

Forever Sunshine

Collette Scott

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In Loving Memory of

Mary Josephine Brennan, Anne and Frank McKay, and Maylah and Richard Park. Thank you for your acceptance and guidance. Though I wish you were still here in the flesh, I always hear your voices in the wind.

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Prologue

Doctor Stansfield told me to write down what I was feeling. He said that if I did, perhaps I would begin to heal. Of course, he's never gone through something like this so how could he truly know if it will help? How could he know how to heal the gaping hole in my chest that used to be my heart? How would he know how badly I ache inside, how tortured my soul feels?

How empty I am.

How could this have happened?

The shadowed forms that came to the door still haunt my dreams. In fact, they even haunt my every thought. I don't think that will ever go away. The pity in their swollen, bloodshot eyes mocks me, and the sounds of their somber words still ring in my ears. I can still hear the puppy barking.

"I'm sorry, Cher, there's been an accident."

An accident?

I knew right away.

I could see it in their eyes. Even though they tried to hide their emotions from me, I could see the despair and shock and sadness all jumbled like a kaleidoscope on their faces.

Oh, yes, I fought them. I screamed at them to tell me it was a joke. How could it be?

We had spoken not three hours before.

COLLETTE SCOTT

Doctor Stansfield told me that those initial feelings were not unusual. He said that there are stages of loss widely experienced by people and my reactions were common. Initially I suffered from denial and anger. The bargaining was normal, he said.

They had posted several officers to stay with me that first night. To watch over me, they said. Among them were Chuck and Kerri, with pained looks of stunned grief on their faces. They watched me with sorrow in their eyes. I knew that they were hurting too.

Statistics are a sad thing. I think that it is a horrible way to commend the life of another. There are statistics for the number of deaths attributed to domestic violence. There are statistics for the number of deaths attributed to cancer. There are statistics for the number of deaths attributed to automobile accidents. Now my family has become connected with a statistic once again, and I hate that. But if we were not a statistic, I probably would not be sitting here now, pouring out my heart to a blank notebook of bright white pages and pale blue lines. I would not know this agony of loss or the pain of this complete sorrow. Then too, I would not have known the unconditional surrender in the love I received. Nor the joy of the brief time we shared.

Am I a survivor? Can I find the strength to pull through this? Right now I do not think I can. I have lost so much, but inside a part of me understood that there are those who suffer like this every day. Who am I to claim my pain is any worse than another's?

To be a survivor is an amazing thing. I see it every day at Mary's shelter. These strong women give up everything, walk away with nothing but the clothes on their back, and they are able to find their courage and learn to move on, smarter and wiser than before. Will I be able to as well? Am I really as strong as they are?

I think that is why I sit here now. To find out if I am as tough as everyone thinks I am. In despair I shall relive those brief years, and maybe, just maybe, Doctor Stansfield is right. Maybe I will heal at least a portion of my heart. And maybe I will understand that I was blessed in receiving the kind of love many people only dream of. I was one of the lucky few.

Chapter 1

It was a suffocating summer evening when my sister brought her unhappy marriage to my apartment door. Summer in the Valley was similar to winter in the more northern states, where the stifling temperatures caused tempers to flare because most wanted to escape the oven that had become Phoenix. Closed quarters due to the heat trapped people in their homes like the cold up north kept people indoors. The feeling of being trapped sometimes encourages anger, and anger at times spreads to violence. Violence sent Shelly into my arms. She needed my help.

That single phone call changed my young life forever, shaping it into a form I never would have thought possible.

She also brought the man who would be harbinger of that change with her.

At the time I was frightened. Shelly was sobbing when she called me at work, so I did the only thing I could think of at the time. I was still a kid, though I never would have admitted it, and my lack of worldly wisdom shaped the events of that night. See, instead of notifying the police straight away, I drove out to her East Mesa house and brought her and Jacob to my apartment not far from the Arizona State University campus in Tempe.

Despite the distance, we were followed.

“You should’ve told me sooner,” I whispered.

I crouched down in front of the front door of my apartment, close enough to hear but safe from the man outside. It had grown dark as the evening progressed but it was still oppressively hot. The thermometer attached to my windowsill claimed it

COLLETTE SCOTT

was still 95 degrees outside. The air retained the oppressiveness of the day, and it was thick and heavy with heat – almost like being in a dryer. Standing out in the heat only seemed to irritate him more.

The coaxing on the other side of my door worsened to an angry howl, and my voice could barely be heard over his demands. More urgent knocking ensued, sending me crawling across the room. Reaching up to the switch on the wall, I shut off the last of the lights in the small living room leaving only a dim orange glow from the street lights outside. I could not believe he had gotten there so quickly.

Blinking several times to adjust to the darkness, I dashed back to Shelly's side. My sister huddled underneath the single window in the living room of my apartment with her knees drawn up to her chest. Her chest was heaving. Of course, mine was too. Eyes swimming with tears, she frowned at the harshness of my words.

“Tell you what, Cher? That my husband hits me when he gets drunk? That's not something you want to announce to everyone, you know?” Her voice lowered. “It wasn't always like this.”

Shelly's voice was rough with tears and hoarse from her cries. Throwing my arm around her shoulders, I noticed that she winced at the pain. With a heavy sigh, I eased my arm away and leaned against the wall. Though I was not sure exactly what had happened that night, I could tell that it was not the first time. She still bore red marks around her shoulders where he had shoved her against the wall and held her there.

“Was he drinking tonight?”

She was slow to answer. “I don't think so.”

This Joe was not the man I had known for the past seven years. The man I had known at Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners was a charming, friendly man. Maybe he was a little controlling, but never deliberately mean. I had to admit that I was scared at the sudden change.

“What happened tonight? Why is he freaking out like this?”

She shook her head in confusion. “I don't know. He came home angry... This is the first time I've left the house.”

After a few moments, I realized that it grew quiet again outside. This was

FOREVER SUNSHINE

nothing new. Several times already he had stopped his incessant pleas to drink from the brown paper bag in his hand. What I originally thought was spirits ended up being a large water bottle. It did not surprise me. I expected that he would have gotten tired of sitting on concrete stairs that still retained the heat of the summer sun. In the summer, one did not sit on any form of pavement. It was just too darn hot.

“Shelly, if you do not open this door right now, there will be serious trouble later.”

We exchanged glances on the other side of the door. His voice was ominously calm, and I felt a shiver race down my back.

“That’s it. I’m calling.”

“Cher, no, please...” I ignored my sister’s plea and came to my feet. The phone was sitting in the charger on the wall in the kitchen, and I reached for it quickly before Shelly could protest any more. After dialing those precious three numbers, I waited to lodge my complaint.

No sooner had I hung up the phone than the knocking began again. He was still using the calm tone at the moment, almost in a sing-song pattern that reminded me of a villain in a scary movie. Returning my attention to my sister, I noticed that her fingers strayed to the lock on the door again.

“Don’t you do it! Not with Jacob asleep in the other room.”

“Is he even asleep now? With all this noise, who knows?”

My eyes narrowed. The lack of concern in her tone made me suspicious. “Has he hurt Jacob before, too?”

She shook her head, wincing at the pain her movement caused. “No,” she whispered, “not yet.”

“Oh, Shelly, you should have told me sooner.”

I pressed my cheek against the cool aluminum of the door. My brother-in-law was making enough noise to wake the whole apartment complex. I hoped management would not evict me for this scene so late at night. While the complex housed mostly ASU students that would party late into the night during the regular semesters, during the summer the place could be as calm as a graveyard. Right now

COLLETTE SCOTT

there were a few people out, and the ones that were sent curious glances towards my place before hurrying to their apartments to lock their doors.

“Shel-ly!”

“Go home, Joe!” I shouted. “I’ve called the police. Please, just go home now.”

“I want my wife! Goddamn it, send her out here... Cheeerrr!”

His voice rose on a wail. I was reminded of a spoiled toddler, whining because he was not getting his way. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep my big mouth shut.

When we did not answer, he began once more to pound on the door with increasing violence. I scooted away again. This time it sounded as though he was kicking the door with both of his booted feet. I could see it straining under his powerful blows. For a moment I worried that it would not hold.

Shelly grimaced in nervousness and pain. Her eyes were wide and wild – at least one of them was. “Jesus, Cher. He’s all out of sorts. Maybe I should just go out and talk to him.”

I stared at my sister hard. Even with only light from outside streaming in, I could see her eye swelling rapidly with every long minute that passed. Her fair skin was now turning purple and red in splotches of swollen tissue. Soon she would be sporting a black eye and multiple bruises.

“I will not let you go out to him while he is acting like this. He needs to cool off. I called the police; they should be here soon. Will you just wait?”

“But he’ll kill me if he gets arrested,” Shelly whispered, her good eye still glistening with tears.

I shook my head adamantly, totally naïve but brave. How little I knew then. “No he won’t. I called the police, not you. If he wants to blame someone, he can blame me.”

As if on cue I saw the flashing lights illuminate the hallway from my bedroom. I sighed with relief and came to my knees. “Wait here,” I said to Shelly.

Hurrying down the short hallway to my bedroom, I first made sure that Jacob was asleep in my bed. Then I tiptoed to the small window overlooking the parking lot below. With a shaky hand, I reached for the blinds to peek out the window. Two

FOREVER SUNSHINE

white and blue cruisers had stopped, and their red, white and blue lights illuminated the whole parking lot as well as my small bedroom. It amazed me just how quiet the normally bustling parking lot had grown. Most likely all my neighbors were huddled by their windows in their apartments watching the Friday night drama unfold.

“Well, they’re here,” Shelly said with resignation. She stood in the doorway, her face pale with fear. Her voice sounded hollow, and it frightened me more than the red marks covering her neck and shoulders.

“Yes... and the whole complex knows it.”

“I’m so sorry, Cher. I shouldn’t have involved you in this.” She grimaced. “I never should have come here.”

“Of course you should have come here. I would never want to see you hurt. What he did was wrong, and he needs to know that you won’t tolerate it,” I said bravely, smoothing a lock of Shelly’s long brown hair from her face. “I’m your sister. If you can’t count on me, who is there?”

As I waited for her to answer me, I returned my attention to the activity outside. Already two of the policemen had emerged from their car, one stocky and the other tall and thin, both dressed in the dark uniform of the police department.

My eyes drifted to a third officer, just then climbing out of his vehicle. I did not know why he captured my attention, but I could not drag my gaze away. The man seemed to exude self-confidence, and his calm nonchalance was soothing to my frazzled nerves. Though he appeared young, there was authority in his manner. This man, I thought, could help end this tonight.

He carelessly shut the door of his cruiser behind him and ran a hand over his close cropped hair with a casual indifference before placing on his hat. He was much taller than the other two and lean, with long legs encased in the dark uniform slacks and dark boots. I watched as he pulled his flashlight from his duty belt and followed close behind the other officers. They exchanged a few friendly words as they passed by the window.

“No one.” At the sound of Shelly’s voice, I dropped back down.

Throwing her a grim smile, I nodded my head. “That’s right. We’ll get him away from you.”

COLLETTE SCOTT

“God, Cher,” she said with a shaky laugh. “You make it sound so easy. You have absolutely no idea who you’re dealing with.”

The ominous sound of her words gave me pause, but I was still so inexperienced that I shrugged it off with a smile. At that time, I had no idea the amount of power one person could hold over another.

“Come on. They’ll find Joe in a minute.”

We shut the door behind us as we left my bedroom in the hopes that Jacob would remain asleep during the visit by the police. Returning to my front door, we heard Joe descend the concrete stairs and begin talking to the approaching officers. A silent communication passed between us, and we were quiet as we strained to listen. Shelly dropped to her knees by the window to witness the spectacle unfolding below. I crouched down beside her and pulled a small corner of the silky sheer curtain covering the blinds aside to witness his lies.

“He wouldn’t be so bad if he hadn’t just lost his job,” I heard Shelly say softly.

“You don’t have to make excuses for him. I’ll help you, Shelly, you know I would.”

“But you have to pay tuition for another year and a half. You work yourself so hard for your degree. I couldn’t accept your pity.”

“It wouldn’t be pity, you know that. You’re my matronly older sister.”

She turned to face me, a wry smile on her face. “I’m older by only five years. Don’t make me sound so ancient.”

