

For Jen and J, who have had their share of family traumas and won their battles as well.

Also by Collette Scott

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Ferri's Gift

by

Collette Scott

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Chapter 1

Glancing in the rearview mirror one more time, Terri Woods breathed a sigh of relief. The black sedan took the Alma School Road exit; an innocent driver in a non-lethal vehicle. Slumping back into her seat, she let up on the gas and took a deep, steadying breath. Once again, she was overreacting by assuming the car was following her.

Bringing her palm down hard on the steering wheel, Terri cursed out loud. Enough was enough. She was tougher than this. Adding paranoia to her long list of faults was just another reason to make the move to Phoenix. She would be farther away from her family and never have to deal with her parents again.

Her father's influence was broken. He no longer held the power, and she had finally escaped from his tenacious hold on her. The morning he had burst into Isabel Evans' home to take her and her sister, Kat, was just a memory now, and she needed to bury it deep inside the dark recesses of her brain. He was safely behind bars and could no longer hurt her, and she would never have to see him again once the federal trial was over. If the smuggling, money laundering, attempted murder, and numerous other charges held up, he would be in jail a very long time.

While every day was a step in the right direction, apparently Terri had not made as many strides as she believed. Every now and then she still spooked and that infuriated her. A normal car with an average driver turning into menacing forms targeting her? Not a good sign, she thought crossly. She wanted it to be over with. Why couldn't the courts work faster?

The buzzing of her phone distracted her from her bitter thoughts. Glancing at the red blinking light indicating a new message, she took her eyes from the road long enough to read her brother-in-law's text. "You all right?"

Though not a willing text-n-drive person, she typed out a hasty response. Her neurotic phone calls must be driving him nuts, she thought with a new rush of anger. "Sorry, Ian, false alarm... again."

Chastising herself for bothering him, she set the phone back in her center console and returned her attention to the busy highway. The drive from East Mesa to her new residence in an affluent suburb of Phoenix was 30 minutes long, and she had an important meeting to get to. She had more pressing matters to attend to than imagining that her father's bullies were following her.

Turning the knob on her radio higher, she sat back and listened to Pink belting out lyrics with her strong voice. It helped Terri recompose herself, and she arrived at her destination with five minutes to spare without envisioning any other sinister vehicles. By the time she pulled into the lot, she was once again Terri Woods – the cool, poised and arrogant debutante.

As she parked in the space marked "visitor," she spied the petite redhead waiting under the broad white arch leading to the entrance. Terri waved a polite greeting, which was enthusiastically

returned.

"You're early," she called as she slung her handbag over her shoulder and climbed out of her car. Gripping the manila envelope with all the required documentation in it, she joined Cherisse Nicholson at the entrance and bent to offer her a quick hug.

Cher patted her back with a laugh. "I'm not early. I work here."

"I thought you taught high school?"

"I do, but it's just around the corner. Our school day is done already."

Nodding, Terri gripped the envelope in her hand as though it held the most precious materials in the world. In her mind, it did. This was her son Aaron's life in a nutshell. He had been jostled and bounced around for most of his life while she ran from her abusive father, and she hoped that would come to an end. With him now locked away, this was to be her and Aaron's new start. A new school, a new home - they had only good things ahead. That was Cher's promise, but Terri remained skeptical. Good things rarely happened to her.

"I noticed when I looked at the website that this school works an alternative schedule," she said with a worried frown. "Are there opportunities for after-school care? I'm going to work, and I'll have to have options for Aaron..."

Cher wrapped her hand through Terri's bent elbow and gave her a light pat that made her stiffen uncomfortably. "Of course," her friend said, not noticing her reaction. "Don't you worry about a thing. A Better Place and I have been working hard for you and Aaron. We have you taken care of."

Leading her to the entrance, Cher continued chatting as she pulled the door open. "This school is one of the best in the district. These kids run almost a full-year ahead academically. Aaron will be caught up in no time. I spoke to the principal already, and she made sure he was put in the best third-grade teacher's class. You're going to love him. Actually..." She paused and laughed. "Everyone loves him. The kids think he's the best thing since ice cream, and the mothers all go gaga over him. I think there have actually been a few fights over who gets to volunteer in his classroom..."

Terri's lips twisted. Great, she thought, a gigolo. Suddenly she was not so sure this was the place for Aaron.

"Ooh," Cher continued in a conniving whisper. "Maybe I can set you two up?"

The hopefulness in her tone made Terri wince. Though she managed a dry chuckle, she was not even remotely interested. She and men did not mix well, and she had no desire to pursue anything involving a heavy dose of testosterone, charm, or good looks, which this teacher apparently had in spades.

Already she did not like him, which did not bode well. Mentally telling herself to calm down, she managed a weak but noncommittal smile for Cher. If this teacher was good with Aaron, she would be polite and appreciative on a strictly professional level. Anything personal would have to remain in Cher's dreams. The only positive thing Terri had gained from her single intimate relationship was Aaron, but the trouble she faced following his birth had forced her to rethink ever having a man in her life again. She could move faster and disappear more easily if it was just the two of them. Involving anyone else would be a complication if her father managed to get free.

Luckily she was spared from Cher's further prodding when they were greeted by a tall older woman. Her brown hair was sprinkled with gray in a charming manner, but her height and bulk coupled with the stern expression seemingly etched permanently into her features reminded Terri of an Army drill sergeant.

"Terri, this is Principal Tarotsky. Alice, this is Terri Woods, Aaron's mom," Cher continued in her upbeat tone.

"Welcome, Ms. Woods," the principal said, holding out her hand politely. Her deep voice matched her harsh façade, and her grip was strong. Terri decided with a hint of humor that truancy was definitely limited in this school.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Principal Tarotsky. Thank you for seeing me today," she replied in

her best debutante voice. However, even she could hear the slight tremble, and a quick glance in Cher's direction showed the smaller woman's lips twisting with amusement. Terri swallowed back her embarrassment and clenched her hands together in front of her. Evidently, the principal was known to be intimidating.

"Let's get right down to business," she announced. "Fill out the necessary paperwork first, and then we'll show you our school."

Terri nodded and hastily reached for the clipboard the principal thrust at her.

Without another word, Tarotsky spun on her sturdy and functional heel and strode past the women behind the welcome counter. They watched their boss with half-shielded eyes, studiously silent, causing Terri to lean in and whisper in Cher's ear. "Is she okay? Everyone seems frightened."

Although she tried to be quiet, Cher responded by laughing gaily. It drew everyone's attention, and Cher exchanged knowing smiles with them before responding. "She's the biggest teddy bear, believe it or not. She adores her students and is very fair. You've nothing to fear, Terri. You can trust me."

Before she could respond, the stern-faced principal returned with more papers, which she thrust at Terri unceremoniously before indicating to a set of chairs just beyond the welcome desk. "You can sit back here and fill everything out instead of sitting in the hallway. It's going to be busy out there in a few minutes."

With her head held high, Terri did as she was directed, filling in the forms quickly. If there was one area she was fully competent in, it was regarding her son. Despite the distraction hustle and bustle of the elementary students as they mingled in small groups within earshot, Terri and Cher were soon back on their feet and directed to two chairs across from the drill sergeant inside her lair.

As soon as she sat again, Terri crossed her legs at the knee and tucked her bag on her lap, discreetly hiding her trembling hands under the leather folds while the principal closed the door behind them. Luckily, the urge to bolt was replaced with awe when the regal woman began to speak.

By the time Principal Tarotsky finished her impressive speech about how her school excelled on standardized tests and how lucky Aaron was for being placed in the best third grade class, the ringing of the final bell caused the hallway outside the office to come alive with the sounds of hundreds of young voices excited to start winter break. Tarotsky's meaty face creased in a frown, much like a Shar Pei's wrinkled brow, and her sharp eyes strayed to the closed door as she seemed to ponder whether or not to go out and use her best threatening voice. Intimidated again, Terri shuddered, but Cher's elbow in her ribs when Tarotsky came to her feet drew her back to the moment. With the close of the school day, the principal had other matters to attend to. They were being dismissed.

