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Forever Sunshine

Hannah's Blessing

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By
Collette Scott

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For information address Marimay Publishing, P.O. Box 11821, Tempe, AZ 85284

ISBN-13: 978-1463539962

ISBN-10: 1463539967

Acknowledgements

This one goes to Caitlin, Shannon and Brynn. You three are my world.

Without your love and support, I would have been lost.

To my Massachusetts family – thank you all for your support.

To my Arizona family – words just can't express my gratitude to you all.

Special thanks to Jenny and Betsy for your input.

And last but most definitely not least, Steve: my editor, my friend, my publicist, and my husband. Thank you for everything. What would I do without you?

Chapter 1

With a sudden squeal of the tires, the midnight black Mustang stopped in front of a long-legged blonde dressed in skin-tight black jeans and a black tank top. Over the rumbling engine, an unseen neighborhood dog could be heard barking while the driver revved the car impatiently. He reached across the seat to open the door. The woman at the end of the driveway hastily tossed her pink overnight bag in the back and climbed in. No sooner had she shut the door than the Mustang was pulling away with another swift chirp of the tires.

“You’re late,” the blonde whined.

She pressed the power button and rolled down her window. Cool night air entered the car and filtered out the aroma of her perfume.

“I’ve had a bad night,” he replied.

She was instantly contrite. Her full lower lip pouted and she reached over to place a well-manicured hand on his thigh. Peter Somerset glanced down at the smooth hand and compared it to his wife’s.

Diana’s hands were dry and her fingernails were brittle from cleaning and cooking. Unlike Camille, she never took the time to paint them anymore. In fact, she did not care about her appearance at all. What had happened to the popular ‘catch’ he thought he had snared? Had their child stolen all of her sex appeal away? He stomped harder on the gas in frustration and maneuvered onto the highway, heading west to the hills. If it was the last thing he did, he was going to enjoy his weekend outside of the city.

As long as he was far away from Diana and Hannah he’d be fine. Just fine. It did not bother him at all that Diana knew he was going to a cabin for the weekend with another woman. He did not care that she had cried when

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she said their marriage was over. Though her money had been good, he was having a hard time finding anything interesting about her now that it was gone. And he knew that Diana understood that as well.

“What happened, babe? Did you and Diana have another fight?”

“Yep,” he snapped, steering onto the open road. “I told her we’re through.”

A smile curved Camille’s painted lips for several minutes. Turning to look out the window, she remained silent. He liked that about her. She did not fight with him, and she had a fat wallet. Two very good qualities, the ones he liked best in a woman.

After a while, she reached over and her hand began to caress his thigh. “Good.”

“No, it’s not good. Why did you come to the house? Hannah told her you were there.”

“So what?”

“So? Well, she could use that during the divorce.”

Peter’s foot pressed harder on the gas pedal and the sleek car sped up smoothly. He was tense all over, but Camille’s hand was distracting him all the same. The lights of the city had turned to the blackness of the mountains ahead. He could already feel the chill in the evening air through Camille’s open window. He deftly maneuvered the car into the hills, enjoying the curves and dips on the road. The vehicle hugged the pavement, compelling him to speed up even more. At this time of night there were very few people out, so he felt confident about putting his car through the paces. He knew Camille loved the way he drove, and he strove to please her as he had never pleased his wife. Right now he had to ensure he stayed on her good side. Too soon he would be dependent on her.

“What’s wrong with starting a new life? Without Diana and Hannah. Let them do their own thing. After all, it’s like the two of them are peas in a pod.” Camille’s hand crept further up his thigh, getting tantalizingly close. “I can give you everything you need, baby.”

Peter’s sharp inhale came through clenched teeth. How could he think about his nagging wife and child when this beautiful woman was teasing him to distraction?

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His fingers gripped the steering wheel harder when he heard the sound of the zipper on his black slacks being released. They were almost there. The cabin was just up the mountain. Ten more minutes. He gasped. Her cool fingers surrounded him.

When her mouth came down, he nearly lost control. Though he was still upset and angry, there was no denying the soft pull of her mouth and teasing intensity of her tongue. One hand left the steering wheel to roughly grasp her head and hold her in place as he sped up even more. Diana and Hannah were forgotten as Peter allowed his lover to distract him.

Then the deer appeared in front of him.

With a shout, Peter's foot quickly shifted from the gas pedal to the brake, but he knew it was too late. He struggled to free his hand from Camille's stiff hair, but he succeeded only in tearing free strands of her mane. She responded by biting down on him in a wail of alarm and pain. His hips bucked, sending her head into the steering wheel with a dull thud.

They were off the road; the headlights shining on nothing.

Peter closed his eyes tightly before the first impact came. The front end of the Mustang buckled as it landed on the soft shoulder of the cliff. A loud bang sounded before he was slammed in the face with the air bag, driving Camille's head into his abdomen with a great force. Then she was gone, her feet flying out of the open window. However, he remained with the car, toppling head over heels. The pain was excruciating, and he was unable to catch his breath.

Suddenly he was rolling, his body tumbling free of the driver's seat to go with the car to the bottom of the ravine.

"Hannah?" he asked again, his last thoughts of his beautiful child. "God forgive me."

Relief flooded through Peter as the pain began to ebb away. He was vaguely aware of the car coming to a halt and everything going quiet. It no longer mattered. Peter knew it was time.

~

Diana came awake from her dream with a gasp, her eyes fluttering open to the gray light of dawn. It streamed through the window via the cracks in the blinds, offering enough light for her to see the untouched side of the bed

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where her husband of six years used to sleep.

Today was his funeral.

The car accident that had taken his life kept replaying itself in her mind, a mind now filled with guilt as though she was somehow responsible for his irresponsible actions. Pieced together from what she had learned from the police, she had envisioned the events of that night over and over again until they now invaded her dreams.

She replayed their final words countless times.

“You’re leaving again?” she had asked.

“I am.”

“Will you be coming back?”

“No.”

Through tears that she had bravely held in, she stared at the man she had promised to love and cherish above all others. “May I ask...” she began. Then her voice broke. “Peter, do you not care about our marriage anymore or the fact that I want out?”

Slowly, so very contemptuously, his gaze had traveled from her head to toe. His lips twisted just before he answered. That single word that had dashed all of her hopes and dreams. They had sealed the deal.

“No.”

She had known that he was leaving that night, had even slammed the door behind him when he stormed out after those final painful two letters. Locking the door behind him, she had picked up all the evidence of their altercation and locked herself in the bedroom to nurse her wounds. When she had gone to bed that night, she had known that the time had come to make a change. She just had not realized that change was being forced upon her by the hands of fate. After eighteen months of watching her marriage crumble around her without doing anything to stop it, she now understood that Mother Nature had taken the reins from her hands and had settled the matter for her. She no longer had a say in her future; it was out of her hands.

In the privacy of her bedroom she allowed the tears to spill. Tears of regret, tears of relief, and tears for the man she used to love with all of her heart trickled down her cheeks. This was her time to grieve, away from onlooker’s eyes. All too soon she would have to face his friends. She would

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have to hold her head high as they whispered behind their hands about how Peter had died, about Camille's presence in the car, and the bruise high on Diana's left cheekbone that remarkably showed signs of being obtained around the same time as the accident. Yes, their final altercation had not gone well, cumulating into physical violence borne from frustration by both parties. They would never have a chance to discuss it, though Diana doubted he would even have wanted to try.

All too soon she would have to face her future bravely. However, at this moment she was free to be weak. To grieve. To wonder what she had done so wrong.

Wiping away her tears, Diana tossed back the covers on her bed and made her way to the bathroom. A long hot shower eased some of the tension in the muscles of her neck and shoulders and washed away the last traces of her sorrow, but it did nothing to ease the ache in her heart. Like a song stuck on replay, she heard the guilt in her mind reminding her that she had not been careful in what she wished for. What she had wanted was her freedom. She had gotten that for sure, but she received that gift at a great cost to herself and others.

For instance, Hannah would grow up never knowing her father. Although, with the way things had been going, Diana was not sure if that was a good or bad thing.

More guilt.

She stood before the mirror on her dresser as she dressed, critically taking in her appearance through blurred vision. These past few months had been the most difficult. Late nights of worrying about Peter's philandering and partying had seen her once rounded figure grow thinner from exhaustion and loss of appetite, and dark circles dulled her normally bright blue eyes. Her wavy blond hair was now dry and limp from the pressure and the stress. Once considered a knockout, she no longer had the time to make herself as beautiful as Peter had wanted her to be. That was a point he had made so repeatedly. In recent months, she had not even had the urge to try.

Smoothing her black dress over her hips one last time, she sighed and turned away from the mirror. Hannah still needed to get ready, and they had to leave soon. She had more important things to worry about. No more time

for self-pity.

Though she had arranged a quiet graveside funeral, she was amazed to see so many people congregate around his casket. She only knew a small portion of the group, and they avoided her intent stare with the shifting eyes and shuffling feet of those who knew too much for their own comfort. Several times she caught some of the men in the group protectively covering their privates with a pained groan. So it was no secret what the police had determined as the cause of the accident, she realized with a touch of humiliation. When they caught her furious stare, they turned away in embarrassment. Not too long ago those men had flirted shamelessly with her. Now they glanced at her out of the corner of their eyes in pity. She and Hannah stood alone by the minister, dressed in their best and remaining dry-eyed and solemn while all his friends in their flashy, high-fashion clothes and lithe, well-toned bodies cried and mourned around her.

The day was cool and sunny, perfect for a funeral, and the high altitude air was fresh and clean. Diana held onto Hannah's hand tightly as she took several deep breaths. Not quite five yet, her daughter had not taken the news very well. With her youthful lack of wisdom, she could not seem to understand that her Daddy would not be coming back ever again. She wanted to know why and sent a barrage of questions Diana's way. They were questions she did not have the strength to answer yet.

Why?

Diana could not say why. It was not her decision.

The morning after the accident, Hannah had awakened to find their elderly neighbor dozing on the sofa while Diana had gone with the police. She had been worried when her mother returned pale and numb with shock. After Diana had told her there was a bad accident, Hannah had cried. However, the tears were more from confusion than understanding.

Diana wept too. She wept bitter tears of anger with her husband. How could he be so foolish and remove himself from his daughter's life so permanently? She remembered the look on his face again. Apparently he had not been considering either her or Hannah at the time and he had made it plain that he regretted their marriage. That look of pure contempt he had given her before he stormed out the front door would stay with her for the

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rest of her lifetime. Well she had certainly learned her lesson, and she would be damned if she ever fell that hard for a man again.

“May he forever rest in peace...”

The minister's final words rung in Diana's ears as she slowly lifted her chin. The silence only lasted a moment before more wailing captured Hannah's attention. She turned her head out of curiosity, and Diana gave her a quick tug on the hand to keep her focused. At the same time, they heard a car door open from somewhere behind the long line of cars parked along the side of the dirt road leading up to the freshly dug grave. How rude to interrupt, Diana thought, though she was not surprised. The tight-knit crowd that Peter had grown friendly with was not necessarily a respectful group of individuals. Disturbing the somber silence of the last rites fell right in line with their standards. In fact, she half-expected that once the grave was filled, most of these people would return to celebrate with him one last time. The idea filled her with disgust.

Again Hannah's head swiveled toward the distraction. Now was not the time to lose the child's attention. With as much grace as she could muster, Diana gave Hannah another tug, this time pulling her forward so that they could drop the rose her daughter clung to her chest into the gaping hole. She could feel the stares upon her, watching her every move and just waiting to see her break down. But no, she would not give them the satisfaction. Her child squeezed her tightly when she saw the pastel floral casket cover that Hannah had chosen after Diana had flat-out refused the red rose arrangement designed to show everlasting love. No, they certainly had not shared that. The one that Hannah had picked out sported colorful blooms of pink, white, orange, lavender and green roses, lilies and mums, more suitable for an Easter celebration but acceptable for her daughter's final gift to her father.

“Mommy, is that Daddy in there?”

Diana nodded solemnly. There was someone behind her, watching her. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up in warning. Yet she remained cool, refusing to give in to the unspoken pressure.

“But why?”

“We can talk all about it later, honey. Now give Daddy your flower.”

Hannah cautiously approached the casket and threw down the single

pink rose Diana had given to her. She stared at it intently, her small face a mask of concern. Then she grasped her mother's hand again. Diana did not bring a flower for him. As it was, she had a hard enough time gracing his casket with such an expensive waste of beautiful flowers. Needless to say, his final and most public humiliation left no doubt to his friends that their relationship was long over. Why bother faking it after his death?

They stepped back and watched as the casket was lowered. Hannah's voice took on a new urgency. "Mommy, why are they putting Daddy in that hole?"

Feeling that heavy stare was irritating Diana. She longed to turn around to see just who was watching her every move. But her daughter's growing panic required all of her strength now. She bent down a little and whispered in her small ear.

"It's okay. Daddy's in Heaven now looking down on us. We're just putting his body to bed."

"But why, Mommy? Why can't he go to bed at home, with us?"

Diana smiled gently. "I'm sorry; it's not his home anymore. He is up in Heaven now. That's where he's going to live. And in Heaven he doesn't need his body. So it's just you and me at home. But don't worry - Daddy will always keep an eye on you. He'll smile down at you and send you kisses. Now hush up and listen to the minister. He's almost done."

Hannah frowned, obviously wanting to ask more questions. However she held her tongue and made her mother proud.

