually all start out living in a hotel, but if the city seems friendly and comfortable after a couple of months, I'll probably find an apartment or something."

"Maybe we'll come visit you," Emmy offered. "Wouldn't that be fun, Mom?"

"Huh?" Justine hadn't heard her daughter's question. She'd been lost in thought about how lonely she'd be after Carly left...and how empty her heart would feel.

"I said we should go to Madrid to visit Carly."

"An excellent idea," the blonde woman added.

"Hmmm...I don't know about that. The way you two pick on me, I don't know if I want to subject myself to being stranded in a foreign country just so you'll both have something to laugh at."

"Would we do that?" Emmy and Carly struck their usual innocent pose, causing both Justine and Kelly to laugh in agreement.

Carly looked at her watch and pulled herself up from the floor. "I guess I should go. I have to sleep late tomorrow, and I want to get an early start."

Emmy and Kelly stood too. "Mom, is it okay if I stay at Kelly's house tonight? I'll be in church tomorrow." They had Kelly's mother's car.

"Are your-"

"My parents are home."

That was exactly the question on Justine's lips. "You can both stay here if you want."

"Yeah, but if we do that, we won't get to drive by Dale Farlowe's house." Kelly gave away her friend's most carefully guarded secret.

"Kelly!" Emmy was mortified.

"Dale Farlowe, eh? That's Daryl's brother, isn't?" Justine placed him as one of the boys on the football team.

"Yes, and he's Emmy's chemistry partner."

Justine and Carly traded a look of understanding. They knew all about falling for one's chemistry partner.

"And this driving by Dale Farlowe's house...you want to tell me about that part?"

"It's nothing, Mom." Emmy turned back to her friend with an exasperated look. "I can't believe you told my mother about that. I'm going to tell your dad about you and Dickie Underwood after the basketball game."

"Never mind, Mrs. Hall. I made all that up about Dale Farlowe."

Justine didn't believe that for a second, but she helped her daughter gather up her things. "You may stay the night with Kelly. And you may drive by Dale's house...but you may not stop. You may drive very slowly, though."

The daughter rolled her eyes in embarrassment, knowing that her mom would want to know all about this crush on her lab partner. She would have told her eventually, though.

"Thanks for all your help, Carly. You want us to drop you off?"

"Nah, I'll drag these old bones over the hill. If I don't make it, I'm sure they'll find my body in the

spring thaw."

"I bet we smell you a long time before spring," Emmy quipped.

"Not with all that perfume you'll be wearing for Dale!"

Emmy groaned again and hurried out the front door to join Kelly on the porch, slamming the door behind her. As they pulled out, the lime green Volkswagen belonging to Trey took their spot in the driveway.

Inside, Justine and Carly were finally enjoying a private moment, standing in the darkened foyer. Carly no longer wanted to leave, and it was almost as though she could feel an invitation from Justine. She just didn't know what the invitation was for.

"I don't like to think about you having to go to Madrid."

"Me neither." Carly took a step closer to the redhead and held out her arms, her eyes never leaving Justine's. Not hesitating, the redhead walked into the embrace, wrapping her own long arms around Carly's waist and pulling her closer. The intensity of the moment left little doubt as to what was going to happen next.

Or what might have happened next.

"Mom?" Trey stood in the open doorway, his face a mask of anger. "What are you doing?"

Carly and Justine separated as though the other were aflame.

"Trey, it isn't-"

Carly made a quick exit to the kitchen, not sure if she should wait or leave through the back door. There was no telling how ugly the scene in the foyer was going to get, but she didn't want to listen to Justine's denial. *It isn't.... It isn't what?* The sick feeling in her stomach answered her question, and out she went into the night.

But that wasn't the conversation taking place between mother and son.

"I can't deal with this," the youngster groused, unable to meet his mother's eye. "Why are you doing this?"

"Honey, I'm not doing anything." Immediately, she regretted her dishonesty. Justine put her hand on her son's arm, willing him to look at her. "At least I'm not doing anything wrong."

"How can you say that? You know what people are going to say." The embarrassment of what had happened in school three years ago was not forgotten; and it would be even worse now.

"Trey...I know what they'll say. But I just can't live my life for all of those narrow-minded

people. I know it's not what you want-"

"You can't do this to me, Mom."

"Please try to understand this, son. I'm not doing this to hurt you."

"But it does...more than you know."

Justine could see that the anguish on her son's face was real. But it was time to ask him to rise above what he wanted for himself. All he needed was a little push, a word of encouragement.

"Please, Trey."

The pressure was more than the teenager could stand; his mother was asking for too much. Without another word, he walked back out the front door.

Justine slumped against the wall, her feet giving way as she slid to the floor. *What have I done?*

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The redhead squirmed uncomfortably in the pew, feeling the eyes of the congregation on the back of her head. Everyone in the place had to be wondering why her son chose to sit by himself on the opposite side of the aisle instead of in his usual seat at his mother's side.

"What's with Trey?" Emmy whispered. She knew that her brother had gone to the house last night, but presumed it was to apologize for missing the party on Friday night.

"He's angry with me."

"How come?"

Justine reached for the hymnal and opened to the proper page, her silence a signal that her daughter's question would go unanswered. Throughout the service, the mother stole glances in her son's direction, catching his eye only once before he hurriedly looked away.

As they sang their closing hymn, Justine prepared to catch Trey on his way out so she could ask him to come to the house and talk. He hadn't actually seen anything, and with Carly leaving in just a few weeks, there really wasn't any sense in pushing this right now. Trey would have to deal with it eventually, but why not put it off for as long as she could?

So if Trey would hear her out, she could explain it all away. Emmy would back up her claim that Carly was only a friend. Crisis over.

"Mom, can we go for a walk today?"

In the split second that she turned to hear her daughter's request, Trey slipped out along the outside aisle. Justine sighed, knowing he would be long gone before she got through the crowd waiting to shake the minister's hand.

"Sure, honey."

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The blonde woman ducked beneath a pine branch and gave it a good shake. The sun never hit this spot, so the snow and ice that had accumulated over the last week still clung to her favorite perch. Instead of climbing the branches, she had to settle for leaning against the sticky trunk. If someone knew to look for her, she was out in the open. But she couldn't resist the urge to watch the house below. She needed a vivid reminder-proof positive-that there wasn't anything down there for her. All of her ideas about having something with Justine Hall were silly, stupid pipe dreams. Justine had spelled it out for her in plain English-she just hadn't listened.

Carly fingered the Dunhills in her pocket, wanting one right now more than anytime since she'd set them aside a couple of weeks ago. If not for the fact that she'd disappoint her mother terribly, she'd chuck the whole idea of quitting and light up right here in Stony Ridge Park. There was no point in not smoking to please Justine.

They'd been so close to sharing a kiss last night, and it wasn't just some lust-filled moment. No, for those scant few seconds, Carly thought she had seen inside Justine's heart, and that what was there mirrored what was inside her own.

And just like that, it was gone. Justine wasn't going to give herself permission to share her heart with someone...at least not someone like Carly. And if Carly couldn't give her heart to Justine...well, then...she might as well smoke.

She pulled a cigarette from the pack, passing it underneath her nose to inhale the inviting tobacco scent. When she wrapped her lips around the filter, the temptation grew too great and she pulled out her lighter. Flick...flick.... It sparked but wouldn't catch.

The dark blue Acura suddenly appeared on Sandstone and pulled into the carport below. Carly watched as Justine and Emmy climbed out of the car, both wearing dresses and long, heavy coats. Obviously, they had been to church this morning. She watched as they walked up the steps to the kitchen door, the same door that Carly had used last night to make her escape.

Justine held the door as her daughter went inside. Then she turned instinctively and met the eyes

that watched her from so far away.

Carly shivered as the woman lifted her hand slightly in a wave that only the two of them could see. She pocketed her lighter and pulled the cigarette from her lips, snapping it in two.

*What is that woman doing to me?* Carly smiled to herself, knowing that Justine had her permission to do anything she wanted.

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With Emmy behind the wheel, mother and daughter parked at the trailhead where Justine and Trey usually ran on Saturdays.

"It's pretty out here," the teenager noted. Running wasn't her thing at all, but Emmy would admit to being just a little bit jealous that her brother got to spend this special time with their mom and she didn't.

"It is nice. You've never been out here before?"

"I've been to the lake, but I didn't know about this trail until Trey told me about it." The teenager buttoned her jacket all the way to the top and turned up her collar. "It's cold."

"Not when you're running," her mother joked. "I know, you hate to run." She was glad to have this time with Emmy, even more so because it had been her daughter's idea. Justine couldn't shake the feeling that Emmy wanted to talk about something, Dale Farlowe perhaps. "You got something on your mind, honey?"

"Yeah...I wanted to ask you about Carly."

Justine's stomach dropped as though she'd topped a Ferris wheel. *Not you too.* "What about Carly?"

"Well, about you and Carly."

Her worst fears now realized, Justine drew a ragged breath. "I thought you might want to talk about Dale Farlowe."

Emmy wouldn't be derailed. "Is Carly just a regular friend? Or do you like her more than that?"

"Honey, did Trey say something about Carly and me? Because he's got the wrong idea-"

"What's Trey got to do with anything?"

Justine dug her hands into her pockets and stared at the ground as they walked deeper into the woods. "Emmy, I don't think this is the kind of conversation I should be having with you."

"Why not? Are there things I shouldn't talk about with you? Things like boyfriends or dating...or sex?"

"Of course not. You know you can talk to me about anything. I'll always listen, and I'll try to help you work through stuff however I can. And I won't give you any advice unless you ask for it."

"Well this ought to work both ways then. You should be able to talk to me about stuff too. Otherwise, I'm going to feel like I can't bring things to you that are personal."

Justine stopped in her tracks and stared incredulously at her too-smart daughter. Starting up again, she shook her head in resignation. "Emmy, you're pushing me into a corner here, and I don't like it at all."

"Why can't you just answer my question? Are you a lesbian?"

"Honey!" Justine felt the walls closing in, like her whole life was starting to unravel again. Sometime between the near-kiss last night and this morning in church, she'd come to the conclusion that JT was wrong about the kids being ready to accept something like that. "Look, no matter what I feel about Carly-or anybody-I'm not going to do something that's going to come between all of us like it did last time. I don't want to go through that again, and I'm not going to put you and Trey through it."