I grinned at her and reached for her hand. Joining our fingers, I could feel her skin, cool and clammy, and I knew that she was terrified. The slight trembling in her limbs pierced my heart.

By rights we were not the closest of siblings, but I still felt the familiar bond. Five years older and married by the age of 21, Shelly had not been a large influence in my life for some years. Nevertheless, blood was thicker than water. That was even more important since our parents had decided that Arizona was too hot and had retired to the wilderness of Montana. We were the only family left in the area. That meant I had to protect her – especially since her husband would not.

Besides, I adored Jacob.

FOREVER SUNSHINE

Darling Jacob was four. A sweet, soft-spoken boy, with black hair and the most striking blue eyes I had ever seen. He had inherited my father's eyes, but the rest of him was purely Joe. Joe was handsome, in a rugged sort of way. Tall and heavy set, he had hair as black as night, so like his son's, but his eyes were the color of muddy water.

Muddy, like his soul.

I watched him below with growing disbelief. He had advanced upon the wary policemen and held out his hand, his smile wide. The shorter officer nodded his head coolly and began questioning him. For a moment it appeared as though they believed his story – whatever it could have been. But then his partner glanced up at the window where Shelly and my face peered out through the glass. With a startled gasp we both crouched down, and then managed nervous giggles at our childish reaction. Despite our frazzled nerves, our similar reactions brought back memories of our childhood together, and once more I swore to do everything I could to protect them. The righteous anger that filled me made me braver than I should have been, almost to the point of foolishness.

The officers below were still talking. Though their voices were muffled through the thickness of the double-paned glass and hum of my air conditioning, I was able to hear them curtly ask for Joe's explanation and then explain to him that he was disturbing the peace. Nervously peeking one last time, I caught the short one's partner glance our way once more. The short one and the authoritative one exchanged words and then they started the ascent. Joe remained behind reluctantly with the short one's partner, watching the other two climb the stairs that led to my door.

I sat back from the window and stared at Shelly. Her gaze flicked between the scene below and my face. I could tell that she was on the verge of caving already, and somehow I knew that was exactly what Joe expected. She was unable to meet my eyes, so I took her hands in mine and spoke firmly. "Maybe you should go check on Jacob, Shelly. I can handle this by myself."

"But..."

"No buts. Remember how scared Jacob was?"

COLLETTE SCOTT

“So?”

“He’s too afraid to go home. And if Joe hit you earlier, he’s only going to be angrier with you now. He’s been outside for ages now, probably getting angrier... Please, just go.”

I shoved her away just as the first knock came on the door. Despite my ignorance with spousal abuse, I was not that foolish. Tempers were high on this hot, oppressive night. I knew something terrible would happen if they left with him, and I was not going to let that happen. Not while I could stop it.

Even as children, Shelly had never been known as an ambitious child. The daring one in the family had always been me. I was the one who led the way and Shelly followed. Growing up, I was labeled the popular one, the pretty one, the smart one. It seemed strange to me, especially when most psychological studies claimed the firstborn was the over-achiever. Never Shelly. The quiet way she grew up transferred into a soft spoken adult who married soon after high school. Jacob arrived just two short years later, and Shelly devoted all of her time to her family.

I knew that she had agreed to go only because I had been so forceful. She wanted to please everyone, and going against Joe was the last thing she would have wanted to do. However, that night I had promised that I would take care of her and Jacob, and I was determined to fulfill that promise.

With determination steeling my spine, I returned my attention to the door. To my surprise, my voice trembled slightly when I asked who was there.

“Police, ma’am,” came the deliberate reply.

As if I did not already know.

I opened the door a crack, my poised foot preventing more than half my face to show. The stocky officer was staring expectantly at me as though waiting for me to let him in. He had a kind face, though at the moment he appeared stern. The crinkle lines around his eyes belied his firm words.

“Did you call the police, ma’am?”

“Yes,” I said. My voice trembled with nervousness. “He’s been at my door all evening, knocking and pounding. I just want him to go away.”

Taking an aggressive step toward the stairs, Joe met my level gaze with a scowl.

FOREVER SUNSHINE

“Officer, my wife and I had an argument earlier today,” he called out. “Cher, here, showed up at my house and convinced my wife to take our son and come here. All I want to do is talk to Shelly and make sure she’s okay.”

“Are you serious?” I asked incredulously.

Any nervousness I had felt was quickly replaced by anger. This Joe I did not know. He was completely foreign to me. All charming and smooth, when just moments ago he was sobbing. I could not comprehend this bizarre behavior.

“Wait a minute!” the second officer commanded as though sensing how close I was to losing my temper. He turned back to Joe. “Were you banging on the door?”

Joe smiled and bowed his head, looking like a perfect remorseful man. “I didn’t mean to scare them. I was just worried.”

The transformation that had taken place still held me rooted to the spot. Though I knew that Joe was always charming, I still could not hide my incredulousness. How could a man cry and sob outside our door for an hour, despite our requests for him to go home, suddenly rise up and smile and shake the hands of the policemen coming to question him?

Talk about bizarre.

“So you were making all the noise here?”

“Yes, sir. I just wanted to make sure she was okay, that’s all!”

“Have you been drinking this evening?”

“Not a drop.”

“I want him to go away,” I insisted, my voice cracking.

When the officers returned their attention back to me, Joe sent me another warning glance. “I’ll go away when I’m sure my wife is okay.”

I ignored him. “She’s fine and doesn’t want to see you right now.”

The officers exchanged looks before returning their attention to me.

“May we come in, Miss...?”

“Bridwell,” I said quickly.

“We’d like to speak to your sister if we may.”

“Fine,” I said. Standing slightly to the side, I opened the door wide to allow them to pass.

COLLETTE SCOTT

When Shelly entered the room, I was stunned by her appearance. She had applied some of my makeup to her bruises, magnificently covering up her injuries. After sending me a warning glance, she broke down and sobbed herself. She tried to defend Joe. After he had beat on her and terrified their son, she actually tried to cover for him and claimed that she had fallen and hurt her eye. I was even more surprised and not just a little bit angry to realize that she was so convincing that even I almost believed her.

The two officers were polite and actually spoke amiably. I could sense their stoic resignation as they patiently listened to our version of the story. They collected our licenses and ran us through their system, returning and handing everything back with no indication as to what they were feeling.

The tall, authoritative one questioned my sister for her side of the story. He was polite and kindly asked her if she needed medical attention for her eye, to which she quickly refused. I wanted to shout at them to be realistic and realize that she was lying through her teeth.

The shorter, portly man with graying brown hair broke away and silently wandered around my apartment, looking around for drugs or weapons, or God only knows what.

Occasionally he would throw a question my way, asking me to confirm something that was said. I watched Shelly and the authoritative officer. He ignored me completely and focused on my sister. Though he was gentle, his face remained aloof as he spoke to her. I was able to overhear him warning her that Jacob could be removed from the house if they thought he was in any danger. Shelly gasped and turned to me in a sheer panic.

I got his attention when I stepped forward and insisted that he was safe in my apartment. What more could I do?

On two other occasions I was aware of the same officer watching me, perhaps sizing me up, yet when I raised my head defiantly to return the stare he looked away.

I can handle my nephew, but I need your help to save my sister, I wanted to scream. Can't you see that he's nuts?

FOREVER SUNSHINE

Of course I should have known that they had much more experience than I did on battered women and domestic violence. The two officers that had crammed into my tight living room that sultry night had known far before I did that the beatings had been going on for longer than that one incident, and there was nothing they could do when she was denying he hit her. It was all in Shelly's hands. When she was ready they could help her.

Clamping my mouth shut, I listened to Shelly weave her story and went to sulk in the corner of the living room by one of my roommate's potted plants. The best advice they could give was given. The problem lay with Shelly following it. I was going to learn that firsthand.

I was distant, to say the least, and filled with the bitter taste of helplessness and disappointment when they explained to me to tell Joe to go home. If he returned they could arrest him for trespassing. I had expected so much more from the police that night. I had thought it would be easier.

"That's the best you can do?" I asked furiously.

Smiling grimly, the short officer nodded his head. "It's a start."

Frowning angrily, I watched as they returned to their cars. With silent ease, their cars departed from the complex behind an outwardly willing Joe, once more casting the parking lot in the dull orange glow of the lamps outside.

The night had progressed to the witching hour. After spending the entire day at work and then coming home to all the stressful excitement, I was exhausted down to my bones. Therefore, while Shelly went into my roommate's bathroom to soak in the tub I eagerly prepared for bed. After going through the apartment and checking that every door was locked and every window secure, I climbed under my lightweight covers and listened to the air conditioning hum. I felt safe then, knowing that I had taken the time to slide the locks on the wide windows in the living room and bedrooms and drawn every curtain and blind in my place closed.

It was not long before I became aware that locks would not keep Joe away that night.

Chapter 2

Dawn was not far away when I heard the hushed voices in the small living room over the subtle whoosh of the air conditioning. My eyes opened reluctantly while my exhausted mind screamed at me to ignore the sounds. It felt as though I had just gone to bed, and my limbs were heavy as I slowly regained complete consciousness. Then the events of the late night sent my dreams scattering, and I sat up with a gasp.

The voice I had heard in my living room was male, a male that had not been there when I went to bed just a few short hours before.

Throwing back the sheet, I slipped from beneath the covers and peeked out the door. Soft light illuminated the dark room, and I noticed that Jacob was still sleeping on the floor, a tangled heap amid the slippery sleeping bag. Long, spindly legs poked from the dark coverlet, the small toes twitching as he dreamed. He was fine but Shelly was gone.

I sighed. The sounds of Joe's voice was reaching me clearly now, rising in pitch and tone. The hallway was shrouded in shadows, so I eased my way quietly a few steps to assess what was going on. Even before I reached the living room I could smell the alcohol. Maybe he had been hitting all of the Mill Avenue or Tempe Marketplace bars after he left my place. What time was last call?

At first I was stunned, but that was quickly replaced with anger. My hot temper flared when I realized that it had been Shelly who allowed him into my home

FOREVER SUNSHINE

stinking of alcohol and angry to boot.

Before I confronted them both, I returned to my room and closed the door solidly behind me. It latched with a click, but I assumed Jacob would not notice. I did not want to frighten my nephew any more than he was already. He had seen enough for one night. While he had probably seen it before, there was no use in having him witness something he did not have to.

Though I had opted for stealth, things in the living room seemed to be escalating quickly. Their voices rose in pitch and intensity. Shelly's pleading did nothing to calm the anger inside of Joe. Even though she was begging him to go home, he continued to berate her for daring to leave him and calling the police.

The threats were violent and hurtful, insulting and controlling. I had never heard someone speak to another person like that in my short life. Sure, I had heard about domestic violence, but the few relationships I had participated in or observed in others always had a modicum of mutual respect. Joe did not respect Shelly. He was cruel in his accusations against her. According to him, she was useless, ugly, fat, whining, and the biggest mistake he had ever made. I was stopped in my tracks, listening in disbelief. How could my sister tolerate this?

Her soft sobbing and murmured apologies seemed to have absolutely no effect on him. Nor did it stop his tirade. I heard her whisper at him to shush before he woke me, that she would go home with him if he would just calm down. She said that if I did awaken I would probably call the police again.

That was when he completely snapped.

A loud crash erupted caused me to burst from the shadows. The scene that greeted me took me completely by surprise. Joe, easily forty pounds larger than Shelly, had grabbed a hold of the back of her neck and was dragging her towards the door. She had apparently reached for the lamp on the end table, and it was on the ground, shattered into large pieces of broken ceramic. The neck of the lamp rested at an awkward angle, held to the base only by the black cord.

"I warned you before about involving others in our family business," he was growling as he dragged her forward.

"Ohmigosh! Joe!" I shrieked. "What are you doing?"

COLLETTE SCOTT

Stunned, I could not stop myself from hesitating. Having never been in such a situation, I had no idea what to do.

Joe continued as though he did not realize I was there. “You made things worse tonight by coming here. You need to be taught who is in charge here.”

The room seemed to waver as though lit by a candle. Shadows danced on the wall and cast part of Joe’s face in darkness and I could not help but think that he appeared evil. Shelly tried to wriggle out of his grip, but he held on tight. It was not so much the broken glass crunching under my toes as it was the blind fury of this man invading my home and laying hands on my sister.

