

Love. Again

Love
For Them

R.A. LEE



Love Again, Love for Them: A Novel

By R. A. Lee
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Dedicated to my mother, the love of my life, and my family.

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Other eBook Titles by R. A. Lee

“The Fountain of Truth: A Novel”
“The Beauty at the Bus Stop: A Novel”
“My Vegas Valentine: A Novella”

“Desert Town Angels” Trilogy

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Other eBook Titles by R. A. Lee

"The Fountain of Truth: A Novel" By R. A. Lee

Tim Jaskin has no time for sentimental notions even when it comes to his own family. The old town his family reputedly established generations earlier is on the brink of being demolished by eminent domain. Although he doesn't side with the city, his grandmother implores him to help the family preserve the fountain in Fountain Way for future generations.

The only evidence Tim has is a tale his family has told for generations about how his great-great-great-great-grandparents met at a fountain, the origin of Trader Fountain. A historian only interested in facts, Tim needs more than just sentimentality to obtain historical status for Fountain Way.

Cherish Tiswell is heading cross-country to be with her fiancé. Unable to maintain the family business through a dire economic cycle, Cherish has given up her family home when her late parents' medical bills make it impossible for her to keep up with the mortgage. Her only ties to family now rest in her future marriage to her fiancé. Lost on a country road looking for the Interstate onramp, Cherish stumbles on the fountain and finds herself in the middle of a family feud to protect a heritage threatened by a complacent heir.

Cherish teaches Tim a valuable lesson in the value of family, and it's up to Tim to decide if his legacy is compelling enough to preserve even without the proof he needs to believe the family tale is true. (Adult contemporary romance)

"The Beauty at the Bus Stop: A Novel" By R. A. Lee

Laid off from his bank job, Mountain Wood, Colorado, native Evan Hillaway takes a risk and accepts an offer from his cousin to work for a friend in Los Angeles. Within days of arriving, Evan sees a woman at a bus stop and instantly falls in love.

Ashley Cooper is also a small-town girl who has been laid off and looking for a way to meet her financial needs. The only difference is that her "small town" is the Westside of Los Angeles. Through a series of fortunate events, Evan meets the woman but soon learns she's looking for someone with more financial security than Evan can provide.

With love on the line, Evan risks everything just to prove to her that they belong together. Now it's up to Ashley to decide if love is enough to take their relationship to the end of the line. (Adult contemporary romance)

“My Vegas Valentine” A Novella By R. A. Lee

There is a code between sisters: Thou shall not be intimate with a guy your sister dumps, not without her permission. Faith lives in the shadow of her more glamorous twin, but on a trip to Vegas she bumps into a man she takes for her sister's ex-lover and debates breaking that code when she inadvertently spends Valentine's Day with him after dumping her cheating boyfriend.

Arriving on a commercial flight, Faith's adventure takes her on a local's tour of Vegas and a stay in a private Villa before she boards a private jet home to get away from her Vegas experience and back to her normal small town life.

When co-workers learn of her exploits from her ex-boyfriend, a co-worker who trashes her reputation, they refer to the stranger as Faith's "Vegas Valentine."

Realizing that she's been settling, Faith begins an adventure that takes her from the comfort of her carefully planned life and into the arms of a stranger who may break her small town heart, but for whom her heart beats. "My Vegas Valentine"

“DESERT TOWN ANGELS” TRILOGY

“Desert Town Angels” PART ONE “The Last Will and Testament of Howard Thornbon”

(Free on obooko.com)The patriarch of Golden Peaks is dead. The fate of the desert town is in jeopardy as the residents fear Howard Thornbon’s daughter will sell the dying town and displace them.

But when Howard’s Last Will and Testament is read, everyone is distressed when a stranger is announced as the person chosen to carry out his final wishes.

As drastic changes are made in the town, the full fury of Sheri, Howard’s daughter, is unleashed.

When the mysterious stranger is introduced, Golden Peaks Property Manager Ryan Camden realizes Sheri has met her match in the person Howard has chosen to inherit Golden Peaks.

As Sheri and the stranger clash over who is the rightful owner of the desolate desert town, Golden Peaks Property Manager Ryan Camden attempts to keep them from destroying Golden Peaks and each other.

“Desert Town Angels”

PART TWO “The Kin of Ms. Honey Hallowell”

“No!” Sheri shouted as the table shook with her pounding fist. “This is my place!”

“Are you so sure?” Van taunted. “Are you sure you are his daughter?”

“She is,” Nelson snapped and they both sat back. “She is. Sheri is legally Howard’s daughter.”

“Legally?” the lawyer said, sensing the meaning of the descriptive word.

The will of Howard Thornbon has been read and the kin of Ms. Honey Hallowell, a woman named Van, has taken over the town of Golden Peaks.

Moving into the old hotel, the mysterious Van invites the residents to dinner to introduce herself. Then, Ryan learns that the fate of the town is still in limbo.

Time is ticking. Howard has stipulated Van must remain in the town thirty days before taking full ownership, otherwise the property reverts to his daughter, who will do everything in her power to take back her birthright.

Thirty days to decide the fate of Golden Peaks. Thirty days to learn why Howard left Golden Peaks to the kin of Ms. Honey Hallowell.

Thirty days before a secret is revealed changing all of their lives forever.

“Desert Town Angels”

PART THREE “The Final Showdown in Golden Peaks”

“They want to discuss some DNA results with us,” Ryan said as he hung up the phone later that night.

“They already gave them to us,” Van whispered horrified.

“The lawyer says he’ll meet us in Hamptonville,” Ryan said as he hugged her tight.

The only thought holding her together was, “Please, don’t let this all be a lie.”

The secrets have been revealed. With the fate of Golden Peaks no longer in limbo, Van and Ryan are free to engage in their own pursuits beyond the desert town.

Van attempts to come to terms with her role in Golden Peaks, and Ryan is ready to reconcile with his past and his parents.

As more strangers reveal the ongoing saga involving the residents of Golden Peaks, Van has learned to adapt to everything about her new life except her feelings for Ryan.

A visitor looking for Nelson unleashes the memory of how the octogenarian ended up in Golden Peaks. Grace's condition worsens and Van turns to an unlikely adversary to find the dying woman's grandson.

Before her first year in Golden Peaks has passed, Van makes a decision with Ryan that goes against her core beliefs.

The struggle for control of Golden Peaks continues.

Van prepares for one last showdown with Sheri.

But in the second year, it may be something under the soil that will decide Van's future in Golden Peaks.

Saving the town she inherited becomes a mission that may cost Van more than the desolate town is worth.

Chapter 1

Ignoring the “Notice of Foreclosure” sign on her front door, Brooke Sandstrom struggled with her bag of groceries as she found the right key and opened the door to her townhome.

Setting the bag in the kitchen, she turned on her voicemail and listened while putting away the groceries.

One message got her attention.

“Mrs. Sandstrom, this is Katrina down at the elder care center,” she said without emotion.

“We’re going to have to discuss your mother’s options, please give us a call.”

Tapping in the number to the facility, which she knew by heart at this time, Brooke asked for the woman who handled her mother’s care.

“What ‘options’ are you talking about?” she said, without greeting the woman.

“Health care won’t pay for a longer stay,” Katrina said. *“If you come down to the center, we can discuss other options. Maybe a state run home in the city,”* she lectured. *“We could also leave her in your care, that would be another option.”*

“How am I supposed to take care of my son, and my mother, I just got laid-off and my home just got foreclosed on?”

“I can only discuss the options with you Mrs. Sandstrom,” Katrina said as if they were discussing a late credit card payment and not her ailing mother’s health care.

Outraged, Brooke kindly told Katrina she would be by tomorrow to talk about the "options."

Brooke stood in her kitchen and held the phone to her chest. Slamming it back down on the cradle, she picked up a bag of frozen peas and threw it at the refrigerator and it popped open. Peas flew like a hailstorm of hard frozen little green pellets. Sinking to the floor, Brooke cried. Sobbing loudly and screaming, she finally fell against the cold tile floor exhausted.

Looking at the clock she realized it was time to pick up her son from kindergarten, so she pulled herself up, washed her tear-streaked face and combed her hair. Only looking long enough to see

she was presentable, she carefully walked around the boxes marked “Matthew storage” and touched a picture of her and Matthew smiling and holding baby MJ before heading out the door.

Walking to the school, Brooke hoped her son’s teacher wouldn’t want to have another "discussion."

Just like Katrina, MJ’s teacher always wanted to talk "options" regarding his education. MJ was thought to be slow. Brooke had sent him to a specialist and they determined he might have to go to a special school. They didn’t have a clear diagnosis. Brooke had set up an interview for a second opinion. Her son was not slow.

Right now, buying food and keeping their health insurance was a priority for Brooke. Getting the best education for her son was also a high priority, but if they couldn’t eat, what would an education matter?

MJ greeted her at the gate and Brooke signed him out quickly before his teacher could lecture her. Brooke didn’t want to hear she was a bad parent today. Katrina already thought she was a negligent daughter. A person could only handle being bad at one thing at a time.

Arriving at home, a new sign had been placed on her door. It was a “3 Day Notice.” Fear ripped through Brooke but she didn’t want her son to get concerned, so she acted as if it were just another ordinary notice.

“Why do they keep putting notes on the door, mom?” he asked while putting away his backpack and waiting for a snack.

“I wasn’t home, and they wanted to make sure I got the message,” she said, spreading jam on a piece of wheat bread.

“What’s the message?” he asked, getting jam all over his face.

Get out.

“Nothing, just a reminder to pay a bill,” she shrugged.

After dinner, there was a bath and story time. Kissing him good-night, Brooke looked into her son's eyes before he closed them to go to sleep.

Eyes the same as his father's always made her sad. His father was extremely intelligent, there was no way MJ had developmental problems. *There has to be another explanation*, she thought as she turned out the light and went to the living room.

Dialing her friend Melinda, Brooke sat down and looked around the room wondering how long it would take to put what she needed in storage.

"It's Brooke," she said when her friend answered the phone.

"How's everything going?" she asked while distracted with work.

Unable to contain herself, Brooke started crying.

"I'll be over when I can," Melinda sighed and hung up the phone.

"Damn it," Brooke hissed as she put the phone in the cradle. Wiping her tears away, Brooke assembled a packing box and started filling it angrily with books and toys that were laying around.

Assembling another box, she threw all her clothes and shoes from her room into it. Pictures were removed from their frames and placed in a baggie. Stuffed animals and tchotchkes of personal value were packed among the clothes. Her life fit in two brown cardboard boxes.

Melinda showed up late and hugged Brooke after seeing the sign.

"So it's official?" she said, taking off her coat and sitting on the couch.

"Almost nine months without a payment," she said, trying to find the bright spot in her dark hour.

"What's the plan?" Melinda asked.

"Put some stuff in storage and find another place," she shrugged.

"I only have an extra room, so it's yours until you find another place," Melinda offered.

Brooke lowered her head. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“My other offer still stands,” her friend asserted while putting on her jacket and getting ready to depart.

“I am at the point of accepting,” Brooke said. It was a last chance, end of the world scenario that seemed unimaginable just three years earlier. But she had run out of insurance money and didn’t have a job. Going on welfare was only lower on her list. That would still leave her mother with less than sub par care. Not to mention what that would mean to MJ if he were in special education and on welfare. This was not the future she intended for her child, for their child.

“You say the word and I’ll set something up,” her friend urged.

Brooke nodded, and they hugged before Melinda left Brooke in the aftermath of her life.

Grabbing the special family photo by the door, Brooke stared at it and wondered how she got here, in a foreclosed home without a job raising a child with special education issues and a sick mother about to be thrown out of the facility that had provided her care for the past five years.

Why aren’t you here to help? she insisted to the photo of the happy family.

Packing the frame carefully in clothes, Brooke taped up the boxes, and put them in her room so her son wouldn’t wonder why she was packing in a hurry. He knew they were moving, but Brooke didn’t want him to worry that they were leaving in two days.

After sending him off to school with a friend and his mother, Brooke packed up her son’s room, filled two suitcases with just enough clothes and toys to get by at Melinda’s and then packed a suitcase for herself.

Calling a storage facility that offered moving services, Brooke packed her life into a 5x10 foot space and headed to the elder care facility.

Meeting with Katrina in her office, Brooke reminded herself to leave her other problems on the other side of the door or else they would remove her mother from her care entirely.

“I wanted to know what you think of the options,” Katrina announced after reading the short list.

“How long until this takes effect?” Brooke asked in the same unemotional monotone manner.

“Two months,” Katrina noted, looking at the paperwork.

“I will let you know in a month,” Brooke said and left while Katrina stammered for her to not leave until a decision was made.

Heading to her mother’s room in a blur of fury she had to contain, Brooke sat in the chair next to her mother’s bed and waited for her to recognize her only child.

“Is that you, Brooke,” she asked, reaching out for her.

“It’s me, mom,” Brooke choked then took a deep breath and asked her mother how things were going.

“I’m fine, dear,” she said, patting Brooke on the arm. As a child, Brooke remembered how comforting it was in her mother’s care. There was never a problem she couldn’t solve. Now, she had to solve all of her mother’s issues but she no longer had the support financially or emotionally.

Not able to confide in her mother without causing her more distress, Brooke stayed and talked and then said she had to pick up her son.

“You look so tired, Brooke,” her mother said as Brooke got up to leave.

“I’m working hard, mom,” she said, trying to get out of the center before breaking down.

“I love you, Brooke,” her mother said, clasping her hands in prayer. “I pray for you, dear.”

Me too.

“I love you, too, mom,” Brooke said and headed out. Walking to the bus stop, Brooke sat down and cried in her hands until the bus pulled up. Waving it away, she caught her breath, wiped her tears and waited for the next one.

When she got home with her son, she had to console him because he was distressed that his room was almost empty.

“What happened to all my stuff?” he said puzzled.

“We’re going to have to move in with Melinda,” she said, cheerfully not showing that his questioning brown eyes were breaking her already broken heart.

“What about school?” he insisted. Even though his teacher didn’t have faith in her son, he still loved going and being with his friends.

“You’ll still go to your school, we’re just gonna be living with Melinda until we find a place to live,” she shrugged as if it were just a normal thing.

“Where’s all my stuff?” he asked again.

“It’s in storage,” she said, putting peas and hot dogs on the table. “We’ll get it out when we move into our new place.”

Eating in silence, Brooke didn’t deviate from their normal routine. There was a bath and story time for the last time in the very same room Brooke and Matthew had brought him when he arrived from the hospital six years prior.

As she read the last page, she realized it was the last story time in their home. Brooke read the one book she didn’t pack. It was MJ’s favorite about the sleepy elephant. Without him asking, Brooke read the book over and over until he fell asleep.

Brooke sat frozen on his bed. Once she got up, turned off the light and left, there would be no turning back. MJ was supposed to grow up in the room. This was supposed to be his home where he would bring his kids someday.

Closing her eyes and holding back the fresh hot tears, Brooke remembered the day she and Matthew brought him home and watched as he slept that first night as a family.

Kissing her on the forehead, he admired the tiny baby.

“MJ,” he had marveled. “Matthew Junior. I have a son. We have a son,” he beamed and hugged her. Brooke had hugged back. It was supposed to be like that forever, a happy family.

Six short years later, she was faced with decisions that never entered her mind back when Matthew held her and vowed always to be there for her and protect them.

For three years, Brooke had tried to protect what she had left. Soon one thing after the other wore at her resolve. She couldn't do it alone anymore.

Turning off the light for the last time, Brooke crawled in her bed and rolled up into a ball. Gathering all the strength she had left, Brooke dialed Melinda.

"We'll be there tomorrow," she told her friend.

Melinda acknowledged and then Brooke gave in to the last chance in the world as she lay in the darkness.

"Set it up, Melinda, set it up," Brooke whispered. *"I'm ready."*

Chapter 2

In an upscale bar at the top of the ritziest hotel downtown, Brooke sat in a lounge chair surrounded by Melinda's male "friends." Sipping a sparkling water and laughing at whatever seemed needed an acknowledging laugh, Brooke tried to be as charming as she could under the circumstances.

Dressed in one of her friend's designer black mini dresses, her hair professionally styled and straightened to remove the unruly waves, Brooke had been transformed into a woman again. Three years of neglect had taken a toll and her friend set her up with her hairstylist and makeup team before the get together.

"So how do you know Melinda," one of the men asked. There were four, two on chairs across from her and one on either side. Brooke was trying to move away from the man on her left who kept trying to brush her leg with his fat hand.

"Family friend," she said without adding details. Melinda was Matthew's boss' wife and they had become good friends in the past three years.

Everybody stood when Melinda came back from wherever she had gone, and Brooke mingled with each of the men.

Melinda interjected whenever there was a lull in the conversation or sensed Brooke freaking out.

"Brooke has a degree in art and she speaks French," Melinda offered and the men were impressed. The fat man on her side whispered, "Would you like to voulez-vous with me?" and grabbed her ass.

Brooke was through with his impertinence.

Pulling him away by his fat arm, she looked down on the man and scolded him.

"I like that," he declared. "You're not what I'm used to, but I'd do you," he chuckled and slapped her on the ass. Brooke slapped him on the face just hard enough to get his attention on her face.

“Listen you fat, little, stupid man,” she whispered threateningly. For a moment she was distracted by a man with intense green eyes standing at the bar entrance. “I’m not only not for sale, but you couldn’t have me in your wildest fantasies,” she hissed, turned and headed to the bar. Locking onto the gaze of the man who had been standing by the door, Brooke looked down humiliated.

“Give me something with alcohol,” she told the bartender.

“This is a bar, lady,” he said sarcastically. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“White wine, two,” the man with green eyes said and held up two fingers for the bartender who nodded and left to get the order. Sitting next to her, the man stared straight ahead with his hands folded on the bar.

“I can’t believe I just did that,” she confided in the man while looking for the fat man she had just scolded.

“I didn’t see anything,” the man with green eyes said as the bartender brought him two glasses of wine. The man pushed a glass toward Brooke.

“Thank you,” she said and tossed back half the glass in one unladylike gulp. Sighing, Brooke carefully placed the glass on the napkin provided by the bartender and moaned.

“Shouldn’t you get back to your party?” he asked, still looking straight ahead as he held onto the stem of his glass. Brooke wondered if he was waiting for someone or just a guest coming up for a drink.

“I think I’m done for the night,” she replied. Staring off across the bar at whatever fascinated the man, Brooke reconsidered her friend’s option.

Melinda, divorced from her very wealthy husband, was always trying to set Brooke up with a new man. Like it was just easy to forget about Matthew and get another man to take care of her.

For three years Brooke did everything in her power to take care of herself, her son and her mother. Meeting an eligible bachelor interested in marriage and the responsibility of taking on her issues had been the last resort of last resorts. Sitting at the bar, Brooke just wanted to go home and relax in the darkness until she melted away in the nothingness.

It didn't work. Morning always came and the problems never ceased. The insurance money had run out. If she hadn't lost her job at the gallery, everything would have been fine. For months she tried to get another job, any job. Barely making it at the gallery, Brooke had been living on borrowed time in her home.

Welfare was an option. Brooke had been seriously considering it, but Melinda said there were plenty of single men and she was still young enough to start over. Unfortunately, these men knew she was desperate, and Brooke would rather live in a homeless shelter rather than compromise her principles. The only problem was that she had other people in her life to consider.

There would be no choices on welfare. She would have to send her child to the school the government chose for her, and her mother would end up in a state run home. The nurses at the elder care facility didn't have many good things to say about those homes.

So she sat in a bar being groped by entitled jackasses who thought they could afford her at any cost.

"What are you guys celebrating," he asked casually.

Brooke was getting numb. It didn't take a lot of alcohol to give her a buzz.

"The loss of my independence," she declared, holding up her glass and pouring the last half of the wine down her dry throat.

"Do they know that?" he asked puzzled as he turned to her. Brooke met his intense green eyes and leaned in close enough to be transfixed by his masculine cologne.

"Yes," she whispered.

"It can't be that bad," he said, taking another drink. Brooke was getting very relaxed.

"It's worse," she confessed.

Looking back at the men, Brooke realized only one of the nicer men was left and he was sitting and talking to Melinda. Catching her gaze, Brooke nodded and Melinda went back to her conversation with the man.

Brooke leaned her head on the bar.

“I am such a disaster,” she moaned.

“Yeah, why is that?” he asked softly and casually drank his wine.

Talking to the stranger was comforting. Knowing she’d never see him again relaxed her even more.

“Three years ago I had everything,” she said out loud, not really caring if the man listened or not. “I had a husband. We had a home. If I thought back then I’d be in some bar scoping out a wealthy husband for security, I would have thought it was the easy solution. I would have told myself I would do everything I could before that happened. It would never have been an option. Now here I am and I’m actually feeling guilty I scared them all away. They’re throwing my mom out of her care facility. My son needs special education. I haven’t been able to find a job.”

“What about you,” the man interjected and Brooke realized he had been listening. Looking into his eyes Brooke answered sincerely.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“How do you feel about marrying a stranger for security?” he asked.

“I want everyone to be happy and healthy,” she shrugged. “That’s what I want more than anything else.”

“What about you?” he asked again.

Brooke didn’t understand. That’s what she wanted for herself.

“I want for everyone ...” the man interrupted her before she could repeat herself.

“You’ll be happy if you give up what you want so that everyone else will be happy?” he asked incredulously.

Brooke looked into his eyes and saw that he wasn’t being rude. They were two chums at a bar trying to figure things out.

“You’ve never been in love, have you?” she said, feeling sorry for the man. “Nothing matters except the happiness of the ones you love. You’re right, what I feel is important as well, but I would never give up what I have for my happiness and nothing else. I would be happy if my son was getting the best education and he had a stable life. I would be very happy if my mother were in a nice care facility where they catered to her every need. If I had security again, I would be happy. If that means giving something up of myself, that’s a small price to pay,” she said.

Realizing she had been too candid with the man, Brooke thanked him for the wine and waved good-bye to Melinda. Without waiting to say good-bye to the man, Melinda quickly got up and met Brooke at the elevator.

“You seemed pretty cozy with the man at the bar,” Melinda surmised as she steadied her inebriated friend. Brooke just wanted to go home.

“Nice eyes,” Brooke shrugged. “He bought me a drink. I’m so sorry I slapped your friend.”

“He’s a jackass,” Melinda shrugged. “I won’t be seeing him again.” The elevator doors opened and Brooke got in but Melinda said she would meet her at the valet station. Shrugging, Brooke agreed and took the elevator down. Not a thought entered her brain as she waited for Melinda and they drove home.

Melinda seemed to be in a good mood.

“Did you like that guy you were talking with?” Brooke asked the beaming Melinda.

“Dave? I’ve known him for years, nice guy, he thought you were nice as well,” Melinda said.

“He was one of the nicer ones,” Brooke agreed.

“You spent a lot of time with the guy at the bar,” Melinda noted.

“He was just listening to me spill my guts,” Brooke shrugged.

When they got back to Melinda’s condo, Brooke checked in on her son sleeping on the couch in his sleeping bag. Brooke had bought it so that the move would seem like an adventure to him. Paying the babysitter, Brooke said good-night and then she sat with Melinda in the kitchen.

“What if one of the men were interested,” Melinda asked as they drank sparkling water.

“Not the short fat one,” Brooke said, disgusted at the way he thought he owned her. It had nothing to do with the way he looked. It was the way he acted.

“Not him, another one,” she insisted.

Brooke shrugged.

“The others were nice,” she replied, not really needing to know which one specifically. They all seemed the same to Brooke. They were polite and treated her respectfully. She wasn’t looking for love. She just needed security.

“Well, one of them is looking for a wife, the same way you’re looking for a husband,” Melinda continued, getting to her point. “He has a proposal.”

Brooke looked puzzled. Is that what she had been talking about with the nice man while she was at the bar.

“What kind of proposal?” Brooke asked, listening very carefully.

“He’s got a mother who has been bugging him for years to marry his on-again off-again girlfriend,” she said as if she were trying to sell the proposal to Brooke. “He needs a ‘family,’” Melinda said, using finger quotes to emphasize her point, “to appease his mother while he continues seeing the woman and going off on business trips and whatever.”

“Why doesn’t he just be a man and tell his mother to lay off, it’s his life?” Brooke asked. She knew relationships with parents were more complicated, but this was supposed to be a grown man.

“I can’t answer that,” she said. “He wants a wife for appearance sake. That’s all.”

“How does that help me and my situation?” Brooke asked.

“He’s a wealthy businessman,” Melinda explained as if Brooke were slow of understanding.

“He’ll send your son to the school he needs, he’ll continue payments to your mother’s elder care facility and all you have to do is marry him.”

Brooke spit out her water and covered her mouth. Staring Melinda straight in the eye she could see Melinda was serious.

“He’s a wealthy businessman who can’t deal with his mother?” Brooke wasn’t slow to understand, she was just confused at why this man needed a wife he didn’t love. “He just wants to marry me in order to keep his mother off his back.”

“It’s not like that,” Melinda corrected her. “There would be no ‘marital duties,’” Melinda explained with the air quotes. “You just have to put up with his overbearing mother who lives in the back house.”

“I can’t believe I’m going to say this,” Brooke said, still trying to figure out the bizarre proposal. “I marry him. We don’t sleep together. I just live in his house and pretend to be a family for his mother so he can see his girlfriend?”

“That’s it,” Melinda said, excited Brooke understood the arrangement.

“What guarantee do I have?” she asked. “What happens if I marry this guy and everything changes?”

“He can have his lawyer draw up papers and it would be a legal and binding arrangement,” Melinda shrugged at the detail. “Like a pre nup.”

Brooke found herself very awake.

“He would take care of my son and mother, guaranteed, and I would have to do nothing?” she asked, considering the option seriously for the first time.

“Except marry him and change your name,” Melinda said, offering the fine points of the proposal.

Brooke looked at the gold band on her finger and massaged it, hoping it would magically give her an answer, or absolution.

“He’s not coming back,” Melinda whispered, trying to comfort her friend.

“I will let you know in the morning,” Brooke said in a trance as she went to her room, closed the door and lay on her bed staring at the ceiling.

Could it be possible? Could such an arrangement exist?

Brooke twisted the band around and around hoping for answers or to be transported back in time.

There was no sleep for her. When MJ poked his head in her room, she just stood up, got him cereal and sat him down for Saturday morning cartoons. Sitting next to him she stared past the cartoons.

Eight years earlier she and Matthew pledged not only their love but made a vow to be together forever.

This decision was too important for Brooke to go back to that night three years earlier. If she fell into that misery, it would take her years to recover again. Her son and her mother needed her to take care of them. They would all have security and she wouldn't have to compromise her body. Morals were something that could be compromised on a case-by-case basis.

Melinda woke up and Brooke announced her decision while her friend headed for the kitchen.

“Have him send the papers over,” Brooke said.

Melinda stopped.

“I'll do that,” she said. “When do you want to meet him?”

Brooke had thought about that. Getting up, she joined Melinda and they went to the kitchen to discuss the arrangement in private.

“I don't,” she asserted. “No ceremony. It doesn't matter as long as you're comfortable with it. I'll have a lawyer review the arrangement and if it's what we've agreed upon, I just want to meet him at city hall the day we get the license.”

Melinda thought about Brooke's request.

“I will get started,” she said, hugging the robe to her thin body. Melinda looked so much older without her makeup and the concern on her face was not masked. “Are you sure you want to do it this way?”

“It’s the only way I can do this,” Brooke affirmed.

“I will set it up,” she agreed and made the coffee before making the call.

Monday morning the papers arrived and Brooke made an appointment to see one of Melinda’s friends who was a lawyer. After the woman reviewed the arrangement, she looked at Brooke and asked if she was sure about the unusual pre nup.

Brooke had reviewed the details.

The main points were acceptable.

There was a clause for taking care of her son and her mother in the event they decided to part ways after a year.

Brooke was to present herself as his wife to his mother and act accordingly. She was to be a companion for his mother.

If either decided to dissolve the arrangement within one year, Brooke would leave with nothing.

Jake could dissolve the relationship if Brooke did not uphold her end of the arrangement in presenting herself as a dutiful wife in his mother’s eyes, and companion to her mother-in-law.

“I have to be,” Brooke asserted. They went to a notary, signed the papers and then Brooke called the man’s lawyer’s office to have them picked up.

Hours later, Melinda called to say an appointment had been set at city hall for the next Friday.

Brooke took a deep breath and agreed to the date.

After sending MJ off to school the morning of her second wedding, Brooke put on a dress she borrowed from Melinda. It was a long floral gown that she could have just as easily worn to a dinner party.

Of all the preparations she made, the hardest was taking off her gold band. Eight years earlier the ring was meant to stay on her finger forever. It was a symbol of enduring love and it was the last remnant of her first marriage. For an hour, Brooke slid the snug fitting ring up and down her finger each time unable to take the ring off her finger.

It was the last step to putting away the past. This was a new day with a new man. Without thinking, she pulled it off like a bandage that had been kept on too long. Brooke couldn't look at the ring. Stuffing it in her suitcase for safekeeping, she left to meet her new husband at city hall.

Melinda drove her and she would be the witness.

“Are you sure you didn't want to meet him first, have a date, get to know each other?” Melinda sounded nervous for her friend who was about to walk down the aisle with a man she had only met for a few hours at a bar.

“Why?” Brooke shrugged. “I just want to get this done so that I can get on with my life. If I stop and think about this...”

“I understand,” Melinda whispered.

At city hall, Brooke waited as Melinda talked to the lawyer and they worked on the license and appointment with the judge. A long line of happy couples waited to get their licenses.

Melinda came back to Brooke and showed her the paperwork that had to be signed in front of the judge. The man, Jake, was late.

What if he never showed up?

Brooke suddenly needed to be alone. Looking at all the couples hugging made her angry.

As she headed back to Melinda, she saw the man with the green eyes talking to Melinda and Brooke stopped.

Melinda, the man with green eyes and the lawyer noticed Brooke frozen in the hallway.

“Parker, Jake Parker,” an officer of the court called. The man with green eyes turned and walked up to the officer to announce he was present.

Melinda bit her lip knowing Brooke was expecting one of the men she had met at the party. Not the stranger from the bar.

Walking up to Brooke, she pulled her aside and explained.

“He was supposed to be there that night,” she reasoned with her friend. “He wasn’t comfortable with the situation either. When I saw you talking to him and he said he would be interested, I didn’t want to freak you out. He’s a nice guy. I used to hang out with him back when I was married to my husband.”

Jake stood by his lawyer and waited patiently for Brooke to make her final decision.

“It’s not a problem,” Brooke shrugged, not breaking eye contact. Brooke pulled Melinda back to Jake and his lawyer.

“Nice to see you again,” Brooke said, holding out her hand. “I’m Brooke.”

Jake took her hand and shook it as if they were business partners.

“Jake,” he said. Dressed in a dark blue suit, his wavy dark hair carefully parted to the side, they looked as if they were two people going to a special event. “Do you want to talk for a moment? Do you have any questions?”

“Only if you do,” Brooke insisted.

“Let’s talk for a moment,” he suggested. Brooke felt her stomach and throat get tight. *Had he changed his mind?*

For some reason that would be more humiliating than the arrangement she was about to enter into with a man she did not know.

“I know it’s in the agreement and you understand the terms,” he said, making sure Brooke was really sure she wanted to go through with the arrangement. “I really need you to understand that my mother has to believe we’re married.”

Brooke looked at the businessman who seemed so confident and professional. *This guy worried about what his mother thought?*

“I understand,” Brooke insisted. “I will be the model wife. I’ve had practice,” she said, making light of the moment. A flicker of an emotion Brooke couldn’t place appeared in his eyes. Looking puzzled, he apologized for not introducing himself at the bar that night.

“I saw you take down that man and I was about to walk out,” he confessed. Brooke cringed.

“I was not myself,” she explained.

“Maybe you were,” he shrugged.

“We need to do this before I think about it too much,” Brooke insisted when he continued scrutinizing her.

“I’m ready,” he said. Brooke nodded and they headed back. The lawyer spoke with the officer of the court and within minutes the judge declared them married and everybody signed the papers making it official.

There was no kiss and no official introduction of the newlyweds.

Heading out, Melinda told them to hold on. Before Brooke could protest, Melinda took a picture.

“This is where I leave you,” Jake said and held out his hand. Brooke shook it and stood in the hallway again alone with Melinda and the lawyer.

The lawyer pulled out a manila package he was holding under his arm and waited impatiently for Brooke to accept it from him.

“All the details and copies of the pre nup are in here,” he said, handing the package to Brooke. Taking it from his hand, Brooke thanked him and the lawyer left.

Brooke just stared at the package containing the details of her new life.

“Congratulations,” Melinda said, putting her arm over Brooke’s shoulder.

“Take me home,” Brooke whispered.

Chapter 3

Brooke sat in the back seat of the sedan hired to take her and her son to the upper class, suburban, gated community where Jake lived with his mother.

A rental truck followed carrying all of their belongings.

Brooke looked out the window and wondered what the house would look like, and how his mother would greet them. Jake would not be there.

How could such a confident looking man be such a coward?

The packet contained all the information Brooke needed to know about their arrangement. She kept the notes about the details of their relationship in her purse for reference.

Pulling up to a quaint cottage behind a white-picket fence and tall mature trees on a graded hill away from the street, MJ was very excited.

“Is this our new house!” he exclaimed, trying to undo his seatbelt.

“Is this the address?” Brooke asked. After passing mansions and larger homes, Brooke was surprised by the modest cottage that looked much older than the rest of the neighborhood showpiece houses.

“This is it,” he declared. Pulling out an envelope with payment, Brooke handed it to the driver.

“Let me get your bags,” he said and then helped her out of the car. Brooke helped her son out of his side of the car and they stood staring at their new house.

Brooke knew she had to go to the kitchen entrance. As they walked up the incline of the cobblestone driveway, Brooke was impressed by a white luxury sedan sitting in the driveway on her way to the side entrance. Knocking on the door and waiting, Brooke knew she would be greeted by Jake’s maid.

“Mrs. Hurligan?” Brooke said, greeting the older woman who wore an apron. Wiping her hands on the apron, Mrs. Hurligan nodded and smiled.

“You must be Jake’s wife,” she beamed and stepped aside. “Make yourself at home.”

Bending down to MJ’s height she greeted Brooke’s son.

“Are you hungry, young man?” she asked, knowing he would say yes.

“I’m MJ,” he said, holding out his hand. Then he looked at Brooke.

“It’s alright, you can have a snack,” Brooke insisted.

MJ nodded emphatically.

Laughing, Mrs. Hurligan offered them a seat at the island and brought sandwiches and a pitcher of iced tea to the table.

Brooke took in the environment. The kitchen was a large stand-alone room with cabinets that were once very beautiful, but were worn with age. Tiles on the floor were chipped and the island countertop was scarred by years of being used as a cutting board.

There was a knock at the door.

“Where do we unload the boxes?” the moving man asked when Mrs. Hurligan greeted him at the door.

“Bring them this way,” she said and the two men grabbed a box each and Brooke followed through the door leading to the rest of the house.

The boxes were marked with their names. Mrs. Hurligan took them down a hallway that separated the dining room in the back of the house from the living room in the front of the house.

Again, Brooke noted the interior had once been glamorous, but now it seemed old, like an elderly person’s home. At the end of the hall were two rooms across from each other and a closed door at the end. Brooke looked up a set of stairs leading to a loft before arriving at their rooms.

Mrs. Hurligan wanted to know in which room Brooke would like to put her son’s boxes. Brooke quickly looked in both rooms and decided the one facing the backyard would be nice for her son. It was late afternoon and she knew he would get direct sunlight in the morning.

Brooke also got a glance of a small white house off to the side at the end of the large landscaped backyard.

The mother-in-law's house.

The other room would be where Brooke stayed. Eventually, she had to come up with a good explanation why she wasn't sharing her husband's bedroom. There weren't any notes in the package.

Sharing his bed was not in the arrangement, but at some point the mother was going to wonder at the arrangement.

When all the boxes were unloaded, Brooke handed the moving men another envelope from the package and they bowed and left.

"MJ, I'm going to unpack your boxes, you stay here with Mrs. Hurligan," she commanded. "Is that alright with you, Mrs. Hurligan?" Brooke asked the cheerful, grandmother-like housekeeper.

"Of course, dear," she said and then asked MJ if he wanted to bake cookies.

MJ screamed his agreement.

Brooke headed to his room. *Why couldn't Mrs. Hurligan be Jake's mother?* She was sweet and the perfect grandmother type. Based on how Jake asked her to treat his mother, Brooke dreaded the meeting.

Distracting herself by setting up her son's room, Brooke unfolded the last box and looked around. This was MJ's new home. Placing no importance on the moment, Brooke left and unpacked her boxes.

The cookies were ready when she got back and Brooke helped them eat the delicious chocolate cookies. Face and hands covered in chocolate, MJ licked his fingers.

Mrs. Hurligan untied her apron and placed it on a hook by the door.

"It's been nice meeting you," she said while putting on her coat and making sure they were settled in. Brooke knew she only worked a few days a week.

“Thank you for everything,” Brooke said, desperately wanting the kind woman to stay and not leave Brooke alone in her own house.

“Bye!” MJ called and Mrs. Hurligan smiled and left.

“Bath time,” Brooke declared. MJ was about to put his chocolate covered hands on the door when Brooke stopped him.

“Wait!” Grabbing a kitchen towel, Brooke put water on it and wiped her son’s face and hands. MJ wiggled and squirmed and Brooke got most of the chocolate off him and onto the dishcloth.

“Go see your new room,” she said, setting him free. MJ ran through the swinging door and down the hallway. Finding his room, he yelled and said hello to all his stuffed animals. Standing in the doorway, Brooke watched as her son played as if he were in his old room in their old house.

After his bath, Brooke sat with him for story time and tucked him into bed.

“What do you think about your new house?” she asked, looking into the eyes that always reminded Brooke of his father.

“I like it!” he exclaimed and hugged his favorite teddy bear. Brooke sighed at the worn, tired teddy bear, the last gift from his father.

MJ was home. It was as simple as that.

Brooke kissed his forehead, said good-night and turned out the lights as she left.

There was just one more thing she had to do.

Heading out the French doors that led to the backyard, Brooke was surprised at the fresh park-like setting of the large backyard. Bright flowers lined the stone walkway and tall trees lined the outer perimeter of the green lawn. There was a patio table and chairs and a lounge chair on a cement deck under a shade tree.

The path led Brooke to the small house at the end of the yard. Standing in front of the pleasant house, Brooke braced herself for meeting Jake’s mother. It was in their arrangement.

Knocking as cheerfully as she could, Brooke put a smile on her face and waited to greet his mother.

What would her mother think about this arrangement? Brooke just told her mother she was getting married again and would be looking into a care home near her new house. Her mother had been overjoyed and Brooke lied about everything. She couldn't bring herself to explain why she was marrying the man. Brooke held her head in shame as she left her mother. It was at that moment she understood why Jake needed to present this lie to his own mother.

A minute passed and Brooke was about to knock again when an elderly woman on the other side of the door said she was coming.

"I'm right here," she snarled and Brooke kept the smile on her face. The door opened a crack and then wider when his mother decided it wasn't some guy trying to break into her house.

"Mrs. Parker?" Brooke greeted the woman.

"Yes?" she asked impatiently.

"Hi, I'm Jake's wife," she said, holding out her hand. His mother just looked at her up and down and shrugged.

"Nice to meet you," she said insincerely and was about to close the door when Brooke asked her if she could come in so they could get to know each other.

Squinting, Jake's mother looked like she was going to slam the door in her face. Instead, she opened the door and stood in the entryway with her arms crossed over her elegant sweater. Not much shorter than Brooke, the woman was sophisticated, her white hair perfectly styled and her pantsuit looked expensive. Fury embraced her cloudy eyes and her skin looked smooth and soft with barely a wrinkle under a light powder of blush.

"So this is how I meet you," she growled. "My son doesn't give me the courtesy to meet you before he goes off and gets married." Huffing, she stood back and looked Brooke up and down. "You're not Jenny," she remarked, sizing up Brooke. "Thanks for stopping by," she said and shut the door on Brooke.

Closing her mouth, Brooke stood there with her hand still extended in greeting.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Brooke told the door and headed back to the house.

Closing the French doors, Brooke turned on the lights in the main area of the house. Did he inherit the house? It looked more like his mother’s house than a bachelor pad. There was lace and heavy wood furniture in the dining room. Crossing over to the living room, Brooke turned on the light next to the front door reserved for guests and noted the dated retro furniture. At one time it must have been very sophisticated, but it was old and Brooke didn’t feel at home.

Turning off the lights, Brooke went to her room and prepared for her next steps. She had to get MJ enrolled in his new school and find a nearby care facility for her mother. Jake would not be back for several weeks. He had conveniently scheduled an overseas business meeting so he wouldn’t have to deal with his mother’s fury at stabbing her in the back.

Brooke couldn’t be angry with the older woman. Her son didn’t respect her. Neither one respected the other. If his mother were more considerate, he wouldn’t have to lie to her.

Closing her eyes, Brooke said a little prayer. She had lied to her mother as well; she had to protect her from further stress. Either way, they were both lying. Brooke wasn’t any better than Jake.

Wondering how she would deal with his angry mother out back, Brooke got a call on the phone next to her bed. Looking at the old phone, Brooke picked it up and waited for the other person to speak.

“*Brooke?*” Jake’s voice came over the line in pieces.

“Jake?” she was surprised to hear from the man.

“*Just wanted to make sure you got there alright,*” he said loudly above traffic noise from some other part of the world.

“I unpacked and met your mother,” she informed him.

“Good,” he said, not asking how it went when his new wife met his mother. Brooke didn’t want to complain. This was part of their arrangement.

“I’ll be there in a few weeks,” he said loudly. *“If you need anything, Mrs. Hurligan can help you. You have my cell number in case of an emergency. I have to go. Good-night,”* he said and hung up.

Shrugging and nodding her head at the businesslike tone of the conversation between the man and his wife, Brooke hung up the phone. The light from the room caught the gold in her new band and Brooke covered it to put it out of her mind. Suddenly, she remembered she had put her first gold band in her suitcase and frantically searched for it.

Relieved at finding the wedding band, she was emotionally exhausted. Looking around the room, Brooke decided on a hiding place for the ring. On the dresser, as she walked into the en suite bathroom, was a plant. Brooke pushed the golden ring gently into the dirt so that she could see it each time she went into the bathroom.

There was something missing. Brooke picked up a shirt on the bed and unwrapped the frame with the happy family photo. Placing it on her nightstand, she sat on her bed and longed to be in that photo. Longed for that day years earlier when her future was much happier and there was nothing but hope and love. All she had left was the picture. Touching it, she smiled and said a prayer as she did every time.

Now she was closer to feeling at home.

Chapter 4

Enrolling her son in his new school, Brooke realized she should have done more research. The new school was on a different track, and the woman at the front desk told her to come back for an evaluation in July, for the new school year.

Brooke made an appointment and took a very disappointed MJ home in his wagon. There didn't seem to be other kids running around the neighborhood even though the school was packed with kids. On the way back, Brooke explored the neighborhood and found a park. It would be the destination for the school break. Lots of kids showed up once school let out.

Heading home for dinner, MJ talked excitedly about all the friends he made and Brooke was very happy.

After putting her son to bed, Brooke closed the door to her room and just stared at the television across from her on the dresser. In the silence, she could relive memories of better days.

Any moment, Brooke expected to just evaporate into the universe to become part of everything. It never happened.

Sitting and staring, she eventually just fell asleep on top of the covers in the clothes she had worn all day.

MJ woke her early in the morning and they went to the park, played in the backyard, had lunch, dinner, bath time, story time, and lights out. Jake's mother didn't stop by, but Brooke did see her walk by the French doors on her way to her car.

In the packet, Jake's lawyers laid out the information she needed to lease a car and Brooke stood in the lot the next day with a number on the paper and realized she could have any car she wanted. Choosing one based on safety and capacity, they drove home. In other circumstances, Brooke would have been overjoyed at just going to a lot and picking out a car, but it wasn't hers, it was a loaner. She was a loaner.

Researching elder care facilities, Brooke found one close by that looked very professional and more like an active center for senior adults than a nursing home. Discussing finances, the staff

was very happy to take her mother immediately. Brooke smiled, but deep down she knew the moment there was nothing but social security and her mother's insurance, they would put her mother out without guilt. Without Jake's contribution, there was no way Brooke could have afforded the resort-style facility.

When they moved her mother, it was a good day and they took a walk while MJ played in the children's center. Marveling at how nice the place was, her mother asked how she was able to afford such luxury.

"I told you, mom," Brooke lied, "my new husband wanted to make sure you were comfortable."

Resting her arm in Brooke's, her mother smiled and her mind wandered away again. Brooke tried to enjoy every moment she spent with her mother, but each time she saw her Brooke knew she wasn't getting better. Every week she deteriorated a little more.

Making sure her mother was comfortable in her room, Brooke talked to her caretakers and promised she would be back the next week. Hugging and kissing her mother, Brooke and MJ left in their luxury sedan and when they got home, Brooke let MJ out of the car then she got back in.

Tears flooded her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. Sobbing silently, Brooke said a prayer for better days then went inside and made dinner for her son.

Weeks went by and MJ was invited to parties where all the mothers wanted to get to know her, especially when they learned that she had married the Parker boy.

Standing in the backyard of one of the newer homes, Brooke stood quietly by herself watching MJ enjoy the party. No expense was spared for this children's party.

"You're Mrs. Parker?" one woman asked and a dozen were suddenly surrounding her. Brooke just nodded. It sounded so weird. She wasn't Mrs. Sandstrom to the world anymore. She was another woman. She was now Mrs. Parker.

"Winona Parker's son?" another asked.

Winona? His mother's name was Winona?

“They were the first ones to build here,” another explained. “His father helped found the community.”

“What’s your name again?” another asked.

“Brooke,” she said nervously and the women sighed as if they were in on a joke Brooke had not heard.

“You’re not Jenny,” they all stated. Brooke was still puzzled but she didn’t let the women know she didn’t know what her legal husband’s girlfriend was like, the woman whom he was probably seeing at the moment.

It wasn’t any of Brooke’s business. This was part of the arrangement.

If the women knew they weren’t even sleeping in the same room, they would have snuck off and told another dozen women and made life very uncomfortable for Brooke.

None of this had gone through Brooke’s mind when she thought the arrangement was a good option. For appearance sake, she had to be Mrs. Parker. Enduring parties and vicious back talking never entered her mind.

This is not something she thought through when she agreed to marry Jake. While he was off living with his fantasy woman behind his overbearing mother’s back, she was on the frontline, the face of the marriage and she had to keep smiling.

Would welfare have been worse?

Distracted by some other woman’s problem, the women got bored and Brooke stepped back to avoid further speculation.