The teenager groaned in exasperation. "Put us through what? I don't see what the big deal is. Just tell me how you feel about Carly."

Justine could feel her façade-the one in which she portrayed Carly Griffin as just a friend-crumbling with each pointed question from her daughter. "Okay, I...like Carly. I think she's interesting...and she's very kind. We were friends a long time ago, and it's been really nice seeing her again, and spending time with her." All of that was true.

"But do you like her as more than a friend?"

"I told you, Emmy. I'm not going to pursue something with Carly that would cause problems for you or your brother."

The girl sighed deeply, frustrated at the way her mom kept dancing around the question. "Look, Mom...I can't speak for Trey...except to say that he can be the most selfish, stuck-up...jerk in the world. But if you're happy with somebody, it isn't going to cause a problem for me...no matter who it is."

Justine was bowled over by her daughter's words. *Did she just say what I think she said?* "Even

if it's another woman who makes me happy?"

"If it's somebody as nice as Carly, then it's okay with me."

The discomfort she'd been feeling with the vein of the conversation dissipated, and Justine found herself simply in awe of how a 16-year-old could be so mature. She and JT had always known that this child was special, but up until right now, she had no idea of the compassion and insight her daughter was capable of. "Honey, come here." She stopped in the path and held out her arms.

"Now we're going to be all mushy, aren't we?" She stepped into her mother's arms and returned the hug.

"Yes. We're going to be mushy." Justine hugged her daughter tightly, her eyes rapidly filling with tears. "Have I ever told you what a wonderful person I think you are?"

When they finally broke, they hooked arms and continued down the trail. The enormity of this breakthrough wasn't lost on Justine, but winning Emmy's support didn't solve the problem of Trey.

## **Chapter 18**

Carly ground the gears on the old truck, this time just to watch her cousin flinch. With her head out the window in the rain, she watched the corner of the building as she backed the truck into its spot behind the store.

Perry did the first run by himself while Carly helped at the coffee house, but she'd come on board to help finish up, knowing that her mom would have their Christmas Eve lunch on the table by one o'clock. It was a big day for Griffin Home Furnishings, and the big lug beside her still had no idea of their plan to turn over the store.

"Looks like Lloyd's already locked up," Perry observed.

"Have you told them about your big plans for tonight?"

"No, I haven't told anybody but you. What if she says no?"

"She's not going to say no." Carly had told him that no fewer than a dozen times in the last week. She climbed into Perry's pickup and waited while he double-checked the lock on the back door. A bag of wrapped presents sat in the floorboard.

Last night when they closed the store, Lloyd and Nadine went to the offices of Cobb, Finkle & Sharpe to sign all the papers they'd need to sell the store to Perry. All that waited was Perry's

signature and the bank's official okay on his loan.

Perry pulled into the sparse traffic on Main Street, catching the stoplight...the only stoplight in downtown Leland. A blue Acura-Justine Hall's car-turned the corner in front of them just as the light changed, and Perry drew up behind her as they both followed the main road out of downtown.

Carly hadn't seen Justine since Saturday night, but they'd talked on the phone a couple of times. Emmy was staying over there this week, so there really wasn't any comfortable way they could talk about what happened with Trey. But Justine seemed to be okay, and if she was worried about anything, she didn't show it. But that didn't mean they were going to just pick up where they left off. Having Trey walk in like that was probably a wake-up call for Justine that they were slipping into risky territory. If she'd managed to convince her son that nothing was going on...then she'd probably convinced herself of the same thing.

"That's Justine Hall, isn't it?" Perry observed.

"Yeah...guess she's going home early too."

"That's one pretty lady. Did you ever see her when she got really fat?"

"I saw her when she was heavier. I thought she was pretty then too."

"You're right, even then she was good-looking. Some people have it, don't you think?"

"Justine Hall has it...She's always had it."

Perry got the strangest inkling at he recalled the delivery to Marian Hall's home. He hadn't known about Carly's preference for women at the time, but now that he did, it made him look at it all in a different light. There was just something about the way his cousin responded to Justine that he hadn't seen in her dealings with other people. And if the rumors about Justine were true.... He was about to probe when he spotted the blue Chevy Lumina in the Griffins' driveway. "Is that Debbie's car?"

"Yeah, Mama invited her. Kevin should be here too."

"Why didn't somebody tell me?"

"Duh...maybe they wanted it to be a surprise."

"Why would anybody want to surprise me? It's not my birthday or anything."

"Why don't you quit asking so many questions and get on in the house?"

The wonderful aroma of freshly baked ham filled the house, and Carly rushed in to announce their arrival. The Griffins had gathered in the living room with their guests, all of the paperwork

for the transfer stacked on the coffee table.

Perry greeted his girlfriend and her son excitedly before he realized that all eyes were on him. "What's going on?"

"Have a seat, son," Lloyd said, picking up the folder off the table. "Ever since Carly was fourteen years old and took to riding in the delivery truck with you, I've been thinking about what I was going to say when this day finally got here. I wanted to look her in the eye and tell her how glad I was to pass on thirty-five years of hard work down at the store, and that I hoped she was going to enjoy it as much as me and her mama did."

Perry looked over at Carly, suddenly getting a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Now you can't push Carly into something-she's just too hardheaded. So I've been nudging her for about the last five or six years, and she's finally given me her answer."

The young man looked up and eyed his cousin, who was already smiling in anticipation of the announcement that would mean the end of his dreams.

"And she said...no thanks. I couldn't twist her arm to save my life, and she says she ain't ever gonna change her mind. So, Perry...." He held out the packet of papers. "If you're still interested in taking on this headache, it's yours...all the stuff we talked about."

Perry sat stunned, reeling from the emotional swing of the last thirty seconds, when he thought he was losing everything to learning that he was finally being given what he'd waited for ever since he went to work for his uncle. When he turned to see how excited his girlfriend was for him, his emotions went on overload. Without even answering the offer, he dropped to a knee before Debbie and fished the ring box from his pocket. "Marry me?"

The woman was clearly shocked at this turn of events, so much that her mouth dropped open to answer, but nothing came out. After what seemed an eternity to the man on his knee, she nodded vigorously and wrapped her arms around his neck. Perry responded with a passionate kiss that caused everyone in the room to blush.

"This is so embarrassing!" Kevin covered his face, but he couldn't hide his smile.

Perry stood up and pulled the boy into a hug. "I hope this is okay with you, buddy. I can't wait for us to be a family."

Thirteen-year-old boys didn't do the hugging thing very well, but his face said everything that needed to be said. "Are we gonna live in your house?" He hoped so, because Perry had a lot more room than they had in the apartment.

"If that's what your mama wants, then that's where we'll live. Debbie, right now, I'm the happiest man in the whole world." He turned back to his uncle and aunt. "And I can't say thanks enough for all you two have done for me. I'm gonna take good care of that store. I hope to make you

proud."

Carly jumped into the celebration. "Don't worry about that. I think Daddy's planning on showing up for work every day. Just don't make him haul that furniture anymore, or I'll have to come back here and kick your butt."

"I won't let him do that. Ol' Kevin here's gonna be fourteen this summer. I'll put him to work."

"Really?"

"Hey, Kevin. Let's go in the kitchen and I'll tell you all about what it's like to ride on the truck," Carly offered.

Lloyd and Nadine took their daughter's cue and slipped into the other room as well, giving the newly-engaged couple a moment of privacy.

"It'll be fun moving furniture. I can pick up our couch all by myself," Kevin boasted.

Carly chuckled, remembering the boy's excited recounting of his video game exploits. He could talk a blue streak, but from what she saw, he wasn't a bad kid at all. She was glad that he was going to have a guy like Perry in his life; and she was even happier that her cousin was getting what he wanted too.

During lunch, they told stories about their experiences at the furniture store over the years, including a couple of tales about some of their more difficult customers...like Marian Hall.

Perry added a story of Carly's high school days. "I remember one time when we were taking this big dresser up the steps at Mrs. Corning's house. She was the librarian at the high school, so she knew both of us. Anyway, she's talking to Carly and asking her all these questions about school and Carly's grunting and heaving and trying to answer. Then this little yappy dog starts down the steps and he's nipping at her feet...."

"I was scared to death I was going to drop that dresser and flatten the little pest."

"But Mrs. Corning can't see her dog from the bottom of the steps and she's still jabbering on and asking all these questions and Carly finally yells out, 'Will you leave me alone, you stupid ol' fleabag!' I tell you, I thought that woman was going to throw a clot!"

"See what you have to look forward to, Kevin," Carly teased.

Lloyd chimed in with the story of the time when Carly was fifteen and they delivered a mattress to the Hobson residence. Old Mr. Hobson didn't realize that his wife had shown them in, and he walked out of the master bathroom without a stitch of clothes.

"It was not a pretty sight," Carly recalled dismally. "Gave me nightmares for weeks."

Today's gathering was probably the biggest celebration they'd ever had.

Perry and Debbie were still riding high from their engagement, and Perry was on cloud nine over the news about the store. Kevin was equally excited, but it was hard to tell if that was from getting a new step-dad or the looming possibility of getting to work on the delivery truck.

Lloyd and Nadine found themselves surprisingly relieved to be out of the furniture business, at least as owners. Lloyd especially was glad to see his wife so happy about giving it up, finally realizing what a burden it must have been for her. He would be forever grateful to his daughter for the push.

Carly was happy for everyone...except perhaps herself. Despite the joy around her-or maybe because of it-she was feeling glum. She was leaving soon and life in Leland was going to go on without her. It was unlikely she would make it back for what Perry and Debbie were saying would be a March wedding. And she wouldn't be around to see how her mom and dad adapted to life outside the furniture store.

The last time she was home for any length of time-almost four years ago-she'd been ready to go when her vacation was up. At times, it felt like the whole town was smothering her and she just had to break free. Now she realized that it probably wasn't the town at all, but her own refusal to be a part of it. This time, she'd let go of that grudge she'd been carrying, that chip on her shoulder; and people like Justine, Perry, Rich and Daniel, and even some of her old classmates showed her what Leland was capable of.

But what was any of it worth with Justine holding her at arm's length? Carly knew that was the real source of her melancholy. It was almost like she could taste what being happy was like, but it was just out of reach. She didn't want to leave Leland if there was a chance she could be with Justine...and she didn't want to stay if there wasn't.