I did the only thing I could think of at the moment.

Reaching for his arm, I tried to get between them. If he reached the door with her, there would be no stopping them. “Let her go! Get out of my house!”

Nothing I did seemed to give him pause. Afraid that he would get her out the door, I looked around the room desperately. The only weapon readily available lay at my feet in jagged pieces. I bent and picked up one of the broken shards from the table lamp and jumped forward. His forearm was exposed, so I gripped it in my hand and reached out, pulling it across the taut skin with enough force to leave a red trail behind my shaking fingers. I was rewarded with a howl from him as he jerked away and stared at his arm in disbelief.

In his distraction, he released my sister, but his arm swung out and struck me in an effort to get me away. Because of his unsteadiness, his full weight went with the blow from his elbow, and the impact knocked me to the ground. I fell hard with a loud exhale, my head and cheek striking the sharp edge of the wood coffee table. The sharp cry that escaped my lips when I fell did little to stop the pain. Stars exploded in my head and my jaw felt as though it had been torn from my face. I could taste the bitter, salty taste of blood and my tongue reached for the gash in my mouth.

My teeth had sliced open the soft tissue of my cheek. It flamed and burned, and an instant swelling at the site made it even more painful. It hurt every bit as much as the throbbing in the back of my head.

I was aware of Shelly’s voice, rising in a panic. “Cher! Cher? Are you okay?”

FOREVER SUNSHINE

Blackness threatened to consume me. I believe the only thing that kept me conscious was the pain in my face and head. The area where I had struck the table burned like an inferno. I shook my head to try to clear it.

“Look what you did!” Stunned, Joe hesitated in order to stare down at the wound I had inflicted. “Goddamn!”

He stopped speaking and took a deep breath. But his fingers continued to clench and unclench as he struggled to control his temper. Starting over again, he tried to speak in a normal tone. But I could feel the rage emanating from him.

“Cher, this is a family problem that has extended too far tonight. All of this –...” He pointed to the lamp on the floor and Shelly crouching by me with a sweeping hand. “This is your fault.”

I reached out to touch my cheek. My fingers were shaking, and I tasted blood when I spoke through stiff lips. “My fault? Are you nuts?”

His anger grew when I looked at him in disbelief. “This is not your concern. You need to stay out of this. She’s my wife!” He pointed at his chest as he spoke, and saliva spewed from his mouth as he fumed. “She needs to be with me!”

“You are in no condition right now,” I sputtered, trying to sit up. It hurt so much that black spots teased the back of my eyes. I fell back again and closed my eyes. “You need to cool off,” I finished weakly.

“Who are you to tell me what to do? You’re just a pathetic kid, you know that?”

Coming to stand in front of me, he stared down but did nothing to help me up. His breath stank of whiskey and cigarettes, so pungent that I winced from the force of it.

Now I was beginning to understand. My cockiness was no match for his violence.

“Back off,” I said through narrow lips.

“Oh, so you think you’re a big girl now? I remember you when you were still wearing training bras, kid.” He stared down at my chest. “Not that you’ve grown out of them yet... You’ll never be a real woman, Cher.”

With one last glance at me, he shook his head in disgust. “You got what you deserved, little girl. If you hadn’t gotten involved, you wouldn’t be lying on the ground now.”

COLLETTE SCOTT

Then he was reaching for Shelly again and dragging her to the door by her arm. She did not fight this time. Instead she sent a worried glance at me where I continued to fight back the tears of pain from the blow to the back of my head.

Joe never made it through the door. Over the rushing in my ears, I heard the forceful knock on the front door. Joe had not thought enough ahead to latch it behind him, and it swung open by the third knock. Once again, uniformed officers were standing at my door. Joe hastily released Shelly and backed further into the room.

Though their voices were muffled and my ears were still ringing, I took in the sight with a deep sense of relief. The cavalry had arrived. Luckily, it was sweet little Jacob who came to the rescue. Awakened by my departure, he heard the voices and grabbed the phone off my nightstand to dial 911. Then he climbed into my closet and hid behind the hanging sweater shelf while he waited for them to arrive.

“She’s coming home with me,” Joe snarled, reaching again for Shelly’s wrist.

That was all the officers needed to act. While Shelly squealed and pulled away from him, they reached for his arms to restrain him. He continued to scream aloud his anger, and the rustling grew more heated as he began to struggle in earnest.

My mouth was filled with blood and swallowing it only increased my nausea. I struggled not to be sick. There were voices all around me but I could not understand their words. Then I felt a presence next to me, on his haunches, and gentle hands lifting my head.

“One forty three, dispatch, I’m going to need EMS at this address. Possibly two patients – both alert and oriented at this time.”

A crackle of indistinguishable words responded, to which he calmly answered.

I opened my eyes then and read the name on the shining gold tag. Brandon Nicholson. The shining gold plated badge marked him as a sergeant. Raising my gaze higher, I got my first good look at him. He seemed familiar, and I realized through my fogged brain that he had been there earlier. He was the third, authoritative officer who had spoken to Shelly.

Now he was bending over me, breathing rapidly from his exertions, and a sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead and upper lip. I studied him as I tried to regain

FOREVER SUNSHINE

my senses. Surprisingly, up close it was obvious that he was the youngest of the group. He was certainly a handsome man with dirty blond hair, closely cropped in a fade style, and large, deep-set blue-green eyes that reminded me of the Pacific Ocean.

Whether it was my hazy mind or the beginnings of love at first sight, his gaze immediately mesmerized me. Even though his face was emotionless and inscrutable at first, his eyes showed something entirely different. He was staring at me with an intensity that I found frightening and very powerful. He gave me the once over, his eyes pausing on my legs. By then I remembered that my nightshirt was up, and I reached down quickly to tug it over my thighs.

His steady gaze returned to my face and a frown appeared upon his sculpted, full lips when he saw the blood around my lips. The initial blank look was replaced with concern, and the tension in his primed muscles was quick to win me over. He was not acting. There was still a touch of formality in his tone, but the warmth in his eyes flowed right through me.

He really was worried about me.

“Are you all right, Miss Bridwell?”

“I’ve been better,” I struggled to say. My lips felt stiff. “Where’s Jacob?”

I could feel the warm stickiness of blood slowly drip from between my lips and grimaced. No wonder they felt stiff. His hands were gentle as he assisted me to sit up and straighten my shirt modestly, and at that point I saw a flash of exasperation and anger glimmer in the abyss of his eyes.

“I know we asked earlier, but I have to ask again. Do you have any weapons in the house?”

I shook my head, unable to speak more.

With his bare hand he gently tipped my face to examine the swelling of my cheek. His fingers were warm and gentle as they tilted my head to the side. It hurt like the dickens, but I was so happy to see a friendly face that I managed to tolerate it.

“What happened?”

“I cut him and he knocked me down. I hit my head.”

COLLETTE SCOTT

“We may need to take photos of your injuries...”

I nodded.

“You might need stitches, but your jaw seems ok. I’ve called for an ambulance.”

He turned to Joe, standing in the safe grip of two of the other officers with his head held low. “Is it not enough to beat on your wife? Now you have to get your kicks out of beating on her sister?”

He turned his angry gaze at me, his red-rimmed eyes spitting fury. “She got me first. Look at my arm. She gouged me. I want to press charges.”

“I think self-defense is an excusable crime.” He scowled fiercely. “We’ve already been here once tonight. You should not have come back.”

“This is my problem, not yours.”

Seeing the sergeant stiffen, one of the other officers gave Joe a tug and shot his friend and fellow officer a warning look. “Nixs, no.”

“She’s my wife, for Christ’s sakes. What right does *she* have to come between us?” Joe hissed angrily.

“Maybe if you’d stop slapping around your wife she wouldn’t need to come to her sister’s for help.”

“This is none of your business, Sergeant Nicholson,” he spat, drawing out the syllables of the Sergeant’s name with disgust.

“It is now. We were called here two times tonight. She asked you to leave her alone earlier. Now you can go to jail for domestic assault and trespassing.”

“Oh, this is bull.”

“You were out of line tonight, Joe.”

The sergeant barely gave me another glance as he regained his feet. “I see you’re not having any trouble breathing. Can you stand?”

I shook my head and was rewarded with a curt nod. “Just stay put then until the medics come to take a look at you.” He glanced over at Shelly, who was sobbing into a napkin in the corner. Her eyes continued to flick to her husband before returning to gaze in fear at the man in the uniform.

“Are you alright?” he asked. When she nodded he frowned. “Where’s the boy?”

“Jacob?” Shelly asked, her voice quivering.

FOREVER SUNSHINE

The sergeant's attention returned to me. "Is that his name?"

I nodded.

"Where is he, ma'am?"

"I imagine he's still asleep."

"Where was he sleeping?"

Though he appeared patient, I could sense his exasperation with my sister. Shelly had turned into an emotional wreck, so I inclined my head in the direction of my bedroom. The pain in my head only worsened. Reaching up, I gingerly touched the back of my head. There was a large goose egg, and my fingers came away with some blood. Though technically an accident, I just could not believe what had happened.

He stepped around the tangle of legs and toes then to make his way cautiously down the hall. I heard him calling for Jacob and then asking him to come out of the closet. One of the other officers left Joe in the custody of the tall, thin one and joined him, surrounding Jacob in order to shield him from the fiasco in the living room.

I could hear them asking him questions about what had happened, and bit back tears. How much had he seen or heard that made him dial 911 at the age of four?

More lights flashed in the growing daylight. The officer standing in the doorway nodded in my direction to the newcomers. More uniforms entered the flat, making me all the more self-conscious of my skimpy attire and bloody appearance. The paramedic team approached with arms weighted down with a heart monitor, oxygen and a jump kit.

"Can you tell me what happened?" the female asked with a polite smile.

As I gave them a summed up breakdown of the injuries, Shelly watched on with a worried look on her face. It only worsened when the two officers lifted Joe from the sofa and led him out of the way. Shelly stood to follow, but they shook their heads. She wrung her hands in helplessness and despair.

It was not going to be good for her.

They half-led, half-dragged him from my apartment and began to guide him down the stairs. He had taken only two steps before he stopped and retched over the wall. The officers shook their heads in disgust, though they stood patiently until Joe

COLLETTE SCOTT

was finished. The tall, skinny one chuckled slightly as Joe wiped his face with the tail of his shirt, and Joe turned on him with blurred eyes.

“Think that was funny? Maybe next time I’ll puke on you.”

His comment earned him a jerk from the shorter officer, and Joe scowled in the direction of Shelly. As they led him to a waiting patrol car he shouted his anger at her, telling her that she would be punished for letting them take him away. I shivered. Now I believed him.

Chapter 3

No sooner had Joe been escorted back to one of the waiting cruisers than I was faced with a new problem. As the paramedics loaded me onto the stretcher, the nice female one advised me that it would take some time and I would most likely need a ride home from the hospital. I glanced at Shelly, who had collapsed onto the sofa with Jacob in her arms. Tears left pale trails down her cheeks, and the paleness of her face contrasted sharply with the dark bruising around her eye.

“Shelly, would you be able to take my car and pick me up?”

She shook her head without hesitation. “I can’t Cher; I’m going to have to go to the station. Can’t you call your roommate?”

“I can’t wake her up this early in the morning.”

Shelly glanced around her as though trapped in a cage. “But Cher, I can’t be two places at once, especially with Jacob.”

Jacob had not lifted his head from his mother’s shoulder. I grimaced. “He should not go near his father, especially when he’s so scared.”

“You’re right... Maybe he should go to the hospital with you.”

The two remaining officers exchanged glances after her comment, and I shook my head in disbelief. “Oh, and that’s better? Forget it Shelly, I’ll just get a cab.”

Even though I knew I was tired and ached everywhere, I could not help but feel irritated. Self-pity and exhaustion made me exaggerate her fear and worry for ingratitude. I did not understand how she could put her husband before me at that

time.

“Just grab me my shorts and some shoes, please? I’ll also need my wallet and mobile.”

Shelly continued to sit and watch with a lost gleam in her eyes. My anger grew as Nicholson stepped forward, holding my whole purse on the tips of his fingers.