Tired and exhausted, Brooke and MJ headed home where Mrs. Hurligan said Jake had called and would be back in the morning. Brooke thanked her and after MJ went to bed, Brooke went throughout the common areas of the house picking up toys and making sure it didn’t look like a young family lived in the bachelor’s home.

Getting up early, Brooke took a shower and made sure she looked presentable. When MJ got up, she made cereal then put him in his best clothes. Brooke had a need to make a good presentation. Jake had not met her son.

Putting her son on display. That had not been something she thought about either. What did it matter what Jake thought?

Sitting outside on the deck, Brooke felt sorry as MJ begged to put on his play clothes as the morning turned into early afternoon. Declaring it lunchtime, she decided not to wait any longer. Brooke made sandwiches while MJ happily changed into play clothes. They ate and drank lemonade at the kitchen island. Covered in mustard, MJ waited to be cleaned and just as she was getting a damp dishcloth, Jake opened the door.

Taking one look at the man, MJ stood at attention. This was not the first impression Brooke wanted. Quickly wiping the mustard from his hands and face, Brooke introduced her son.

“MJ, this is Jake,” she said. Jake looked at the boy as if he were an alien being. “Jake, this is my son MJ.”

“Hello, sir,” her son greeted Jake like a little soldier.

Jake nodded and said “hi.” Realizing Jake was not used to being around kids, Brooke proclaimed that MJ could play in the backyard, and he ran out of the kitchen yelling and sounding like more than a dozen excited children.

Throwing the dirty towel in the sink, Brooke just faced the man she had married. It was another thing she hadn’t thought through. How was she supposed to act when he was around?

Jake finally took off his jacket and announced he had work to do and headed past her into the living room. Brooke sighed in relief. Heading out to the backyard through the kitchen door, she sat on the deck while MJ played with his toys and trucks.

Soon, Brooke’s mother-in-law came walking briskly down the path to the French doors of the main house. Brooke was glad she was sitting outside. She was not interested in the fury his mother was going to unleash on Jake.

Voices carried from the open doors and Brooke tried not to listen, but the voices got louder and she caught a few of the arguments.

“How dare you show up and not come over and tell me you were home,” his mother scolded her son. “I’ve had to walk around that woman you brought home because you didn’t have the courtesy to introduce me yourself.”

“You’ve been begging me for years to settle down, and you’re mad at me,” he retorted. “I think I did you a favor, mother.”

Brooke cringed. She knew that tone when he said “mother.” She had used it herself whenever she was outraged by her own mother.

Moments later, Jake’s mother emerged from the French doors and mumbled angrily back to her house without acknowledging either Brooke or MJ. Jake emerged and watched as she slammed her door. Brooke slid into the lounge chair and pretended to focus somewhere else.

Pretending not to notice Jake heading her way, Brooke tensed up for an argument and suddenly realized she had done nothing wrong. Jake stomped over to the deck and collapsed on a chair.

Waiting for him to vent, Brooke just watched MJ and wondered what she had gotten them into.

Jake finally voiced his anger.

“I can’t win with her,” he surmised. “I knew it would be like this, so it’s good to get it over with.”

Brooke turned to him and raised her eyebrow.

“You could have warned me!” she whispered, surprised by his confession. “She slammed the door in my face.”

“Sorry about that,” he sighed. “We have to invite her to a family dinner to rectify this.”

“When?” Brooke hadn’t hosted a party in years, and never for an angry mother-in-law. Matthew’s parents were very nice and loving people who passed away too soon.

“Tomorrow night,” he shrugged as if that were no problem.

“Yeah, no problem,” Brooke said sarcastically. “I don’t even know what your mother likes and you know she’ll be scrutinizing every move we make, every detail we share.”

“You’ve said you’ve done this before,” Jake shrugged. “Mrs. Hurligan will help you. I’ll tell my mother and we’ll be set.” Standing, Jake left her to deal with the details. Brooke had mentioned she had experience with marriage before, so that was her mistake.

Luckily, Mrs. Hurligan was excited about the idea and helped Brooke plan the whole event. From the tableware to the main dish, Mrs. Hurligan had been with the family long enough to know their tastes.

“Mrs. Parker has a sharp bite,” Mrs. Hurligan was telling Brooke as they prepared dinner, “but once you get past her bitterness, she loves her family and Jake really upset her when he didn’t get her blessing.”

Maybe he didn’t have a choice? Brooke didn’t know enough about Jake’s mother, or even Jake, to know why mother and son didn’t get along. Brooke sided with Jake because she had lied to her own mother, fearing the stress would harm her even more than the knowledge that her daughter had given up herself in order to put her in a nice home.

Showering and putting on her best dress, Brooke only applied enough makeup to accentuate her features. She didn’t want his strict mother thinking she was a whore. MJ sat on her bed so that he wouldn’t destroy his new clothes before meeting Jake’s mother.

Officially, she was his step-grandmother, but Brooke was pretty sure Jake’s mother was not interested in having a relationship with a grandson not from her own son. Trying to remember the details about how they met, Brooke still didn’t have an answer for why they didn’t sleep in the same room.

At 6:30 p.m. Brooke and Mrs. Hurligan made the last preparations and then Mrs. Hurligan announced she was leaving.

“I don’t want to get in the way of family,” she explained and Brooke’s only friendly member of the house left her to deal with a scenario she didn’t anticipate.

Jake came down from his room at the top of the steps dressed in dark pants and a sweater vest over a tie and button-down, white, long-sleeved shirt. Sitting at the table, MJ played with his silverware as they waited.

They looked like the perfect family unit.

Jake’s mother tapped on the French doors and Brooke glared at Jake. Realizing she wanted him to answer, Jake greeted his mother. Still furious, his mother presented a bottle of wine to her son and waited to be greeted. It was going to be a long night, Brooke thought, readying for the impact of her decisions.

Lying to his mother should be a lot easier than lying to her own. Irresponsible. That’s what she was. Looking for security she put her family in the middle of a family feud.

Brooke didn’t even know the man and here she was pretending to be his dutiful wife. Maybe she was a whore. Not for sex, but for selling out herself, her family. Ashamed, she wanted to run, but the damage was done. If she left, she’d have nothing. Better preparation is what she needed. The next move would have to be thought out more carefully.

Where do I start?

Brooke sighed. One year. If she could hold out till then she would be better prepared to make her next move. The next time she would think it through. Until then, she would do her best to be the wife his mother wanted.

“Mother, I would like to introduce my wife, Brooke,” Jake said and Brooke contained the desire to cringe. Jake had practiced his introduction because it sounded sincere.

Carefully stepping toward her mother-in-law, Brooke held out her hand and his mother just glared at her. Finally, she gingerly shook Brooke’s fingers.

“This is her son MJ,” Jake said and upon hearing his name MJ was fascinated and stood to greet the woman.

“I’m MJ,” he announced and Jake’s mother softened, but she didn’t say anything.

“Let’s sit!” Jake proclaimed and he pulled out a chair for his mother and MJ sat back in his chair. Brooke went to the kitchen and Jake followed.

“Grab the salad bowls,” Brooke commanded as she grabbed the bowl of salad. Meeting his eyes, Brooke showed that she was resolute and dinner would go as well as it could.

Appreciation? Is that what she saw in his eyes? Relief? Why did a successful, good looking grown man need a woman to take care of his personal life?

Nodding, they headed out to the dinner table. Sitting properly, Jake’s mother was trying to set an example for MJ.

Placing the salad on the table and a bowl at each setting, Brooke served the salad while Jake poured the wine. They had already discussed the seating plan and Brooke gratefully sat next to her son and across from an empty chair. Jake sat next to his mother. The questions began immediately.

“How did you meet?” she asked and waited for any discrepancy or false material in their story. Jake started the tale he had made up but his mother wanted to hear it from Brooke.

Every word memorized, Brooke related how they met at a bar and they felt a connection and decided they couldn’t wait and just got married. Glaring the whole time, Brooke knew his mother was waiting to rip them both apart.

Clearing the salad, Brooke brought out the roast beef and vegetables and they ate in silence. Brooke thought things were going well and they only had dessert left. Pulling the tray of pudding from the refrigerator that Mrs. Hurligan prepared, Brooke served dessert.

“So you’ve been married before,” his mother taunted, looking at MJ happily eating his pudding. Brooke had no desire to bring up Matthew or her son with her new mother-in-law.

“Yes,” she said, trying to sound cheerful.

“What happened, divorce, he left you?” Brooke looked over at MJ, who was still eating his pudding and not listening to the adult talk.

“I guess it was convenient, finding a father for your son,” his mother said and her words inflicted pain in Brooke. She did not sign up for this.

Glaring at the angry, bitter old woman, Brooke stood.

“MJ, go to your room and play,” she commanded.

“I’m not finished with my pudding,” he whined.

“You can have more later, just go to your room,” she commanded while glaring at Jake’s mother. MJ quickly left because more pudding later was better than finishing what he had. “Close your door,” Brooke called and when she heard the door slam, Brooke unleashed her fury.

“How dare you,” Brooke growled. His mother was right. Brooke had nothing else. It was true; she had found a new father for her son. She had married for security. It was none of his mother’s business and she had no right whatsoever to discuss such complex issues with MJ in the room.

“Don’t you ever talk like that in front of my son again.”

Jake’s mother smirked and patted imaginary food from her mouth with her crisp white linen napkin.

“I didn’t hear you deny it,” his mother asserted as she stood to face Brooke. She was old, but she was not feeble.

“Whatever happens between us is none of your business,” Brooke threatened his mother in a low angry voice.

“I’m just looking after my son,” his mother said calmly. From the corner of her eye, Brooke saw Jake cringe, but he didn’t dare get in the middle of their battle.

“So am I, and I don’t appreciate you meddling in our affairs,” Brooke replied meeting his mother’s gaze and never giving in to the woman.

“I have a right to know my son’s new wife,” she disagreed with Brooke. “It’s my job to make sure he doesn’t make mistakes.”

“It’s your job to make sure your son is healthy, to make sure he’s happy,” Brooke corrected her. “His mistakes are his own. You should support your son.”

“Don’t tell me how I should treat my son,” his mother threatened Brooke, but Brooke wasn’t backing down.

“Don’t insult me, don’t treat my son like baggage and never, ever bring up my husband Matthew ever again,” Brooke stated in a very low angry voice and turned, knocked over her chair and made it to her room before the hot flood of tears spilled down her cheek. Covering her mouth, she muffled a scream. Waiting an hour, Brooke opened the door and peeked out. Only Jake remained at the table casually drinking the wine.

Brooke checked in on MJ and quickly got him ready for bed. Promising him two desserts the next time, Brooke hated herself for all the promises broken. She couldn’t resolve everything by breaking promises and promising even more when it didn’t work out. Turning off the light, she returned to her own room and shut the door. Resting on her bed, Brooke was very angry with herself for how she treated Jake’s mother, but she would not allow the woman to insult her family no matter what was in their agreement.

There was a clause stating Jake could take it all away if things went awry in the first year, but Brooke would fight it if she had to. Jake did not prepare her for his mother. He had brought her into a war he didn’t want to fight for himself.

A sliver of light cut into the darkness as the door was opened a crack. Jake’s silhouette waited for her to acknowledge him.

“Don’t you dare say anything,” Brooke whispered angrily. “You did not prepare me for this. I will not allow my family to be insulted. I don’t care if she was right. I have never been so insulted in my entire life. Don’t you dare talk to me about this.”

For a moment, Jake stood at the door but he didn’t say anything. Brooke turned over and Jake closed the door leaving her in the darkness. Exhausted, Brooke fell asleep on the bed in her dress.

Waking, she was greeted by the happy family in the photo. Turning away, Brooke got ready for her day. Maybe Jake had gone back to the city. Maybe he was calling his lawyer to dissolve their agreement. Nothing would change if she stayed in bed.

Brooke didn't see Jake or his car as she took MJ to the park. His mother most likely wouldn't be talking to Brooke again.

How could she have handled it differently?

Guilt and anger mingled in an emotion Brooke couldn't decipher. Sitting at the park, Brooke called Melinda and tried not to cry as she told her the story of the failed family dinner.

"I'm so sorry," Melinda said, trying to comfort her friend. *"Do you want me to call Jake and see where he's at?"*

Brooke wiped her tears and sniffled.

"No, I have to handle this," Brooke explained. "I should have thought about this more carefully."

"Let me know what happens," Melinda insisted before they said good-bye.

Tugging MJ's wagon while he napped, Brooke tried to think about what she could do to correct the situation. Either Jake was going to be angry, they were going to work it out or he was just going to call his lawyer to deal with his mistake.

Arriving at the house, Jake's sports car was parked in front, and Brooke took a deep breath before pulling the wagon up to the kitchen door.

"Wake up," she urged MJ and he yawned, got up with renewed energy and ran to the backyard. Brooke held onto the door handle and finally got the nerve to turn it and go inside.

Sitting at the island drinking coffee, Jake waited for her alone. Meeting his gaze, Brooke stood and waited for some sort of direction.

"Have some coffee," he offered. Brooke nodded and grabbed a mug on the counter, poured coffee and sat across from Jake. Looking more relaxed than she had anticipated, Jake just stared and drank his coffee.

Brooke sipped the black brew and didn't feel the need to add creamer. Bitter was better.

"You know," he finally said as if they were in a business meeting, "one of the stipulations of our agreement was that you would get along with my mother. Be the bridge between us."

Brooke didn't respond.

"You upset her greatly and now she's upset with me," he continued. "You didn't have the right to disrespect her like that."

Brooke's mouth flew open in indignation, but Jake held out his hand for her to remain quiet.

"I didn't prepare you for this," he said. "I knew how my mother would react. If I wanted someone who would back down I would not have chosen you," he said.

This threw Brooke.

Standing and pushing back her chair, Brooke glared at Jake.

That was all she did.

"I'm not saying I appreciate it and want this to be a regular thing," he added. "You need to repair this."

"You want me to repair your relationship with your mother?" Brooke finally replied rhetorically.

"No," he clarified. "You have to repair your relationship with my mother."

"That doesn't make any sense," she said in disbelief.

Jake didn't respond and MJ came in asking for dinner.

"In a minute, honey," she said, still holding Jake's stare. Breaking eye contact, Jake stood and left without acknowledging MJ.

After making dinner for the two of them, Brooke thought about Jake's suggestion and was still thinking about it when she got into bed.

What relationship with his mother? she wondered.

Jake was the one who couldn't face his mother.

Slamming her fist into her soft bed, Brooke groaned and turned away from the photo.

What am I doing here? This was not in her plan. She just wanted a good education and security for her son and mother.

Brooke was willing to give of herself, but she didn't understand the parameters of the compromise into which she had entered.

On one level she was supposed to play the dutiful wife, but on the other she was supposed to confront Jake's mother and shield him from her anger, all while he was off with his girlfriend in the city.

This is what she signed on for the sake of her family.

Trying to figure out what she should do to mend the situation, Brooke fell asleep staring at the happy family photo. Being a dutiful wife and mother was not a job for the woman in the photo; it was love.

Reminding herself that at one time she had been loved and respected, Brooke had peaceful dreams.

The next morning, Brooke visited her mother and didn't mention the argument with Jake's mother. Looking better than ever, her mother talked animatedly with MJ who told her all about his new home and the old lady who lived out back.

"How do you like your new father," her mother asked and Brooke cringed. Jake hadn't been interested in MJ enough for that to be an issue.

Looking confused, MJ turned to Brooke.

"Jake's away a lot," Brooke explained. "He doesn't call him that."

"When will I meet this Jake?" her mother asked concerned.

“Soon,” Brooke promised, but wasn’t sure she could deliver.

“I look forward to it,” she said and a caretaker announced visiting hours were up. Brooke kissed her mother and promised to return the next weekend.

Happy her mother was looking better, Brooke wondered if her mother was strong enough to learn the truth about her arrangement with Jake.

It stung when her mother asked if MJ liked his new father. Brooke never considered that would be a possibility. Jake was never around so MJ didn’t really ask about the man she had married. When he did talk about Jake, he called him by name. Now that her mother asked him about his new father, MJ was sure to ask her why he didn’t call him dad and she didn’t want to explain he already had a dad.

Tears threatened to blur her vision, so she wiped them away as they drove up to the house.

Joining MJ in the backyard, Brooke sat on the lounge. Startled when the French doors opened, Brooke straightened and was very tense expecting the worst. Jake’s mother emerged. She was just as startled as Brooke and clutching something to her chest. Brooke relaxed and Jake’s mother quickly headed up the path to her house.

The sun started its slow dip to the horizon and Brooke made dinner and got MJ to bed. Brooke noticed something different in her room but didn’t see anything out of place.

Jake returned and Brooke heard him walk up the stairs and shut his door.

Brooke went to sleep feeling as if something was out of place.

The next morning, Brooke was glad when Mrs. Hurligan offered to take MJ to the park. She needed some time to figure out how she was going to work out a truce with Jake’s mother.

Taking a nap, Brooke suddenly realized what was different. Her happy family photo was not on her nightstand. Frantically searching around the nightstand and her bed, Brooke couldn’t find the photo.

Brooke searched MJ's room, the living and dining rooms and kitchen. The photo was not in the house unless it was in Jake's room or at the end of the hallway.

Returning to her room, Brooke sat at the edge of her bed. There was a new frame on her dresser. It was a photo of Jake.

Jake's mother.

Brooke had seen her leaving the house with something. Frozen, Brooke realized she was about to detonate a nuclear explosion on her mother-in-law.

What proof do I have?

She couldn't just go up to his mother and demand something from her based on a theory. Weren't things bad enough already between them? She was supposed to mend, not bend things more out of control.

"I'm just going to ask her," she said out loud.

Marching up the path to her mother-in-law's house, Brooke banged on the door.

"What do you want?" his mother called impatiently through the door.

"I have to ask you a question," Brooke said, trying not to sound like she felt.

"Ask," she said loudly through the door.

"I want to talk to you in person," Brooke said, trying to coax the old lady into opening the door.

There was nothing, then the door handle turned and the door was opened. Brooke saw his mother go to her living room and Brooke let herself in and followed.

Sitting on her white couch, Jake's mother waited for Brooke to confront her. Pictures of Jake and his mother and a gentleman who was most likely Mr. Parker were all over the walls and in frames on tables and shelves.

The mother-in-law's house was more updated than the main house, but it looked as if an elderly couple lived there and Brooke tried to think of her mother-in-law like her mother or Mrs. Hurligan. Compassionate.

Sitting calmly, Brooke thought about her question before asking the woman directly.

"I had a photo of my husband and child on my nightstand and it's missing," Brooke said calmly and slowly. "It's missing. I was wondering if you know what happened to it?"

Jake's mother shrugged.

"I don't know anything about your photo," she said.

"I noticed there's a photo of Jake on the dresser that I didn't put there," Brooke said. "Do you know anything about that?"

"I might have put that there," she confessed without remorse.

Brooke was seething.

"Do you happen to know who took my photo?" she asked, getting impatient.

"I don't know who took your photo," she said.

In the blink of an eye, Jake's mother fired the first shot.

"I don't understand why you would have a photo of another man on your nightstand," she smirked. "There should only be a picture of your husband and child."

Brooke absorbed the impact.

"That's none of your business," she corrected the old woman. "I have my reasons."

"I also don't understand why you're sleeping downstairs when your husband is upstairs," his mother shot again.

"I don't have to explain our living arrangement to you," Brooke said deflecting.

Jake's mother stood.

"It's my duty to protect my son," she scolded Brooke. "I don't like what I see."

"Where is the photo, Mrs. Parker?" Brooke stood and pleaded. She didn't want to get into another fight with Jake's mother, but she could tell the woman was trying to make a point. "Just give me the photo and we'll never have to speak to one another again."

"You're just using my son," Jake's mother snapped.

"That's it," Brooke warned her. "I'm going to look for it myself."

Filled with rage and fury she had never felt before, Brooke started looking around the living room and in drawers while Jake's mother threatened her.

"You get out of my house or I'll call the cops," she asserted.

"Good," Brooke said, "then they can help me find the photo." Knocking over frames and looking under the couch, Brooke was exhausted but she wasn't leaving without her picture.

"I don't want to tear this place apart but I will," Brooke warned. Jake's mother did not reach for the phone. Brooke had called her bluff.

"Fine," Brooke said. Grabbing a frame from the wall, Brooke opened the front door and threw it out onto the grass. Jake's mother was horrified. Brooke was horrified. Her anger stretched far beyond the photograph. The old woman was trying to steal a memory, make her forget. It was all Brooke had left and she wasn't leaving without it.

Brooke grabbed two more off a table and tossed them out the door. More frames from the wall and shelves.

"How dare you," she yelled. "That's our wedding photo!"

Brooke took it outside and smashed it on the grass and a crack split down the couple.

Running outside, Jake's mother grabbed the large framed photo of her wedding photo and screamed at Brooke.

“This is our wedding photo,” she yelled, turning red. Part of Brooke was concerned the old woman was going to have a stroke, but Brooke was too angry to back off.

“This is a photo of my husband,” she cried. “He’s dead now, this is all I have left.”

“Brooke!” Jake yelled as he stood frozen in the middle of the backyard.

“Don’t you interrupt, Jake,” she pointed at him. “This is between your mother and me. You wanted me to fix this, I’m going to fix this.”

“How dare you come into my home and desecrate my husband’s memory,” his mother sputtered. “You are a cold and horrible person.”

“No, I’m not the cold and horrible person,” Brooke corrected the old woman angrily. Throat tight, Brooke fought for each word. “You took a photo of my family. You tried to take away my memory. You took a photo of my dead husband,” she growled. Holding back tears, Brooke was not finished scolding the old woman.

“That was one of the happiest moments in my life before a stupid accident took him away at the age of 32,” Brooke said, grasping for words and air. “That picture was before he left me, my son and our home. Am I using your son? You bet your ass I am. You scare the hell out of him. He had to go behind your back because you’re such an uncaring, unsupportive, bitter woman.”

Brooke couldn’t be there anymore. Hot fury and anger blurred her vision but she made her way down the pathway and then down the driveway to the sidewalk. Picking up speed, Brooke just ran and ran trying to escape, hoping to run so fast she could leave everything behind.

Exhausted, Brooke finally collapsed on a bus bench. Gasping, she sat on the bench angry with herself, angry with Matthew for not being more careful, angry with Jake’s mother for being so overbearing and angry she didn’t realize her actions would lead her to where she was.

It seemed like the only option, marrying for security. Just one job, one rich uncle and she wouldn’t be in the middle of a family feud she didn’t understand. This wasn’t her family.

Her family was at home right now wondering why his mother wasn’t there to make him dinner.

Brooke sighed. She had to go home.

Walking back, Brooke got lost but she was able to find her way to the street and it was dark when she walked up the driveway like a bad dog ready to take his punishment.

Peeking in the kitchen window, Brooke saw that Mrs. Hurligan was sitting with MJ having dinner.

Brooke entered the kitchen and MJ hopped off his chair to greet her. Hugging him, Brooke told him to finish his dinner. Staring out the kitchen window, Brooke saw Jake coming from his mother's house with his head down and hands in his pocket. Turning quickly, she gave MJ two desserts and waited for what seemed like enough time for Jake to go to his room.

If he were in the living room, it would be harder for her to walk to her room. Done with his desserts, Brooke took MJ in her arms and thanked Mrs. Hurligan for taking care of her son. Walking slowly through the door, Brooke didn't see Jake so she put MJ to bed and read him two stories.

Sitting next to his bed, Brooke wondered what to do. Did she just go to bed? Did she wait to talk to Jake? Did she pack her bags and get out of the situation before things escalated?

Brooke turned off MJ's light and went to her room and sat on the bed. Exhausted, she rolled onto the bed and turned toward the nightstand. Sitting up, she saw that her photo had been returned. Sobbing uncontrollably, Brooke collapsed and fell asleep facing the happy family.

Morning came and she placed her hand on the photo and said a prayer. Taking a shower and dressing, Brooke poured cereal for MJ and they ate their food in silence. Mrs. Hurligan arrived and Brooke was surprised. It was her day off.

Suddenly tense, Brooke waited for the next sign this morning would be different than the others since she arrived.

"Mrs. Parker wanted me to take MJ to the toy store," Mrs. Hurligan explained. Meeting her eyes, Brooke saw that she was trying to tell her that Jake's mother wanted to talk to her alone.

"Would you like that, MJ?" she asked and MJ nodded.

“Go get dressed,” Brooke said cheerfully and Mrs. Hurligan sat down.

Brooke covered her mouth with her hands and fretted.

“You must have made an impression on her,” Mrs. Hurligan confided in her.

“I believe I did,” Brooke agreed.

“You have to stand your ground,” Mrs. Hurligan continued as she looked for something in her purse. “She is strong-willed but she is loving.”

Loving?

MJ raced back into the room, and after helping him put on his shoes, Mrs. Hurligan wished her luck as they left.

“I love you,” Brooke called after them and sighed. Sitting at the island, she wondered if she was supposed to go see her mother-in-law or wait for her to arrive.

Brooke decided to sit and wait.

She didn't have to wait long. The door opened and Brooke started to panic.

“Brooke,” Jake's voice said softly. “My mother wants to see you at the house.”

Without saying good-bye, Jake left. Waiting a few minutes, Brooke stood and walked slowly through the house, out the French doors and up the path.

There were no frames on the ground and the glass had been picked up as if there was never a crazy psychotic breakdown.

Before Brooke got to the door, it opened. When no one greeted her, Brooke slowly pushed it open and saw Jake's mother sitting on her couch. There was a formal tea set up on the coffee table.

Was she expecting me? Brooke wondered. The frames, cracks and all were put back in their place, the wedding photo back on the wall.

Standing in the foyer, Brooke waited to be invited into the living room.

Brooke's mother-in-law looked up and smiled. Brooke was puzzled.

"Come in, dear," she motioned and patted on the couch. Brooke hesitated for a moment and looked to see if there was anyone else with them. They were alone.

Brooke locked eyes with the woman and sat down carefully.

"Would you like tea?" she asked politely. Brooke nodded.

Jake's mother poured two cups of tea.

"Sugar or milk?" she asked and Brooke shook her head. She wanted her tea straight.

Handing a beautiful china teacup and saucer to Brooke, Jake's mother then picked up her cup and sipped. Brooke imitated her.

"My son and I have had a talk," she told Brooke as if they were just two in-laws having tea and discussing family. "I love my son very much, maybe too much. I've been nagging him for years to settle down and get a family. He just wants to hang out with Jenny, but she's never going to give him what he needs. He thinks she will. He thinks he's satisfied, but he's not. I just wanted him to be happy."

Brooke hung her head in shame. People did stupid things for love, for the happiness of everyone in their family.

"I went along with it, for the sake of my family," Brooke confessed. "I never meant to hurt you, I just didn't think this through."

Brooke could hear Jake's mother sip her tea.

"I think you're the best thing that could have happened to my son," his mother said and Brooke stared at her in disbelief.

"If it weren't for you, for trying to appease me, he would have never gotten married," his mother explained. "I think once he sees you and your son, once he gets to know you he'll realize what

he's missing. I'm not saying he'll decide to make it a real marriage, I mean he'll realize he's wasting his life."

Jake's mother was a very rational woman who understood her son better than he understood himself. She went about it in the worst way possible, but Brooke understood. Brooke was a pawn in their game and Jake thought his opponent was an idiot.

Brooke sighed and blinked away fresh tears.

"I can't imagine what you've been through, Brooke," she said, caressing Brooke's arm like her mother always did when she needed comfort. "I see why you accepted his proposal. I just want you to know I'm sorry and I won't interfere anymore. You're my son's wife. Until that changes, I have to respect your relationship."

Her mother-in-law started to cry and Brooke could no longer hold back her tears.

"I have a grandson, even if it's only temporary and it's not real. I have a child to call a grandchild and I really want to beg your forgiveness so that I can embrace him in my life," she sobbed with pleading eyes.

Shaking uncontrollably, Brooke stood, sat next to Jake's mother and hugged the woman who no longer looked like a bitter old lady. She was bitter, but it was disappointment that shaped her, not arbitrary hatred.

When they both stopped shaking, they each wiped their tears and laughed.

"I would love nothing more than for my son to have another grandmother again," Brooke confided, giving the woman absolution.

With their feud mended, Jake's mother showed her the pictures and told her all about Jake and his father and showed her around the home that had been her mother-in-law's home.

Jake had inherited the front house when his father passed away, and now his mother stepped back so that her son could raise his family in the main house. Jake preferred to stay in the city.

Parting, Brooke hugged Jake's mother and invited her to dinner to spend more time with MJ.

Brooke floated back to the house. Very hungry and exhausted, Brooke headed to the kitchen and ate leftovers from a plastic container. Jake walked in and Brooke glared at the man who looked like a boy who had been scolded by his mother. Hands in his pockets, he asked Brooke how it went with his mother.

Angry at the emotions and situation he was unable to correct himself, Brooke threw the container in the sink and grabbed a dishtowel.

Whipping it at Jake's chest, she saw the startled look as he stepped back.

"How dare you do that to your poor mother," she snapped. "She just wants to make sure you're happy and you do this to her? I mended my relationship with your mother, have you mended yours?"

Brooke threw the dishtowel at him and left him there to think about what he had put his mother through.

Waiting for MJ to come home, Brooke thought about the actions she was taking that were shaping her relationship with her son. Would she know when she was being overbearing? What was the line between love and being overprotective as a parent?

MJ came home excited by his new toys.

"Go show your grandma, the lady in the house out back," she suggested and MJ ran out the door.

As soon as she knew her own mother was stronger, Brooke would explain her arrangement. Until Jake said otherwise, Brooke wasn't going anywhere. This was home for MJ and Brooke couldn't take that away from him until she was sure she could find a more secure arrangement.

Until then, she was in this marriage for better or worse.

Chapter 5

Getting ready for their interview at the school, Brooke walked nervously up the steps to the office with MJ holding her hand excited to be back.

How was a kid who loved school slow?

Clearing her throat, Brooke announced herself and they sat in plastic chairs. She watched as the second hand swung boldly without hesitation around the clock face, and time passed without care.

A young, professional looking woman greeted them cheerfully. Her hair was pulled back in a bun and her skirt suit fit her body like it was sewn on, and all Brooke could think was, *“Please don’t think my son is slow.”*

Following her into her office, the woman invited them to sit and after asking all the preliminary questions, she said she was going to test MJ for his grade level and Brooke waited on the plastic chair again watching time dutifully move on.

An hour later, MJ emerged and wanted to go outside and play. Brooke looked to Mrs. Harlan who showed MJ to the playground where an attendant was watching other kids. Running out to the playground, MJ quickly made friends.

Mrs. Harlan invited Brooke back to her office where she went over the results.

“Your son has a learning disability,” she said nonchalantly. Looking at Brooke she gauged her response.

“That’s what his other teacher told me,” Brooke admitted.

“Was he ever tested?” she asked.

“Yes,” Brooke said. “I wanted another opinion.”

She couldn’t look at Mrs. Harlan. The specialist and his teacher had been right. It was Brooke who was slow to realize this. She just didn’t want this to stigmatize her son.

“I believe your son has a form of dyslexia,” she explained. “Did they tell you that?”

“Never,” she shrugged, remembering they didn’t have a clear diagnosis. “They just wanted to put him in special classes.”

“He will need special classes,” the woman agreed without emotion and Brooke wondered what that would mean for her son.

“I don’t know much about dyslexia,” she said, quietly realizing she should clarify his condition or whatever it was. “Something about reading backwards?”

“We’ll have to do more testing. It’s more complex than that. There are many different forms,” she said, looking over his results.

“I could see why they didn’t catch it,” she said.

“What do you advise?” Brooke asked, needing solutions. Mrs. Harlan was very nice and didn’t demean her son’s special condition.

“We just put him with special classes, maybe look into tutors,” she advised.

“Won’t that make him a target for other kids?” she fretted. It was forefront in her concerns for her son.

“We don’t tolerate that here,” she explained. “He’ll be in a mix of classes.” Mrs. Harlan saw Brooke’s concern and put down her papers.

“Mrs. Parker, your son is healthy and happy, he just needs extra help and we want to make sure he gets that,” she said in a very reassuring manner.

Meeting her gaze, Brooke nodded.

“What do we need to do?” she asked, ready to embrace the issue and find a solution. It was what it was.

“We’ll make an appointment with a specialist and he’ll be ready for the school year,” she said simply.

“Sounds good to me,” Brooke agreed and after filling out paperwork, Brooke took her son home in his wagon.

Looking into the eyes he inherited from his father, Brooke knew no matter what that MJ would persevere. She would not burden him with her issues. Matthew was extremely intelligent and outgoing. There was nothing different about MJ. He just needed a little extra help.

Confiding in her mother, Brooke explained that MJ was going to get the best education possible.

“There’s nothing wrong with him,” her mother consoled while rubbing her arm. “He’s just as smart as his daddy.”

“I should have listened to the specialists, his teacher,” she fretted. “I shouldn’t have gotten so defensive.”

“You’re doing the right thing now,” her mother told her. “Don’t look back, Brooke, it doesn’t solve anything. Learn from your mistakes and move on. It’s a long road.”

“Thanks, mom,” she said and changed the subject. “How are you doing here?”

“They’re all very good to me,” her mother beamed and Brooke listened as her mother talked about how wonderful her new home was.

Hours later, Brooke said she would be back in a week then went home to make dinner for her son.

Jake’s mother was in the kitchen when Brooke arrived, helping Mrs. Hurligan get dinner ready. Taking off her jacket and hanging up her purse, Brooke hugged her animated son and he told her all about his day.

Dinner was put on the island and they bowed their heads, said grace and ate in silence. When they were done, the older women cleaned up while Brooke got MJ ready for bed.

Jake’s mother watched as Brooke walked her son through the routine and pulled out a book and read him his story.

Waiting outside, Jake's mother watched as Brooke turned off the light and closed the door just enough.

Following her mother-in-law to the living room, they sat and talked about MJ's special education needs.

"That school is one of the best in the state," Jake's mother beamed. "If he needs special tutors we can always find that."

Brooke thanked MJ's new grandmother.

"I have a request," she said, holding Brooke's hands. "I want to babysit for you. I want to be there for him if you ever need to get out and do something for yourself."

"I didn't want to burden you," Brooke confided.

"It wouldn't be a burden," she insisted. "It may be my only opportunity to spoil a grandkid."

Brooke laughed.

"I don't think you know what you're asking," she joked. They hugged and agreed to make plans.

Exhausted, Brooke said "good-night" to her mother-in-law and headed to bed.

A car pulled up and the motor was shut off. Recognizing Jake's sports car, Brooke knew he was back, but she didn't know for how long. Jake only stayed for two days and she barely saw him. They didn't speak and she didn't start a conversation.

Two months passed quickly as Brooke prepared MJ for his new school and she only saw Jake in passing. They did not speak to one another and he ate alone most nights or worked in his room. Jake went for a run every day he was at home.

Exhausted, Brooke was glad when Jake's mother took MJ for a few hours while Brooke went shopping or got a haircut. It was good to feel free for just a few hours, but she missed her family and was grateful to come home.

School started and Brooke wished her son luck and he raced off to be with the other kids. In a month, Brooke noticed a difference in MJ's homework and test results. The special classes were helping MJ. The most important thing was that he loved learning and being with all his friends at school.

Brooke was overjoyed.

The only thing that knocked her back was when Jake came into the kitchen one afternoon after a run. Jake's mother and Mrs. Hurligan were getting dinner ready and MJ was excited about playing baseball at school. Jake's mother had bought him a new glove, bat and ball, and all he wanted to do was play in the backyard.

Jake came in and MJ ran up to him as Brooke was coming in from the dining room and both Jake and her stared at each other when MJ requested for Jake to play catch with him.

"Please, daddy," he begged tugging at Jake. Brooke's mother-in-law was overjoyed and contained her excitement by covering her mouth with her hands. She had waited a lifetime for her son to become a father. The only thing was that Jake never really interacted with MJ and Brooke didn't know how to explain to MJ that Jake really wasn't used to being around kids.

When she heard MJ call Jake "daddy," Brooke gasped. Jake wasn't expecting it either. A part of Brooke broke because Jake was not MJ's daddy; his father had passed away without the blessing of getting to know his son. Now another man would someday fill that role and that angered Brooke. This was another moment when she realized what she wanted wasn't as important as what her son wanted, so she didn't say anything and hoped Jake just let it pass.

"Jake's very busy," Brooke interjected. Jake was relieved and MJ was disappointed.

Brooke motioned for Jake to follow her into the living room. Sitting on the couch, she waited and he stood in front of her with his hands on his hips, his shirt soaked in sweat.

"Would you mind just giving him five minutes," she requested. "Five minutes would mean everything to him."

Jake didn't respond. He just headed upstairs and Brooke sighed.

In the kitchen, MJ was helping with the rolls and Brooke didn't want to say anything. Putting the food on the island, Brooke was about to put food on plates when Jake came in, fresh from his shower with clean sweats, and told MJ to get his glove and ball.

Leaving the women speechless, Jake left and MJ grabbed his glove and ball and left screaming on his way out to the backyard.

The women didn't say anything. They just put the food on the table and watched through the French doors as the boys played catch for almost an hour.

It was a moment like this that Brooke realized her decision may have been misguided and not well thought out, but it was worth it to see her son happy. She didn't know how long it would last, but it gave her the spiritual strength to make wiser decisions.

Jake's mother called them in and they sat to dinner, said grace and ate like a family.

Offering to put MJ to bed, Jake's mother walked MJ through his routine and Brooke helped Mrs. Hurligan clean up while Jake headed to his room.

When all was quiet, Brooke went to the kitchen to get a glass of water and headed down the hallway to her room. Standing at the foot of the stairs to Jake's room, Brooke really wanted to thank the man who hid up in his room. A light came from under his door and she knew he was awake.

Placing one foot on the first step, Brooke got the courage to make it to the top of the steps. Knocking, she heard Jake invite her in. Opening the door slowly, Brooke saw Jake sitting on top of his comforter in his sweatpants, his bare tan chest rising up and down. Papers were all over his bed and he was wearing reading glasses.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked, taking off his glasses. Brooke felt an old desire start to rise deep within her and she took a step forward into the room and closed the door. Jake sat up as Brooke presented the glass of water.

"I was just getting a glass of water when I saw your light on," she said. Feeling bold, Brooke sat on the end of his bed. Jake looked confused but didn't send her away.

“I wanted to thank you for what you did for my son today,” Brooke said, holding his gaze.

“I haven’t played ball in a while,” he shrugged. “It was fun tossing the ball.”

Brooke stood and walked closer and Jake moved further into his bed. Sitting next to his chest, Brooke didn’t know what she was doing but she was drawn to the man. He had done something so wonderful for her and she had a desire to show her appreciation.

Jake took the water from Brooke’s hand and carefully placed it on his nightstand breaking eye contact for only a moment.

The warmth in Brooke’s stomach spread throughout her body and she placed her palm gently on Jake’s chest. Jake had a very strong chest. Sliding her hand further down over his sweatpants, Brooke felt his member get hard and Jake gasped.

“You don’t have to,” Jake whispered, but Brooke could see he wanted to be thanked. If she stopped to think what she was doing, she would be ashamed. There was something about being close to the man that reminded her how long it had been since she had been this intimate, and she just needed to feel human contact again.

“I can go if you want,” she whispered. Jake didn’t say anything. Flipping off the switch to his light, he carefully untied the string on his sweatpants and let Brooke decide how to thank him.

Turning to pull something from his nightstand, Jake placed a condom in Brooke’s hand. Holding the square flat packaging, Brooke knew it was up to her and she was past the point of no return.

An hour later, trying to stifle their moans of ecstasy, Brooke and Jake parted, breathing heavy in the darkness. Brooke returned to her senses and, grabbing her nightgown and underwear, she rolled off the bed. Grabbing her robe from the floor and wrapping it around herself, Brooke was out of the room without a good-bye.

In her own room, behind her own door, Brooke sat on her bed, nude beneath her robe, trying to catch her breath.

In all her life, she had never propositioned a man. The only man she had slept with was Matthew. It had been so long since she had made love to Matthew, and Brooke had been ignited by such a small act of kindness.

This was not in the agreement. Jake had a girlfriend and Brooke was his wife in name only.

Pure pleasure. That's all Brooke had felt. For the time they were together, she didn't think about anything else. Brooke was grateful Jake had turned out the light.

Desire had overtaken her and three years without human contact made her voracious. But now she only felt regret.

Matthew was the love of her life. The only man she ever wanted to make love to. This was a betrayal. Brooke could not get that out of her mind.

Another thought was even worse.

I will never make love to Matthew again.

For a moment, when Jake was inside, holding her close, his breath heavy on her neck, for a moment, she had imagined it was Matthew and she held on tightly. When they were through, she didn't want to be reminded that it wasn't Matthew. She needed to hold that memory. She was beginning to lose that memory. It was unbearable.

Shaking, Brooke took a long hot shower, and as she climbed into bed, she made sure she didn't face the happy family photo.

The guilt would kill her.

Chapter 6

As Jake lay in bed, he was surprised Brooke had come to his room to “thank him.” Taking control, Brooke had brought him to a level of pleasure he didn’t think she was capable of achieving. Somewhat pretty, nowhere near ravishing, there was nothing that was really sensual about her. She wasn’t Jenny, who was sexy just breathing.

Leaving him breathless, Brooke just got up and left. Exhausted, Jake fell asleep thinking about the woman he had married.

Getting ready for another two-week stay in the city, Jake hoped to have a moment with Brooke before he left.

The commotion downstairs made Jake realize he probably wouldn’t have a moment alone with Brooke. He showered and got dressed for the ride back to the city.

As he stood in the hallway, Jake’s mother entered through the French doors and smiled at her son.

“I’m going to take MJ to school today,” she beamed and they both entered the kitchen. Jake was transfixed on Brooke as she poured cereal, packed a lunch and sang a song with her son. Not looking at Jake, she tightened her robe around her. After Brooke kissed and hugged her son, Jake followed his mother and MJ to the door. When they departed, he turned and watched as Brooke cleaned up the kitchen, and wiped down the table. He still couldn’t believe it was the same woman from last night.

Realizing Jake was staring, Brooke turned to head out of the kitchen.

“Anytime you want to thank me...” he said hoarsely. Brooke stopped and turned. Her cheeks were red from embarrassment and she couldn’t look Jake in the eyes.

“I’m sorry about that,” she apologized needlessly. “I’ve never done that before, not with a stranger.”

“Well, it was appreciated,” he said from across the room.

“I know you’re with someone else,” she explained. “That was very selfish of me. It won’t happen again.”

Brooke started to leave then stopped. Turning to Jake she took a deep breath and considered her thoughts before she spoke.

“Are you freaked out MJ called you daddy?” she asked. Jake was still thinking about her caress and she was worried about a million other things. “I never discussed it with him. I don’t want you to think I told him to. You just looked freaked out. I was freaked out for other reasons,” she explained, mumbling the last part to herself.

Jake had freaked out. He hadn’t thought about the possibility of being called daddy. Appeasing his mother had been the only thing on his mind when he entered the arrangement with Brooke. He had chosen a ready-made family and a woman who could buffer the hostility between him and his mother.

“We’ll talk when I get back,” he said. Brooke nodded, turned and left quickly. Jake stood in the kitchen alone.

Taking a deep breath, Jake turned and headed to his car. For the first time since he took over his parents’ house, Jake actually looked forward to returning.

Revvng his motor and screeching into a U-turn, Jake headed to his life in the city.

Alone in his condo, Jake thought about many things. Staring out over the city from his wall of windows, Jake rested his elbow on the armrest of his leather sofa and dangled a wine glass over the edge.

There were no pictures in Jake’s condo. Only carefully chosen art pieces he and Jenny had picked out while traveling the world. Jake had only paid for the pieces and he relied on Jenny and her artistic talent to select the perfect pieces.

Appreciating art, Jake didn’t admire it and he really didn’t find any pleasure in the wild gyrations and frenetic fancy even when Jenny explained the significance of the piece. Jake found pleasure in having Jenny lay in bed explaining why it was an important piece of art.

It had been a while since he had seen Jenny. Months before he entered the arrangement with Brooke, Jenny left with no indication as to when or if she'd return. Spite. That's what urged Jake to marry Brooke.

Jake never intended for the drama that erupted when he went back to the house. Horrified as Brooke threw all his mother's precious photos on the lawn, Jake realized he had underestimated his mother who saw right through his ruse. He had also underestimated Brooke.

Slapping the man in the bar, Brooke didn't take insult well. It was what attracted him to her, the fact she could stand up for herself even when she should step back.

Bringing the two forces together under one roof had been a misjudgment on his part, and he got paid lots of money to make the right choices.

Jake knew Brooke was a widow, but he had no idea the power such emotions could produce when that memory was threatened. Assuming enough time had passed for her to have sufficiently mourned, he thought she would be content putting up with his mother and her nagging and antics in order to provide for her son.

When he had returned the photo to her room, he placed it on her nightstand as his mother requested and sat looking at the people in the picture to see what had enraged the woman.

Cleaning up the glass, Jake had been on the verge of calling his lawyer to dissolve the arrangement when his mother sat him down to explain where she herself, and not Brooke, had crossed the line.

Jake never thought he'd see the day when his mother apologized for nagging someone to the point of hysteria. Had she known how Brooke had lost her husband, she confessed, she would never have disturbed her memory. Wanting only the best for her son, his mother thought Jake was being cheated out of love by a woman who only married him for security. Even though Brooke was only with him for security, his mother understood her intentions were not as cold and calculating as she had assumed.

There were three people in the photo, a man, a woman, and a baby. They were very happy and looking in the camera and smiling.

Standing in the yard, watching Brooke and his mother battling, he had been startled when she explained how she had lost everything. His mother's actions ignited an inferno of pent up pain and anguish.

The people in the photo knew no such pain. The woman in the photo was happy. She was content. The woman in the photo would have thought it unimaginable to propose sex to a new husband because he decided to play catch with her son.

The woman in the photo only knew of one father for her child. She did not know the pain of having their child call another man "daddy," especially when it wasn't in their arrangement.

Most of all, the happy woman in the photo didn't look like she had any complex thoughts that spun and spun in her head becoming tangled and incomprehensible. She had a husband she loved, a child born from that love and that was all that mattered.

Jake did not know that woman.

He barely knew the woman he had agreed to provide for while he lived his life free of all provincial responsibility.

Although he wanted nothing more than to explore more of what Brooke had to offer, Jake knew he had to be careful not to complicate the situation further.

It was only a matter of time before Jenny returned, and that was all the wonderful complication he could handle.

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In the office, Jake was too busy to think about anything except spreadsheets and projections. Weeks could go by before he realized he hadn't taken a day off.

Intent on figuring out his latest projections, Jake was distracted by something on his neck and shrugged it off, and stopped as if under a spell.

Jake recognized the feel of the delicate fingers tracing the back of his neck and he gave in to the familiar sensation.