The minister glanced at Hannah and smiled gently. Then he blessed the casket one last time. "Now go in peace, and peace be with you."

The congregation murmured their response and slowly began to melt away. No one approached Diana. Nor did she wish anyone to. She could not guess how many of these women her husband had enjoyed a relationship with.

They eyed her speculatively as if to say 'now I know why he strayed from home', and it hurt her more than she cared to admit. Though not a vain woman, she knew that she too had once been fresh and beautiful like them. However, her husband's constant verbal abuse and lack of interest had chipped away at her self-esteem until she barely had any left. She had been at the point where she no longer cared enough about recapturing her former

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beauty.

Things would change now, she thought with a firm resolve. For whatever reason she had been given a chance to start all over again with Hannah, and she intended to do just that. Though her last five years had not been joyous, she still had Peter to thank for the gift of Hannah. She had her daughter, and that was all that mattered now.

Taking a deep breath, Diana approached the minister to thank him. He shook her hand and reached down to stroke Hannah's cheek.

"Will you be all right, Diana?" he asked softly.

She managed a small smile. "We'll be fine."

"How about financially? I know that it took all of your savings to pay for this. Will you be okay?"

"I have a job. I've already looked into going full-time. Once I find good daycare for Hannah, I'll take the extra hours. Thank you for your concern."

He nodded. "My parish will do whatever they can to help. You need only ask."

She reached forward and squeezed his hand. "Thanks so much. I do appreciate everything you've done so far, but I'm sure we'll be fine."

As Diana watched the minister move away, she again felt the gaze on her back. Glancing around her quickly, Diana noticed that almost everyone was returning to the waiting cars. With heads bent together in quiet words of soothing, Peter's friends silently made their way away from her. They were leaving her and Hannah all alone.

Alone. She was alone again.

Well, not completely. She still had Hannah. Hannah was all she needed. She may be alone, but she would never be lonely while she had her precious child.

With everyone moving on, Diana gave her husband's casket one last long glance. The colorful flower arrangement seemed so out of place residing on the final resting place of a man whose heart was as black as they came. Tilting her chin, she took a deep, shaky breath and let it out slowly. Why, Peter, she wondered. Why did you have to do this to our marriage, to our child, to us? Even as her agonized heart asked the question, she knew the answer. It was clear almost from the beginning. He had never loved her as much as he loved

himself. She had foolishly lived a lie, hoping that he would see the good in her and overcome his selfishness. However that would never be, and she had learned a valuable lesson. Never would she succumb like that again.

Confident that most everyone had gained enough distance from her so she and Hannah could depart, she began to head back to her car. The prickly feeling on the back of her neck had not eased, but she felt fairly certain it was just her own paranoia. Then she noticed the long, black stretch limousine. Standing beside it was a tall, lean man as dark as the vehicle. His black hair was professionally trimmed and stirred only slightly in the mid-summer breeze, and even from the distance she could tell his black, tailored suit was top dollar. Hanging open and flapping lightly against his slacks was an elegant, lightweight overcoat. A large, hulking blond man stood beside him. Not as expensively dressed, he stood proud and tall and frighteningly impassive. Diana shivered. He appeared to be some sort of strong arm or perhaps a bodyguard. Had Peter gotten involved with thugs too?

From the distance she could feel his penetrating stare and shivered. A feeling of fear filled her at his intensity. Oh no, she thought with a touch of panic, what kind of mess had Peter gotten into? And more importantly, she realized, what did they want with her?

~

Devlan Doyle crossed his arms over his chest and frowned as he scrutinized his sister-in-law. During the end of the service his eyes had remained on her hastily pinned golden hair and trim back, not moving away even when she bent to speak to his niece. All he remembered of his sister-in-law was how beautiful and vibrant she had been, and how proud his step-brother was to have captured her. Looking at her now reminded him how destructive his step-brother had been. Not content with even the best, he always felt as though he deserved better.

It was sad that he left such a trail of devastation behind him.

He saw the bitterness in her profile when she turned to speak with the minister. It made her appear harsh, and his astute gaze carefully took note that she had not shed one tear. Even from a distance, he could grasp her disengaged countenance. She acted like a woman who no longer felt with her heart. While the other attendees held handkerchiefs and dabbed occasionally

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at their eyes, Diana remained stoic and grim. And once the minister said his final words and the guests began to mingle, not one person approached her or looked her way. She remained rigid as they meandered off, with her child by her side impatiently scuffing the green grass with the tip of her shoe.

The child.

It was the child that brought him here, he reminded himself, not her.

With Peter's death, Devlan was faced with a problem. Unfortunately, he did not like problems. They were a nuisance. While there definitely had been no love lost between him and his closest remaining family member, his lawyers had advised him that the death of his younger step-brother had changed everything. A serious problem, he was told. His entire estate would now be left to a four-year-old child, and though he had no plans of dying in the near future, Peter's accident reminded him that no one could ever be sure. Now this child, a child that he had never set eyes on before this very day, was his heiress and would remain so unless he married and had children of his own.

Hannah Somerset stood in line to inherit one of the largest software companies in the world. Now Devlan's first priority was to ensure that the girl was in good hands. Peter's influence could not have been all that good, and he was feeling the first stirrings of doubt about Diana now that he had seen her again. Not only had she stayed with the squanderer, but looking at her now made him even more concerned. Though he had been prepared for the possibility that her good looks hid the truth like Peter's once did, all he saw was an angry and bitter woman. He knew he had to pay his last respects and see for himself the child that was all he had left of family, but he viewed the whole debacle with distaste and irritation.

Such a shame.

His attention was brought back to the present when Diana moved away from the minister and glanced around. Her cool gaze took in the mourners as they wandered away, but still her face expressed no emotion. Then her roving gaze met his. At that point, everything about her changed. As soon as she noticed him standing by the car, her whole posture stiffened and the hand that gripped Hannah's noticeably tightened. She spun on her heel and rushed back to the road, hastily pulling her child along beside her and away from him.

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With some surprise, he noticed Diana had taken her own vehicle to her husband's funeral. She came to a sudden stop beside an older-style compact car while she fumbled with her keys, refusing to look in their direction. Pushing away from the side of his limo, Devlan turned to his companion with an almost imperceptible nod.

"Okay Mike, let's get this over with."

"Right, Mr. Doyle."

The two men approached Diana and Hannah, stopping her as she buckled the little golden child in her car seat.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Somerset."

Diana startled visibly and backed slowly out of the car. As she straightened to greet him with her dark blue eyes wide and wary, Devlan's breath caught. Despite her rundown appearance she was still a stunningly beautiful woman. Her classic features belonged on the cover of a magazine, not in a graveyard with dark circles under eyes that were wide with what looked like fear.

Even though there was no make-up adorning her smooth skin, she was by far the loveliest woman he had seen in attendance. The black dress that covered her trim form had seen better days and hid what he remembered as a perfect figure, but still Devlan could feel his heart beat quicken when he stared at her.

Just like it had six years ago. Taking a deep breath, he forced his thoughts to return to the present.

"Yes?" she replied.

When she answered he noticed that her voice quivered slightly. He wondered about her nervousness, but before he could continue a slight change came over her. Almost as though someone had flipped a switch, some of her tension eased. As she stared up at him, her head cocked slightly to one side, and her lips turned down in a slight frown. He could tell by her squinted eyes that she was struggling to place him.

"Devlan Doyle. Peter's step-brother. We met briefly at your wedding."

That easing tension suddenly returned. Ignoring his outstretched hand, she inclined her chin ever so slightly in refusal. As he studied her, he watched

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a flash of distaste in her gaze before she carefully schooled her features to reveal no hint of her feelings. With the grace of a debutante, she nodded coolly.

“Wow, well it was nice of you to come all the way out here. What can I do for you, Mr. Doyle?”

Devlan smiled thinly. It seemed she held him in as high esteem as he held her. He glanced down at the child and his smile grew. Hannah was beautiful, the spitting image of her mother, and to his untrained eye she looked just as a four-year-old girl ought to. To all appearances, she looked healthy and well kept. And at the moment the bright blue gaze, so similar to her mother's, was glued to him and his big friend in curiosity.

“Hi Hannah, I'm your Uncle Devlan.”

She smiled shyly and glanced at her mother for approval, but Diana stood with arms crossed under her deceptively round breasts. Never one to refuse an invitation, he could not help but stare at the firm mounds that were so well hidden behind her dark clothing, even though his actions made Diana's scowl deepen.

“Mr. Doyle, why are you here?”

Devlan knew this was the moment Diana would change her attitude towards him. Mention money to a woman and they were putty in your hands. With a cool smile he reached into his pocket and handed her a business card.

“I'm here to ensure that Hannah will be okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yes. With Peter gone now, she will need someone to watch over her.”

“Watch over her?”

He nodded impatiently, growing irritated that she kept answering him with questions. “Yes. She is, after all, the only family I have left. I want to make sure that she's well cared for.”

With a curt nod of her head, Diana pressed her lips together with finality. “Thank you for your concern, Mr. Doyle, but Peter's ‘departure’ has not changed a thing. I can assure you that Hannah was fine before and will continue to be fine now that he's ‘gone’.”

She had just dismissed him, of that he had no doubt. Devlan realized his mistake just before the cold words escaped her stiff lips when her gaze turned

as icy as the mountain peaks around them. He had misjudged this woman, forgetting the class with which she had conducted herself when they had first met. Apparently his brother had not taken that from her along with everything else.

With reluctant admiration, he studied her closely. The light breeze stirred several loose strands of her hair across her face. The thick, sun-streaked mane was a texture and color that women would pay for in the hairdressers' shops. Her slender fingers, with the nails unpainted and closely cropped, reached up to carelessly curl the wayward strands behind her ear as her eyes narrowed under his close scrutiny.

Frustration hardened Devlan's jaw as he hurried to make up for his blunder before she turned and left him standing in her dust. Never before had he had trouble speaking to a beautiful woman, and he refused to allow this one to be the first.

He cleared his throat meaningfully before he answered. "I meant financially, Diana."

"Financially?"

Still with arms crossed, she raised her gaze to study him steadily. It was then that he noticed a fading, yellowish discoloration around her left eye. Though wisps of hair had been strategically placed to try to cover the mark, apparently she had forgotten when she tucked those strands behind her ear. He wondered where the mark had come from.

"Yes, financially."

"And what do you want from me in return?"

Her sarcasm was not missed, but the truth was that he had not even given it a thought. His concern had been solely focused on Hannah. He had not even considered Diana. Yet he was still a man, and her cold words planted sudden ideas and images in his head. His brows rose as he glanced at her more closely from head to toe.

"I can take care of you and Hannah. That's why I'm here. What you give me in return can be worked out."

Diana glanced down at the business card with distaste. Then she met his gaze coolly and handed the card back. There was a strange look on her face as her mouth turned down.

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“As I said, Hannah is fine, Mr. Doyle. I have a job and can take care of her. She is, after all, *my* daughter. If you were so concerned about her safety you should’ve come a lot sooner. Your help may have made a difference then. Now it’s too late. Now Hannah and I would like to move on with our lives and forget all this.” She indicated with one hand toward the casket before turning back to her car. As if in afterthought, she sent him one last icy glare over her shoulder. “Thank you for coming to pay your respects.”

Devlan watched in stunned surprise as she hastily opened the car door. With a flash of her shapely leg, she was in the car and fastening her seatbelt. Then the engine roared to life and she put it into gear roughly before pulling away and showering them with dust, just as he had expected.

Mike jumped back, whistling under his breath. “Wow. Well how do you like that?”

When there was no returning answer, Mike glanced at him. Ignoring his questioning look, Devlan continued to watch her drive away, frowning thoughtfully at her disappearing car.

“Find out everything you can about her. Debts, job information, what she’s been doing. Also check out Hannah. I want her medical records and any hospital visits she may have had.”

“Why, what’s up?” Mike asked.

“She had a black eye, Mike.”

“So? Maybe the two of them played it rough – with each other or with others.”

“No, not her... I want them watched.”

Devlan was surprised at how angry he felt. It was a damn crime to be marring such a beautiful woman. She was the type that a man showed off proudly by displaying her on his arm, not one that was knocked around until bruises marred her smooth skin.

Diana’s cryptic words echoed in his ears. He needed to know what had happened. Most of all, he wanted to know what Diana meant when she said his offer to help was too late.

“Yes sir.”

Devlan nodded slowly, his mind whirling like the leaves in the breeze. His problem had suddenly grown more complicated, for now he was intrigued

by his sister-in-law. There was something different about her, beginning with her disdainful reaction to him. She had taken him completely by surprise, and he had momentarily lost his composure. That was a victory on her part. After all, there was one thing he had learned in his time, and that was that women loved his money. At least in his previous relationships, the women he had dated proved to appreciate his status and wealth more than him – an apparent misconception that had kept him single and skeptical for so long. She had been different, and her reaction to him both excited and challenged him. Not interested in his money? In fact, it seemed only to increase her dislike of him.

However, despite his surprise he was not completely blinded. Diana Somerset had let some emotion slip, and his astute business sense had detected her faux pas. There had been fear in her eyes when she looked at him, and he had noticed loneliness behind her self-righteous anger. He suspected that the loneliness he saw was not for the death of her husband, but perhaps for being alone. He wanted to know why.