“Where are your shoes?”

“In my closet.”

He disappeared back into my room, only to emerge a few minutes later carrying my running sneakers and a pair of my jean shorts.

“I hope these are yours. They’re so small I thought they might be the boy’s.”

His face showed absolutely no sign of humor, but when the other officer chuckled, I realized that he was making a joke. I scowled the best I could. I had been insulted enough that night about my diminutive size.

“I’m not a child.”

He nodded sagely.

Turning my attention to Shelly, I gave her my best exasperated look. “Will you please get me?”

“I can’t Cher... You just don’t understand. He’ll kill me.”

After watching him in action that night, I realized that I truly did believe her. Even though every word was awkward and sent the taste of fresh blood into my mouth, I could not stop warning her. Someone had to get through to her.

“That’s all the more reason to stay away from him. Don’t bother bailing him out. He’s just going to hurt you again. What about Jacob? You have to think of him too. How can you even think of going back when you know he’ll just hurt you again?”

Shelly turned away from me then, blocking me out. Again I felt the sting of tears burning against the back of my eyelids. Bravely, I held them in check. There was no way I was going to cry in front of all these men.

Seeing my frustration, Nicholson sank down on his haunches by the stretcher and stared at me, and I was once more captured by the intensity in his blue eyes. He saw the emotion on my face and his lips tightened with unveiled irritation.

“Miss Bridwell, I’m going to need to ask you some questions, and you’ll have to

FOREVER SUNSHINE

make a statement. I'll swing by the hospital when I'm done with my paperwork and give you a lift home if you want."

I noticed the strange looks sent his way from some of the other officers and shook my head. "It's okay, really. Thanks for offering. St. Luke's isn't far. I can get a cab, and I'll swing by the station and answer your questions."

His head inclined slightly in response. As I stared at Shelly in despair, I was suddenly lifted on the stretcher and wheeled to the door. The EMS team carefully wheeled me out and into the bright lights of the ambulance. Shelly did not come out with me. At that moment I did not expect her to.

In fact, I did not expect anything from her at all.

*

Four small dissolvable sutures and a prescription for Vicodin three hours later found me dressed in the jean shorts and sneakers that Sergeant Nicholson had taken from my closet. I was relieved that the Emergency Room was having a slow morning, because I felt awkward being out in my Victoria's Secret nightshirt. Even though I suspected that others in the sparsely crowded emergency room had seen much worse, I was still happy to have been in and out of there in record time.

My head still throbbed, and the pressure from the huge lump on the back of my head had only increased in my time there. The nurse, a sweet older woman with gentle brown eyes, was kind enough to send me along with my first dose of Vicodin and already it was kicking in. As I waited, the throbbing eased to the ever-present dull pain in the spot.

My mouth was still numb from the local, but my nurse had convinced me that I was not drooling and looked normal enough to get home. She also made me promise someone would be there to watch me for a while to ensure the bump on my head did not become more serious.

I promised, though I really did not expect Shelly to be there. I was certain that I had lost her when I left on the ambulance gurney. She was too upset with the events of the night, and she would be doing whatever she could to get Joe out of trouble.

COLLETTE SCOTT

That was about all I was able to convince the nurse of. She insisted I wait in my bed and rest until the cab showed up. Snuggled deep under warmed blankets, I lay back and nodded my acquiescence. As she pulled the curtain closed behind her, she promised me that the front desk would alert her when my ride came.

The nurse had shown more wisdom than I had the entire night, for no sooner had she pulled the curtain than I fell asleep. The noise of the people speaking and equipment working seemed to fade away, leaving me to fall into a deep but troubled slumber. However, it was short lived, for it seemed that no sooner had I closed my eyes than the curtain was pulled back again and footsteps approached my bed. A warm hand landed on my forearm and gently shook me.

“Miss Bridwell?”

Even though the deep voice was familiar, the sound and the touch startled me out of my dreams. Thinking Joe was back yet again, I shot up while my head screamed in pain, but when I saw the familiar face I sank back onto the pillow and sighed. One shaky hand reached up to press against my throbbing temple.

“You scared me, Sergeant Nicholson.”

“I called your name first, but you didn’t respond. I didn’t think I could wake you unless I gave you a shake.”

His face was still impassive, a look that I had always connected with officers of law enforcement. However, he was again staring at me strangely, making me very conscious of my appearance. It was disconcerting, and suddenly I began to feel as though I were in trouble.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Yes. I’ve just finished my shift. I figured if you were all set I could bring you home.”

My eyes widened. I could not figure out if he was this nice to everyone, or if he somehow felt guilty for not being able to prevent the night’s occurrences. Wishful thinking, I thought, he probably saw situations like mine all the time. Yet, I found myself studying him again. As I expected, his face was inscrutable, completely unreadable. It was almost as though he had no emotion whatsoever.

“Are you sure? I mean, the other officers looked at you a little funny at my house

FOREVER SUNSHINE

when you offered before.”

He shrugged. “They’re just not used to seeing me offer, that’s all.”

“Will you get in trouble?”

“No.” His lips curved the slightest bit. “Do you want the ride or not?”

I slowly sat up, afraid of the possible aches I may find that I had not noticed before. Luckily the painkiller my motherly nurse had watched me take was working. I had wanted to question him more, but he reached for my arm and assisted me as I slid off the bed. My thigh brushed against his leg, revealing what I had already suspected. It was hard and lean, strong and well defined under the thin material of his uniform slacks. He was in good shape.

I had not realized just how tall he was until I was standing beside him. Granted I was barely five foot three inches tall, but he stood over six feet easily, and his broad shoulders completely blocked everything past him. A typical policeman, he certainly did not lack in intimidation.

His arm remained in a loose grip around my arm. His fingers were long and lean and easily encircled my upper arm. The result was a slight breathlessness that I tried to contribute to the medication, but it was no use. It was his presence that stole my breath away. Like a randy teenager, my palms grew moist and my heart pounded in my chest.

Leading me out into the hall, Sergeant Nicholson nodded in the direction of the nurse’s desk, completely oblivious to the stares and coy smiles sent his way. I saw the covert glances and whispers behind their hands and inadvertently grimaced. Though I knew it should not have mattered to me that the nurses found him attractive, for some odd reason it did. I looked a wreck, had been involved in one of his nightly arrests, and here these nurses were, fresh and attractive. It just was not fair.

He was *my* savior.

I wanted to pull away, fearing that I looked like a prisoner, but at the same time I found myself leaning into his touch. It was gentle but strong and gave me the support I so desperately needed at that time. Things were fuzzy and a little out of focus and the pain in the back of my head left me dizzy and lightheaded.

COLLETTE SCOTT

I felt awful. I hated Joe for placing me in this situation, especially when I was in the company of one of the most handsome men I had ever seen in my life, and I looked like something out of a horror movie.

He paused once more at the admissions desk and asked another wide-eyed woman to cancel the cab. I stood next to him feeling like a transient.

His hand remained around my arm as we stepped out into the bright sunlight. My eyes burned painfully, increasing the volume of my severely protesting head, and I stumbled slightly while my eyes attempted to adjust. His fingers tightened immediately, and I threw him a thankful half smile.

“Sorry about that.”

He nodded shortly. “Not a problem.”

Leading me to the police car parked illegally in the front of the emergency room, he opened the front passenger side door. I glanced at him again, my eyes shining with curiosity, but he merely assisted me to sit and shut the door behind me.

The radio crackled before me, and I was aware of the cage behind me. With glowing lights and beeps echoing in the small, tight area, I was struck with a feeling of claustrophobia. It was like sitting in the cockpit of an airplane, with switches, equipment and a computer screen filling the space around me. Never in my life had the front seat of a car felt so small and closed to me.

As he bent his tall frame into the driver’s side, I turned to him. “Am I allowed to ride up front with you?”

He closed the door and fastened his seatbelt without glancing at me. Just as I opened my mouth to ask him again, he nodded in the direction of my hands. “Just don’t touch anything, okay?”

I secured my seatbelt without responding, but as he began to drive it occurred to me that he was teasing me again. More relaxed than I had seen him before, he handled the car with utter ease. One arm rested on the windowsill and the other draped over the steering wheel. He spoke into his car radio and pulled slowly from the parking lot, leaving me to rest my head against the seat.

With my eyes closed my other senses slowly took over. I could smell him, the leather on his belt and the slight tang of his after-shave. It bothered me that he

FOREVER SUNSHINE

could still look so good after being awake all night long.

“Do you have a prescription?”

My eyes opened slowly to find him staring at me. I glanced around in surprise. We were stopped at a red light, the last in a long line of cars on Mill Avenue heading south. I knew that there was a drug store just another block down, and he could head back to my place a lot faster by taking Broadway than going through the university. When I returned my attention to him, I almost let it slip that I thought his eyes were beautiful. Catching myself just in time, I nodded slowly.

“Yes, for Amoxicillin and Vicodin.”

“Why don’t you give it to me? I’ll run into the pharmacy. Walgreens okay?”

“Yes, I’ve had one filled there before. They have my information on file.”

He pulled into the parking lot and held out his hand expectantly. Though my eyelids were growing heavier, I handed him the slip of paper, a twenty and my insurance card before I began to feel myself slip away. Even though I wanted to tell him it was unnecessary, I could not find the words. I was so tired. Too tired to ask him – why me?

Falling asleep in Brandon Nicholson’s police car was the last thing that I had wanted to do. However, the power of stress, lack of sleep, and medication took over all of my best intentions. I slowly became aware of my surroundings again when he gently shook my shoulder. With no memory of anything beyond the stop in Walgreens, it was startling to hear the car door open again. The warm morning breeze rustled the tangles in my hair and promised another miserably hot day. The ever-present dry heat just sucked what little energy I had left right out of me.

When I slowly opened my eyes, I once again saw uniform-clad legs standing before me. Following them up to his face I noticed he was smiling slightly. My heart responded by picking up in tempo, even as my cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

The small smile on his lips drew my attention. They appeared solid and firm. Through my sleep fogged mind I imagined what they would feel like. My flush deepened as I looked away quickly. I must have been having a good dream in the car to be thinking in that way. All I could do is hope he did not notice my infatuation.

“We’re at your apartment. Are you okay to get in?”

COLLETTE SCOTT

I felt in my pocket for my keys, pulling them free with a triumphant grunt. "I'm not usually so dull," I said lamely. "But they gave me something at the hospital."

"I know," he said shortly, once more reaching for my arm.

Slowly and cautiously he assisted me out of the car and helped support me as I slogged up the stairs. Strange thoughts continued to ramble through my head. Things like kissing the man and then wondering if he had ever shot anyone before. I had never been that close to a police officer's gun before.

When we reached the door, I turned to him and tried to smile. I wanted to thank him but could not think of any words to do so, and he just stared at me with his impassive look. I could not see his eyes behind his dark glasses, but I could feel his appraising stare on my face. A faint blush rose to my cheeks under his intent scrutiny. Aware that my shoulder-length hair was tangled beyond repair, my cheek was swollen and my clothing was hanging off me only heightened my discomfort. I could only imagine just how terrible I must look.

Before I could speak, the door to my apartment opened quickly, saving me from my discomfort. Arianne stood just inside the door, a fierce frown turning down her brightly glossed lips and her hands planted solidly on her round hips.

"Cher Bridwell! What the hell happened here last night? There's glass everywhere, and there's blood. I thought you were dead!" She stopped and stared from me to my companion, her frown fading. "What happened to your face? And why are you with a cop?"

For a moment I was jealous at the appraising look my champion gave my roommate behind his glasses. Granted the view of his profile, I could see how his eyes swept her from head to toe, pausing momentarily on her plush hips and generous breasts. I could not help but bristle, considering how terrible I looked and felt.

Of course, when one looked at Arianne, one would have to stare. Garbed in a skintight, red dress that ended at mid-thigh, Arianne posed a seductive picture. After a night clubbing in nearby Old Town, Scottsdale, she looked just disheveled enough to be sexy. Her long blond hair hung loose around her shoulders, and her wide blue eyes sparkled with anger and worry. Even though I felt the surprising urge

FOREVER SUNSHINE

to lean into Sergeant Nicholson and tell him that she was just about married, I just stood there.