In a red dress that fit her curvaceous body like a painted landscape on a winding mountain road, Jenny stood before him shimmering, the essence of foreign lands and exotic locales exuded from her like seductive perfume.

Hair like a fiery orange-red sunset framed her delicate face, and accentuated her bright blue eyes. Gripping the armrests of his chair, Jenny leaned in and Jake was transfixed by her eyes that reminded him of the calm blue waters of some white sandy beach where they escaped to be alone.

“It’s been a long time, Jake,” she purred in a seductive non-distinct European accent and Jake was seduced.

Taking her to lunch, Jake and Jenny sat in a private booth at their favorite downtown restaurant.

“How have you been?” Jenny asked after a very long “I’m very glad to see you” kiss.

“I’m doing well,” he answered and reached for his wine. A flash of gold reminded him he forgot to take off his ring. Quickly hiding his hands under the table, Jake hoped Jenny hadn’t noticed, and he slipped the ring off and put it in his jacket pocket.

This did not escape Jenny.

“I heard you went off and got married,” she said in a deep, sexy voice he only heard in more intimate settings. “I had to see it for myself.”

“It’s a business arrangement,” he whispered, pulling her close. “Pretty much like yours.”

“Aren’t they all, my darling?” she surmised and Jake kissed her two beautifully pouty lips.

“Are you back in town?” he asked almost eagerly.

“The Count and I are taking a break,” she explained and Jake contained his desire to celebrate. The Count and Jenny navigated their marriage based on the weather and not the journey.

At any moment, they could split up, but they never reached that point. Jenny desperately wanted that title but it was only hers as long as she stayed with the Count. The Count was a very old man

and Jenny figured she could outlast him. It left her a lot of free time to have other interests, and she was interested in Jake.

“Let’s not talk about the Count or your arrangement,” Jenny moaned as she stretched and tugged at her skin-tight dress.

“Let’s get out of here,” he whispered hoarsely, already feeling the pleasure of the prelude to their lovemaking.

Grabbing a taxi to his nearby downtown condo, Jake fumbled with his keys as Jenny held on kissing and caressing. Stumbling through the elevator doors, they collapsed on the couch and Jake relieved her of her clothes.

As they parted, breathless, hours later in his room, Jake held Jenny in his arms as the pleasure rippled through his body and slowly faded into still waters.

“Is it truly horrible, married life?” Jenny finally asked while caressing Jake’s chest with her soft, warm, delicate palms.

Jake had no intention of boring Jenny with the details of the drama involved; she would think it was a charming story.

“It appeases my mother,” he shrugged. “I brought home a wife and kid, she’s happy to spoil a grandchild.”

Laughing, Jenny propped herself up on her elbow and looked down at Jake.

“You went all out, my darling,” she teased Jake with her finger on his lips and he instinctively closed his eyes and moaned. “Did you miss this?” she taunted, running her mischievous fingers along his mouth.

“No one can love me like you, Jenny,” he whispered as he gazed into her calm blue eyes. Leaning down for a kiss, Jenny caressed Jake’s cheek and he rolled her onto her back.

Nothing mattered when he was in her arms.

Chapter 7

Weeks passed by and Jake had no desire to head back to the house. He had all but forgotten about his life behind the gates and had no desire to return.

In late November, his mother called him to duty. It was Thanksgiving and he was expected. Unfortunately, Jake was in Paris with Jenny and traveling was difficult in the snow-covered states.

Promising to make it home for Christmas, Jake hung up the phone and realized that only left him a few weeks with Jenny before he had to fulfill his family obligations.

Explaining this to Jenny, Jake realized she had other plans as well.

There were many obligations for the wife of a Count as well at Christmastime.

“We’ll meet for the New Year,” he said, trying to get a promise from his love.

“I’ll be waiting,” she teased. Jake kissed Jenny and took one last look into her eyes.

“Don’t you ever wonder what it would be like if it were just you and I?” he asked without thinking. Averting his gaze, Jenny thought about his question.

“This works for us, my darling,” she said, kissing him quickly. “Why change anything?”

Jake didn’t know what he was thinking. What they had was great. It didn’t make sense to want anything more. How could it be any better?

Parting at the terminal, Jake headed to the states and Jenny to her Count.

Arriving at the house a few days before Christmas pleased his mother.

“Thank you, Jake,” she remarked when he visited her at the back house. “I wanted to let you know I promised Brooke we would all visit her mother at the home on Christmas Day.”

Jake didn’t object, but he wasn’t excited about meeting Brooke’s frail mother who believed they were married for love and Jake was paying for the best care out of the kindness of his heart, and not as part of an arrangement.

At the main house, MJ rushed up and hugged his legs to greet him.

“Merry Christmas, daddy,” he yelled wholeheartedly. Jake saw Brooke wince, and Jake gently pulled the boy from his grip and knelt at his eye level.

“MJ, that’s so sweet,” Brooke said, holding onto the counter and maintaining her composure. “When did you decide to call Jake ‘daddy,’ honey?”

“Well, he is, isn’t he?” the boy asked puzzled. “All my friends say it to their dads.”

“That’s so sweet,” Brooke said calmly. “We have business to discuss, why don’t you go to your room and play.” MJ gave Jake an animal growl and ran off to his room.

Brooke held onto the countertop with all her strength. Her knuckles were white and Jake hoped she didn’t pop a tile.

“It was inevitable,” Jake shrugged. “Don’t put too much thought into it.”

Brooke turned and glared at Jake with her eyes raised in her “are you kidding me” face.

“Inevitable, yes,” she agreed, releasing her grip on the countertop as she fixed her attention on Jake. Walking up to him without breaking eye contact, Brooke sighed and shook her head.

“Wait until you have a son,” she whispered painfully. “See how painful the inevitable is when you hear your child call another man ‘daddy’ when you know that man will never love your son the way his father did. You don’t know anything, Jake.”

Brooke closed her eyes, took a deep breath and walked away as if he weren’t even there.

Collapsing on an island chair, Jake was not expecting her angry homecoming. He had left the loving arms of the beautiful and delightful Jenny to fulfill his obligations. Dreading being at home for the holidays, all the drama and tension, Jake dreamed about the moment when he said good-bye and welcomed the New Year with Jenny.

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Christmas shopping was being handled by Brooke and his mother, so Jake concentrated on the work he had put aside to spend loving moments with Jenny.

On Christmas Eve, MJ begged Jake to read him a story and he obliged. Whenever he spent a father-son moment with MJ, Jake could always feel Brooke's remorseful eyes watching them interact, secretly angry but also overjoyed to have a father figure for her son.

Playing Santa, Jake, Brooke and his mother marched back and forth from the back house bringing present after present for the child who only thought there were a few presents under the tree. Jake realized this is what his parents must have done for him as well when he was a child.

He would go to bed on Christmas Eve thinking there were no presents, and on Christmas Day, Santa delivered. He now knew why his parents were exhausted on Christmas morning.

Gratefully, Brooke had paid someone to assemble the motorized car and new bike his mother had splurged on for her only grandchild. Admiring their work, they each went to bed knowing they had a big day ahead.

Jake knew he was close to the finish line.

On Christmas morning, MJ opened all his gifts and the living room was littered with torn festive paper.

Then it was off to church, where Jake had to uncomfortably greet all the church members who said they were such a beautiful family. Jake knew why he was uncomfortable with being in church with his family after spending weeks with his girlfriend, but during the sermon he didn't understand why Brooke seemed so angry as she clutched her jacket to her stomach and seemed to focus on something other than the preacher.

Afterward, they all got in the car and headed for the care center to visit Brooke's mother.

Sitting in a large lounge decorated with colorful lights and holiday ornaments, Brooke's mom stood to greet them dressed in a red and green robe with a Christmas tree embroidered on her chest.

Hugging MJ and Brooke, her mother waited to be introduced to Jake. Frail and thin, Brooke's mother stood supported by her daughter. Stout and strong, his mother seemed young in comparison.

"Mom, this is my husband Jake, and his mother Winona," Brooke said, introducing her new family.

Jake extended his hand, but the woman gently wiped it away and held out her arms for a hug. Jake walked to her slowly and gently embraced the woman, fearing he would break her fragile body.

Pulling away, her mother embraced his mother and they all sat and talked and sang and opened presents.

Jake wondered how bad the other center must have been if Brooke thought the new place was a resort in comparison. Stylish but sterile, the whole place was depressing and he finally appreciated the fact his mother was healthy and strong enough to live on her own. She would wither in an environment where she couldn't command the respect of her stubborn son. In comparison, Brooke's mother seemed reserved and accepting of her daughter's choices. They wouldn't really know, though, because Brooke hadn't explained the details of their arrangement.

Brooke had lied to her mother. Jake had lied to his mother. The only difference was that his mother was strong enough to handle the situation, and Brooke's mother looked as if the wind could zap her strength.

A caretaker approached and Jake's mother asked if she would take a photo of the happy family, which she agreed to and they all smiled.

Hugging and kissing, Brooke's mother said she wanted a moment with Jake.

Helping her to her feet, Brooke passed her mother off to Jake with a knowing stare. He was to play the loving husband.

Escorting the woman to a table with holiday cookies on a wreath-shaped tray, Brooke's mother was very lucid.

“My daughter’s not in love with you, is she?” Brooke’s mother said clearly without judgment. Jake was speechless. Obviously this woman could press on against the wind, but not for long. Maybe Brooke already knew that.

“Matthew was the love of her life,” Brooke’s mother explained. Her question had been rhetorical. “When she said she got married again, to a man who also was willing to put me up in this place, I knew she hadn’t married for love. That makes me very sad.”

“You must make her happy, though,” her mother said as they watched Brooke and MJ playing with his new toys with his new grandmother. “She seems very peaceful,” her mother nodded wistfully. “For now that’s all I can hope for. I’m in no place to burden her further.”

Jake didn’t respond. Her mother offered him her hand and Jake gently pulled the weak woman to her feet and escorted her back to her family.

More hugs and kisses and Brooke promised to return in a week. Returning home, Brooke and his mother made lunch and Jake went to his room to work.

“Jake, lunch is ready,” his mother called and Jake put away his work and joined his family downstairs.

Begging to play with his toys, Brooke excused MJ from the table. Then he started pleading for Jake to help him put together some racetrack toy.

Jake hadn’t assembled or played with a toy since he was a boy. Brooke’s eyes pleaded for him to spend a few minutes playing daddy.

“Five minutes is all he needs,” she urged Jake.

“Go play,” his mother commanded.

Unsure how to approach, Jake walked up to the tree and sat down on the floor near MJ. Handing Jake some parts, MJ explained that he couldn’t connect the tracks and Jake read the instructions and snapped the track together. Shrieking in delight, MJ raced his cars around the battery-operated track and soon Jake was betting which one would cross the plastic sticker-covered finish line.

A flash went off, and Jake looked up. His mother had stealth photographed him playing dad. That was his present to her, even better than the expensive perfume he brought from Paris.

Jake's cell went off and he saw the code for Jenny and he leapt up. Turning to take the call, he caught Brooke's gaze.

"Please. Go," she said. The phone rang and vibrated in his hand, and he answered it as he hopped up the stairs to his room.

"I'm back in the city," Jenny teased Jake. *"Pick me up at the airport at 10."*

The phone disconnected and Jake stood staring at his escape. Family Christmas was officially over.

Chapter 8

Spending the New Year in the city with Jenny was very relaxing. He had no obligations, no eyes pleading for him to be a good family man for five minutes, no mother nagging him and pressuring him into a role in which he was not comfortable.

With Jenny, they dined at the finest restaurants, attended sophisticated parties and spent the day making love.

Ring in the New Year, Jake kissed Jenny.

For two glorious weeks afterward, Jake thought their time together would never end, but it always did. That didn't make their parting any less difficult.

“When will you be back?” he asked as they got ready for another inevitable separation.

“The Count is looking into an ambassadorship and I'll be very busy with new duties,” she shrugged.

“What does that mean for us, Jenny?” Jake asked, somewhat irritated.

“Just the same as it always does, my darling,” she said, pulling on her robe over bronze, sculpted arms. Freeing her hair from the robe, it cascaded down her back and Jake winced knowing it would be a long time before he saw her again.

Each time it got more and more difficult for him to say good-bye until who knew when.

“What if we weren't married, Jenny,” he asked, propping himself up on his pillow. “What if we were both single, we didn't have obligations?”

Without blinking Jenny answered.

“But we're not, darling, and we do have obligations,” she replied.

“Pretend we're not,” he insisted. “You and I are both single. What if I asked you to run away with me? What if I asked you to marry me? What would you say, Jenny?”

Storm clouds gathered in her calm ocean blue eyes.

“Even if the Count passed away, we couldn’t get married,” she chided Jake. “The moment I remarry I lose everything.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Jake said, shaking his head.

Sensing his disappointment, Jenny slid over to Jake and caressed his chest to soothe her lover.

“What’s gotten into you,” she asked softly, her eyes a calm serene ocean. Jake caressed her cheek.

“This is fun, Jenny, but I guess I want you all to myself,” he replied softly. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she said while kissing his chest and making her way to his lips. The time for talking was over. Making love for the last time again, Jenny left and Jake was alone in his condo.

Like so many times before, Jake was left with the knowledge she would return, they would fall into bed again and all would be forgotten. All the time in between would compress and it would be like no time had passed when they met again. The only thing was that the time in between seemed longer and slower, and their time together shorter.

Dragging himself back to the house, Jake arrived late and headed straight to his room.

Downstairs he knew Brooke and MJ would greet him in the morning, so he slept late and didn’t go to the kitchen. Leaving by the front door, he put on his headphones and went for his daily run.

“Jake, dinner’s ready,” his mother called after he had taken a shower.

“I’ll eat later,” he called back.

“Five minutes,” she commanded. Jake wanted to yell something obscene, but he wasn’t a teenager. When he was at the house, he was expected to fulfill certain obligations.

Everybody was seated and waiting for Jake. His mother said grace and they ate quietly. Jake missed the intimate dinners and late night cocktails with Jenny.

Instead of learning about the latest trend in art, he had to listen to MJ talk about his day at school.

“Now, mom’s my art teacher!” he heard MJ exclaim. He hadn’t heard the beginning of the conversation and assumed Brooke was teaching him art at home.

“Isn’t that great, Jake?” his mother beamed. “There is this after school program, and Brooke is now an art teacher.”

Jake looked at Brooke who seemed distant.

“I didn’t know you were into art,” he said.

“I majored in art in college,” she shrugged. “I worked at several galleries. I was working on my master’s.”

“Congratulations,” Jake said and Brooke thanked him.

“Isn’t that cool, daddy?” MJ asked and waited for Jake to respond. Cringing, Jake smiled and said it was. The first “daddy” of his visits back home was always the hardest, like the first in a series of painful shots.

Jake noticed Brooke close her eyes and sigh as well. It pained her in other ways.

There was no pain when he was with Jenny. Just love. Love and leaving. Jake always felt pain when she left and he had to adjust to life without her, he had to live the moments in between anticipating her next visit.

When they were together, Jenny never had a care Jake knew of, but as he looked over at Brooke, he realized that she was always thinking, always trying to figure out what she needed to do next.

Flashes of their night together where she “thanked him” reminded Jake there was more to her than he saw on an everyday basis. It was hard to see anything but worry and pain in her dark eyes.

When she came to his room to “thank him,” Jake thought she was just a woman who needed a little sexual contact. After he turned off the light, she had stimulated him in places he didn’t know existed. Deftly maneuvering her hands and gently guiding him, she knew what she wanted.

Jake thought she was a basic missionary-position woman, but the missionary position was just a cool down.

Sighing and holding her heavy head in her hand as she leaned on her elbow and dutifully forked peas in her mouth, Brooke glanced at Jake and raised her eyebrows to show she didn't have an answer for whatever question she was pondering in her head.

Eyes brown and sad didn't compare to the vibrant blue eyes that promised pleasure when he looked at Jenny. Brooke was always somewhere else, working on some problem, gauging her next decision, or remembering what it was like in another lifetime. *How did I get here* always seemed to be on her mind.

That night she came to him, though, there were no thoughts on her mind. Jake felt she had come to him fully abandoning all worries with a clear and precise goal. Once she had achieved it, she just slipped away as if it were a dream leaving Jake breathless with a newfound respect for the woman he had married.

Unlike Jake, Brooke had been married before and had years of experience with just one man loving and sharing and caring.

When she came to him, Jake assumed she expected something mundane and ordinary, he expected boring and suburban. After all, she had spent eight years with the same man and only one man. How much could she know?

Watching her ponder things Jake could never imagine, he realized that whatever he thought about love and marriage had evaporated the moment she slid off his sweatpants. Unspoken, intimate pleasures awaited the man she gave herself to and Jake had only received a preview.

Jake just wanted to take her mind off things.

Still thinking about Jenny, Jake decided the only way he could do that was to be nice to MJ, play ball and help him with his homework, maybe take him to school and pick him up once in a while.

Brooke always watched in bittersweet fascination as Jake played daddy to her son. She didn't expect anything else or "thank him" again. Jake didn't want her to or expect her to because it

wasn't part of their arrangement. That night had been a perk for offering more of himself than was required.

When his mother announced they were throwing a small birthday party for MJ in the backyard, he agreed but said he was too busy to make any plans.

Brooke gave him a hint of what MJ wanted for his birthday and he just handed her his credit card. Shrugging, Brooke took the card and wrapped the present for him. Jake just had to present it to MJ on his birthday.

On MJ's birthday, Melinda arrived and she and Brooke spent most of the day getting ready for the party. Jake stayed in his room.

Sounds of screaming and yelling brought Jake downstairs. Melinda was sitting at the dining room table, looking out the French doors.

"Sit with me, Jake," she said, pulling out a chair. "I couldn't take it out there anymore."

Jake sat and through the windows of the French doors he saw MJ and a bunch of other kids throwing water balloons while mothers stood observing the situation and talking amongst themselves.

Jake noticed a picture on the table.

He recognized their unofficial wedding photo and picked it up.

It was not one of those happy, loving photos of two people about to start their lives together. They both looked stunned. They didn't look like a couple that had just gotten happily married.

"Has Brooke seen this?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"What did she say?" he wondered out loud.

"She thinks you both look stunned," Melinda said, reading his mind.

“We do,” he said and put the picture back on the table.

Brooke backed out from the kitchen with a cake for the birthday boy and a lit candle on top of the racing car shaped cake.

“Cake time,” she declared, “you can’t sit this out.”

“Be there in a sec,” Melinda said as she let Brooke out the door. Holding the cake up high, Brooke was mobbed by children in desperate need of birthday cake.

“How’s it going?” Melinda asked.

“Things are going well,” he said, knowing she wanted to get his opinion about his arrangement with Brooke.

“You know what I mean, Jake,” she admonished her friend.

“Why? Has she said anything?” he shrugged.

“She said it was going well as well,” Melinda said, irritated they didn’t divulge more personal details.

“What did you expect?” he asked while he listened to the kids sing “Happy Birthday” to MJ.

“I don’t know,” Melinda confessed. Sighing Melinda stood and Jake joined her.

“I can see it’s going well,” she said. “Your mother’s happy, she has a grandchild and daughter-in-law,” she pointed out. “Her son’s happy, he has a daddy. Everyone’s happy.”

“That pretty much sums it up,” he said. Melinda waited for a reaction from Jake but he didn’t have any to offer.

“Let’s go have cake,” she said and they headed out to face a mob of children overdosing on sugar.

It was then time to open presents.

“Thank you, daddy,” MJ yelled when he opened the special robot warrior Brooke had purchased.

“I hope you like it,” he yelled back over the noise. Jake’s mother whispered something into MJ’s ear and he came running toward Jake with the robot box in his grip.

Standing next to Jake, who was eating cake, MJ faced his grandma and smiled. A flash went off. It would be another present for his mother.

Watching MJ running back to open his other presents, Jake recovered from the stealth camera attack. When all the presents were opened, Brooke announced all the children would get a gift bag on their way out. Like little soldiers, the children marched and took a gift bag while their mothers escorted them to their homes.

Melinda announced it was time for her to get back to the city, and she hugged Jake. Brooke was starting to clean up and took a moment to hug her friend as they said their good-byes.

Jake decided he could pick up some plates and cups. Grabbing a trash bag from a stack Brooke had ready, Jake proceeded to pick up trash and bits of water balloon pieces. The lawn was soaked. What happened next took him by surprise.

Something hit him on the back and when he turned he saw a failed water balloon jiggling on the grass. Looking up, he saw his mother conspiring with Brooke and they threw another balloon, delighted in their game.

This one not only hit, it splattered, soaking Jake. Standing there startled, he looked at them and they were just beginning.

Ducking, Jake deflected the next one. The battle was on.

“MJ, help,” he cried and MJ looked up from his robot and shrieked in delight as he saw another water balloon fight in progress. Grabbing water balloons from a nearby blow-up pool, MJ handed a balloon to Jake and they threw them at the women.

Jake’s balloon hit and he and MJ high-fived each other.

“I’ll throw, you bring the balloons,” he said, breathlessly coming up with a plan of attack.

Running back and forth with balloons, MJ handed them to Jake and Jake aimed and made direct hits, and each time the women were shocked that he would hit a woman. They launched a barrage of water balloons at him. Jake decided there were too many balloons on their side, so he was going in for the final push.

Grabbing the hose as they continued their assault, he turned on the faucet and came at them like they were protestors at a rally that got out of hand.

Screaming, the women laughed as they were soaked and Jake declared victory and turned to celebrate with his comrade. Jake's celebration was short lived. The hose was swiped from his hand and put down the back of his shirt. Turning, he saw Brooke laughing hysterically while his mother urged her on.

Grabbing her arms, she protested while still laughing and holding her ground. Cold water poured down Jake's chest and she couldn't stop laughing long enough to surrender. Mud formed under his feet and he fell, bringing Brooke on top of him.

They both grunted as they hit the wet ground and the hose flew out of her hands and slithered away. Dripping wet from head to toe, Brooke was breathing hard but she was no longer laughing. Jake could see her breasts through her shirt, cold and pressed up against his chest. Laughter turned to lust for a split second in her eyes then she rolled off Jake.

"Party's over," she proclaimed. "Bath time."

Protesting, MJ wanted five more minutes and Brooke nodded and headed to the kitchen with the remainder of the cake.

Jake made a request from his mother then headed to the kitchen. Standing at the sink wiping dirt from her arms, Brooke thought it was MJ and she declared that the party was over again.

The cold water only cooled Jake down, but it didn't quench the fire she had ignited. Coming up behind her, Jake gently put his hands on her shoulder.

Brooke's reaction was all he needed to know. Moaning, she uncoiled into him, her back arched, her wet head pressed against his chest.

“My mom’s going to take MJ for a while,” he whispered. “I’m going to take a shower,” he suggested. Brooke was breathing heavy and he left her standing at the counter.

Jake left a trail of wet clothes in his bedroom as he headed for the shower. It was up to Brooke now.

...

Brooke stood at the counter wiping dirt from her arms when she felt Jake just graze her shoulders. Her reaction was almost instantaneous, and she felt that her body betrayed her when she moaned at his touch and uncoiled like a spring twisted too tight and released.

The choice was hers.

Not sure what to do, Brooke went to her room and sat on the edge of her bed. Jake was waiting in a hot shower upstairs.

Heading to her bathroom, the gold from her first wedding band glinted for recognition in the waning light of day.

Touching it, Brooke said a prayer.

“I will always only love you,” she affirmed and pushed it just a tad deeper into the dirt. Determined to not break down, Brooke pulled off her wet clothes, rinsed off the dirt from her skin, grabbed her robe and nightgown from the back of the bathroom door and headed upstairs.

Throwing the garments on a chair near the bathroom, Brooke closed the curtains and turned off the light until the room was dark.

She waited on the edge of Jake’s bed, facing the bathroom.

Her mind had reservations, but her body had been neglected for so long it was now in control.

It’s just sex, she told herself. *Really, really good sex*. Brooke hadn’t forgotten the last time they got together and that memory urged her mind to shut up and just enjoy the ride.

Jake appeared with a towel wrapped around his waist and looked puzzled. Then he turned off the light, dropped his towel and carefully walked over to her in the dark.

Resting in bed, enjoying their cool down, they finally parted and lay staring at the ceiling while they each caught their breath.

“Did you hear that?” Brooke whispered. Birth had given her a powerful tool, super hearing.

Listening for a moment, Jake shook his head.

“I didn’t hear anything,” he whispered.

“Mom!” a voice yelled from far away, but coming closer. Without thinking, Brooke rolled out of bed, grabbed her clothes and raced into the bathroom. Dressing at super speed, she was out of his room and down the stairs by the time MJ came marching through the French doors still yelling for her. Coming up quickly behind him was Jake’s mother, who looked embarrassed and apologized.

“I wanted to show you my new toy,” he said, sitting on the floor and demonstrating the battery-operated truck he clutched to his chest.

Through eye language, she told Jake’s mother not to worry, that everything was fine. Relieved, she said good-bye and headed back to her house, closing the doors behind her.

“That’s great, honey,” she exclaimed. “I think it’s time for the birthday boy to get to bed.”

Complaining and stalling, MJ finally completed his bedtime routine. The story was read, the lights turned off, the door closed just so much.

Sighing, Brooke headed to the kitchen for something to eat. She was starving.

A few minutes after she pulled a bunch of plastic containers from the refrigerator, Jake came in, dressed in sweatpants and a shirt and sat down.

“You hungry?” she asked, not able to make eye contact with the man she had just been in bed with.

“Yes!” he declared emphatically and Brooke put together two plates of leftover meatloaf and coleslaw and potato salad. Sliding his plate over, Brooke tried to contain herself because she just wanted to devour the entire plate in one swallow.

Jake ate a few bites, but she could sense he wanted to talk. Knowing she would lose her appetite after a meaningful conversation about casual sex, she continued eating until she was satiated and then met his patient gaze.

Dark wonder still rolling in his eyes, Jake put his hand on the table face up and waited for Brooke to place her hand in his. Lifting her arm as if it suddenly had gotten heavier, Brooke placed her hand in his and he squeezed.

Just speak, she thought.

“I need to know what we’re doing, Brooke,” he asked with uncertain eyes.

“You don’t want to have this conversation, Jake,” she said, staring at her plate. “It’s best to just take this day to day, but don’t ask. It’s just sex. Don’t place any thought on it. This is not a conversation you want to have.”

Jake looked hurt, but he nodded.

Brooke sighed and left. How could uncomplicated be so complicated?

In bed, Brooke faced away from her happy family photo.

She had just made an informal arrangement for casual sex with a man she was married to but living in separate bedrooms. Where was she headed?

Falling asleep, Brooke was very tense again.

Chapter 9

Brooke was excited when Melinda wanted to see her about some great news she had to tell her in person.

Sitting in the dining room having coffee, Brooke ate cupcakes Melinda brought from a neighborhood bakery where she used to live.

“I loved this place,” Brooke said, taking a bite out of a chocolate iced cupcake. “So good,” she moaned.

“Don’t you want one?” Brooke asked, wiping chocolate icing from her face.

Holding out her ring finger, Melinda waited and Brooke stood to admire her friend’s good news.

“I have to fit into my wedding dress!” Melinda exclaimed and they were hugging and screaming in excitement.

Sitting down to catch their breath, Brooke asked for all the details.

“How’d you meet? When’s the date? Are you in love?”

Melinda scoffed at the last question.

“Of course I’m in love,” she said.

“Sorry,” Brooke blushed. Melinda hadn’t married for love the first time and had no problem setting up Brooke with a man just for security.

“Remember that night you met Jake,” she asked and Brooke nodded. She would never forget that night because she had met the man she would marry and never even knew it. The most life changing events in life never came with foreshadowing music like in movies. You never realize life-changing events until after the fact.

“I remember,” she said.

“Well, there was the cute guy I was talking to while you were with Jake,” Melinda explained very cheerfully. “We got together,” she said and motioned that they did more than just meet, “and before you know it, he proposed!”

Hugging excitedly again, they parted.

“What about you?” Melinda asked. “Anything new?”

Brooke shrugged. Her friend didn’t need to know the details of her relationship with Jake.

“Fine,” she said. “Jake’s in the city most of the time. I have everything I need.”

“Everything?” she asked mischievously. Brooke was caught off guard and blushed.

“I knew it,” Melinda whispered victoriously.

“SHHH,” Brooke whispered. “I already have to deal with the possibility of his mother asking about grandchildren. It’s just sex.”

“Just sex?” she asked. “How many times have you...”

“Just twice,” Brooke admitted. She didn’t want Melinda to think they were now sharing the same bed.

“How was he?” she asked. “He looks like he’d be good.”

“That’s none of your business,” Brooke said, blushing until even she could feel the heat from her face.

“I knew it!” Melinda whispered, victorious again.

“So are you guys...” Melinda insinuated.

Brooke sighed.

“I still feel like I’m betraying Matthew,” Brooke confided. “Yes, sex with Jake is incredible, but it’s just sex. As long as I can’t actually see him, and I feel awful for saying this, I can deal with it.

For a few moments I can forget about everything. For a few moments I can even pretend it's Matthew, if I try really, really hard."

Brooke lowered her head and the tears poured before she realized they were there.

"It's not love, Melinda," she asserted. "It's pleasurable, but we're not making love. It's great to relieve tension, but I have to get up and go the moment we're done. At that moment, I regret it. It makes me miss him more."

Brooke wiped the tears from her eyes.

"I would give up all the pleasure in the world for the rest of my life for one last, long hug from Matthew," she wished.

Melinda hugged her and looked her in the eyes.

"You're not betraying him," she asserted. "Do you think he wanted this for you? Do you think he just wanted you to wither away after he passed?"

It was hard for Brooke to even think about what Matthew would have wanted for her, so she didn't know how he would feel. The subject never came up.

"Are you in love with your fiancé, Melinda?" Brooke asked, knowing she would have to fight for her words as her throat tightened.

"Of course," Melinda replied.

"Have you ever loved anyone like you love him?" she asked. Melinda turned her head.

"No," she stated, knowing where Brooke was going with her questions.

"If that were taken away from you right now, if you had to find solace with another man, how easy do you think it would be to forget his touch, his smell, the way he looks at you with love? That feeling of completeness where making love is just part of loving one another like holding hands? How easy would it be to just sleep with another man?"

Melinda started to get angry.

“I understand what you’re trying to say, Brooke,” she retorted. “But what are you going to do? You don’t think I’ve seen you pull away, withdraw within yourself since he passed? I don’t know how I’d react. I do know this is doing no good for anyone.”

Brooke glared at her and lowered her head.

“That was bitter of me,” she whispered.

“You have every right to be,” Melinda said, holding Brooke’s hands. “You couldn’t ask for a more perfect partner at this time, Brooke. It’s not like he’s suddenly going to fall in love with you. He’s still chasing his lover. It sounds like you’re just two people in need right now. Get what you need and get out. The pain will never go away. You can’t cut yourself off from everything.”

Brooke sighed and they hugged.

“You’re blunt, Melinda, but you mean well,” Brooke whispered.

“I only hope you’d do the same for me,” she said then beamed. “Now, back to me,” she said cheerfully and Brooke laughed.

Discussing the wedding details, Melinda wanted Brooke to be one of her bridesmaids, since her sister would be the Maid of Honor.

Hugging, Melinda headed back to the city to leave Brooke to think about her friend’s lecture.

Using people was not Brooke’s intention. Being used, well, Brooke hadn’t considered that. She knew Jake wasn’t into her romantically, but she never thought about it that way.

At one time, she had been the most special person to Matthew. There were no other people in their lives. They were connected physically and spiritually. Brooke knew no other way.

Somehow, she didn’t feel like she was being used. It was more like an understanding. Like Melinda said, two people coming together for the same purpose. They were seeking comfort when they could find none.

Jake's relationship with Jenny was on-again off-again but he loved her and didn't know how to resolve the issue of wanting commitment, but being held at a distance. Love was complex and Brooke knew there was no way to cap off that feeling even when it was destructive. Finding a moment to forget, Brooke and Jake just found pleasure.

Making love was more than sex. It involved the deepest desire to be as close to the other person as possible, showing the other person how much they meant, their commitment and desire to make them happy.

Brooke knew she could never make love again, not the way she did with Matthew. That involved a level of love only achieved once in a lifetime.

The desire to be close to someone was strong and took nothing away from the love she had for Matthew. It only demonstrated that what she had was special and now she knew the difference.

The tears fell again.

She would never feel that special again.

Chapter 10

In the city, Jake was distracted by his relationship with Brooke.

For the second time, they had ended up in bed together. *What was the draw?*

When he first saw her he was attracted to her ability to handle herself. But at his house, their house now, she was always moping around when not lavishing all her attention on her son. Jake wasn't jealous, it was that for most of the time she always seemed like a depressed housewife.

Dressed in jeans or a robe, she never really did anything but sit around thinking. She was always thinking. Staring. She was also always staring at something far away and sometimes Jake would stare wondering what had her full attention.

With one touch, though, barely grazing her shoulder, she had sprung to life.

It wasn't just the sex. Brooke was a different person when they were alone in the dark. Uninhibited and expressive, Jake never felt that she was thinking about anything else.

As long as it was dark and she couldn't see him or what they were doing.

Jake realized that the second time they came together. Brooke closed the curtains and turned off the light. At first he thought it was because she was ashamed of her body, but it was more than that.

The moment they were done, she was gone. There was a reason she didn't want to talk about their intimate moments. She wasn't really having sex with him. More likely, she was trying to remember what it was like to make love to the man she loved. She was trying to recapture a moment.

Jake would have been bothered, but he knew it was just sex as well. If Jenny were in town or he met her in another country, he and Brooke wouldn't even be having sex.

The first time she surprised him and he didn't want to turn her away. Remembering how incredibly uninhibited and expressive Brooke was made him reconsider everything he thought he knew about the woman who lived in his house.

The second time, it was her laughter and lust that motivated him. The moment he grazed her shoulders and she reacted instantly, Jake knew she wanted it as well.

When he wanted to discuss their encounters further, she didn't want to talk about it. It was just sex. She could take it or leave it.

What was I going to say to her anyway? he tried to remember as he sat staring out his office window in the middle of his busy workday.

It wasn't in their agreement. He wanted to discuss amending their agreement, verbally, to include a clause for casual sex. That's what he wanted to discuss. Knowing Jenny could be away for months at a time with no promise she'd return again, Jake would be amenable to releasing some tension with Brooke, if that's what interested her as well.

She didn't want to talk about it though.

Sighing, Jake got back to work.

It was best to take her advice and just take it day to day.

Hours later, Jake closed his laptop and decided to head back to the house early.

Arriving at dinnertime, Jake was surprised to see his mother with a cup of coffee, dinner plates of partially eaten food still sitting on the island table.

"You hungry?" she asked, putting down her coffee.

Puzzled, Jake nodded and his mother made him a plate of meatloaf and potatoes. She brought him a glass of water and watched as he ate his dinner.

"Is everything alright?" he asked as he realized his mother was thinking more than she was drinking.

"Finish up your dinner," she reprimanded him like the old days, but it wasn't the threat it used to be.

Jake finished and pushed his plate away.

“What is it?” he asked exasperated. Ever since Brooke reprimanded him for being cruel to his mother and mended their relationship, Jake knew he didn’t have to lie to her anymore. His mother, on the other hand, had formed an alliance with Brooke so he didn’t really gain much respect from either of them.

It was his house, but it was their home.

“Brooke found a video she made for her husband’s funeral,” his mother explained. “She’s been in bed all day watching it over and over. I gave MJ dinner, but she insisted that they watch it together. She’s worried he’s going to forget his father. I want to go in there and rip the video out of her room, but I understand what’s she’s going through. The only problem is that I don’t think MJ understands.”

His mother was asking for his help.

“Wait here,” he said and headed for Brooke’s room.

Listening at her door, Jake heard voices and laughing. She was still watching the video. Knocking lightly, he opened the door.

“You don’t want to be here right now,” her voice warned weakly from the room only lit by the television. Jake entered slowly and shut the door carefully.

“What are we watching?” he asked lightly and was able to see Brooke on the bed staring at the TV. Curled up next to her sleeping was MJ.

When Brooke didn’t respond, Jake crossed to the other side of the room and Brooke looked around him, annoyed when he blocked her line of sight to the memory she was trying to relive.

“Move over,” he said and she glared at him, but she moved over and Jake sat next to her on the bed.

“I’ll start from the beginning,” she said without explaining. In a few moments, the screen went black and Jake was invited into the life Brooke lived before he met her.

Clips from a million memories were spliced together with a song about love and life. Their wedding. The music faded and he heard them say their vows. The music swelled again at their first kiss, and the cutting of the cake. Brooke missed Matthew's mouth after he had carefully put a piece in hers. Laughing. There was a lot of laughing and a lot of smiling. Brooke looking at a townhouse, her stomach swollen with the soon-to-be-born MJ. Painting the nursery. Labor. The first time she saw MJ. Matthew proudly held his son and the music faded to introduce Matthew Junior and Jake finally realized why Brooke called him MJ. More music as MJ is introduced to his new home, his new room. Christmases, birthdays, anniversaries all captured on tape to sum up a life.

The Brooke in the video, like the Brooke in the happy family photo his mother tried to get her to forget, was happy. She smiled and laughed. She joked and teased. She looked at Matthew with a love Jake had only seen in movies. He loved Jenny, but he wondered if she loved him the way Brooke loved Matthew. By the way he held her, kissed her, hugged her, Jake knew Matthew loved Brooke just as much as she loved Matthew.

The Brooke Jake knew was not happy. She wasn't even happy watching herself be happy. She was actually more depressed.

Another song played as the video continued. It was more sorrowful. Jake watched MJ take his first steps, eating food in his high chair, being hugged and loved. Matthew loved his son and the Brooke in the video loved recording her husband hugging and playing with his son. Matthew threw a soft ball, which MJ caught with his baby hands and Jake cringed. The music faded and MJ said, "I love you, daddy," and kissed his father as the video faded to black. Jake swallowed a lump in his throat.

A picture of the happy family that Brooke had on her nightstand appeared with the dates of Matthew's life and death. He was a very young man who had left a young family.

Jake realized that he was only five years older than Matthew was when he died and if he left the world, he wondered who would put a video together for him.

Brooke was cradling a star-covered shoebox. She was just touching the rocks and figurines inside.

Pulling out a figurine of an ugly, hairy troll, Brooke turned it around, made its hair fluff. Holding it tightly in her grasp, she closed her eyes.

“Just looking at this, just holding it,” she said, fighting for her words, “I can tell you everything that happened when Matthew gave this to me. He was wearing jeans and a purple shirt, his hair too long, his sneakers dirty, he didn’t know they could be washed in the machine, he came over and just handed me this. We were barely dating at the time, and he came over and handed me this. Said he was out and about and saw this, that it reminded him of a trip we had taken. He’s so proud and I took it, said it was ugly, but in a nice way, and put it on my dresser.”

Opening her eyes, Brooke held up the troll, whose fur was now crushed tight against his body.

Placing it back in the box, she pulled out a rock.

Holding it tight in her hand, she told Jake about the day he gave her the rock.

“We’re on the beach,” she remembered. “It’s a beautiful blue day, one that doesn’t look like it’s going to end. He’s wearing swim trunks, and I’m in shorts and a halter-top. We’re walking along the water. He picks up a rock and hands it to me. It has silver flecks. We hold hands.”

Opening her eyes again, she sighed and put the rock back in the box.

“How did it happen?” Jake asked as he took the remote from her tight grip. Brooke conceded and Jake powered off the machine.

Melinda had already told Jake what had happened, but he wanted to hear it from Brooke.

“He was on a business trip and slipped on ice,” she whispered.

Jake understood the extent of her horror. A senseless accident. All her reality ripped away in the blink of an eye.

“I can never understand your pain,” he said, not trying to console the inconsolable.

“In movies, you know when something bad is going to happen,” she said. “In real life, it happens and time just moves on. The second hand just keeps going. Every second I wonder, is this going to be the last time I see the second hand move? Is this going to be the last time? This second, this

second, this second. I keep waiting to evaporate and melt into the universe until I no longer feel anything, I'm just part of everything."

Brooke looked over at her son.

"But I can't," she whispered and cleared her throat. "I still have our son. Everything that we were is in him. But I have to look into his eyes and all I see is a reflection of his father. How do I put him behind me? He's always with me, with us."

Brooke took a deep breath and a groan escaped.

"If I can get him to 18," she confided. "Happy and healthy and able to be on his own, then I can melt away. But I see what that does to a person. My mother kept slipping back and now she can't even function. I have to put our life behind me, but not our love."

Looking up into his eyes, Brooke had a plan.

"Jake, do me a favor," she whispered, afraid of her own words. "Take that disc and hide it. I never want to see it again. Someday you'll give it to MJ, but I can't go back there again."

Nodding, Jake rose and tried to see the machine, but he could only see the blinking lights. Not wanting to turn on the lights, he reached behind the hot machine and pulled out all the plugs. Pulling the machine away from the dresser, Jake took it to his room to hide the video another time.

When he came back downstairs, Brooke had placed MJ in his bed and was closing his door. Dressed in a robe, her hair tangled and sticking in the air, Brooke glanced at Jake with eyes that looked as if they had been in a fight, and then went back to her room.

Jake went to the kitchen and his mother was still there.

"You can go home now," he said and his mother let go of her coffee cup and stood.

Before she left, his mother held onto the door and turned back to thank him.

"I'm glad you were here," she said gratefully and pulled the door closed.

Sitting, Jake took a deep breath and let out all the tension from his chest and deep within his gut.

What would have happened if I had come home when I was expected? he wondered.

Would Brooke have played it until he got back? Would his mother have told her to stop watching the video? What did MJ think about watching a video of a father he barely knew?

Jake went to bed that night after he plugged the player in place of his own machine and took out the disc.

Placing it in his safe hidden in the wall of his closet, along with gold bars and other investments, Jake promised himself he wouldn't disclose the location to Brooke.

The next morning, MJ was up and cheerfully eating cereal while Brooke was standing over the sink still in her robe, and she had only patted down her mangled hair.

"Do you want to go to the park today?" he asked MJ.

"Can I, mom!" he begged as he hopped off the stool. Brooke nodded and MJ ran to his room to get dressed.

Jake sat at the island.

"Don't spoil him, Jake," she sighed. Turning, she faced Jake and had the same look she always did when she needed Jake to be the father figure for MJ, even though it was disdainful for her.

"See if he's alright about the whole thing," she said vaguely, but Jake knew what she meant. It was one of the reasons he wanted to take MJ to the park. Her son needed perspective from an impartial parent.

"Promise me you'll do something for yourself today," Jake said, looking at the tired woman.

"Promise me you'll go to the spa or whatever women do when they have a day to themselves. I don't want you back before dinner," he said, not warning her or threatening her, just urging her to step back and regroup.

Brooke sighed and agreed.

The door flew open and MJ was there with his glove and ball already out of breath with the prospect of playing catch.

“Ready?” Jake asked the eager kid.

Nodding his head emphatically, MJ raced to the door.

“Can we have ice cream?” he asked, looking to Jake and Brooke.

Brooke nodded.

“Have fun,” she said and MJ headed outside.

Jake followed behind, and only caught a glimpse of Brooke slumping against the counter, her hands covering her face as she sobbed.

Jake hoped she took his advice.

Holding his hand, Jake walked MJ to the park and played catch, and when Jake got tired, MJ ran to the playground and played with the other kids.

The kids heard the ice cream truck before the adults, and a wave of youngsters followed the sound to the sidewalk.

“Jake,” a woman said and he recognized her from church and HOA gatherings. “It’s a surprise to see you here.”

Standing to meet MJ at the truck, Jake smiled and shook her hand.

“I have to get ice cream,” he said trailing off because it felt foreign to say “for my kid” or “my son.” The video the night before showed him just how far he was from being a father.

“How sweet,” she said following. “My Carl is over there.”

Jake nodded.

“We don’t see you or your wife at HOA meetings,” she said, but it felt more like an admonishment. No older than Brooke, the well-dressed, professional looking woman seemed so poised or pushy, Jake wasn’t sure.

“I work in the city,” he said. Handing MJ some money, Jake stood back and just made sure he was safe. Buying an iced treat way too big for the boy to finish, MJ ran off with his friends.

Jake headed back to his bench and the woman followed. He still didn’t know her name. He didn’t care either.

“We’re having a fund-raiser to raise money for new playground equipment,” she said. “I am hoping you both can be there.”

The woman smiled but Jake didn’t think she wanted them to come just to raise money. Jake and his new wife were a novelty and the HOA members wanted to see what all the fuss was about. His family helped develop the area and the prodigal son, a longtime bachelor, now had a wife and kid.

Curiosity drove the invitation.

“I don’t know my schedule,” he said, watching MJ still playing and the ice cream dripping down his hands and covering his face.

Jake had not prepared to clean off the mess and he could already feel sticky ice cream on his hands.

“I’ll send you an invite,” she volunteered and said good-bye. “Hope to see you there!”

Jake sighed and waved, imitating her insincere gesture.

The mothers started gathering their children and Jake called MJ back.

“I’m hungry!” he said breathlessly, his sticky hands on Jake’s sweatpants.

“You are,” he said, trying to match his enthusiasm. Nodding his head emphatically, MJ put his sticky hand in Jake’s hand and they headed back to the house. Washing MJ’s hands and face

while the kid tried everything to avoid being cleaned up, Jake realized he knew nothing about kids.

Grabbing his keys, they headed to a restaurant and Jake talked MJ into ordering actual food and not dessert.

“Your mother will give you dessert later,” he promised.

Ordering a hamburger from the pirate menu, MJ sat back. He had a hard day and it was only early afternoon.

Jake was exhausted, and he ran three miles every day.

While they ate, Jake brought up the subject of the funeral video without freaking the kid out and learned that MJ was very observant.

“I don’t like it cause it makes my mom sad,” he said between a mouthful of burger.

“Does it make you sad?” Jake asked as if talking about the weather.

Thinking carefully while chewing and chewing and chewing, MJ swallowed and took a long drink of soda that mostly made it in his mouth. Jake figured it was a good time for an auto detail, and didn’t worry about the mess the soda was going to make on his leather seats.

“I’m sad because she’s sad,” he said. “She misses my daddy, I guess.”

“Do you miss your daddy?” he asked.

Eyes darting around looking at everything, MJ wasn’t sure.

“I don’t remember him,” he said. Leaning forward, pointing to his eyes, MJ beamed. “She says I have his eyes. Do you think I have his eyes?”

Jake wasn’t a sentimental man, he didn’t cry, ever, but looking into the boy’s eager eyes he noticed they looked exactly like his dead father’s eyes. Every time Brooke looked at her son, she saw her husband. Jake understood her pain.

“They look exactly like your father’s eyes,” Jake said and his voice cracked. “Exactly.” Applauding, MJ smiled and sat back trying to look at his own eyes.