"If you have no further questions, I'll let Mrs. Nicholson show you around the grounds. Just make sure you sign in and take a badge with you."

Feeling relieved to escape from the intimidating woman, Terri fell in step behind Cher out the door, past the welcome desk, and into the hallway now bustling with youth. While Terri watched the giant woman stride purposefully through the crowd, Cher reached for two name tags and hastily scribbled their names. She slapped one on her chest and handed the other to Terri.

"Ready?"

"Yes," Terri replied, clutching the badge in her hand.

They wove down the hall, dodging a river of children who watched them with wide, curious eyes as they filed in neat lines to the parent pick-up line or the waiting buses. Terri made eye contact with several, smiling her greeting and observing those who responded with a shy one of their own. America's future, she thought tenderly before catching herself and schooling her features back to cool disdain.

Cher led her down a long hallway colorfully decorated with various reincarnations of holiday greetings. A wall of wreaths here, an overly plump candy cane there, and several pinned up depictions of the winter holidays from other cultures that turned the bland white walls into a

kaleidoscope of colors. Terri spotted a future artist in one menorah, and there was even a Kwanzaa wall at the far end where Terri and Cher took a right turn into another corridor marked with a sign stating "Third Grade" in large red lettering.

Small chairs, more suited to the eight-year-olds who sat in them, lined the hallway outside the now-empty classrooms. She thought back to when she was a child and smiled. Would Aaron be as enthusiastic as these children at the end of the school day? Remembering Tarotsky's praise for his new teacher, Terri began to feel the first glimmers of hope beyond the throbbing pain in her temples that started whenever she felt nervous. She remembered the psychiatrist at A Better Place, Dr. Stansfield, and his claim that the energy she expended making herself appear disinterested was too draining. It rang in her head along with his suggestion to start working on being more natural. Yeah, right, she thought nervously, that won't happen anytime soon. This was too big. This was for Aaron.

"Up here on the right," Cher whispered.

It amazed Terri how quickly kids could move when it came to the final bell. What had been a sea of varying skin tones and hair colors was now a ghost corridor. Up ahead, all she could hear was the sound of several mingled adult voices followed by cheerful laughter. Two teachers emerged from a class at the end of the hall, glancing at Cher just as she stopped in front of Aaron's new classroom.

"Cher?" A statuesque woman with white hair exclaimed. "My goodness, it's been a while."

Cher was knocking on the open door to announce their presence when the woman called out. Her face lit up when she saw the other teachers, and she glanced at Terri apologetically. "Would you excuse me for just a second?"

"Of course," Terri answered.

"He waved us in, so go on ahead. I'll be right there."

No sooner had she finished speaking than she was hurrying down the hall with her arms wide open. In typical Cher fashion, she hugged the two women tightly with warm words of greeting. Wishing she could be so openly affectionate, Terri turned away from the friendly display and entered Aaron's classroom for the first time.

The paragon of third grade education was standing with his back to her, his cell phone pressed against his ear. Without turning, he raised a long finger in a request to wait, so Terri turned her attention awkwardly to the walls decorated with children's artwork interspersed with multiplication tables and an alphabet ribbon. The customary flag with a hand-written Pledge of Allegiance tacked next to it resided across from an adjustable calendar announcing daily activities.

At first glance, it appeared to be a normal classroom, as similar in appearance to any class they had passed. Continuing her scan, she began to envelope herself in the understated enthusiasm emanating from the walls. Small handprints, handwritten statements, stories, and shelving units loaded with books, papers, and supplies fully stocked the classroom, leaving nothing out of place. It was difficult not to feel the joy in the room, and she knew in that moment that Aaron would be very happy with the passion in there.

Then she heard the voice.

"I know, love. Look, I have to go. I'll see you very soon."

Though spoken in a low tone to attempt to disguise the unprofessional behavior, the voice was still familiar. Too familiar. She went still and frowned. The words he crooned imparted such a feeling of déjà vu that Terri stopped scanning the list of line leaders and whipped around to stare at the tall man's back.

"Yes, I promise... I love you too, baby girl."

How she did not immediately recognize the man who had nearly ruined her sister's wedding just a month-and-a-half ago astonished her. Terri's eyes narrowed as her heart began to beat furiously in her chest. Of course it was him! There was the same dark brown hair, trimmed neatly but still devilishly brushing the collar of his navy pullover. And that tall, athletic build that made her palms grow moist the first time she saw him proclaimed his past in Major League Baseball. A promising

career cut short, Kat had told her. Some freak injury – shoulder or something – had ended it after only three seasons.

Stiffening, she also remembered an almost verbatim phone conversation in the chapel of the Las Vegas resort Kat and Ian married in. They stood watching in dismay when he interrupted the ceremony to take the call, and her older sister, Kat, had stared at his back, her fresh bouquet of flowers slowly wilting in her hand, with a look of such forlorn sadness that Terri had almost knocked the phone out of his hand for being so rude.

She fought the urge to do it then, too.

But he was disconnecting his call and turning hastily around, and she remembered why she had not reached for his phone then any faster than she did now. Pale gray eyes, a distinctively un-Evans trait in an otherwise Evans handsome face, focused on her.

As before, Terri's breath stuck in her throat when she met the light eyes framed with the darkest and thickest lashes she had ever seen. Those eyes reminded her of a stormy day, and she battled the instant pull of attraction so unusual in her celibate life. That was why she avoided him, was rude to him, and ran away every chance she got. She struggled with the impulse to do it again as she watched his eyes widen in surprised recognition.

“You?”

The welcoming and friendly smile that had been plastered on his beautiful lips was immediately replaced with a look of irritation. Terri would have laughed if she did not feel the sting of rejection. While it was true they agreed to politely dislike each other after the wedding, she still had a tiny bit of an ego left, and it was crushed when she saw the distaste he tried to hide from his face.

Instead of laughing at his shock, she did what she had learned from years of dealing with her manipulative father. Defensively lifting one brow in a sarcastic question, she crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a haughty look. “I’m so sorry... am I interrupting something?”

Tucking his phone back in the front pocket of his beige trousers, Brian had the grace to look somewhat contrite at the false sweetness in her voice. He responded smoothly as he crossed the room. “No, you’re not interrupting. I’m just surprised to see you here.”

“And why’s that?” Terri asked with her overly sweet tone.

He paused in mid-stride as if her question caught him off guard, but he chuckled rather than let loose the sarcastic response she suspected he longed to toss at her. The way his eyes sparked behind his pleasant smile announced that he was ready to go against her anytime. It reminded her of her harsh words in the chapel and his equally sharp retorts. Their dislike definitely had been mutual.

But he was still smiling. “Terri Woods, you have got to be the very last person I ever expected to come strolling into my classroom.”

Hating the fact that he remembered her name, Terri pursed her lips when he stopped several feet away from her. He was close enough for her to smell the faintest traces of aftershave and close enough for her to be reminded that he was a lot taller than she, but he was not close enough to be considered inappropriate. That raised her hackles even more.

He stood studying her but did not hold out his hand to shake, not that she expected him to. His face remained impassively questioning, and she grew edgy with the ease with which he had taken the upper hand so quickly.

No, she corrected, he did not have her beat yet. Cocking her head to the side, she blinked innocently. “How come?”

He looked amused, as though he knew very well how nervous she was, and the rapid pitter-patter of her heart turned into an all-out race when he flashed his most seductive half-smile and slowly scanned her from head to toe. “Usually women come to see me in my bedroom, not at work, remember?”

She ground her teeth together at the reminder of her harsh set-down after the wedding when she cornered him and accused him of arranging a visitor in his hotel room, an accusation that had him

asking her if she was offering before he stormed away. That had been the last she saw of him. He was gone the next morning, and she had not seen him since – until now.

Speaking through clenched teeth, she stared down her nose at him. “I’m not one of your women, *remember?*”

“Now that’s something I know I’d never forget,” he replied in a tone that left her wondering if that was an insult or something else.

Reminding herself that he was the one who had run away childishly, she tossed her head haughtily. “Can we be adults here, Mr. Evans?”