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Justine pulled into the carport, still fighting the tears that had threatened to fall all night. Christmas dinner at her mother's had been the usual elaborate affair-a fat turkey, the good china, extravagant gifts for everyone, and songs around the piano. It was like every other year, except for the empty place at the table. Trey hadn't called at all, not even to arrange to pick up his gifts. JT said the boy had hardly been at home all week; he was spending his days and evenings with Melissa. He came home after midnight, and left before anyone got up. Even when he was there, he'd been in a quiet mood...somber and distracted.

There had to be a way to reach him, a way to reassure him. Trey's life was good; he just needed to see that. His future was secure at the university, and if he went on to law school as he planned, there would be a job waiting at his father's firm. Unlike a lot of kids his age, he didn't have to

worry about money or having the right things. And he had a girlfriend who was crazy about him. Surely, the idea that his mom might be having a quiet relationship with another woman wasn't enough to bring down his whole world!

Lugging the gifts from her family, she unlocked the back door and pushed into the kitchen, dreading how quiet the house would be without Emmy there. In the short time her daughter had been staying with her, she'd grown used to having her around. It was fun to cook together, and to talk into the night in front of the fire. After their revealing conversation on Sunday afternoon, there was a new intimacy between them. She still hadn't shared much about her feelings for Carly, but it was now a given between them that the feelings were there. And Justine had even heard a little about Dale Farlowe.

But tonight, Emmy was back at her dad's, getting ready to head out tomorrow with her church group to the ski slopes in West Virginia. The big house on Sandstone was lonely again, and the New Year would bring more of the same.

And if all that weren't enough, Carly Griffin would soon be gone.

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Carly stepped out onto the porch and drew in a deep breath of cold air. Christmas Day at the Griffin house was a quiet affair. They'd opened gifts together last night and slept in, enjoying a big breakfast together about ten.

All day, Carly had pored over her feelings for Justine Hall, unable to shake the belief that her old friend was the key to what happened next in Carly's life. One thing was increasingly clear: Carly didn't want to spend the next two years in Madrid, no matter what. She had a dinner appointment with her boss in Louisville tomorrow to talk about a permanent transfer to corporate. Heck, if she lived in Louisville, she and Justine could see each other on the weekends. Maybe that could lead to something down the road; the kids weren't going to be around forever. And if she lived in Louisville, she could come back to town often enough to keep up with everybody.

Normally, this was the time of night when Carly would creep up the ridge to peek down at Justine's house. But she'd been up there twice already today and the blue car was gone.

"Carly?" That was her mom at the front door. "Your cell phone's ringing."

She jumped up and stumbled down the hall, but was too late to catch it. The missed number that showed up made her heart skip a beat, and she quickly redialed.

"Hey, it's Carly...I was out on the porch." She sat down on her bed and started to unbutton her leather jacket.

"Sneaking a cigarette?" Justine teased.

"No, I was not smoking! I'll have you know that I've been smoke-free for twelve days, two hours...and forty minutes. Not that I'm counting or anything." She flopped back onto the bed, happy just to hear her friend's voice.

"That's great. I'm really proud of you."

"Yeah, yeah. So are Mama and Daddy. Except if I stay here much longer, I'm going to eat them out of house and home."

"Well, when the cupboards are bare over there, you just come on down and I'll feed you."

"Right, I'll just waddle over the ridge."

They kept the conversation light, both content with knowing that their friendship was still on solid ground. Carly had almost expected Justine to push her away again, but that hadn't really happened. They hadn't seen each other since Saturday night, but that was understandable, since Emmy was staying over there.

"So...did you get things worked out with Trey?"

Justine sighed heavily. "No. I haven't seen him since Saturday. He didn't even show up at my mother's house today to open presents. He must...really be mad at me right now."

"I'm really sorry. I know how much that hurts you...." Carly remembered that Justine's greatest fear wasn't losing Trey and Emmy, but losing control of herself again. "But it'll be okay this time, Justine. You're a lot stronger now...and you can always tell him that he got the wrong idea. All he saw was two friends sharing a hug." *Three seconds later would have been a different story altogether.*

"I know. That's what I've been telling myself. I'm sure he'll come around eventually to talk...probably with a list of things I can do and can't do. He just isn't capable of dealing with that kind of stuff, and if I try to push it on him, he'll just get that much more stubborn." Her voice was full of frustration.

"You can't really blame him, Justine. Those are the rules for living in a place like this." The optimism Carly had begun to feel for Leland had slipped some since Saturday night. In twenty-five years, the attitudes here hadn't really changed at all. Kids like Trey might grow up over time and learn to behave themselves in public, but the changes were barely skin-deep. "Kids aren't ever going to learn to accept people who are different because their parents don't. And it's not just gays...It's the people who don't have money, or the ones who just don't know how to dress or who aren't jocks."

"But I don't want my own son to be like that! He wasn't raised by his friends and their parents.

He was raised by me!" Justine was surprised by the anger in her voice, anger not at Trey for how he felt, but anger at herself as she realized that she'd let him get away with it. "I can teach him not to lie or steal, and not to mouth off to his teachers. But I can't teach him the most fundamental things he needs to know to be a good person...that you have to respect everybody." She was up and pacing the den now, the picture getting clearer on what she had to do. "You're absolutely right, Carly. This isn't Trey's fault at all. It's mine."

"Yours?" Carly hadn't meant to send that message. Justine didn't need to add guilt to what she was already feeling.

"Yes, mine! Who else's would it be? I should have beat it into his head when he was little, but JT and I both thought that we were teaching him more by letting him pick his own friends. I didn't know my son was going to turn into such a little snob."

Justine was so adamant and forceful that Carly grew nervous about where she was going with all this. If she went on a tirade like the night they didn't come to her birthday dinner, she might do more harm than good. "Listen...calm down okay? You need to think all this through. You don't want to say or do something that you're going to regret later."

"I know...I know." Justine realized that she sounded like she was about to go off half-cocked. "But I really do have to talk to him about all this. I've been so worried about how the other kids would act that I didn't stop to think about what I was saying about myself. I need to quit acting like I'm doing something so awful."

Carly was relieved to hear the voice of reason return, but she was still worried that Justine wasn't seeing it all the way through. "And what about Emmy, Justine? You were just telling me that you feel really close to her again. You don't want to risk that."

"Emmy's okay with everything. We talked about it on Sunday." Justine hedged on saying exactly what her daughter had asked. "She asked me point blank if I was a lesbian. I couldn't lie to her. And you know what she told me? She said it was okay, that she wanted me to be happy."

"Wow!"

"It's amazing sometimes to think that those two grew up in the same house, huh?"

Carly relaxed. "So what are you going to do?"

"I need to find a way to talk to my son, so I can tell him what I expect of him. JT will back me on this. But Trey needs to understand that he's not going to act like this without consequences."

"Wow," Carly said again. In light of all Justine had gone through over the past few years, this was a huge step. "I'm really proud of you for this, Justine."

Her voice went soft. "Well, I want to raise my kids to be good people. It's time I stepped up and did my job."

"You really are a great mother, you know."

"Thank you...that means a lot." It was time to lighten this conversation. "So, are you going to the reunion Saturday night?"

"You know, I think I will. But don't let me get drunk and start talking to Sara McCurry. I'm afraid of what I might say."

"You and me both. I just hope her husband doesn't ask me to dance. I don't want to smell like him all night."

The two women eased into their friendly banter, talking about all of their old classmates, and trying to guess what everyone was doing now. After more than an hour, Carly's phone beeped its warning.

"My battery's dying. I guess I should go."

"Okay...merry Christmas, Carly."

"It is, Justine. Talking to you tonight really made my day. I've really missed you this week." Thinking back to how she'd felt when she was sitting on the porch, Carly realized the truth of her words.

"I've missed you too. You want to come for dinner tomorrow?"

"I can't. I have to go to Louisville tomorrow. I'm having dinner with my boss."

"Then I guess I'll see you Saturday night?"

"I'll be there." Carly smiled into the phone. "Merry Christmas, Justine."

Yes, I too am thinking that it is time for these women to have sex again. [Part 7 \(conclusion\)](#)

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~ The House on Sandstone - Part 7 ~

by KG MacGregor

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Nothing much to disclaim here. This is an original story, though the main characters bear a mild resemblance to familiar faces. The town of Leland, Kentucky, is fictitious. Any similarity to persons living or dead is coincidental.

Thanks to my Sweetcakes for her help and inspiration. I'm always interested in feedback, and you may direct that to [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com).

## Chapter 19

Carly shifted on the leather couch, growing more irritated by the minute at Jim Fitzpatrick. Her appointment was for six, and according to his secretary, he'd gone out at five for a quick haircut. It was a quarter to seven, but he'd called to say he was running late. *No shit.*

Jim was three years younger than Carly and joined the company on the labor team she put together for Estonia. He accompanied her on the second tour in Bolivia, then on to Peru, but got married and requested a job at corporate.

Carly had put in for a job stateside that year too, but she'd been given a hefty raise and shuffled off to Johannesburg instead. She was too important to them in the field, they said, and they didn't want to lose her experience and know-how.

After two years in Shanghai, she asked again, mindful of an opening that popped up when one of the project managers left the company for a competitor. Again, one of the women on her team—who happened to marry someone at corporate—was hired for the slot, and Carly was given a sizable raise to go to Jerusalem. But that time, she was promised the next opening. Wade Morrow was that opening, due to retire in May when he turned sixty-five. She wanted to be certain that Worldwide Workforce remembered its promise, and that they knew she was still interested.

It galled her that Jim Fitzpatrick was now her boss, and that all of her requests had to go up through him. He had been mediocre at best in the field, and in his current job, he supervised three field projects that he barely understood. The trains ran on time because Carly and her fellow team leaders made it happen.

A handsome man came through the glass door exuberantly, and stretched his hand out to take hers. "Carly! Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Jim. Good to see you again." His breath smelled of alcohol. *Running late, my ass.*

"So I made us a reservation across the street at Ruth's Chris. Linda's going to join us at seven. She's really looking forward to seeing you again."