The waitress showed up and asked if they wanted dessert. As MJ sat up with pleading eyes that looked just like his father’s, Jake couldn’t keep his promise to not spoil the kid.

“Whatever he wants,” Jake said, realizing he would be a lousy father.

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When Brooke got home, she was ready to take over. Making dinner, Brooke told Jake he had done a good job. Exhausted, Jake went to bed and didn’t wake up until he heard a knock on the door.

“Hello?” he asked.

“Come down for dinner,” Brooke said through the door. Jake looked at his clock and noted that it was after 8 p.m. He had slept for four hours.

Massaging his face, Jake changed his sweats to another pair and headed down for dinner.

In the kitchen, Brooke had set two places. She had already fed MJ and put him to bed. Placing a plate in front of him, she asked what he wanted to drink.

When Jake asked for a soda, Brooke laughed.

“I think we need something stronger,” she said. When she pulled a bottle of wine from the refrigerator, Jake was both pleased and alarmed.

Jake really did need a drink, but did Brooke? Was this a new thing for her or was she a secret alcoholic?

Sensing his panic, Brooke sat down and admonished him with her eyes.

“I’m not taking up drinking,” she said. “It was a gift from some HOA lady who stopped by to give me an invitation and welcome gift.”

“Probably the same woman who invited me at the park,” Jake confided.

Jake opened the bottle and let it breathe before pouring two glasses.

“She just wants to get details on us,” Brooke observed. “We’re not part of their group and they’re curious.”

Jake wasn’t sure if that meant Brooke was suggesting they go to the fund-raiser.

“What did you say,” he asked.

“I said we’d think about it, but that you have a busy schedule,” she shrugged and tasted the wine.

“It’s alright.”

Jake tolerated it, but it was only average.

Staring at Jake, Brooke waited for him to talk about his day with her son.

“Have I completely messed up my son with my issues?” she finally asked. Jake finished his meal and wiped his face. Taking a drink of the tolerable wine, he put the glass down and considered his words. Brooke waited patiently.

“Your son is sad that you are sad,” Jake said simply. Brooke’s mouth quivered and a tear dropped suddenly from nowhere.

Lowering her head, she caught her breath and sighed.

Looking back at Jake she smiled through gritted teeth.

“I guess I better get happy,” she choked out and closed her eyes in pain.

“There are support groups and counseling...” he tried to suggest, but she shook her head.

“I went to those,” she said. “Hearing that assessment, it puts it all in perspective.”

“You can’t just get happy,” he insisted.

Brooke opened her eyes and sighed again.

“I can get closer,” she said and took their plates away. “By the way, did you see my toes?” she asked, wiggling them through her slippers.

Cute red toes peeked from beneath the cotton slippers and Jake smiled.

“Very cute,” he said.

“We might have to go to that HOA meeting fund-raiser thing,” she said, scraping the plates.

Jake had no desire to go, but he knew it might be beneficial to keep the busy bodies away from their home.

“You’ll have to laugh and be charming,” he joked and Brooke growled.

“I think I have one night in me,” she said. “I’ll need new shoes,” she joked.

Anything she wanted.

“You RSVP,” he said, getting up to leave. “Be prepared for a million questions and catty looks.”

Brooke didn’t respond and he realized she had other things on her mind. As he was leaving, she finally heard him.

“Sounds good,” she said.

Chapter 11

Sitting in the living room dressed in a light beige suit, Jake waited for Brooke.

In the kitchen, she was giving instructions to her son for being good for his grandmother.

Soon, she was ready and he stood.

Looking nice but not overdressed, Brooke was ready.

“I had no desire to be compared to Jenny,” she said as they headed to the car.

Jake was puzzled.

“The last time I was at a party the women all noted that I wasn’t Jenny,” she explained. “That implied she was the opposite of me. Glamorous, sophisticated.”

Jake didn’t respond. They were right, but she wasn’t Jenny because she wasn’t Jenny. She was Brooke. Jake couldn’t compare the two women in his life because he was in love with one of them.

The parking lot of the banquet hall was almost full, but Jake found a spot. As he helped Brooke out of the car, HOA members walked by and greeted them. Brooke squeezed his hand.

Leading her to the event, he noticed furtive glances and outright pointing.

The lady from the park, ‘Jan’ according to her nametag, was thrilled that they showed up. She personally escorted them to their table near the front of the room where a lectern was set up. A dance floor was set up between the lectern and the tables. A few older couples were slow dancing to soft music that came from speakers around the room.

Auction items were on the perimeter of the room. Thanking her, Brooke decided to look at the items. Jake headed to the bar.

“Jake,” a man Jake knew from his daily runs said and they shook hands.

Ordering a glass of wine, Jake stood off to the side to talk.

“I see you brought your wife,” he said, pointing to Brooke. “All the women have been talking about meeting her. Wondering how she got you to settle down. Been trying to get you guys since Christmas.”

Jake glared at the man.

“Just preparing you,” he said, drinking his beer.

“Thank you,” Jake said. Brooke hadn’t been paranoid.

The music faded and Jan announced dinner would be served then they would have an auction. Jake heard people pointing and whispering at him.

Sitting, Brooke joined him smiling, ready to sell their happy relationship to all the members.

“See anything you like,” he asked, leaning into her. The older woman next to him seemed interested in having a conversation.

“I would like to bid on a few things if that’s alright,” she said and Jake nodded. “I’ll tell you which ones and you can control the bidding.”

Agreeing, Jake had to acknowledge the woman next to him.

“Jake? Jake Parker?” she asked. Jake recognized his mother’s friend from church.

“Hello,” he said, not remembering her name.

“We saw you at church for Christmas,” she said. “Is this your lovely wife?”

Brooke squeezed his hand.

“Yes, this is Brooke,” he introduced her and Brooke leaned over him to shake the woman’s hand.

“I’m Mrs. Jameson,” she said, delighted to meet his wife.

The food arrived, but the conversation didn’t stop.

“None of us ever thought we’d see Jake settle down,” she explained.

Brooke let go of his hand and he hoped the woman would notice he was busy.

“Where’s your mother?” she asked.

Jake’s mother was more interested in them attending, so she agreed to watch MJ. Sensing his tension, Brooke asked to switch seats.

“It’s drafty over there,” she explained as she took Jake’s seat.

“Where’s his mother?” she asked again once Brooke was seated.

“She wanted to stay home with MJ,” Brooke explained.

When Mrs. Jameson looked puzzled, Brooke explained.

“He’s my son from my first marriage,” Brooke said. Jake waited for a million questions, but Mrs. Jameson didn’t ask for details.

“That’s nice, dear,” she said and ate quietly. Jake squeezed Brooke’s hand and let go. The couple on Jake’s side was now interested, but he didn’t acknowledge them.

“How did you two meet?” the wife asked and Brooke answered.

“In the city,” she said simply and didn’t offer details. The woman decided not to pry.

The plates were taken away and Brooke leaned in between courses.

“Look like I’m saying something interesting,” she whispered and Jake nodded. When the dessert came, she heartily ate the pudding. Brooke loved chocolate.

Jake pushed his toward her and she blushed. She took it anyway.

“You’re such a cute couple,” Mrs. Jameson said. Brooke smiled.

Jake sighed in relief when Jan started the auction. After a long boring HOA statement, Jan called up the auctioneer and the bidding began.

There were two items in which Brooke was interested. The first was a weekend at a cabin in the woods, Jake bid until he won. It was a good donation to the cause for new playground equipment.

The second item was trickier. Every man in the room wanted it. It was a father-son baseball day with a famous baseball player. It was the last item of the evening.

After nudging him that she wanted him to bid, Brooke lowered her head and waited for the outcome.

Jake bid until they reached a limit above what he thought he was willing to pay. For a moment, he hesitated. Brooke didn't urge him or insist he win. That was up to him. Jake made a grand gesture.

"Sold!" the auctioneer yelled and everyone applauded. Brooke sighed, but didn't look at Jake.

Jan thanked Jake for his contribution and there was more applause. Jake drank his water. He was embarrassed by the praise.

Jan encouraged everyone to dance and mingle.

The night was almost over and they had introduced themselves to the HOA members. There was only one thing left to do.

Standing, Jake held out his hand.

"Shall we dance," he asked and was surprised that he had to clear his throat to get the request out. Brooke looked up. Taking his hand, she stood. Jake led her to the dance floor and members parted, whispering as they passed.

Twirling Brooke, she smiled as he pulled her close for a slow dance.

Resting her head on his shoulder, he felt her breath on his neck.

"You're a good dancer," she whispered.

“My mother sent me to gentlemen school,” he joked, but it was true. She wanted to make a civilized man out of her son. It helped now that he was in the business world. It didn’t hurt that he was also dating and having an international romance with a sophisticated, elegant woman.

Brooke felt different in his arms. He was used to the thin, tall Jenny who met him at eye-level in her heels. In heels, Brooke reached a bit above his shoulders and although she wasn’t overweight, Brooke wasn’t thin. It wasn’t that Jake didn’t think she was attractive, but it was that it didn’t matter. He loved Jenny.

Closing his eyes, Jake remembered what it was like to be close to Brooke. Her body warm and soft next to his, Jake knew that there was more to her than a comparison to his girlfriend.

To everyone else, she looked like a demure, boring housewife. But Jake knew that she left everything behind when they were alone in the dark.

Jake lived with the pre-conceived notion that a woman’s sexual prowess was equal to how she dressed and presented herself. With that in mind, he dated women who looked sexy. Women like Brooke didn’t look like they’d be very interesting in bed. They looked like they would make good mothers, but not interesting lovers.

Brooke was interesting. She brought a new approach to positions he thought he had already mastered. A woman had never taught Jake anything before and he was impressed.

The music stopped momentarily and Jake held on for another dance. When the music faded, Brooke pulled away.

“Let’s go home,” she announced and Jake agreed. Leading her out, members said “good-bye” and they just nodded and went to their car.

Brooke didn’t say anything on the way home. Greeted by his mother, Jake waited for the questions.

“How was it,” she beamed, putting down her book.

Sitting on the living room couch, they gave her the details.

“We ate, we bid on a couple auction items, we came home,” Jake said breaking down the evening and leaving out the dance.

“We bid on a weekend at a cabin,” Brooke interjected. “Do you want to come with MJ and me?”

Jake realized he wasn’t invited and a part of him was disappointed.

“I would love to,” she said. “But when you’re my age, it’s not that great. You’ll have a great time.”

Brooke nodded. Jake knew she at least wanted to offer.

“I’m glad you went,” his mother said, getting up to leave.

“I’ll walk you home,” Jake offered.

“I’m going to check on MJ and then go to bed,” Brooke announced. His mother wished her good-night and they left.

The pathway to his mother’s house was lit and he made sure she was safe inside before leaving.

When Jake got back, Brooke was in her robe getting a glass of water. It was hard to believe the woman roaming his home in flannel pajamas and big robe could possibly be capable of offering so much pleasure.

Sensing Jake watching her, she stopped.

“You didn’t have to bid that high,” she said.

“It seemed important to you,” he replied.

“It was,” she said.

Standing there, Jake realized he was staring and started to go to his room when Brooke said his name softly.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she whispered and he knew what she meant.

“Come up when you want and we won’t talk,” he offered and headed up the stairs to his room.

Anticipating her arrival, Jake undressed and took a shower. In the dark, naked under his blankets, he waited.

There was a knock and the door opened and closed. Brooke’s shadow approached and she sat next to him on the bed.

Holding her hand, he waited for her to proceed.

Jake learned another thing that night. Although he liked to lead on the dance floor, he didn’t mind when she led in the bedroom.

Chapter 12

Getting ready for their camping trip, Brooke double-checked her list with the items she had put in the kitchen waiting to be loaded in the SUV they had rented.

It was just supposed to be her and MJ, but MJ had talked Jake and his mother into going as well. Jake said he'd meet them there.

When everything was verified, Brooke loaded the SUV. They had a cabin, but Brooke wasn't sure what kind of amenities it had.

Packing blankets and food and a first aid kit, she loaded MJ in the car and Jake's mother was the navigator at her side. Brooke had bought MJ a fishing cap and vest, and he had worn it for days.

Brooke was glad Jake would be there. She had never fished in her life and he had some camp experience.

Brooke only hoped Jake kept his promise. Ever since the day with the baseball player, MJ never stopped talking about how great his new daddy was. If he was happy, Brooke was happy.

Knowing that at any moment Jake could call their relationship off, Brooke slipped into a dark mood, but there were no guarantees in life. At least with Jake, she knew it could come to an end. She would just have to handle the transition well when it did.

Singing songs and eating chips, they arrived at the campsite in the mountains two hours later. At first Brooke only saw small cabins, RVs and tents and she fretted that she hadn't packed enough. Reading the address and getting directions from a ranger, they drove up a long driveway and they were all surprised at the cabin.

Flowers lined the porch where two rocking chairs and a chair swing hung. It was a two-story house with a log cabin facade. It wasn't the cabin in the woods she anticipated and she was relieved.

Brooke let MJ out of the car and he ran up the steps, happy on the porch swing.

"Mommy, come push me," he begged and Brooke joined him.

“It’s not that kind of swing,” she corrected him.

“Should I do the honors?” her mother-in-law asked and Brooke handed her the key. Standing, Brooke followed her into the cabin.

“This is not what I expected,” Brooke said while looking at the interior that was designed after an expensive lodge.

“This must be the Hutchinson cabin,” his mother remarked. “They’re always bragging about their great cabin in the mountains.”

Brooke fought the urge to agree with the Hutchinsons. It was a point of pride for his mother and not a debating point.

Joining them, MJ ran up the stairs and looked in each room.

“I found my room!” he called down to them. “There are fish on every wall!”

Unpacking the food, Brooke opened the refrigerator and there was a note for them to enjoy themselves. From the Hutchinsons. The refrigerator was fully stocked. Brooke put the note in her pocket. She would send a thank-you note later.

While they were fixing dinner, MJ asked about Jake, and they consoled him and said he would probably arrive the next day. Still wearing his fishing vest, MJ begged for a story and his grandmother read him a story and Brooke read a story.

“Can I go fishing tomorrow?” he pleaded.

“When Jake gets here,” Brooke said and hoped Jake didn’t break his promise.

After breakfast the next day, Brooke took MJ for a walk and they picked up leaves and pinecones. When they got back for lunch, Jake’s sports car was in the driveway.

Running and calling his name, MJ joined Jake on the porch swing.

“Can we go fishing!” MJ pleaded and Jake nodded. Brooke noticed that he seemed distressed or sad about something.

“Go get your floaties,” Brooke said and MJ obeyed. Climbing the stairs, Brooke made eye contact with Jake.

His eyes were wide and green, and he was trying to figure something out in his head.

Joining him on the swing, Brooke asked if everything was alright.

Jake looked at her and studied her face.

Nodding, Jake stood.

“Did you bring the gear I left?” he asked.

“It’s in the back,” she said, nodding toward her rented SUV.

Jake sighed and went to the SUV to inspect the gear. Flying through the door and down the stairs, MJ started rambling about fishing. Brooke decided Jake needed some support.

“I’ll help you with the gear,” Brooke said and joined them. Jake looked relieved. Taking the tackle box and MJ’s hand, they headed down the path to the lake.

At the end of a wooden dock, they sat and Jake showed MJ how to bait his pole and other stuff Brooke would never have known how to do. Soon, they were quietly waiting for a tug on the line. Brooke could feel Jake thinking.

An hour almost passed and MJ was getting bored. Then, there was a tug at Jake’s line and he had MJ sit with him as they reeled in the fish together. As much as MJ wanted to fish, when he saw the fish wiggling and trying to get off the line, he wanted to let it go.

Jake looked at Brooke puzzled as he agreed and released the fish back into the water.

“I’m hungry,” MJ declared and Brooke contained her amusement.

Gathering all their gear, Brooke and Jake followed MJ as he ran up to the path and waited.

“I don’t think he understands the concept,” Brooke said when MJ was out of earshot.

“I thought we were going to be there all day,” he confessed. “I’m kind of glad.”

“I know it doesn’t seem like you did anything,” she confided, “but he will remember this forever. He still hasn’t stopped talking about the baseball day. He thinks you’re the coolest dad in the world.”

“I wish his father was here for this,” Jake said, looking at the ground.

“Me too,” Brooke confessed.

Walking in silence, they reached the house and had a snack.

Declaring it nap time, MJ protested but he was asleep in minutes. Brooke also fell asleep on her bed.

When she woke, she took another hike with MJ.

Jake’s mother was making dinner when she got back and they all ate quietly. Everyone was exhausted.

After dinner, Jake made a fire in the pit at the side of the house and they melted marshmallows on a stick and put it between chocolate bars. Brooke had forgotten the graham crackers.

Singing songs and looking at the stars, Brooke was happy that MJ was having fun and looking at nature in wonder. *Why hadn’t I done this before?* she thought as they did nothing but look at the bright stars that hung like white Christmas lights from the night sky.

Jake picked up a sleepy MJ and helped Brooke put him to bed. His grandmother read a story, and Brooke read a story.

“Good-night, dear,” his mother said before they passed by her door. Brooke hugged her and thanked her for coming.

Joining Jake on the couch, she closed her eyes while listening to the crackling logs in the fireplace.

“I have no idea what I’m going to do to entertain him tomorrow,” Brooke murmured.

“I have to head out tomorrow afternoon,” Jake said. “I can take him to see a ranger if you want.”

Brooke opened her eyes and turned to him.

“That would be incredible,” she whispered, surprised at his offer.

Jake closed his eyes again. Brooke reached out and squeezed his hand.

“What’s bugging you,” she said softly. Jake sighed.

“Let’s take a walk,” she said. Jake opened his eyes.

“Are you serious?” he said weakly.

“Or not,” she shrugged. “It’s up to you.”

Jake considered it for a moment, then stood and stretched.

“I’ll meet you outside,” he said and Brooke nodded.

Grabbing a blanket from the front closet, Brooke knew where she wanted to go. When Jake joined her, she led him to a clearing along the path and laid out the blanket. Reclining on the blanket, she clasped her hands under her head and stared at the stars. Jake joined her and they lay together just looking at the stars.

Brooke freed up a hand and carefully intertwined her fingers with Jake’s.

“Why did you look so angry in church that first Christmas,” he asked. It had been on his mind for a long time. “The whole time the preacher was giving the sermon, you just seemed angry.”

“I was?” she asked, trying to remember that day.

“I know what I was worried about,” he joked weakly.

“Being struck down by lightning,” she assumed.

At first he thought she wanted to forget about the question, but then she answered.

“I didn’t want to be inspired,” she shrugged.

Odd observation, Jake thought as a leaf dropped on his stomach.

“Whenever I go to church after being away for awhile, I always forget how inspiring sermons can be, but then I leave angry,” she said. “Things happen for a reason and sometimes it’s too hard to accept that if it’s true. I didn’t want to be inspired. I’m still angry.”

Jake could feel it from where he lay barely a few inches from her and he wished he hadn’t brought up the subject.

Still holding his hand, they simply looked up at the stars. There were no more questions. There was no request of either of them from the other.

Of all the things they could do out in the woods, Brooke thought it best to just lay there holding hands.

Sometimes saying nothing was the most powerful support in the world.

Chapter 13

Back in the city, Jake distracted himself with work. The weekend in the mountains was refreshing.

If he had not promised MJ that he would be there, he might not have gone.

Looking out the window at the tall buildings that sprung up like concrete trees, Jake smiled as he remembered MJ's reaction to catching a fish.

The reality of fishing didn't live up to his expectation. That or MJ thought fishing was catch and release.

Jake was also grateful for Brooke. She knew he was worried about something and that he needed a friend. She took him out and they just looked up at the stars, contemplating their place in the universe. Jake thought maybe she wanted more, but she just wanted to be with him while he figured out his issues.

Remembering the way she consoled him, Jake massaged his hand to conjure up the sensation of just holding hands.

Wanting nothing from him, Brooke amazed Jake.

He really needed a friend, and she knew how to be one.

Vibrating in his pocket, the cell phone commanded his attention. Jake pulled it out. It was the twelfth missed call from Jenny.

Jake had no desire to see her.

"Ignoring me," he heard a familiar voice say and he turned quickly in his chair. Jenny stood by his door in a sexy pose.

"Jenny," he whispered and stood holding onto his desk for support.

"We should talk, Jake," she pouted and Jake was unable to resist her in person.

Grabbing his jacket, Jake followed her out of the office and to their favorite restaurant.

Sitting in a quiet booth, Jake insisted on being across from Jenny.

“Why did you come all the way here?” he asked agitated. Jenny was distractingly beautiful and he was too upset to have a conversation about her betrayal.

“You have to understand, darling,” she pleaded seductively. The waiter brought them drinks. Waiting until he left, Jenny sighed and flipped her hair. She was now agitated at him.

“You could have called me,” he said, not falling for her fake anger. “When the Count passed, you could have come to me.”

Sighing indignantly, Jenny produced a tear.

“You don’t understand, darling,” she said, “I didn’t have a choice. He cut me out of the will.”

“You could have come to me,” he leaned forward and whispered angrily.

Jenny met his anger with insult.

“You still don’t get it, Jake,” she shot back. “I need this title. I’m nothing without it.”

Jake didn’t like Jenny much at that moment.

“You could have at least talked to me before you ran off and married his cousin just because he’s a Duke,” Jake snapped, shaking his head in disgust.

Sitting back in the booth, he glared at the beautiful woman. He only felt betrayal.

“You didn’t tell me before you went out and got married,” she retorted and Jake laughed.

“You’re unbelievable,” he said, finishing off his club soda.

“Maybe we shouldn’t see each other anymore,” she said.

Jake agreed.

“You can go be happy with that boring housewife of yours,” she snapped.

Jake laughed to himself. Standing, he threw some bills on the table.

“It’s been fun,” he said and headed out.

Walking, Jake didn’t stop until he was exhausted. Grabbing a taxi back to his condo, he took a hot shower and lay in bed still angry.

When the Count died, Jake had tried calling Jenny, but she never returned his calls. He didn’t know where she was. He would have flown to her, wherever in the world she was.

Instead, she just married immediately without informing Jake and somehow he was to blame.

Jake knew the irony in feeling betrayal when he was sleeping with a married woman while he was married.

Jake may have hesitated, but he knew Brooke would have understood if he left her for Jenny. It was part of their agreement.

In the mountains, he had been depressed because he had received news that Jenny had remarried without giving Jake a chance to offer his intentions. Sensing his depression, Brooke just held his hand.

Lingering behind to grab something in case she wanted more than a walk, he thought he was looking for human contact. Frustrated at his loss, he thought it would be helpful to have someone to relieve the tension with and have no emotional baggage involved. Brooke did offer human contact and it was more satisfying than any momentary pleasure.

Brooke offered more than just tension relief. She offered her understanding and support. Jake just needed to know he wasn’t alone. Staring at the stars, he was able to work out his feelings and he had come to the conclusion he needed to separate from Jenny.

Marriage wasn’t what he wanted from Jenny if she didn’t want it as well. All he ever wanted was to be with her and she rebuffed him at every opportunity. Jake was not good enough for her. He was common, only good enough for trysts when she was bored.

The phone rang. Jake answered and waited for the person to talk.

“I’m downstairs, Jake,” Jenny said desperately. *“I really need to see you.”* Jake knew she was being dramatic. She had a key to the elevator.

“We don’t have anything to say,” he said.

“I can’t leave this way,” she pleaded.

“Come up,” he said. Jake put on sweatpants and stood with his arms crossed, waiting for the elevator doors to open. When they did, Jenny walked right up to him and hugged him. Jake could never resist her touch.

Before he knew it, they were naked in bed and she was moaning and writhing beneath him. Jake rolled away from her and onto his side. Cuddling up to him, Jenny consoled Jake by massaging his back and arms.

“This doesn’t change anything, darling,” she pleaded through kisses along his shoulder and arm. Turning, Jake looked up at her and pushed her hair back to see her eyes.

“When you’re ready to give up your title,” Jake said through a tight throat, “you come back to me.” Eyes of calm blue turned fierce with stormy fury.

“I expected more from you, Jake,” she muttered as she gathered her clothes. The last thing Jake saw as she walked out was the perfect outline of her naked sexy backside.

Staring at the ceiling, Jake let his mind go blank. He couldn’t comprehend the impact of what he just did. He just sent away the woman he loved.

Jake knew he would feel the pain later. The numbness gave him enough time to ignore the urge to run after her and beg her to come back.

Falling asleep, one thought popped into his brain. Closing his hand, he thought about sitting under the stars while holding Brooke’s hand.

Chapter 14

Jake stayed in the city as long as he could before his mother urged him to come home and visit her.

If he went home, he would have to play the husband and father and he didn't want to be either at the moment.

It wasn't until Brooke called that he decided to return.

"Your mother really misses you," she asserted. "Just visit her for a couple of hours."

"I can't right now, Brooke," he said, choking on his words.

"You can tell her what's bothering you, Jake," she insisted. "If you're alone out there you should come home. You don't have to visit MJ and me. Just go and see your mother."

Without promising anything, Jake said he would take her suggestion into consideration.

That night, Jake got in his car and headed for his condo. On the way, he changed his mind and turned around.

There was someone to whom he needed to talk.

Knocking on the door, he waited patiently and the door opened.

"Can we talk out back?" he asked. Pulling her robe around her tightly, Brooke nodded and followed him to the backyard.

Jake told her about Jenny and she just listened.

As she placed her hand on his, Jake hung his head and wanted to cry, but it didn't come easy to him.

Sitting there, Brooke eventually pulled him up and led him to her room. Pulling off his belt, Brooke told him to lie down. Jake wasn't looking for that kind of consolation.

“Just lie down, Jake,” she whispered. On his side with one hand under his head, Jake closed his eyes. Brooke got in bed behind him and pressed her clothed body against his like a shield. Reaching over to hold his hand, she just lay with him in silence.

Cradled in her embrace, Jake came as close as he could to crying. Brooke held him tighter and soon he fell asleep.

When he woke up, he was alone, but he felt better.

Bacon and eggs beckoned him to the kitchen. Brooke had the door closed and Jake waited until she had gotten MJ off to school. Jake liked MJ, but her son took a lot out of him and he was already depleted. He would see him later for dinner.

Opening the door, Brooke said it was all clear.

“I made bacon and eggs,” she tempted him. “There’s a fresh pot of coffee.”

Jake was hungry.

Sitting at the island, he ate all the bacon she could make and dipped buttery toast in the yolks of four over-easy eggs. His morning run would be delayed.

Sitting across from him, holding a mug of steaming coffee, Brooke watched him eat.

“I don’t want to be your rebound, Jake,” she said out of nowhere.

Puzzled, Jake looked up.

“I don’t mind hooking up, as they say, once in a while, but I don’t want to be your rebound,” she explained.

“Where is this coming from?” he wondered, not hungry anymore.

Brooke got up and walked into the living room. Baffled, Jake followed.

Sitting on the couch, Brooke stared at the cold fireplace. Standing with his hands on his hips, Jake wanted to know what she meant.

“There’s nothing more to say,” she said, not looking at him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he asserted. Brooke turned to him.

“Have a seat, Jake,” she said. Huffing, Jake sat at the far end of the couch away from her.

“You just broke up with the love of your life,” she explained slowly. “You’re going to seek solace or vengeance with your next lover. I prefer you get it out of your system with someone else.”

“I wasn’t looking for anything,” he said still confused.

“Not now you’re not,” she insisted. “I don’t want to be caught in the middle of what you’re going through personally.”

Jake understood. It would jeopardize their relationship.

“I guess that’s good to know,” he confided, holding his head in his hands, his elbows digging into his lap.

Jake’s mother came in from the kitchen.

“I saw your car out front,” his mother said. Looking at Jake, she decided to come back at a better time. “Visit me before you leave,” she said and left through the French doors. “Don’t take too long,” she sighed.

Brooke stood and went to her bedroom. Jake heard her door close.

Groaning, Jake stood and went to his room. Changing into his sweats, he took a long run. Showering when he got back, Jake went to lie down in bed. Sighing, he realized it was time to see his mother.

Knocking on her door, Jake greeted his mother who made him tea, and they drank in silence while sitting in her living room surrounded by family photos.

There were new additions to her collection. Family Christmas with MJ, and Jake and MJ at the birthday party had a place of honor among the other photos. All the cracked frames had been replaced and they never spoke about the incident again.

“When I was younger, I had many suitors,” his mother said and he listened. “Your father was among them. I really wanted this one guy, Harold. He was in the army. Your father sent me flowers, all my admirers tried to win my heart. I wouldn’t have it. Harold was the one I loved.”

His mother put down her tea and placed her hands in her lap. Looking out the window, she continued as if Jake weren’t there.

“When I look back, when I think what I would have missed if I didn’t choose your father, I can’t imagine any other life,” she said.

“Did you love him?” he asked softly. Jake wasn’t aware his mother had any feelings about her life with his father except love.

“Jake,” she reprimanded her son. “I didn’t know I loved him. I was blinded by my lust for Harold.”

Jake spit out his tea.

“Lust?” he said in disbelief.

“Don’t get tea all over my photos,” his mother scolded him and wiped imaginary drips from her precious memories.

“Yes, Jake, lust,” she said. “Lust looks like love. Love doesn’t look like love.”

When Jake looked puzzled she explained it to him in terms he would understand.

“If you’re only with someone because they make you feel good, that’s lust,” she explained. “The person you love makes you happy and angry and frustrated. It doesn’t seem like love at first. Once you realize it, you can’t see anything else. You can distinguish between the two. You have to truly fall in love to understand. Until then, you’ll make mistakes. I just hope you learn from them.”

“Did you talk to Brooke?” Jake asked. He had told Brooke about Jenny in confidence. It was supposed to stay that way.

“I don’t have to talk to Brooke,” his mother admonished him. “I can see you’re unhappy. You’re confused. I’m your mother. I know what worries you.”

“There’s no way you could know about my personal life in the city,” he insisted.

“You have a lot to learn, son,” she said. “Just don’t confuse your emotions.”

“What does that mean?” he asked. It seems he had heard that before.

Why did everyone feel the need to lecture him about his life?

“So you’re suggesting I just settle?” he said sarcastically. “Find some woman to have kids with? Is that what you did with dad?”

“You think that just because I didn’t have lust for your father I didn’t love him?” she scoffed.

“You think just because she’s not gorgeous like Jenny that Brooke’s boring? You’re just not looking. I know Brooke, and she will defend her family, Jake. You think that’s boring? Having someone you trust to be there for you always? You have to look beyond what you think is beautiful, Jake.”

Jake sighed.

“Go back to the city, Jake,” she urged him. Giving him a reassuring squeeze on the arm she insisted he go back to his single life. “It’s too confusing for you here. Too many distractions. Go back to the city and come back home when you’ve figured it all out.”

Jake nodded.

“Make sure you have dinner and play catch with MJ first,” she said. “He’s missed you. Then head back to the city.”

Jake nodded and got up to leave.

“I love you, Jake,” she said. Jake had never seen his mother so calm.

When MJ came home, they played catch out back and had dinner together.

Sitting in the living room, Jake waited for Brooke to put MJ to bed so that he could say good-bye.

“Jake,” she called and he stood. Brooke was holding a book. “He wanted you to read a story.”

Hesitating, Jake stood and shook his head. He had never read a child a bedtime story.

“It’s just a story, it’s about leaving, you’ll enjoy it,” she coaxed him. Jake walked up to her and explained he’d never read a child a bedtime story before.

With her famous “you’ve got to be kidding me” stare, Brooke handed him the book.

Jake took the book. It was mostly pictures with a few words.

Sitting by his bed on a step stool, Jake cleared his throat and commanded MJ’s attention. The kid had a question about every page and each page only had one sentence.

“Alright,” Brooke said rescuing Jake. “Say good-bye, he has to go back to the city and work.”

Holding out his arms, MJ wanted a hug. Jake looked into his eyes. Hugging the boy, he sighed. Letting go, he stood and left.

“Bye, daddy,” he said and Brooke turned out the light and closed the door just so.

“I’ll walk you to the door,” she said. Standing outside in the driveway, Jake tried to say his good-bye.

“It’s going to get harder, Jake,” she said, hugging her robe close to her chest. “Don’t think about us. You won’t be doing any of us a favor.”

Nodding, Jake turned and walked to his car.

Driving away, he thought about Brooke and MJ and his life at the house.

His mother was right. He had to get away.

How could such a simple life be so confusing?

Chapter 15

With Jake gone to sort out his love life, Brooke went back to her routine. Spending most of the day in her room, she only left to take care of MJ and teach art part-time.

Waking up, getting dressed, making breakfast, walking MJ to school, picking MJ up from school, making snacks, helping with homework, dinner, bath, story and then she was back in her room. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, she added teaching art. On the weekends it was the park or the backyard or both, then to her room.

On weekends she visited her mother and was always happy to see that her mother was doing well at the new facility.

Then it was back to her room.

It was the only place she felt at home. The rest of the house was not hers; it belonged to a bachelor who wanted to show a family living in his house. Brooke made sure MJ didn't make a mess in the common areas or ever climb the stairs to Jake's room.

The backyard had plenty of room to play in and the kitchen was a good place for him to hang out at other times. It was a roof over their heads, but it wasn't their home.

When Mrs. Hurligan told her she was retiring, Brooke thought she was losing a kindly old grandmother and friend. At the party they threw to celebrate the time she had spent with the family, Mrs. Hurligan reassured her everything would be alright.

"I know I'm leaving them in good hands," she had told Brooke.

Wanting to cry and beg the sweet woman to stay, she hugged her instead and wished her well. Brooke didn't feel that way about her new family.

The other mothers tried to get Brooke to join their clubs or do other mother events, but she had no interest.

As long as MJ was doing well in his classes, that was all that mattered.

Lying in bed after dropping MJ off at school, Brooke stared at the ceiling thinking about nothing.

That's always when Matthew popped into her thoughts and she relived happy memories, but they only made her feel more alone with each passing day.

She hadn't prepared for this, for life after Matthew. Their life had been promising until the accident.

Ripped from the life, the path she thought was straight and forever, Brooke stumbled when it suddenly had forked. Brooke was lost and making plans no longer made any sense.

Rolling toward the happy family photo, Brooke fell asleep.

Waking to the sound of her mother-in-law, Brooke opened her eyes and rolled over.

"I can't take the two of you like this," she scolded Brooke. Sitting on the edge of the bed, his mother told her to get her jacket.

"Today is the new official spa day," she declared and Brooke was puzzled.

"I've got to pick up MJ," she corrected her mother-in-law and rolled over.

"Get up," she said, rolling Brooke toward her.

"Why?" Brooke whined like a petulant child.

"Because," she explained. "I can't help my son, but I sure can get you out of the house once in a while."

Begrudgingly, Brooke was driven to a day spa, had what was supposed to be a relaxing facial, then a back massage. In a better mood, she would have had a great time.

While manicurists painted their toes and fingernails, Brooke knew his mother would want to talk about everything.

"I can't believe my son lets that woman control his life," his mother complained.

"It's none of my business," Brooke droned, but his mother just kept whining about Jake.

“He’s a good looking boy,” she said, examining the fresh coat of paint on her nails. “He could have any woman he wanted.”

Brooke agreed, but she didn’t say anything.

“I don’t know why he doesn’t come to his senses and settle down with a nice young woman and give me a couple of grandkids,” she muttered.

Brooke did not respond. She knew his mother wanted nothing more in the world than to see her son settle down, possibly with Brooke, and give her grandkids and raise them in the house a few hundred feet from her own.

His mother didn’t consider something about her son. Jake was living a bachelor’s life and he had no desire to settle down. Even if he had a family, he most likely wouldn’t be very involved.

Jake led another life in the city. Coming back to the house was an obligation.

It worked out well for Brooke, but she was the one who had to deal with his mother’s disappointment.

It was part of their arrangement.

Jake took care of her family, and she took care of his. Along the way, there were a few additional things they took care of, but those were rare occasions. Occasions when Brooke felt both pleasure and guilt, close intimate contact mixed with feelings of betrayal.

Jake was an incredible sex partner, a compatible sex partner, but he wasn’t Matthew.

In the dark though, a small part of her could feel what she felt when making love to Matthew. It was much easier in the dark.

They had an understanding, an unspoken arrangement. His mother probably knew, but she didn’t pry or encourage them.

She just dragged Brooke out and complained that her son needed a good woman to tie him down.

Brooke was not interested in settling down with Jake. Having casual sex with him, that was a possibility, but there was no way she was going to be able to give his mother what she wanted.

Jake was a man. There was no time limit for him to have a family as long as he was healthy.

Brooke nodded or shook her head at his mother's comments, and they had tea while waiting for their nails to dry.

Every week?

Jake's mother talked on and on and Brooke didn't think she could spend one day a week agreeing with his mother.

Driving home, Brooke mentioned that her art teaching would be taking up more of her time.

Disappointed, her mother-in-law acknowledged that it was alright.

"We can do this once a month," Brooke conceded feeling guilty. His mother seemed so excited about spending time with her.

"It's a date!" she said and all was well with the family again.

Brooke was still holding up her end of the agreement, on her own terms.

Chapter 16

In the city, Jake only felt more depressed that Jenny had married another man. Jake had always hoped that once the Count passed, she would come to him and they would live together without other obligations. He wasn't looking for marriage, but he was looking to spend his life with the love of his life.

Barred from coming home until he worked out his confusion, his mother would call to see how he was doing, but when she advised him to wise up and settle down, possibly with Brooke, Jake found an excuse to get off the phone.

Jake had no desire to settle down. Brooke was nice and incredible in bed, but he wanted to be with Jenny.

Settling down with Jake wasn't something Brooke considered either. She wasn't waiting at home for him to return and declare his love and settle down.

Except for casual sex a few times, they were just two people living together leading separate lives.

She fulfilled the role of wife and he looked like a good family man when he was at the house.

With Brooke keeping his mother happy, Jake didn't have to go back to the house. Everything he needed was in the city.

Soon his days were filled with parties and he allowed himself to be set up on dates. All he had to do was go out to dinner. Drinking wine, eating great food, talking about politics and then a quick kiss and he never saw the woman again.

Over and over Jake compared the women to Jenny. Even Brooke. None of them would ever be Jenny.

A month went by and Jake still had no desire to get back to the house.

It wasn't until his mother called and mentioned that Brooke had hurt herself walking in the rain that Jake decided it was time to check in on his other life.

Arriving at the house, Jake found Brooke making dinner, her arm looked bruised, but she looked fine. His mother made her injuries sound much worse.

Running up to him, MJ grabbed Jake's legs and welcomed him home. Patting MJ on the head, Brooke nodded.

"Do you want dinner?" she asked.

"Sure," he said. "I'm going to get changed."

Feeling ridiculous, Jake changed into his sweatpants and shirt and headed back to the kitchen.

"If you want dessert, you'll finish your peas," Brooke reprimanded her son. Jake sat at the end of the table and they dined in silence on meatloaf and peas, with extra gravy.

"What brings you back?" she asked casually as she gathered the plates and sent MJ to play in his room.

"The usual," he shrugged. He wanted to make sure Brooke was alright. Then he would head back.

"Your mother said you had an accident?" he said, pointing to her bruise.

Brooke laughed and rubbed her arm.

"I tripped on a branch that had fallen in the rain," she explained. "Hardly an accident."

"Good to see you're doing well," he said and sighed. His mother was very clever.

"By the way," she warned Jake, "there's this carnival next week and I know MJ's going to beg you to go, so I'm warning you in advance. Let him know you're busy or that you have to go back to the city."

"Good to know, thank you," he said. This was the hardest part of their arrangement. Even though being around MJ exhausted him, he hated disappointing the kid.

"Better go say 'hi' to your mom," she said.

“I know,” he replied and headed to his mother’s house.

His mother opened the door before he knocked.

“You’re home!” she exclaimed and hugged him.

“Good to see you, mom,” he said as she dragged him to her living room couch and pulled him down to sit next to her.

“You said ‘hi’ to Brooke and MJ, right?” she asked rhetorically.

“We had dinner,” he shrugged.

“It’s good to see you,” she said.

“I have to get back to work,” he said, ready to go. Jake did not want a lecture.

“There’s a carnival next week,” she said, suggesting something to Jake.

“I know, Brooke warned me,” he replied.

“Doesn’t it sound like fun?” she asked.

“I’m going back to the city,” he stated and got up to leave.

“I know,” she said as she stood and they hugged.

Shaking his head as he headed down the path, Jake decided to go back to the city immediately.

“Please don’t ask Jake if he wants to go,” he heard Brooke telling MJ as she was closing his door for the night.

Jake climbed his stairs and closed the door behind him.

When he left the house, life went on. While he was still trying to figure out how to resolve his breakup with Jenny, the people in his house continued living even when he was away.

Brooke and MJ and his mother weren’t just people who lived in his house, they were a family that missed him when he was gone. Everyone except Brooke, that is, who understood the rules.

It would be easy to tell MJ he didn't have time to go to the carnival or whatever event to which he wanted a father to take him. When he left, he didn't have to deal with the disappointment.

Jake had not factored this in when he entered into an agreement with Brooke.

Lying in bed Jake had a decision to make. He could leave without seeing the disappointment, decline and deal with the disappointment, or take the kid to the carnival.

Falling asleep, Jake hoped he would have an answer when he woke up.

He did not.

Taking a morning run, Jake returned to find Brooke home from taking MJ to school. Brooke offered to make him breakfast.

"I'll just grab a bowl of cereal," he said and she went to her room.

Eating alone, Jake finished and headed to his room. As usual, Brooke's door was closed.

Showering, Jake lay on his bed naked. The door was closed so he was totally startled when Brooke knocked on the door and opened it unexpectedly to announce he had a phone call.

Both stunned, Brooke turned away when Jake grabbed the sheet and pulled it over him.

"You left your phone downstairs," she said while holding the ringing phone and putting it on the floor.

"Thank you," he said, catching his breath.

Without another word, Brooke was gone, the door closed behind her.

Putting on a clean pair of sweatpants, Jake grabbed his phone.

Spending an hour with his co-worker, Jake helped resolve a contract issue then hung up his phone.

Although they had been with each other intimately, Jake was startled because neither he nor Brooke had seen the other naked. She preferred the room dark.

Knowing she would be embarrassed, Jake went down to talk to her. Making lunch in the kitchen, Brooke blushed when she saw Jake.

“I am so sorry, that won’t happen again,” she said. “Do you want a sandwich?”

“Sure,” Jake said and he sat while Brooke made another sandwich. Placing a plate in front of Jake, Brooke did not look at him.

They didn’t talk while they ate.

When they did make eye contact, Jake saw Brooke blush so red she looked like she had a sunburn. Eyes demure met eyes unsure.

Was it the access that made him want Brooke? Was he interested in casual sex because she was a lonely widow who needed occasional sexual gratification? Was he attracted to her or did he like the fact they had an uncomplicated sex life?

Jake still could not understand why the woman he shared a house with was becoming more than just a partner in their made-up life. She was now a friend and a casual lover.

When he heard she had been in an accident, he was concerned for her safety.

Was it just an obligation?

“When do you pick up MJ?” he asked, suddenly hungry for something else.

“Two hours,” she said, understanding his request.

Without blinking, they both rose suddenly and Jake grabbed her hand as they climbed the stairs two at a time.

While he pulled off his clothes, Brooke pulled the shades and joined him in bed.

This was a different Brooke again, a very vocal and uninhibited Brooke not concerned they would be heard by anyone else in the house. Jake couldn’t believe the woman who blushed at seeing him naked was now moaning loudly, wrapped around him tightly.

Parting, they were both breathless.

Before he could catch his breath, Brooke was up, her clothes on, and ready at the door before Jake could react.

“Remember, if you don’t want to go to the carnival leave now or let him know you have to get back to work,” she said between heavy breaths. With that, she closed the door behind her and was gone.

Still gasping, Jake couldn’t think about anything but the incredible creature that had appeared when the room was dark.

Jake knew that when he saw her in the light, she would seem either nonchalant or ashamed at their sexual encounter.

Knowing that she would be picking up MJ at school, Jake grabbed his clothes, stumbled into them and rushed downstairs. Running outside, Jake raced up to her.

Startled, Brooke was concerned when Jake ran up to her.

“Is there an emergency?” she asked.

“No, I just wanted to pick up MJ with you,” he said, slightly out of breath. The three-mile run was no comparison to the workout she had just given him.

Walking again, Brooke stared at the sidewalk and wrapped her sweater tightly to her chest.

“Why are you really here, Jake?” she asked and scrutinized him with her questioning eyes.

“I don’t get it, Brooke,” he said. “You hang around the house lifeless, then all of a sudden it’s like another person is unleashed.”

Jake couldn’t believe he was being so candid. Didn’t understand why he needed to question such an incredible arrangement. Sex without guilt. Wasn’t that the goal, the perfect arrangement?

“Like most people, Jake,” she lectured him. “I have many sides. You choose to see what you want. If you really knew me, you’d know I’m a bit more complicated than you want to believe.”

She was right. Jake did have a pre-conceived notion of the woman.

Looking sexy, Jenny was a sexual person. Jake was used to a person being what they presented.

Widow, mother, wife, art teacher, lover. Jake was surprised every time she took on a new role.

“It’s best not to talk about it, Jake,” she warned him.

She was offering him guilt-free uninhibited sex on a casual basis. Why did he feel the need to analyze it?

“I won’t,” he promised. Walking in silence, they waited at the front of the school and MJ ran up to them when the bell rang.

“Daddy!” he yelled happily and Jake braced for the impact. Patting his head, Jake looked up at Brooke.

Staring at the sidewalk, Brooke still disliked MJ calling Jake such an affectionate name, but it made her son happy, so she didn’t say anything.

Walking back to the house, MJ asked Jake to take him to the carnival.

“It will be so much fun!” he said.

“Remember what I told you,” Brooke lectured him. “Jake is busy. He has to get back to the city.”

Disappointed, MJ looked at the sidewalk as they walked.

Brooke did not plead with Jake or beg Jake to change his mind.

Sensing that part of Brooke did not want MJ to get too attached to Jake, he made his decision carefully. Another part also wanted him to play the father role.

“I may be able to change my plans,” Jake said without thinking.

Looking up at him incredulously, MJ hugged his legs and then ran up the driveway yelling that he was going to the carnival.

Glaring at him, Brooke shook her head and sighed as she followed.

Jake didn't know what changed his mind. It wasn't the disappointment in MJ's eyes. It wasn't the desire to be a good daddy to MJ.

It had something to do with the fact that Jake wanted to know what his made-up family was like when he was not around.

If he drove away without going to the carnival, he would miss an opportunity to see Brooke and her family as they were.

Jake had been treated to glimpses and flickers of insight into her true personality. Somewhere between depressed housewife and insatiable lover, a stable personality ruled Brooke, but Jake had not been privileged to enjoy that woman's company for very long.

One minute a water fight at her kid's birthday party, the next uncoiling at his touch. Having dinner with his mother, then Brooke throwing all his mother's pictures on the lawn to retrieve the one his mother had taken.