“You’re in my classroom, Terri,” he said with a chuckle. “It’s full of third graders. Why would you think there are any adults around?”

“Oh, for goodness sakes,” she muttered. “You can’t even answer a question?”

His eyebrows shot up as if surprised she would press the issue. The blood racing in her veins threatened to cover the surface of her skin when she realized she had revealed the extent of her wounded pride. However, he merely smiled, his seductive eyes toying with hers as they stared into her soul speculatively the same way he had when they first met. He was sizing her up, and she felt as though she was sorely lacking. Her spine stiffened when he responded in a slow, deep voice. “Okay, then, Terri. Multiple reasons, I guess. I –”

Before he could explain, Cher reappeared in the doorway with a cheerful greeting that drew their gazes to the open door. “Sorry about that, Terri. Brian, have you met Terri?”

“Oh, yeah,” he replied wryly.

Cher paused and glanced at each of them curiously, and Terri tried to hide her frown. She was successful in forcing a smile on her face, but it did little to ease the palpable tension floating in the air between them. Cher seemed to sense it, for she hesitated just inside the door and took a seat at the closest child’s desk.

Like an invisible force field, it seemed to hold her at bay, and Terri’s fear was confirmed when Cher spoke cautiously. “I get the impression that you know your newest student’s mom already.”

That earned Terri another surprised glance from Brian, and the shock he was unable to disguise gave her a small victory. “You’re a mom?”

She smiled sweetly. Score one for her. “Now why else would I ever come here...Brian?”

She watched the line of his throat as he swallowed in response. From the corner of her eye, she saw Cher’s eyes grow wide and wondered if she had made a mistake in being so rude. However, before she could force out an apology, Brian’s whole demeanor changed, and he threw back his dark head and laughed good-naturedly.

“Good point, Terri,” he said with a grin and wry shake of his head. “I should’ve known right away. Aaron’s mom, I presume?”

Holding out a hand this time, he appeared ready to fall into professional mode. She cocked her head to the side, suspicious of the sudden change, but reluctantly placed her hand in his when she spied Cher’s encouraging nod. His long fingers were warm when they covered hers and unexpectedly reassuring with their calloused strength. A strange tingly feeling filled her belly, and for the first time ever she felt the urge to rest her head on a man’s chest. It did not help that he bestowed her with an angelic smile. The look alone made her understand why all the moms fought to volunteer in his classroom. His gaze exuded raw sensuality, and he knew it. But why was he using it on her of all people?

Heart fluttering in her chest all over again, she regained control of her traitorous urges and wrestled her hand from his grasp, grinding her teeth together when she saw his eyes flash with triumph. Score one for Evans, she conceded reluctantly.

“Yes, I am,” she said in an even voice, despite the butterflies dancing in her throat.

He hesitated briefly, and a look of startled comprehension flickered across his face before he quickly masked it. “I’ve heard a lot about him. The class is eager to meet him after break.”

"I'm glad to hear it," Terri said cautiously, unable to shake the suspicion that she just missed something very important.

He nodded, suddenly avoiding her gaze. "I have a question for you, if I may? Does he have an IEP?"

Terri frowned and glanced at Cher in confusion. "An IEP?"

Across the room, Cher's face flushed nearly as red as her hair. Clearing her throat awkwardly, she waved her hand to gain Brian's attention. "Um, Brian, Aaron's quite bright and has scored right where he needs to be. He's just missed some school lately due to... other issues."

Terri frowned as Brian's face took on the same pinkish hue as Cher's. Still avoiding her stare, he glanced down as if suddenly finding something interesting on the polished tile floor. "I see," he mumbled, no longer the cocky and smoothly debonair man used to having women fall at his feet. This was suddenly a man who appeared ready to bolt from the room in fear. Terri made a mental note to look up IEP on the Internet as soon as she got home.

"Anyway," Cher continued hastily, "I was showing Terri around the school. She's completely new to the area."

"I assumed as much," Brian said slowly. His gaze returned to her, sweeping her from head to toe again as if seeing her for the first time.

"We've found them an apartment," she continued. "They're moving in over break. He's pretty eager to get back to school after missing so much."

Terri shifted uncomfortably, beginning to feel as though she was the third wheel of the conversation, and her jaw clenched while Cher continued. Though she knew her friend was not deliberately revealing too much, Terri found her candidness painful.

It was no secret that Cher volunteered at the women's shelter, A Better Place, in her spare time, but Brian did not need to know that she and Aaron had been guests there. Although he was an Evans and it was possible that he knew about her situation through the family grapevine, it made her uncomfortable to think that he was making the connection. She went to great lengths to keep her private life private and wanted to remain as anonymous as possible, at least until after the trial and her father was sentenced. Unfortunately, that could take longer than the remaining school year, and the last thing her son needed was a teacher who believed the worst of them. With her father's face all over the news, Aaron's chances of having a good relationship with his teacher could be dashed.

While Terri grappled with her fears, Cher had continued chatting, and Terri grimaced when she heard her describing her new location. It turned into a scowl when Brian nodded in recognition. "I live down the street from that development. It's a nice place." He glanced over at her with somber eyes. "Safe, too."

That was it. She much preferred his dislike over pity. Grinding her teeth, she took a step back and nodded dismissively. "I don't want to keep you," she said sharply. The two educators paused in mid-conversation and watched her back toward the door. Jerking a thumb over her shoulder, she blurted a lame excuse. "I'd like to beat the traffic anyway."

"I understand," Brian said with obvious relief. "I guess we'll talk more about Aaron's education after break." He swallowed again as if the words he needed to speak were stuck in his throat. "Perhaps we can set up a parent-teacher conference sometime after the New Year? I assume you filled out all the parent contact forms?"

Seeing the tentative challenge in his smile, Terri wanted to decline, but she was trapped with Mr. Too Sexy Evans. Lifting her chin, she decided not to make it any easier on him than he was making it for her. "I'll schedule something after the holidays."

Cher pushed her trim frame out of the child-sized seat. "I'll walk out with you, Terri."

"You've done enough already. Stay and visit," she said in a falsely cheerful voice.

Brian's dark eyebrows lowered over his eyes as he studied her. She could feel his gaze as though he was actually touching her, and it felt disapproving.

Terri's Gift

Who was he to pass judgment on her? She had done nothing wrong, and it was because she came forward that her father was behind bars, she thought, going rigid with anger. Meanwhile, *Brian* had the morals of a bonobo monkey, oversexed and indulgent.

Without another word, she spun around so fast that her brown hair swung around her shoulders. Fleeing the school that had held so much promise just two hours before, she stomped on the gas pedal back to East Mesa wondering if she had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. Brian Evans was to be Aaron's teacher...

Chapter 2

Poking his head in through the open bedroom door, Brian stared at the sleeping beauty that made his heart fill with joy. Her walnut-brown hair spread across her pillow in gentle curls, and one arm rested above her head in a pose of such relaxation that he hated to disturb her slumber.

Sighing, he pushed the door a little wider, pleased it did not make a sound. For just a little longer he wanted to study her as she lay so peaceful and relaxed. Her bangs, a little on the long side, covered her finely arched brows. A trip to the hairdresser was in order, he thought absently. Seeing her joy when she sat in the chair made his day every time.

As usual, she had kicked off the covers and lay on top of them in the chilly morning air. He wondered if she even felt the cold beneath her pink, fairy-imprinted fleece pajamas.

With another sigh, he determined that it was time to wake her. The serene silence was about to end...

“Merry Christmas, baby girl,” he whispered.

Although he did not speak loudly, Avery Evans’ eyes snapped open, a flash of electric blue that startled him with their brilliance. With a burst of energy that so belied her relaxed stance, she sat up and grinned broadly, revealing a missing lower tooth. “Is it Christmas, Daddy?”

“It is,” he said with a dramatic nod. “And guess what? Santa came...”

Her eyes widened even more, and Brian was reminded of his ex for the briefest of moments. Avery’s mother, Amber, had bestowed that look on him many times back when she admired him, before the freak injury stole his career – and her – away.