Carly fumed inwardly, instantly realizing that she'd been kept waiting simply because Jim's wife couldn't make it at six. The women hardly knew each other; this was just Jim and Linda taking advantage of an opportunity to eat out on the company's nickel. Now, she understood why he had insisted on dinner instead of meeting with her this afternoon.

"I need to talk about some work issues, Jim... personnel matters. I hope that won't be a problem."

"Nah, shouldn't be. Linda's heard it all before."

Fifteen minutes later, they were seated at an elegant table overlooking the Ohio River.

"I just never get tired of this view," Linda sighed. "I love it when Jim has work dinners."

"I'm sure you do." *Very sure.* "So, Jim... I wanted to talk with you about Wade's job. I know he's retiring in May, and I'd like to call in that promise you made before I went to Israel."

Jim paused to order a \$90 bottle of wine, without even asking her preference. When the waiter departed, he gave his attention back to Carly. He was ready for this, and had all his arguments lined up. "That would really be a bad time to leave Madrid, Carly. You know the four-month mark is a critical period."

*Or the five-month...or the eight-month....* Carly had heard this before. "Damon's ready to step up. By May, we'll be interviewing and training already. Those modules are already in place."

"Damon's not as experienced as you are, though."

"Nobody is! That's because I've been in the field longer than anybody in the company. My performance reviews are good. I get the top ratings. Now I'm ready to move up." *I've been ready for the last twelve years.* "I deserve to move up."

"It's not that simple, Carly. There are nine field teams out there. A lot of people on those teams are going to apply for Wade's spot. It's going to come down to a lot of different factors."

Carly was determined not to lose her cool, but she knew when she was being jerked around. "But I have it in writing from you that I will get top consideration."

"That's right. You will be considered, and all of your experience is going to be taken into account. But that's not the only factor."

The waiter interrupted them again to take their order. Carly hadn't really thought about what she would eat, but when both of her dinner companions ordered the twenty-ounce Porterhouse, she assumed it was probably the most expensive item on the menu, and ordered one for herself. Linda was bored already, and started talking to her husband about a funny noise the mini-van made. After ten minutes of debate, they agreed that she would take it to the shop on Monday. *Crisis averted!*

"So if experience isn't the only factor, what else is going to be considered?"

"Well, I know that Bob Schiller asked about it too before he went to Pakistan. It's hard to get somebody to head up a project in a place like that."

"In other words, Wade's job has been promised to more than one person."

"Nobody's been promised anything, Carly. I'm sure you have just as good a shot as anybody else...but I think Bob having been in Pakistan is going to weigh pretty heavy."

The waiter returned to place three sizzling steaks in front of them. Carly looked at the size of the monstrous piece of beef with dismay. She couldn't eat that much meat in a week!

"Jim, Bob has been with Worldwide for six years. He's not even thirty years old!"

"Now you know we can't discriminate by age. That's against the law."

"Nobody's asking you to. But you can't get twenty years work experience when you're only twenty-nine."

"Look...I wasn't going to bring this up, but...you got special consideration from the company before. We really-I really went out on a limb to let you hire Alison. And look what that cost us. We paid moving expenses for somebody who didn't even stay six months. I could have lost my job over that."

"Who's Alison?" Linda asked, her mouth full of steak.

"She was somebody Carly got involved with...romantically...in South Africa. Carly asked us to hire her on the next job at Shanghai so she could go too."

"You do that a lot, don't you? Hire people's husbands or wives," she continued.

"We do it a fair bit. But Alison wasn't somebody's wife. I really stuck my neck out on that one, Carly."

"It's not like I had an option, Jim."

"I know, I know. But I had an option. I could have said no. But I didn't. All I'm saying is that we can't give everybody special consideration every time."

Carly felt her stomach sinking with disappointment and frustration. Despite their promises, she knew now that she wouldn't be offered a stateside job. After twenty-one years with the company, she was going to have to settle for that single bone they'd tossed her almost five years ago. For a few fleeting seconds, she regretted not taking her father up on his offer of the furniture store.

Her appetite was gone, and she hadn't even had a bite of her steak. Setting her utensils down, she

eyed the slab of beef, knowing that it would go home in a doggie bag with the Fitzpatricks if she left it untouched.

"Oh, dear!" Carly put her hand over her forehead and began to sneeze onto her plate. Again...and again...and again...seven times in all. "I don't know what that is. I feel so sick." Struggling to her feet, she reached around for her purse. "I think I better go on home before this gets worse. I have a long drive. Thank you so much for dinner." She laid her linen napkin atop her plate and left.

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"All right, Justine. You take A through K and I'll get L through Z." Justine took a seat beside Sara McCurry Rice behind a table with boxes of nametags. "And make sure you get everybody's email address. This'll be a piece of cake next time if we can just email everybody and not have to send out everything."

A few of their classmates were putting the finishing touches on the decorations at the Kiwanis Club meeting hall, and the band was warming up. The Kiwanis didn't have a license to sell liquor, but they'd gotten a special permit to serve beer and wine. Sara ordered seven cases of wine coolers, insisting that they'd last longer than regular wine.

*They'd last forever at my house,* Justine thought.

"Well, looky here. If it ain't David Willis!" Sara was excited to see their first classmate. But then Sara was excited to see everyone.

Justine jumped right in to help the next person, and within half an hour, most of the nametags in her box were gone. She fingered a few until she got to the one she really cared about, looking up just in time to see the blonde woman walk in the door with two men.

Carly looked dazzling! She was wearing a tailored gray pantsuit with a wide-collared white top. A vibrant silk scarf was threaded beneath her lapel.

"Hello. You're Justine Hall...right?" The blonde woman flashed a killer smile that nearly melted Justine on the spot. "You probably don't remember me. I'm Carly Griffin...We used to be lab partners in chemistry class."

Justine was caught off-guard by the greeting, until she saw the mischievous smirk that followed the smile. "Why, yes! We did have...chemistry together, now that I think about it. How nice to see you again," she answered back, her voice dripping with syrupy sweetness. Inside, she was reeling at a rush of sensations. *She looks like a million dollars!*

"Oh, my god! Would you look at who it is? It's Richie Cortner." Sara was on her feet and around the table for a hug from the artist, who was clearly baffled by the attention from someone who hardly acknowledged his existence in high school.

Justine looked at Richie and back at Carly, not quite understanding the connection. Then she noticed Daniel, the man who ran the new coffee shop.

"This gentleman needs a nametag, please. This is Daniel Youngblood." Carly tugged her friend up to the table.

"Okay." Justine began to write it out. "And Daniel is here with...."

"Me," Carly said, looking back at her friend from the coffee house and his partner.

Justine nodded in understanding, trying not to scowl in Daniel's direction. *Cut it out, numbskull. She just didn't want to come alone, so she brought a friend.*

Carly went into the dance hall with her two friends and staked out a table.

"Okay, girlfriend, fess up!" Daniel leaned across their table and waited expectantly.

"What?"

"What's with you and the redhead? 'We had chemistry together'."

Carly looked to Rich for help, but got the same questioning look.

"Okay...that was Justine Hall, and I've had the hots for her ever since eleventh grade."

"That's probably true for half the kids at Leland High," Rich added.

"You can see why." Carly looked up as her beautiful friend entered the dance hall, where she was immediately approached by a man Carly recognized as Mark Matthews, the boy in their class who was voted-like Justine-Most Likely to Succeed.

"Well, I'd say it was mutual, honey. If looks could kill, you'd be picking up my dead body right about now."

"Why do you say that?"

"When you said 'He's with me.' That woman was not a happy camper."

"Have you got a little history with Justine?" Rich had noticed the interchange between the two women and his curiosity was piqued as well.

"No...not really."

"God, what an awful liar you are! I want to play poker with you sometime." Daniel was starting to wonder if this was the woman his friend had told him about, the one who had some problems with the people in Leland.

Carly knew that her face was giving her away, but she didn't feel right about sharing something so private about Justine. "So...which one of you guys gets to dance with me first?"

Daniel and Rich understood her cue. The subject of Justine Hall was closed for now.

Justine tried to duck back out to the foyer, but was lured to the dance floor by Mark. There wasn't a gracious way to decline, and it wouldn't kill her to be polite.

Everybody in Leland knew the tale of Mark Matthews. Mark was released from federal prison last year after serving time for investor fraud. He'd managed to convince people—a lot of people—that he had the capital to develop a housing tract in the hills of Tennessee. Unfortunately, the land was owned by the Tennessee Valley Authority. But his brand of malfeasance was popular, and he was released early to make room for the next wave of slimy blood-suckers that preyed on the elderly and infirm.

"What are you up to these days, Mark?"

"I hang around the house a lot...you know, with the ankle bracelet and all."

*That's right...house arrest.* She suddenly wondered if the police might swoop in and carrying him off in cuffs.

Matthews read her mind. "But my probation officer signed off on this. I'm allowed to have visitors, too, by the way. Maybe you could drop by some time...."

Carly was making her way through the crowd for a beer when she heard her name called.

"Carly! Carly Griffin." It was Sara McCurry. "Look who I found. It's Tommy Hampton. You know I told you about him being in the army, too. You two are going to have so much to talk about." She beamed with excitement as she deposited the man and left.

"Hi, Tommy."

"Carly, it's good to see you again." He held out a hand that was soft to the touch, Carly thought...even softer than her own. "I'm embarrassed to say this, but I'm not in the army. Never was, either. I don't where Sara got that idea."

The blonde woman laughed out loud. "Neither am I. I told Sara that I worked overseas and she just...filled in the rest." That got a hearty laugh from her old classmate. "So what are you doing these days, Tommy?"

"I've been working in Frankfort at the National Archives since I got out of college. But I ran into Sara about ten years ago when I was doing a project over at Fort Knox and I must have mentioned it."

"Well, at least she was right about us having something in common. She's confused about both of us."

Tommy introduced her to his wife, and after a few more friendly words, they went off to dance and Carly continued on her path to the keg. She was genuinely surprised all along the way by the smiles and friendly greetings. It was as though all of the people here had always been her friends. Maybe they just had her confused with someone else.

The song ended and Justine left the dance floor, automatically scanning the floor for her pretty friend. She spotted Carly near the beer keg, caught up in a conversation with Darlene Johnston. Working at the hospital, she saw a lot of Darlene, but they weren't especially close.

"Carly, hi! Daniel says you've been helping him out at the coffee shop. I go by there every day on my way to work."