Well he would find out. His people would find out everything there was to know about her. It was only a matter of time. Though he was not yet sure why, he decided at that moment that he wanted to help this woman more than he had ever wanted to do anything before.

Chapter 2

Diana glanced one last time in the rear view mirror of her car. She saw the bodyguard jump back, but Devlan remained where he stood, allowing the dust to spatter his expensive suit. His face bore a thoughtful expression as he watched her leave, and with a shudder she realized that would not be the last of Devlan Doyle.

She took a deep, shaking breath and brushed the hair once again away from her face. How dare he insinuate that she should take up with him? *He could take care of her.* Like it was some sort of honor. No, she could take care of herself and Hannah just fine. All she needed was time to get reorganized and take stock of her life.

No, another man was not what she wanted or needed right now, especially her husband's womanizing step-brother. She shuddered at the thought. Oh yes, Peter had told her all about him when they were first married. How Devlan went from one woman to another, keeping track of his conquests by carving notches in the hardwood of an Irish walking stick his father had given him. How ridiculous and childish, she thought as she glanced back one more time. A total commitment-phobe refusing to ever commit to anyone, he played the field casually, and if one woman grew too attached he immediately ended the relationship. It must have run in the family, she thought furiously. What a creep.

Still seething, Diana maneuvered her small car into traffic, trying to focus on Hannah's soft singing in the backseat. But no matter how hard she tried, all she could hear was Devlan's deep, seductive voice telling her that they could work out her repayment. How could that man have such a nerve? At her husband's funeral? The gall of it made her feel ill. No, she had already made a promise to herself. After Peter, she would never fall blindly for a man again.

COLLETTE SCOTT

And that included Devlan Doyle, for all his sexy charisma and confidence. She certainly would not fall for those dark blue eyes and sensual good looks. So he had a fit figure and was gorgeous, but he also had a track record that would out-do Peter's. No, she told herself yet another time, another cheating man was not what she needed. Not now; not ever again. She would not be one of his conquests.

She and Hannah would do fine. Once she took stock of their assets and cashed in Peter's life insurance, she would finance a sum for Hannah's education and maybe use the rest to pay off their mortgage. Then she could find work more leisurely and perhaps stash up enough to open her own shop. This was her time to start a new life. She was free to do whatever she and Hannah wanted to do.

Her only regret was that she had not done this a long time ago.

~

The office she sat in had a row of windows against the wall, but it did little to ease the dreariness of the dark wood desk and black, upholstered plastic and aluminum chairs, on one of which she now sat. A half-dead plant was also housed in black plastic, and the pot sported the white and brown wounds of overwatering and leakage. Diana studied the fine veins on a single leaf, struggling to remember all the parts of a plant that she had learned long ago. Blade, vein, margin and petiole... Then the man looked up and blinked at her.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Somerset, but we've given him as many extensions as we could. The mortgage hasn't been paid in a year."

Diana sensed the blood draining from her face and closed her eyes briefly. She could not be hearing what she thought she was. Hoping it was all a bad dream, she slowly re-opened her eyes. Unfortunately, she was still in the same dreary office sitting across from the same somber man.

"I had no idea we were in arrears, Mr. Simms, but certainly if I can pay what we owe, they'll let me and Hannah stay in our house?"

"Well, we'd have to have everything you owe in back payments. Can you come up with that kind of cash?"

"How much are we behind?"

The bank manager stared down at the papers on his desk. "Uh," he

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stuttered, his face flushing to his light brown roots. "Mrs. Somerset, you would need to pay twenty thousand dollars."

Diana gasped. "You can't be serious. Surely there's something you can do."

The manager looked over his glasses at her. "Foreclosure proceedings have been in process already. Letters have been sent. Unless you can pay it all, I'm afraid there's nothing I can do."

"Wait a minute," she said. "Peter's life insurance policy is with this bank. When I get the cash from that would it be enough to pay off the mortgage?"

Mr. Simms looked at his computer screen with a frown. When he turned back to Diana his face was grim. "I'm sorry... the insurance policy was cashed in six months ago. The only accounts I have listed for you are your savings and the joint checking. There's a savings account for Hannah, but that has a zero balance."

Diana felt her world come crashing down. Gripping the edge of his desk to prevent herself from pulling out her hair, she peered at the squirming manager in desperation. "He emptied Hannah's account too?"

The manager looked at his hands. She knew he felt as awkward as she did, and she knew that it was her fault. She should never have trusted Peter.

"If I sold my car, would that be enough to postpone the foreclosure?"

"What I would suggest, Mrs. Somerset, is that you sell what you can before they seize your house. Or try to sell your house quick. Pay off what debts you can under bankruptcy and start anew. If you'd like, I can give you the name of a lawyer..."

Diana could feel tears burn her eyes and blinked rapidly. One by one the salty drops escaped, running unchecked down her pale cheeks. Avoiding her gaze, Simms found an invisible speck of dust on the framed photo of his two beautiful children and busied himself with wiping it away.

Hopelessness devoured all of her good intentions. There was nothing she could do. Dreams shattered, she understood clearly that now she could not pay off the mortgage and purchase a shop. He had blown through it all, every last penny. It was one more ambush Peter had won.

All because she had let him.

Nodding slowly, Diana reached for the number. She stared at the card

through blurred vision. A solitary tear dropped onto it before she tucked it into her pocket.

Coming to her feet, she managed a tremulous smile at Mr. Simms. "I'm sorry to take up so much of your time."

Fumbling in a nearly empty desk drawer, he handed her a box of tissues. She pulled two out and crumpled them in her fist with a short laugh of embarrassment. "Thank you."

"It was no trouble, Mrs. Somerset. Let me just say how very sorry I am. And if you need any help that I can give you, please don't hesitate to call me."

"How about a loan?" she muttered.

Simms laughed awkwardly and led her to the door. Holding it open, he allowed her to pass. She knew he was as eager as she to escape the awkward situation. As she turned to say goodbye, he smiled again.

"Please believe that I've done what I could."

"I know you did."

She nodded one last time and walked away.

~

"Diana Marie Halliday. Born December 7; age 29. Parents died in small plane crash when she was eighteen and in college. She majored in finance with a minor in business management. Graduated with honors at age 21. Smart chick. One steady boyfriend. Took parent's money and invested it. Started work straight out of college as a manager at a bookstore. Met your brother. According to my sources, he wined and dined her. Swept her off her feet. They married and had a baby within a year. They bought the house for the baby, using part of her trust fund as a down payment. Peter had odd jobs here and there; Diana kept working part-time at the bookstore. Hannah was born in September four years ago. No exact date for when Peter started cheating, but he has a list of women trailing after him.

"You were right, by the way."

Devlan glanced up at Mike, his brows raised. "How so?"

"She didn't sleep around from all appearances. She's kept pretty much to the straight road... despite the cheating husband."

"Mmm." He waved his hand, indicating to Mike to continue.

"Okay. Peter drove the Mustang involved in the crash. Bought new."

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Devlan nodded.

“Diana kept the Corolla we saw her in. She also managed to have a private savings account that she stashed money into. According to the minister, that was how she paid for his funeral. He told me Peter stole and squandered everything else away.”

“Does she have any money now?”

“Nothing. Not a dime. In fact, there’s so much debt over her head now, she’s completely broke.”

A finance major? Devlan shook his head in disbelief. “How did she not know?”

Mike glanced down at his papers. “He controlled everything. I don’t think she had much of a choice... Let me leave it at this: he did not allow her to find out. He was an overbearing bully that liked to shout as loud as he could. Her paycheck was direct deposited into their joint checking account. How she managed to store away what little money she had was a stroke of pure luck or genius on her part.”

Devlan’s lips thinned. “Well, I guess she’s better off without him. Did you happen to find out why she stayed with him?”

Mike shrugged. “Beats me. Although, since she lost both her parents, it appears as though she may have stuck around for Hannah’s sake. An old friend at her last job mentioned that she was known to say that she thought it important that Hannah have both parents.”

“But if the parent is not good for the child?”

“That’s just it. He may have worn down Diana, but everyone we spoke to all agreed that he never hurt his daughter. Her medical records are impeccable. No accidents, no bumps or bruises. Healthy as can be. Besides, from what I’ve learned about her – if he touched his daughter Diana would have torn him to pieces.”

Shaking his head, Devlan wondered if he would ever understand women. “But she allowed him to hurt her? That makes no sense.”

“I’m not so sure it was a regular thing,” Mike offered. He glanced down at his papers again. “I could only find one episode for her at an emergency room, and that was recent. Three cracked ribs. Bound and sent home with no questions asked. Reported she fell down the stairs while home alone.”

Devlan's brow rose. "Okay? That's possible."

"They live in a ranch house, no basement."

Devlan nodded curtly in understanding, and his jaw tightened in anger. Women. They were all trouble, every last one of them. And this particular woman was bothering him more than she should, which made him even more annoyed. He should not give two hoots that this woman appeared to be pure, honest and simple. It should not bother him that life had dealt her an unfair blow by his selfish step-brother.

Yet that sad look in her eye still haunted him. She was completely alone now, with a small child to care and provide for and financial ruin hanging over her head. Despite all that, she had still flat out refused to accept the help of the last member of her extended family.

"I gave my connection at the bank your card. He was told that your lawyer is handling Peter's estate and that you are power of attorney now. That way he can release information. He's sure to call you."

"Excellent. Good work Mike, and thanks."

Mike nodded and backed out of the room. Before he shut the door behind him, Devlan glanced up. "Mike. Do me another favor. Keep that watch on her."

Mike's eyes widened in surprise, but Devlan did not notice. "Sir?"

"Desperation can force people to act in reckless ways. I need to make sure she doesn't do anything too drastic. Hannah's my priority."

Though he knew that he was not fooling Mike any more than he was fooling himself, Devlan continued to study the papers in front of him as the door closed behind his closest friend and most trusted employee. He knew Mike would remain discreet and do as he asked. In fact, he thought with a small shake of his head, Mike was more like a brother to him than Peter had ever been.

Forming a steeple with his fingers, he rested his chin upon them as he continued to go over the information Mike had given him. Behind him the sun continued to rise above the hustle and bustle of downtown Los Angeles, but he barely noticed. In the quiet of his office with only the sound of his employee's muffled voices to distract him, he wondered what it was that had forced Diana to make such sacrifices and fall so hard. If it was love, he hoped

he never fell in love.

The intercom buzzed. "Mr. Doyle?"

Devlan pressed down the button to answer his secretary. "Yes, what is it, Kathy?"

"A Mr. Simms, from the bank, sir. He says it's important."

Devlan frowned. Then he saw the name on his desk. Ah, yes. Simms was Diana's banker. That did not take very long.

"Put him through," he said grimly. He reached for the handset as soon as the light blinked. "Doyle."

"Mr. Doyle? John Simms."

"Yes, Mr. Simms, what can I do for you?"

"Mr. O'Hare told me that you are the power of attorney to Peter Somerset's estate, and that I should contact you with any updates."

"Yes, I'm aware of that."

"I spoke with Mrs. Somerset today, and have had a chance to review the accounts. I know you're in charge of his remaining estate, and I'm hopeful that things can be settled quickly on your end."

"There are a lot of debts?"

"Well, yes sir. Quite a bit of defaults."

"I see. Is Diana financially stable?"

Simms cleared his throat. "I can't really say, sir. I'm sorry. I know he was your brother, but she's still alive and most of the accounts are in both names. I'm borderline breaking confidentiality now."

"I understand, Simms, but I will personally handle his debts with the fund in my control. Pull a bureau on my brother and have it ready. My secretary will wire the funds for you to settle the debts. In fact, I'll buy the mortgage and sell the house outright."

"Yes sir, Mr. Doyle." The relief in the banker's voice was so apparent that Devlan almost smiled.

"Oh, and Simms? Your secret is safe with me as long as mine is safe with you."

"Of course, thank you sir."

Devlan smiled. "Thank you. Rest assured that all my brother's debts will be handled."

“I’m on it now.”

Devlan hung up the phone and sat back in his chair, spinning it around until he faced the window. Outside the city of Los Angeles came alive in the steamy summer sunlight. How fast-paced and different life here was compared to the relaxed atmosphere he had witnessed in the quiet suburb of Denver. The cost of living for one year in his house in Brentwood would probably cover all of Peter’s debts in Denver, but inside his office on the top floor Devlan shook his head in self-reproach. He was taking on a huge responsibility; one he was now absolutely certain Diana would not want him involved in.

However, he reminded himself yet again, it was really for the child. While the gossip columns might accuse him of not having a heart, never in a million years could he allow the last remnant of his family to suffer needlessly. Not while he had the means to fix things. He was not that selfish and cold.

Diana was just an added distraction.

What did it matter that his heart fluttered in his chest when he thought about all the pain she had been through? It had nothing to do with her. Not even because she looked so vulnerable behind her tough as nails exterior.

His gaze scanned the horizon, staring out at hazy Los Angeles around him. The heat here was stifling, but he had enjoyed the brief reprieve at Peter’s funeral. Back in Colorado the snow had almost completely melted from the high peaks in preparation for the new snow coming soon. As he pondered the differing climates, he wondered what Diana was doing at that moment. She had just left the bank. Chances were that she was heading home to pack. Where would she be when the weather turned?