Pushing all resentment aside, Brian maintained his smile despite the residual pain that returned whenever he thought of Amber’s abandonment. He had not heard from her since she had dropped Avery off at his mother’s house in October, saying only that she could no longer care for their daughter and needed him to step up.

Oh, he had been willing to step up, especially since she had disappeared with his daughter for two years prior to the phone call. For two whole years, he had searched relentlessly for ways to get his daughter back and had wasted no time when she suddenly reappeared. He had booked an immediate flight back from Las Vegas after his cousin’s wedding, alienating the bride’s sister in the process by his uncustomary rudeness.

Despite Avery’s excitement as she bounded out of bed and slipped her feet into her fuzzy pink slippers, Brian’s smile slightly faded when he thought of the enigmatic and uncompromising Terri Woods. He had seen her smile – once – and had liked the way it transformed her face from guarded hostility to a rather pretty, all-American woman. There had been a brief time when he considered encouraging her to smile more, but it ended when she lashed out at him furiously after the wedding for taking Avery’s emergency call. His ears still burned from the sharp words bursting from those kissable lips, and his shame doubled when he thought of his bitter retort. After that spat, he was

confident she would never smile at him again. His shock when she appeared in his classroom must have been greater than he thought, for there he went again, inserting his foot in his mouth and alienating her even more. What was it about her that made him turn into a ghastly jerk?

"Did he get me a Webkinz? A pillow pet? Ooh, I wonder if he got me the Abbey Monster High doll," Avery gushed as she pulled on the second slipper.

Brian shrugged, pushing the distasteful and humiliating thoughts of Terri away. Today was for Avery. He had spent enough endless hours at night rehashing his botched interactions with Terri to last him a lifetime. She did not like him. End of story.

"I don't know," he mumbled. "You'll have to go see."

In truth, he really did not know. Sure, he had shopped and paid for everything, but it was his mother who chose everything on Avery's list. Girl toys, hell, girls in general, were beyond his comprehension. But he was learning fast and getting better every day.

"Can we go look?"

Brian felt tiny fingers wrap around his hand and smiled. Avery stood at his side, staring up at him with an excited grin. How could he resist such hopeful innocence? "Of course," he replied grandly. "That's why I woke you. I want to see, too."

Hand in hand, he allowed Avery to lead him down the three stairs to the living room, where he had gone all out in spreading sooty footprints on the creamy-white Berber carpeting leading from the fireplace to the ten-foot live evergreen tree he had bought at Avery's insistence. It had taken him hours the night before to set up, and he'd have quite a mess to clean later, but her gasp of sheer joy made it worth every back-breaking minute.

When he bought the sprawling house in the posh gated community in affluent Ahwatukee, Arizona, he had not expected to have children living with him full-time. The white carpeting and cream furniture were too pale to remain child friendly for long, but he had sworn off having more children and turned to his new teaching career after Amber claimed full custody of his only child. If he could not have his own, he would borrow others' little tykes. That had worked until recently. Now having Avery, he wondered if he should sell the house and move somewhere more suitable for children or at least decorate a little more ruggedly. One glance at the soot-covered carpeting told him it was something worth considering.

Drawn back to Avery's enthusiastic "oohs and ah's," Brian concluded that whatever twist of fate that made Amber abandon a child she no longer wanted was a good twist for him. He stared at his daughter and felt his heart swell. In the two months she had been with him, she made him feel complete. The hollow gap in his heart he never realized was there was filled now with a frighteningly powerful love.

"Oh, Daddy," she gasped breathlessly. "Look at all the presents he brought me!"

Brian chuckled wryly. "You look like you've never seen so many before."

She glanced up in surprise. "I haven't."

Disguising his shock under another laugh, he released her hand and gave her a slight nudge. "You're only six. How do you remember how many presents you've opened at Christmas?"

"I remember," she said solemnly. "Last year, Santa brought me Pucky. That's it."

"What about the gifts from me?"

She cocked her head to the side with a confused frown. "Mommy said you forgot."

Brian ground his teeth together in irritation. So the extra money he sent to Amber every Christmas was not used on his daughter? He wondered if his lawyer would like to know about that. Plastering a smile on his face, he met her bright blue eyes with his own earnest gaze. "I didn't forget you, baby girl. Don't ever think that I did."

She shrugged and beamed at him. "It's okay. I've had fun here, and I love my Pucky. He's my favorite."

Deciding it was a good time to change the subject, he waved a hand toward the towering tree.

"Maybe Santa was saving them for you to have here."

She fell to her knees and pressed her small hands over her mouth in a look of innocent delight. "Look at the beautiful paper, Daddy."

Again he stifled a smile. The wrapping had been done in the stores, so they were a mismatched hodgepodge of colors and scenes typical of the holiday season. However, seeing them through his daughter's eyes gave him a new perspective. Glimpsing Frosty the Snowman, Santa and his reindeer, Christmas trees and colorful wreaths like a child reminded him how exciting the holidays could be.

Going down on his haunches beside her, he reached for the camcorder resting on a tripod and pressed the record button. "Are you going to just sit and stare, or are you going to start opening?"

"Which should I open first?"

Brian chuckled and reached for a small rectangular box wrapped in red paper. "Start here. In the front."

She plucked it from his hand and methodically removed the paper while he thought back to his own childhood. He and his twin sister, Brianna, tore through their presents in a matter of minutes, leaving a mess in their wake that often ended with their parents digging through piles to find missing pieces and gifts. The way Avery seemed to savor each present and wrapping job had him alternating between impatience and joy at seeing her so happy. He watched with the appropriate responses as she received everything she had on her list and then some.

An hour later, all the presents were opened, and Avery sat for a moment to scan the room in awe. Finally, she threw her arms around his neck and squeezed him with an elated laugh that jingled in his ears. He had put a smile on her face, and that was the best Christmas gift ever.

"Look at them all," she gushed.

Putting on a mock stern face, Brian crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Are you a spoiled little girl?"

Giggling, she glanced around her at the ring of toys that held her in a prison of presents with eyes glowing with mischief. "No, I'm not. Not yet."

Laughing, he reached out and mussed her fine hair. "Yet being the key word, baby girl. So, should I make us some breakfast now?"

She glanced up in alarm. "But you haven't opened yours yet."

Brian frowned. Obviously he had not bought himself any presents. "Santa doesn't come for grown-ups. I think all my presents are at Grandma's house."

She shook her head violently as he spoke. "No, no, I have presents for you."

Of course she did, he thought as he ducked his chin in embarrassment. After all, he led projects with the kids in his class every holiday with homemade gifts for their caregivers.

This would be the first year he had received something from her. Usually Amber kept those in a power play that cut him to the core.

Feeling genuine excitement, he grinned like a youth. "You do? You got me something?"

Avery jumped to her feet and lithely leapt over the stack of toys surrounding her. "I made you something in class. Wait here and I'll get it."

Brian watched a flash of pink as Avery bounded back up the stairs and down the hall to her room. He heard her door slam against the back wall and cringed with the thought that she had just put a hole in the wall. *Note to self*, he mused, *fix doorstop*. Moments later, he was aware of the sound of her closet door opening and a resulting crash as the stack of board games came down. *Second note to self: Install more shelving in closet*. She hustled back holding two tissue-wrapped packages in her hand and a gift bag in the crook of her elbow.

"You gave me money to visit the school shop this year," she explained excitedly as she pulled the gift bag off her arm. "So, I bought you something." Holding out the two wrapped items that consisted more of tape than tissue, she beamed proudly. "And I made you stuff in class."

Brian stared down at the presents, feeling tightness in his chest. Clearing his throat to stem back

the uncustomary emotion, he smiled. "What about your mom?"

"It wasn't her turn; it was yours. I made her stuff in preschool and Kindergarten." She shrugged. "Besides, Jeff gets her lots of presents every year. She always has a lot to open. You're alone, so you don't."