After a moment, I sighed softly and glanced around the apartment with a disappointed eye. The once immaculate gray rug had drops of blood on it. Mine, Shelly's, Joe's? Maybe from all of us, all mingled together in dark smears of color.

The lamp was still in shards on the floor, some small pieces ground in from the weight of the policemen's boots. The coffee table was askew, and Arianne's *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan* and *People* magazines that once sat upon it were scattered from one end of the room to the other. It did look a lot worse than it had been. I would have a lot of explaining to do.

"I'm fine, Ari. Everything's okay. Don't worry. I'll get this mess cleaned up."

Her voice was less frantic as she took my arm and stared into my face. "Cher, what happened here last night?"

"Well, remember I called to tell you that Joe and Shelly were fighting? Well, the fight ended here."

She sighed heavily and turned away in disgust. Reaching down, she picked up the answering machine and set it back on the end table where it had once sat next to the lamp.

"Are they going to pay you for the lamp?"

I shook my head. "I'll take care of it next payday."

"Oh, like you ever have extra money. Why don't you ask Shelly to pay?"

"She's not here?" I asked. Arianne shook her head, still scowling. I was not sure that I was at all surprised.

I turned to Nicholson. He had stood silently during our exchange, but I noticed that his lips thinned to a narrow line. The shrug he sent my way held all of the frustration I felt at that moment. "Usually they will go back to their husbands for fear of retribution. It's not unusual."

I shook my head. "She should know better. We weren't raised like that."

"She's scared. Sometimes the abuse will get worse once he's been arrested." He shrugged again. "Other times it just sends the fact home that what he did was wrong and unacceptable. Who knows what Joe will do? If you were my sister, I would be

COLLETTE SCOTT

afraid to have him come back here and bang you up again.”

When I did not answer, his hand came down to rest on my shoulder. He gave it a slight squeeze before stepping back outside. “The battle has just begun, Cherisse. I’d recommend you consider an Order of Protection.”

“Me?”

I thought one of his long fingers might touch my cheek, but it hovered mere inches from the swollen and discolored skin. “He took a swing at you last night. You said he’s never done that before.”

“Of course he hasn’t. I never even knew that he hit Shelly. Besides, he didn’t really hit me. I went after him first and he just knocked me aside. Maybe it was all because he was drunk – like Shelly said,” I said hastily. Then I laughed which sounded hollow even to my ears. “Listen to me. Now I’m making excuses for him.”

Again his lips curved slightly in a small smile. I was aware of Arianne watching us closely. “Maybe so, but if she’s come here for help, your place will be the first place he’ll look next time. If he’s comfortable enough to barge in and start banging her around while you’re there, you may get hurt again.”

When he saw my eyes widen, he shrugged again. “Or not. It’s not usual for batterers to bully family members other than their children. They choose to maintain control in their relationships by abusing the people they claim to love. I’m just telling you this so that you’re aware next time.”

“But he was drunk. Maybe he just lost it. He’s never...” I glanced down at my hands. There was blood under my fingernails.

When I looked up again, I saw that his gaze had followed mine. There was the same tightening around his lips again. Once more I thought how soft those lips would feel. Probably wonderful to his beautiful wife and two towheaded children at home – assuming he was married, after all.

Giving myself a mental shake, I swallowed hard. “What’s going to happen to him now?”

“He’s going to have to go to court. They’ll probably tell your sister to take out an Order of Protection and have him go to anger management classes.”

“This is terrible.” I sighed. “Why didn’t she tell me sooner?”

FOREVER SUNSHINE

Shrugging, he took another step away. “Call the station when you’re able and we can talk, okay?”

With a final nod at me and Arianne, he turned and descended the stairs. My gaze followed him until he disappeared from sight, and it was then I felt the exhausted tears fill my eyes. I needed a long, hot bath and a soft, clean bed. I needed to call in sick at work and just crash.

I also knew that I needed to sit down and think about what happened and what to do about it. One thing was for sure, and that was that I was completely unprepared for Shelly’s state of mind.

Chapter 4

Shelly returned to Joe as soon as he was released.

Unfortunately, he was considered a first-time offender and released on his own recognizance. Now that I knew it was not the first time Shelly had been hit, I was upset that he was let out so quickly. In my opinion, the man needed to be locked up for hurting the woman he was supposed to honor and cherish. I believed strongly that the system was flawed.

Without even an effort to find out how I was doing, Shelly returned to her small home in East Mesa with Jacob. Burning with a need for punishment, I followed up myself. I did go to the station. It became an obsession for me, finding out all I could about domestic violence. Paying my own way through ASU with a scholarship and full-time work did not leave me with much extra time, but the small amount of free time that I actually had was spent surfing the Internet for more information. I read up on the laws that protected women and the laws that did not. It amazed me at how many women out there went through what Shelly had, and that her behavior was not much different from others. It had a name: Battered Woman's Syndrome.

I wanted to free Shelly from the prison called her marriage. I wanted give her and her son a chance at life, but she still was not ready. The phone calls and texts I sent out went unanswered, so I was forced to face the truth. Unfortunately, she was unwilling.

So many reasons screamed out at me as to why she would stay with the man who

FOREVER SUNSHINE

had hurt her so badly. Perhaps she was afraid he would kill her or try to take away Jacob. Or maybe it was because she depended on him to support her and was afraid to try it on her own. Maybe she thought he would change over time. Or the greatest tragedy of all: maybe she thought it was all her fault. Would I ever know?

Shelly finally called me two days later to say she was staying with her husband. Then she told me that Joe thought it would be best if they focused on their marriage for a while. That meant just the two of them and Jacob, without any outside influence – which meant me. He blamed my involvement for his violence and told her that things would be better if I were not around. As sick as it was, she believed him and wanted to give him another chance. I did not remind her that I had only been involved in one altercation. How many had there been before?

Before we hung up, I let her hear my tears and my wobbly voice. “Shelly, are you really happy? Is this what you want?”

Her voice broke when she answered. “Things are good now, Cher. We’ll be fine.”

That was it. She hung up without saying another word, and I felt more helpless than ever. Remembering Sergeant Nicholson’s kindness, I thought about asking him for help. It spurred me into returning to the station.

Unfortunately, when I did go down I did not see Sergeant Nicholson at all. Instead I was led to a detective who asked me more questions about that night and compared it to the officer’s reports. Everything matched up satisfactorily, and I was told he would be in touch for the hearing. They never called me. It was all handled without my presence, for one reason or another. When I called in, I was told rather briskly that he had shown up with a good lawyer, pled guilty, and had gotten off with probation.

A phone call to my parents did little to help. The way they spoke indulgently told me everything I needed to know. Shelly had spun her own story, and I knew how convincing she was after seeing her in action that night. They asked me to pass on my love to Jacob when I saw them next, and we hung up. I felt more helpless than ever.

There was nothing left for me to do except return to my studies now that the new semester had started. It seemed that with the yearly monsoon season came the

COLLETTE SCOTT

beginning of classes at ASU, and despite the oppressive desert heat the students returned with gusto. I did as well. Having no other choice than to move on with my life, I turned to my studies. Even so, deep down I understood that I had changed. I was no longer an innocent and sheltered twenty-three year old college student. I had a new awareness that the world was not a safe place, and that terrible things do happen very close to home. With the knowledge that my sister was in trouble, and that I could do nothing to stop it, I faced my days with a heavy weight on my shoulders.

But my friends were persistent in dragging me from my internal reverie. A friend of mine from one of my English classes, Paul, caught up to me on the steep road bridge over University Drive. Like the dozens of other students crowding around me, I was returning to my car after finishing up the day's classes when he shouted my name.

Stopping was hard to do. It was blazing hot and the sun beat down upon the top of my head brutally. With no shade around and crowds of people hurrying past, I was eager to escape to my car and its air conditioning. Wishing for nothing more than the safety of my home and a good cup of coffee, I hurried along. But Paul was insistent. He jogged up to me and grabbed my arm, his voice breathless after hurrying up the steep bridge. I was impressed with his stamina.

“Didn’t you hear me calling you?”

I shrugged at the stocky, dark-haired football player whom I had dated on a couple of occasions. We had waited tables together during our sophomore year at a cantina in Tempe Marketplace and had hung out after work for a couple of months, but both of us knew that there was no spark. Luckily we had remained good friends, which was helpful since attending a college so large that making friends while commuting to classes was tricky for me.

“I’ve got to get home, Paul. I have to work tonight and I have a ton of reading to do. I really don’t have much time.”

He studied me with his deep set brown eyes. He really was a handsome young man, and the last I had heard, he had been on every sports recruiter’s list to play pro. I wished him all the best. Paul was one of the few people aside from Arianne

FOREVER SUNSHINE

that I spent my sparse free time with.

It was as my friend that he persisted then. Falling into step beside me, he reached out and took my book bag. I almost protested, but figured in the end that it was just too hot to argue. He shouldered it and then turned his attention back to me.

“So, how’ve you been?”

“I’m okay,” I answered vaguely. “How about you?”

He sent me a sidelong glance. “What’s the deal, Cher? You’ve been a little strange lately.”

“Strange?”

He had the grace to look a little uncomfortable. “Well, yeah. You haven’t been the same since you’re uh...thing.”

I smiled. “You mean Shelly?”

“I should take a ride out there and show Joe what it feels like. Want me to do that for you?”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “As much as I’d love to say yes, you’re far more valuable than that. I don’t want you to have any blemishes on your record due to me.”

“What can I do then? You’re not happy anymore.”

“Things aren’t so great right now. I’ve got a lot on my mind. That’s all, really... I’ll be back to my normal self soon. I promise.”

He looked so uncomfortable that I reached up on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. “That’s all, Paul. Things will be fine soon.”

“Well I was going to ask you to come with a few of us to the movies tonight. It’s Friday, you know. We’re all going out.”

“I can’t. I have to work.”

“What about after work? We can meet up in Old Town.”

I sighed. It was too hot outside, and all the students returning to the dorms brushed past us like a school of fish. The feeling of being in a fishbowl was irritating me. “Can we do something next week? I’m not up for it tonight.”

“You haven’t been up to anything these last couple of weeks. Are you sure I can’t do anything for you?”

COLLETTE SCOTT

“Look,” I said a little sharply. “I’m fine.”

He gripped both my shoulders with his hands and pressed his forehead against mine. His palms were moist against my skin and our foreheads were instantly hot. I wanted to pull away. Instead I continued to smile, despite the sweat forming between our two brows and my discomfort.

“You are a real pain, Cher. Are you sure you’re going to be all right?”

To placate him, I smiled widely. “Call me tomorrow and we’ll catch up. I have to work all day, but you can take me out to lunch or something, okay?”

He placed a kiss on my forehead before releasing me. “Will you call me if you need anything before then?”

“Of course. But you know that I can take care of myself.”

“I do know.” He smiled at me then and gave me a gentle shove. “Go home, Cher. I won’t keep you any longer.”

With an exaggerated bow, he handed me back my book bag and turned to go, sending me a grin over his shoulders. “I’ll call you.”

“Thanks.”

“You bet.”

He strode a couple of feet then turned around one last time. “When do you want to hit the track again? We haven’t done that in a long time.”

“Not until it’s below eighty in the morning,” I returned.

“Fine. I’ll keep checking the weather, and as soon as the temperature drops I’ll be at your door at six.”

Laughing, I watched him jog off towards the Palo Verde Main dormitory. Most likely he was going off to meet up with guys on the team over at the Arena. I was planning on turning in the opposite direction, towards San Pablo Hall and Lot 59. Like all the other poor students, I could not afford to park anywhere else.

With another wistful glance toward Paul, I began to appreciate his concern now that he was gone. When he finally slipped out of sight in the crowds heading to and from their classes, I spun on my heel and slammed right into someone standing directly behind me.

My heavy book bag fell to the ground and several loose papers scattered

FOREVER SUNSHINE

everywhere while I let out a startled, “oof.”

“Sorry,” was the mumbled reply.

We both bent and reached for the books at the same time, bumping our heads in the process. Again I let out, “oof.” This he echoed.

I had to laugh when we both reached for our heads and straightened. It was my turn to mumble my apologies. He handed me a handful of papers, which I took gratefully. While I awkwardly tried to get them organized, I did not immediately give the man my attention. He continued to stand close, his gaze boring into the top of my head.