Closing his eyes against the strong California sun, Devlan envisioned Diana as he had always remembered her. The stunning bride dressed in a sheath ivory silk gown that had clung to her curves like a fitted glove. He still remembered that day as if it were yesterday. She had been so happy, her young face glowing with hope and happiness in the candlelight. Peter, too, had appeared happy until he arrived. Without as much as an invitation to stay and dine with them, Peter had demanded that he leave.

How jealous his brother had been, jealous and selfish from the first moment he had arrived on the scene. Despite the eight year age difference,

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Peter had constantly tried to best him. It was a feat not accomplished until he had found Diana. Peter glowed with pride over having landed her, and for the first time Devlan had to admit he was envious, especially when she smiled at him. It had reached her bright eyes, the skin around them crinkling endearingly, and her laugh was clear, contagious and so full of joy.

A knock on the door broke his reverie, and he turned away from the window reluctantly. "Yeah."

Mike came strolling back in. "Simms called already?"

"Word travels fast," Devlan said with a grimace.

"I was in the office." Mike took the seat in front of Devlan's desk and leaned forward. "What's going on here? What's making you do this?"

Devlan shrugged. "I need to make sure that Hannah is well cared for. If not, she'll be in the custody battle of a lifetime."

Mike shook his head. "No, this goes beyond that. What did your brother do that makes you feel so guilty?"

Devlan laughed shortly and came to his feet. "Believe me, Mike, it's not Peter. I have absolutely no loyalty to him at all."

Peter had been the sole black smear upon his father's good name. His elderly father had found Peter's mother somewhere in Las Vegas and brought the pretty woman home with him. She had died three years later from a sedative overdose, leaving her thirteen-year-old son behind. But Peter had not missed his mother. Even at a young age he was spoiled and wanted so much more than he deserved. His mother had been merely the key to his step-father's money. Unfortunately, when his step-father died six months later from a heart attack the only money he had left Peter was stashed away in a college fund. He depleted that by the end of his sophomore year, and that was when he found Diana. She had money left to her by her deceased parents, and apparently the lovely face and charming personality that went with it was an added bonus that he took advantage of.

Devlan's hands curled into tight fists. It sickened him that it did not take Peter long to squander her money as well as her love. Now he and Diana were left picking up the pieces.

Everything that Peter had touched he destroyed, but it was not out of guilt that Devlan was trying to clean up after him. No, there was something

else that tugged at his heart like a child on someone's coattails.

But even he was not sure what exactly that was.

~

Hot tears burned Diana's eyes. She struggled to keep them in, but it was too hard. No matter how quickly she blinked her lashes, the persistent moistness welled and overflowed. Sighing sadly, Diana resigned herself to allowing the tears to fall while she drove home from the bank. There was no holding back anymore; she no longer had to hide her true feelings. While Peter used to ridicule her whenever she felt down, he was gone now. It was time to let it all out. Now, before Hannah saw her.

She pulled into the driveway and stared at the small ranch-style house she had called home for the last five years. It rested in a quiet, family-oriented cul-de-sac, where SUVs were parked next to bicycles and community parks were overflowing with block parties. While the sad memories had begun to outweigh the good ones in recent months, it was the house she carried her newborn baby home to. It was the only home Hannah had ever known.

She was glad Hannah was not there when she had received the news. She could not imagine trying to answer the questions the child was sure to ask. She needed time. Unfortunately, that was a luxury she no longer had.

With shaking fingers, she unlocked the door and went in, taking note of how quiet the house was. There would be no more arguments. She had thought she was finally free now that Peter was gone, but he took with him everything she owned. How could she have been so ignorant, so foolish to believe in him, or so blind to the reality of her life?

Sitting down hard on the couch, Diana sighed as she placed her face in her hands. She deserved a good cry. It was a long time coming. Once she was done crying she would move on and make new plans. There was much to do and she needed to get started. She could survive this; she was tougher than she thought. At least, that was what she kept telling herself.

So why did she feel so alone?

~

"That's the last one." Diana sat back with a sigh and glanced around her at the empty house.

Her neighbor Mindy, with her chocolate hair drawn back in a pony tail

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that bunched in the hood of her black, green and gold CSU sweatshirt, entered the living room carrying Hannah's favorite stuffed bear. "Wait a minute. I have one more."

"I don't have any room. We'll have to let Hannah carry it."

Mindy nodded and enthusiastically viewed the room. "Then that's it. Let's go."

"Yes. I have a lot of unloading to do when we get there."

With a strength that belied her petite frame, Mindy picked up the last box and carried it to the small rental truck parked in the driveway. Her husband Allan called for Hannah and their son AJ, who came running with squeals of delight. They were quickly loaded into the truck with Allan.

Diana lagged behind. With a heavy heart she walked through her house for the last time. Dust motes danced in the sunlight streaming through the windows, and echoing footsteps replaced the sound of Hannah's laughter down the narrow hallway leading to the bedrooms. No beds remained in those rooms anymore. In fact, there was nothing left. Everything was swept clean. Only emptiness remained, and it left her with a hollow feeling.

After committing everything to the back corners of her memory, Diana returned outside to the brisk morning chill and joined the others. The 'For Sale' sign in her front yard told it all. It was over. This part of her life was now one experience from which she had learned. From here on out she had the rest of her life ahead of her.

In a stroke of pure luck, Diana had received a call later in the afternoon after her visit to the bank. Fortunately Mr. Simms had located the account that Peter had put the money from their savings in. While it was not enough to bail out her mortgage completely, she was able to pay off some of their smaller debts without having to sell her car. He had guided her through signing all the necessary papers, and then he told her that she could move on. After selling and donating her extra furniture and most of Peter's belongings, Diana packed up what little remained from block yard sales and prepared to move to her new apartment.

The apartment she took was a small three room place in a newer complex close to Hannah's preschool in Westminster. Small but clean, the single bedroom was all that she could afford for the time being. While not the

lifestyle Hannah was used to, Diana was sure that she was young enough to adjust. Once she had explained why they had to leave, Hannah had accepted it reluctantly but Diana had felt the first stirrings of hope for their new future together.

“Are we ready?” Diana asked. Though the words were hard and stuck in her throat like spoonful of peanut butter, she thought she matched Mindy’s enthusiasm.

The kids in the truck shouted their eagerness, and Diana smiled in return. Allan, on the other hand, rolled his eyes, but his voice was teasing. “I knew I would be the one stuck with the kids. I just knew it.”

Diana gave him a grateful smile. “I can’t thank you enough, Allan. You and Mindy have been a great help.”

“It’s no problem, Diana. I wish you had come to us a long time ago. Perhaps we could’ve helped you more than this.”

Diana could feel a blush rise to her cheeks. Allan was not a small man, and the fierce frown on his face spoke volumes. How she hated that her neighbors had learned some of what had happened.

“I’m okay, and Hannah’s great. We’ll manage just fine,” she said lightly.

“It’s the hidden scars we’re afraid of, Di,” he said pointedly.

Diana could feel herself squirming under his scrutiny. This line of discussion was not the direction she wanted to head into. Not today. “You know, these past two months have done wonders for Hannah. She’s started her new school, and I’ve found this new apartment. Losing the house right after Peter has been hard, but we’ll manage. We just need to start all over.”

“Well, I know a few guys who would love to help you, Diana. Just give me the okay and you’ll have your pick.”

Diana laughed, a genuine giggle that came from deep within and made her eyes sparkle. She liked that she was able to laugh again. “I’m not ready for that yet, Allan. But thanks, I’ll definitely keep your offer in mind as winter sets in.”

He grinned and revved the engine. Diana waved back and crossed her neatly manicured grass one last time to reach her car, starting it up and leading the way to her new place. As she pulled out of her neighborhood one last time, she glanced in the mirror and saw the truck following behind. It

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reminded her that not everyone was selfish and cruel. There were good people out there that were willing to help. Like Mr. Simms at the bank and Allan and Mindy. Thank goodness she had been able to keep her car, and thank goodness she had finally found some friends.

Chapter 3

Their new home was small but safe, despite its location on a main thoroughfare. As she and Hannah settled in, there was a lot to keep them busy and the adjustment went well. The new routine suited them both. As fall approached, Hannah began Kindergarten, and Mindy kept her after school until Diana was done with work. At the same time, Diana started full-time at her job, and the extra money was well worth it. They were starting over on their terms.

Although this new lifestyle was busy, Diana and Hannah still managed to keep some quality time together. Though she never thought it possible, she and Hannah had bonded even closer. Without Peter's constant harassment, Diana was able to become her old self again, and her evenings with Hannah were shared with plenty of giggles, hugs and kisses.

It was just the two of them, and they were a team. After Diana picked her up from Mindy's house, she would prepare dinner and Hannah helped her clean up. Then they would spend the evenings together, completing Hannah's homework, reading, doing household chores and then preparing for bed before another busy day arrived. Hannah chose the outfits; Diana tucked her in. So full of each other, Diana rarely had use of the electronic sitter. The television set resting on the used entertainment center was reserved for weekends and special occasions.

However, it was through the television that Diana again saw Devlan Doyle.

Three months had passed since he had confronted her at the funeral. Though at one time certain he would be harassing her more regularly, she had not heard from him since. It later dawned on her that his professed concern

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had been just a courtesy, and neither she nor Hannah had made his cut. Surprisingly, she was comfortable knowing that they probably would not ever see or hear from him again. He was from a part of her life that she would just as soon put behind her. Nevertheless, when Diana heard his name on the evening entertainment show, she could not resist her curiosity.

She was up to her elbows in Hannah's bath bubbles when she heard the announcement, and her ears instantly keyed in to what was being said. Cursing her interest, she tossed down the towel and came to her feet. Though she knew she was being silly, she hurried into the living room and stared at the set. Tall, dark, and oh so debonair in his black tux, he beamed at the cameras with the stunningly beautiful woman on his arm.

Nah, she confirmed in her mind, he had not spared them a thought since the moment he left Denver.

“And high fashion model Roxanne Lemieux showed up at the premier with none other than Devlan Doyle, business tycoon and rumored producer. There has been talk of Doyle teaming up with Hugh Davis, a close friend of Roxanne's, for a new project, though neither party will comment on it. While Doyle claims merely to enjoy the beautiful model's company, the pair has been seen together at several functions, although neither will admit to a serious relationship. As you know, Roxanne is the former wife of Director Wayne Moore, and Doyle has been linked to several beautiful actresses including superstar Catalina Jasper...”

With an exasperated sigh, Diana turned away. Those brothers may not have been bound by blood, but they certainly shared the same fear of commitment. She and Hannah were so much better off without them in their lives, and it had been foolish of her to watch because the sight only served to ruin her mood. Seeing Devlan flashing his white teeth in a friendly smile for the cameras with a stunning model on his arm made her teeth clench, even while it reminded her of the lack of companionship in her own secluded life. For what one took for granted, another could only dream of.

She went back to the bathroom and sat on the lowered toilet seat thoughtfully. Hannah was still happily playing with her dolls in the bath and did not look up when she returned, so Diana watched her idly as her mind drifted back in time to the first time she had seen Peter's handsome brother. It

seemed so long ago, though really only six years had passed. Her forehead puckered in remembrance. He had changed a bit since that night so long ago. There were more lines around his large blue eyes, and his face had thinned slightly over the years. Perhaps that was why she had not immediately recognized him.

Devlan Doyle. A man as dark as his step-brother was fair. When he had arrived at her wedding reception in his form fitting black suit that almost perfectly matched his hair, he had immediately drawn attention. Whether it was because he arrived during the toast to the bride and groom or because he was just a mesmerizing man, his presence had taken the attention away from his brother. And Diana clearly remembered that Peter had not been happy about it.

Though Peter had told her that Devlan never lacked for female company, he had come alone to their wedding. Her curiosity, along with everyone else's, drew many interested stares his way. However, his focus remained on the head table – on her and Peter. Much to Peter's dismay, Diana's eyes were drawn to Devlan's instantly, and she felt her new husband stiffen beside her when her gaze locked with the enigmatic man's in the doorway. While she told herself it was just the interruption that made her return his steady stare, in truth it was because he was so darkly handsome and had such bright eyes. They were mesmerizing. His intense blue orbs had focused solely on her, and he studied her intently. The way he had stared made her shiver, but she had been helpless to look away. There was no denying it; the man was not only handsome as sin, but sexy as well.

As though in a trance, she had broken away from her guests as soon as possible and approached him, smiling cheerfully and stating her welcome. He had grasped her hand in his and held it longer than necessary, leaning forward to offer a kiss to the bride.

At the time she had been blinded by hope, so Diana had not seen the warning sign in Peter's jealous reaction. After watching his brother's appreciative appraisal, he had risen and approached Devlan before he had completely lowered his head to her cheek. There was a heated discussion, with Peter doing most of the gesturing, and Devlan left quietly without another word. His parting gaze had left her feeling unsatisfied somehow, but her

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idealism quickly brushed aside the compelling attraction.

It was much later in their honeymoon that Diana had mentioned the incident. Peter had shrugged it off and told her about Devlan. How his step-brother had stolen his inheritance and used it to buy into a huge corporation that was struggling. He took it over and slowly expanded before using every trick in the book to cheat Peter out of his share. Hiring smooth talking lawyers to search every document, Devlan ruthlessly swindled Peter out of his wealth.

At the time, Diana had sympathized with Peter. He had painted the perfect picture of a family embezzlement, of a selfish and ambitious man who had forcefully gone after what he wanted without considering those he hurt. She had put Devlan Doyle out of her mind, burying her curiosity behind her righteous anger and indignation.