Opening his mouth to respond, Brian immediately snapped it shut. Now that he knew that Amber was hooking up with Jeff Zilcoff, he believed it was true. Jeff was still with the League, and Brian suspected he was fulfilling Amber's unquenchable need for the best of the best. He almost pitied the guy. While he may have only spent three years playing, Brian wisely invested most of it for a rainy day. Knowing Amber, he doubted his former friend and team member had a chance to save a dime with her in his life.

"Fair enough," Brian said, drawing her close. Giving her a tight squeeze, he inhaled the scent of her hair and closed his eyes. In his arms was the most precious of gifts, and he was elated to be able to share this moment with her for the first time. "That's very generous of you."

Sitting back on her haunches, Avery bounced up and down impatiently. "Open 'em," she begged.

Taking a deep breath, Brian made a dramatic show of plucking at the tape that surrounded the first package, a navy tissue-wrapped square that felt surprisingly similar to Popsicle sticks. Knowing from experience what it was, he schooled his features for the appropriate surprise when he finally managed to tear the tissue off. Holding it out at arm's length, he stared into Avery's lovely face, taking in her cheerful smile and walnut curls. "Hey, this looks familiar. I think I've seen this picture before."

Avery's face fell. "But –"

Before she could answer, he tapped the tip of her nose gently. "But I haven't seen it in such a beautiful frame!" Flipping the frame over, he made a display of studying the workmanship. "This is magnificent. I wonder who made it."

"I did!"

"You did?" Brian gasped with wide eyes. "Wow, I think you're an artist in the making."

Avery giggled. "You're silly."

"No, I'm not," he replied back indignantly. "I think it's amazing. And the picture inside is beautiful, just like you."

"It is me." She pointed to the framed photo on the wall. "Remember? That's my school photo."

Brian exaggerated his study of the two photos, finally nodding his head. "Yep, I see the similarities. That's why it looked so familiar."

"Open the other one."

The red tissue-wrapped present came with just as much thick tape. "Now I know where all my tape went," he muttered as he pulled the last of it free. Revealed in the stiff mess was a set of Avery's handprints. Brian grinned from ear to ear. "This is awesome."

She giggled.

Holding his own large hand over the cutout of her small one, he flipped it over to show Avery the difference in size. "I love it. And soon your hand is going to be almost as big as mine." He glanced at the walls. "I think we should put this on the fridge until I can get a nice frame for it. Would you help me pick one out?"

Avery's head bobbed.

Brian leaned over and hugged her again. "Thank you for making this such a special Christmas."

She squeezed him back with all the strength she had. "I love you, Daddy."

Without hesitation, he replied back. "I love you more."

"No you don't."

"Yes, I do."

She was giggling by their third time going back and forth, and it resulted into a tickle-fest that had her squirming on the floor. When he finally relented, her eyes were watering from mirth.

"What would you like for breakfast?"

"Pancakes!"

"Pancakes it is," Brian said with a brisk nod. Dad, Santa, chef, mom... Wow, he thought, he was turning into an all-around multi-tasker. However, though this was not where he thought he would be just eight short years ago, he knew he would not change a thing about it now. Ignoring the mess surrounding him, he strolled into the kitchen and took down everything he needed to make the best pancakes ever. After all, it was his first Christmas with Avery. He wanted to make it her best.

Although Brian had spent days dreading it, dinner with his parents ended up being less of a trial than he feared. Without his sister's presence, there was less to talk about, but luckily a companionable silence fell between the adults as they watched Avery open the presents they brought for her. However, once she disappeared into the living room to play, Amber's shenanigans inevitably entered the conversation, just as he had feared.

"So no word from her?"

Like the rest of the Evans' patriarchs, with the exception of Brian's cousin, Ford, Brian's father was a retired cop. His no-nonsense approach and low tolerance level was the exact opposite of his mother's, who remained a soft-hearted woman. Under normal circumstances, it was a delicate balance, but her kindness extended to Amber, much to father and son's dismay. How his mother could still see any good in that woman after what she had done was beyond their comprehension.

"Not one," Brian said, his hand tightening around the mug of coffee his mother placed before him. "I don't know what's going on. The last my lawyer reported, she was signing over full custody to me. I still don't know why, and it makes me uneasy after she disappeared on me without a word before."

"She has a new guy, that's why. Just make sure your lawyer makes it bulletproof this time," Eric Evans muttered before taking a sip of his coffee. He scowled as the hot liquid scorched his tongue. "That girl's nothing but lies and drama, and the last thing you need is for her to take Avery and disappear again."

"Eric," Lindsey Evans scolded lightly. "Be careful. Avery's in the other room."

"Did I mention names?" Eric retorted.

"But a child knows," Lindsey argued.

Brian shook his head. "Whatever it is she's gotten herself into is not my problem. My concern remains solely on Avery. She's an innocent and doesn't need to be reminded of her mother's abandonment."

"She never should've been placed with her to begin with. That woman's a horrible role model for anyone."

Brian stiffened, hating the reminder of his poor choice in a love interest. "True enough, but the courts didn't see it."

"Protection would've been better," Eric muttered.

Brian felt himself flushing from his father's sharp words. It was a dilemma he had pondered many times over the years of being unable to see his daughter regularly and watch her grow from infancy. After all, he had been the one driving Amber to the doctor's office for her birth control injections. After she left, he had learned that a woman could become pregnant as quickly as three to four months following the last injection, meaning she had faked her final visit. At the time, he had not realized why.

Only six months into their relationship and four months prior to the collision that destroyed his baseball career, he had been told he was going to be a father and trapped with a woman he was not sure he loved. Soon after that, he was out of a job and alone.

That had been a rough year, where every one of his dreams and goals had been destroyed. As soon as she found out her financial ticket to fame and glory was ruined, Amber left. A month after

Avery's birth and three weeks after the surgeons told him he would never play pro again, he had lost everything that mattered in his life.

Sighing, Brian glanced at his father. "Everything happens for a reason. She's here now, and I wouldn't trade her for anything."

"Raising a girl alone is tough. You need a woman."

"He has plenty of women," Lindsey announced with a wink in his direction. "I hear all the moms, single and married, offer to help."

"That wasn't what I meant," Eric said, rolling his eyes. "I meant a serious relationship, not an adulterous or convenient dalliance."

Brian grimaced. Sometimes he hated that his mother still worked in the same school district. Her job in the library of the neighboring middle school gave her access to all the rumors, and he knew she loved to talk. Scowling, he changed the subject away from the women who wanted him for his past more than for his teaching skills. "Hey, why don't you pick on Bri? She's my age too, remember?"

"You're twins," Eric muttered.

"Exactly. Why don't you harp on her about getting married? She's never been married."

"Neither have you," he pointed out sourly.

Brian flushed. "Technicality only. I gave Avery my name."

"It's probably better that he didn't marry her. She's been taking almost his entire teaching salary in child support," Lindsey interjected.

"I hope you're having your lawyer look into that, too," Eric grunted.

Brian balled his hands into fists. "This isn't how I wanted Christmas dinner to end. Fighting with my parents isn't a great way to celebrate."

"Nonsense," Lindsey said. "We're not fighting. I just want you to find a nice girl, one who doesn't care that you played pro-ball. Those moms look at you with stars in their eyes. You need someone who doesn't give a hoot."

Lips compressed tightly to stem his hot retort, Brian stared at his father. "She makes it sound so easy."

Eric shrugged.

"It could be if you ignore the bimbos and go for the one who isn't in awe of you," Lindsey insisted.

As soon as his mother stopped speaking, an image came into his mind: tall and athletic, with legs that extended forever, long light-brown hair and china-blue eyes that always stared at him coldly. It was a face he had only seen on a couple of occasions, but he knew she was probably the only woman he was aware of who did not find his past intriguing. In fact, he suspected that she did not find anything about him intriguing at all. Whenever they met, her dislike radiated off her in waves so palpable that anyone nearby ran the other way. There was no doubt about it; Terri Woods did not like him.

He blinked, confused. She despised him and made no secret of it. So why was it her face that rose in his mind when Lindsey Evans spoke?