What about the night she just held his hand under the stars?

At Christmas she had pleaded for him to go, follow his desire to be with the woman he loved.

Jake had, wholeheartedly. He had run as fast as he could away from her and the family life that was designed for no other reason than to placate his mother.

No longer the master of his own home, the women had sent him away to deal with his heartache over breaking off his relationship with Jenny.

That's what he had done. He could no longer hang out at his house in misery, it would interfere with the life he had created and no longer controlled.

A sort of jealousy overtook him when Brooke just told him to go back to the city. She didn't need him to complicate her life. She could take her son to the carnival herself. His mother would find nothing but joy in the adventure.

Wanting desperately to interact in his own life, Jake wanted to go to the carnival. Wanted to see if he was missing out on anything.

If it were as mundane and provincial as he expected, he could just head back to the city. Life would resume as normal

Following Brooke and MJ, Jake headed to the kitchen.

Had they actually been married, living in the same room, he would have been sleeping on the couch.

Chapter 17

When Jake announced he had to get back to the city and would be back in time to take them to the carnival, MJ was completely excited, but Brooke glared at him.

“Why would you do that, promise him you’d go and then leave?” she berated him after his mother took MJ to school.

Jake pushed away his coffee and met her anger with calm.

“I will be back,” he promised, and left the room.

Upstairs, Jake put all his papers and his laptop in his briefcase as he braced himself for a lecture.

Sitting at the island drinking coffee, Brooke didn’t say anything as Jake put on his jacket and grabbed his keys.

He was already gone in her mind.

“I’ll be back,” he promised, and she stood and walked out without saying anything.

Trying to resolve a major international contract dispute, Jake realized he might have promised too soon.

As the time approached for the carnival, he found himself so embroiled in the problem that making the carnival seemed unimportant.

When they finally came to a resolution, Jake realized he was two hours past the time he promised to meet Brooke.

Driving as fast as he could safely, Jake navigated the speed traps and dialed Brooke on his phone. When she didn’t pick up he called his mother.

“Where are you?” she scolded him above the noise of people having fun. “MJ is so disappointed.”

“I’m on my way,” he yelled so she could hear him and they agreed to meet at the food court.

Parking his sports car as far away from the haphazardly parked cars in the dirt lot of an abandoned construction project, Jake took off his suit jacket, rolled up his sleeves and took off his tie. Looking more casual, he tried not to be concerned that his designer shoes were being compromised by the dust and rocks he stumbled over on his way to the food court.

Sitting at a table eating hamburgers and cotton candy and ice cream, his mother and Brooke were overcompensating to make up for Jake's absence.

"Daddy!" MJ yelled, standing on the bench of the picnic table and pointing at him with sticky fingers.

I'll just get them dry cleaned, he told himself as MJ raced to him and grabbed his slacks.

His mother applauded, but Brooke didn't even glance at him.

"I want to go on the Spin Blaster, but mom says I'll get sick," he whined.

"Maybe she's right," he said as they sat at the table. "I would get sick on that as well."

"You would?" he exclaimed incredulously. Jake really wanted someone to wipe MJ's face. The ice cream was glue for the cotton candy and MJ's mouth looked fuzzy pink.

Pouring water over a napkin, his mother wiped MJ's face and Jake was relieved.

"Maybe we can find something that won't make us both sick," he said and MJ looked to Brooke for approval.

"We'll meet you back here in an hour," she said, not looking at Jake or revealing the true intensity of her anger.

When MJ held out his hand, Jake saw the sticky fuzz and hesitated. Grabbing another napkin and dousing it with water, Brooke wiped MJ's hands and lectured her son.

"No running, hold hands and no more junk food," she told him.

Not really listening, MJ danced back and forth like an addict in the middle of a high. When Brooke was done, MJ ran to Jake and took Jake's hand as he dragged him away.

Looking for the most innocuous rides, Jake made them sound more interesting and MJ was satisfied with the slower attractions.

Dizzy and exhausted, they made their way back to the table and MJ was excited about another attraction.

“I want a stuffed giraffe!” he yelled, crashing into Brooke breathlessly. Puzzled, Brooke looked to Jake for an explanation.

“There’s a bottle toss game and the big prize is a giraffe,” Jake explained.

Looking at MJ, a mischievous grin crossed Brooke’s angry face.

“I guess Jake will have to win it for you,” Brooke said and Jake knew it was payback time.

How hard could it be to knock over some bottles?

Jake found out as he shelled out bill after bill for another try. Each time he failed, MJ was disappointed. He wanted to say he would buy the kid a giraffe, but Brooke had challenged him. It was punishment for a promise he hadn’t kept.

Just missing each time, Jake was about to give up when physics worked for him and the top bottles pulled down the bottom ones. Jake hadn’t realized what he had done until MJ went hysterically crazy.

Raising his arms in victory, Jake turned to hug everyone in triumph but realized only his mother and MJ were sharing in his glory.

Holding the giraffe that stood equal to his height, MJ was ready for the next adventure.

“The bouncy house,” he declared, forgetting about the giraffe. Holding the prize, Brooke shook her head as MJ ran ahead with Jake’s mother to the big air-filled attraction.

“You’re a hero,” she said sarcastically, trying to hang onto the prize MJ had wanted so desperately earlier. Jake was still living his high but he still didn’t realize how different children were from adults.

Winning the prize should have been the penultimate moment, they should have cheered and gone home, but it was off to the next great adventure.

“When you didn’t show up I had to make up for your lie,” she said. Jake took the giraffe from her and tucked it under his arm.

“Don’t say you were too busy, or anything,” she said. Walking slightly ahead, unburdened by the prize, Brooke stopped and turned to face him.

“Just promise me you’ll never promise him anything again,” she demanded.

Trying to hold the giraffe, Jake realized his mistake.

“I will promise never to promise anything to MJ again,” he declared, mulling it over in his head and hoping he correctly said what he meant.

Relieved, Brooke sighed and started walking again. Jake followed closely behind. When they got to the bouncy house, they sat on a bench.

Sooner than expected, MJ was out of the bouncy house and Jake’s mother motioned for them to follow. She looked alarmed, so they left the giraffe alone on the bench and Brooke ran ahead.

As Jake arrived, he stood next to his mother who was watching in horror as Brooke pulled her son away from an argument with another boy.

“It’s not true,” MJ yelled at the boy. “You’re a liar. They’re not getting a divorce just cause they don’t sleep in the same bed,” MJ was yelling and Jake was horrified as well. The mother of the other boy stood by watching and realized she should intervene.

“Darryl, don’t be rude,” she seemed to reprimand her son. Brooke was controlled.

“Let’s go, MJ,” she said, turning him away from the argument.

“Tell him he’s a liar,” MJ demanded.

The other boy just smirked at MJ. That wasn’t the worst part, Jake saw the mother smirk as well.

Knowing Brooke just well enough, Jake became tense. He knew she was capable of great fury, and this seemed like the time to unleash it. Even he was feeling defensive at the obvious attack on his family.

“They’re just kids,” Brooke said calmly but loudly as she found the safety of her family. Once in their circle, she made a civilized version of her usual attack. “They only know what others teach them,” she snapped back at the mother. Jake watched the other mother’s reaction. Cringing slightly, the woman was about to leave with her son.

“Too bad you have to make others miserable just because your own marriage collapsed,” Brooke said as if simply wishing the woman well. Glaring, the woman jerked her son away.

Without another word, Brooke walked away holding MJ’s hand. Seeing the giraffe, he begged to hold it and Jake grabbed it as they left the carnival.

When he arrived at the house just behind them, Jake figured Brooke was putting MJ to bed, so he passed through the living room to go to his room when he realized he was not alone. Sitting in the dark, a sleeping MJ on her lap, Brooke didn’t acknowledge Jake.

Worried, but not sure about what, Jake walked over and sat on the armchair next to the couch and said nothing.

Making out her face as he adjusted to the darkness, Jake realized she was in deep thought and Brooke was getting more and more furious as the anger ratcheted up in her brain.

“I never considered this when Melinda made the proposal,” she said quietly. “I thought MJ would be protected. I never thought this through. Never realized he’d be caught in the middle defending my actions. What the hell kind of mother does that. What kind of mother watches as her kid defends her lie and she doesn’t say anything?”

Silent again, Brooke sighed and another wave of anger overcame her.

“I saw what that other mother was doing and I saw myself,” Brooke confided. “What she did was reprehensible, projecting her misery on her child. I realized I was no better. No better and no worse,” she mused.

“I don’t know how to resolve this, Jake,” she said. “I know I have to explain something to MJ. He can’t go on thinking we’re this wonderful family. That there are many different kinds and he lost the kind that he thinks he has.”

“He’s just a kid,” Jake interjected. “If you think you’ve already messed him up, you’d better think it through before you make it worse.”

Turning, Brooke looked at him as if he didn’t have a right to intercede with how she dealt with her son.

“Do you know how many unhappy marriages are out there?” he asked quietly. “You happened to find one of the few happy marriages on this planet. Now you want to take MJ off looking for something that may take time to find again. So what if some angry housewife knows your marriage is just a show for everyone else? Figure out how to deal with it or get out, Brooke. If you think MJ would be better off the way things were, then we’ll discuss it. I just can’t stand the constant self-pity. There’s nothing holding us together now. I know my mother’s heart will be broken but I can deal with that now.”

Eyes darting in confusion, Brooke didn’t know how to respond.

“Some mommies and daddies sleep in separate beds sometimes,” he shrugged. “If that’s not good enough, let me know and we’ll make arrangements,” Jake said and stood.

Looking down at her, Jake knew he had to wake up the core that was dying within her.

“Just don’t base your decision on embarrassment,” Jake recommended. Walking away, he was not proud of himself.

He wasn’t better well adjusted or wiser than she was. It was just that he knew she needed to be motivated, needed someone to get her engine running again.

Flickers of the Brooke that had once lived proved she was a woman who could handle herself if she ever unleashed the inner strength dying inside of her.

Lying in bed, Jake knew that if Brooke ever revived herself, awakened the woman she once was, the woman who held the heart of another so deeply, he would no longer be perplexed by the woman so uninhibited and daring when they shared a bed.

Chapter 18

Brooke thought a lot about Jake's words in the days after the carnival catastrophe. The mother of the other boy had tried to tear her down, and Brooke wanted to run from the devastating embarrassment instead of rebuilding her dignity.

Sitting MJ down, Brooke explained to him exactly what Jake had suggested. It was true. There were marriages based on love and others based on an understanding. She put it in a child-friendly version, but it was still the truth.

Until Brooke understood what she needed to do, this was where she needed to be. If there was ever an emergency, Brooke knew her son had a support system, her mother would be taken care of and that was what mattered.

The fact his mommy and daddy didn't sleep together didn't mean they were going to break up, which worried MJ the most. As soon as she explained it, MJ wanted to go play in the park.

Closing her eyes, Brooke agreed. She knew that the mother would be at the park. She knew that the mother wasn't the only one who looked down on Brooke, pitied her.

Agreeing, they walked to the park and Brooke found her usual spot at a nearby bench where she sat alone. The other mothers clung in groups.

Sitting with a pack of four other women, the mother gave Brooke a glare and that was it. Brooke could handle a glare. These were not her friends.

Looking away, Brooke didn't notice another group of women getting up and heading over to her. Before she knew it, they asked if they could join her. Puzzled and somewhat alarmed, Brooke nodded. It wouldn't do any good to deny them.

"We heard what Miranda did to you at the carnival," one of them consoled Brooke, and she got tense. Was this a different attempt to degrade and pity her?

"That's between us," Brooke said while watching MJ having fun playing with all the kids. Even Darryl joined in as if they had never argued with each other.

“Miranda’s just miserable,” another explained. “Her husband left her for a younger woman.”

Brooke did not want to participate in this kind of gossip. It was counter-productive. Why couldn’t women put their effort into solving the world’s problems? If these women put as much effort into finding a solution to world hunger as they did into making sure no one was happier than they were, no one would starve.

“I don’t like talking about other people’s lives,” Brooke asserted. “I’m just trying to raise a happy healthy kid,” she said.

The mothers didn’t say anything for a moment.

“Aren’t we all,” another woman confessed and the others agreed.

“I haven’t slept with my husband in two months,” one offered and Brooke realized they didn’t understand what she was trying to tell them.

“Mine won’t stop playing those fantasy sports games,” another interjected.

“Mine loves his job more than me,” yet another added and Brooke looked at them puzzled.

“We’re all in this together,” the first woman said and they all sighed. Was she part of their pack now? Brooke had no desire to be a part of their pack.

“We’ll leave you alone, then,” they said and got up to leave. Brooke was grateful. She wasn’t ready to join their group. She wasn’t ready to join any group. With MJ and her mother and her mother-in-law and teaching, she didn’t need any more drama. She was grateful for the women’s honesty and it made her arrangement with Jake feel less undignified than she believed it to be.

Everyone had problems. No one was perfect. Even Matthew drove her nuts with his mountain biking. Brooke did not dwell on that thought.

Jake had offered to provide her with security. That was the most she could ask of anybody at the time. He asked for nothing in return except that she present herself as his wife and make his mother feel needed again.

Someday Jake would find love. Someday Brooke might find love again. Until then, it was true. All mommies and daddies have different relationships. As unconventional as theirs was, MJ was happy and he was healthy. Brooke couldn't hope for anything better than that for the time being.

Sitting at the bench day after day, though, Brooke realized she did need something more. Isolating herself totally was not the best way to show she was trying to be happy.

Once a month, Brooke joined the mothers for lunch. Without going into details about her unconventional marriage to Jake, she learned that she enjoyed sharing parenting tips and information about the best education for her child. Every mother only wanted the best for her children. They all could agree on that.

Chapter 19

Jake was at the house a lot, and one night Brooke happened to mention it to him as they were watching TV in the kitchen on a bench in the far corner of the room.

Looking around, Brooke was always remodeling the room in her head, but he knew she didn't want to suggest changes. Then it would be her home. It would be great if there were a couch where they could relax and watch television. The room was big enough for it.

Watching the news and business reports, Brooke dropped her head backwards in defeat.

"We just heard this story ten times on ten different stations," she cried in exasperation. She could have gone to her own room, but she decided to join him and he hadn't minded.

Without handing her the remote, or looking at her, Jake asked what she wanted to watch.

Grabbing the remote, Brooke turned on a gardening show. Watching a woman digging a hole with her hands and talking about the proper way to plant the flower, Jake tried to grab the remote back, but Brooke held it out of his reach.

The woman started to plant seeds and Jake decided it was time to go.

As he walked away, Brooke turned it to a movie channel and Jake was indignant.

"Were you just trying to get rid of me?" he asked, turning to the amused woman.

Clutching the remote against her chest and tucking her body around it, Brooke pointed to the door.

"That's what you'd like me to do," he said. Brooke ignored him. Jake walked back and sat down.

"You may not comment," she said as Jake was prepared to wait her out.

"I love this movie," he shrugged. "Look at that, their eyes met, it's a horror movie," Jake said, making a comment. Brooke was engaged in the romance.

Ignoring him, Brooke just stared at the screen.

“I’ve always wanted to see this and my room doesn’t always get all the channels,” she whispered, trying to watch the movie. “Disclaimer,” she warned, “there’s kissing.”

At commercial, the remote still in her hands, Brooke put it on the counter when she went to make popcorn.

“It’s starting again,” he said and she poured the popcorn in a bowl and ran back, forgetting the remote. As she clutched the popcorn to her chest, Jake tried to grab some, but she had some rules.

“No flicking them at the TV,” she warned. “You will have to pick it up.”

Nodding, Jake took the bowl she extended to him and it ended up on the bench between them.

Jake never watched romance movies. Never took a date to one. Never watched one late at night. He had seen them, but he never chose to watch one for himself. He knew women loved them.

The only woman who didn’t was Jenny. In all the years he knew her she never took him to a romantic movie unless it was an art flick, and Jake didn’t know what he was watching.

Glancing over at Brooke, he could see a yearning and longing in her eyes. It wasn’t just a movie to her; it was her life being played out on the screen.

“If we reach into the bowl at the same time,” he joked, “would that be a meaningful moment?”

Brooke glared at him.

“I thought you were in love?” she reprimanded him. Jake cringed. “Doesn’t this do anything for you?”

It didn’t. Everything in the movie was geared toward the characters’ eventual confirmation of love and Jake knew life didn’t work that way. At least not for him. Maybe for Brooke, and if it did, that made him sad. *How often did that kind of love come along? How often did it work out?*

Jake reached in for popcorn at the same time she did. Massaging his greasy salted fingers, Brooke made fun of him.

“This was meant to be,” she said, holding his hand to her chest to mock him. “Now that our fingers casually met in a popcorn bowl we can declare our love for each other,” she said in a very whiney voice.

Staring at her, Jake waited for her to finish. He rarely saw the fun Brooke. Even if she was making fun of him, it was nice to see her having fun. Jake realized he could feel her heartbeat and didn’t pull his hand away. It was the same heartbeat he felt when they were together in bed.

“Are you done?” he asked and she pushed his hand away.

“You never felt this way about Jenny,” she said, nodding to the TV.

Jake started to joke with her then realized it wasn’t a joke.

“I thought so,” she beamed, poking him in the arm playfully.

“Your eyes met across a room, I am betting,” she said, leaning back and watching the movie.

“One look and you were in love.” Jake blushed.

Brooke was up on her knees, pointing at Jake victoriously, and she knocked over the plastic bowl. Popcorn flew everywhere and Brooke didn’t care.

Jake had looked across the room and seen Jenny and instantly fell in love. He never thought it was that romantic, but it was what all the movies Brooke watched were based on. Love at first sight. Jake had never been the same. He always thought those men were fools, that his was a more sophisticated relationship. It was just a variation on a theme.

“I knew it,” she declared pointing at him and doing a bizarre victory dance still on her knees.

Jake ignored her.

“You’re picking that up yourself,” he said.

“I don’t care,” she sang joyfully. “Jake is a romantic!”

Brooke suddenly realized Jake had broken up with Jenny.

Eyes wide, hands over her gaping mouth, Brooke sat back and apologized.

“I forgot,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“Just rub it in,” he said and Brooke waddled on her knees over to him and hugged him.

“I got carried away,” she said and Jake absolved her.

“I shouldn’t have made fun of your silly romance movie,” he joked. Brooke clasped her hands around his cheeks and looked sadly into his eyes.

“Now you’re one of us,” she said and it was the way she looked at him or the way she held his face or joked with him, but Jake suddenly wanted to kiss her.

Placing a hand on her back, Jake pressed her toward him and she rested her forehead on his. Jake could feel her breath quick on his cheeks.

Letting go of his cheeks, Brooke slid her soft warm hands down his neck and rested them on his chest. Raising his other hand to her neck, Jake felt her shiver when his hand grazed the skin of her neck as he held her like a fragile animal ready to flit away at any moment.

Guiding her, Jake placed his mouth on hers and lingered, just their lips barely touching. The sensation sent a jolt through his stomach and hot explosions throughout his body. Grabbing his shirt, Brooke flicked her tongue and Jake nearly moaned. Shaking, Brooke waited for him to make the next move. Jake could have just kissed her, but he enjoyed the pleasure of holding her close, getting to feel her skin on his hands, the beat of her heart fast on his hands, the anticipation of kissing her somewhere outside his bedroom.

Resting his tongue just inside his lips, Jake pressed his mouth to hers and he felt her lean back in his embrace and relax into his kiss.

Grasping each other as they engaged in the most erotic kiss he had ever had in his own kitchen, Jake lowered Brooke onto the bench.

Back arched, hair flowing on his arms, Brooke moaned and Jake wanted to just pick her up and take her upstairs, but this was the first time they were intimate in the light and he could actually see her reaction to his touch, so he didn't move them.

Kissing her cheeks and down her neck, Jake tucked his cheek into her kisses and pulled away to catch a glimpse of Brooke lost in the pleasure of the moment, and Jake gasped realizing that must be how she looked when they were wrapped naked around each other, and he got very hard.

Brooke opened her eyes and tilted her head further back and froze. In a movement Jake didn't see coming, Brooke pushed Jake away, rolled onto the floor and was up just as the kitchen door opened. Jake wondered from which ninja school she graduated. She could hear people approaching before she saw them.

"I saw the lights on," his mother said and she peeked in.

"Just watching TV," Brooke reassured her from the sink. Turning on the water, Brooke washed the popcorn bowl that had fallen on the floor.

When did she pick that up?

"Good-night," his mother said and closed the door. When it clicked, Brooke almost collapsed.

"That was close," she said breathlessly, her back against the counter for support. "If she saw us together like that, I would have gotten nothing but baby hints for the next year at least."

Shaking the thought off, Brooke caught her breath. Jake was still trying to figure out what happened.

"Good-night," she said leaving Jake on the bench to gather his senses. The couple in the movie was kissing and he stood and turned it off.

Good-night?

After that kiss, it was just good-night?

Hobbling to her room, Jake peeked in through her open door. Brooke was on her bed facing him in the dark.

He didn't know what to say. He hoped she would have a solution.

"I can't be her replacement, Jake," she said. "If you're looking for a friend for the night, that's fine, but I don't want to be her placeholder."

Jake hung his head. He didn't think she was.

"I need a friend in my room in five," he said.

Closing her door, Jake went to the dining room, grabbed a candle and a pack of matches from the hutch and headed one step at a time to his room.

Placing the melted candle on his nightstand, Jake lit it and waited for Brooke.

A few minutes later, peeking in and gently closing the door and locking it, Brooke stepped carefully toward Jake.

"Very cheesy," she admonished him as she sat on the edge of the bed. Holding her warm cheek in his hand, Jake could see Brooke close her eyes and lean into his caress. Warm, golden candlelight flickered and caught the many emotions he never could see when they were in bed before.

Sliding his hand down her neck and grazing her collar bone, trailing one finger down to her breast, he felt her shiver. Rising to meet her, Jake pulled Brooke to him and resumed their kiss.

Caressing her body, he just wanted to hold her close, feel her heartbeat, her chest rising and falling on his own, and her soft hands exploring and caressing his body.

It was a simple romantic gesture, and he had no idea he was a romantic. Deep down, he needed to feel a connection with a woman stronger than sexual attraction. He thought he could only feel that with Jenny, but as Jake held Brooke, he started feeling something that went beyond friendship or obligation.

This depressed housewife was making him believe he might be able to find a life without Jenny. It was just a flicker of recognition. If he had any chance of being with Jenny in the long run, Jake knew he wouldn't hesitate to take it when the chance was presented.

For the time being, he wanted to explore his attraction to his wife.

Chapter 20

Sitting in the kitchen, Brooke sat straddled on Jake while holding hands and they were laughing about the day MJ wanted him to throw the fish back in the water.

Staring into Brooke's eyes, Jake sighed as their laughter faded.

"I have to discuss something with you," he said and felt Brooke become tense, her eyes on alert.

"I want to make changes to our arrangement," he said, holding onto her waist as Brooke started to pull away.

"Let me explain," he urged, not sure how his change might be received. Brooke didn't move and just stared at him calculating all the options.

"What if I said I wanted to be married for real," he said and Brooke sighed loudly.

"How long do I have?" she asked and Jake was confused.

"What do you mean?" he asked puzzled.

"You want to be with your lover," she shrugged. "How long do I have to transition out of this."

Looking into her eyes already making arrangements for her departure and a million other things, Jake closed his eyes realizing she misunderstood.

"I don't mean to someone else," Jake asserted. "I mean to each other. What if I wanted this to be for real, for there to be no arrangement?"

Brooke stopped making plans and was now recalculating.

"I don't understand," she said.

"You and I are already married," he said, slowly trying to lighten the situation. It was so hard to get to this point and he was afraid he was failing in communicating his intentions.

"I'm not stupid," she said.

“I want us to be husband and wife, man and woman,” he explained. “Sleep in the same bed, you know, married.”

Brooke realized what he wanted and laughed. Clapping his face in her hands and looking deep into his eyes, Brooke shook her head and Jake had no idea what she was thinking.

“You think what we’ve been doing is any indication of what married life would be like?” she asked.

Jake was confused. *What else was there?*

“If I were your wife, I wouldn’t hold back on a lot of things, Jake,” she said. “What we’re doing is fun, Jake.”

“What would be different?” Jake asked, wondering what he missed.

“I would not be happy about the time you spend away from home,” she explained. “I would nag you and accuse you of having an affair. Another thing, I would not hesitate to tell you I hate the interior of this house and would remodel everything,” she laughed. “Sex? You like these intimate moments. Eventually, the fascination would wear off and where would we be? We don’t even really know each other Jake. Just think about that. We bypassed everything. We have never been on a date.”

“Is that what you need?” he asked. Brooke had been married before and he realized she knew what he had missed.

“Think about it for a while,” Brooke said, sliding off his legs and back to the ground. “You scared the heck out of me,” she said walking away.

Jake was left stunned when he thought he was surprising Brooke.

Sitting for a long time pondering her challenge, Jake headed to his room. As he walked by the dining room and living room, he stood looking at what she was talking about.

The house was the same as it had always been. What didn’t she like? What else didn’t she like about him?

Jake didn't say good-night to Brooke. He took the stairs to his room and lay in bed thinking about what Brooke said.

Where did he begin?

Chapter 21

Brooke woke up to the sounds of men talking loudly outside and the sounds of trucks backing up.

“Mommy, mommy,” MJ said, jumping on the bed to wake her up. “There’s men in the kitchen with hammers!”

Brooke bolted out of bed and grabbed her robe.

“Stay here,” she commanded and closed the door on her way out.

Loud pounding greeted her as she pushed open the kitchen door carefully. Tearing down cabinets and ripping out the island, the men didn’t notice Brooke.

“Are you Mrs. Parker?” an overweight man holding a clipboard asked.

“Yes,” she said, remembering she was the Mrs. Parker of the house.

“Your husband sent us,” he explained as he handed her a business card. Brooke quickly read the name of a design firm. Looking up at the man, Brooke questioned him with her eyes.

“Call Mitch over there,” he said gruffly as cabinets fell and her island was carted away.

Brooke nodded and backed out of the kitchen.

Calling Jake, Brooke hung up when she got a busy signal.

Brooke called Mitch.

After Mitch told her Jake had contracted their services to remodel the house, Brooke thanked him and made an appointment.

Holding the phone to her chest, Brooke didn’t know whether to smile or get angry.

Part of her was happy he listened to her about her desire to remodel the house if she was going to be his wife, the other part of her was angry he didn’t consult his wife before making a big decision.

“Good morning, Brooke,” her mother-in-law cheerfully said as she came in through the French doors.

“Your son thought he’d make a grand gesture,” Brooke said, motioning to the kitchen.

“I know,” Jake’s mother confessed. “I told him he should consult you first, but he really wanted to show you he’s trying. He’s never done this before.”

Jake’s mother was beaming. Brooke sighed.

“We’re going to have to discuss this,” she asserted. With her kitchen almost destroyed, though, Brooke really wanted to go through with the project. The house did not feel like her home.

“Yeah, but maybe after they finish,” his mother suggested. Brooke turned to her and smiled.

“That’ll teach him,” she joked.

“I cleared out my extra rooms,” his mother said. “Grab some clothes and whatever you need. This place is going to be dusty in a few hours.”

“Can I come out now,” MJ whined from her room.

“You sure you’re ready for the both of us for about a month?” she asked her happy mother-in-law.

“Since Jake left for college,” she confessed and Brooke knew she was sincere.

“What’s in the room at the end of the hallway?” Brooke asked. She had always wanted to know, but didn’t want to ask. Until now, she hadn’t needed to know.

“That’s just a spare room,” his mother shrugged. “Probably filled with junk. Do what you want.”

“Thank you,” Brooke said and she knew what she would like to do with a spare room.

Packing their clothes and toys for MJ, Brooke moved them into her mother-in-law’s. When the kitchen was cleared, she met with the designer and they mapped out Brooke’s dream kitchen.

From there they discussed the living and dining room. Brooke wanted a fireplace that worked and would be safe for her son.

“One more thing,” Brooke said, motioning for the designer to follow her after she showed him the downstairs concept. Climbing the stairs to Jake’s room, Brooke announced she wanted a few changes to his room as well.

While the house was being torn down and renovated, Brooke took MJ for a visit to her mother’s.

Sitting in bed reading a magazine, her mother was excited to see the two of them. While MJ played with his toys, Brooke told her mother about Jake’s gesture, but she still didn’t have the heart to tell her about their arrangement.

“He’s trying to show you he cares,” her mother said, rubbing her arm and consoling her. “He’s trying to get through to you, Brooke.”

Brooke lowered her head on her mother’s stomach as she had done when she was younger.

“It’s so complicated, mom,” she sighed and her mother massaged her tired head.

“It only gets more complicated, Brooke,” her mother affirmed.

Brooke left consoled, but still confused.

Passing the men and their work trucks and piles of construction material, Brooke carried MJ to his other grandmother’s house.

“Do you have Jake’s address in the city?” she asked when MJ went to get a freshly baked cookie.

“It’s about time you saw how he lives when he’s not here,” his mother asserted and went to her bedroom, returning with Jake’s work information and address to his condo.

“Do you want to watch him for a few days?” she asked and Jake’s mother hugged her.

“Take your time,” she said. “I’ll call if there’s an emergency,” she asserted and Brooke packed for a meeting with her husband in the city.

Arriving in the city, near where she used to live, Brooke didn't go to Jake's condo. Checking into a hotel, Brooke went shopping, met with a hairstylist and made an appointment for a spa day. Brooke the tired mother was not an acceptable date for Jake the wealthy, city dwelling businessman.

In a new suit that accentuated her curves, Brooke took another look at the woman in the mirror.

Where have you been?

When she worked at the gallery, Brooke had always looked business-like before leaving her house. Even after MJ was born and she returned to work, she never left for her job without looking highly professional.

Everything changed the years after Matthew passed. Brooke could feel a part of her slipping away every day and when the gallery had to let somebody go, it was no surprise they chose her.

Tired, exhausted and barely hanging on, she had alienated her co-workers and because the economy was so bad, many of her close friends weren't around anymore. Melinda became her only contact to the outside world. While dealing with her divorce, Melinda had worked hard to get Brooke as much compensation as possible. She really liked Matthew and felt devastated for his widow.

Melinda also worked hard to get Brooke married again.

Ready to meet her husband and ask him out for a date, Brooke drove over to his office and waited for the receptionist to announce her. Sitting on the edge of the lobby couch, Brooke admired the contemporary design and expensive artwork. The view of the city was the best feature in the room.

Jake turned the corner and Brooke stood immediately and felt herself panic. Dressed in a dark suit and tie, his hair slicked back, Jake looked like a model in a men's magazine.

"Brooke?" he said, amazed to see her in the reception area of his office.

Brooke walked toward him maintaining eye contact. She was still uncomfortable with herself and the situation, and needed the familiar presence of his unwavering constant eyes.

“I’m here, Jake,” she said so that no one else could hear. His co-workers tried to look busy, but she knew they wanted to see the woman Jake had married and kept hidden in a house far from the city.

“Is there something you wanted to ask me?” She was not going to invite him to dinner. He had to invite her.

“Would you go out with me tonight,” he said also low enough for only Brooke to hear.

“I’m at the Park Grand on Twelfth,” she said. “I’ll be in the lounge.” Jake looked her up and down admiring her new suit. Brooke turned and walked slowly to the elevator, mainly so she didn’t trip on her own shoes when exiting dramatically.

Back at the hotel, Brooke took a long, hot bath and kept waiting to be disturbed. She wasn’t, but that didn’t make her any less tense. She always felt coiled, waiting to react to the next moment of horror lobbed her way.

Slowly dressing in her red gown with a slit up to her left thigh, Brooke stood and wondered how she compared to Jenny. From what she could gather, Jenny was beautiful and tall and sexy.

Brooke wasn’t short, but she was not the sexy, tall model-type. Matthew always told her she was beautiful and that was all that mattered.

Love blinded him, she always thought. Average was a more apt description. It had nothing to do with any one feature, it just all added up to average.

Jake wasn’t super hot himself, but he had a subtle sexy manner that drew Brooke to him physically. Matthew was not sexy. He was just the most perfect man Brooke had ever known.

Brooke knew there had to be more to her attraction to Jake. After a while, his distant moodiness would overcome any physical attraction that drew her to him.

Taking one last look at sexy Brooke, she headed to the lounge and waited for Jake on a sofa by the fireplace. Knots painfully formed in her stomach and Brooke tried not to grimace. It wasn’t sexy.

Sitting straight when Jake walked into the room and surveyed the atmosphere, Brooke squeezed her hands together until they were white. Rising, she waited for Jake to notice. Jake looked the same as he did when she met him at the office, but he had looked very sexy and it translated well into the evening.

Slowly turning his head, Jake met her gaze and Brooke clenched her fists. Looking her up and down again, Jake winked and Brooke smiled.

Sauntering over to her, Jake introduced himself.

“I was looking for my wife, but I thought I’d come say ‘hi’ to you instead,” he said in a very deep, sexy voice. Brooke took his hand and contained herself. She was so nervous and she had already been intimate with him. It was as if they were meeting for the first time.

“Nice to meet you,” she said, but choked and had to repeat herself.

Jake pulled her close. In his familiar embrace, the masculine scent of his cologne filling her senses and reminding her they were already old friends, Brooke sighed and melted to the warm touch of his hands on her neck and back.

Parting, Brooke was no longer nervous.

“I made reservations,” he said and led her through the lounge to a black car waiting in the valet turnout.

Riding quietly, Brooke smiled as they arrived at a fancy French restaurant she had always wanted to dine in, but never had the opportunity.

Helping her out of the car, Jake led her to the door and inside the candle-lit lushly decorated romantic restaurant. The host nodded and led them to a cozy booth. Other diners were too busy in intimate conversations to notice anything else around them.

Brooke stared at the candle on the table soothed by its gentle flicker and warm light. The host waited for their drink order and Jake responded in French.

Brooke was not surprised. Jake worked for an international office and probably knew a few languages. Nothing was said as the sommelier arrived and poured wine. Brooke held onto the stem of her glass and just enjoyed the moment.

She watched as Jake went through the whole letting the wine breathe ritual and admired his respect for the art. Alcohol was just something Brooke enjoyed on occasion, but didn't have a true appreciation like Jake apparently had.

Noticing she hadn't tried the wine, Jake nodded to urge her to try it.

Brooke took a sip and smiled. The sommelier must have noticed displeasure on their part and arrived to ask Jake something in French.

When Brooke replied in French, both just stared at her for a moment. The sommelier nodded, bowed and departed.

Meeting Jake's admiring eyes, Brooke realized how little the man she married knew about her.

"Where did you learn?" he asked.

"I spent a semester abroad," she replied. "I visited every major art museum when I backpacked through France."

"Where did you learn?" she joked to lighten the mood now that they had a starting point for learning more about each other.

"In school," he said. "My father used to come back from business trips in Europe and was frustrated because the language barrier held him back from achieving even greater success."

"Is that what you wanted for yourself?" she asked, wondering if he may have had other dreams.

"It's what I knew," he shrugged. "What about you? Was working at an art gallery and teaching to kids what you wanted?"

There was no arrogant or sarcastic tone in his question.

“Yes,” she agreed. “I love being around creativity and my mother encouraged me to follow my dreams. We didn’t have a lot of money, but she said you can work anytime. Finding something you love to do with your life is more important than just making money to pay rent.”

“What did your mother do?” he asked.

“She was a waitress and house cleaner,” she said without shame. “Any job that didn’t take an education she took and it paid the bills, but the stress of not having money took its toll on her. When my father died, she had to raise me and keep going. She didn’t have any time for herself and she just slowly deteriorated spiritually. She really loved my father and the loss consumed her. That’s why it’s so hard for me to tell her what I did. I know she would feel guilty that her daughter ...”

Brooke turned away and caught her breath. Jake put his hand on hers to console her. The waiter arrived and Jake ordered for the two of them.

By not breathing for ten seconds, Brooke could always hold back the tears that seemed overly eager to escape. Releasing her tension and taking a deep breath, Brooke turned to her wine glass. She couldn’t meet Jake’s gaze. They weren’t supposed to delve into such maudlin topics so early into learning about one another.

“My mother never had to work,” he said. “My father was successful and she only worked if she wanted to or needed to for her own pleasure, but she was expected to be a good hostess and mother. I always wonder if she got out and had a career of her own, something she loved to do, she wouldn’t be so obsessed with how I’m living my life.”

“I always think once MJ is grown, I’ll let him find his own way,” Brooke said. “But as the years pass I always wonder, will I know when that time is to let go?”

Dinner arrived and they ate in silence. Picking at her fish, Brooke wondered if they had anything in common. Jake followed in his father’s golden footsteps, but Brooke had to work for everything she had. His mother never had to struggle financially and Brooke’s mother struggled every day with everything.

Jake married Brooke to buffer himself from his overprotective mother and Brooke had to marry Jake just to take care of her ailing mother.

Sitting in the restaurant she had walked by with Matthew dreaming about dining in one day, Brooke suddenly felt morose. Drinking expensive wine and dining on French cuisine, she would have rather been walking by outside with Matthew dreaming of someday.

In France there was a thrill to eating in cafés, but in the States it was a luxury to have a French meal in an authentic French restaurant.

Had she known that someday she would be with another man, Brooke would never have cared about ever walking through the lead-glass inlaid doors.

“I used to live around here,” Brooke said, still thinking about her walks with Matthew.

“Really?” he said, casually swishing the wine in his glass. Brooke noticed that he hadn’t touched his food either. Looking just as uncomfortable, Jake searched for something they could talk about. His eyes darted around the room for conversation inspiration.

“If you haven’t already ordered the soufflé, we can go take a walk,” she suggested. Brooke only knew one thing for certain at French restaurants. You ordered the soufflé before you sat down to dine.

“I’ve seen you devour an entire piece of chocolate cake in one orgasmic bite, what do you think?” he asked smiling. The waiter cleared their barely touched plates and Jake motioned for him to bring the soufflé.

In minutes, a large puffy chocolate dessert erupting from a ceramic pot was placed in the middle of the table. From a separate dish, the waiter scooped steaming frothy whipped cream over the mountain of chocolate. Brooke could not contain her excitement.

Placing two spoons on the plate containing the massive volcano of chocolate and cream, Brooke waited politely.

Jake gently pushed it toward her.

“I’m not about to lose a hand over this,” he joked. “I ordered it for you.”

Clasping her hands together, Brooke pulled the dessert until she felt the steam on her face.

“I will try to contain my ecstasy,” she muttered, picking up a spoon. Wondering where to start, Brooke finally decided to just get right to the heart of the molten mass and blew on the soggy chocolate, waiting for the steam to fade before gently spooning it in her mouth and moaning as she pulled it off the spoon through her lips.

“So good,” she murmured and teased Jake. “Are you sure you don’t want a bite?” Jake shook his head and relaxed. Brooke knew where she had seen that look in his eyes before. It was always just before he wanted her.

The pleasure of the chocolate was only heightened knowing what he was thinking.

Almost finished, Brooke asked Jake again if he wanted a bite. Jake moved closer and nodded. Brooke dug in and pulled out a modest scoop.

“Please contain yourself,” she joked meeting his gaze. Without losing eye contact, Brooke leaned toward Jake and felt a familiar warmth take over her body as she placed the spoon at Jake’s mouth and he gently accepted the pleasure. Breathing steadily, Brooke pulled the spoon out slowly and she heard Jake moan under his breath. Gently placing his warm hand on hers, he took the spoon and dipped it into the remaining chocolate, placing a modest warm spoonful at her lips.

Accepting the warm spoonful, Brooke closed her mouth as Jake slowly pulled the spoon through her lips, and for once, Brooke didn’t moan as she sucked on the sweet chocolate soufflé. She was too busy looking at the hunger in his green eyes. Swallowing the chocolate with a gulp, Brooke knew they were reverting to the familiar physical intimacy and not learning more about one another that would bring them closer as a couple.

Excusing herself, Brooke searched for the restroom and instead found a dark corner in the back of the restaurant where she stood to regroup.

Taking deep breaths, she closed her eyes. Sensing someone approaching, Brooke opened her eyes as Jake pulled her close and kissed her deeply. Grabbing his tie and grasping the back of his suit

jacket, Brooke felt a hot jolt sear her stomach and pleasure ripple through her body in response. Breathlessly they parted and Brooke clasped her hands on his flush face.

“I need to get to know you, Jake,” Brooke whispered between breaths. “Whatever you’re feeling now fades in everyday life. There has to be something more.”

Jake nodded and held onto her waist. Meeting her eyes, his breath hot on her cheeks, he nodded in agreement.

“Let’s take a walk,” he proposed. Each taking a deep breath, they headed out of the restaurant and into the cool air of the evening.

Taking her by the arm, they got in the car when it pulled up and drove past upscale dress shops and boutiques until they arrived at the entrance to a condominium building.

“This is where I live,” he announced and Brooke craned her neck to take in the tall building. An attendant opened the door, greeted Jake and let them in.

“This is my wife Brooke,” he said, introducing her to the regal older man. Nodding silently, the man said, “Welcome,” and they headed to the elevator.

Placing a key in its slot, Jake hit the “P” button and Brooke looked at him surprised.

Leaning casually against the back of the elevator car as it rose 20 stories, Brooke stood in anticipation as it slowed. For the longest time, the car slowly stopped and then there was a ding and finally the doors slowly opened. For the first time in her life, Brooke had a jaw-dropping moment. Casually swinging his keys, Jake stepped out of the elevator. Closing her gaping mouth, Brooke followed.

In a large open-concept space, floor to ceiling windows revealed the city lights beyond. Walking up to the windows, Brooke stood in awe.

“It looks so peaceful from up here,” she said to herself. Behind her, she felt Jake watching from the contemporary living room sofa. The whole condo was a page from a design magazine. It was exactly how Brooke wanted the house remodeled, but she had to factor in that she had a kid who liked to run around without washing his hands, and she had made revisions.

Turning to Jake she smiled.

“Damned pre nup,” she joked and her eyes were distracted by his artwork before she could gauge his reaction.

“You have interesting taste,” she noted, going up to the largest piece. “Simon Canacutty.”

Looking over at Jake, she wondered if he picked it out himself or did someone else choose his taste.

Admiring the piece, Brooke smiled in recollection.

“Is this an original?” she asked and she turned to see Jake nodding.

Laughing, Brooke explained why she admired the piece.

“At the gallery, Tyrone, who worked with me, bet that he could sell this piece to the next person who walked through the door,” she said, remembering the day the piece was sold. “Neither one of us really appreciate Simon’s work but he’s popular with hip, trendy, upper-class clientele. Ten minutes later, this beautiful woman walks in, beautiful natural-looking red hair like a mane, diamond earrings and large pendant necklace. He called her the Countess, he had worked with her before. So, she asks about the pieces and when they get to this one,” Brooke said, pointing at the large piece, “Tyrone really sells it and before you know it, it’s sold. I had to buy him lunch. He was a much better sales person than I. I couldn’t talk somebody into a piece I didn’t appreciate.”

Turning her attention to papers and other personal effects in his condo, Brooke was curious if he liked the piece.

“Is this your taste?” she asked while concentrating on things that could give her insight into the man watching her while she poked through his life. “Is she your designer?”

Before Jake could answer, Brooke picked up a picture and turned to Jake in wonder.

“The Countess?” she exclaimed, looking from the picture to Jake and back to the picture again. Jake was hugging the beautiful woman. They were smiling and looked very happy and absolutely in love.

“The Countess is Jenny?” Brooke said again in amazement and utter horror. This is the woman to whom others compared her, to whom Jake compared her? Suddenly feeling very self-conscious in a dress she thought made her look sexy, Brooke covered her exposed thigh.

Unable to look away from the picture, Brooke could feel her throat tighten.

“I know this feeling, Jake,” she said to the photo. “When you’re together, nothing else matters, you feel whole. Nothing can replace that feeling. To have someone else love you so completely feels so good. When you lose it, you lose your sense of place in the world. Nobody can replace that feeling.”

When Matthew hugged her, Brooke knew there was nothing else in the world she needed. Ripped from that comfort, Brooke was still stumbling startled through the world.

“Is that how you feel, Jake?” she asked, looking at the man staring at the art piece his love had selected for him. “Am I just a placeholder? Time between? The inevitable knowledge that at some point you have to settle?”

Jake mused her query. Turning his head toward her defeated, he answered with a question.

“Do you feel like a placeholder?” he asked sincerely.

Lowering her eyes, Brooke thought about how she felt around Jake.

“I feel like the person you think you need to be with,” she explained. “I bet your Jenny is not someone who’s gonna settle down and I think at some point you’re going to want that.”

Looking at Jake, Brooke knew they were both each other’s second choice.

“The difference between us is that I don’t have anything to fall back on,” she said. “Your love is still there for you.”

Jake closed his eyes and sighed.

“Right now, that’s not a problem for me,” she said and Jake opened his eyes surprised by her revelation.

Sauntering over to Jake, Brooke straddled him and he held onto her waist as she supported herself with her arms on his chest. The slit on her dress ripped a bit and Jake ripped it even further while never losing connection with her gaze. Smiling, Brooke leaned down and kissed Jake while he hugged her close.

Parting, Brooke rested her forehead on his.

“What are you looking for, Jake?” she asked in a questioning whisper, not knowing if he would be able to answer.

“I want to try this, Brooke,” he whispered. “I want to try us.”

Clasping her face in his hands, Jake brought Brooke to his eye level and pleaded with his tired eyes.

“That’s all I needed to know,” she sighed and he leaned in until they were joined in a kiss.

Jake unzipped her dress and Brooke pulled away breathlessly and stood. The gown slipped down her breasts and past her hips revealing the very expensive negligee she had purchased earlier. Jake lifted himself off the couch. Stumbling over furniture as they kissed and ripped off each other’s clothes, Jake led her into his dark bedroom with a full city view.

Under the watchful eye of the picture perfect city view, they relapsed into the familiar and Brooke enjoyed the pleasure of the moment. This time she didn’t get up and walk away when they were through.

Biting her lip when he pulled her close, Brooke fought the urge to pull away. Of all that they had just experienced, relaxing quietly together in post-coital bliss was the most intimate. Fists clenched, Brooke tried not to think of Matthew who enjoyed just being together and talking as much as she did.

This is not betrayal, she tried telling herself. Sighing in relief as Jake’s breath grazed her neck as he slept, Brooke gently pulled away and went to his bathroom.

Starting a steamy shower, Brooke sat on the ledge of the tub and let the hot water wash away the layer of guilt she seemed to build up with every intimate occasion.

When would the guilt cease? She couldn't spend the rest of her life without human contact. That was not possible.

Although her time with Jake was pleasurable, Brooke never felt close to Jake.

Sensing her distress, Jake pulled open the shower curtain and stared down at Brooke. Without saying a word, he joined her and she moved over to make room for him. Sitting silently until the water started to cool, Jake put an arm around Brooke and just swayed gently.