“Hi, Cherisse. How have you been?”

It was the way he said my name that caught my attention and stirred my fogged memory. With narrowed eyes I stared up at the man, not believing my ears. He looked entirely different from the authoritative uniformed police officer that had kindly driven me home from the hospital several weeks ago.

“Sergeant Nicholson?”

“Brandon,” he corrected with a short nod.

The first thing I thought of was Shelly. “What are you doing here? Has my sister gotten into trouble again?”

No sooner had I said it than I realized the implausibility of my thinking. Shelly was all in the way in East Mesa. It would be pretty unlikely that something happened to her in Tempe.

While I was rationalizing this, he glanced down at himself which drew my attention to his garb. He was not in uniform, and I was quick to notice that he was just as handsome without it. Though in street clothes, his bearing screamed military training.

He held himself straight and alert, with his long jean clad legs spread wide. I admired the way they hugged his narrow hips and clung to the long expanse of his legs. Leather and suede hiking boots covered his long feet, and a battered Air Force T-shirt embraced his broad shoulders. I thought idly that no man had the right to be that handsome, especially in this scorching desert heat.

“No, not that I’m aware of.” He shrugged. “I’m not on duty.”

COLLETTE SCOTT

His eyes were impossible to read, hidden as they were behind his dark sunglasses. It was frustrating to have him stand so close, studying me, while I could not interpret his emotions.

“Why are you here, then? Are you looking for me?”

His lips curved slightly upwards. “Why would I be looking for you? Have you done something illegal?”

Flustered, I shook my head. “No way.”

“I wasn’t looking for you. I saw you with your boyfriend and thought I’d see how you were doing.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

I was not sure why I corrected him so quickly, but his response was exactly what I could have hoped for. His brows rose inquisitively and the small curvature of his lips widened to a grin. There was warmth in his smile, and it sent shivers of pleasure down my spine.

Reminding myself that he was probably married to a beautiful wife and had two gorgeous children, I mentally slapped myself to get back to reality. I glanced away nervously from his stare, aware again that my palms were moist.

The silence stretched out for too long, in my opinion, so I looked up at him again. “Then what are you doing here?”

“I take classes here. Just finished one.”

“You?” His brows rose again from behind his glasses. I grimaced in response. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.”

He gave me another small smile. “I know. Yes, I’m taking classes here. I’m working post-grad. Justice studies... Which is why I work nights now.”

I could feel my eyes widen in response to my surprise. “Wow. Good for you.”

“Thanks.”

We stood awkwardly for a minute as I mentally calculated the distance to Wilson Hall. It was a long walk in this heat. “Why are you up here? Shouldn’t you be at the other end of the campus?”

“I usually do, but I had lunch with a buddy. I met him up in Lot 59, and he dropped me at Denny’s on our way back from Phoenix.”

FOREVER SUNSHINE

It was well over a hundred degrees outside, and he was in jeans and hiking boots. How had he managed to get here and still look as though he was fresh from a shower?

“Long walk,” I commented stupidly.

He nodded again, and then jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Are you in a hurry? Going somewhere?”

I almost gave him the same replies that I had used on Paul. Two things held me back. First, I knew he would not believe me. And second, I had so many questions to ask, and somehow I knew he would take the time then to answer them.

“No, I was just on my way home.”

“Do you like coffee?”

I nodded. “Decaf.”

“Would you like to go get a cup with me?”

“Will your wife mind?”

“I’m not married,” he said with a surprised edge to his voice.

“Oh,” I answered, my face coloring yet again.

Seeming not to notice my embarrassment, one brow rose above his dark glasses. “Join me?”

“Sure. Where to?”

“There’s a Starbucks over here, but I think we could both use some air conditioning. Do you feel up to walking down to the MU?” He cocked his head to the side, appraising me. “That way we don’t have to drive.”

I appreciated the thought. It certainly saved us both the effort of trying to find parking at one of the metered spots around the campus. The Memorial Union was a bustling center of student dining amongst other things, busy but not too far of a walk in the heat. With a nod, I shifted my bag and turned back to the road bridge with a sigh of resignation.

Falling into step beside him, I was quick to notice that keeping up to his long-legged pace would be difficult. By the time we reached the double doors, I was breathless and my legs were straining. Naturally he looked as cool as ever, but when he held the door open for me to pass, his nostrils flared slightly as I passed. I noticed

COLLETTE SCOTT

and responded almost immediately with a nervous flutter in my chest. At this point in the afternoon, I was not sure there was any perfume left on me.

The Memorial Union was crowded but blessedly cooler than outside. The hum of people's voices echoed off the high ceilings. People hustled by and between us, threatening to separate us into the crowd. Brandon ended up stepping closer to prevent it. His hand settled between my shoulder blades and stayed there as we found our place. His fingers were splayed just enough to guide me to the line, but I could feel the change in my breathing pattern. For the tenth time in as many minutes, I told myself to calm down even though I knew I was becoming even more hopelessly attracted to him.

Hiding my nervousness was more work than I imagined, and I noticed that my hands were shaking by the time we found a place to sit. It was difficult to conceal anything from his piercing gaze, so I did the best I could by adding the sugar and creamer and stirring my coffee for an unbelievably long time. He sat across from me with his back against the wall, watching the people pass by with his customary alert indifference. After a minute or so, and once he was satisfied with our surroundings, he turned his attention to me and watched my ministrations. I noticed that he added nothing to his coffee, and his fingers curled around his cup in a relaxed and easy grip. Finally he sat back and raised the steaming liquid to his lips.

“So, I see your face has healed.”

My stirring stopped abruptly. Placing the stirrer on a napkin next to my cup, I reached up and touched my cheek. My fingers traced the spot that had landed against the coffee table all the way to the back of my head. The bruising had faded under my summer tan, but inside my mouth I could still feel the scar tissue with my tongue.

“Yes. The bruises have faded.” I sighed. The bruises inside were a different story. Raising my gaze, I met his stare evenly. “I can't thank you enough for helping me out that day. I'm sorry I haven't had a chance to before now.”

He shrugged his broad shoulders, his battered and worn shirt rising from around his narrow waist. “Not a problem. Just doing my job.”

“I understand,” I murmured.

FOREVER SUNSHINE

He smiled. “You look a lot better without the chipmunk cheek. You’re much prettier.”

“Thank you,” I said with a nervous smile.

“How’s your sister – Shelly, right?”

I nodded in response. He had removed his glasses and the aquamarine of his eyes initially held me captivated but the mention of Shelly brought me back to the present, and I reminded myself to get a grip. He was here, the very man I had wanted to talk to, and I was stuttering like a teenager.

“She won’t talk to me.”

“He won’t let her.” It was more a statement than a question.

I nodded. “Yeah, Joe told her that she couldn’t talk to me anymore, and now she won’t answer my calls. I actually drove out there last week, but Shelly’s car was gone and Joe’s truck was there... I didn’t stop.” I inhaled slowly. “Two days ago I tried to call again, but he’s changed the phone number.”

“Isolation. It’s not uncommon.”

I nodded in agreement. “So how do you know so much?”

“I see it almost every day. The same people go back and forth over and over again.”

“Why won’t she just leave him? I mean, it’s not like we were beaten as kids. My parents never hit us.”

“Where are they now?”

“Who? My parents?”

“Yes.”

“In Montana. I called to tell them what happened, but Shelly got to them first and said I overreacted. They won’t come down here because they think that Shelly is perfectly fine.”

His lips thinned. “Sometimes it’s better to let the players work on their own game.”

“How can you say that? She’s my sister. I need to help her.”

“You can’t help someone who doesn’t want to be helped, Cherisse.”

“I won’t accept that,” I said in a hushed tone. “Why can’t you go and arrest him?”

COLLETTE SCOTT

“Believe me, Cherisse, I would if I could. But there are laws to follow, and he’s got to break them first.”

“How? By killing her? I’ve done some research; I’ve seen how badly the system works.”

I saw the emotion flash in his eyes and thought I may have offended him. Yet when he leaned forward, his eyes were urgent. “You have no idea how hard it is to watch the same couples go at it time and again. Do you know how frustrating it is to see a child after he’s watched his father beat his mother? They stare at you with a mixture of relief and disgust. They love the cops to help them but hate them for doing their job and taking their parent away. And then after I arrest the father that same child has to call me back two nights later for the same thing. After he’s been to court... all because she’s too scared of him to leave.”

“Yes,” I hissed. “Just a few weeks ago I had my first experience with that. You and I both know he’s going to hurt her again. What about Jacob? What’s all this going to do to him?”

“He should be in counseling. And if he doesn’t get it, he could end up just like his father.”

“I should go and kill him myself.”

“And end up in jail.” He chuckled. “Remember who you’re talking to here.”

When I looked away, he leaned forward to capture one of my hands in his wide palm. I was again aware of the fluttering in my belly and considered pulling free before I blushed again, but his soft voice stilled me.

“You’re a dangerous young woman, Cherisse, and he sees you as a direct threat. He’s used to Shelly doing everything he wants her to, and then you come along and have him arrested. Abusers want control. They don’t usually hit people other than their wives.”

“I went after him to get him off my sister.”

“And he completely lost it and hurt you. You’re way too feisty to get involved. You’ll be the one to end up hurt.”

“But that’s my problem.”

His eyes smoldered as his lips narrowed to a thin line.

FOREVER SUNSHINE

“The very last thing I would ever want to do is find your body one night after another 911 call from your nephew, Cherisse.”

“I don’t want you to either,” I answered softly.

Sighing deeply, Brandon released my hand and sat back in his chair. Pushing it back on two legs, he studied me for a moment. His frustration wavered slightly under my wide-eyed scrutiny, but I continued to wonder what he was truly thinking. It was too easy to develop a crush on one so enigmatic.

“Enough said,” he said abruptly, dropping his chair back on all four legs. “We’re arguing like an old married couple and we’ve only been here for thirty minutes.” He gestured with his hand to the pile of my books beside me. “What’s your major?”

“Education.”

“You want to teach?”

I nodded with a shy smile. “High school.”

“What year are you?”

“Junior.”

“So you’re how old?”

“Not a child,” I quipped.

He smiled again, a heart shattering, breathtaking smile that I felt down to my toes. It bothered me that he could have such straight, even teeth. Of course he was a policeman, he would be perfect. Or at least pretty close to it.

“How old are you, Cherisse?”

“Twenty-three last April.”

“So you didn’t come here right away after finishing high school?”

I shook my head. His questions were starting to get more personal, and I was not sure if that was a good thing or not. I told myself that he was inquisitive because of his job, but he seemed so earnest that I could not hold back.

“No. I worked for two years to raise enough money. I still work now.”

“Do your parents help you at all?”

“No,” I muttered. “They’re retired up in Montana. They spend all their time either hunting or fishing. They don’t really care what Shelly and I do now that we’re adults. But I have a scholarship that helps a lot. Tuition increases are killing me.”

COLLETTE SCOTT

“So I guess they don’t approve of your chosen major either?”

I laughed. He had them pinned. “How’d you guess?”

“It’s my job,” he answered with a shrug.

I counted off on my fingers. “They say I won’t make any money. They say that I’ll be burnt out in a year or two. They say it’s an undervalued and underpaid job that politics tries to maintain too much control over. They say I’m wasting my time and my mind. And, of course, they say I won’t even be able to find a job after student teaching.”

“You know what I think?” he asked, downing the rest of his coffee.

“What?”

The room seemed to grow quiet as I waited expectantly for him to answer. Despite the people that mingled and chatted around us, despite those that paused next to our table to share a few words, I was aware only of him. He took his time, his eyes twinkling.

“Life is what you make of it. You can choose to succeed and pursue your goals, or you can sit back and let life pass you by. Hopefully you’ll always have that ability to taste your hope.”

“Taste hope?” I asked. “What’s that exactly?”

He pursed his lips together as though considering my question carefully. I liked the intent look on his face.

“When you know what you want and go after it. Hope is tangible. Hope is ever-present. When someone has the ability to taste hope, they catch it, they hold it in their hands, and feel it in their hearts. I think that you’re a tough young woman who could probably achieve whatever goals you set for yourself. So you should do whatever you want, especially if it makes you happy. Besides, teaching is an honorable job, no matter what anyone else thinks. You’d be shaping the kids of our future.”