Chapter 3

For the first time in her life, Terri enjoyed the holidays. Instead of sharp criticisms and brutal beatings behind closed doors, she and Aaron enjoyed a delicious meal filled with easy laughter and lighthearted banter. Rather than making herself appear as invisible as possible, she relaxed in the company of people who did not judge her every action. It was a new experience, and some of her skittishness began to ease.

After spending the afternoon wrapped in the caring and accepting embrace of the boisterous Evans' family, Terri and Aaron settled into their apartment. With the help of Grady and Ian Evans, they had collected as many belongings as possible from the house in her father's name, and she and Aaron gathered the last of their clothing from Ford's guest house where they had briefly called home after they left A Better Place. The excitement was mutual. This was their new start, and they had friends eager to support them.

Though still cautiously optimistic, Terri was slowly beginning to feel free. Ian had taken her aside and promised that the charges against her father were solid. John Woods' reach was broken, and he would never again be able to harm her. She was in charge of her life now. No longer was she trapped under her father's violent influence. They had broken the gang leaders, and the smuggling ring was being dismantled. Ian promised that there was no one out there able to harm her with her father locked away.

After seeing her sister, Kat, ecstatically happy in her new life as Ian's wife, she tried to follow her sister's lead and face her future without fear. Things could only get better, and she had help in the form of the Evans family and Cherisse Nicholson, her guardian angel from the women's shelter. Visions of menacing cars and night terrors began to fade once they were settled in their new apartment, and Aaron lost the haunted look in his eyes within weeks of moving in. Terri knew she had made the right choice, with only one problem...

When winter break ended, Aaron began school in Mr. Evans' class. Although Terri clenched her teeth with just the mention of his name, Aaron came home every day with a smile, gushing profusely about his new teacher. It infuriated her that Cher had been right when she said his charm worked on the students as well as it did on the mothers. She imagined how he used that power... women visiting him at home to squeeze those bulging biceps and stare in awe at his baseball mementos while he grinned lazily at them with those sensual gray eyes, oozing sex appeal from every pore. It was enough to drive her mad.

She would swiftly change the subject whenever he was mentioned, having no intentions of getting in line to be one of his classroom helpers. In fact, she avoided the man whose pale eyes seemed to see right into her soul with the same intensity she avoided her parents.

Naturally, he had done his best to provoke her, leaving her a voicemail in his deep, erotic voice the first day back to school requesting a meeting. She never returned his call. The voicemail remained on her phone as a glaring reminder that he was one to evade whenever possible. A follow up call was laced with

guilt, but she ignored that one, too. She no longer had the leisure of going into the classroom anyway. With her trust fund frozen, she was unable to continue living the life of a wealthy heiress and had to put her marketing degree to use. So when Aaron began his new school, Terri went to work for an advertising firm. It kept her away from Brian Evans, but it also limited her time with her son. Luckily, Kat eagerly jumped at the chance to help in the afternoons.

What began as an offer to get him to Little League practice quickly evolved into a close friendship. To Terri's pleasure, she and her sister mended the gap their father had worked so hard to widen over the years. Kat understood her, knew that she did have a heart behind her tough façade, and accepted her for who she was. As they grew closer, Terri's heart began to lighten. There was someone who loved her despite her flaws, and Kat understood why she was the way she was. They both had scars, and they both were battling the trauma their father had put them through. It gave Terri hope, and the days of looking over her shoulder for some gang member with a gun were dwindling.

But not gone completely.

She was called out on her lingering fears when Kat arrived to join them for Aaron's first Saturday practice. It was Terri's first time being able to see her son play, and she was upbeat and determined to enjoy the day, with no dismal thoughts of John Woods or Brian Evans. However, after giving Terri a hug in greeting, Kat gave her a concerned once-over. "Ian told me you called last night after a dream."

Her meaningful look immediately dampened Terri's enthusiasm. She sighed and wiped her hands on her jeans with a grimace. "I did," she admitted. The reminder of the nightmare the night before of her father barging into Ford Evans' house to kidnap her and Kat made her shudder. "I'll stop bothering him, I promise. I've been getting better every day, it's just..."

"I get it," Kat interrupted softly. "I still have nightmares, too. I was just thinking that I should hang out here more, so you and Aaron aren't alone as much."

"That's unnecessary," she said, ducking her head to hide her embarrassment. She had built her tough façade so painstakingly that even allowing her sister and her husband to see her fears made her feel vulnerable. "I love it here. It's helping."

Kat's lips twisted sardonically. "I don't think either one of us will get over everything right away. It's going to take more than just a few months to get over a lifetime of him and his..."

Terri opened her mouth but shut it quickly. What could she say to that? Nothing really. Her father's abuse had started when they were children, and he had maintained his stranglehold over them into adulthood until it finally culminated over the summer when he had threatened her life. Although she had weekly appointments with Dr. Stansfield, the psychiatrist at the women's shelter, A Better Place, to discuss her childhood trauma, the scars were painful.

Grimacing again, she shrugged. "Every time I talk about it, everything comes back. Sometimes I think I should just stop seeing him."

Kat knew immediately who she referred to and shook her head. "No, it's good to get it all out. You've hidden your feelings for too long. You always put on the tough act when inside you were hurting far worse than I was. At least I had Ian to help me through most of the time. You've never had anyone."

Terri glanced at the clock pointedly, desperate to get off the subject before her enthusiasm was destroyed for the day. "We should go."

Ignoring her, Kat's eyes narrowed. "Did Mom call?"

Startled, Terri's eyes widened. "No. That wasn't it. Why? Did she call you?"

"Yep," Kat replied matter-of-factly. "Last week. Ian was home, luckily. She freaked out and told me not to testify."

"Are you going to back out?"

"Not on your life," she retorted in a voice laced with steel.

The harsh tone was unusual for her people-pleasing sister, and Terri laughed in surprise. "You go, girl."

"It's over, Terri. You'll see."

Waving a fluttering hand, Terri shook her head. "Not now."

"Okay, okay." Kat reached out and hugged her again. "I meant it when I said that I want to be here. Starting tonight. Dinner's on me." She shook her head sadly. "We never should've allowed Dad to put a rift between us, and I don't want that to happen again. I know you better than you think, and I don't want you taking off again."

Terri nodded but refused to admit that her sister's words warmed her to her toes. Opening up about her feelings was still alien to her, and she had no intentions of working on that now. Reaching for the door handle, she glanced over her shoulder expectantly. "Thanks, Kat. But let's go. I don't want to be late."

Laughing lightly, Kat followed with Aaron in tow down the stairs to the parking lot. They had dressed in layers, prepared to take off the sweatshirts as the early-spring day heated up, but it had already grown warm by the time they found a place to park. Grimacing, Terri crammed her car between two oversized SUVs belonging to well-to-do families, many of whom attended the school functions she avoided. Doing her best to remain out of the cliques she knew were prevalent in the elementary school hierarchy, she maintained her distance and did her part as a silently supportive mom, unknown beyond speculation. It had been working for the past six weeks, and she had not had to see Aaron's teacher once. Nor had she interacted with the mothers who emailed her almost daily asking for her support in the classroom.

Several of those moms nodded politely at them as they passed, and Terri spread their blanket with a cool smile in response. No one approached, and she preferred it that way. The fewer connections she made, the less likely she would be hurt when her heart became attached before they violated her trust. No matter what Dr. Stansfield and Kat said, walls were best erected and maintained.

Feeling confident they would be left in peace, Terri dropped down beside Kat and smiled into the sunshine. Things were going to be good, and they were going to fully enjoy the glorious day. The sun kissed her cheeks, making her smile turn into a happy grin. It remained as she lowered her chin and glanced around at all the little players, but it faded immediately when she stared out at the field.

Stiffening, she sat bolt upright and blinked several times to confirm the sight before her. A low groan accompanied the immediate lurch of her heart. Of course he coached, she thought. He had been a former pro. Coaching would be second nature to him, and leave it to Aaron to be placed with the best possible one in the league... Standing only a few yards away was none other than Brian Evans.

Biting back her frustration, she adjusted her baseball cap to shield her eyes and turned to Kat. "Is that who I think it is?"