Diana grimaced. What a naïve fool she was. She should have known then that she had married into the wrong family. If they would cheat each other so horribly, why would she be treated any different? Back then her love was blind, and she had been captivated by her new husband and the promise of a happily ever after. Today she just felt foolish.

She was still resentful as she drove Hannah into school the next morning. Both men had the ability to wreak havoc and cause trouble in her life, and she no longer needed that stress. She and Hannah were much better off without them. Hannah could remember Peter the way she wanted to, and Diana could move on.

Pulling the car to a stop across from the school she reached into the back seat and gave her daughter's leg a tickle. Hannah giggled and pulled her leg away

“Mommy, stop that!”

She smiled at her daughter, feeling a surge of love for the child. “Okay... I go into work late today, so I'll see you tonight after dinner. I love you.”

“I love you too, Mommy.”

Hannah was smiling happily, and it made Diana's heart want to sing. Yep, she thought, much better off as just the two of them. Hopping from the car, Diana went to the back door to collect Hannah. She waited impatiently as Diana unbuckled her car seat and helped her out.

“Come on, Mommy.”

Diana raised her brow and took her daughter's hand. "Don't fret, silly. We're early."

"I know, but you take so long. Why do you take so long?"

"Because I'm old," she muttered.

Hannah giggled. "You're silly, Mommy."

"Yeah, yeah. Come on, let's go."

They crossed the street together, with Hannah dragging her feet through the fallen leaves. Fall was coming fast, Diana thought, and that meant more winter clothes for Hannah. After that, Christmas would be upon them. What would she do then? Could she come up with enough money to make her daughter's dreams come true?

The kids were all lining up outside on this blustery morning, and after bending down to give her daughter one last kiss, Diana sent her on her way with the rest of the group. She watched as Hannah was enveloped into the smiling group until she was out of sight before hurrying back to her car.

She was just opening the car door when she heard Hannah call for her. Turning back, Diana watched in confusion as her daughter ran toward her, not minding the road or the oncoming traffic. In her hand she held a paper, waving it excitedly, while behind her, the teacher was calling out to her to stop. When Hannah did not respond, the teacher broke away from the group of children to give chase. Soon all eyes were upon her, but still Hannah paid no mind.

With a frightened scream, Diana held out her hands, but she was too late. Eyes wide, Diana viewed the oncoming disaster with horror. Hannah had finally stopped, but she halted in the middle of the road. Her eyes were round with fear as she stared at an oncoming car. Too fast. It was moving way too fast. Without considering her own safety, Diana forced herself to move. She was running, screaming, waving her hands as though she could stop the accident by her own force of will.

It did not work.

There was a horrible squealing of the tires and a sickening thud, and Hannah was suddenly sailing through the air and landing with a dull thump several yards away.

"Hannah!" Diana screamed, her hands going to her mouth in horror.

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Still running and screaming at the same time, she fell to her knees beside her daughter. She barely noticed the pain when they struck the hard pavement.

“Don’t move her!” a bystander shouted. Suddenly there were people everywhere, and the sound of running feet echoed in her agonized mind.

“Hold her head still.”

There was blood seeping from a wound on her head, but Hannah was still breathing and her eyelids fluttered. Diana grasped her head and held on, taking the handkerchief someone handed her and pressing it to the gash on her forehead.

“She’s breathing!”

“There’s so much blood. Somebody please call for help,” she cried.

“They’re on their way, ma’am. Just stay calm.”

Diana wanted to scream that it was not their child lying broken in the middle of the street, but there were so many voices that she knew no one would hear. She bit her lip until it bled in an effort to keep her panic at bay.

One of the mothers bent down next to her and wrapped her arms around Diana’s shoulders. “It’s okay, Diana. Everything will be okay.”

Diana’s eyes filled with tears as she fought back the anguish. Right now, she was not sure that Hannah would be okay.

After what seemed an eternity, she heard the sirens. They sounded loud in the sudden hush of the children and parents gathered around her. She could hear the increasing urgency in their voices and felt the cold hand of terror take a hold of her heart.

Please, oh please, don't take my baby too.

~

“There’s been trouble.”

Mike’s unceremonious entry into his office brought a warning frown to Devlan’s face. Already in an irritable mood, he raised his weary gaze to his closest associate. He had spent the evening in the spotlight with Roxanne again, something he dreaded doing. It had been a long evening listening to her endless chatter, and an even longer night trying to be rid of her. Now he was back at work with hardly any sleep and sporting a headache to worsen his mood.

“I hope this is good, Mike.”

COLLETTE SCOTT

“I just got a call from my guy in Denver. It’s Hannah Somerset. She’s in the hospital.”

For the briefest of moments, he struggled to place the name. Then it hit him. He sat up straighter. “What happened?”

“Hit by a car this morning by an uninsured motorist. She’s got serious injuries.”

He dragged his hand slowly down his face. Of all the luck. Though he wanted to just shout out a curse, he knew that it would not help matters. Right now, he needed to keep his calm and take immediate action.

“Okay. Get the jet ready. I want to be there within the hour. Is she in a trauma center?”

“They sent her to Denver. Just arrived.”

Ignoring Mike’s curious glance, Devlan pressed the button on his desk to page his assistant.

“Kathy, cancel all my appointments. I’ll be out of town for an indeterminable amount of time. And call in any contacts we have in Denver. I need to find the best pediatric orthopedic surgeons, neurologists and whatever else may be needed for a child struck by a car. I’ll get you the details as soon as I get them.”

“Yes, sir,” came the crisp response.

Devlan collected what papers he needed and placed them in his briefcase. His headache and his frustration with Roxanne would have to wait. In fact, everything would have to wait. Diana and Hannah needed him now and he had a plane to catch.

~

Diana stood by the nurse’s station, ears attuned to the activity in the trauma room while she struggled to keep from barging in. One nurse had told her in an overly patient and calm voice that there was a tube to Hannah’s lungs and they were giving her oxygen to keep the swelling in her brain down. They would soon be getting x-rays, and then they would be sending her for a CT scan. While they were doing all this, they would continue to stabilize her. If she would just take a seat...

No, Diana would not just take a seat. Though the words were meant to reassure her, it did little to help. Tears continued to roll down her face, and

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she paced and worried while her heart screamed out for her child. Why could it not be her on that table? She should have done something to stop it from happening. Something more. While she waited in a hallway with bated breath, her daughter could be dying without her.

She was still hovering as close as she could get when the emergency room doctor approached her. "Mrs. Somerset?"

She nodded.

"Is there anyone else with you?"

"Uh, no. I'm alone," she whispered. Yes, she was very alone. Hannah was all she had.

His face was solemn as he led her to the family waiting room. The room was empty now, but he shut the door behind them for even more privacy.

"I'm Doctor James Haverill. I'm the Emergency Room physician on duty this morning. I have some good news and some bad news."

She nodded her head weakly.

"We've got some swelling in her brain. We also found some bleeding into her pelvic cavity. There's a question as to the stability of her pelvis, but right now it appears intact. One of her femurs, the thighbone, is fractured and the other leg shows some bending, which is not unusual in a child since their bones are so flexible. Fortunately, the break is not within the epiphysis, or growth plate. It's the head injury that we're very concerned about. It can be fatal or at least permanently damaging..."

He stopped and gave her a moment to ingest everything before continuing. "I have a neurosurgeon on the way. He's very good; the best in the area. We need to operate immediately to get the bleeding controlled and the swelling down."

"Do whatever you must, just please let her be okay."

He shook his head solemnly. "I can't tell you for sure if she'll be okay. It's far too early. We have grave injuries here that we must treat carefully."

Diana blinked away fresh tears. "Do what you have to."

He nodded and gave her hand a squeeze. His hand was warm and strong. "I'll do my very best. We all will. Betty over there will have papers for you to sign."

A tremulous smile crossed Diana's lips and she watched the doctor hurry

back down the hall. She sank to the sofa and ran her hands through her hair as a moment of panic filled her chest. What if something went wrong and she did not have a chance to see Hannah once more and tell her how much she loved her? Unable to stop the frantic pounding of her heart, Diana bit back the despair that threatened to overcome her. First Peter, and now Hannah. How much more could she take?

Struggling against the tightness in her chest, Diana mentally shook herself. Hannah needed her to be strong and in control right now, and she owed it to her daughter to be so. Inhaling another deep breath, she let it out slowly in an effort to ease the growing pain in her breast. She had to get moving - now.

It was through blurred vision that she saw the tall, broad shouldered man in a dark suit rush past the door in the direction of the nurse's station. He stopped in his tracks and turned back when he saw her.

"Diana?"

Diana stiffened at the sound of that deep, seductive voice. She knew that voice. She had just heard it on the television. Why was she hearing it here?

She wiped at her eyes quickly, trying to clear the tears before he noticed her show of weakness. Then she met his concerned stare. Astonished, she realized that it really was him. From the television the evening before to standing in the middle of the family waiting room, Devlan Doyle appeared to be everywhere.

"What on earth are you doing here?"

He came to tower above her, looking fresh and clean and smelling of expensive cologne. Though intimidating in his power suit, his face was grave and worry glittered in his eyes. "I came as soon as I heard. Where's Hannah? Is she going to be all right?"

"They don't know yet," she whispered brokenly.

"Wow Diana, I'm sorry."

She nodded and looked away, unwilling to share her pain with him. But Devlan was not having it. He reached down, captured her hands, and pulled her to her feet. Too stunned to resist, she stiffened when he suddenly enveloped her in his arms and pulled her close, his hand smoothing her hair down her back. She remained rigid until his husky whisper reached her ears.

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"You're not alone, Diana. I'm here to help in any way that I can."

Alone. She had not felt this alone until the idea of losing her child became a sudden reality. Now everything seemed so tenuous, so many unknowns, and his small gesture of kindness was all it took to break down her resolve to resist. Her tears overflowed and ran in a silent stream down her cheeks. How had he known how alone she felt?

"I'm so afraid that she'll never know how much I love her."

"Doubtful," he said forcefully.

Devlan's hands tightened encouragingly. He did not seem to mind that she was crying on his fancy suit which probably cost as much as her monthly salary. In fact, by the racing of his own heart he appeared to be as frightened as she was. Surprised by his sudden vulnerability, she began to weaken. His touch was gentle and soothing, and it was so welcome during this time of uncertainty. Surely he could make matters all right. He said she was not alone.

How easy it would be to fall back into that trap.

Quickly changing the subject from her traitorous thoughts, Diana took a deep breath. "The doctor said that she has swelling in her brain and that both her legs are injured. She might also be bleeding into her pelvis. What will happen now?"

She could feel Devlan nod as his chin came to rest upon the top of her head. "I've already called in favors from some friends of mine, Diana. They'll work on Hannah to the best of their abilities. She'll pull through. You have the best in the area to help her."

As his words sank in, Diana suddenly realized just how bizarre his presence in the hospital was. It was almost surrealistic. She stiffened and pulled away from him, leaving the comfort of his arms with the suspicion that things were not what they seemed. Reaching for another tissue, she took a moment to regain her composure. She could feel his intense gaze upon her as she moved away to a safe spot within the small room.

"How is it, Mr. Doyle, that you're here?" She managed a shaky laugh. "I mean, how did you hear about the accident and get here so quickly?"

There was a slight hesitation before Devlan answered. His gaze did not quite meet hers as he spoke, which only increased her suspicion. She watched him warily as he focused on his clean, short fingernails.

“I was already here, Diana. I was upstairs in a meeting with upper management. I’m doing some work with the hospital. There was a lot of talk about the accident, and when I heard Hannah’s name I came down.”

Diana was not sure she believed him, but judging by his sharp appearance she suspected he was doing some sort of work. Whether or not it was upstairs was another story altogether. However, he did have the means to help her, and at that moment Hannah needed all the help she could get. The police had told her that the driver could not show proof of insurance, and that did not bode well for her at all.

She nodded slowly and sat back down on the couch, keeping a safe distance between them. Her guard was up again, and she intended to keep it that way. No, she *needed* to keep it that way.

Seeing her continued hesitation, Devlan took a step toward her and spoke quickly. “Let me help you help your daughter, Diana. I can do it. I can ensure that she has the best medical care available, with specialists in every field.”

“I am capable of taking care of Hannah, Mr. Doyle.”

He nodded impatiently while his hand waved away her words dismissively. “I know that. But I am offering you financial help. You have no insurance. How will you pay for her care?”

The warning bells that had rung when she first saw him were an all-out cacophony of noise now. Her eyes narrowed until they were almost slits. “How did you know that?”

“Common sense, Diana.” When she continued to stare at him suspiciously, he shrugged. “You just started full-time, did you not? Does your job offer you benefits immediately?”

She grimaced. He was right. “We’re covered as of the first of the month.”

“You see? You can’t get her the care I can. Trust me, Diana. I will do my best for her.”

“But why? I can offer you nothing in return. You know I can’t repay you; I have no money.”

“I don’t want your money.”

Their gazes locked, but Diana held her tongue and waited for him to

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elaborate. Tense moments passed until his gaze slipped away from hers to travel her length. Unlike Peter's scathing and contemptuous look, Devlan's was warm and appreciative, and Diana felt the power of it all the way to her toes. He cleared his throat, but his voice grew deeper when he finally answered her unspoken question. "There are things other than money that you can offer."

She could imagine what that meant.