For the first time since she met Jake, Brooke crossed over from the realization that Matthew was never coming back. Only a ripple through her body that started in her stomach, Brooke was soon shaking uncontrollably and Jake just held her tightly.

In shared pain, Brooke finally felt a connection.

Chapter 22

Six weeks passed since construction started and Brooke, Jake, his mother and MJ waited on the driveway as the designer waited to reveal their new house.

Brooke had made Jake promise he wouldn't check in on the changes, she wanted it to be a surprise. Wanting a surprise for herself, Brooke let the designer handle the finishing touches. She trusted his style better than she trusted her own.

Leading them to the kitchen door, dressed in khakis and a sweater vest, the designer was beaming with pride.

"Let me know what you think," he said, opening the door and stepping back. Holding onto Jake's hand, Brooke stepped through the door first and quickly pulled her hand away as she gasped and covered her mouth with her trembling hands.

The first time she had stepped through the door, Brooke admired the layout of the kitchen, but it felt old and it wasn't cozy. The kitchen was the room in which they spent most of their time together.

This kitchen was a family room. The island was still the central point, but wasted space was filled with a couch to lounge on and watch television while MJ finished his homework at his own desk and Brooke cooked dinner. It was the family kitchen she had always dreamed of having. She always thought it would be with Matthew, but here it was in a new house with a new family. Brooke blinked away tears of anger and concentrated on the future.

"This is incredible," his mother exclaimed, looking around at the new kitchen in admiration. Seeing his backpack by the desk, MJ ran up to the desk and sat down.

"I have my own desk," he proclaimed and opened the drawers to see what surprises the designer had left. Pens and pencils were pulled out and MJ started drawing on a piece of paper sitting on the desk.

Jake sat on the couch, put his feet up and turned on the television. Sitting up suddenly, Jake realized the sound was coming from around the couch and not up by the television.

“I don’t have to play it loud and disturb anyone,” he remarked in praise at the design efforts. Leaning back, Jake watched the news and flipped to sports and news and back to sports.

Jake’s mother opened cabinets and admired the large refrigerator built into the cabinets. Laughing, she opened the doors.

“It doesn’t look like a refrigerator,” Jake’s mother said. Looking at the rest of the cabinets she noticed an appliance was missing.

“Where’s the dishwasher?” Jake’s mother asked.

The designer pulled at a cabinet and it opened to reveal a dishwasher. Hands flew to her mouth in surprise.

“I want this kitchen!” Jake’s mother exclaimed and hugged Brooke.

“Are we ready for the next room?” he asked.

“You go on,” Jake said, staring at the TV.

A glare from Brooke got him to his feet, but his eyes trailed as he followed the designer through the swinging kitchen door.

Brooke hadn’t seen the completed concept and was speechless. The designer had lived up to his promise. Tile stretched throughout the open room and the worn furniture and walls were gone.

Bright and airy, the dining room was formal but not stuffy, and the living room was contemporary but very warm and homey. The designer walked up to the revitalized fireplace and flicked a switch. A fire sprung to life and burned as if it had taken hours to reach the intensity achieved immediately with the flick of a switch.

“What do you think?” he asked beaming.

Walking carefully on the wool carpet she helped choose, Brooke sat on the edge of the custom-designed floral-patterned couch she had also chosen and just stared at the fire.

Sitting quietly, Brooke waited to say how she felt at the transformation. Jake crossed past her and sat down gently.

“It feels like home,” she whispered. From behind her, she heard the designer jump up and whisper an excited, “Yes!”

Standing, Brooke thanked the designer and they hugged.

“I’ll leave you now to your new home,” he said as he walked out cheerfully, beaming brightly. “It was a pleasure.”

“I’ll go check on MJ,” Jake’s mother said and left them alone.

Brooke sat next to Jake and rested her head on his shoulder. Jake put an arm around her shoulder and they just stared at the fireplace in their new home.

“I have a few more surprises for you,” she whispered. Jake nodded.

“You always do,” he said.

Taking a deep breath, Brooke stood and took Jake’s hands in her own as he lifted himself from the new couch. For a moment she looked into his eyes, which were steady on her own.

Sighing, she took his hand and pulled him down the hall to the last door at the end of the hallway.

Jake looked puzzled.

“Ready?” she asked. Jake nodded and they entered the new art studio.

Jake was astonished. The room he just threw things in was now a working studio.

“That’s not all,” she beamed. Opening a large armoire, Brooke pulled out a computer center. “It’s for both of us.”

Walking up to the work center, Jake admired the clever use of space.

“We can work together,” she said. Closing the armoire, Brooke continued. “When you’re not here, I can close it up to have more work space.”

“That’s very clever,” Jake said, looking around the room. Art supplies and easels completed the studio.

“There’s more,” she said and led him to her old room.

“Ready?” she asked. Jake nodded and she opened the door. Her old room had been transformed into something from a hospital room. Puzzled, Jake looked at the reclining bed and saw that the bathroom had a tub he had seen on a commercial for elderly people.

Turning, Jake was still confused.

“This is my way of asking you if we can take my mother in,” she explained with her hands covering her mouth. Brooke knew Jake had to agree with bringing her ailing mother into their house even though she went about the changes without his knowledge.

“Is this your way of asking me?” he said and Brooke nodded, not knowing if he was considering it or angry she went ahead with the changes without discussing it with him first.

“Have you thought about everything involved?” he asked. “Special care around the clock, constant care? Are you ready for that?”

Fully resolved to the idea, Brooke pulled out a bound presentation with a clear plastic cover and handed it to Jake.

Puzzled, Jake took the presentation and smiled then laughed as he read the title of the presentation.

““The Care and Feeding of My Mother Who I Really Want to Bring Home to Live With Us – A Presentation.”” Looking up at Brooke, he scrutinized her then approached for a hug, the portfolio pressed against her back.

Squeezing him tightly, Brooke closed her eyes and hugged him back, but she was still waiting for an answer.

“You always surprise me,” he whispered. “If you want your mother here, I cannot and will not say no. This is your home, Brooke. Our home.”

Relief uncoiled her tension and Brooke groaned. Lightening the moment, she braced him for one more surprise.

“Let’s go upstairs,” she whispered. Pulling away, Brooke led Jake to the upstairs room. Opening the door, she pulled him inside and they stood there staring at their room.

New bed, new curtains, new life.

“Let’s check out the bathroom,” she said, pulling him to the bathroom while he was still grasping the changes to his room.

Walking slowly to the far corner where his tub once sat, Jake was speechless as he saw a new jet tub big enough for two.

Turning to Brooke, he pointed out there was a jet tub big enough for two.

Nodding, Brooke beamed.

“I always wanted a jet tub,” he whispered, turning to her.

“I know,” she asserted. “That’s all you talk about after you take a bath. Now here it is.”

Clasping her face in his hands, Jake looked very excited and thankful.

“Thank you,” he said and hugged her.

“I had to put in something for you,” she laughed, hugging him back. Squeezing her eyes tight, Brooke was almost angry. When Jake reacted to the new tub, Brooke saw flashes of Matthew and how he would have reacted and it angered her.

Taking a deep breath, she let out a moan.

“I’m hungry,” she declared.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked.

Looking confused, Brooke answered as if he didn’t understand.

“I’ve got a brand new kitchen,” she explained.

Jake kissed her and laughed.

“I know, I’m just teasing,” he said and Brooke couldn’t hide the anguish in her face. Matthew would have said the exact same thing. Jake hugged her.

“It’s not my fault, Brooke,” he whispered and she caught her breath as she melted into his pleading embrace.

“I get angry sometimes because he’s not here to enjoy these moments,” she said. “This is something we dreamed about.”

“And you’re stuck with me,” he said.

Reassuring him with a hug, Brooke sighed.

“I am scared that someday I won’t see him in you anymore,” she explained. “I am holding on so tight. I’m afraid to let go. I feel like I’m betraying his memory.”

“I don’t blame you, Brooke,” he whispered. “If Jenny called right now, I honestly don’t know what I would do and I’m ashamed about that.”

Brooke pulled away and looked into his frightened eyes for answers.

“I know, Jake,” she asserted. “You’ll go, you’ll run into her arms and may not look back. I would. Right now I would. But that’s a fact no matter what for any married couple. When that time comes I’ll let you make that choice. I think at that point we’ll both know. Breaking up doesn’t scare me, indecision does. At some point you’re going to have to make a choice. And the only promise I want from you is that you make it from the heart and not because of any obligation to me. Remember, you can buy me off, I just don’t want you to make your choice based on any sort of guilt.”

Jake lifted his head to hold back the tears threatening to spill and gasped.

Wiping away the tears, he made her a promise more important than their vows.

“I won’t,” he said. “I never want to hurt you and the minute I know, it will be from my heart.”

Hugging tightly, Brooke gritted her teeth.

When the time came and he told her his choice would be Jenny, Brooke only hoped for the strength to start over again. Until that day, this was her home and she really wanted to try and build a new family.

Chapter 23

The day Brooke brought her mother into her home was one of the happiest moments in her life.

Senility had crossed from vague moments of forgetfulness to times of heightened confusion. A nurse helped out during the day and was on call for evenings when Brooke needed extra support.

MJ loved having his grandmother nearby and would just talk and talk while she watched him play or sat in the backyard just staring at the sky.

Jake's mother enjoyed Brooke's mother's company and on good days they got together for tea.

Sitting in Jake's mother's living room, the women were having a discussion about dealing with the loss of their husbands when her mother suddenly became very wistful. Brooke sat in silence as she talked about her father.

"I met him while I was working at this woman's house in Clareford," she said, staring off into the distance. "He came over to visit the woman's daughter who was in college. I accidentally bumped into him while washing her floors. That was it. One look and we fell in love. I was wearing this handkerchief to cover my hair and I was dirty from cleaning the floor, but our eyes met and that was it. We got married a year later."

Breathing steadily, Brooke didn't want to break the moment. She knew her mother always got very sad remembering her father.

"What happened to him," Jake's mother asked softly while drinking her tea.

"Just died," she said. "Doctors didn't know if it was a heart problem or disease or stroke. They didn't have testing back then. Nearly killed me. Lost our baby. But I had to get up every day because I had our little girl to take care of," she said and Brooke knew she had drifted off into another reality.

Hot tears burned her cheeks. Brooke never knew the extent of her mother's loss.

Excusing herself, Brooke stumbled to the bathroom, turned on the faucet water and cried silently.

She had never heard her mother speak so plainly about what happened to the man Brooke had forgotten, her father. Never knew the love they shared and the loss that took her mother's spirit.

Shaking, Brooke wanted to hug her mother and console her, but she wasn't really cognizant of the present reality anymore.

If her mother couldn't handle the devastating loss, how was Brooke supposed to move on?

Realizing what she would be missing, Brooke wiped her tears and washed her face. Staring at the angry and sad woman in the mirror, she saw traces of her mother that became more pronounced the older she got.

At what point do you cross over and can't turn back? she wondered. Had her mother tried so hard to look back that she lost herself?

When she returned, Jake's mother was talking about how she got her tea set and nodded at Brooke.

"It's time for dinner, mom," Brooke said, but there was no acknowledgment from her mother. Leaning down, Brooke looked directly into her mother's eyes and they didn't recognize her.

"It's time for dinner," she said softly. Her mother nodded and Jake's mother helped Brooke lead her mother back to her room.

"I'll be back," Brooke said and her mother just nodded.

In the kitchen, Brooke started making dinner preparations while MJ played in the backyard. Shaking, Brooke tried several times to open a container. Frustrated, she threw it in the sink. Sobbing silently, she jerked when she felt Jake's mother's hands on her arms.

Turning, Brooke grasped the woman and wept for her mother, herself and the future.

"You're not your mother," Jake's mother whispered. "I know she would never want you to feel this way."

Brooke nodded and groaned.

“Thank you,” she said, wiping her tears and pulling away.

Making sure Brooke understood, Jake’s mother’s eyes darted around her face and then she smiled.

“We’ve got dinner to make,” she announced. Brooke laughed and sniffled as they made dinner together.

Two days later, Brooke felt inspiration and went to her studio while everyone was sleeping. For hours she jotted down creative ideas and started to piece together her ideas on paper. When MJ called for her, she realized she had been working for hours and left the room, closing the door behind her.

Getting MJ off to school, Brooke checked in with her mother, discussed a few things with the caretaker and headed off to her studio.

For two weeks nothing else mattered. Jake came home and she made time for him, but the moment she could she was in her studio working again. Jake joined her and worked at the computer center, but she wouldn’t let him see her work and he didn’t insist after she said it was a private endeavor.

One day, her mother came in and sat down to watch her work.

“I remember you always wanted to color when you were a kid,” her mother reminisced and Brooke became tense. She wanted to give her mother her total attention so she would tell Brooke a story about their life.

“I bought you coloring books and paint,” she smiled, looking somewhere over Brooke. Fighting off the urge to see what imaginary image her mother was channeling, Brooke just sat and listened.

“I made sure you had everything you wanted,” she continued. “I didn’t have any parents. I had to work before I finished school, but I made sure my daughter didn’t have to work cleaning floors,” she asserted. “You didn’t have all those clothes and things the other kids had, but you had an

education. That was all that mattered. I figured if you had an education you would never have to struggle, never scrub floors or wait on other people.”

Brooke held her head in shame. If only her mother knew what she did to make sure she had the best care.

“Mom,” Brooke heard from the living room coming toward them. The moment was broken. Brooke rose to greet her son and asked the caretaker to bring her mother to the kitchen.

Making a snack for her son, Brooke thought about her mother’s resolve and knew they had that in common.

More inspiration came to Brooke and by the end of the week, she had finished.

Stepping back, Brooke made a few adjustments. Grabbing her camera, she took a few photos and sat down. Sighing, she was relieved to have put on canvas the deepest feelings that she needed to release from her soul.

Chapter 24

Jake was surprised when Brooke met him in the city one day to take him to lunch. In the past few weeks she had been obsessed with something she was working on, but now she was relaxed and enjoyed taking a walk to a new restaurant she wanted to try out.

“How long are you here for?” he asked, wanting to spend more time with her.

“If you like I can stay tonight,” she suggested and Jake eagerly agreed. Kissing her behind the ear, Jake gave her a playful lick and she laughed.

“Not fair,” she said.

“You two look cozy,” a familiar voice joked.

“Melinda!” Brooke said, offering her friend a chair. Jake greeted Melinda and they sat and talked about the wedding plans.

Jake knew that Melinda was enjoying the fact he and Brooke had come to some sort of appreciation and fondness for one another. Looking from Brooke to Jake, she scrutinized their reactions as they talked and joked.

Eventually, Melinda said she had to go.

“You have to come over someday and see what we did to the house,” Brooke pleaded and Melinda agreed.

“Bye,” she said, teasing them, and Jake nodded as Melinda gave him a glance he didn’t want to acknowledge.

“Let’s take a walk,” he said and Brooke agreed.

“Do you want to see where we used to live?” she asked, pulling Jake up the street.

Nodding, Jake followed as they casually walked a few blocks and turned into a residential street. Rows of townhouses filled the side street from the main intersection.

Walking and thinking, Brooke came to the end of the second block and held him as she stopped. Pointing to a blue building, Brooke stood silently, looking at the two-story structure that housed her happier life.

“Decided it was time when I got pregnant,” she explained. “We were just living place to place fulfilling our dreams when we found out I was pregnant. Birth control failed. Matthew was so excited. I was so scared, but he was excited for the both of us.”

Jake remembered from the video.

“Do you miss it?” he asked softly, staring at the townhouse. It was in an older part of the city on the opposite side of town where he had bought his condo.

Brooke thought about her answer for a long time. Pulling Jake back to the main intersection, Brooke gathered her thoughts.

“When I got pregnant I was so scared,” she said. “We were free to do what we wanted. I wanted to travel again. We used double protection. The plan was to get pregnant when we were established. I got sick and didn’t believe the doctor when he said I was pregnant. All these new hormones took over and I was sick one moment and scared the next. Matthew was so excited. It wasn’t until I saw this little tiny white spec on the screen did I realize there was a baby growing inside of me. I was still scared, but there it was.”

“I thought we were going to raise MJ there,” she said, resting her head on Jake’s arm as they walked. “I think that’s what I miss the most. Painting his room together, story time together, laughing together. I don’t miss the house. I miss what we had. If I could get that back, I would.”

Jake nodded and sighed.

“I have got to get back to work,” he said, checking his watch.

“Should I meet you at the condo?” she asked, not sure what he wanted.

“That would be nice,” he said and kissed her. Parting, Jake remembered Melinda’s look and he hung his head.

In town for a few hours, Jenny stopped by and they had gone to dinner the night before. Jake explained the situation to his lover and they had parted. Melinda had seen them walking down the street. He didn't need to explain it to Melinda.

Jake didn't feel the need to tell Brooke. They had an understanding. Nothing had changed for him.

Jake went back to work.

Coming home, Jake was greeted with the aroma of actual food being cooked in his model kitchen. A candle was on the table and the lights were low. Slow jazz played in the background.

"Welcome home," Brooke greeted him, dressed in a very sexy negligee and matching robe. Jake was suddenly very hungry.

"You need to come to the city more often," he joked, hugging her from behind as she put food on two plates.

"I know, but my husband gets jealous," she joked and they kissed. Grabbing the plates, Jake whisked them off and Brooke thanked him until she saw that he wasn't going to the table.

Realizing they were going to have dinner in bed, Brooke followed and Jake put the plates on the dresser. Pulling Brooke close, they worked up an appetite.

Lying on bed eating the fabulous food Brooke had made, they talked and joked with each other.

"If you wanted it hot, you should have thought about that," she lectured Jake.

"I thought I did have it hot," he joked and Brooke shook her head.

"Very funny," she said sarcastically.

"I'm off to Paris next week," he said.

"Sounds like fun," she sighed, taking his plate.

“I wish you could come,” he said, looking into her eyes just staring at him while a million other things more important crossed her mind.

“Me too,” she whispered wistfully.

“I won’t be back for a few weeks,” he told her and gauged her reaction. Still thinking about other things, Brooke just sighed and crawled over him as she went to the kitchen in nothing but her robe.

Jake followed. Sitting at the table, he noticed that the candle had melted to nothing.

“What are you thinking, Brooke,” he asked. Was she just thinking about other things?

Placing the plates in the sink, Brooke opened the oven and pulled out two ceramic containers. Her soufflé was now an inverted cupcake. Bringing the tray to the table with two spoons, Brooke placed one in front of Jake and the other at her placemat and sat down.

Taking a bite and sneering, Brooke shrugged and ate the cold chocolate anyway.

“I’m used to it, Jake,” she said. “What am I supposed to say?”

“I’ll miss you,” he said.

“I know,” she shrugged. “Come home when you can. We all miss you at home.”

A part of Jake cracked and he contained his pain. Jake knew Brooke would never talk about their understanding.

She was waiting for his decision and until then, they were a married couple with a kid and two mothers to take care of while maintaining separate lives for most of the time.

At home, Brooke was busy in her studio or taking care of her mother and son. Jake enjoyed their time in the city because it was stress-free from family concerns.

“When do you leave?” she asked, finishing her disappointing soufflé.

“Friday,” he said. “Sorry about the soufflé. I know you worked hard.”

Brooke shrugged.

“It’s not what we want, it’s what we get,” she said and Jake was puzzled by the riddle. “You either get angry or just accept it.”

Taking the dish to the sink, Brooke went to take a shower. Jake made a quick call then joined her.

Scrubbing each other, Brooke seemed distracted.

Sitting on the couch, the phone rang and Jake told the attendant to send the visitor to his floor.

A few minutes later, he took the box from a young man, gave him money for what was in the box and a generous tip.

Jake presented the box to Brooke.

“You may want to open this quickly,” he said, holding the plain white box to her. Puzzled, Brooke took the box and was surprised that it was warm.

Looking for an answer in his eyes, Brooke quickly opened the box and smiled, tears streamed down her cheeks as she looked up at Jake.

It was a soufflé from the French restaurant, warm and fresh with a side of fresh whipping cream.

Jake knew it would make her happy, but the look in her eyes startled him. For the first time she looked at him, and he hadn’t realized it before, but it never really looked like she saw him.

“Spoon?” she asked.

Jake nodded still trying to keep her gaze.

Grabbing a spoon, Jake heard Brooke make one more request.

“Grab one for you as well.”

Chapter 25

Jake hadn't expected to see Jenny again.

After their breakup, Jake didn't expect to see her so soon.

Drawn to her, Jake forgot about their fight, but not her blatant disregard for his feelings.

Although she wanted to get back to where they were before the fight, just as they always had over the years, Jake wasn't feeling very willing.

Part of him needed more, but the other part just wanted to be close to her and know they were going to be alright.

"I know we didn't leave things on good terms, darling," she consoled him as they sat in their favorite booth.

Sitting across from her, Jake looked into her eyes,

"We need to take this slow," he said, holding her hand.

"If that's what you need, darling," she said and sat back.

"I want to be with you, Jenny," he explained. "I am just still angry that you didn't think enough of me before you married again."

"I don't want to have this argument again, Jake," she sighed. "Can't we start over?"

Yes.

"That would be good, Jenny," he said.

Every day that week they met for drinks. They had dinner. They went dancing.

All the while, Jake tried not to feel guilty.

Back at the house, Brooke was living in their home, and he was out with his girlfriend.

The one stipulation was that Brooke never wanted him to choose her over Jenny because he felt obligated.

Jake owed it to her to figure out if he could live happily ever after with Jenny.

The choice always came to Jenny.

Jake had a desire to see if he and Jenny could really make a life together. He knew he could with Brooke, but he was always thinking about Jenny.

The more he got to know Brooke, he realized there was always more to know and it was always amazing and interesting.

With Jenny it was always the same. He loved her. He had never needed to know more than that. But when she married without at least seeing him first, Jake realized he needed more from her. He needed more than great sex and incredible passion.

“Let’s go to a movie,” he proposed one night at dinner.

“There’s a French movie that just opened,” she said, agreeing with him. “I’m glad you reminded me.”

Jake shook his head.

“No, I meant a real movie,” he insisted. “Let’s go see some crappy romance playing down the street. It should be fun.”

Looking puzzled, Jenny laughed.

“I almost believed you, darling,” she sighed and took Jake’s hand on the table between them.

“I wasn’t,” he said.

Looking into his eyes, she realized he was being serious.

Leaning back and letting go of Jake’s hand, Jenny wasn’t interested in playing games with Jake.

“What’s gotten into you?” she asked irritated. “We haven’t been back to your place since I got here,” she pouted.

“You realize that’s all we do,” he said and that used to be all he needed. Looking as if she wanted to be somewhere else more fun, Jake coaxed her back to him.

“I just thought we’d do something romantic,” he suggested.

“Where did all this talk of romance come from, Jake?” she asked, shaking her head. “We don’t just go to your place,” she corrected him with one well-manicured finger.

“We go to parties, and galleries and movies,” she insisted. “We go many places together.”

Softening as she held his hands, Jenny looked into his eyes.

“What’s the matter with what we have, darling,” she asked.

Absolutely nothing. Jake didn’t know why he needed more. A beautiful woman he loved just wanted to love him. They had a great time. But that was the problem. That’s all it was, a great time and nothing more.

For a long time that was all he needed.

Jake felt as if he had suddenly realized there was more than dessert and he needed some real food to complement his meal. Dessert alone was not satisfying anymore. It was just indulgent.

“Let’s go back to your place,” she urged him, but Jake didn’t want to.

“Remember the night we met,” he asked, holding her hands.

“I saw you staring from across the room,” she smiled. “I knew you wanted to meet me.”

“I wanted nothing more,” he agreed.

“What were you thinking?” he wanted to know now that years had passed since that night. “What did you think of me?”

Thinking really hard, Jenny didn’t have an answer.

“That was so long ago, darling,” she laughed.

“I thought you were the most beautiful woman in the world,” he said, trying to connect on another level. “I still do, I always will. I had to meet you, I wanted you to be mine.”

Thinking carefully, Jenny finally revealed what she thought of Jake that night.

“You were looking at me like I was the most beautiful woman in the world,” she replied. “That’s what I remember, Jake.”

“Thank you,” he said and leaned back in his chair.

“You were this good looking man with incredibly intense eyes and I wanted to talk to you,” she confessed. “But I don’t think that’s what you want me to say.”

Part of Jake had been defeated by her revelation.

“There is no love at first sight, Jake,” she lectured him. “Until you got married, you and I thought the same way.”

Jake lowered his head. Brooke had definitely changed him, but he still wanted to be with Jenny. He just expected more. He wanted what Brooke had with Matthew.

Brooke told him to be grateful he never felt total and true romantic love. When it was gone, she told him, the heart you gave dies with that love and you’re left hollow.

It was that love, the love Brooke had for Matthew that Jake desperately thought he had with Jenny. He was beginning to realize she might not have it for him.

It had been love at first sight for Jake. He didn’t realize he was no different than any other man falling for a beautiful woman. He thought they were more sophisticated than the holding hands, calling each other by cute names lovers. Turns out, there is no one kind of way to express love. Jake’s love was every cliché, and she didn’t feel the same way.

“I have a long day tomorrow,” he said and pulled out some bills for the table.

“I understand, darling,” she said, getting her purse and waiting for Jake to help her out of the booth. Holding her waiting hands, Jake gently pulled her to her feet and held her close.

What if her eyes didn't make him think of exotic oceans? What if her hair weren't radiant and soft and incredible to hold while they made love? Would he still feel the same about her?

Sensing his confusion, Jenny hugged Jake and kissed him on the cheek. Pressing her tall, thin body to his chest, Jake felt her soft bosom pressed against him and he couldn't believe he was questioning his love for Jenny.

Leading her to a cab, Jake kissed her and said good-night.

“I'll call you later, darling,” she said and the cab pulled away when the driver heard the door close. Watching the taxi disappear into the night, Jake decided to walk home.

Distracted, he found himself on the other side of the city along a row of galleries. Looking at the canvases in the windows, he thought about Jenny. They liked going to galleries together. Meeting hip artists, Jenny loved discovering new talent and Jake just liked being with Jenny.

Standing in front of one window, Jake was transfixed by a piece that made him feel sad. There was a flier for the opening of the artist's exhibition and Jake called Jenny. He thought he should go to an opening of something that interested him for once.

“I wanted to invite you on a date,” he said.

“What are we doing, darling,” she said seductively into his ear.

“There's an exhibit tomorrow,” he said, looking at the flier.

“I knew you'd come around,” she sighed in relief.

“I'll pick you up tomorrow,” he said and hung up the phone.

Taking one last look at the painting, Jake realized where he was. He had wandered to Brooke's old neighborhood.

Standing at the intersection where she turned down to show him her townhouse, Jake stood just thinking.

He could have been in Jenny's arms. Instead he was in the old part of town asking his lover on a date.

Would Brooke see this as betrayal? They were living as man and wife. She shared his bed. Jake had made a grand gesture.

Just a few minutes earlier, that didn't enter his mind.

He had made a date with his girlfriend and his wife was at home taking care of their family. Instead of being the man of the family, he was thinking of getting back with his lover, the woman he loved.

Standing on the corner of her old life, Jake knew Brooke would not have a problem with him dating the love of his life.

Brooke did not want him settling for her.

If Jake could have a chance to be happy, Brooke did not want him feeling guilty he would be leaving behind a wife and her kid and her mother. She didn't want him worrying about disappointing his mother.

Brooke wanted Jake to be happy.

Walking back to his condo, Jake knew there was a limit to this acceptance of their agreement. It was why he couldn't just take Jenny home and make love to her as he had in the past.

That would be betrayal.

If Jake reverted back to his old relationship where he and his lover met for good times alone with no understanding of their future together, he knew Brooke would not tolerate his inability to make a decision.

Jake knew Brooke would make one of her own at some point.

Knowing what he was risking, Jake had to find out if Jenny loved him the way he loved her and if she could ever see a future that only included the two of them.

Every moment he spent with Brooke, Jake felt a stronger connection, but it still wasn't enough to pull him away from his lover.

There was always a distance between the two that would never be closed. Jake would always love Jenny, and Brooke would always long for the love she shared with Matthew. Two people stood between them and they tried looking through them to each other, but it was still an obstacle they both had to decide to overcome. It was that or live with the knowledge they would never feel for each other the love they knew existed in the world.

Jake didn't want to risk his entire relationship with Brooke.

If the only thing Jenny wanted from their relationship were good times, Jake would have to gauge his decision then.

Until then, he had a date with his lover, his girlfriend and the only woman who had his heart.

Jake didn't call Brooke. It would only confuse them both.

The next evening, Jake picked up Jenny and she was stunning. Meeting her in the lounge of her apartment, Jake couldn't believe she could get even more beautiful. Pressing herself against him, Jenny whispered seductively in his ear.

"We can just go to your place," she whispered and Jake shivered. Laughing seductively at his reaction, Jenny kissed him gently on his lips, but she didn't linger long enough for him to kiss her back.

Sighing, Jake led her to his car and they rode in silence to the gallery.

Handing the valet his keys, Jake led the stunning Jenny into the gallery. Men and women, of all ages and backgrounds, hung out on the sidewalk and at the entrance talking about how inspirational the artist was, and Jenny got excited.

The only thing Jenny loved more than art was discovering new talent. Being creative was frowned upon in her circle, but hanging around an inspirational and aspiring edgy artist was always in vogue.

“You found this exhibit, Jake?” she asked in admiration and he nodded.

Another man noticed her admiring the work and made Jenny an offer she couldn’t refuse.

“Did you want to meet the artist?” he asked eagerly.

Nodding, Jenny thought that would be an honor.

“How do you know the artist,” she asked loudly above the packed crowd as he guided them through the admiring guests. Jake didn’t take offense at the men and women staring at the beautiful piece of work that was Jenny.

“I’m the agent,” Jake heard the man say.

Following the agent, Jenny prepared to say something intelligent about the artist’s work.

Tapping an elegantly dressed woman on the shoulder, the agent got the attention of the artist. Jake felt his insides ripped from his body.

“This is Sandstrom,” the agent said, introducing them. Eyes cutting him apart, Brooke shook Jenny’s hand. Introducing Jake, Brooke nodded. Jake didn’t hear anything Jenny babbled about art, but he noticed how composed and confident Brooke was as she stood there talking to his lover.

“I was wondering where you got your inspiration,” Jenny chattered and Brooke looked Jake straight in the eyes and seared his heart.

“It’s not hard coming up with inspiration from the pain we all share in our hearts,” Brooke said staring at Jake. “Inspiration is all around you. Maybe standing right next to you,” she said through gritted teeth.

Taking a deep breath, Brooke returned to Jenny.

“You’re very beautiful,” Brooke said wistfully. Straightening, Brooke offered her hand and Jenny gratefully shook it. “I hope you enjoy it enough to take one home,” she laughed and walked away.

“That was strange,” Jenny confided in Jake as they watched Brooke push through the crowd. Before she got out the door, someone held up the phone and Brooke listened for a moment, dropped the phone and ran out of the gallery.

Puzzled, Jenny looked at Jake and made a decision.

“She looks normal, but she’s clearly insane,” she noted. “I think I’m going to get a couple pieces, she’s going to be famous.”

Jake wanted nothing more than to find out what made Brooke run out of the gallery.

Pushing his way to the front of the gallery past all the guests mingling and discussing Brooke’s art, Jake got the attention of the person who handed Brooke the phone.

“Sorry to disturb you, but do you know who called the artist,” he asked. “She seemed despondent.”

Puzzled, the man said it was her mother-in-law.

Thanking the man, Jake headed out the door and gave the attendant a large bill to get his car. Waiting impatiently, Jake stood wondering what had happened at home. He tried calling on his cell, but his mother’s line went to voicemail.

Leaving an urgent message, Jake hung up as his car pulled up. The attendant opened the door and got out. Just as Jake was about to get in, Jenny came out of the gallery calling after him.

“Emergency at home,” he said, jumping in the driver’s seat.

Jake drove off after Brooke.

Chapter 26

Arriving home, Jake was met by his mother, who was crying.

“What happened, is everybody alright?” he asked, looking around. Sitting at his desk, MJ looked fine.

“Grandma got taken in an ambulance,” he said, turning to Jake.

Backing out of the kitchen, Jake headed to the hospital. Parking illegally, Jake raced inside and was told he would have to wait. While he was pacing, an attendant came out and led Jake to his mother-in-law. Brooke was sitting by her side and when she saw him, there was nothing but fear in her red eyes.

Hooked up to an IV and other instruments, Brooke’s mother looked frailer than Jake had ever seen her.

“What happened?” he asked, keeping his distance.

“Collapsed,” Brooke shrugged. “They’re still running tests.”

Turning to him now filled with anger, Brooke addressed the meeting at the gallery.

“You don’t need to be here, Jake,” she snapped. “I don’t want your pity. You’re relieved of all duties.”

“I know I don’t have to be here,” he whispered, her words impacting him. “I want to be here.”

Glaring at him, Brooke started crying. The doctor walked in and wanted to speak with Brooke.

Glaring as she walked by, Brooke walked down the hall with the doctor.

Jake decided to sit with her mother. Holding her frail hand, Jake felt a squeeze and saw that Brooke’s mother had opened her eyes.

Rising, Jake saw that she was trying to speak and tugged at the facemask pumping oxygen into her weak body. Jake gently lifted the mask, not sure if he should, but she seemed intent on telling him something.

Her mouth moved, but Jake couldn't hear her. Leaning in closer, her mother spoke in broken phrases and Jake listened to her meaning.

Placing the mask back on her face, Jake nodded and she squeezed his hand.

Brooke returned, devastated, and Jake quickly rose from the chair and got out of her path. Holding her mother's hand, Brooke rested her head on her mother's stomach.

"I'm taking her home, Jake," Brooke stated. Jake nodded.

Kissing her mother's hand, Brooke escorted Jake to the hallway.

"This is hard enough for me, Jake," she said through gritted teeth to hold back her tears. "I don't want you at home. I can only handle one horrifying event at a time."

Jake nodded. This was not the time to help Brooke.

Turning, Brooke wiped her tears and it was the last he saw of her. Taking a deep breath and gasping, Jake steadied himself.

On his way back to the city, Jake was still in pain from what had happened in the emergency room. Pulling over, Jake put his head on the steering wheel and cried until he was shaking.

The last words he would most likely ever hear from Brooke's mother were loud in his head.

He only hoped he would have the opportunity to carry out his mother-in-law's request.

Chapter 27

Curled up next to her mother on the full bed she had purchased so her mother could be comfortable while living in her home, Brooke was as scared as if she were a child. The hissing of the machines lulled her to sleep but she denied the urge to close her eyes.

The doctor said Brooke's mother might have a few days, they weren't sure if it was a stroke or something else. Brooke decided she wanted her mother to spend her last moments with family and not in a hospital. Clearing her schedule, Brooke spent day and night with her mother.

As she lay there, Brooke sat up when her mother woke up. Her mother was trying to say something and Brooke consoled her.

"Don't talk," she whispered. Her mother insisted and squeezed her hand. Brooke lifted the mask and her mother released her weak grip.

Hot tears burned her cheeks as she looked into her mother's gaze. It had been a long time since she felt her mother was looking at her.

"Brooke," she whispered and Brooke leaned in close.

"Jake is good man," she whispered and Brooke shook her head.

"I don't want to talk about him," she said, shaking her head. There was too much she wanted to say to her mother and she had no desire to talk about Jake.

At the gallery, Brooke almost lost it when she saw Jake and Jenny together. She knew he was seeing her, but to see them actually together was too much for her to comprehend. As long as she didn't see them together, nothing had changed in their marriage.

She didn't want to think about Jake. A committed husband would be there to support her in this time of need. She did not have a committed relationship.

"Love again," her mother whispered weakly. Brooke started sobbing and her mother patted her arm and Brooke only barely felt her touch. "Love for them," she insisted. Breathing heavy, her mother reached for the oxygen mask and Brooke immediately placed it over her mother's mouth.

“I love you, mom,” she whispered through sobs while wiping away the never-ending tears. “I just wanted to make you happy,” she stammered.

Holding her mother’s hand, Brooke lay next to her mother and couldn’t fight sleep any longer. Closing her eyes, she succumbed to its peaceful embrace.

Waking the next morning, Brooke heard loud beeping and the nurse entered and turned off the machine.

“Close the door,” Brooke urged quietly. As the nurse closed the door behind her, Brooke took the oxygen mask off her mother and kissed her gaunt, pale cold face. Getting out of the bed, Brooke took a deep breath and helped MJ with his school routine.

“Can I say ‘hi’ to grandma?” he asked and Brooke lied and said she was sleeping.

Fixing him breakfast, Brooke welcomed her mother-in-law and asked her to join her in the living room.

“I need you to take MJ to school,” she requested. “I need this to be a day like any other.”

Jake’s mother hugged her.

“I will,” she whispered and left. They went back to the kitchen and Brooke made sure MJ was gone before she locked the door and headed back to her mother’s room.

The nurse had called the funeral home where they had a pre-arranged pick-up, and Brooke wanted to be with her mother until then.

Holding her mother’s lifeless hand, Brooke had no more tears. No anger, no fear, no nothing.

Only groans that escaped when she remembered to breathe.

Standing to the side while the funeral home attendants carefully took her mother away, Brooke closed the door and sat down on the spot where her mother had taken her last breath.

Picking up the phone, Brooke dialed and waited for an answer.

“You need to come home, Jake,” she said and her throat tightened as she fought for her next words. “*I need you.*”

Chapter 28

Weeks after the funeral, Brooke couldn't get out of her mother's bed and Jake's mother helped with MJ, but Jake had to snap Brooke out of her self-pity.

It was her mother's dying wish for him to fulfill.

Her last words to him were for her daughter. She only wanted Brooke's happiness. When she had pushed him away he thought he would miss his chance, but Brooke had called and it was time for him to support her.

Resting behind Brooke and holding her while she looked at a picture of the family, Jake let her talk as she did when she had many things on her mind.

"When I was 8, I wanted to join this club or group after school, but I needed a uniform and we didn't have the money," Brooke rambled. "My mom was way too busy working nights. My grandma took me shopping and then to my mom, who just stood at the doorway of this woman's house she was working at and didn't say anything as I showed her my new uniform. For years and years I thought she didn't care, that it didn't matter that uniform. But it turns out, the reason she worked so late at the woman's house for so many nights was because she had to save up enough money to buy the uniform because we only had enough money to pay food and rent."

Brooke ran out of breath, but Jake let her continue before she started sobbing and he wouldn't be able to understand a thing she said.

"She couldn't come out to admire my uniform because she would get fired and then we wouldn't eat," Brooke gritted through her teeth and Jake knew she would be inconsolable again.

"I wanted her happiness, and she just wanted mine," Brooke shrugged. "She always told me one day when I had a kid I'd understand, but I didn't know it was forever. I thought once you grew up, that was it. They don't care or worry as much anymore. It never ends, Jake. They always worry. I will always worry."

Rolling over, Brooke cried into the bed and was shaking and moaning loudly. Jake was glad he had sent MJ to the park with his mother. He had to put an end to the self-pity and anguish.

Moments later, he came back with a bucket and threw its contents on Brooke.

Screaming, but no longer crying, Brooke sat up in bed covered in ice and water.

“What the ...” she demanded with fury and surprise in her eyes. Jake put the bucket on the floor.

“She said she didn’t want to see you like this,” Jake lectured her. “She told me to let you mourn, but after that, to get your butt up and out again. She said it wouldn’t make her happy if you just checked out again.”

That was the message Jake pieced together that night.

For a moment, Brooke just sat there thinking about what he said and slowly anger turned to recognition and she flung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up still in disbelief he had thrown a bucket of ice water on her.

“How would you know?” she yelled.

“She told me, that night in the hospital,” he yelled back and Brooke was startled.

“She said that to you?” she asked in amazement.

“Yes,” Jake replied confidently and calmed down.

Brooke wiped the water from her face and shook her body of excess water. Pulling an ice cube from her hair, she was still in awe of both being doused and her mother’s recommendation.

Walking past Jake to the end of the bed, she had formed a resolution.

“She liked you,” she realized and looked up at Jake. Tears started forming in her eyes but they didn’t fall.

“She couldn’t get up again, Jake,” Brooke explained with eyes resolute and bright. “She got knocked down so many times, she just couldn’t get up again. She saw that I had reached that point and she didn’t want me going down the same path. I checked out, Jake, put my life on autopilot and she knew that. But I have to get up again and again because life is just going to keep kicking me in the face. It’ll kick you even if you’re down, but if you’re up you can still

enjoy life as well and also still look to the future. If this doesn't work between us, if it's a mistake, if our love doesn't hold, if you end up leaving, at least I know I can get up again ..."

"If our love doesn't hold?" Jake interrupted, startled by her admission.

"Did I use those words?" she asked, puzzled at being interrupted.

"Yes," he agreed, wanting more explanation. It was like being called "daddy" for the first time or telling people she was his "wife" for the first time, it was foreign and he wasn't sure how he felt about it. Wasn't sure Brooke meant what she said considering she'd never love again.

Brooke sighed and walked up to Jake.

"There are all kinds of love, Jake," Brooke explained. "Love of God. Love of family. Love for Country. There are all kinds of love. I never want to love another man the way I loved Matthew. That kind of love can't ever be given again. It only happens once. You know that. I love my family, Jake. I'm not going anywhere. I guess I love you in that way. You're my family, my husband, but you're not the love of my life. I'm not yours. The only difference is that I'm here raising a family. Every day is a struggle and a joy. You, Jake, are still playing. You're not really living life. You're waiting for a life that's most likely never going to happen. If that freaks you out, then give me the means to take care of my child and you can go on to whatever you think is going to make you happy. Either way, I am here to stay."

Finished with her lecture, Brooke headed to the bathroom unbuttoning her soaked shirt.

Without turning her back, Brooke had one last epiphany.

"Maybe it's you who needs to be doused with water."

Jake just stood there absorbing the impact of her words.

"Ice, Jake, really?" she muttered and slammed the door.

Stumbling to the bed, Jake sat down. Brooke's words had hit their mark. She had doused him with a dose of reality.

With her core reignited, Brooke would not waste her time on Jake's decision. He had to choose between the love of his life or his wife.

Sitting on the wet bed, Jake knew it would not be an easy decision. Brooke was able to use the word "love" again when talking about a relationship.

Jake needed to hear that sincerely from Jenny.

Chapter 29

Stunned by Brooke's admission, Jake headed back to the city.

What was the source in her sudden change of terminology? Brooke knew he was seeing Jenny again.

Feeling guilty for not being there in her time of need, Jake had found comfort with Jenny.

Jake hadn't been intimate with Jenny when they showed up at Brooke's showing. They were just working on mending what was left of their relationship. Jake thought a date to the art gallery to see a hot new artist would be harmless.

Taking his wife's dignity, though, was not.

He didn't even know Brooke was having a showing. Didn't know she was thinking about displaying her work. But there she was, poised and confident surrounded by paintings Jenny had described as bold and dark and inspiring.

Eyes full of fury, Brooke would have cut him if she could. It didn't matter that they had an understanding. Even though Brooke knew he still loved Jenny, she didn't want to be humiliated in her presence.

Jake didn't mention his relationship or the fact that his wife was the artist.

Seeing Brooke successful, Jake didn't want to spoil her spotlight. For a moment, before she proclaimed to Jenny that she was beautiful and ran out the door, Jake was filled with pride. Then it was obliterated by guilt.

Guilty that he should have been there with Brooke when her mother passed. The only consolation, an absolution, was that he was able to fulfill her mother's last wishes and get Brooke out of bed and on with her life.

Back in the city, he had breathing room. Being with Jenny was exciting and uncomplicated. Even though she didn't let Jake know what she wanted from their relationship, nothing had changed. That had always been the status of their relationship.

At the house, it was different. Jake was husband and father and son and it was a lot of responsibility. Jenny was sexy and exciting. Brooke always had a lot on her mind and challenged Jake to figure out his life. Jenny didn't have those expectations.

Meeting her for lunch, Jake sat next to Jenny for the first time since before the breakup. With her warm, fragrant, familiar body pressed up against his own, Jake felt the familiar passion, but he hadn't given into it yet.

Caressing his arm, Jenny placed her beautiful, gorgeous head on his shoulder and he sighed.

"I'm going to Paris for a while," she said.

Jake was not surprised. This was part of their relationship. It was familiar.

"When will you be back?" he asked.

"A month or two," she shrugged like a cat languidly rubbing up against his arm.

"I'll miss you," he said, leaning his head against her soft, glowing hair.

"I'll miss you too," she said and looked up at him.

"I'm sure the, whoever you're married to, will be happy," he said, not remembering the old guy's title.

Sitting up and beaming, Jenny's eyes glowed as she told him why she was going away.

"You know that artist?" she asked rhetorically. Jake had no idea to which one she was referring. She had many artist friends.

"The one that said I was beautiful and ran out," she said, nudging him.

Jake went cold as prickles crawled up his arms.

"Go on," he said, not mentioning that indeed he knew the artist well enough. Not enough to know she was an up and coming star in the art world, but well enough.

“There’s going to be a tour in Paris,” she explained. “I recommended her and I’m going to be her guide. It’s going to be fabulous!”

Jake nodded. Brooke had not mentioned this detail.

“Sounds like fun,” he said. His mistress and his wife in Paris hanging out together at fabulous parties. Sounded like fun.

Had Brooke really agreed to go to Paris knowing Jenny would be her representative?

At that moment, Jake wanted to find out from Brooke. They hadn’t spoken in a while. Jake had left right after he got her up and out of her grieving and mourning.

“How did she take it?” he asked casually. “When she found out you’d be representing her in a Paris art tour? Being a new artist and all.” It was not his most eloquent moment.

“I spoke through her agent, but he said she was excited,” Jenny said.

They finished their meal, and as they were leaving Jenny kissed him.

“I’ll see you when I get back,” she beamed and left him with a seductive glance as she got in a cab and departed.

Uncomplicated. That was Jenny.

Beyond complicated. That was Brooke.

Instead of heading back to work, Jake wanted to know what Brooke was thinking. *Did she really not know she would be hanging out with Jenny in Paris? Or did she know, and was fully aware of what she was doing?*

Driving to the house, Jake knew it was the latter. There was never a moment when Brooke wasn’t thinking. There was one in particular, but even then Brooke knew what she was doing.

Why was he so upset? So what if his mistress hung out with his wife. They both knew the situation.

Except you didn't tell Jenny that the artist she was gushing over was your wife.

That might be awkward cocktail conversation.

Pulling up to the house, Jake parked in front. There were suitcases in the driveway.

Jogging up to the open kitchen door, Jake entered carefully. Sitting patiently at his desk drawing, MJ was happy to see Jake.

“Bonjour!” he said, getting up to greet Jake. Running up and grabbing him by the legs, MJ almost knocked Jake down. Catching his breath, Jake patted MJ’s head. Standing back, MJ looked at him confused.