"That's right. It's the best way to service my caffeine addiction. Mainlining."

Darlene laughed amiably. "Listen, how's Rich doing? I felt so sorry for him the last time he brought his daddy to the hospital."

Carly remembered that both Daniel and Rich had had nothing but kind words to say about Darlene. "He's...taking it pretty hard. And I think he went on oxygen a few days ago, so it's even worse."

"The poor guy. He just lost his mother a couple of years ago. I'm so glad he's got somebody like Daniel to support him through this. So many people just aren't that lucky."

"Yeah...Daniel's a really good guy."

"I wish they'd stick around Leland, but Daniel says Rich is pretty set on leaving it all behind when his daddy goes. I guess it's hard for him here...the memories."

This was the confirmation for Carly's suspicions. Daniel had dropped a lot of hints, but he hadn't come right out and said they were moving on...perhaps because he was still hoping to change his partner's mind about settling in Leland for good.

"You know, they both told me how good it made them feel when you talked to them in the hospital. It really meant a lot to Rich...and he was glad to hear that you were going into Daniel's shop every day." That was Carly's subtle way of saying thanks for respecting what these guys had together.

"He's such a nice guy. They're both nice guys, and I'm really happy they have each other. Daniel

said you were heading out to Spain soon for your job."

"Yeah, I have to leave in a couple of weeks."

"That sounds so exciting."

"I'm sure it'll be fun." *For the first fifteen minutes or so.*

"Listen, I'll see you in a bit. I have to get this beer to my husband before he runs off in the car to buy his own six-pack." She looked over in the direction of a bored-looking man, sitting at a table alone. "He hates coming to these things."

Carly was joined in the beer line by Rich, who stopped on his way over to say a couple of words to Darlene. Instinctively, she looked around the room for Justine, who stood by the hors d'oeuvres table with Sara.

Sara was bending Justine's ear. "That Carly Griffin looks like a whole different person. I saw her at the movies the other day and I hardly recognized her. Who in the world would have thought she'd turn out to look that good?"

*I did...but then I always thought she looked good.* "She does look good. So does Richie." Justine did that just to torment Sara, who'd had a crush on the artist since high school.

"Richie! God, he was the cutest boy in Leland, and now look at him. Hubba hubba! Wonder how come he came in with Carly and that guy from the coffee house? You don't reckon he and Carly are...? No, couldn't be. I mean, she looks good, but he could have whoever he wanted."

Justine bristled, but held her temper in check. She watched as Carly and Rich walked back to their table to deposit their beer before taking to the dance floor. *What is this with Carly and Rich Cortner? I didn't even know they knew each other.* She didn't have time to dwell on that question. Tony Belichek suddenly appeared to ask her to dance.

Carly smiled as she caught sight of Justine with Tony. She was a full head taller than he was, and it was obvious that he was trying to get close enough to lay his head on her breasts. Despite his diminutive stature, Tony had never been shy about the ladies. He'd been suspended for ten days for pulling out a plumbing pipe in the boys' locker room so he could peek through into theirs.

The redhead looked fabulous tonight, Carly thought. She wore a one-piece black pantsuit that zipped up the back. It was sleeveless, and the v-neck showed off Justine's sculpted shoulders nicely.

*That is one gorgeous body....*

"Daniel says business has really been good this week, a lot better than he expected for the holiday." Rich's remark snapped her back from the wonderful place where her mind had begun to wander.

"Yeah, we had a really big crowd today. I wish somebody would answer his ad, though. I've got to leave soon, and he'll go nuts if he doesn't have some help."

"Yeah, I wish he could get somebody too. He's worked hard to build that store up."

"It's a great place. He was saying that he wanted to get a bookshelf in there, and some board games. I think it has a lot of potential to get even bigger."

The music stopped and Carly watched as Justine and Tony separated. Suddenly, the blue eyes met hers and the redhead smiled. Without dropping her gaze, Carly retreated to her table, her own smile growing broader as she realized that Justine was coming over.

"You guys better behave yourselves," Carly warned quietly just before the redhead arrived at their table.

Rich quickly got up and pulled out a chair. "Justine, it's nice to see you."

"You too, Richie. I love your murals down in the coffee house."

"Thank you."

"Rich has done some wonderful work. I wish you could have seen his last exhibit in Boston." Daniel patted his partner's forearm and smiled with obvious pride.

In that instant, Justine grasped the nature of the men's relationship and she couldn't stop her own knowing smile. "You should both be very proud of how well the coffee house is doing."

"We were just talking about that," Carly interjected. "We were saying that you ought to quit your job and go to work helping out."

"Sure you were. What if you were to quit your job instead, and stay there? Stay in Leland?"

"Don't think I haven't thought about it." The playfulness in Carly's voice belied the seriousness with which she'd been thinking about her job these last few days, and how much she dreaded leaving for Madrid.

"Coffee in the morning...furniture delivery in the afternoon. Sounds like a nice life," Justine cajoled teasingly.

Carly could only nod, not trusting what would come out of her mouth if she were to open it. *And what would I do in the evening?*

The band broke into its rendition of a 1979 disco tune, and virtually everyone in the room took to the dance floor, including the foursome at the table. Dancing side by side with Rich and Daniel, the women couldn't help but remember their steamy night at the club in Louisville. And when the

music stopped, Justine couldn't keep from squeezing Carly's arm, a subconscious thanks for the dance.

When they left the dance floor, the redhead was whisked away to attend to a few details at the sign-in desk, and Carly found herself back at the table with her friends, sad and frustrated at what was almost in her grasp. She and Justine were right for each other, if they'd just forget about everybody else and go for it.

"Looks to me like you're not the only one hung up, Carly."

She looked into Daniel's eyes and allowed herself a soft smile.

"What are you going to do?"

Carly shook her head solemnly. "I don't know, Daniel. The ball's in her court-it always has been."

Two hours later, the crowd began to thin. People promised to keep in touch, and everyone had their reading glasses out jotting down email addresses and phone numbers. Sara and Justine basked in the praise from their classmates, accepting that their success would mean they probably would be tapped to do this again in another five years.

Carly stopped by the table on her way out to offer her congratulations. "It was really nice, Justine. Thanks for encouraging me to come. I had a great time."

"I'm glad you did. And if I didn't tell you earlier," she lowered her voice so that no one would hear, "you look sensational tonight. I heard a lot of people say so."

The blonde woman gave her a lopsided smile. "You're the one who turned all the heads in the room, Justine. Just like you always did."

Daniel and Rich waited by the door, and Carly turned to give them the signal that she would be along soon.

"Come home with me," Justine whispered, her eyes smoldering in the dim light. She didn't know where her courage was coming from, but she had no reservations about the invitation. It was time to show Carly how she felt.

Carly froze, her eyes never leaving the blue ones. She answered with a nod, barely perceptible, even to Justine. "I'll meet you outside."

## **Chapter 20**

The short ride to the house on Sandstone was quiet, punctuated when Carly took the long slender hand in her own, lacing their fingers. When they entered the darkened home through the kitchen, Justine turned off the porch light, her indication that she had no intentions of either them going back out into the night. She touched the five numbers of her alarm code, knowing that an open door would alert them if Trey should happen to stop by. But Justine didn't expect that to happen tonight.

Carly stood nervously in the kitchen while Justine locked up, waiting and wondering just how this dance would start. A part of her wanted to return to their last scene in front of the fire, so they'd have a chance to undo that clumsy encounter. She wanted to look inside Justine's heart to see if it held any promise for their future. Even if it didn't, she wanted this chance to rewrite the memory of that drunken night.

"Will you come to my bedroom?"

The blonde woman nodded and followed Justine through the house, which was lit only by a soft light in the foyer. When they reached the master suite, her host closed the bedroom door and turned the lock. As Carly stood in the dark, she crossed the room and turned on a bedside lamp.

Carly stepped out of her shoes and followed Justine to stand beside the king-sized bed. "Are you sure you want this?"

"Yes."

"And...how will you feel about it tomorrow?"

"I'll want it then too." The truth of her words struck Justine like a thunderbolt. She didn't want this just for tonight, but for all the nights to come. That's what it was like to be in love. One small step closed the distance between them, and Justine dropped her head to touch her lips to Carly's.

Carly slid her mouth against Justine's, ever so softly...ever so slowly. This was what they had missed the last time, the chance to savor the sensations of touching one another and tasting their closeness. As their kisses grew more intense, she moved into Justine's embrace, feeling the quickening pace of both their hearts as their bodies came together.

Working together, they freed themselves of their clothes, finally falling into bed to relish the feel of warm skin from head to toe. "God, you feel so good," Justine murmured, hooking both hands beneath Carly's shoulders as she settled her long body on top. After a slow, deep kiss, she dropped her head beside Carly's to nuzzle her ear.

Carly's hands wandered up and down the muscular contours of the taller woman's back, coming to rest at the top of her buttocks. "Justine...Did you mean what you said? Will you want this tomorrow too?"

Justine rose up and looked seriously into the questioning green eyes, understanding that her

flighty behavior after their earlier encounters was responsible for Carly's doubt. "I will, I promise."

"What is it...that you want?" The blue eyes looked back at her in confusion, and she felt Justine shift her body to the side.

"What are you asking me?"

The blonde almost wished she hadn't asked the question, but what she most wanted to hear was that Justine wanted her...and not just the intimacy they were about to share. "I'm in love with you, Justine."

"Oh, Carly." She lowered her head to drop a kiss on the blonde woman's cheek, then on her forehead, and finally on her lips. "That's what I want tomorrow...for you to love me."

With both hands, Carly clutched the back of her head and pulled her back down for a fiery kiss, which Justine returned with equal passion. She could feel her toes curling as she pushed herself against the strong body on top.

Justine emptied her mind of her will, allowing her hands to roam where they would, marveling at the way Carly's body responded beneath her. Instinctively, she discovered the touches and sensations that drove the woman higher, and her own arousal peaked as well. "I love you," she whispered, finally sliding her fingers through Carly's wet center.

"God, Justine...." She opened her eyes to find her partner lost in concentration, savoring her first bold exploration of another woman's sex. Justine's eyes were closed, but her mouth was open and her breathing was deep and slow. "That's so nice."

Justine pushed inside, at once captivated by the way her fingers were encircled in the velvety cocoon. Rhythmically, she slid in and out, adding another digit when Carly opened her legs wider.