Though her mind screamed that she was being foolish and reckless, her heart told her that nothing mattered more than her daughter. She would do anything for Hannah. Taking a deep breath, she met Devlan's gaze steadily.

"What would I have to do?"

"I would expect that you return with Hannah to L.A. I can take care of you both there. Hannah will have the best medical care that money can buy. We can discuss repayment options at a later date."

"I'm still not sure I understand," she said with a quick shake of her head. "Why would you do this for us? We're nothing to you."

He recoiled in surprise, and a fierce frown appeared on his face. "Nothing?"

As his blue eyes darkened in frustration, Diana realized that he was not a man used to being questioned. Judging by his glare, he apparently did not like that she did just that. When he finally spoke, his voice was clipped and cold and she shivered at his tone.

"I'm offering you the best of care for your daughter. Take it or leave it. But I'd advise you to reconsider your stubbornness and think of how far you will go for Hannah... I'll be out in the hall."

Chapter 4

Diana watched Devlan back from the room and shut the door behind him with a gentle click. The smell of his cologne remained behind, a tangy male scent that tickled her nose. She could tell that it was costly. Of course, everything about him spelled out quality. She knew he was wealthy beyond belief, and that meant he had the means to help Hannah.

His words still rang in her ears. How far would she go for her child?

She was not that stubborn. She would do anything for her baby.

If the steamy look he had given her was any indication, he did not want her money. No, he wanted something else from her, and she could only think of one thing that might be. Was she prepared to get involved with a man who would surely break her heart? Was she willing to put aside her firm decisions to get her life and confidence back before allowing another man into her life, especially a man that would surely bring havoc?

Entering a relationship with Devlan Doyle would cause trouble. But Hannah needed his help, and unfortunately she had no way to give her everything she needed without taking Doyle up on his offer.

Diana came to her feet. Nothing mattered as much as her daughter. She would do whatever it took to get the best for Hannah. Closing her eyes briefly, Diana stiffened her resolve and took a deep breath to give her strength. She reached for the door handle and grasped it tightly, knowing that once she opened that door she would seal her fate. But she could find a way to steel her heart against Devlan Doyle; she would not allow it to betray her again.

“I’ll take it.”

Devlan stood by the nurse’s station with his companion, the same man

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he was with at the funeral, speaking in hushed tones. At the sound of her voice his head swiveled slowly in her direction, and his triumphant gaze penetrated her very soul. With an almost imperceptible nod, he straightened and joined her again.

“They’re taking Hannah upstairs now. I’ll bring you up.”

“I’ll go anywhere. I’ll do anything. Just help her.”

Devlan responded with a quick nod. “I’ll take care of it.”

“I’m counting on that.”

His hand came down on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “Don’t doubt me. I always keep my word.”

When she immediately stiffened, his hand dropped to her arm. Without another word, he guided her to the nearest elevator and up to the surgical floor. There he stood aside so that she could exit the elevator but did not follow.

“Mike will stay with you. I have to get some work done, but I’ll be back when they’re done. If you need to reach me, Mike will take care of it.”

Diana glanced at the burly blond man with a little trepidation. She had never met a bodyguard before. As if in answer to her unspoken question, he smiled cheerfully down at her.

“Hello, Mrs. Somerset.”

She managed a small smile. “Please call me Diana.”

Mike glanced at Devlan who nodded shortly before the elevator doors closed again. Stuck alone with Mike, she began walking down the hall.

“Very well. Can I get you anything?”

Diana shook her head. All she wanted now was reassurance that Hannah would be okay. Unfortunately, that meant another waiting room. This one was sporting four white walls, a sofa and several chairs. Magazines rested on the battered wooden coffee table, most current but well read. Everything was clean and well-kept but missing her laughing daughter.

Sinking into the chair closest to the door, Diana stared at her feet. As she glanced down at her worn jeans, she noticed for the first time Hannah’s blood staining her knees and thighs. Fresh tears pricked her eyes as an image of the accident scene flashed behind her eyes. There had been so much blood and so much noise. For as long as she lived, she would never forget the sound of that

sickening thud.

Please let Hannah get well.

~

Devlan exited the elevator and strode toward the exit. The bright late-morning sunlight greeted him, and the cool fall air went right through him. Squinting against the glare, he shivered and pulled his jacket closed as he approached the waiting limo.

“Chilly out today, sir?” the driver asked.

“I left in too much of a hurry to grab a winter coat,” he muttered.

“I have the heat running in the car.”

The driver opened his door and stood aside while Devlan climbed in. Once in the privacy of the dark interior he leaned his head against the seat and closed his eyes. Though he was used to sudden events and immediate reaction times, this morning had caught him completely by surprise. Little Hannah Somerset was in serious condition, and now he had to prepare for the worst case scenario.

First Peter and now Hannah, he thought in frustration. Was he destined to donate everything to charity? No sooner did the thought escape than he chided himself. After all, to him Hannah’s situation was an annoyance; to her mother, it was devastation.

His irritability must be due to the lack of sleep. He was just too old for these late nights, he concluded. If Roxanne had not forced him to escort her to another premier and the parties afterwards, he would have been more alert this morning instead of frazzled and cranky. His days of enjoying the night life were over, now they left him exhausted.

“Where to, sir?”

Devlan sat forward and pressed the intercom button. “To my suite.”

“Very well.”

The silent limo eased away from the curb, and Devlan settled back once more. Hannah was in trouble; her injuries serious. Now he needed to make sure that he could live up to his promise to the child’s mother. He did not like promises or the commitment they required, but this time he was determined. Not only did his estate require it, but he had given Diana his word.

The elation of victory was somewhat hollow but still there. Diana and

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Hannah were finally under his protection. Though not exactly in the way he intended, he had accomplished what he had set out to do. Diana had relented, and he had control. The question now was whether or not he could pull it off. Not in the clear yet, he needed to demonstrate to them both that he was capable of taking care of them, and taking care of them well. He had to earn Diana's trust and prove that she had made the right choice. The only choice.

He reached for his phone and dialed Kathy. "Open the Malibu house. I need it cleaned and ready for use."

"Sir? But you've never used the Malibu house before."

"Just do it. And find a good rehabilitation center for the child. Once she's cleared to leave the hospital, I want to settle her mother there and personally oversee Hannah's rehab."

"How is she now?"

"In surgery. Too soon to tell. It's serious, though."

"Oh no, that's terrible. The poor thing. Her mother must be frantic... I'll get right on it. I've cancelled all your appointments here for now. I had a problem rescheduling your golf game with Mr. Littleton. He's booked now until after Christmas."

Devlan grimaced. "I'm not too concerned with a golf game. At least that was a break."

"Yes, sir. Will you be coming back today?"

"No, I've decided to spend the night here. I'm on my way to the suite now. I want to be close by when Hannah's done with surgery and has her first night."

"But you have the plane."

"Yeah, but I wouldn't want to put all my trust in an airport. Who knows what can happen?"

He heard Kathy sigh on the other line and frowned. "Is there a problem?"

"No, but Roxanne called and was expecting you for supper. She made dinner plans at your Brentwood house. She's going to be disappointed that you won't be there."

That woman was getting far too presumptuous, he thought. Inwardly he groaned in frustration, and his voice was curt when he answered. "My

presence here is more important than her dinner plans.”

He thought he heard Kathy giggle in the background, but she was serious when she answered. “I’ll call her straight away.”

“Do me a favor, Kath? Don’t tell her where I am, okay? Diana doesn’t need her here. As a matter of fact, don’t tell anyone I’m here. I’d rather have some privacy right now.”

“Of course, sir.”

He signed off and glanced out the window. Clouds were slowly rolling in from the west. The sun was no longer glittering brightly through the tinted windows. Fall was certainly making its presence known here. Multi-colored leaves littered the street around him, and houses were happily showing off their Halloween decorations. Summer had ended early in this climate, and the entire area seemed different.

The three months that had passed since the funeral seemed so long ago. A lot had changed while he had observed from a safe distance, but seeing those changes firsthand had been more unsettling than he had imagined they would be. Even emotional and disheveled, Diana had regained her natural beauty. The dark circles and strain that had marred her face when he saw her last were replaced by fresh, glowing skin and laughter lines. Not only did she appear physically healthier, but emotionally she seemed stronger. Even frightened and worried about her daughter, she glowed more than Roxanne on her best day. It was a concerning reality that he found her so damned attractive. And though he kept telling himself that Hannah’s health was his priority, he suspected that proving himself to Diana was playing a large part too.

That was a problem. One he did not have time to consider at the moment.

Work was his life, his livelihood. However, with the wealth came the hard work and long hours. Even a family emergency could not draw him away from the day-to-day problems, and he knew that he had plenty to do before he could rest. Perhaps that was why he had no one until now. Suddenly things had changed. In the blink of an eye, he had a ready-made family, which surprisingly filled him with hope and pleasure rather than fear. With his money, he fully intended on drawing the Somerset ladies into his life and

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keeping them there until he could sort out his feelings.

The afternoon was spent in the quiet of his spacious suite working, and it was past dinner when he finally got Mike's text that Hannah was out of recovery. The surgery was successful, and Hannah was being moved into a room in the pediatric intensive care unit. Much to his surprise, all thoughts of work fled and his priority switched to the hospital to see with his own eyes that Hannah was pulling through. Even though he had only met her once, he looked forward to seeing the adorable golden-haired child awake and smiling.

As he entered the lobby of the hospital, he overheard a man at the information desk. "I'm looking for information about Hannah Somerset. She was brought in this morning. Little girl, hit by a car."

The woman punched in some information into her computer and then looked up apologetically. "I'm sorry, sir, but she's in the intensive care unit. Only immediate family members allowed. Are you a family member?"

The man looked frustrated. "Just about."

The woman shrugged in response. "I'm sorry, sir. Only the mother, father, or primary caregiver."

"Well, can I leave her a message? Can I at least let Diana know I was here?"

"I'll call up to her room and see if she'd like to see you. Would that be okay?"

Devlan frowned at the tall man as he walked by. He was good looking in a rough way, dressed in khaki slacks and a dark sweater. His brown hair was slicked back like he had just gotten out of the shower, and he carried a handful of balloons and a huge teddy bear the size of Hannah. Was Diana dating already? And if so, how had he not been notified?

"I'm sorry sir, but what was your name?"

"Allan."

"I told her you were here, but she doesn't want to leave the room." The woman placed down the phone and smiled apologetically again. "If you want to leave your gift, I'll make sure she gets them as soon as we can."

Allan handed everything to the lady behind the desk and thanked her politely. Devlan paused to inspect the bundle but looked away quickly when the other man noticed his stare. Continuing toward the elevator, he flashed his

pass at the security guard. "Where can I use my phone?"

"Public areas only."

Devlan thanked him and pressed the button to the elevator. He should have thought of it himself, he thought grimly. Boy did he have a lot to learn. Children were beyond his reasoning... Way out of his league.

As soon as the elevator doors opened, Devlan dialed his secretary once again. "Kathy, I need your help."

Scowling, he glanced around him to see if anyone was listening. Standing in the middle of the hushed hallway prepared to let everyone listening know how ignorant he had been was not something he liked.

"What is it?"

"You have children, right?"

"Yes," she said slowly.

"How old?"

"Two and five, sir."

"So you know what a little girl would like, right?"

Kathy laughed on the other line, and Devlan felt his grip on the phone tighten. Again his eyes scanned the hallway for eavesdroppers. The reminder that he was not as knowledgeable as he thought certainly stung his pride, and Kathy's gloating made it all the worse.

"Mr. Doyle, shame on you. Did you not even think to bring the child anything?"

"You're joking, right?" he said ominously.

"Yes, I'm joking. I'll take care of everything. Does price matter?"

"Of course not."

"I should have known."

"I'll ask you what you mean by that when I get back. Just handle this for me and get it here as soon as possible."

Kathy giggled again, and Devlan hung up the phone with an exasperated sigh. How would he have known? He was a forty-year-old businessman, not a father.

Reminded of his earlier concern, Devlan paused and frowned slightly. He was not trying to be this little girl's father, was he? Of course not, he thought. While he would admit that he was enjoying the idea of bringing them to

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California with him, his reasons were simple. He needed to keep an eye on his little heiress. Besides, he knew next to nothing about this child and her mother except from what his research had told him. Sending a gift was the polite thing to do, and he had long ago learned his manners well. So why was his heart telling him that it was slightly more than just politeness that caused him to care so much for the wellbeing of these two females? If that was true, perhaps he was lonelier than he had originally thought. Once again he concluded that he required more time to sort these strange new feelings out.

Mike was standing outside the room, and he met Devlan several doors down. His normally impassive face showed traces of worry.

"How is she?" Devlan asked in greeting.

"The doctor said something about watching the swelling in her brain. The next twenty-four hours will say a lot. But they set her legs and stopped the bleeding in her pelvis. Nothing major internally, from what I overheard."

"Her mother?"

Mike shrugged. "She's with Hannah now. Hasn't moved since they let her in. She hasn't spoken much since you left."

Nodding, Devlan patted his friend's back. "Thank you for staying with her. Have you eaten?"

"Not yet. I didn't want to leave her alone."

"Go and get something. I'll meet you back here in an hour."

"Right."

Mike sauntered away, leaving Devlan alone in the hallway. All was quiet on the floor. The nurses on duty murmured in soft tones, their gazes studying him with interest. He did not notice them, nor did he return their flirtatious smiles as he normally would.