“Wow, thank you,” I said, following his example of drinking the rest of my coffee. I grimaced immediately. The coffee had turned cold, and I was surprised to see how much time had passed. The sun had moved from its position just over our heads to glare through the glass windows.

FOREVER SUNSHINE

“Gosh, look at the time.”

“Can I walk you back to your car?”

I nodded and came to my feet, gathering up my books as I did so. Side by side we exited the building, both inhaling sharply as the heat outside blasted our faces. I fell into step beside him again, matching his long strides equally this time. He was so close I could hear the slight sounds of his breathing. I liked it, probably more than I should have.

A long walk through the crowds mingling on Palm Walk in the burning heat of late-August kept me somewhat grounded. I was able to answer his casual questions as we again hiked up the steep bridge across University Drive and pass through the dormitory area over to Lot 59. The car was approaching, and I resigned myself to ending our pleasant meeting.

Disappointment slowed my steps, causing him to glance down questioningly. “That’s it over there, right?”

He pointed to my small blue Kia Rio just a mere ten paces away, and I nodded. At this point I knew better than to ask him how he knew. More than likely he had seen it in its assigned space that night he was at my apartment or perhaps when he ran my license. “It’s not much, but it’s paid for.”

“And it runs,” he finished with another heartbreaking grin.

“Most of the time,” I said lamely, pulling out my keys.

He took them from me and deftly opened the door, holding it wide for me to get behind the wheel.

“Thanks for letting me vent,” I said before I climbed in.

He smiled again and nodded his head. “It was good to see you. I’m glad that you’re doing well... Maybe I’ll see you around campus sometime.”

Ducking into the car, I paused to search for something that was not forthcoming on his face. “Yeah, I’ll look for you.”

Once I had placed my purse and books on the seat beside me, he closed the door and handed me the keys through the open window. It was hot inside the car, and the smell of my air freshener combined with the wave of hot air out the window to wrinkle Brandon’s nose.

COLLETTE SCOTT

“Berries? A new one, eh?”

“I guess I do whatever it takes.”

“Yeah, that’s what scares me.”

Before I could question him, he reached across me into the car, his forearm brushing my chest. I leaned back in surprise, but he merely picked up my notebook and took out his pen. As I watched he scribbled something on the last page, and then folded the notebook over and handed it back to me. Three phone numbers glared back at me, written in neat, block-style handwriting.

“The top one is my mobile, the middle one my home phone and the last one the number to the station. If you ever need me, Cherisse, you call me. I’ll do what I can to help you out, okay?”

It was not an invitation for a date, and it certainly was not a promise of one, but as I stared down at those phone numbers I felt my heart tug. It was not a huge lurch, but it was something. I knew then that he cared at least a little.

When I did not immediately speak, Brandon tapped the top of my head with his pen. I glanced up, smiling, to meet my reflection in his glasses.

“Thank you, Sergeant Nicholson,” I murmured, hugging the notebook to my chest. “I promise I won’t abuse your generosity.”

He smiled again. “I trust you, Sunshine. And call me Brandon.”

No sooner had the words left my mouth than I was feeling like an idiot. What was I thinking? Why had I said something so childish, so foolish?

I could feel the blush burn my cheeks, growing hotter when he raised his hand to wave back. I did not wait to see him climb into his own vehicle. I sped away home as fast as I could so I could hide my burning cheeks under the covers of my bed.

Chapter 5

“I promise I won’t abuse your generosity? You said that Cher? What’s wrong with you? Haven’t I taught you anything about flirting in all this time?”

I wanted to reach out and kick Arianne’s foot out from under her. Two weeks ago I had developed a teenage-like crush on Brandon Nicholson. Just that day, I finally let my roommate in on my embarrassing secret as we jogged around the track at the campus. Her response was a loud, enthusiastic laugh which made me scowl.

It was another hot morning, despite the recent departure of the monsoon season. Labor Day usually indicated the end of the summer season for the folks in the colder climates, but not here. Labor Day had come and gone and we still had temperatures over one hundred degrees. Our heat showed no sign of waning any time before rapidly approaching October. As I had reminded Paul, I refused to run before the morning low dropped below eighty degrees, and this morning was the first that we had been able to hit the track. Unfortunately, Paul had not made it. Though we were jogging early, I could already feel the stickiness of my sweat trickle down my back, and we were only halfway through our three-mile run.

“He really called you ‘Sunshine’?”

“Yes,” I grunted.

“I don’t know, Cher. He did look a bit worried about you that day he dropped you off.”

COLLETTE SCOTT

“Nice try, Ari. You saw how he’s made hiding his emotions an art form.”

“And I just thought it was his body that was the art form.”

I gave her a quick shove, sending her jogging on the green grass next to the track.

“Hey!”

“You’re not helping.”

“Well, he is handsome as sin.”

“And I’m just wasting my time.” I took a deep breath and let it out. “Besides, he was staring at you.”

Arienne glanced at me, sizing me up. “Cher, don’t sell yourself short. You are a beautiful girl, you know, and I would kill to have a figure like yours. Unlike me, you don’t need to be out here running every day. You eat whatever you want and don’t put on a pound while I have to struggle to keep in my clothes.”

“You have breasts, Ari, and I have molehills. And he *stared* at you when he saw you.”

“It’s not the size, babe,” she purred. “Besides, those *are not* molehills.”

“I look like a boy.”

She laughed. “I can’t think of a single guy out there that would think you look like a boy!” I didn’t tell her of Sergeant Nicholson’s comment that night over a month ago. “And you have a gorgeous head of hair and huge blue eyes. Like that’s not stunning?”

“I’m plain.”

“Your modesty is growing thin.” She waved her hand, throwing aside her voluptuousness. “You’re not plain at all, Cher. I think it’s just that we’re never happy with what we have. It’s unfortunate, but something we have to live with. But I’ll tell you, if your cop’s butt was within my reach I would grab it. Like this guy here – I’ve never seen him here before... Look, it’s a new guy.”

She gestured to a jogger that had just arrived on the track. He moved slowly to warm up, and we were catching up quickly. His feet were clad in worn running shoes, and baggy sweats covered his body, hiding his form, all except for his

FOREVER SUNSHINE

derriere. It was taut and muscular, and it clung to his gray sweats enticingly. A worn baseball cap covered his head, but at that moment we two were not staring at anything but his behind.

Much to my dismay, as we came up behind the jogger, Arianne reached out and pinched his buttock on the side I jogged on, leaving me to get the surprised, “Hey,” shouted our way.

“Arianne,” I gasped. “Why did you do that?”

“Don’t worry about it, Cher. He loved it. Guys love it when a girl takes the initiative.”

“But I don’t know him! What if he catches up to us? What if he thinks I was hitting on him?”

“Who cares? You’ll probably never see him again. But boy, did he have a nice butt.”

“I’m out of here,”

Forgoing my stretches, I ran right to the locker-room. I didn’t care if Arianne followed. Naturally she did, and she was merciless when she teased me about finally falling for a guy.

“It’s about time, Cher. I was beginning to wonder about you.”

“Wonder what? I’m just too busy for a guy.”

“But he’s too good looking to let slide. Any fish is good if you’ve got him on a hook, Cher. I say you go after him.”

“I’m done listening to you, Ari.” I scowled at her. “Let’s just go.”

Reluctantly giving up, Arianne finished dressing and tossed my bag to me. I slipped my flip-flops on and gathered my stuff, hurrying out behind her, only to see the jogger standing outside waiting for us. He was leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest, and I immediately realized that there was no way he could have missed our conversation.

Then it occurred to me that there was something familiar about him, about his form and the way his T-shirt was clinging to his damp skin, outlining the firm muscles of his chest. It was a broad chest, smooth and sleek. Though his hat hid his

COLLETTE SCOTT

face in the shadows of the early morning sunlight, I was sure I had seen him around before. That only made me even more ashamed. Arianne elbowed me as I caught sight of him, stopping me from breaking into a run.

My mouth dropped open in a surprised gasp, and I began to stutter almost incoherently. "I'm really sorry about that. It was just a misunderstanding."

The jogger pushed himself away from the wall and pushed his cap back on his head. It felt as though the ground gave way beneath me as the realization of who it was hit home.

"Jesus, Sergeant Nicholson. I had no idea it was you."

Arianne's eyes widened too, and for once she too was speechless. The irony was not lost on her, either. She stared down at her hands, a blush rising up her cheeks. I knew that it would be up to me to explain this one, and that Arianne would be cooking me dinner for at least the next two weeks. I shot an angry glance her way.

"Obviously... Do you know that sexual harassment can go both ways, ladies? I could arrest you."

I gasped and sent another look at Arianne, this one frantic. Her blue eyes were wide with surprise and a little fear. I peered up at Brandon, trying desperately to read his emotions. His face was a blank mask – as usual.

"I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"Why are you apologizing, Cherisse?"

"Well." My voice trailed off. "Aren't you mad?"

"I want to hear your roommate – what's your name?"

"Arianne, Sergeant."

She used her most enticing voice and nearly batted her eyes at him. A spark of jealousy ignited within me, growing to a flame when he smiled down at her. I was reminded how long it took him to smile at me and felt a surge of envy. It had never bothered me before, her easy way with men. This time however, it bothered me a lot.

Brandon had just seemed to be my find, my friend. Ari would eat him alive, and probably he her. That thought bothered me very much.

However, when he spoke I realized that I was completely wrong.

FOREVER SUNSHINE

“Arianne. I want you to apologize.”

“How did you know?” I blurted.

He chuckled. “Your fingernails are cut pretty close, Cherisse. I’ll have a bruise from the daggers on her hands.”

I glanced at my hands in surprise. When had he noticed my hands? Then I remembered the morning he brought me home. We had both seen the blood under my nails.

Ari flashed him her white teeth and bowed, giving him a view of the tops of her breasts beneath her square neck tank top. “Sergeant Nicholson, I’m very sorry. I meant you no harm, believe me. We were just talking about a guy with a nice butt and you were there. You know how it is?”

I was aware of Brandon’s curious stare and glanced away. I refused to meet Ari’s eyes as well.

“Not a problem, Arianne, just don’t do it again. Any other man could have gotten the wrong idea.”

She bowed again and reached for my arm, intent on leading me away. Brandon shook his head as he reached for me first. “Wait a minute, Cherisse. Got a minute?”

Arianne stepped away, smiling at me with a knowing look. With brows raised over dancing blue eyes, she nodded in my direction. “I’ll meet you at the car, Cher.” She waved. “Ta ta.”

He remained silent for a time, re-crossing his arms across his chest and spreading his legs to take an authoritative stance. I hated the way I could not see even the slightest glimpse of any emotion on his face, and the way he continued to stare at me had me shifting uncomfortably. My discomfort grew until I could not stand it anymore.

“You wouldn’t have arrested us,” I accused.

“I know.” He looked surprised at my sharp words, and his voice grew warm when he spoke again. “How are you, Cherisse?”

“You know we didn’t know it was you.”

He laughed aloud, a wide smile upon his angular face. “I knew that, too. I was

COLLETTE SCOTT

just giving you a hard time. The only reason I came over here was because of you.” He pointed at me in a sweeping gesture. “I recognized you.”

“Oh.”

“You haven’t called. I was worried.”

I was caught off guard. That was the last thing I had expected him to say. He had wanted me to call him? It was almost too good to be true. A breeze stirred my hair. I took a moment to tuck it behind my ear while I regained my composure.

“Umm, well I’m okay. I thought you told me to call you if I ever needed you. I haven’t had any murderous thoughts lately, and I haven’t gotten into trouble.”

With a soft chuckle, he shook his head. “I didn’t mean to save you from a speeding ticket, Cherisse.”

“What did you mean, then?”

“If you need a friend or a companion, I’ll be here for you.”

“Are you sure you’re not married?”

He shook his head, smiling down at me. “No.”

“Involved?”

“If I was I wouldn’t be here, would I?”

“How would I know? I don’t know you at all, really. I mean, you know all there is to know about me, and I know nothing about you except for your name.”

“Let’s fix that,” he said softly. “I just had a schedule change to accommodate my classes, so I come here some mornings before I head in to campus. I know you’re busy too, so how often do you come?”