"Oh, yes...that's it...." Carly dug her fingers into the taller woman's back as she arched off the bed, the rush of heat erupting from her core. She lowered herself to the bed, stroking the sides of her lover's face. "God...feel what you did to me."

Justine was fascinated by the throbbing sensations, knowing that those happened for her only when she came hard. "That was...so amazing." Eager to discover more, she lowered her head to take a nipple into her mouth, knowing it was just a stop on the way.

"Justine...." Carly pushed her gently to the side, rolling over on top and draping her leg between Justine's. Her body was too sensitive to endure another touch without rest and recovery. With twinkling eyes, she gently teased her lover. "Should I ask where you learned to do that so well?"

"I have no idea," the redhead answered, smiling timidly. "I just did what I wanted to do."

"It was perfect." Carly leaned forward to deliver a kiss. "It was like you knew exactly what I needed," she whispered. "But I have other needs, too." With excruciating slowness, she trailed her tongue across Justine's collarbone and chest, stopping for what seemed like ages to taste first one nipple, then the other. When she shifted lower in the bed, she heard her lover's breathing hitch, a clear sign that Justine knew what Carly intended.

Wordlessly, Justine parted her legs and bent a knee to give Carly access to what they both wanted. When she felt the woman's tongue stroke the length of her sex for the first time, she shuddered and drew an arm to her forehead in abandon. "Oh, god...that's so good...so nice." The soft tongue circled her hardened clitoris, then plunged inside her. "Ooh, Carly. I love that...I love you."

Carly wrapped one arm around Justine's thigh to pull her closer, and with the other hand, slipped two fingers inside. After only a few gentle thrusts, she felt the sudden contraction, and slowed her touches to draw out the orgasm. The moment Justine called out her name was the sweetest, most satisfying experience Carly had ever had.

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"Wake up, sleepyhead."

Carly opened one eye to see Justine leaning across the bed, smiling shyly as she tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear. She was dressed in a dark blue wool suit with a soft white shell underneath.

"I need to go to church. There's coffee in the kitchen if you want it."

Carly rolled over, orienting herself to her new surroundings. The bed was soft and warm, and Justine was much more hospitable than she had been the last time they woke up together here. She reached out and brushed her hand against the woman's forearm. "You look nice."

"Thank you." She tugged the sheet down to reveal the tops of Carly's naked breasts. "You look nice, too."

The blonde woman smiled. It was almost unfathomable that Justine could be up and about after the long night of lovemaking they'd shared. Over and over, they took turns touching and tasting one another, all the while proclaiming their love.

"Listen, if Trey shows any signs that he's ready to talk, I may ask him to come back here with me."

"It's okay...I'll get dressed and go." She gave Justine her most understanding look. This was a

condition she knew and accepted.

"Carly, I...I meant what I said last night...every word. I love you." She squeezed the smaller hand, hoping to reassure her lover of her resolve. "I need to settle this with Trey...but I won't let him take this away."

"Really, it's okay. You need to fix things with him." *I don't want anything between us again.* "I need to get over the ridge...see if I can slip in the back door without anyone noticing. Like that would ever happen."

Justine kissed her goodbye and walked toward the bedroom door. "You can lock the back door and pull it shut behind you, okay?"

"Okay," Carly answered, her lips still tingling from their morning kiss. "Call me?"

"I will."

\*\*\*\*\*

Carly turned off her ignition and stared through the windshield at the lake. The path went all the way around, her mom said...a half-mile in all. It was a pretty nice day for the end of December, but she had a little trouble believing that people really enjoyed this kind of thing.

Not to worry, though. Before too long, she would enjoy it too!

From where she was sitting, she could see a handful of others walking or jogging around the path, already started on dropping those holiday pounds.

*Nothing to this.*

Carly got out and began to jog slowly along the path, reminding herself about why she was out here doing this. Justine liked running; she looked forward to it; and being physically fit was important to her. It was a demarcation of sorts, a line between when she had command of her life and when she did not. Running was a symbol of control. And it gave her a body to die for!

*This hurts my foot.*

Carly remembered how Justine had smiled at the other runner at the dance club in Louisville. It was obvious that this kind of thing was something she appreciated in other women, too. Justine wanted to run a marathon someday. Wouldn't it be nice if they could do it together?

*Now it's my whole shin. Maybe I need to slow down a little. It's just the first day.*

Justine was going to be proud of her for this, just like she was that Carly had stopped smoking. She'd have to find a place to run in Madrid. There were probably parks around the city, or places near the university. And when Justine came to visit, they could go together.

*How is that going to work? Ow, there goes my knee.*

Justine probably got two or three weeks vacation every year. She could come to visit in the summer for a week, and she might even want to bring Emmy. And then she could come back next fall. And Carly would try to come home for a couple of weeks next Christmas. If they planned it right, they could see each other every three months or so. And the time in Madrid would be gone before they knew it.

Justine loved her. Of that, Carly had no doubt. Their lovemaking had been so much more than physical. They talked into the night about how these feelings had been pent up for so long, and how it felt so wonderful to finally be able to set them free. When Carly mentioned having to leave soon, Justine assured her that they would find a way to work it all out. They'd both been searching for this feeling for too long and they weren't going to let a few thousand miles get in the way of it.

*Man! Why does my side always hurt like that when I run?*

Since this was her first day, Carly had vowed not to overdo it. Two times around the lake—a mile—was the limit she'd set for herself, but she could probably double that tomorrow, as long as she wasn't sore. She was now almost halfway around on her first lap, which meant only a quarter of a mile, and she was rapidly rethinking her plan. Her legs and feet were screaming, and it felt like her guts were going to explode out of her side at any second.

Carly slowed to a walk, panting to catch her breath. This would work...If she walked back to her car from here, that would be a good cool-down exercise.

And what might happen after Madrid? There were lots of possibilities, she realized. Trey and Emmy would both be in college by that time...adults, practically. That would free up Justine to come along with her, as long as she landed her next job in a country that would allow an extended tourist visa. Justine wouldn't need to work; Carly made plenty of money, and all of her living expenses were paid for by the company.

Maybe she could get on with a project in Australia...or Singapore...or down in the Yucatan. That would be a pretty nice life. It wouldn't be bad at all to stay in the field if Justine could share all of these places with her.

She got back to her car and plopped down sideways in the driver's seat, pulling off her left shoe and sock in one motion. A blister had already formed on the top of her big toe.

*God, it feels good to be in love!*

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It was a day of mixed emotions for Justine. Trey was a no-show at church, and that bothered her a lot. He was usually pretty dependable when it came to Sunday mornings, but nothing he did of late made much sense. JT said he'd been gone most of the weekend, and that his friends hadn't been by at all.

All afternoon, she'd hoped to hear from her son, but it was almost dark and there was no word. It was probably going to take another visit to his bedroom at dawn to get him to talk to her.

But there was also reason to celebrate, and Justine let herself do that today too. The smile that graced her face off and on all day was because of Carly, and she wasn't going to give that up, no matter who asked or why. Being in love was too special-too rare-to be pushed aside for anything else.

Justine laid a split log diagonally across the two others that surrounded the fire starter. She wasn't about to waste the evening waiting for Trey. She and Carly had too few opportunities to be together as it was, what with her leaving in a couple of weeks. They were both determined to make the most of their time together, and tonight, that would mean cuddling and talking in front of the fire.

The phone rang as she finished, and her first thought was of her new lover.

"Hello...Trey." *Finally.* "Of course you can come over. It's time we talked about some things..." She bristled at her son's words. "It so happens that I am alone...But I won't have you dictate to me who comes and goes in my house. Is that clear?"

Her hands were shaking when she returned the phone to its cradle.

"It's crunch time, Justine. You've got to hold your ground."

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Carly hurried to her room to pick up her cell phone, smiling at once when she recognized the number. "Hello?"

"Hi, beautiful."

"Mmm...I think you've got the wrong number. You meant to dial Justine Hall."

"No, I meant to dial you."

Justine explained that her son was on his way over, and that she would call when he left. Carly started back down the hall, on her way to tell her mom that she might be out "late" again.

But the ringing phone called her back one more time. Carly expected it to be Justine again, but it flashed Daniel's ID instead. He probably was calling to pump her for details on her evening with Justine.

"Hello...oh, no!" The smile left her face at once. "Daniel, I'm so sorry. Please tell Rich that I'm so sorry."

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Justine jumped off the couch in the living room to greet her son, who was coming in the front door. She missed the old days, when you couldn't sneak up on somebody in a Volkswagen Beetle. Their distinct putter could be heard a block away.

"Trey?" When she entered the foyer, she was surprised and disappointed to see that Melissa had come along.

"Mom." His face was drawn and serious, but he didn't seem angry.

"Hello, Melissa."

"Hi, Mrs. Hall." The name thing was confusing to everybody, even Justine. Mrs. Hall was her mother, but Miss Hall was that debutante that married JT Sharpe. And the folks in Leland had no use for the word Ms.

"Won't you both come in? Would you like a Coke or something?"

Trey shook his head and looked at his girlfriend, who also declined. Together, they went into the living room and sat together on the couch, where they avoided meeting her eye.

Justine really didn't want to have this conversation with Melissa present, but it was clear that Trey did. Obviously, he had shared all the details with her; maybe she was here to back him up.

"Did you want to talk about something, Trey?"

The teenager took his girlfriend's hand and looked at her. "Melissa's going to have a baby."

*Oh, my...you didn't just...I don't think I...Jesus Christ and all the saints!* On the outside, Justine sat perfectly still, her face not giving away her emotions. Elsewhere, she was experiencing a full body response. Her stomach dropped; her throat closed; her mouth went dry; her eyes glazed over; and her tongue went numb.

"We found out for sure last week...that Friday when I was supposed to be at the nursing home."

"Have you...told your father?"

Trey shook his head. "We haven't told anybody."

"Not your parents either, Melissa?"

The young girl shook her head, unable to hold back the tears that now poured down her face. "They're going to kill me."

Justine got up and hurried to the couch, wrapping both her arms around the crying teenager, resting one hand on her son's shoulder. "No, they won't, honey. They'll be surprised..." *blown away, flabbergasted, aged twenty years*, "but they love you. It's going to be okay."