Pausing just outside the door, Devlan came up short and took a moment to absorb the somberness of the scene. Diana was as close to Hannah's side as she could get without being in the bed with her. Though her back was to him, he could see the defeat and terror in her posture. She held the child's pale hand gently and was stroking her soft skin while her face rested on the pillow next to Hannah's ear. He could hear Diana's soft sniffling between murmured words of encouragement and felt his heart give a tug.

The reality of the seriousness of Hannah's condition was disappointing.

There would be no smiles this evening. Hannah looked so small in the large hospital bed with all the equipment attached to her. Her blond hair was hidden behind a pristine white bandage and there were wires surrounding her from head to toe. The beeping of her cardiac monitor struggled with the ventilator for supremacy in the otherwise quiet room.

Devlan approached silently, reaching out to place a hand on Diana's shoulder. Though she startled slightly before turning her bloodshot gaze to him, she did not grow tense as she had before. Pleased, he could not prevent the faint smile he sent her way.

"Things are good so far?"

Her brow rose as if to ask him how he could even ask that, but then she nodded slowly. "The doctor said that there's still activity in her brain, and the swelling is not as bad as they first thought. We just have to wait and see."

"Excellent."

Easing away, Devlan went around the bed and took a seat across from Diana. The suspicious wall she had erected earlier returned as she watched his every move warily. Devlan refused to let that daunt him and smiled as he stretched out his legs in front of him. Telling himself that he had broken the cycle of mistrust in men far tougher than her over the years, he was confident that Diana could be handled with time. The silence that fell between them was broken only by the sounds of the activity in the hall and the machinery in the room. They were absorbed in their own thoughts for some time before Devlan finally shifted in the hard plastic seat and captured her attention once more.

"I spoke to my secretary and she's opening my house in Malibu for you. Once Hannah is able to leave the hospital, I'll fly her to L.A. She'll have the best pediatric rehabilitation services available there."

Diana glanced down at Hannah before meeting his gaze. Her voice was low and subdued. "Very well." He was about to comment on the resignation in her voice when her soft voice once again broke the silence. "Are you staying in town?"

"What?"

"In town. Are you staying here?"

"Yes. I'm at the Four Seasons just a couple miles away. I'll stick around

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until Hannah is out of the woods. That way, if you need me..."

Diana remained silent as she studied him. He smiled faintly in an attempt to reassure her, but her weary gaze continued to search his face as if questioning his motives once again. Not accustomed to being regarded with such wariness and not enjoying it at all, Devlan looked away and reached into his suit pocket for one of his business cards.

"Last time I gave you one of these you gave it right back. Considering our new agreement it seems appropriate for you to hold onto one now. My home phone is at the bottom, as is my mobile."

Reaching over her sleeping daughter's legs, Diana took the card he held out. Their fingers brushed briefly before she snatched her hand away and sat back down.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"You're welcome."

"I don't use a cell phone," she offered in explanation for not giving him her number.

"That's okay. I can reach you through the hospital switchboard when I need to. They can take a message."

She returned her attention to Hannah's inert form. Devlan stared at her head, wishing he could say something to put her at ease but knowing it was useless at that moment. He shifted uncomfortably again. "Have you eaten?"

"No, I'm not hungry."

"Would you like me to get you something for later?"

"No, the nurses ordered a meal for me." She glanced up and cocked her head to the side. "But thank you."

With nowhere else to go in that conversation, Devlan fell silent. Diana did not seem to mind. After another few awkward minutes he came to his feet and stretched. There was not a whole lot he could do for her now, and she was far too preoccupied for him to press his own agenda. All he could do is remain close by in case something came up during the night.

"I'll leave you two alone for now. Do you want me to arrange a ride home for you?"

Diana shook her head. "No. I can't leave her."

Devlan nodded, accepting his bad choice. Once again he had displayed

uncustomary ignorance, and he looked forward to kicking himself later. There was just something about this woman that made him nervous. He wanted her to like him. “I understand. Can I get you anything from home? A change of clothes?”

“No, Allan will take care of it. He has a key to my apartment.”

Devlan was immediately reminded of the burly man in the lobby. In spite of his best intentions, he frowned. “Allan? I didn’t realize you were involved.”

Her head came up. “Involved? What do you mean?”

“Allan? I saw him downstairs.”

A bitter smile curved her pink lips. “Do you really think me so stupid to jump into the first bed I found?”

Devlan remained cool as he answered, for how could he say that most of the women he knew would do exactly that? “I don’t know, Diana. I really don’t know you at all.”

“You’re right; you don’t know me. So don’t come to such hasty conclusions. Allan Collins is my friend. His son and Hannah are friends. Allan and Mindy have helped me a lot through the past few months.”

Chastised, Devlan fought his surprising possessiveness. “I see. I apologize if I’ve offended you. I didn’t mean to.”

She refused to meet his eyes when she spoke next. “Yeah, well, I don’t jump from bed to bed.”

Feeling the tension and hostility rising, Devlan backed away. Once again he had offended her with his clumsiness. This was not how he had expected things to happen, but it was too late now. All he could do is retreat and try again later.

“Please call me if you need anything or if anything changes. Mike is coming with me now, but I wrote down the number of my suite on the back of the card.”

Diana flipped the card over and stared at his bold handwriting silently while Devlan gave one final glance at Hannah and slipped from the room. Now he would track down the doctors and see what they had to say. The next twenty-four hours would be the test, and it was a test he prayed the child would pass.

Chapter 5

There was a ringing in his head, a persistent high-pitched ring. Devlan opened his eyes a crack and glanced at the clock beside the bed. It was three in the morning. Who in the hell would be calling him at this time of night?

Sitting bolt upright, Devlan grabbed his phone with a shaking hand. "Diana."

There was a slight hesitation before she responded. "How did you know it was me?"

He sank back against his pillows in relief. There was no grief in her voice. "Call it intuition."

"I thought that was something I would say."

"What happened?"

"Hannah's awake. She opened her eyes."

Devlan's smile turned into a grin. "Diana, that's great news. Did she recognize you?"

Diana was speaking quickly, and her tone was lighter than he had ever heard before. "I really couldn't tell. She is on so many medications that I couldn't be sure. But her eyes are open... She's going to be okay, I just know it."

"I'll be there within an hour."

Although he expected some reluctance from her, she surprised him by not objecting. Warning himself not to get his hopes up as he hastily threw back the covers, he realized that more than likely she was just so relieved that Hannah was finally awake that even his company was acceptable. But maybe, just maybe, his persistent presence over the past few days may have begun to

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have an effect on her stubborn defiance. After all, it was well known that he could be charming when necessary, and he had been using every trick in his book to break down her self-protective walls.

Devlan rang Mike's room and told him where he was going before heading to the parking garage to retrieve the rental he had picked up for his frequent trips back and forth from the hospital. Much to his surprise, another inch of snow had fallen during the chilly night. It reminded him that winter would soon be upon the city in full force. He wanted to be back in L.A. long before then.

It was four o'clock by the time he reached Hannah's hospital bed. No one in the deserted hospital questioned him; at that point they all assumed he was Hannah's father. Passing the nurse's desk, he sent a cheerful smile to the night shift as he hurried along to see his family.

Diana met him outside the room, her face radiant with a bright smile. He had not seen her smile since her wedding, and the sight of her pearly white teeth felt similar to an electric shock, sending tingly waves throughout his body. It was as if years had been erased from her face with just the simple gesture, and that brief flicker of happiness was like a ray of sunshine peeking through the storm clouds of those stressful recent days. Taking a deep, steadying breath, Devlan stopped in front of her. A smile of his own creased his face, one as genuine as hers.

"She's awake. She's finally awake!"

"Now?" Devlan asked.

"No. She went right back out, but they're going to run more tests and begin weaning her from all the medications."

"That's great, Diana. I'm very pleased."

Diana blessed him with another brilliant smile before hugging her hands to her waist. "Right now I want to go home and take a real shower, put on some clean clothes, and get a real meal."

Devlan chuckled. "Is that all?"

Her gaze met his and a blush stole up her cheeks. As she bit her lip, he laughed out loud. Like everything else about her, her reaction to his teasing was invigorating and genuine.

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Hoping to ease her embarrassment, he shrugged. "It's really no surprise. You've been living here for days. When was the last time you were home?"

"I don't even remember," she said with a chuckle.

"Well, I'm here. Why don't I give you a ride to your apartment? Then you can take your time and come back when you want."

"Would you mind?"

"Of course not," he answered quickly. "May I peek in at Hannah first?"

Devlan was aware of Diana's curious gaze upon his back as he glanced in at the child who remained quietly sleeping. Her color was better, and her eyelashes fluttered as she dreamed. It was a sight that filled his heart with joy. She was returning to the land of the living – finally. Giving Hannah's hand a gentle squeeze, Devlan smiled. Now that she was mending, he knew he had time to fulfill his promise. The worst was over. From here on out, it could only get better, and he was finally confident that he would win them both over. It just went to show that patience truly was a virtue. He could wait her out. After all, he had the means and skills to outlast one stubborn woman.

~

Diana stared at the shiny rented Mercedes and felt the first twinges of regret. Mike was nowhere in sight, and the car was much too small for just the two of them. She should never have agreed to let Devlan bring her home. Not only was she reluctant to show him her tiny apartment, but she was not ready to be alone with him yet either. Especially now that she was riding high with relief that Hannah was going to be just fine.

"Where's Mike? Isn't he coming too?" she asked, glancing around.

Devlan grimaced as he shot her a wry look. "I don't bring him with me everywhere I go."

Her lips twisted into a sarcastic half smile. "I thought you did."

"No, he's asleep, like the rest of the city."

Devlan reached past her to open her door. Diana nodded her thanks and slipped into the soft, plush leather seat. While Devlan shut the door behind her and went around to his side, Diana glanced at the fine leather and wood interior. This was so beyond her modest means. Everything about Devlan was so beyond her.

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"I'll need directions, Diana. I don't know where you live," he reminded her as he secured his tall length into the driver's seat.

Swallowing hard, Diana glanced over at him nervously. "Would it be easier for me to call a cab? You don't need to take me all the way home. You should be back at your room getting some sleep, not traversing all over with me."

"Don't be silly," he said. "What kind of gentleman would I be if I put you in a cab while I went back to sleep? Buckle up."

Diana sank back in the seat reluctantly. Her palms felt moist from her nervousness, and she wiped them against her jeans as casually as she could while she told herself to not care so much about his opinion. It was her pride that made it difficult. There had been a time, long before Peter had stolen everything from her, when she would have felt completely comfortable in the Mercedes with a man who had more money than Midas. However, so much had changed since then, and she was still picking up the pieces.

Devlan seemed not to notice her discomfort as he pulled the beautiful car out into the dark streets. He maneuvered it with ease, his hand firm on the gear shift and strong legs maneuvering through the gears smoothly. He was a piece of work, she realized grimly. There was a grace about him and a compassion she feared could easily win her over if she allowed her guard to slip. For all of his blinding success, there was absolutely no glimmer of selfishness in his demeanor. He had proven to be a hard man to resist with his sexy charm and winning smile.

"Which way?"

In a voice that quivered slightly, Diana guided Devlan back to her apartment complex. Luckily he did not seem to notice and continued driving with an occasional glance around him. Aside from her directions, they passed the fifteen minute ride in a companionable silence, but that ended when they pulled into her complex. Tucked behind a commercial area and on a busy main road, the cars in the lot announced the income level of the occupants. A grim frown turned down the corners of his mouth, but before she could jump to her own defense he scowled at her.

"You live here?"

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Though she had been hesitant about bringing him there, she did not really understand how humiliating it would be until she witnessed his reaction. It bothered her so much more than she thought it would. After all, her monthly rent was probably what he earned in an hour, if that.

"I just recently started full-time work. I don't have a whole lot left over once the bills are paid."

"I thought your bills were paid," he snapped.

"My bills are not your concern," she replied through clenched teeth.

Devlan instantly closed his mouth and gave her an apologetic smile. His hand reached out as if to touch her flushed cheek, but she was already offended and recoiled away. "I'm sorry, Diana... I wasn't expecting to find you and Hannah living like this."

"It's safer than it looks, and that's all that matters to me. Thanks for the ride."

Devlan pulled into an unmarked spot in front of her building and shut down the car. To her growing irritation, he opened the door and rounded the trunk to gallantly open her door. When she climbed out, his warm fingers encircled her arm and remained there while she fished out her keys.

"You don't need to escort me in, I can manage from here," she said quickly.

The smile he sent her told her that she was crazy if she thought he would give up that easily. "It's quite alright. You mentioned breakfast, so I'll take you out after you shower. Besides, I'm curious to see where you live."

"But why?" she snapped, still stung by his earlier reaction. If he thought the parking lot was bad, he definitely would not approve of the inside. "Why are you so interested in my life?"

With a patient sigh, Devlan met her gaze straight on. "I told you before. Hannah's my last surviving relative. I'm concerned about how and where she is raised."

"And I've told you, she's fine."

One brow rose skeptically as he plucked the keys from her fingers. Frustrated, Diana knew this was one battle she was not going to win out in the parking lot. Spinning on her heel, she stiffly led him to her door. She stood to

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the side while he opened it then brushed past him angrily. The dark chill caught them first, for Allan had apparently turned down the heat in her absence, and the faint scent of eucalyptus and vanilla candles did their best to overpower the stale smell of an empty apartment. While Devlan closed the door behind them, Diana reached for the lamp.