Her sister glanced around the mingling group of parents spreading out blankets on the lush green grass with a look of confusion. "Who?"

"Who's the coach?"

Kat glanced across the field where the tall form of Brian Evans was leaning over a bright blue plastic bin, removing bats and tossing out balls to the boys and girls behind him. Terri was granted a nice view of his backside covered by snug gray sweats and felt her palms grow moist. The reaction made her want to scream. Why did he do that to her?

So distracted, she almost did not hear Kat when she responded. "That's Brian."

As if he sensed their stare, he straightened and glanced directly their way. Grinning widely, he raised his hand and waved, and Kat was quick to respond. When she turned back to Terri, she was still smiling. "He's such a great guy."

Terri rolled her eyes and pretended not to see him. "Don't tell me he has you charmed, too."

"What do you mean?"

Under the guise of straightening the ends of their blanket, she debated telling her sister about her suspicions. Obviously Kat liked her husband's cousin, and there was the risk that anything she said would find its way back to him. Always erring on the paranoid side, she opted to play it cool. "I've heard that all

the moms fight over him at school.”

“Knowing him, I believe it,” Kat said with a laugh. Terri’s lip curled with distaste before her sister continued. “But I highly doubt he cares. He’s a great guy, really patient and easygoing, but he hates when women fawn all over him because he played ball.”

Terri shrugged. “I’m sure it’s flattering, and we both know how much men love attention.”

Bending her legs at the knees, Kat propped her chin on her hand. She studied Terri until she glanced out at the field where Aaron was swinging a bat. Smiling at her son, she studiously ignored Kat’s penetrating stare. “Are you still mad at him for Vegas?”

“What?” Terri played ignorant, but the squeak of her voice gave her away. “Of course not.”

Kat’s look warned her that the lie had not gone unnoticed. “It wasn’t that big of a deal.”

“You mean talking all gushy on the phone while you and Ian waited to exchange your vows – after fifteen years? Jeez, Kat, he ruined your wedding.”

Though Terri had never been married, she had dreamed how she wanted it to be. She knew she was far too romantic at heart to ever see such a fairytale vision come true, but she still could not prevent her resentment against the man who answered his phone during what was supposed to be her sister’s best day. After years of miscommunications, separations, and an engagement to someone else, Kat was finally with the man she had loved since high school.

However, rather than agree with her, Kat tossed back her head and laughed. It was a joyful sound, a deep, belly laugh that proved Terri’s point. She was happy in her new life. “Oh gosh, Ian and I just wanted to get it done. We really didn’t care by then.”

“You should have.” The kids were well underway, and Terri turned her attention to Aaron. Unfortunately, her eyes continued to stray over to Brian, too. Though they were too far away to hear his instructions, the way the youths nodded their heads and scrambled to do what he suggested proved that he was a good coach. For some reason, that made her even more frustrated, and she huffed in self-righteous indignation. “That was your special day.”

Kat shrugged. “Brian had a good reason to be on the phone. Maybe you should talk to him about it. I think you’re missing out on a great guy, who also happens to be a neighbor. I’m sure he’d be thrilled with the idea of hanging out more with you.”

Knowing their dislike was mutual, Terri ignored her final comment and latched onto her first one. What possible reason could he have to speak to a woman so pathetically while holding up his cousin’s wedding? It had to be a damn good one, in her opinion. “What reason?”

Before she could answer, Terri caught sight of Aaron choosing a bat. He began swinging it like all the other boys, but she believed he was strongest and most capable player out there. Following Terri’s gaze, Kat watched as avidly as Terri did while she munched on the bagged snacks they brought. The remainder of practice was spent enjoying her son’s budding skills, with Brian Evans almost forgotten. Almost, but not quite, thanks to her troublesome wandering eye.

Terri was staring at him when Kat returned her attention to her. “So where do you want to eat?”

Dragging her gaze away from Brian’s chest, Terri gasped. “Are you serious? You’ve been snacking ever since we sat down.”

Glancing down at the crumpled bags of Teddy Grahams, Ritz Bitz Crackers and Peanut M&Ms, Kat giggled behind her hand. “I guess I have. I get nervous when I watch him play and don’t even notice.”

While the kids gathered up the equipment, the parents began packing up. Across the field, lawn chairs were folded, mothers called to their younger children, and the young ones broke up their groups to return to their waiting parents. Terri glanced back down at the blanket and cocked her head to the side. “Something’s off with you.”

She narrowed her eyes and stared intently at her. Although completely different in appearance, with Kat a petite blond and Terri a tall brunette, they did share the same bright blue eyes. Right now her strong gaze was penetrating through the side of Kat’s skull, spying the cream-colored cheeks that were

slowly turning pink. That was all it took to give her away.

"All right," she demanded. "Spill it."

Hastily gathering the crumpled evidence, Kat's cheeks continued to deepen in color. Finally Terri reached out and caught her wrist. "I know you better than that. You can't stay silent now."

"I never was a good liar," Kat said with a rueful laugh.

"True." Terri crossed her arms over her chest. "So tell me."

"I've been more hungry than usual lately."

Giving her a wry smile, she nodded. "I noticed." Awareness began to dawn even before Kat went any further, and her eyes went wide. "Nooo..."

Kat bit her lips and ducked her chin in the timeless pose of someone too shy to speak. It was the confirmation Terri needed.

"Seriously?"

"Twelve weeks."

Surprisingly, a pang of loneliness suddenly engulfed her, but she swallowed it and jabbed playfully at her sister instead. "You two didn't waste any time, did you?"

"We had a lot of missed opportunities to make up for."

"I'll say," Terri huffed self-righteously.

"You don't have to remind me how right you were back then. Trust me, I've paid the price for my mistake," she replied solemnly.

Unsure what to do or how to respond, Terri leaned forward and awkwardly gave her a hug. She could feel tears rise in her eyes, though from joy or envy she could not say. "All that matters is that you're together now. I'm happy for you both."

"Me, too," Kat whispered. With a shaky laugh, she wrapped her arms around Terri's neck and squeezed her back. "We're so happy."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"It was scary at first," she continued excitedly. "But we've been to a couple of appointments, and they say everything looks good. We heard the heartbeat together... It was amazing."

Terri smiled wistfully. "I remember the first time I heard Aaron's. I cried." Alone. As quickly as the memory of her solitude rose, she banished it. All that mattered was that she had Aaron. He was all she needed.

"I did, too," Kat continued. "I think even Ian got a little choked up."

Both women chuckled at the image that evoked. Ian was a man's man, and the idea of him shedding a tear made Terri giggle. "I bet he's walking on air."

"He's going to be a great daddy. He won't be anything like Dad or Curtis." Terri jerked away at the mention of Aaron's father, and Kat reached out apologetically. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

Waving her hand in dismissal, Terri ducked her chin to wipe her eyes before anyone noticed her tears. "I know. I just don't like to hear his name."

"Don't you ladies remember there's no crying in baseball?"

Both women startled guiltily and raised scandalized gazes to the inopportune intruder. Terri stiffened when she spied Brian standing a few feet away, appearing curious and far too handsome for his own good. He was staring at her, his smile wary, and she felt her heart begin to pound against her ribcage as he came closer. It was so frustrating that she did not understand why she reacted that way whenever he was near, especially when she knew he was to be avoided.

Kat broke the tension immediately thickening the air between them and drew his gaze away from her with her cheerful laugh. "We were just sharing some news."

Dropping his gear on the ground, he bent at the waist and hugged Kat. "I hope it's good. You don't look very happy." He nodded politely at Terri. "Hey, Terri."

No hug for her. She nodded coolly, all traces of her joy hidden behind an impassive mask. "Hello."

"Things are great," Kat said, ignoring the forced interplay.

"So fill me in," he said with one of his brilliant smiles.

Grinding her teeth in irritation, she turned away in disgust, only to spy the curious looks of the women who were wondering why they were being graced with the almighty-Brian's presence. Some even had their hands on their hips as they watched them openly. Feeling peevish, she considered staring back but was distracted by Aaron's cheerful cry.