“What’s the matter?” Jake asked concerned.

“I’m only supposed to be speaking French,” he whispered.

Jake laughed.

“*I speak French,*” Jake said in French and MJ smiled. As MJ was jabbering away in French, Jake caught the essence of the conversation.

They were heading to Paris.

“*You speak well,*” Jake congratulated MJ in French and MJ applauded. They both turned when Brooke entered the room distracted by the bags in her hand. Dropping them on the island, she glared at Jake.

“*Go play in your room,*” she commanded MJ in French, and MJ hugged Jake good-bye and went to his room as ordered.

“Hello, Jake,” she said annoyed. “We’re driving to the airport in a few minutes.”

“I was talking to Jenny,” he said and Brooke shook her head.

“Good for you,” she said sarcastically, checking to make sure she had everything for the trip.

“She mentioned she was going to be your guide during the tour,” he said. Brooke stopped what she was doing.

“What do you want me to say, Jake?” she asked irritated. “What did you want me to do?”

Jake didn’t respond. There was no reason he had any right to tell her what to do.

“I never told her you were the woman I had married,” he said sheepishly.

“Of course you didn’t, Jake,” she said sarcastically and continued with checking her bags. “That would have been the mature thing to do. We both know you’re not capable of that.”

Cringing, Jake lowered his head.

Closing her eyes, Brooke stopped checking her bags and when she opened them again she spoke softly.

“I have no intention of ruining your relationship with Jenny,” Brooke said. Jake lifted his head and looked at her sincere eyes. “I am getting the opportunity of a lifetime, Jake. Your relationship with Jenny has nothing to do with this. In my wildest fantasies I never thought this would happen. I’m going to show my work in Paris, Jake. I still can’t believe it. It’s a once in a lifetime dream come true. Do you congratulate me? Do you share in my joy? No,” she said, shaking her head. Holding her breath, Brooke suppressed the tears and anger.

“No, Jake,” she said. “You’re worried I’m going to confront your girlfriend. Like I’m some angry wife who feels betrayed. Do I care that you’re seeing her? Yes. Does it bother me that you can’t commit to one relationship? Yes, Jake. My son loves you like you’re his father. Every day I worry how I’m going to break it to him that you’re just a placeholder in our lives. Until then, until you make a decision, I’m going out there like it’s normal. I’m going to go after my happiness,” she said through gritted teeth and pointing angrily at her chest.

“I’m ready,” his mother said as she entered the kitchen. “Jake!” she exclaimed and hugged Jake. Stunned by Brooke’s confession, he hugged his mother back.

“They’re off to Paris!” she exclaimed. “Aren’t you proud of her?”

Jake nodded his head.

“It’s time to go,” Brooke declared.

“I’ll help you load,” Jake said quietly and Brooke just nodded.

With everything and every body in the car, the good-byes said and a cold glare from Brooke, Jake waved as his mother pulled out of the driveway.

Jake was left standing alone in his driveway.

Lowering his head, he went back to the house and closed the kitchen door.

His house was quiet again.

The first day his mother handed him the keys after his father died and they officially changed title, Jake stood on the exact same spot.

His first thought back then was that he was alone. It was a peaceful thought. His mother had been nagging him about settling down. Before his father passed, he had urged Jake to find someone with whom to build a life.

Standing in the house that day, he was alone. It didn’t bother him.

Standing in the same spot almost a decade later, Jake did not feel peaceful. He was alone but it was not peaceful. Silence blared at him, reminded him that he was alone.

When Brooke first arrived with her son, Jake had sought the solace of his room. It was the only part of the house in which he felt comfortable. Life played out like a drama all around him. A family occupied his house and he only had to play a part in it if he wanted.

A stranger in his own house, Jake’s plan to stop his mother’s nagging had backfired. He didn’t control his life. His plan took on a life of its own.

With Brooke and MJ gone, Jake realized they had taken the life out of his house. They had transformed the house into a home, and now it was just a house again. His house.

Jake had never expected he would miss it, the family that greeted him and expected from him what he could only give on a part-time basis. It didn't matter to them. It was consistent. It had become their normal.

It wasn't his though. Jake could always seek refuge in the city. He could sit back alone in his condo and take a break from all the responsibilities.

There was no stepping back for Brooke. She was moving forward. This might just be a rest stop on her journey.

It would be hard for her to move on, but Jake knew she would. Then it would just be him again alone in his own house.

How hard could this decision be? Jake demanded to know from himself.

It was either Jenny or Brooke or neither. He had three choices.

Jake had an epiphany.

It wasn't his choice to make.

He was waiting for Jenny to make her decision. Everything depended on her decision. If that took too long, Brooke would be gone.

But he didn't want to be with Brooke just because Jenny couldn't, or wouldn't, make up her mind.

Jake sat at the kitchen island surrounded by their memory.

Lowering his head, he picked up one of Brooke's socks left behind in the race out the door.

When she first arrived, Brooke barely got out of her robe. Now she was off to Paris, an inspiration to his girlfriend.

He hadn't congratulated her. Never said he was proud. Never took the time to know that she was interested in showing her work.

When she first showed him the studio, he thought it was nice that she would have a hobby. Jake thought she needed something to keep her busy while he was in the city. The job teaching art was a start. Painting at home in her studio seemed like a perfect complement to keep her content.

Jake was the one who wanted to try making an actual marriage work. Brooke had gone with his new proposal knowing it was a start.

It was a magnanimous gesture on his part, but she was experienced and knew Jake had no idea what he was offering. Brooke knew it was only time until Jake reverted back to the comfort of Jenny, who was uncomplicated.

Jake thought he was helping Brooke in the beginning. Their relationship was uncomplicated on paper. Although he admired her strength, he thought she needed him and would do what he expected of her.

That did not happen. Brooke took control and soon she was growing as his equal. Still pulled down by the pain of her loss, Jake always thought she would be dependent on him.

That didn't last for very long.

After learning that his pre-conceived notions about her sexual prowess were incorrect, she amazed him over and over again and he was intrigued. Not intrigued enough to forget about Jenny, but enough to consider a commitment beyond what they had on paper.

Brooke didn't care about the agreement. Commitment was what she sought from Jake. He was either in the marriage or not. It was his choice.

There were terms to their verbal agreement. Jake was not allowed to base his choice out of obligation or responsibility. Brooke would accept a payoff.

Unfortunately, Jake felt obligated by some form of guilt if he left the family he joined together. He was pulled between the two. He wanted Jenny, he wanted their relationship to work and that they would live happily ever after. Jake wanted what Brooke had with Matthew.

On the other side of the issue, Jake had become attracted to Brooke. She continued to amaze him, but it was appreciation that didn't cross over to love. He loved Jenny.

At some point, though, he was either going to make a decision or it was going to be made for him.

With Brooke finding both personal success and financial success, it was only time before she didn't need him anymore.

Looking around the kitchen that she had transformed from an old outdated room, Jake knew it would be more than a parting of ways, more significant than a termination of their agreement.

Jake knew he would miss Brooke. He wasn't sure in what way, but he knew it would leave a big silent gaping hole in his life.

Dropping her soft cotton sock, Jake took one last look at the kitchen and closed the door leaving the room just how they left it.

Driving back to the city, shame still hung over Jake.

Both his girlfriend and wife would be hanging out in Paris.

If only one returned, which one would he be excited to see?

Which would be excited to see him?

Chapter 30

In Paris, Brooke settled into the cottage Jenny had provided through the foundation that was putting the art tour together. The foundation had gathered the most inspiring and aspiring artists from the States to introduce to France.

Meeting with the nanny who would stay with MJ, she reminded him and the nanny that there would be no English while they were in France.

It was supposed to be summer vacation for MJ, but this was an opportunity that would come once in a lifetime. The nanny would show him the culture and he could still go to the park and play with French kids his own age.

When he saw the park and ran to the kids, Brooke sighed in relief. He would be fine.

Kissing him good-bye, Brooke took a cab to the welcome mixer where she would meet the other artists and gallery owners who would be hosting the exhibits. Recognizing Jenny immediately, her hair a glorious sunset around eyes as bright as the sea, Brooke grabbed a glass of champagne and waited for Jenny to introduce herself.

There was some comfort in knowing that Jake was horrified at the thought of Brooke hanging out with his girlfriend.

Their entire relationship was a result of his relationship with the beautiful, elegant and sophisticated woman. Brooke could understand how she held Jake under her spell.

Was there more than that? she wondered, watching Jenny laugh and mingle so naturally, captivating the crowd of men around her.

What did Jake see in Jenny besides the obvious?

Brooke had stopped comparing herself to the beautiful woman. She understood there was no comparison to another person if love were involved.

There were moments when Brooke was frozen when she saw traces of Matthew's characteristics in Jake.

Jake would say something or look at her a certain way or grow his stubble just so, and Brooke had the air ripped from her lungs.

There was no comparison. If Brooke saw a sexy man, she realized it was because he reminded her of Matthew.

Neither tall nor super handsome, Matthew was her love. Every man was held to a new standard of attractiveness based on mannerisms she found attractive in Matthew.

This elegant, beautiful woman was Jake's standard. If he found Brooke attractive it was because she had a characteristic that reminded him of Jenny. Since Brooke was neither elegant nor sophisticated, there must be more to his love than just a beautiful physique.

Brooke would be lying to herself if she didn't admit she was a little jealous of the woman.

In the aftermath of her loss, Brooke knew she would never love another man again the way she loved Matthew. She didn't realize that she could find another level of love with another man.

If Jake thought he was confused, Brooke had him beat. Attracted to Jake, enjoying the pleasure when they were in bed together, Brooke wondered if it was because of gratitude and access and not a real connection to the man she had married.

In the beginning it had been her intention to hide behind the veil of their marriage to buffer her from the harsh aftermath of dealing with life after her loss.

With her son and mother cared for and financially protected, Brooke thought her problems would be solved and she could dwell in self-pity without guilt.

It was irresponsible of her to drag her family into such a relationship. Jake had grown to be a father figure for her son. To leave now would be beyond cruelty and it would be all her fault.

Pain and anger and numbness had blinded her to see only one way out. She hadn't considered the ramifications of her decision. It had seemed like such a perfect solution at the time. A home for her son and care for her mother.

When Jake said he wanted to try their marriage for real, Brooke was terrified. Betrayal. She was betraying Matthew. She had just gotten over the guilt of having sex with another man. The only resolution was to make sure she really couldn't see her lover. As long as it was dark, she could imagine she was still making love to Matthew.

Unfortunately, she had started caring for Jake. She had achieved a level of caring for the man that hovered below everlasting love, and that terrified her as well. She didn't think it was possible, but it was there.

Worrying about MJ losing another father couldn't be her concern anymore. Lying to herself had only made matters worse.

Brooke had to consider this was a detour in her journey and prayed fervently her son would understand. Until that day came, she would give everything of herself to make the right choices not only for her son, but herself.

Neither one would be happy if the other sacrificed of themselves totally for the other. Both her and her mother had played that game and they had both lost. There had to be a balance.

It was Brooke's resolution to find that balance. With or without Jake.

Finishing her champagne, Brooke took a deep breath and stepped into the crowd. Beaming, Jenny invited Brooke into her circle and introduced her to all the artists and gallery owners.

Life was a blur from there. Everything she had never imagined was now her reality, and the flashing fantasies she ignored made her time in Paris like a dream. Brooke had always admired art, studied art and dabbled at painting.

At most, she hoped to own her own gallery and discover a talented artist who would change the world with his or her art, at best, maybe curator for a major metropolitan museum. Even that was only a fantasy.

Taking pictures and greeting France's most prestigious and influential gallery owners, Brooke blushed when they said she was inspirational, her work a triumph.

The fact that she didn't look like a dark and edgy artist was even more amazing to them.

Every other night she was at a new gallery, greeting admirers and being invited to parties.

Shopping. The one thing Brooke had not been interested in on her first visit was something she looked forward to on her afternoons off. Waking to say “good morning” to MJ, Brooke would sleep for a few hours then she was off to shopping and exploring the city.

The most special moment of the trip was when she took her son to the Eiffel Tower and they took a picture, looking very happy. Even though she was not around, MJ was busy with friends and birthdays and museums.

The most intense moment of the trip was when Jenny invited her to have dinner with her, and her alone.

Meeting at the most expensive restaurant in the city, Brooke was not excited at the adventure that had been a fantasy. Her fantasy did not contain a meeting with her second husband’s girlfriend in the aftermath of the loss of her only love.

Sitting in a booth in the middle of the room, strategically placed where every man would be able to admire the both of them, Brooke only had one thought on her mind and only Jenny could answer that puzzle.

At this moment in time, they were equals. On one side there was Brooke, highly successful near the top of her burgeoning career, and on the other side Jenny, sophisticated and elegant, every man’s fantasy.

Ordering the most expensive champagne in the restaurant, or in France for that matter, Jenny proposed a toast in her beautiful, perfect French accent.

“To a successful tour!” Jenny proclaimed and they clinked glasses and drank their champagne.

“How does it feel to be the talk of the town?” her host asked while smiling at people who passed by and admired the two spectacular women.

“It is beyond my wildest imagination,” Brooke confessed. “I am enjoying every moment.”

“I know we never got a moment to talk to each other,” Jenny said. “So, I thought it would be nice to get together and just have ‘girl talk’ as they say in the States.” Brooke was still not clear what part of Europe Jenny was from. She had a European accent, but Brooke wasn’t sophisticated enough to know from which country.

It was hard to look at Jenny in the eyes when she spoke to her though, they were so bright and inquisitive and magical.

“How does your husband feel about your success,” Jenny asked with mischief. “Is he jealous that all the men in France are in love with you?”

Gulping, Brooke took a drink from her champagne glass.

“My husband is a successful man himself,” she said. “We have an understanding. He can see his beautiful mistress and I can pursue my career.”

Brooke had stepped over a line, but her desire to understand Jenny’s intentions with Jake trumped propriety.

Gasping, Jenny leaned in close.

“I have a confession to make,” she whispered loudly. “My marriage is the same way. We have that in common,” Jenny said, clinking Brooke’s glass. Containing herself, Brooke was stunned the woman found pleasure in sharing a connection with Brooke. She had just told the woman her marriage was a fake, and the woman thought it was great they had that in common. It was the perfect opening for Brooke.

“So do you have someone on the side as well?” Brooke asked mischievously as if she had a lover on the side in addition to her husband. She had no desire to confront Jenny about Jake, but she truly needed to know if Jenny felt the same way about Jake, who was deeply in love with the woman. This was the love of his life.

Excited and surprised by the question, Jenny shared with her new best friend.

“I do, darling,” she shared. “We’ve been seeing each other for years. He’s such a beautiful man, but he doesn’t understand my obligations. He’s a romantic but there’s no way I can leave my

husband. He can't offer me what I want. I know it breaks his heart, but he has to accept I'm happy with what we have."

"What's that?" Brooke asked as casually as she could, with just a sprinkling of jealous curiosity.

"We have a great time together, that's all," she sighed. "You understand, right darling," she said raising her glass.

"I do," Brooke said and raised her glass as well. Taking a long drink, Brooke studied Jenny. It was fun for her, the relationship she had with Jake. It would never be more than that. While Jake waited for the moment when Jenny would finally agree to settle down with him, even if it was not as a married couple, Jenny never had any intention of leaving the life she craved. Jake was wasting away and Jenny was living her life to the fullest extent.

Knowledge was not power. It ripped open doors of curiosity that could never be shut again, laid bare emotions that were never meant to be unwrapped, and stripped the veil from assumptions. Knowledge was not power. It was the opposite. Brooke had full knowledge of Jenny's relationship with Jake, and was not filled with information for which she had power to change anything.

Even if she went to Jake and told him how Jenny felt, he would never believe anything than what was in his heart.

It was also ironic that Brooke didn't have a problem using the woman's influence to advance her career.

Brooke didn't feel powerful or content or angry. She only felt sorry for Jake. He had given his love freely and it was not returned. Brooke had all the love in the world and it had been reciprocated. Even though Jake didn't feel the same for Brooke as Matthew did, it did not matter to her. Her love was gone. What she felt for Jake was strong, but not anywhere near what she felt for Matthew.

"Shall we order?" Brooke asked.

Declaring she was famished, Jenny told the waiter to ask the chef to make them something special.

Brooke was sure the meal was the most exquisite masterpiece she would ever eat in her life, but the conversation with Jenny had only left a bitter aftertaste. As usual, Brooke didn't think before entering treacherous territory.

Parting, the women hugged.

"I'll see you at the gallery tomorrow, darling," she said and Brooke thanked her for everything she had done for her.

Hailing a taxi, Jenny wished her well and the car drove off into the night.

Brooke let go of all the tension with one long groan.

She was in a relationship with a man who loved a woman who didn't love him back. Walking down the street past all the shops and restaurants, Brooke realized that she should have been enjoying her time in Paris, but everything in her life back home shadowed the pleasure she should have felt.

She could walk away. That was an option. Divorce happened all the time.

This time she needed to think it through. It was one thing to provide her son with a family that was a placeholder at best, it would be devastating to pull him out of the same family when she wasn't one hundred percent sure her marriage would not work out.

There was no way she would achieve the same level of love she had with Matthew, but now she knew she could be with someone else.

Arriving home, Brooke checked in on MJ and kissed his forehead. In the living room, she thanked the nanny, who retired to her room. Alone, Brooke lay down on the couch. She had another busy day and just needed to rest.

Sunlight pierced her sleep and MJ stood before her waiting for her to open her eyes. Sitting up, Brooke squinted.

“Good morning, mom,” he said cheerfully. *“Do you want crepes?”*

Smiling, Brooke hugged and kissed her son. He was almost fluent for a child his age. But most of all he was adjusting well.

“Are you happy?” she asked, looking into the eyes he shared with his father.

“Yes!” he exclaimed. “We’re going to ride a merry go round today!”

Brooke really wished she could join them, but she was there for business. She would spend time with him when they got back home. Wherever that was.

Falling back to sleep in her own bed and nightgown when they left, Brooke woke when her alarm went off. Showering and dressing, she made her way to the center of town in a cab.

Arriving as the party was just starting, Brooke followed the guests inside the gallery. Inside, Jenny introduced her to influential art collectors and admirers. Upon seeing one of the guests, Brooke froze when she wanted to run.

Standing and looking at her work was Michael. Matthew’s best friend from college, the man she dated until she met Matthew. She hadn’t seen him since the funeral and Brooke felt the same pain she did that day. Before she could escape, Michael turned and smiled.

As her throat tightened, numbness overcame her and she stood while he walked up to her. It was college and the funeral, all the good times and bad times rolled into one moment.

“Hello, Brooke,” he said in English and he held out his hand. Brooke took his hand and Michael just held it softly as he stared into her eyes. Only this man knew the extent of her pain. All her pain was splattered in the dozen art pieces on the wall, and only he knew how it got there.

“Hello, Michael,” she whispered. Interrupted by admirers, Michael let go of her hand and Brooke apologized as she was pulled away. Flashes blinded her, the noise overwhelmed her and she needed air. Gently pushing her way outside, Brooke stood in the night air and just breathed.

“It’s not your scene, is it?” she heard Michael say as he walked up to her with his hands in his pants pockets. Standing on the sidewalk, they watched the traffic go by and didn’t say anything to one another.

“I can’t leave right now, Michael,” she said, turning to him. “If you want to talk some other time, that would be good.”

Pulling out a business card from his inside jacket pocket, Michael handed her his card and nodded.

“Congratulations, Brooke,” he said as she took the card. “Matthew would have been proud.”

Brooke closed her eyes and held her breath. She could not cry right now.

“There you are,” Jenny called in French. *“I want you to meet a very important person,”* she said, holding Brooke’s arm and coaxing her back into the gallery. Looking back, Brooke saw Michael walking away.

Would she have the strength to call him?

It was the only thought on her mind as she entertained guests, took pictures and thanked everyone for coming to her exhibition.

Hours later, she was sitting on her couch looking at Michael’s business card. Holding her phone in her hand, she had gotten the courage to push the number buttons, but didn’t have the strength to push the dial button.

Without thinking, she hit the dial button.

“Bonjour?” Michael asked. Brooke had woken him.

“Michael,” she whispered. “Can we meet tomorrow?” she asked in English.

“Brooke,” he said. *“Meet me at the gallery at noon. It’s near my place.”*

“See you tomorrow,” she whispered and hung up.

It was set. Tomorrow she would meet with Michael.

Lying in bed staring at the ceiling, Brooke thought about everything she could talk about with Michael and realized it would not make Matthew proud.

Seeing MJ off, Brooke put on a pleasant dress and promised herself in the mirror not to cry.

Taking a cab to the gallery, Brooke saw Michael leaning against the wall and he walked toward her when she got out of the cab. Handing the driver the fare, Brooke turned to Michael. They stood there quietly for a moment and Brooke lost her resolve. Michael embraced her and consoled her.

Wiping her tears, Brooke sighed.

“Let’s go somewhere quiet,” she said and Michael led her to his flat.

Offering Brooke a drink, Michael waited for her to answer.

“Sparkling water,” she said.

As he went to get her drink, Brooke continued to be distracted.

When he got back, Michael tried to figure out what she was looking at then he picked up a frame, took it over to the couch and sat next to Brooke.

Holding the precious frame, Brooke remembered the day the photo was taken. It was at college just after she started dating Michael and had just met Matthew.

Michael had seen her at a party, and their love of the French culture brought them together. It was the only thing they had in common and they never took their relationship beyond a few dates.

Taking her home to his apartment he shared with Matthew, Brooke met the man who would not only be her husband and love of her life, but the father of her only child.

“He fell in love with you that day I took you back to our apartment,” he said and tears fell naturally down her cheeks as Michael reminisced.

“Can I have a copy?” she asked, staring at the precious photo.

“I’ll send you a copy,” he promised. Brooke nodded and handed him back the photo. When he handed her the sparkling water, Brooke noticed he wasn’t wearing his wedding band.

“What happened?” she asked, pointing to his bare ring finger. Michael had eloped with a woman he had met at a bar after she and Matthew got married. Brooke had never met the woman and hadn’t spoken to Michael since the funeral.

Self-conscious of his bare hand, Michael covered his ring finger with his other hand.

“It wasn’t like what you and Matthew had,” he explained. “It was great but soon we realized it wasn’t great enough to last.”

“I’m sorry,” Brooke said and wanted to cry for him, and her, and everything they had endured.

“Thank you,” he said. Lightening the mood, Michael changed the subject from personal to professional.

“You’ve come a long way since working in that gallery,” he said cheerfully. Brooke sighed.

“I woke up one day with this idea,” she said, gesturing with her hands. “Didn’t stop until it was out of my head. Took a photo, sent it to my old gallery contacts and here I am.”

Michael smiled.

“What about you?” she asked.

“I own a consulting company and I spend most of my time here in Paris,” he said, looking around his home. If Brooke lived in France, Michael’s flat would have been something she would have chosen for herself.

“What about your son?” he asked quietly.

“He’s doing great,” she replied.

“How are you doing?” he asked and Brooke stopped a groan from escaping, but one tear got past her. Looking at Michael she didn’t know where to start.

“I’m adjusting,” she said.

“I saw your art, Brooke,” Michael said as he placed a comforting hand on her cheek. “That’s not adjustment.”

Pressing her cheek against his hand, Brooke agreed.

“I married a man for security and now my son calls him daddy and he’s still in love with another woman and I don’t know how to fix my life,” she blurted.

“That’s more like the Brooke I know,” he joked and wiped away her tear. Smiling, Brooke grabbed his hand and kissed it quickly.

“Crude,” she replied. “That’s the Michael I know,” she joked and they spent the afternoon talking about everything.

As the afternoon sun pulled away from them, Brooke hugged Michael and made him promise to stop by her place and see MJ.

Parting, Brooke headed home and for the first time in a while felt the burden of loneliness lifted and replaced with the knowledge she had a friend who knew her pain and shared her joy.

Bringing presents, Michael stopped by two days later and he told MJ all about his father and their friendship. Brooke watched as MJ listened in fascination and asked questions only a friend of Matthew’s could answer.

Reading her son a story for bedtime, as he had a few times before in better times, Michael promised to tell MJ more stories, shook hands and joined Brooke in the living room.

“That was very sweet of you,” Brooke said. “I can’t tell him stories without getting emotional.”

Michael hugged Brooke.

“He has his father’s eyes,” he whispered. “That must be wonderful and hard at the same time.”

Nodding into his chest, Brooke agreed.

Sighing, she wiped away her tears.

“I’m leaving soon,” she said. “Can we get together before I head back to the States?”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he said and hugged her again before departing.

Closing the door, Brooke leaned up against the wall and slid down until she was crouched on the floor.

What if she had reached out to Michael? Would things have turned out differently? He told her to call if she needed anything, but Brooke thought her situation required more than just a shoulder to cry on.

Sighing, Brooke went to bed. She had another exhibition and needed her rest.

Longing for her own bed, Brooke thought about Jake for the first time in days.

He hadn’t called. She was very harsh to him that day and was too angry to say good-bye.

Jealous. That was how Brooke felt. It took her a while to figure it out, but she was so angry because Jake was more concerned about losing Jenny than congratulating her on her success.

It was a revelation. If he had to choose, Jake would choose Jenny.

There was no more waiting. Brooke had to find a way to transition out of Jake’s life. It would pain his mother, but she could still be MJ’s grandmother. That relationship didn’t have to end.

As the tour winded to an end, Brooke met up with Michael again and he had a copy of the photo.

Grateful, Brooke hugged him and they ended up at his place. At some point, one of them made a move and Brooke was in his embrace as they kissed. Pulling her on the couch, they kissed, at times tender, at times passionate and at other times consoling.

Breathless as she pulled away, she looked into his eyes and saw that he was interested in more.

Standing and buttoning her blouse, Brooke grabbed her things and apologized.

“I have to get home,” she said and ran out into the night air, hailing a taxi while still holding her shoes in her hand.

Arriving home, Brooke realized she had forgotten the photo.

It didn't matter. She had also forgotten that although she and Michael didn't have a lot in common, he was still an incredible kisser.

Holding her hands on her lips, Brooke was doubly guilty.

Lying in bed, Brooke cried. She wasn't sad about the kiss. She wasn't sad she had slept with Jake.

The cause of her pain was deeper.

With each kiss, each intimate moment she spent with another man, she was further away from remembering Matthew's touch.

Her biggest fear was that someday she would forget him altogether.

Crying herself to sleep, Brooke woke up tired, wished MJ a good day and went back to sleep. It was the night of her last exhibition. After that they could go home.

Arriving with the other guests, and fashionably late, Brooke was surprised to see Michael.

“You forgot your photo,” he said, handing her an envelope. Tucking it into her evening purse, Brooke invited Michael to join her.

“I can only stay for awhile,” he said, walking into the gallery with her. “I have a business trip in the morning.”

Nodding, Brooke mingled and introduced her friend to guests and art collectors. Whispering he had to go, Brooke nodded and walked him out.

Standing on the sidewalk, Brooke held his hand as they stared at each other not knowing what to say.

“I wish you the best,” Michael said, squeezing her hand. Still standing, she wanted to say “good-bye” better.

Hugging, she kissed him on the cheek and they slowly turned their heads until they were lip-to-lip and whispering “good-bye.” Giving him one last kiss for old time’s sake, Brooke hugged him and when she opened her eyes she almost screamed.

Standing on the sidewalk, frozen in his pace, stood Jake staring at her in disbelief.

Anger engulfed Brooke after the momentary flash faded that he might be there for her. Hugging Michael and kissing him on the cheek, she bid him farewell, saw him into a cab, and turned back to glare at Jake before walking back into the gallery.

Jake never entered the gallery. The only thing Brooke found was satisfaction. Now he knew how she felt that night at the gallery before she was called away to be with her dying mother.

It was a hollow victory. If he didn’t care for her, then it would be meaningless.

A few days later, Brooke headed back home and was greeted by his mother at the airport.

Arriving home, Brooke didn’t unpack her bags.

The time to wait for Jake’s decision had passed.

This would be the second hardest thing she would have to do in her life.

Chapter 31

On a cold crisp day, after a meeting with the owner and her agent, Brooke wandered from the gallery where she had her first exhibit. They wanted her to do another exhibit, with new work and she had declined.

“I will work on something but I can’t guarantee anything,” she said. “I gave everything I had to this exhibit.”

Although they were disappointed, the last exhibit had taken in an extraordinary amount of money, they understood.

Without inspiration, a lackluster exhibit would be worse than no exhibit at all. Saying “good-bye,” Brooke decided to take a walk. She found herself in a familiar part of town and let the past guide her.

Walking through her old neighborhood, Brooke was torn when she saw an “Open House” sign in front of her old yard.

Yearning for one last look, Brooke considered going inside and looking around, but she couldn’t move. When she left, she had said “good-bye” to the house thinking she would never see it again, but here was her opportunity and she was frozen.

When she got pregnant, she and Matthew immediately went out looking for homes. Wanting to stay in the city for the galleries and Matthew’s job, they realized the only thing they could afford was an attached house or a condo.

When the real estate agent showed them the townhouse, Brooke was thrilled because it was closer to a house and it had a small backyard. Brooke couldn’t have a backyard in a condo. Not any she had seen.

The agent told them to act quickly because it was an end unit with more windows and one wall that didn’t connect to anyone.

Once inside, they raced around, imagining everything they could do with the house, and stood in MJ’s soon-to-be nursery where they decided they had found the home to raise their child.

Did she really want to revisit that memory? For about two years she had moved on, did she really want to take a step back? It was hard enough leaving the first time.

A young couple emerged from the house and talked animatedly as they walked down the stairs from the small porch. Looking back at the house together, they turned and walked past Brooke talking about all the wonderful things they could do with the house.

Anger overtook Brooke. Rationally she knew it was not her house, but seeing other people talk about the dream that once was hers urged her on and she quickly crossed to the stairs and up the porch.

A real estate agent greeted her at the door with a spec sheet and Brooke waved her away as she walked by her and stood in the living room where she had spent the most cherished times of her life.

Warmth embraced her in the cold empty room filled with the light from the hazy winter day, but Brooke only saw the room as it was and was seized by the desire to have that feeling back one more time.

The real estate agent had been talking but Brooke didn't hear anything she said and interrupted her when she had made her decision.

"All cash," she said. "I will put in an all cash offer as is."

The agent, a true professional, nodded.

"I will get the paperwork," she said and left Brooke to dream about building the future from her past.

Chapter 32

Sitting on her couch in the sparsely decorated townhouse, Brooke just sat and stared at the wall.

Ever since she bought the house, she had done nothing but put in a couch, a bed in her old room upstairs, a bed in MJ's room, and hung paintings on the walls. Brooke still didn't know what she was going to do. She was still in a stalemate with Jake and was moving to the idea that she didn't need to wait for his decision.

The one characteristic she didn't like about Jake was he didn't handle personal relationships well, and that was a very big flaw. Brooke had to mend his relationship with his mother and was now patiently waiting for him to decide whether he was going to try and make their marriage into something stable or he was going to continue pursuing a woman who most likely would never settle down with him. If that's what he wanted, a woman he loved but didn't love him the same in return, then it wasn't Brooke's job to change his mind.

Jake's mother took it hard when Brooke told her it wasn't up to them to change Jake's mind or encourage him to choose a life he didn't want to live.

Sitting in the room, Brooke wondered who would make the decision for them.

The doorbell rang and Brooke sighed. It wasn't unusual to get visitors, the gallery was around the corner and there was always something to sign.

Standing and sighing, Brooke looked out the window and didn't see anyone at first. Then a man turned and under the porch light stood Jake, looking glazed over in the eyes. Brooke realized he must be drunk.

Brooke had seen him inebriated and relaxed, but never drunk and wasn't sure what mood he was in, so she pulled open the door the length of the security chain.

Peeking her face out, Jake stood in her view and they locked eyes.

“What do you want, Jake,” she said.

“I want to talk,” he said, holding onto the doorjamb for support. Brooke didn’t detect any animosity or anger and closed the door, took off the chain and opened the door. Jake nodded and walked past her into the living room. Brooke closed the door and locked it.

Watching Jake explore the room, she crossed her arms waiting for whatever he came there to say.

Surprised when he carefully looked at each painting, Brooke imagined him in a gallery and that relaxed her because it was hard to realize Jake was in the home she had shared with her first husband, a man she had loved deeply.

For a long time, he carefully looked at the paintings. Then Jake backed up from the one Brooke liked to stare at while sitting on the couch, and he carefully sat down still looking at the painting. Brooke quietly walked over to the couch and sat carefully on the far side of Jake, waiting for him to say what he came to say.

“What were you thinking when you did that one?” Jake asked wistfully, unable to take his eyes off the piece.

Leaning back into the couch, Brooke thought about the moment that inspired her to put her feelings and emotions on canvas.

“That was the night I saw you with your lover,” she explained.

“It looks angry and confused,” he surmised. A groan almost escaped from deep within her stomach. Jake saw more than she realized.

“What brings you here, Jake,” she asked softly, staring at the painting with him.

Sighing, Jake leaned back on the couch, let his coat that he had wrapped tightly around him loose, and he unbuttoned his suit jacket. Turning to Brooke, he answered.

“I wanted to see how you were doing in your new old place,” he said.

“I’m doing fine,” she said because it was easy.

Jake nodded.

“I’m glad to see you’re happy,” he whispered. Brooke would not describe herself as happy.

“You looked happy in Paris,” Jake said and Brooke knew why he had sought her out that night.

“I saw you too, Jake,” she acknowledged.

“A friend of yours?” he asked, trying to sound casual.

“Yes,” she asserted. “Yes he is. We go way back. He’s Matthew’s best friend from college. We dated. He introduced me to my husband.”

Jake turned away because Brooke challenged him to respond to the fact she had kissed her first husband’s best friend, a man she had dated, and she was not ashamed.

“In this very room, Jake, do you know how many memories there are?” she asked rhetorically. “I can see every Christmas, every birthday, every moment. I remember MJ’s first steps. I remember making love on our couch. I remember waiting for my husband to come home every night.”

Tears threatened to drown her memories so Brooke held her breath and the tears abated. She was not going to break down in front of Jake.

Standing, she pointed out all the moments she shared in her other life, as another man’s wife.

“I remember cooking dinner in that kitchen, feeding MJ at his high chair, and putting candles on cakes for their birthdays. Up those stairs I remember racing to get away from Matthew as I stole the newspaper he was reading to get his attention. He raced right after me and we fell in our bed laughing. I remember the laughter, Jake.”

Jake sighed again.

“Do you have those kinds of memories, Jake?” she asked rhetorically.

Jake didn’t respond.

“You saw me on the street with another man, and now you’re here,” she stated. “When Michael kissed me, I wasn’t expecting it, Jake, but it was nice. It wasn’t on the sidewalk either. It was at his place in France. I didn’t think I was capable of getting to that stage so fast. It’s getting easier

to deal with being intimate with another man, Jake. But you know what's not?" she asked and held her breath until the tears subsided again.

"Knowing that I will forget what I felt when I kissed Matthew," she said through gritted teeth. Her throat started to tighten and she breathed carefully until it was relaxed again. If Jake came for an explanation, she was going to give it to him.

"Do you know what it's like to be loved that way, Jake? So fully and completely that another person knows your soul. Someone who understands everything you're feeling even if you do not know yourself?"

"Do you know how I feel now, Jake? Most of the time I feel like a call girl just good enough for someone else's pleasure. Sure, people like Michael think they want to care for me, but they are not seeing who I am, Jake. I don't know who you're seeing when you look at me, Jake."

Pointing to the couch, she remembered how Matthew cared for her.

"One night we had a fight, I don't remember what it was about, I never remembered what our fights were about," she rambled. "But I decided to sleep on the couch. I woke up and lying on the floor beside me on our comforter with his hand on my stomach was Matthew. He said he couldn't sleep without me. Even though I would never leave him, a part of him always worried because I was always so opinionated and let him know what I felt. It was something he loved about me but always knew he had to ignore me as well. He knew how to temper my anger because I needed to vent. He knew that, Jake."

Pointing to the downstairs guest bathroom, Brooke continued.

"We had another fight about something I don't remember and I locked myself in the bathroom and just sat on the counter to cool down. I get angry or upset, I let it out then I let it go. Matthew knew that. The door popped open and Matthew was standing there with a screwdriver. He was casual showing that he could open the door with a screwdriver and I remember he said something like 'where were we' and then we just started laughing and laughing."

Brooke smiled and closed her eyes thinking about how he never took their fights to heart.

“No one will ever know my soul like Matthew and my mother,” she asserted like a promise.

“They’re both gone, Jake. When I’m around other people I realize I’m just another person. I’m nothing special. I will never be special in that way to another human being in my life. My son, I pray, will grow up to respect and love me, but he won’t understand my heart. I feel that I could blow away, melt into the universe and it wouldn’t matter.”

Jake sighed.

“Is that why you bought the place?” he asked quietly when she paused from pounding him with her words.

“Yes,” she whispered. Looking around, Brooke remembered feeling so powerful when she bought her old home. It was hers. Nobody could take it away. It was a victory.

“I wanted to bring my son back here and raise him in the house where he was first intended to be raised,” she avowed. “It was a victory for me, Jake.”

“Is that what you’re going to do?” he asked, overwhelmed by her confession.

Brooke looked around the room, at the kitchen, over at Jake slumped on the couch, up the stairs and out the window where cars passed by in the cold winter night.

She had every memory that she thought she had lost.

“When I bought the place, that was the plan, Jake,” she confessed. “I started moving in. Then I brought MJ here to show him the old house. The house we first brought him to when he was born and do you know what he said?”

Jake slowly shook his head.

“He said ‘can we go home now?’” Brooke said and she stopped a groan from escaping. “I brought him home and wanted him to be happy, but it wasn’t what he needed to be happy, Jake. Home to him was your house. Home to him was where he was living because he had the ones he loved. The memories that I have are not his memories. He has a mother and father figure and a grandmother. He loves his school and friends. He wanted to go home. He wanted to be in his room.”

“I’m sorry, Brooke,” Jake said quietly.

“What am I going to do, Jake?” she asked, hoping he would help her make her decision.

“It looks like you’re doing well for yourself,” he said and Brooke didn’t know how to interpret his statement.

“Is that what you think, Jake,” she said to his back. Walking up to him she stood and faced him. Jake didn’t move; he just looked up at her with tired eyes.

“You’re right, Jake,” she asserted, holding her hands on her hips. “I can make it without you. I probably always could, but I didn’t know it at the time. I thought I needed to wait for you to make your decision. But I don’t anymore, Jake. The only thing holding us together is that I don’t want to pull MJ out of the home I created out of thin air. I can lose you, Jake. I’ve lost enough already. I will not end up like my mother.”

Brooke covered her mouth, but it was too late.

“It’s not that easy,” she whispered and turned away. Catching her breath, Brooke fought to finish her thought.

“I never thought I’d love again, Jake,” she whispered. “But I was surprised that I came close. I can do it again. Not the same as before. But I could find some happiness again. I’m not going to wait for you anymore.”

The tears would not be stopped. Overflowing, they burned her cheek and she wiped them away, caught them in sniffles, but they wouldn’t stop flowing.

Brooke wanted to say more, needed to say more, but she couldn’t talk. Breathing was her only consideration.

Walking away, she headed upstairs and slammed the bedroom door behind her. Resting on her bed, Brooke had one more memory.

It was of the night the laughter died in her home.

Chapter 33

Jake met with Jenny at their favorite restaurant.

Sitting across from him she pouted.

“We have to talk,” he said after they ordered drinks. His hands folded on the table, Jake was in no mood for games with Jenny.

“Why do you have to be so serious, darling?” she said dramatically.

“It’s clear that you’re never going to leave your husband,” he said. “I am content with that. It’s been this way for so long I don’t know anything else. I’ve been happy, but I need something more.”

For some reason, when Brooke made a decision based on his indecision, he realized he had to figure out where he wanted to be and whom he wanted to be with. The clear choice was Jenny. He had loved her for as long as they had been together.

At some point in the last few months, though, Brooke had somehow made him realize there was much more to their relationship than just a mutual agreement. She had put up with him going back and forth, but her patience had run out.

Brooke never wanted him to base his choice on guilt, but his feelings for her had gone beyond that. He had shared more with Brooke in the short time they had been together than he ever shared with Jenny.

Brooke couldn’t twist his feelings like Jenny. Whatever he felt for Brooke was not that strong. But the twisting from Jenny was now tiresome.

Was it better to be in love with someone who clearly didn’t want him in her life, or settle for someone with whom he could build a life?

This had been his struggle and he wasn’t winning on either side.

“What more could you want, darling?” she asked irritated, crossing her arms over her beautiful bosom.

“A promise,” he answered.

Sighing, Jenny glared at him.

“What kind of promise?” she asked.

“The next time you’re single, you will come to me,” he stated. “We can talk from there.”

Leaning forward, Jenny uncrossed her arms and pointed at Jake.

“Why are you making these demands?” she whispered angrily.

Leaning back, she turned away and crossed her arms again.

“What we have is great, Jake,” she said exhausted. “Why do you want to change what we have? I have never promised you anything more. I don’t know if I can even promise you that much.”

“I am pleading and begging with you, Jenny,” he said, lowering his head. This never went well. He had been here before. He would probably be there again.

Gathering her things, Jenny stood.

“I can’t make any promises, Jake,” she said. Waiting for his response, Jenny stood challenging him.

With his head still lowered, Jake had made a decision.

“I love you, Jenny, I always will,” he said hoarsely. “I can’t do this anymore. If it’s too much for you to talk to me before you marry again, then I can’t do this anymore.”

Gasping, Jenny composed herself. Jake looked up, his hands clenched white on the table in front of him.

“Then this is it,” she declared and turned and walked away. Jake didn’t watch her depart. Breathing was painful and he wanted to run and stop her, but he stopped himself.

In his deepest prayers, he wished she would walk back and tell him she would promise. It seemed like such a simple promise. He wasn't asking her to marry him. He just wanted a chance to discuss their future.

Waiting for an hour, Jake realized she wasn't coming back. Pulling out some money, Jake stood and threw it on the table. Each step took him further away from her.

Each step was harder than the next, his legs got heavier and heavier as he got to the sidewalk.

Looking around, he realized she wasn't waiting for him. There would be no dramatic moment where she drove up, declared her love and they would live happily ever after.

Arriving at his condo, Jake sat and stared at the artwork Jenny had purchased for him. The new paintings mocked him. All the pain Brooke felt in the world was splattered on large canvases hanging from his condo wall.

The only piece he ever appreciated was the one he chose himself and he stared at it from the couch.

Jake didn't need the confusion. Standing, he lifted the canvas off the wall and turned it around. Setting it on the floor, he leaned it carefully against the wall.

It was an original SANDSTROM and someone had written his name on it. It had to be respected for the unique inspiration it represented, and Jake couldn't do that at the moment.

Jake went to his room and took a long hot shower.

In bed, staring at the ceiling with his arms on his stomach, Jake prayed for an answer.

He knew he had broken so many rules he didn't expect much. His sin was great, but if he made a mistake, it was in the name of love.

Jake couldn't go back to Brooke now. He knew how Brooke felt about being a rebound.

Staying in the city until he figured out where he was going would be the best for everyone.

Needing a friend, Jake closed his eyes and thought about the way Brooke had held his hand that night in the woods.

Was she just a friend? he wondered. Thinking about holding her hand, Jake had a need to run to her, but that would be a mistake. Brooke had already told him love was involved.

Never did he think Brooke would have that emotion for him. Fighting it, she had some epiphany and now there was no going back. Either Jake chose to be with her and work on their marriage, or she was moving on. He could not go to her and talk to her like a friend.

He thought of the next best thing.

Getting out of bed, he went to the living room, picked up her canvas artwork, brought it to his room, and propped it on his dresser.

Lying back on the bed, Jake looked at the sad piece of art. Brooke had put everything she felt into the painting. It represented her essence. Staring at it, Jake felt comforted. He closed his eyes and fell into a peaceful sleep.

Chapter 34

Jake spent a week staring at Brooke's painting every day and every night.

At the moment, they were both in the same city, each mourning their loss.

Brooke was in her townhouse, trying to recapture memories of better days, knowing no matter what, they would not return.

Jake still couldn't believe that he had broken up with Jenny. For a second time.

The longer he stayed in the city, the longer he wanted to visit Brooke.

But why? She was on the verge of leaving him as well. Jake had disappointed her too many times.

Running one day, he had made his way to the gallery where Brooke had her exhibit.

Why didn't I pay more attention to her? he wondered as he stood outside the gallery. She had created that artwork while he sat in her studio.

He knew it was her artwork, though. Subconsciously he knew. He didn't put the name together, but his mind must have known. The artist Sandstrom, he didn't notice it until he saw Brooke being introduced as the artist. She was going by her first husband's last name.

It was a message to him.

Jake knew he had pushed her away. Brooke didn't need him anymore.

It was a new feeling for Jake. The woman who married him for security was going to leave him because she had gotten up once again and was ready for the next punch in the face, as she had put it.

This confidence made Jake seriously reconsider his relationship. He was never able to compare anyone to Jenny. Sophisticated, beautiful, elegant Jenny.

The more he got to know Brooke, the more he did compare her to Jenny. It wasn't based on looks, no other woman could compare to Jenny, but it was her fierce spirit she was unleashing more and more every day.

Brooke wasn't homely, but she wasn't elegant or stunning. She was nice looking, but it was her moments of total abandon and strength that made her more beautiful.

Jake couldn't deny it anymore. He was connecting more and more to Brooke, but he couldn't make that first step over to love.

Standing in front of her gallery, Jake started to turn to head back to the condo and get to work when he saw a familiar figure emerge from the gallery.

Dressed in a coat tucked tight around her, Brooke didn't see Jake at first, but when she did, she scowled at him.

Jake didn't want to anger her, so he turned and left. Running back to his condo, Jake realized it was such a cowardly move.

But the next day, he found himself right back at the same spot.

He didn't see Brooke, so he headed back to his condo.

At work, Jake couldn't concentrate. He had no idea how to deal with his feelings for Brooke and the breakup with Jenny.

When his phone rang, Jake was embarrassed that he tried to hide from a call.

It was Brooke.

Picking up the phone, Jake answered it.

"Hello," he said and waited for her to scream or yell or be angry with him.

"Meet me at the gallery tonight," was all she said in a calm voice that offered nothing as to what her emotional state would be like once he arrived.

Jake immediately got up, told his secretary he was taking a long lunch, and he went back to his condo.

Preparing for his meeting with Brooke, Jake took a very long run, far away from the gallery, and came back exhausted. As he showered in a long, hot, steamy shower, the tension rolled off him and he was ready to meet the other woman in his life.

Driving up to the gallery, with cars waiting for the valet, Jake realized she had invited him to another party. Stepping inside the converted warehouse building, Jake looked cautiously for Brooke.