Safe inside where no one else could overhear them, Diana turned back to face him. “Now you listen to me,” she said sharply. “I was raised with strong morals and know how to care for my daughter. I don’t need you to butt your nose into my business.”

When she paused, he merely nodded. Though surprised at his calm acceptance of her anger, she took the opportunity to continue her rant and express her frustration with his arrogance. “She’s my daughter - not yours – and I do doubt your motives. You’d never even set eyes on her before the funeral... So where were you during the tough times? Where were you those last months of hell?”

At that point, her voice broke and she turned away with a muffled curse of embarrassment. Pressing her fingers to the bridge of her nose, she blinked back the sudden tears, determined not to let him see her pain. No, she was not ready yet to get into the tragic end of her marriage to Peter.

“Diana...”

She raised her hand to stop him and shook her head. There was no way she was going to get into this with him. Not in her living room on the day her daughter finally opened her eyes. This was a good day, and she was determined to enjoy it to the fullest. She sighed heavily. “There’s instant coffee in the cabinet over the sink, help yourself. I’m going to take a shower.”

The apartment was small, consisting only of three rooms and a bathroom. There was no wall between the kitchen and living room, and Diana left Devlan standing awkwardly between them as she went to Hannah’s bedroom in the back. At that moment she did not care if he felt uncomfortable. He needed to know that his arrogance was out of line and she would not stand for it.

After closing the bedroom door securely behind her, she made her way to the closet she shared with Hannah to pick out some clean clothes. There,

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alongside her work clothes and worn jeans, she beheld her daughter's small two-piece outfits all lined up neatly. A tender smile erased her frown as she fingered Hannah's favorite dress, and she pulled it off the hangar and placed it on the child sized bed. When Hannah came home she would wear her favorite clothes and be surrounded by her favorite things. No matter what it took, Diana planned to make sure that happened. Even if it meant that she played nice with Devlan Doyle today. She would have to watch her temper a little better.

Jutting her chin forward stubbornly, Diana found the rest of her necessities and locked herself in the bathroom. Through the thin walls she could hear Devlan rummaging in her kitchen and cringed. His dismay had reminded her again of how much she had lost in recent years.

When she had met Peter, she had thought he was the sweetest, most wonderful man in the world, and the way he had courted her like an old-fashioned lover had swept her easily off her feet. His promise of the family she had lost and wanted so desperately to have made her commit too quickly. He had claimed that he loved her, and she had trusted him. Though all of that was in the past, she was now at risk of falling prey to his outwardly generous and kind step-brother. She could only hope that since Devlan had seen just how poor they were, he would realize that she and Hannah had no place in his high-society life. Unfortunately, she suspected it would not be that easy.

Sighing again, Diana finished undressing and climbed into the slowly warming shower. Not long after she heard the customary loud bang of the pipes and Devlan's muffled curse. Pressing her hand against her lips, she giggled as she imagined him jump out of his skin the way she had the first time she heard the bang. It sounded as though a bomb was going off in one of the lower floors when the hot water finally reached her apartment.

Just as quickly, she erased the smile from her face. It was not fair to laugh at another's surprise, no matter how irritated he made her that morning. For the truth was that Devlan had been nothing but kind and courteous so far, and even she had to admit that he was trying his hardest to be friendly. Starting the day after the accident, he arrived at the hospital with arms loaded with gifts for Hannah. There was a doll, a stuffed animal, the latest DVD, and

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early-reader books. Anything Hannah could have possibly wanted was in his hands, and he turned it all over to her with an awkward smile.

She had been about to demand he send it all back when he had glanced at her sheepishly. "Will she like any of this?"

Despite the stress, worry and tension she had dealt with, the look on his face paired with his crazy question had caused her to giggle behind her hand. Though his cheeks had darkened, he had returned her smile and admitted that his assistant had assembled it all since he had no clue what to buy a child. In that brief shared moment, she had seen the ice wall erected around her start to melt ever so slightly. His honesty had taken her completely by surprise, and she grudgingly respected him for it.

"I can't lose my heart again," she whispered into the hot water.

She could be strong. After all, she had survived a devastating marriage, so she knew she could deny Devlan. This was for Hannah, and she would do anything for her little girl. With firm resolve, Diana finished her shower and hurriedly dressed into a warm sweater and faded blue jeans.

When she exited the bathroom, she was dressed casually and her face clear of makeup. She carried her brush in one hand, tugging on the knotted ends of her hair as she went in search of her mysterious benefactor. He was in her small kitchen, standing by the stove and frying up some eggs. She stood in the entryway and watched as he deftly flipped them then turned to butter the toast he had made.

"You cook?"

Devlan turned and smiled lopsidedly, and the rest of her earlier anger dissipated completely. She became aware of a melting sensation deep inside her belly and steeled her face not to respond. He was so handsome with his well-trimmed dark hair and freshly shaven cheeks, and she was disappointed to realize that he looked just as good in jeans and a pull-over as he did in a tailored suit.

The man was just plain gorgeous.

"I do have a housekeeper, Mrs. Maclean, but she's a horrible cook." Turning his attention away from the stove, he cocked his head to the side thoughtfully and pointed the spatula at her as he spoke. "Have you ever

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noticed that some of the chubbiest people are the worst cooks? How do they do it? I mean, Mrs. Maclean reminds me of a cream puff.”

Diana laughed out loud. “A cream puff? That doesn’t make sense.”

Unable to hide his returning smile, Devlan shook his head. “How does that not make sense? The woman is round.”

“I would’ve expected you to be surrounded by perfect beauties all the time.”

The playful smile faded, and Devlan’s face went serious as if remembering her earlier attack. Narrowing his eyes, he studied her intently. “Is that why you dislike me so much?”

Diana inhaled sharply. “Dislike you? I never -”

“Yes, you do. Don’t try to deny it.”

“I’m not,” she began.

“I just want to know why,” he interrupted solemnly.

“Well, I guess you’re guilty by association,” she conceded reluctantly.

He sighed. Obviously he remembered how his step-brother really was. “But you don’t know me any more than I know you.”

“I know,” she admitted reluctantly.

“Then how can you despise me when you don’t know me?”

Feeling as though she had no other choice but to come clean, she decided on honesty. It did not help that his voice had the tone of a man wounded. It made her feel guilty and ashamed at the same time. “I’ve heard things,” she murmured, looking down at her hands.

“What could you possibly have heard about me that would make such a smart lady like you hate so much?”

“Well...”

He shook his head. “Seriously, don’t actions speak louder than words? Haven’t I proven that I have only your best interests at heart?”

“That’s what scares me. Like I said, I don’t understand why you’re so interested in me.”

“Hannah is your daughter.”

“I know, but -”

“But what? You are family, Diana. It’s my responsibility to help you and

Hannah.”

Family. There was that word again. She sighed. “Peter said a lot about you when we were first married. And of course, I’ve seen you on the television. It seems as though there’s a new woman every month. I know it’s not my business, but I don’t trust men like that... That doesn’t mean that I hate you.”

“Peter said things?” He asked incredulously. “Oh, that’s rich. Please, tell me what he said. This could be interesting.”

Devlan leaned against the counter, his arms crossed as he waited for Diana to enlighten him. Fortunately the burning of the toast in her toaster saved her from having to speak. With a muffled curse he dropped the spatula and turned around, frantically trying to get the toast free.

“Let me do it. It gets stuck sometimes,” she said, coming to his aid.

Devlan stood back to allow her to free the burning toast, but suddenly her nervous fingers refused to jiggle the familiar latch correctly. Despite the charred odor permeating the kitchen, Diana could still smell his familiar cologne. The heady scent grew stronger as he bent closer to her. As if she needed the reminder that he was so near.

“Do you need help?”

Devlan’s hands came up to cover hers as she toyed with the defective lever. The large size of him briefly overwhelmed her, and for a moment she was overcome with panic. Yet his long fingers were gentle and warm, his touch almost feather-like, and surprisingly his palms had the rough feel of a man familiar with hard work. All too soon she realized that it felt good, which frightened her even more.

She pulled away hastily and turned to face him, instantly regretting her sudden move. He was so close that she had to tilt her head back to look up at his face. Though the sudden jerk of her hand made the toast pop back up and the charred remains smoldered in the fluorescent lights, Diana did not notice or care. She was consumed by Devlan’s warmth and the impenetrable gaze he pinned her with. Suddenly the kitchen was way too small for the two of them.

“It’s all set,” she whispered.

With a mixture of anticipation and dread, she realized that Devlan did

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not back away. Instead he leaned past her to pull the hot crumbs from the toaster and toss them on the nearby plate. His voice was slightly husky as he spoke, but his words were very serious.

"I don't intend on taking over your life any more than I plan to take over Hannah's. You are her mother, and as long as you're a fit mother she should remain with you. However, if you ever become unfit I will take her away."

When she felt herself stiffen in indignation, Devlan shook his head slowly. His lips were compressed in disappointment, but his eyes still glowed with some unfathomable emotion that she longed to explore.

"I only want to help you, Diana. I realize you're fresh from a terrible situation, but you can start trusting again... You can trust me, Diana. There's no malice in my offer, and I have absolutely no intentions of hurting you or Hannah," his voice lowered. "That's the last thing I would do."

Diana's mouth felt dry, and the pounding in her chest was so forceful she feared he could see it. This was not good. He was gaining the upper hand, and she could feel her resolve slipping. He was too close for her to think straight, and then there was that strange gleam in his eye that made breathing difficult. Taking a deep steadying breath, she stared up at him with wide eyes. Time to be strong, she thought.

"You may not want to hurt us, but it will happen. We'll get used to seeing you, to having you around, and then you'll go back to your life and we'll never see you again."

Devlan's face lowered slightly. "And that would bother you?"

"Hannah would not take the rejection lightly. She's just lost her father."

He bent still more, his hands coming to rest on either side of her on the counter, and his gaze fell to her lips as he spoke. "And you've lost a husband."

She let out a shaky laugh and waved her hand dismissively. "Our marriage was over a long time ago."

"Now you're afraid. Afraid because you actually do care."

Diana opened her mouth to deny his words, but it was too late. His arms swiftly enveloped her and his lips descended onto hers in the kiss she had so feared and anticipated. No, no, no, she thought just before her eyes flickered closed. Push him away, she warned herself. But she could feel the rapid

pounding of his heartbeat against her chest when her arms reached up to grasp his shoulders, and although she meant to push him away, she ended up pulling him closer instead.

Fool!

She was a fool. Even though he felt so large, she instinctively knew he would pull back if she tried to fend him off. But she did not want to. She felt captivated by his adept lips, and when his tongue slipped forward to taste her lips, her mouth opened to allow him entrance. It angered her that she had given in so quickly, but gosh, it had been so long since she had felt even slightly desirable, and he was skillful in his attempt to break her resolve. The man definitely knew how to kiss a woman senseless.

Taking advantage of her submission, Devlan's hands tightened around her waist and his long fingers stroked her back gently. It felt wonderful, he felt wonderful, and she shivered and squirmed against the growing need pressing against her belly in response. It was a slight satisfaction to note that she had as much an effect on him as he did on her, but it also served as the final glass of cold water in the face of her conscience. No matter how good he felt pressed against her, she knew she needed to resist the growing passion between them, to keep control of her emotions, or she would be pulling off his clothes in the middle of her kitchen.

Devlan sensed her withdrawal and released his hold on her lips reluctantly. He still held her close as he raised his head almost as though he did not want to release her at all. His eyes were warm and glazed, and he reached up to stroke her cheek.

"I can't tell you how long I've wanted to do that," he murmured. His lips were curved in a wistful smile.

He did? Unable to tear her gaze from his, Diana licked her moist lips and let her hands slide down his arms. Oh, did they feel good. Strong and capable for sure, but they were also adept at extreme gentleness. Her voice shook as she spoke softly. "I'm sorry, but I'm just not ready for this."

Devlan nodded and stood back, smiling as he loosened his grip on her. She turned her attention to the eggs he had made in an effort to cool the passion that had unexpectedly flared between them. "I hope we haven't ruined

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breakfast," she said with an awkward laugh.

"I doubt it. Let me make more toast." He handed her a plate. "Take this; I'll eat the other ones."

Diana glanced down and sniffed the food. "Whatever possessed you to cook anyway?"

"You hadn't been home in days. I figured you'd want to use up all the food. Besides, you're coming home with me, remember? We'll need to get rid of it anyway."

She glanced down at the coffee he had made. His attempt to win her over was working, and she had just learned how susceptible to his charms she was. It both frightened and intimidated her "Do we really need to go all the way to California? There must be a good rehab institution here."

"Diana," he sighed.

When he came to sit down he was frowning, and Diana struggled to get her words out before he interrupted her. "Let's be realistic. You really don't want us hanging around. We'll just cramp your style."

Devlan spoke calmly, but his meaning was clear. He was done with the conversation and would not tolerate any more excuses. "You will not cramp my style, Diana, and you will go to Los Angeles with me. We had an agreement, remember?"

Feeling chastised, she nodded her head. "I do remember. I remember that very well."

Though the frown he sent in her direction told her that he was not entirely sure what she meant by that, she did not respond. The truth of the matter was that she was not sure what she meant either. This could be the greatest bargain she had ever struck or the biggest mistake she had made in her life. One thing was certain, only time would tell.

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