"Mom!" A tackle from her right side announced his arrival, and he threw himself across her lap with a loud whoop. Ignoring his sweaty and mud-stained clothing, she counter-tackled, flipping him onto the blanket and burying her face in his neck and her fingers under his arms. Nosy mothers – and Brian – forgotten, she focused on her son.

"You were amazing out there, little man."

Aaron collapsed into a fit of laughter as she tickled him, but her public display of affection did not last long. Growing conscious that Kat and Brian had stopped talking, she raised her head and found them both watching her interplay. Brian's cool gray eyes were suddenly closed and unreadable, and she bit her lip uneasily. She did not like that look on him. Turning to Kat, she frowned. "Sorry, did I miss something?"

Smiling, Kat reached out and ruffled Aaron's hair. "I was just telling Brian that we're going for dinner. He recommended an Italian place not far from here. Are you up for Italian?"

"I'm starving, Mom," Aaron announced.

Terri shrugged noncommittally. How could she even think about food when he was staring at her with that strange look on his face? "Whatever the pregnant mother wants."

"Pregnant?" Brian asked, one dark eyebrow arching in surprise. Finally tearing that unsettling gaze away from her, he turned to Kat in open-mouthed surprise, and Terri noticed for the first time that his nose had been broken sometime in the past. There was a slight curve to it that she had missed before. Darn, she realized, she was noticing an awful lot about him today. Too much.

Kat sent Terri a reprimanding frown before she smiled at Brian. "Just," she said wryly. "You two are the only ones who know."

"We should be, considering we were there for your wedding," he stated proudly with a quick glance at her.

Terri's eyes narrowed. Oh, how desperately she wanted to point out his inappropriate phone conversation in the chapel again, but she managed to hold her tongue. If he noticed the sarcastic twist of her lips, he ignored it and bent to hug Kat tightly instead. The move infuriated her even more, although she could not explain why. Brian was Kat's cousin by marriage, and she had no business being jealous of her sister. Wait a minute. Jealous? No way, she thought with growing frustration.

Straightening with a lean grace, Brian continued grinning at Kat. "Ian must be damn happy."

That was it. The happy smile for her sister, the slightly crooked nose, and those tight sweats now clinging damply to his body finally made her lose the last of her reserve. "Language," she snapped.

"Oh, Mom," Aaron protested.

Turning slowly with a knowing smile, Brian's eyes darkened like a stormy sky. Once again, they scanned her from head to toe in what could have been offensive if not for the distant look in his eyes. "You're right," he said politely. "Sorry about that, Aaron."

Feeling chastised for her spitefulness, she looked away. It hardly mattered, for he had turned his attention to Aaron. "You did well today, by the way. You have a great swing and a lot of power behind it."

Aaron visibly puffed up his chest as he scrambled away from her. "Thank you, Mr. Evans."

Though outwardly cool, inside Terri beamed with pride. She watched as Aaron gazed up adoringly at his teacher.

"I mean it," Brian insisted. "If you keep that up, you'll be moving up to majors in no time."

She wanted to dislike him, she really did. But when Brian Evans was making her son shine like a star,

she had a hard time holding a grudge, especially when he spoke so honestly. A proud smile teased her lips, but she quickly masked it when Mr. Too Sexy Evans returned his attention to her.

“Terri, I’m sorry for offending you,” he said courteously.

Her earlier chastisement returned in full force, making her feel guilty and ashamed. “It’s fine,” she mumbled.

But no sooner had she spoken than she watched his teasing smile reappear. Darn, she thought, he had just played her.

“It’s not like Aaron hasn’t heard it before,” Kat said with a wink.

“True.” Aaron grinned at Brian. “You should hear my mom sometimes, especially if she’s running late.”

“Enough,” Terri snapped. She glared at Kat for effect, but her sister merely grinned.

“Thanks for the warning,” Brian replied. Reaching out with a friendly smile, he tousled Aaron’s short hair. “I’ll try to stay on your mom’s better side so I’m not a recipient of her foul language.”

“Good luck there,” Kat said, laughing.

Smile slowly fading, he turned back to her, and his mouth opened as though he wanted to speak. Terri hastily glanced away, but she felt the pressure his stare on the top of her head. After an indeterminably long time, it moved away, and she released the breath she had been holding in a quiet rush.

“On that note, I guess I’d better head out,” he said resignedly.

“Why don’t you join us for dinner? It’s not like we get to see you often.”

Terri shot Kat a threatening stare, but she was staring hopefully at Brian and missed it. Brian, on the other hand, did not.

“I’m sorry, but I’ll have to decline,” he said, staring at Terri as he spoke. “Maybe we can take a ride out there some weekend Ian’s not working and have a cookout? Or you two are welcome to try our cooking anytime. Although, I’ll admit it won’t be four-star dining.”

Noticing that the invitation did not extend to her, Terri gathered up their scattered belongings. She felt the urge to rip the blanket out from under Kat but managed to subdue it by remembering her delicate condition. After Kat came to her feet, Terri shook it out and folded it into a neat square, half-listening as Brian continued on with his “ours” and “we.” Feeling irritable and left out, she could not help but wonder who he referred to. Most likely the “baby girl” he gushed to on the phone, she thought miserably.

Once she packed up, Terri turned to Aaron. Her son had gallantly strung the cooler over his shoulder already, prepared to carry it out for them. Pride made her smile reappear. Right there was the only man she needed in her life. Playboy former ball players who gaga’d over the phone need not apply.

Don’t delude yourself there, she reminded herself sternly. Not once had he given any indication of wanting to. She was not like her sister and never would be. She was Terri: plain, stern, and unapproachable, and there was nothing in that mix that would ever interest Brian Evans.

As if he knew she was thinking of him, he turned to her again. There was no smile on his face this time, and he spoke firmly with no traces of his good humor. “It’s great seeing you attend a practice, Terri. It would be nice if you’d come more often. It’s very helpful to the kids to have parental support.”

Knowing there was an underlying reprimand because she had not set up a parent/teacher conference or returned his calls, Terri felt her hackles rise. She bit her lip, but the words spilled out anyway. How dare he believe he knew more about her situation than she did? She and Aaron played all the time, not that he would know. “Are you insinuating that I’m not supportive of my son, Mr. Evans?”

Undeterred by her cold tone, he shrugged and glanced at Aaron. “It means a lot to the kids when their parents make an effort, even though they don’t always say so. I noticed how excited Aaron was that you came today.”

She blinked away the sun that suddenly made her vision blur behind her sunglasses and met Brian’s stare, defiantly tossing her head in her well-practiced show of indifference, but his words cut to the bone

inside. "You don't know a damn –"

"Terri's working full-time, and I admit I've been jumping at the chance to hang with Aaron. It's been cathartic for all of us," Kat interrupted quickly.

Try as she might, Terri could not drag her gaze from Brian's to thank her sister. He had the palest eyes she had ever seen, and they were searching her face as if to determine what was behind her thoughts – and her sunglasses. She remained rigid with her hands balled into fists, refusing to back down and blinking furiously so the tears would not fall.

Finally giving up, he nodded his head. "Then I hope Kat will allow you to come again. It's vital for children to have at least one parent involved in their schooling."

Without another word, he turned on his heel and began to make his way over to a family still relaxing under a tree. Three young kids sat at their feet, two tow-headed boys and an adorable girl with brown curls who caught Terri's eye. All three hopped up and hugged Brian's legs while he laughed in greeting, and he reached down to join the little girl in a graceful backflip through his hands. Still reeling from his scolding, Terri watched him then pick up one of the boys with a single hand and toss him over his left shoulder as though he weighed no more than bag of chips.

"He didn't mean anything by it," Kat said softly. "He doesn't know the circumstances."

"Just, don't," she snapped.

Sighing, she snatched up the folded blanket and crammed it under her arm. She wished Aaron had a father who laughed and wrestled with him like she did. Although Brian believed otherwise, she was involved with Aaron, and her son was her life. He knew it, even if Mr. Too Sexy Evans did not.

That was all that mattered, right?

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