The mother's words of assurance weren't enough to stem the tide of tears. "No, they won't. They'll make me have an abortion."

"Shhh...It'll be all right." For Justine, this was all a matter of what Melissa wanted. Everybody could put their two cents in the bucket, but no one but Melissa had the right to decide. "Have you seen a doctor?"

The girl shook her head.

"Are you sure you're pregnant?"

Melissa nodded. "I missed my period...and we took one of those tests."

She was probably right, Justine thought; but she still needed to see a doctor soon. "I'm going to make an appointment for you to see Dr. Coulter at the hospital tomorrow. I'll go with you if you want me to, or I'll just show you where to go."

"Everybody'll find out!"

"No, they won't. Just come to my office and we'll go upstairs the back way. And I promise you that no one there will say anything."

Melissa nodded and tried to smile.

"Have you two...thought about what you want to do?"

"We want to get married," Trey answered without hesitation.

"Melissa?"

"Yes, we love each other and that's what we want." She squeezed her boyfriend's hand and gave him an almost desperate look.

"And I'll get a job. I can go to college later...get a scholarship or something. But we'll need money for the baby."

"Trey, I'd like to call your father and ask him to come over. Is that okay?"

"What do you think Dad's going to say?"

"I don't know, honey. But he loves you as much as I do, and that's more than you can imagine."

"Even now?"

Justine smiled at her son. "I think there's a hormone or something that...makes a mother love her children more...right when they need it the most."

Trey looked like he might cry too. He and Melissa had been so stressed out for the past ten days that they had hardly slept or ate. "Thanks, Mom."

Justine phoned her ex-husband from the kitchen. "Trey's here. I need you to come over...Right now...Drop it. You need to come right now."

An hour later, they had it all sorted out...subject to Walton and Millie Chandler's input. Both of the kids were going to finish high school, no matter what. In August, Trey would start college at UK as planned, but he would continue to live in Leland and drive the forty minutes each way to class. JT would pay his tuition and fees as planned, and they would live with Justine.

Melissa's plans for college were on hold for now; but JT and Justine promised to help with that down the road if necessary.

Next week, JT and Trey would start work on Justine's basement, turning what had been the kids' rec room into an efficiency apartment. A job after school was a good idea for Trey, they agreed, more befitting a married man and father-to-be than video games with his friends. That might help convince Melissa's parents that the kids were serious about this, and deserved all the help they could get.

The last hurdle for now would be getting Walton and Millie to sign off on the marriage of their minor daughter. If they refused, it would only be symbolic, since Melissa would turn eighteen in early March and would then be able to marry on her own. Justine and JT would give their approval right away to Trey, who was three weeks shy of adulthood.

"Are you sure you don't want your mother to come with you tomorrow?" If it were Emmy, Justine knew she would want to be there for her daughter.

Melissa shook her head. She was terrified of her mother. "Will you go with me?"

"Of course."

JT addressed his son. "You need to be with Melissa when she tells her parents. And don't be surprised if they get pretty upset. This isn't what they planned for her, and they're probably going to say that it's all your fault."

"It is all my fault. I should have...been more careful."

"It's not just your fault, Trey," Melissa said.

"But I...I want to show your mom and dad that I can take care of you, and...this isn't a very good start."

Justine had probably never been more proud of her son that she was right that minute. It was going to be a tough row for them to hoe, but she and JT would lend them all the help they could. All four of them walked to the door together, and the kids put on their coats. "We'll all get through this. Call me first thing tomorrow at work, and I'll tell you what time to come in."

When the door closed behind the kids, Justine turned and pounded her forehead against her ex-husband's chest. "Oh, my god, JT!"

"Oh, my god, Justine!"

## **Chapter 21**

"This row of buttons is for the size. We're pretty simple here...we use common words, like small, medium, and large." Nadine Griffin had volunteered to come in and work with her daughter in the coffee house for the next few days while Daniel helped Rich over the loss of his father. Carly was showing her how to operate the cash register.

"Why do I have to punch in what they give me? I'm not stupid. I know how to make change."

"All the new cash registers do it, Mama. No one thinks you're stupid."

The back door opened and the vendor entered with fresh pastries and biscottis, which Nadine began to put away.

Carly checked her supplies in the cooler under the counter, running back to the stockroom to get a few extra things. On her third trip, she laid the store key on the counter. "Will you take these and go unlock the door?"

"There's somebody now."

Darlene Johnston was peering through the glass door, and hurried in out of the cold as soon as it was open. "Good morning." Immediately, she noticed that Daniel wasn't there. "Oh, no. It happened?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"That's so sad. So you're going to run the store?"

"Yeah, for a couple of days."

Darlene gave her order to Carly and paid Nadine. "Hey, you know what? People think so much of Daniel. I'm going to put a few dollars in this mug...Do you have a pen I can use?" Darlene scratched out a note explaining that Daniel had a death in the family, and that this was a flower fund. "I'll pick this up tomorrow and send some flowers from everybody at the coffee house."

"That's really nice, Darlene." Carly continued to be amazed at the way this town had changed...because the people in it had changed.

The first couple of hours were kind of slow, since most of the downtown stores and offices didn't open until nine. Daniel said he did a lot of ordering of supplies in the morning. This was something she couldn't do, but Daniel said he would come by to take care of it when he got a chance.

"So I thought you were going to go out last night," Nadine said, a hint of teasing in her voice.

"Something came up for Justine...and one of her kids." Carly was floored by the news when Justine called, but she had to admit selfishly that she was glad their embrace in the hallway hadn't been the big issue after all. "And since I had to get up so early..." *I didn't think I should sleep over.* God, it was embarrassing talking to your mother about these things!

Fortunately for Carly, the morning rush started, and she didn't have to answer any more pointed questions about her love life...though she hadn't exactly confessed to having a love life, per se. Her mama and daddy knew that she'd stayed over at Justine's a couple of times, and that they'd spent a lot of time together. But other than a few words here and there, she hadn't told them that she was in love. It would be nice to share something like that with her folks. They never met Isabel...and they never liked Alison. News that she and Justine were in love would make both of them very happy, especially if it meant she'd be coming back to Leland every chance she could.

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Justine stood at Melissa's shoulder holding her hand while Dr. Brian Coulter performed the pelvic exam. All the tests confirmed her status, and Dr. Coulter set her due date at the end of July.

When they returned to Justine's office, Melissa could barely contain her tears.

"Sweetheart, listen." Her future mother-in-law guided her to a chair in the file room and handed her a cold drink of water from the office cooler. "You and Trey want this baby. Right?"

The teenager nodded.

"Then it's time to be happy. It's going to start growing soon, and your body's going to change a lot. And we all want a healthy baby, so you're going to have to take good care of yourself. If you and Trey are staying at my house, I'll make sure you eat right, and you have to get plenty of rest after school. But it's a happy time, Melissa."

In the span of twenty-four hours, Justine had gone from wishing her son would break up with this girl to total acceptance of her as part of the family. Melissa Chandler was the girl-the young woman-that her son wanted to marry, and she would be the mother of his child. That put Justine squarely on her side.

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"What are you up to, Grandma?"

Justine groaned into the phone. "I am much too young for this...or maybe I'm too old for this."

"How did it go today?"

Justine told Carly a little about Melissa's visit to the hospital, and about the kids' plan to tell the Chandlers this evening. "I'm sort of expecting a call in a little while."

"Okay...I'll let you go. I need to get to bed early anyway." Carly chuckled. "Mama's already asleep."

"Carly, you're a good person to help Daniel out like this."

"I've actually had a lot of fun down there...I mean, not this time, with Rich's dad dying. But I've enjoyed helping out. Everybody who comes in is really nice. Makes me wish I didn't have to leave in a couple of weeks. I'm really going to miss that."

"And I'm going to miss you!"

Carly sighed. "I'll miss you too, Justine."

"You know, this craziness is going to settle down in a couple of days, and when it does, I have plans for you."

"Oh, yeah? Do any of them involve...chocolate sauce?"

Justine laughed heartily. "I'm thinking the whole banana split, honey!"

\*\*\*\*\*

This night, Justine was called to the Sharpe home, where she walked into the kitchen to find J2 holding an icepack to Trey's swollen eye. JT was storming around the room, shouting into the phone.

"And if you ever lay another hand on my son, I'll see to it that he's driving that car of yours." JT was a good enough litigator to make that guarantee.

Justine kissed her son's forehead and held out her hand for the phone.

"Walton? Justine Hall. Would you mind putting Millie on the phone for me?" She looked back over at her son's shiner and shook her head. "Hello, Millie. It's Justine Hall. How's Melissa feeling this evening?" Justine wanted to remind the other mother that she had a job, and that was taking care of her daughter. "It's just that I was a little worried about her earlier today. You remember how overwhelming all this can be even in the best of circumstances...No, it isn't the way we would have preferred, either, but it's what we got. And it's all about them now, not us. They love each other, and I think we ought to do everything we can to help them be happy."

The family watched, impressed with the way Justine was handling Melissa's angry mother.

"You really don't have any cards to play here, Millie...It doesn't matter. She'll be eighteen in three months and they'll do it then." Justine rolled her eyes as she listened to Millie's indignant rant about what might happen if Melissa went against their wishes. "Look, if you want to risk losing your daughter for good, that's up to you. But don't you worry about Melissa. JT and I are going to stand by both of them, and if Melissa needs a mother through any of this, she'll have me." That did it.

Trey was on his feet to stand by his mother.

"I'm thinking New Year's Eve at the Methodist Church...seven o'clock. Does that work for you and Walton?" Without looking up, she reached out an arm and pulled her son close. "I'll call Reverend Scott here in a minute and let you know."

She hung up the phone and looked around at everyone. "So...ya'll doing anything on Wednesday night?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Trey walked his mom back out to her car, still smarting from his black eye, but calm inside for the first time in nearly two weeks.

"I really appreciate all of this, Mom. I'm sorry I've been such a...well, I'm sorry I've let you and Dad down."

"Honey, you get to start over with a clean slate right now. It's not going to be easy, but you have to be a man now. And it's not what your dad and I think that matters anymore."

"I know."

Justine opened her car door, then closed it without getting in. She'd probably never have more leverage over her son than she had right this second, and she wasn't ashamed to use it. "Trey, we need to talk about something else...my friend, Carly."