“Just about every morning now that it’s cooler.”

“Do you want to meet Tuesdays and Sundays? Say around seven o’clock?”

I could barely find my voice. Apparently he did not think I was a dork after what I had said the last time we parted ways. I was so excited that I wanted to throw my arms around his neck and hug him. Instead I nodded my head, my eyes shining with excitement.

He smiled back then, and my heart stopped. It was an angelic smile, one that reached all the way down to my toes. For the first time since Shelly had called me in

FOREVER SUNSHINE

tears, I felt happy – truly happy. He wanted to see me twice a week, which was more than I had ever dreamed of.

“That would be great.”

“Great. Until then.” He walked backward for a few steps. “Look, I’ve got to run. I’ll see you later.”

I watched him jog towards the men’s locker room, his sneaker-clad feet slapping the pavement. There was no way I could drag my eyes away. They remained on the spot I last saw him for several minutes before I shook my head to clear it and went off to find Arianne. She had to know, and I could not wait to tell her.

*

Despite Arianne’s initial disappointment at my refusal to jog with her two days a week, she ended up coping rather well and encouraged me to keep at it. During this time, Brandon treated me like a friend, perhaps even one of his buddies. Despite my hectic schedule and my comment to Arianne about how I had no time for dating, I found myself growing even more attached to him and his growing role in my life. We talked. We shared our dreams and goals, and I enjoyed talking to him. It was so easy. I could be myself, say anything, do anything, and he accepted me and my antics with a good natured chuckle.

He opened up to me as well, telling me that not only was he a Sergeant on the police force, but he also was a member of their Tactical Unit, which required extra training every month. In the beginning of each year he would take part in a training course which lasted a week. It was a full week, but he enjoyed the challenge.

His enjoyment of challenges extended from his time at Luke Air Force Base in the West Valley. As I had suspected, he was ex-military, and very proud to have served his country. Straight out of the military he joined the police department and finished his college degree. With a graduate degree his next challenge, I learned that Brandon was not one to sit idle.

Because of all of this, I was finding it so hard to believe that he had not made any

COLLETTE SCOTT

attempt to make a pass at me. I wondered sometimes if he wanted to go further, but even if he had there was no way I could tell. He still kept his expressionless face on and remained courteous. For my part, my secret crush turned into hero worship and it was a struggle to hide my impatience from his observant stare. The discouragement that I felt was growing to the point where I was preparing to come right out and ask him, but he beat me to the punch on a Sunday in mid-October.

That day was a beautifully sunny one, and the weather had finally cooled enough to make jogging more pleasant. To accommodate both our schedules, we had changed our Sunday jog to eight that morning. The sun was warm as it beat down on us from the deep blue sky, though there was a pleasant breeze to keep us cool.

We jogged side by side, with Brandon doing his best to accommodate my shorter legs. In the month that we had been running together, I had noticed that I was stronger due to the difference in our styles. The irony was not lost on me that it was mostly due to my struggles in keeping up with him.

Since it was a cooler morning than usual, I had thrown a sweatshirt and pants over my normal jogging tank and shorts when I left my apartment. Now I was regretting my decision. The day was growing warm, and I was already overtired. I had worked an extra shift the night before, and I just did not have the energy to go all out that day.

By the time we passed our halfway point, I was slightly breathless and feeling run down. After another lap, Brandon astutely noticed my weariness. Giving me a slight nudge, he nodded in the direction of the bleachers. They were empty, and I fell onto the bench with a heavy sigh.

“Wow, I’m pooped,” I muttered.

“You look a little red,” he said, smiling.

“Thanks,” I said wryly. “I had a late night.”

“You looked tired when you got out of the car this morning,” he remarked.

“Yeah, I’ve been working all week. One of the girls is really sick.”

“After classes? That’s a long day.”

“But it’s good money. Remember, I have to save up to make it through student

FOREVER SUNSHINE

teaching. I'll have no income then... I'll just crash later."

He sat beside me and stretched out his long legs. My lips twisted as they extended past mine.

"Do you watch what you eat?" I asked suddenly, remembering my conversation with Arianne.

"Like dieting?" He glanced at me in surprise when I nodded. "No. Do you?"

"No."

He chuckled. "Why do you sound so disappointed?"

"What I meant is..." I said awkwardly. "Do you work out just because of your job or because you have to?"

"Mostly because of my job. You'd be surprised how many rabbits there are around here. It's amazing how fast people can run when they're afraid."

I laughed. "So why do you do it?"

He was quiet for a moment, as though pondering my question. I glanced at him and saw the color that had risen on his cheeks.

"Well?"

"I guess I thought I could help."

"You don't think that anymore?"

"Oh, I'm sure I've helped some people, but not in the way I thought. There are a lot of ungrateful people out there. I mean, people hate cops. They don't trust us any more than we trust them. It's tiring sometimes." He shrugged and glanced at me. "Why did you ask anyway?"

Sensing his discomfort with the turn of our conversation, I raised my brows at him. "It's not right that a person can look as good as you do and not have to work hard at it."

"I could say the same thing about you, couldn't I?"

I snorted in surprise. "Me? Why me? I'm not handsome."

He smiled at me as he shoved me lightly with his shoulder. "Not handsome, but very pretty."

"You think so?"

COLLETTE SCOTT

He nodded slowly, his head dipping ever so slightly. "I do, yes."

"Wow."

Before I could stop myself, I reached up and cupped his cheek in my palm. It was moist, and I could feel the stubble there. My thumb stroked his strong cheekbone along the underside of his eye. He was so real, so utterly male, and just so handsome, and he was staring at me with a look on his face that I had not seen before.

Suddenly I knew. He was finally going to kiss me. There was a glow in his eyes that I had never seen before. It shone like fire within the oceans of his gaze. Excitement coursed through my veins as I prepared for my first touch of his soft, full lips, and I wondered how many times I imagined this moment.

His determined stare captured my attention, and his face descended ever so slowly. I was powerless to look away. The heat from his body enveloped mine. That, coupled with the desire showing plainly in his eyes, promised me that this was not going to be an ordinary kiss. My heart pounded furiously in anticipation, and I felt my lips part. When his fingers reached up to tip up my chin I thought I would die of excitement.

It was finally happening.

The touch of his lips was everything as I had expected. They touched mine gently, brushing ever so slightly, before drawing away. While I wanted to wrap my arms around him and pull him close, he continued to exercise his magnificent control. When he pulled away, I sighed softly in protest. The corner of his mouth deepened in a tiny smile before he dipped his head again. The whole time his gaze held mine, intent and solemn.

"I'm going to kiss you," he murmured.

"Oh...yes."

As his moist lips settled upon mine again, I felt my eyes slip closed. Taking his time to explore my mouth thoroughly, Brandon held himself in check while I relaxed and let him take control. His free arm slipped around my shoulders, pulling me closer to him, and I settled into the crook of his arm happily. He was strong and

FOREVER SUNSHINE

his arm was demanding where his lips were not.

For many hours I had speculated and dreamed what his close cropped hair would feel like, and suddenly given the chance I eagerly reached for the short pieces. My fingers stole up his powerful neck to wind in the short, silky strands. Much softer than I had imagined, it was so much more luxurious.

I was in heaven until he slowly pulled away from me, pressing two small kisses to the corners of my mouth before he lifted his head. I made a protesting sound in the back of my throat, but he continued to move away. The snickers not a hundred feet away brought me back to earth with a solid thump.

“Someone’s coming,” he murmured in explanation.

Disappointed with the intrusion, I was surprised to realize that I did not care if someone saw us. Brandon released his hold on me and straightened, holding out his hand to help me up.

“Come on. I don’t need an audience.”

I wanted to protest, but he pulled me to my feet and wrapped his arm around my shoulders as we walked back towards the locker rooms. Coming towards us from the parking lot was another couple, and they sent catcalls our way. I tensed up, ready to tell them to butt out, but Brandon’s grip on me tightened. A moment later I realized why. I recognized the approaching blond head and curvaceous body.

“Couldn’t wait until you got home, eh?”

“Ari! Really!”

She wagged her eyebrows at me and elbowed her boyfriend, Mike. “Aren’t they so cute, Mike? So perfect together.”

Mike smiled at us as he shook his head in understanding. It was so typical of Arianne to be suggestive, and it was one of the many reasons Mike loved her. He held out his hand to Brandon, who shook it quickly.

“You have bad timing,” Brandon said.

“I noticed,” she said, laughing. “But I think we came just in time. If we hadn’t you may have been naked within minutes.”

Mike grinned. “Good thing the locker rooms are locked, eh?”

COLLETTE SCOTT

“Knock it off! Just go... go away, Arianne,” I snapped.

“We just got here. Why don’t you go home and do it in private? Aren’t you the first one to complain about PDA? So hypocritical.”

The color rose on my cheeks and everyone noticed. While Arianne giggled, Brandon gave my sweatshirt a tug. “Let’s go.”

As soon as we were out of earshot, Brandon turned to me. “Have I told you how obnoxious I think your roommate is?”

“You think she’s obnoxious?”

“Yeah.” He gave me a sidelong glance. “Why do you sound so surprised?”

“She’s very sexy.”

“So?”

I was honestly surprised. Most guys I knew would love a shot at Arianne, given the chance. “I just assumed that you’d like to...”

For the first time I heard his full-blown laughter. Though I wanted to be irritated, the sound was so infectious that I smiled too.

“You’re too much. No, I don’t want anything to do with your roommate. She’s definitely not my type,” he said.

I was granted his most angelic smile. Again I felt it down to my very toes.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

His arm tightened around my shoulders, and I leaned into him. It was nice to be held like that. I felt so protected.

“Cherisse, we’ve been meeting up for a while now, and I really like hanging with you...”

“But...”

He was silent for a moment, and his hand slipped away from me. For a moment I felt loss. I looked up at him.

“I want more.”

“More?”

“Yes, more. I like running with you. We talk all the time, and I enjoy texting you. But you’ve said you don’t have time for a relationship. I want to work on that. I

FOREVER SUNSHINE

think we could make it work, even though your schedule is full.” He sighed. “I’m in a wedding next Saturday, the best man.”

My heart was racing so fast that I could barely get the words out. “Saturday? Okay.”

He nodded. “Are you working?”

“Yes.”

Seeing the flash of disappointment in his aquamarine eyes, I smiled apologetically.

“Why, what’s going on?”

“I want to bring you with me. I want it to be a date,” he said in a rush.

It was finally happening. He wanted more! He wanted to make it work. I was floating on air, so excited and joyful that most of my problems seemed insignificant. Schedules be damned. We could do this. I thought of the fool I would be if I let this opportunity pass. With all the extra shifts and covering I had done recently, I just knew that someone would repay the favor. I was grinning so wide that I thought my face would crack.

“I’ll see if I can switch with someone and make it up some nights this week, okay? What time is the wedding?”

“Ten.”

I was surprised. “But don’t you work the late shift?”

“Just until midnight. All the more reason for you to come.”

“Why is that?”

“So you can drive me home when I pass out.”

I laughed and Brandon kissed me again. The second kiss was different from his first one. Gone was the exploratory hesitance. In its place was what I believed all those heroines in romance novels experienced. There was so much honesty in the hungry pressure of his mouth that I felt devoured. It was magical.

When he finally lifted his head I was swaying on my feet. Seeing this, a look of satisfaction replaced his hesitancy.

“Will you try to come with me? I’d really like your company.”

COLLETTE SCOTT

“Definitely.”

“Great. Can I call you later?”

“Yes. I’ll ask to cash in a favor and let you know.”

“I’m working tonight, so I don’t know when I’ll be able to break away. I’ll make sure I call before eleven, so you can get some sleep tonight. Okay, Sunshine?”

I wanted to shout that I would wait up all night, but instead I merely nodded. He took my keys in what was fast becoming a habit and opened my door. As soon as I climbed in and began to secure my seatbelt he shut it.

“I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

I nodded as he turned and walked away with his customary wave. I watched him go until he reached his truck and opened the door. All too soon for my hungry eyes he had disappeared into the dark tinted confines. At that point I allowed myself to squeal in delight.

Two kisses! Two kisses in one day. What had I done to deserve it?

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