The teenager looked away uncomfortably. He had sort of hoped all that would just go away.

Justine tipped his chin so that he'd look her in the eye. "We're in love with each other, and she's going to be a part of my life."

"That's one of the things Mr. Chandler was talking about," he said meekly. "He said he didn't want his daughter marrying into something like that."

*Something like that...That arrogant snob!* "Trey...I really don't expect you to be able to understand why I am the way I am. To tell you the truth, I've had a little trouble with it myself, but I know that it's what's right for me. I hope you can come through for me on this. Carly Griffin is important to me, and that's something that I need, just like your father needs J2...and you need Melissa."

The boy drew a deep breath of resignation.

"And besides, I'd like to think that Melissa could do a lot worse than marrying into the Sharpes and Halls. And in twenty years, when he sees what a happy life his daughter's had, Walton Chandler's going to know that too."

Trey enveloped his mother in a tight hug. Considering all the support she was giving for what he wanted, he was going to do his best to return it. Like she said, it was time to stop being a boy, and start being a man.

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Justine pinned the boutonniere onto Trey's lapel and brushed away a piece of lint that really wasn't there. Her son was very handsome in the three-piece black suit his father had bought him yesterday. The three of them were waiting in an ante room until the minister gave the signal that they were ready to begin.

"Just so you know, I'm probably going to cry."

JT reached into his pocket and handed his ex-wife a handkerchief.

Trey laughed. "Nobody will even notice, because I'll probably wet my pants."

That got them all laughing, and the tension dissolved, if just for a moment.

"I meant to tell you earlier... You remember that I mentioned my friend Carly?"

The teenager nodded, trying his best to appear casual.

"Well, her mama and daddy used to own the furniture shop, but they sold it to her cousin last week. Turns out he needs some help on the delivery truck. After school and Saturdays would work out pretty well for him, if you want to do that...."

Trey's face lit up. "Heck, yeah! And what about in the summer? And after I start at UK? I bet I could work it out with my classes."

"Good, I'll let him know, and you can go by there next week."

"Why wait until then? I'll call him on Friday." Trey was eager to get started on this "being a man" thing.

"I think you're going to be a little busy until Sunday, son." JT pulled a packet of documents from inside his coat and stuffed it inside Trey's. "That's for the Gratz Park Inn in Lexington. They're

expecting you and Melissa later tonight."

"Awwww," Justine started to cry at JT's sweet gesture.

"Cut it out, Mom. We haven't even had the wedding yet."

"And speaking of weddings...." JT opened the door a crack. "I think it's show time."

It was just a small gathering. Emmy had gotten back in town earlier in the day, and was predictably shocked at all that had happened in her absence. She sat next to her mom at the end of the pew, and JT, J2 and Alex filled out the row.

On the other side of the aisle sat the Hatfields...er, the Chandler family. That consisted of Melissa's parents, her older brother and his wife and two children, and an older sister, who was in college.

True to her word, Justine cried, especially when she caught Millie Chandler actually smiling during the brief ceremony. When it was all official, they headed to the fellowship hall for a small cake that Millie had procured on short notice.

Everyone posed for snapshots, and soon, the happy newlyweds were on their way. That's when Justine noticed the sad look on her daughter's face.

"What is it, honey?" They were walking out to the car, where Emmy would head home with her dad, and Justine would meet Carly at home to ring in the New Year.

Emmy shrugged her shoulders and looked away.

"Is it something I can help with?"

Emmy sniffed, a sure sign the floodgates were about to open.

Justine stopped and took both her daughter's shoulders in her hands. "What is it?"

Her lip quivering and her eyes looking away, Emmy finally said what was on her mind. "It's just that...Trey gets everything...even when he screws up."

Justine was confused about what it was that Emmy resented. It wasn't like her daughter to be selfish. Surely, she understood that these were special circumstances. "What is it that's bothering you about this?"

"I wanted to move back to your house, Mom. I've been trying to do everything right...and not cause any trouble or anything. And now, he goes and does this, and he's the one that gets to move back, not me." Her tears were coming full force now, and she was angry and frustrated that she had even brought it up. She knew it made her look like a spoiled brat.

"You wanted to live with me?"

Emmy nodded, still not looking up.

"Honey, why didn't you say so?"

"Cause you told me to leave...and go stay with Dad."

Justine couldn't believe she was hearing this. "Sweetheart, I told you that three years ago, when I was crazy as a bed bug! And I've regretted it ever since. But my door's always been open for you. I thought you knew that...I told you it was your home too."

"I know, but...I didn't think you wanted me to stay there all the time."

"Honey!" Justine wrapped her daughter up in her arms. "Nothing would make me happier than to have both you and Trey back at home."

"You mean it?"

"I sure do. As far as I'm concerned, we can start moving your things tomorrow. But you're going to have to get your driver's license, so you can go over and see Alex and J2. They're going to miss you something fierce."

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Justine kissed the inside of Carly's thigh and crawled up to lay beside her lover, who was flushed from her climax and gasping for breath.

"Have I told you lately how much I appreciate your tongular dexterity?"

The redhead chuckled and nuzzled her neck. "There's no such word as tongular."

"I don't think any of those sounds I was making were real words." The women were savoring what might be their last night alone in the house, since Emmy was planning to move back home soon. "I love you...Grandma."

That earned her a pinch...which led to a tickle fest...which spawned a wrestling match...which resulted in Justine being pinned to the bed...where Carly slipped her tongue in Justine's ear...which started the whole cycle of lovemaking all over again.

"How did I ever live without this?" Justine panted.

"It wasn't really living."

"You can say that again."

"It wasn't really living."

Justine was tempted to deliver another pinch, but her body couldn't take another round right this minute. "It wasn't living, Carly. My whole life was just getting from one day to the next. Now all of a sudden, I feel like I have everything. I have you. I have my kids. I never used to think I could have both of those things, and I wasn't even sure I could get just one of them."

Carly rolled onto her side and draped her arm across Justine's waist. "You always had me, Justine. You just didn't know it."

The redhead smiled and pulled her close.

"I mean it. I've been in love with you nearly all my life."

"Oh, Carly. My life would have been so different if I'd just been honest with myself back in high school. You lit a fire in me back then...and it never did go all the way out."

"I know. It was the same way for me." She laid her head on Justine's shoulder, thinking about how that little flame would rise up all those times she climbed that hill to look down on this house.

"I can't wait to see the look on Valerie's face when I tell her that I don't think I'm going to need any more therapy."

Carly chuckled. "Maybe you should wait until you get past being part of the diaper brigade again."

"Boy, this is going to be one crazy house. I bet you're glad you're going to miss that part."

Carly didn't have an answer for that. At least, she didn't have a funny retort. The truth was, she really was going to miss that part. She'd been thinking over the last few days about what her cousin Perry had said about marrying a woman who already had a child. He said it was all a package deal, and that loving Debbie meant loving Kevin too.

She already liked Emmy, and in time, she thought she might even make some headway with Trey. Hooking him up with Perry at the furniture store was a good start.

But what she realized when she started thinking about having a life with Justine was that Justine needed all of it to be happy. And Carly didn't want to be on the outside of things; she wanted to be part of Justine's family too.

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Carly slipped in the back door of the coffee shop, trading her coat for an apron. Already, the shop was abuzz, and Daniel was swamped.

"Where do you want me to start?"

"I need whole milk and soy from the back."

She went back into the cooler and emerged with the supplies, shifting over to the cash register to start taking orders. In thirty minutes, they had everything under control.

"Mom was kind of bummed about not coming in today. I think she really liked it."

"Tell her again how much I appreciate that. And you too."

"It was no problem. How's Rich?"

Daniel nodded grimly. "He's...doing all right, considering. He said to tell you thanks for coming to the funeral, by the way. Oh, and the flowers!"

"That was Darlene Johnston's idea. Practically everybody that came in on Monday put money in the jar."

"They were beautiful. And that really meant a lot."

"It just goes to show you. People around here like you. It's not just the coffee house, either. They like you."

"I like them, too. I'm going to miss this place."

Carly knew this was coming. "So you've decided for sure."

"Yeah, Rich wants to head on out to the west coast. He's trying to get the house ready for sale, and I'm going to need to find a buyer for the store."

"What kind of time are you looking at?"

"I don't know. But the way Rich is feeling, he wishes he could turn it all over to a real estate agent and leave tomorrow."

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An unfamiliar green Corolla pulled into the driveway on Sandstone just as Justine was getting out of her car with two grocery bags.

"Carly?"

"Hi, there. So whaddya think?" She took one of the bags and led her lover over to see her new wheels.

"Where's your rental car?"

"I turned it in. Bought this one just this afternoon. Wanna smell the inside?"

Justine obligingly stuck her head in the new car, which still sported its window sticker from a dealer in Louisville. "You went to Louisville today?"

"Yep. I've been lots of places. I've been to the coffee house, the bank, your ex-husband's office, back to the coffee house, Worldwide headquarters, the airport rental office, the Toyota dealership...and now here."

"Wow! And here I thought I wore you out last night. I do believe you're holding out on me."

Carly grinned and followed Justine into the kitchen. "I quit my job." She lunged to catch the bag of groceries that dropped automatically from the redhead's arms. "And I bought the coffee house from Daniel." *For cash.*

"And Madrid?"

"Maybe we'll get there one of these days and see if it's as pretty as everybody says. They have one of the best art museums in the world, you know." Carly heaved the grocery bags onto the counter and turned back around, just in time to feel her feet leave the floor as she was swooped up and twirled around the kitchen.

"And you're going to stay in Leland and watch me be a grandmother?"

"I'm going to stay in Leland and watch you be a great-grandmother."

Justine hugged her tightly. "Carly Griffin, do you have any idea what you're getting into?"

"Yeah...I'm getting into being really happy for the first time in my life."

"And I'm going to see to it that you stay that way."

And standing there in the kitchen, Justine dipped her head to kiss the woman she loved. A rush of emotions filled her heart and overloaded her senses. And without even thinking, she raised her hand to cover Carly's breast, just as she'd done twenty-six years ago in the chemistry closet.

## **The End**

Thanks very much for reading. I'd love to hear what you thought of Justine and Carly. Write me at [kgmacgregor@yahoo.com](mailto:kgmacgregor@yahoo.com).

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