Looking across the room, Jake saw her. Standing casually waiting for him in a long floral gown, she watched his reaction.

Surrounded by other men, being praised for her work, others admiring her external qualities, Jake was actually jealous for the first time when it came to Brooke. Confident and strong, she didn't need him.

Turning, Jake wanted to leave. This was some sort of test or tease and he wasn't interested.

Jake saw her agent and pulled him aside.

"Tell her I'll be at the downtown hotel where we met," he said, and waited for his car and drove off to the hotel.

He needed a neutral setting. The condo was his ground, the gallery hers.

Sitting at the lounge, where he first saw her tear into some fool who overreached his bounds, Jake waited. He wasn't sure if she would ever appear, but he was willing to wait for a very long time.

Hours later, the elevator opened, but Jake had since stopped bothering to see if it was Brooke. He had counted 55 people getting off the elevator since he started counting.

This time it was Brooke. Their eyes met and she just stood there.

Jake stood and turned. He sat at the bar as he had done that very first night.

Back then it was she who needed him. This time, he wasn't sure if either one needed the other.

Ordering two white wines, Jake waited while the bartender brought the two glasses. Brooke hadn't sat down and Jake wondered if she left.

"When you looked across the room," he heard her say from behind him, "what did you think?"

Staring at the muted TV, Jake took a drink of his wine and answered honestly.

"I was jealous," he stated in a low deep voice. It was an admission he didn't want to make.

With the touch of her hand on his back, Jake almost melted. Sitting beside him, she took the other glass and drank as well.

"If you didn't know me, Jake," she asked. "Would you have wanted to get to know me better? If you saw me at the gallery, would you want to take me home?"

Drinking to clear his dry throat, Jake knew it was a night for honest answers.

"To tell you the truth," he said. "If I wasn't completely in love with a woman I just broke up with I would have wanted to get to know you better and take you home."

"Then you're not," she said and Jake turned to her. Eyes resolute, Brooke wanted to be seen for her own qualities and not be compared to Jenny. They were both capable of jealousy.

"What game are you playing?" he asked hoarsely. "We should have never gotten together that night," he insisted.

"I should have left, you should have come to your senses," he said. "Look where we are now."

"We're here now for many reasons, Jake," she said. "One of them is the fact that we did get together. Everything up to now has been inspiration, Jake."

"Even now?" he asked almost sarcastically.

"You're obviously in pain over your lover," she said and got up to leave. Jake gently grasped her wrist and she stopped.

“I want to take you home tonight,” he said through gritted teeth.

Brooke lowered her head.

“What are you waiting for?” she demanded.

Letting go of her arm, Jake threw some bills on the counter and followed Brooke to the elevator.

Waiting separately and quietly, they rode down the elevator, waited for his car at the valet station and drove to his condo.

The elevator doors opened and he watched and she entered the condo.

Unzipping her gown, Brooke let it slide to the floor. She stood naked except for her lace underwear and bra.

Pushing himself from the wall of the elevator and out into the foyer, Jake scrutinized Brooke as she stood defiant before him.

Without saying anything, Jake took her hand as he walked past. Taking her to his room, Jake stood behind her holding her shoulders. Brooke saw the painting on his dresser.

“What do you think?” Brooke asked, admiring his taste.

“What am I supposed to think?” he asked.

“Whatever you want,” she said.

“It makes me sad,” he replied. “All your work makes me sad.”

“That’s an educated response?” she asked rhetorically.

“I don’t claim to understand art,” he said.

“Why have it in your room,” she asked shivering. He couldn’t tell whether she was reacting to the situation or the cold on her semi-nude body. He had never seen her in lace underwear.

“I was lonely,” he confessed. “I needed a friend.”

Jake could hear Brooke swallow that last word like dry toast.

“I guess that’s my answer then,” she shrugged. “I’m your friend.”

“I don’t know what you are, Brooke,” he said.

“Ever look at the back of the piece?” she asked.

Jake had but didn’t remember anything interesting.

Sauntering over to the canvas, Brooke turned the art piece around and waited like a sexy showcase model. Jake was distracted at the sight of her in lace underwear and high heels.

“I got them in Paris,” she said proudly, noticing that he was admiring her new look.

Jake walked up to the painting and took a look at the scribble he had seen before.

“It’s just my name,” he said. It was the first piece of art he ever bought for himself. The gallery must have put his name on it.

“That’s the name of the piece, Jake,” she explained. It took a moment for him to understand the meaning.

“That was inspired by me?” he asked incredulously. He had never inspired anyone before. Standing in sexy underwear, his talented, sexy, estranged wife was telling him he had chosen her inspiration for him.

“It’s sad because you’re sad, Jake,” she said. “The other piece, that’s how I felt when I saw you with Jenny. This one is about you.”

Jake stumbled back and dropped onto the end of his platform bed.

Brooke turned the canvas around, propped it up on the dresser and joined Jake on the bed. They sat quietly contemplating where they were and where they were going.

“You’re in my life, Jake,” she said. “I don’t know what that means, but I can’t just walk away. I will never be over Matthew, but I am somehow connected to you.”

Brooke put her hand on his. Jake pulled his hand away and gripped hers tightly.

“Who did you come to see that night, Jake,” she asked softly. It was a question he knew she needed answered.

“I came to congratulate you,” he said. “I realized how selfish I was and I wanted to congratulate you. I wanted to support you in your success. When you came to my house, you were so angry and withdrawn. You turned that into something inspirational. I stood in our kitchen and it was so lonely. I had to tell you how proud I was. But right at that moment, when I saw you with that man, I didn’t think you needed me. I didn’t think it mattered what I thought.”

“Once you congratulated me, would you then have gone off with Jenny?” she asked.

Lowering his head, Jake nodded.

“If Matthew ever shows up, if cloning ever becomes a reality,” she said, “If I ever had a chance to be with him, I wouldn’t hesitate either, Jake. There is always going to be a distance between us.”

Brooke pulled a folded magazine clipping from inside her bra and handed it to him. Releasing his grip, Jake took the clipping thinking she wanted to show him a review.

Unfolding it, Jake nearly dropped the clipping.

It was a picture of Jenny. There was also a picture of her aging husband.

DUKE PASSES the headline read.

His love was free to marry or be with whomever she wanted. Brooke pointed to the date. It was weeks old.

Standing, Brooke caressed Jake’s head and he leaned into her embrace.

“I’m going home,” she said. “You know where to find me. I need to know your decision. I have to prepare my son and your mother.” Releasing him, Brooke sauntered out the door while Jake gripped the clipping.

There was his answer. She had been divorced for weeks and she hadn't returned to Jake.

Getting on a flight to see her would be easy. He could go and see if she was still angry with him. He just needed to talk to her.

Standing, Jake went to his closet and pulled out a bag. Throwing it on his dresser, the painting he inspired started to slip. Jake straightened it and froze.

He had choices. He could run off and implore the woman he loved to return to him. He could try to work out his marriage with the woman who found inspiration in him. He could be alone.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Jake realized he needed to make a choice.

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Driving back to Brooke's neighborhood, Jake decided to let Brooke know what he had chosen. Pulling up to her house, he saw a FOR SALE sign on the front lawn in front of her townhouse and the words SOLD over it.

Jake gasped as he saw the sign.

Unlike Jake, Brooke had made her decision. Whatever he decided, she wasn't going to let her memories overtake her. It would always be a struggle, but she had to keep getting back up.

Walking past the clear message the sign sent to him, Jake climbed the steps and knocked on her door.

He stepped backed and nearly fell off the steps.

"Hello?" Michael said when he opened the door.

The man Brooke had kissed in Paris was in her home.

Chapter 35

“Who is it?” Jake heard Brooke ask from inside her home.

Standing and staring, Jake wanted to leave but he couldn't.

Footsteps crossed the wooden floor, and Brooke appeared when Michael moved to the side.

Looking at the two of them standing side-by-side, Jake got a glimpse of Brooke's past. At one time, she belonged to another and this was her home. At one time in her life she was the most special person in another man's life.

It wasn't Brooke who was going to settle.

“Jake,” she whispered. “Give us a minute,” she said to Michael and he stepped back.

“Hold on,” she said and went back into the house. Jake could no longer say what he had come to tell her. Turning, he started toward his car.

“Wait!” Brooke called, running down the stairs. “What's the matter?”

Jake stopped but he didn't turn. The air was cold, but he was burning inside.

“Just came to see how you were doing,” he lied. What he wanted no longer mattered.

“Come inside, then,” she insisted. “Come and meet Michael.”

“I don't want to disturb you,” he said and started walking again. He needed some air, some time to think through this new twist in their lives.

“What's on your mind, Jake,” she asked, angrily standing her ground. “What have you come to tell me?”

“Nothing,” he snapped and regretted it. He didn't want her to know how much it bothered him, seeing Michael at her door.

“Fine,” she said and he could feel her shrugging him off. Jake heard her turn. “Just go, Jake,” she sighed. “I'm tired of trying to figure you out.”

Her words stopped him and he turned.

“Trying to figure me out?” he said incredulously. Turning, Brooke was ready to meet his challenge.

Walking a few steps toward her, Jake stopped.

“You are the single most frustrating person I’ve ever met in my life,” he said exasperated.

“Then go,” she said simply. “Go find your uncomplicated girlfriend and be happy. I don’t need you anymore.”

“So that’s it,” he said sarcastically. “You get a little taste of success and suddenly you can make it on your own?”

“You had better go, Jake,” she insisted. “Go before you say something you’re going to regret.”

“Have a nice life, Brooke,” he said and turned. Walking as fast as he could to his car, he fumbled with the car lock.

“I know I’m not worth it, Jake, not to you,” she shouted and he was startled as the door clicked open. Looking over, he could see the anger in her under the moonlight. “Do you know how that feels? To know I’m not worth fighting for?”

Turning suddenly, Brooke raced back to the house and slammed the door. Jake was frozen. Regaining his senses, Jake hopped in his car and drove off. Wandering aimlessly, anger and confusion mixed inside until he didn’t know what he was feeling anymore.

Driving past the restaurant he enjoyed going to with Jenny, Jake made a U-turn and pulled up to the valet, tossed his keys to the attendant and headed to the bar. He needed a drink.

One hard drink later, Jake stared, trying to focus on the fight he had with Brooke. He was going to say many things, and she was right. He might have regretted them.

“Jake,” a familiar voice said and he felt Melinda’s comforting hand on his back.

Sitting at the edge of the stool next to him, she gazed at his face and sighed.

“Who was it this time?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” he muttered. “Just having a drink.”

Melinda laughed.

“Dave,” she called to her fiancé. “I’ll get a ride with Jake here,” she said and kissed her fiancé before he left.

Sitting on the stool and making herself comfortable, Melinda ordered two white wines.

“Brooke or Jenny?” she asked. Jake did not want to confide in Brooke’s friend.

“Both,” he said when the bartender brought their drinks.

“Cheers,” she said and clinked his glass.

“I think it’s funny,” she said, not waiting for Jake to confide in her. “When I introduced you to Brooke, she was probably at the lowest in her life. I knew she’d get back up again. I just didn’t know how high.”

“If you knew she’d be able to work things out,” he said incredulously, “why did you introduce her to me?”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Jake?” she asked, staring at him in disbelief. “You just wanted her to be forever stunted. Forever dependent on you?”

It sounded very warped the way Melinda put it. Jake drank his wine. His first drink was already calming and numbing his body. His mind was waiting to be engulfed in its soothing embrace. Melinda threatened his desire to be alone to untangle the mess he hadn’t meant to stumble into. It seemed to happen a lot when he was around Brooke.

Whenever he thought he knew where he was going, she revealed that he was actually on the wrong path, not lost, but misguided and wandering aimlessly.

“Why did you introduce us, Melinda,” he stated. “You knew what I was looking for.”

“You didn’t,” she said bluntly. Startled, Jake looked at Melinda.

“I am so sick of people telling me what’s right for me,” he whispered angrily. “I was perfectly fine...”

“Really, Jake,” she interrupted him. “If you were so fine, why bother with appeasing your mother at all? Why not just continue seeing your lover and living the way you always had?”

Closing his eyes, Jake knew she was right, but he still didn’t know why. It was something deep inside and he had followed his gut, but his mind never understood.

“She doesn’t need me anymore,” he sighed. “It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“You’re right, Jake,” Melinda agreed. “She doesn’t need you anymore.”

“She’s with someone else anyway,” he shrugged.

“How does that make you feel?” she asked.

“I don’t want to discuss this, Melinda,” he said, pushing his barely touched wine glass away.

“It’s interesting, Jake,” Melinda laughed to herself. “When I introduced the two of you, I thought you were perfect for one another. Both incapable of loving another person, two miserable people just looking for a companion. But now I see Brooke, and I think, what has happened to change her so much? She went from mourning the love of her life to attempting to find some happiness from her pain. You don’t think she struggles with anger and remorse every day?”

Jake had no answer.

“She doesn’t need you, Jake,” Melinda asserted. “I know you two have been trying to make this marriage work, but I only see her trying. You’re still waiting. Do you know how that makes her feel? She has no desire to be the person you settle for, Jake.”

Lowering his head, Jake realized that Melinda was right.

“All the love in the world was hers, Jake,” she said. “Now it’s gone. What’s she left with?”

Raising the son of the only man she will ever love and a husband who thinks she’s a good second

choice. She's never going to be whole again, and you only reinforce that, Jake. You have an incredible human being who wants to work things out with you and you think you're settling. If I were her I'd kick your ass out."

With that, Melinda left disgusted.

No amount of alcohol would be enough to absorb the pain inflicted from her final point.

Jake could no longer take the confusion. He needed to sleep. Offering the valet a large bill, the guy drove him home a few blocks away. Parting, Jake took the elevator to his condo and collapsed on his bed.

Sleep overtook him quickly and he slept peacefully. Waking, Jake couldn't remember what he was trying to forget, but he saw Brooke's painting and moaned.

Bright, indirect sunlight gave the painting a warm glow, and he knew he had to figure out why he had gone to Brooke's house. Taking a long hot shower, Jake made coffee and sat on his couch just thinking.

The clipping Brooke had given him had made him angry. It was the impetus for his decision. He had chosen Brooke. He had chosen Brooke and it was not for the right reasons.

Melinda had been right. He was still settling. He still considered Brooke the second choice. Everyone knew that except Jake. He never considered that he felt she was inferior and dependent.

An aching head pounded this into his brain. *When will I see her for who she is?* he wondered.

Sitting up, Jake realized he had. Watching her stand with Michael, Jake had seen her and he had been jealous. The night he saw her kissing Michael he had been jealous as well. He was just never jealous enough to fight for her.

Brooke wanted someone to fight for her, but Jake couldn't do that. Not as long as he loved Jenny.

There was something he still couldn't comprehend, though. Why was he jealous? Was it because another man was with his wife? Was it because he wanted to be with Brooke?

Betrayal? She used him and now didn't need him anymore? Was it more basic and controlling?

When she came to him, Brooke was depressed and angry. Over time, he watched her core become more powerful. Jake did not change. Indecisive. He was unable to make a decision on his life.

Nothing. That's what he had. The decision had been made for him because he was unable to act.

There was still time, though. He didn't have to win the war, he just had to fight one battle. Had to see if he had it within him to fight win or lose.

Putting on jeans and a shirt, Jake grabbed his jacket and keys and headed over to Brooke's place.

Running up the stairs to the porch landing, he knocked on the door.

A few moments later, Brooke peeked out the window. Unlatching the chain, she opened the door and stood with her arms crossed over her bathrobe.

"You're right," he said. "I can't fight for you."

Tears filled Brooke's eyes, but they did not fall. She had been prepared.

"I can't fight for you, but I don't want to fight for Jenny right now either," he confessed.

A tear fell down her cheek.

"I know you don't need me, Brooke," he said. "I know you can stand on your own. I admire that. I admire so much about you. I just don't know if it's going to be enough. I can give you what I have. I have never been here before. I only know I will try. If that's not enough, then we will have given it everything we have."

Fighting for his last words, Jake's throat tightened and he could no longer speak.

Brooke said nothing.

Shaking her head, Brooke only had one simple message for him.

"I'll see you at home," she said.

Without ceremony, Jake nodded and she closed the door.

Standing on her front step for a moment, Jake gasped. He had fought. Only breaking up with Jenny had been harder. He had fought for something he didn't know if he could win in the end, but it didn't matter. Jake turned and left.

It was one of the hardest decisions he had ever made, but at least he made it. For better or worse, he had finally made a decision.

Chapter 36

In bed with Brooke, Jake could make out her face and reached out to caress her cheeks. Kissing his hand, Brooke was starting to think again.

“You don’t turn off for very long do you?” he asked softly and he knew she was puzzled. He could feel her face move in his palm. He was learning how to read her body in the darkness.

“When we’re done doing whatever you want to call this,” he explained. “You go right back to thinking.”

“I do?” she asked, trying to figure out if she ever stopped thinking.

“When I’m inside you, you may not be with me a hundred percent, but I do know you’re in the moment,” he said, running his palm from her cheek to her neck and down her arm.

Sitting up, Brooke leaned over him and kissed him.

Her thinking was now aimed at him.

“What is it now,” he asked, just trying to enjoy the moment.

“It’s silly,” she said.

“Just tell me,” he sighed.

“Have I ever told you that you have incredible eyes?” she asked and Jake wasn’t expecting such a candid evaluation of himself from Brooke.

“You smell incredible, you’re an incredible lover, and you have a rocking hard body,” she said with a laugh.

“Why is that silly?” he asked in disbelief.

“You probably already know this,” she shrugged and put her head on his chest. He could feel her warm cheeks pressed against his body.

“How would I know this?” he asked.

Lifting her head, she looked at him, puzzled.

“I’m just an inexperienced housewife who has only been with one other man,” she explained.

“You’re a bachelor having a fling with some woman everybody considers a goddess.”

Caressing her cheek, Jake wished there were more light in the room.

“You’re an incredible lover as well,” he whispered in confession.

Kissing his chest, she laughed.

“You don’t have to say that just because I said it,” she reprimanded him.

“I mean it,” he said. “How does a woman who’s just been with one man know half what you do in bed?”

She sighed.

“We used to have those sex position books with pictures,” she whispered. “We’d flip through it to see what we were missing. We had such a great time trying some of the crazy stuff, but none of it mattered. We just needed to be close. Nothing else mattered.”

Jake didn’t want her to withdraw into her memory at the moment, and Brooke pulled herself out.

“Plus, I work out,” she joked cheerfully, resurrecting herself from the pain that would have come from remembering making love with Matthew.

Jake flipped her on her back and she laughed until he was laughing with her as well. Sighing, they looked into each other’s eyes.

“Make me stop thinking again,” she teased him.

“My pleasure,” he said, embracing her and kissing her deeply and passionately.

When Brooke started thinking again, Jake pulled her close and they lay together naked and relaxed.

When would the distance between them grow closer? He knew a part of her was always thinking about Matthew. A part of him was always thinking about Jenny. They were trying so hard to connect on that level. On everything else they were compatible, but each of them held a part of themselves at a distance.

Brooke was his friend, his lover, and someday he hoped she would be the mother of his children, but a part of him still yearned for Jenny.

Would he always yearn for her? Was there a possibility he wasn't going to find complete fulfillment from either woman?

Did they just need time?

Jake was willing to give it time. He had a promise from Brooke stronger than their marriage agreement.

There was the promise they would put everything they had into their marriage and when either one didn't think it would succeed, they would part ways.

So far, neither one had reached that point.

He knew Brooke would never consider starting a family with him unless she had a full commitment from Jake.

Jake was willing to consider that a possibility. He was no longer afraid of becoming a father and a husband. He was tired of waiting for his life to start.

"Now you're thinking," Brooke joked.

"I am?" he asked, kissing her on the forehead.

"Go to sleep," she groaned. "I don't have anything left," she joked and rolled over. Jake followed and hugged her from behind.

Falling asleep, Jake still kept on thinking until peaceful dreams washed away his fears.

This is how their life went for so long that Jake felt the distance between them getting shorter and shorter.

That was until he received an unexpected visitor at his front door.

Eating and talking about their day, Jake enjoyed dinner with his family. When the doorbell rang, they had just finished dinner, and Brooke asked him to get it. They had all stared at each other when they heard the doorbell ring. The front door was rarely ever used. Only strangers used the front door.

Jake got up and headed out to the living room and opened the door.

A very surprised and stunned Jenny looked at the address then at Jake.

“I was here to see Brooke, the artist,” she said confused.

Every muscle in Jake’s body tensed up and he froze. Brooke came into the room and stopped the moment she saw Jenny. Nobody said anything until Jenny realized she had got the right house.

“I didn’t know you two were seeing each other,” Jenny said, pointing back and forth from Brooke to Jake.

“We’re not seeing each other,” Jake explained. “This is my wife, Jenny,” he said, not taking his eyes off the woman he loved standing at his doorstep.

“I came by to talk to Brooke,” she explained, stunned by Jake’s revelation.

Brooke walked up to them.

“Please come in,” she said like a good host.

Pushing Jake away gently, Brooke made way for a very confused Jenny to enter. Looking around the room, she complimented Brooke on her taste.

“It was a present from Jake,” she said. Jake could not detect anything but civility in Brooke’s voice.

“Please have a seat,” Brooke suggested.

Sitting on the sofa, Jenny looked at each of them. Jake sat on the edge of an armchair between Jenny and Brooke.

His lover and his wife were in the same room again, and his lover had come to see his wife. She did not intend to see Jake. A part of him was pained by this revelation.

“Jake, would you help me in the kitchen for a moment?” Brooke said. Without taking his eyes off Jenny, Jake stood, then turned and followed Brooke to the kitchen.

MJ was watching TV.

“We’re going to grandma’s,” she called to MJ. “Go and run ahead of me.”

Turning off the TV, MJ got up, pulled open the kitchen door and left it open behind him as he ran to his grandma’s for dessert.

Turning, Brooke stopped Jake by placing her hands on his chest. There was nothing but resolve in her eyes.

Taking off her ring, Brooke held it up for Jake to see.

“Tonight, I am not your wife,” she said. Tucking her wedding band into his shirt pocket, Brooke patted the ring and commanded his gaze.

Brown eyes resolute, Brooke released him of all obligations.

“Accept nothing less than everything,” she demanded. “You owe it to yourself, don’t accept anything less.” With one more pat on his chest to let him know what was at stake, Brooke headed out of the house and to his mother’s.

Jake held his hand where Brooke had just made her point. Feeling the indentation of her ring, he gasped. There was nothing between him and Jenny. This was his opportunity to find out if there was a future with the woman he loved, before he severed ties with the woman he called his wife.

Jake grabbed two glasses and a bottle of wine from the refrigerator for Jenny. Taking a deep breath, Jake passed through the door and nodded to Jenny. Straightening up on the couch, Jenny smiled and Jake was very glad Brooke sent him out without guilt.

Placing the glasses on the table, Jake pulled out the cork and poured the wine. Handing a glass to Jenny, Jake went over to the fireplace and hit the switch. The fire roared to life. It was a romantic evening and Jake wanted the moment to be perfect. Jenny stood and they toasted to seeing each other again, and drank while never losing eye contact.

Jake asked Jenny to sit and he put down his glass. Sitting next to her, Jake showed her his ring and he could see Jenny wince in the firelight. Jake pulled it off and ceremoniously put it on the coffee table so that it was between them.

“Tonight, I’m not married, Jenny,” he explained. “Tonight it’s just you and me. Tonight we can decide what we want to do with our future.”

Jenny was puzzled as she looked at the ring.

“I am willing to walk away from my marriage, Jenny,” he explained.

“What are you doing, Jake?” she asked, looking uncomfortable. Jake had forgotten how beautiful and sexy Jenny was as he admired the hint of her breast peeking from behind her silk blouse, and her long legs shining in her black, shimmery stockings.

“Do you love me, Jenny?” Jake asked, getting to the point.

“Jake, you know I love you,” she stammered. “What’s gotten into you?”

“We have this opportunity,” Jake asserted. “We’re both single. I love you. You love me. Where does that leave us, Jenny?”

“You’re not single, Jake,” she admonished her lover. “You’ve got a wife and step-kid.”

“Not tonight I don’t,” he said, covering her elegant hand with his own. Taking his hand, Jenny put her glass on the table.

“What do you want me to say, Jake?” she asked. “We should run off together and live happily ever after?”

“Yes!” Jake exclaimed. Jenny looked startled. “I want you to say that, Jenny. I want you to say we’re going to run off and live happily ever after. This is our opportunity.”

Gathering her senses, Jenny crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Jake.

“Fine, Jake, let’s run off and live happily ever after,” she said sarcastically.

“Great,” Jake proclaimed, raising his arms in victory, and then moved in closer to Jenny. “Let’s you and I run off, get married, settle down, be happy,” he said softly.

Jenny stared at him.

“Neither one of us ever really wanted to get married, Jake,” she reminded him. “Your sham marriage to your fake wife has warped your brain. And I think she’s one of the most brilliant artists I’ve seen in a while.”

Jenny saw the hurt in his eyes. Uncrossing her arms, she moved closer to Jake. Taking his hands in her own, she proposed their old lifestyle.

“We could go back to your condo, and go back to the way things were, Jake,” she begged seductively. “We were happy.”

Jake looked deep in her beautiful blue eyes and remembered what it was like. Making love in his condo when they were both in town, making love in his condo while she was married to some other guy, making love in some European city when they were in the same country. It was a million times he looked into those eyes in ecstasy, but he saw nothing else. Jenny could bring him to his knees with a look, and as he looked into her eyes in the firelight of the home he shared with his wife and step-kid, those eyes no longer had the power to sway him.

“I wanted marriage, Jenny,” he confessed. “All that time we made love, I wanted nothing more than to marry you. I didn’t know that until now. I love you, Jenny. You’re the love of my life. I can’t go on like this though. I want everything, Jenny, and all you offer is some things. But it’s not enough anymore.”

Jake leaned back and she released her gentle grip. A flicker of gold from his ring caught his attention and Jake realized he had more with Brooke than he would ever have with Jenny.

“What are you saying, Jake? We’re good together you and I,” she coaxed him. “Think of all the times we made love. Do you have that with your wife?”

Jake winced. Ever since he declared his desire to be a married couple to Brooke, she was no longer just a placeholder in his life. Jenny consumed him, but Brooke stabilized him.

“Brooke and I know we will never love each other the way I have loved you and the way she loved her first husband,” he confessed. “We have a common goal and a mutual understanding. If you must know, we might not be making love, but it’s not boring and dutiful like you think. It’s easy to lose your inhibitions when love is not involved. I made love to you, Jenny. I have incredible sex with my wife and we make a connection on our level. I have a future with her. I don’t have anything with you but incredible moments and bursts of ecstasy. If you want more, I can give that to you. If not, I can’t go on like this.”

Jenny considered Jake’s proposal.

“Can we talk about this elsewhere?” she asked, trying to figure out her decision.

“Let’s go take a walk,” he offered and stood. Jake pulled her up and they headed out the door.

...

After two hours, Brooke decided she needed to get back in her home. Waiting by the back door, she heard the car drive off and took the opportunity to see what was left of her marriage.

Carefully peeking through a crack in the kitchen door, Brooke realized the room was empty. Opening the door, she saw that there were two glasses of wine and an uncorked bottle on the coffee table. The fireplace was still crackling. In the firelight, Brooke approached and her throat tightened and she gasped for breath. Sitting on the middle of the table was Jake’s wedding ring, flashing golden in the firelight.

Brooke gasped and covered her mouth in shock. The symbol of mutual commitment was no longer on either of their hands. Staring at the ring on the table, Brooke didn’t realize how much

this moment would impact her. When she gave Jake her ring, she wanted him to decide between her and the woman he loved.

Seeing his ring placed on the table, Brooke realized he had made his choice.

It's not like you loved the man the way you loved Matthew, she told herself as she tried to grasp the impact of his decision. It was his message to her that he preferred to be with the woman he loved. Supporting herself against the back of the sofa, Brooke didn't begrudge him this desire. If she could have Matthew back, she would run from Jake and into Matthew's arms and wouldn't look back in remorse.

Jake had that opportunity and he took it. Brooke would still have everything she needed. A pain cut through her stomach.

All that was left was his ring, a symbol that he no longer desired to keep up the charade.

Leaving the room, Brooke headed upstairs to sleep. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she stared at the newly decorated room.

When Jake proposed that they work on their marriage, he remodeled the house to prove to her that they were equal in their relationship. A new bed was brought in to symbolize a fresh start.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Brooke was overwhelmed by a sense of loss that was irrational. Tears turned into sobs turned into crying.

She wasn't sad that she would have to move or that she would be divorced. It was a deeper sense of loss she never thought she would feel if Jake ever decided to end their marriage. They didn't love each other the way she loved Matthew, but she cared deeply for him, almost to the level of love, but it would never rise above that level. Jake needed more than that, deserved more than that and if he could be happy, Brooke would not object.

"Brooke!" she heard and jumped up. Jake was standing at the landing to their room. Brooke wiped her tears. Puzzled, she wondered if he was there to discuss his decision. Whatever he wanted to talk about, Brooke needed a moment.

“I’ll be back,” she said and sniffled as she headed to the bathroom. Staring at her red eyes in the mirror, Brooke gave herself a pep talk.

“Don’t make him feel guilty,” she told her reflection. Taking a deep breath and straightening, Brooke washed her face and combed her hair. A fresher Brooke peered back at her and she was ready to meet with Jake.

Taking a moment, Brooke thought about being strong, then opened the door and stepped into their bedroom. Jake was sitting at the edge of the bed facing the bathroom, twirling her ring in his fingers.

Here we go, she said to herself as she stepped toward him.

“Why were you crying,” he asked softly as she approached.

“Stress,” she shrugged. “Jenny is a very beautiful woman.” Jake nodded in agreement. Brooke contained her emotions.

Jake held out his hand and Brooke hesitated but put her hand in his. Jake pulled her to him and onto his lap.

Gazing into her eyes, Jake looked confused and puzzled and sad.

“I wanted to give this back to you,” he said, handing her the ring. Brooke was puzzled. She took the ring and shrugged.

“Thank you?” she said, unsure of what it meant. “You shouldn’t feel guilty about your decision, Jake. If I were in your place, I’d be out of here as well,” she explained.

“Put the ring on, Brooke,” he whispered hoarsely. He looked away in pain as if she had said something to hurt him.

Brooke slipped the ring on her finger.

Startled as Jake hugged her tightly, Brooke started shaking uncontrollably. This was going to be hard for them both.

Brooke put her arms around Jake and hugged him back.

“I proposed to Jenny tonight,” Jake whispered in her ear. Brooke waited for an explanation.

“I love Jenny,” Jake sobbed and Brooke sighed.

“I know, baby,” she whispered, holding onto him as he rocked her.

“I will never love you the way I love her,” he confessed and Brooke nodded.

“I know, Jake,” she whispered. Brooke just wanted to curl up in the dark and melt away from all the pain.

Jake pulled her away, held her head in his hands and looked deep within her soul. Brooke tried to turn away from the anguish in his intense green eyes, but he held her steady.

“I can only promise you that I will care for you very deeply, Brooke,” he declared and Brooke was confused. *Was this a breakup?*

Sensing her confusion, he clarified.

“Will that be enough for you?” he asked insistently.

“I’m confused, Jake,” she whispered. “You’re going to be with Jenny, you don’t have to care for me anymore.”

Realizing Brooke didn’t understand, Jake kissed her deeply and Brooke tried to catch her breath as he made his point.

Gasping, they parted and met each other’s gaze. Brooke grabbed his arms and realized he wasn’t breaking up with her.

“I will never love you the way I love Matthew, but I will never care for anyone the way I care for you,” she declared, finally realizing his intentions. Jake kissed her again and Brooke could no longer contain her tears. Sobbing and gasping for breath, Jake released her and held her tight as they cried together.

When they finally exhausted themselves, Jake collapsed on the bed and brought her with him. Intertwined in each other's arms, Brooke gazed into Jake's eyes and saw relief.

"Why didn't you go with her, Jake?" she pleaded for an answer. "I would have been out of here, I don't expect anything less from you. I don't want to think you felt some sort of obligation."

Jake brushed a strand of hair from her cheek and sighed.

"I offered her everything I had, Brooke," he confided. "She turned it down. All this time I hoped she would love me enough to finally settle down, not here, but somewhere. She just didn't want to. I can't live like that, Brooke."

"That's my concern, Jake," Brooke said, propping herself up on her elbow to look down on Jake. "Someday you're going to realize what you're missing and you're going to take off. I'd rather you do it now rather than later. We've discussed the possibility of having a child of our own someday. What do I do then?"

"Is that a real possibility?" he asked. Brooke noticed a hopeful spark in his eyes.

"I can't think about that as long as you're thinking about Jenny," she asserted. "I'm not looking for love, and I know there are no guarantees, but I need commitment, Jake. I need something that's going to keep me around once my son leaves home."

Jake winced. Lifting himself up to meet Brooke's glare, Jake reassured her that he was committed to her.

"I want a family with you," he said. "I have a family with you." Jake showed her his ring finger. He had been wearing his wedding ring and she hadn't noticed.

Brooke closed her eyes and moaned.

"I can't ask for more," she shrugged and sighed.

"We can start trying," he said, caressing her face and pleading with his eyes.

"We're not ready, Jake," she said.

“Soon?” he asked.

Brooke gritted her teeth and closed her eyes to block out his gaze. She was not ready to start a family with Jake.

“We will,” she confided and that was all she could guarantee. Trying to read her eyes, Jake finally relented as he lowered Brooke to the bed and kissed her. Brooke knew he wanted more. Pulling him down onto her, Brooke let him know she wanted more as well.

“We’re alone,” she whispered.

“We’re doing it with the lights on,” he whispered in her ear, and Brooke moaned in anticipation. Separating, they both quickly started pulling their clothes off and tossing them. Down to their underwear, they stopped and grasped each other and fell to the bed in a tight embrace.

“I was so scared,” Brooke admitted. “I didn’t think I would be, but I was.”

Jake kissed her forehead and held her close.

“I didn’t think I would be either,” he admitted. “We can turn the lights off if you want,” he whispered, looking into her eyes. Brooke saw such tenderness in them and she just wanted to come as close to making love as she could offer.

“We need the light,” she asserted.

Showing each other how much they cared for the other, they came up to the level of love and hovered just below its embrace.

Chapter 37

Newly inspired, Brooke spent all her time in the studio, and Jake watched her work until she told him to leave.

“I can’t work when you’re staring at me,” she groaned. “I’m not painting your portrait.”

“You should, it might be prettier,” he joked and she threw a paint soaked sponge at him.

“You almost got my sweatpants,” he said indignantly.

Smiling, Jake loved it when he received her “you’ve got to be kidding me” stare.

“I’m going to make lunch,” he said.

“Make me a sandwich,” she yelled.

“I might,” he said.

Beaming, Brooke put the final touches on her last piece. Her agent had already found her an exhibitor.

Even if it wasn’t as successful as the other installation, it didn’t matter to her. Failure was always an option.

When Jake had said his final good-bye to Jenny, Brooke felt relief for once.

That relief led to inspiration, and inspiration led to another exhibition. More was at stake financially and professionally, but Brooke had already lived an incredible fantasy and it would satisfy her for the rest of her life.

Success wasn’t her goal. Finding a balance between the losses she had endured and the life she had to lead was the only thing that mattered. Now that Jake had said good-bye to the love of his life, they could build a life of their own from the rubble of their shared goals and experiences.

Returning with a sandwich, Jake stood back and looked at her piece.

“That’s different from the others,” he noted and she admired the fact he knew it was not part of the collection.

“Very good,” she said, taking a sandwich half from the plate. It was just the way she liked it, lots of meat and tomatoes, dripping with mayo.

“It’s a special gift,” she said.

“It seems like it means something but I can’t make it out,” he said, trying to understand the symbolism.

“It’s not meant for you to understand,” she said. “You forgot the mustard,” she said as they walked out of the studio.

“If someone spent more time with the housekeeping ...” he joked and she gave him her “you’ve got to be kidding me” glare. Running up the stairs, Brooke stuffed the last bite in her mouth and chased him.

Falling in bed together, Brooke let Jake clear her mind. The exhibition was in a week, and even though she wasn’t concerned about its success or failure, it was another matter that she feared might backfire. It was a risk she was willing to take, no matter the consequence.

Jake left for the city, and kissed her before leaving.

“I’ll meet you at the gallery,” he said and then hugged her tightly. “Good luck,” he said and kissed her again.

Closing the kitchen door, Brooke busied herself with housework. Ever since Mrs. Hurligan retired, Brooke decided she could take care of the house herself, even though she didn’t do a very good job. She just didn’t want to hire another person. Mrs. Hurligan was too perfect to replace, she was more like family.

Folding clothes, vacuuming, and scrubbing the showers, Brooke normally would have put it off, but she was nervous. Busy work settled her and for days she cleaned the house until it was a model home. Finishing, she sat down and wondered what would happen if her plan backfired.

This was now becoming her home every day. It was already home for MJ, but it was slowly going from house to home for her. Although she wanted to make it her home, the transition into her new life was proving more difficult than she thought it would be. Part of her feared that if she fully gave into her new life, she would lose Matthew forever. She wasn't ready to lose him. She never wanted to lose him.

Sitting in her remodeled living room, Brooke was exhausted.

Selling the townhouse had been another step in her attempt to make peace with her life with Matthew. Thinking it was some sort of victory to buy back the house they had purchased together, Brooke realized there was nothing left but hollow rooms filled with memories that suffocated her.

Even if Jake had run off to be with Jenny, Brooke was going to move on and find a place of her own to start a life of her own. Jake's indecision had made her decision for her.

When he showed up at her door to tell her he had chosen their fledgling marriage over the chance to get back with his single girlfriend, there was no victory for Brooke. It was just the beginning of another struggle to find a balance between the loves they lost and the life they had to build together.

Bittersweet was the moment Jake fought for her. Standing on her porch, he fought for her as hard as he could. At another time, it would have been a feeble attempt, but Brooke knew he gave it everything he could, which was more than she could have ever hoped.

It was his inner conflict that was still unresolved. Brooke knew she could never fully transition into a commitment with Jake unless she knew he wasn't longing for another life. She knew Jake would never stop loving Jenny, but as long as he was waiting for his love to change her mind, Brooke would not feel as if she were home.

Sighing, Brooke got up, grabbed her jacket and headed over to MJ's school. As he rode home beside her on his bike, she told MJ to behave his grandmother while she was gone, then he ran off to play in the backyard.

Walking the path to her mother-in-law's house, Brooke greeted her at the door, hugged her and told her she'd be back in a week.

Back at the house, Brooke took her suitcase to the car, and hugged and kissed her son.

"Yuck, mom," he protested and Brooke didn't want to let him go, but she did.

"Be good," she said and he ran off.

Sighing, she got in her car, drove to the city, got dressed in the condo, and stared at the painting Jake had chosen from her last exhibition.

Intuitive, Jake knew it was meant for him. He also might have chosen it based on the nameplate. The title of the piece was clearly under the painting. Maybe he subconsciously saw it, or maybe all those years hanging out with Jenny studying and appreciating art had been a master course for him.

Upon seeing the special piece she had made for one person in particular, he knew it was different, that it had a message.

Dressed in a long green and orange gown purchased just for the occasion, Brooke rose and gave herself a mental pep talk.

This has to be done, she told herself.

Shaking her body to release the fear and tension, Brooke took a deep breath and the phone rang. Her car was ready. Picking up the wrapped canvas by the elevator, Brooke pushed the button and waited. The doors whooshed open and she entered.

Standing in the open elevator before pushing the button, Brooke took one last look into Jake's condo, and the last thing she saw was the painting he had inspired.

Arriving before anyone else, Brooke put the wrapped package behind the reception desk and met with her agent and all the assistants on hand for the evening. Carefully examining the setup, she gave her approval.

Taking her to a bar down the street, her agent was grateful that she had started painting again. Raising their wine glasses, they waited until the exhibit opened, then slowly walked back to the gallery.

A few people flowed in, and Brooke greeted them and mingled. Charming and personable, she was still waiting for the moment that would decide the next chapter in her life with Jake.

A warm familiar hand grazed her shoulder and caressed her neck. Brooke contained herself. It was like the ignition being started on her motor, the first stroke of a masterwork.

Turning, she beamed at him.

“You look lovely,” he said. “I was watching you from across the room.”

Blushing, Brooke smiled. The moment she had been waiting for was about to begin, so she kissed Jake and told him she had to mingle. Stepping away, she went to the far corner of the gallery and greeted and mingled while keeping an eye on Jake.

It had to be a total surprise what she had set up.

Chapter 38

Jake saw Brooke in the center of the room mingling. Walking up to the most talented and interesting woman, he caressed her neck knowing she would have to contain herself. He knew how incredibly she reacted to his softest touch, and delighted in the fact they had an intimate moment in the middle of the gallery.

Busy, Brooke had left and Jake grabbed a glass of wine. He was in her workplace and would have to wait for her workday to be finished before heading to dinner.

Turning, Jake nearly dropped his glass. Standing in the gallery near the door was Jenny. Jake locked eyes with the love of his life. He had never expected to see her again. Unable to move, Jake stood frozen between his wife, the brilliant artist, and his lover, the single and beautiful love of his life.

As he stood there, Jenny walked up to him, but there was a sort of hesitation in her look.

“Hello, darling,” she said.

“Hello, Jenny,” he choked out. Drinking a large portion of his wine, he waited for her to start the conversation.

“Brooke invited me,” she explained. “She said she had something for me.”

Jake had his answer. She had not come for him.

Glancing to his side, he could see Brooke approaching, watching them both carefully.

Holding out her hand, Brooke greeted Jenny as she would have any guest.

“I’m glad you made it,” she said. “I have something for you, I’ll be right back.”

Jake watched as she went to the reception desk.

“Your wife is a very talented woman,” Jenny said, admiring Brooke. “I thought you had married a boring housewife. I am actually jealous,” she confessed.

Still unable to think or say anything, Jake watched Brooke approach, smiling as she made her way through the crowd with a wrapped canvas.

Smiling, she handed the package to Jenny.

“What’s this?” she asked surprised.

“It’s a one of a kind, never to be reproduced present to you,” Brooke beamed. “There’s a certificate and everything.”

Watching Jenny’s reaction, Jake realized he had never seen that expression in his presence before. It was as if she were receiving the most incredible gift of her life. In all the time he had given his love gifts and other pleasures, he had never seen the look of amazement and joy on her face that appeared when Brooke handed her a plain, brown paper, wrapped canvas.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“I will never be able to repay you for everything you have done for me, for us,” Brooke said and Jenny took the package.

“Open it!” Brooke insisted and helped Jenny open the package.

It was the last piece Brooke completed. It was the stand-alone piece meant as a message.

Eyes wide, Jenny almost cried. Jake had never seen Jenny cry, not real tears at least, just the kind to get him to agree to whatever she wanted.

“I love it,” she declared and turned it over. The certificate of authenticity was taped to the back. FOR JENNY was the title of the piece.

Handing the crumpled paper to Jake, Brooke received Jenny’s gracious hug as Jake made sure the painting didn’t fall out of Jenny’s arm. Tucked like a baby, the art piece was safe in her arms. There was no room for Jake.

“Mingle, have fun,” Brooke encouraged them and walked off to leave them alone.

Jake wasn't sure what his wife was trying to accomplish. Holding the art piece in her hands, Jenny admired the gift.

"Can you believe this?" she asked rhetorically. "An original Sandstrom just for me."

"What do you think it symbolizes," Jake asked.

"Like she said, for all my help," she shrugged.

"No," he said puzzled. "What do you think the piece symbolizes? Don't artists put meaning in their work?"

Looking at the piece carefully, Jenny shrugged.

"It's subjective," she shrugged. "It could just be an appreciation, a special thank you."

For the first time in all the years he had known Jenny, Jake realized she wasn't as sophisticated as he thought in the beginning.

There was a clear message in the art piece Brooke had made for Jenny.

Unschooling in the ways of artists and symbolism, Jake had learned a lot about art from being with Brooke.

Looking at the piece, Jake finally saw the message.

YOU HAVE TO LET HIM GO.

Smiling, Jake realized Jenny might understand subconsciously someday.

"Let me help you take that to your car," he said.

Still admiring the piece, Jenny followed Jake to the valet station and they waited for her car to arrive.

"Why didn't you come to me after the divorce?" Jake asked brazenly.

Startled, Jenny looked up at Jake.

“What do you mean, darling?” she asked.

“I saw that you got divorced,” he shrugged. “I was wondering if you would tell me at some point.”

“We broke up, darling,” she pouted. “I came to your house where you were living with your wife. You gave me an ultimatum.”

“We have broken up many times, Jenny,” he said exasperated. It never changed, their relationship, never evolved. Jake always found himself at this same point with his love and he didn’t want to climb the same stairs again, go down the other side, wait and go back up again. He was getting dizzy and exhausted.

The valet drove up with Jenny’s convertible and opened the trunk. Jenny put the painting carefully in the trunk and the valet closed it firmly.

Standing with the keys, they had three decisions. The valet could take the car away and they could enjoy the party, Jake could get in the car and they could drive somewhere to talk, or Jenny could get in her car and leave Jake with many wonderful memories she could never take away.

“I think I should go,” she stated, looking at the valet.

Jake agreed.

Without looking back, Jenny took the keys and Jake followed her as she got into the driver’s seat. Helping her close the door, Jake stood back with his hands in his pants pockets.

“It’s been fun, darling,” she said. Confusion flitted and shadowed the calm blue oceans of her eyes. “Say good-bye to your wife for me.”

Jake nodded. He contained the desire to say, “*I love you, Jenny.*” Although he meant it, he did not want there to be any confusion between them. This was where Jake got off the incredible journey they had shared together. He would always long and yearn for the beautiful elegant Jenny, but another journey was about to begin.

Standing back, Jake sighed.

“I had fun, too,” he said.

With one last look, she drove away and Jake watched until the car was just a memory.

It was the closure he needed.

Walking back inside, Jake didn't seek out Brooke. Leaving a note at the front desk, he walked out and headed to the hotel where they first met.

Chapter 39

When Brooke saw Jake leave with Jenny, her whole body tightened and she breathed slowly through the suffocating tension.

Watching Jake walk back in, she thought he was going to give her good news or bad, but instead he left a note and walked out the door.

Making her way to the front desk, Brooke asked for the note. Casually opening it, there was just a message to meet at the bar where they first met. Some tension left her body, but she knew Jake would not be happy at her action.

Without warning him, she had placed him in a precarious spot between the woman he was committed to and the woman he loved.

Busying herself with mingling and being charming, the evening at the gallery finally drew to a close. As the last guest left, the crew gathered and her agent had received the totals.

The exhibit had almost sold out. It was a success in its own right.

Raising their glasses of champagne, Brooke and staff clinked glasses and drank in celebration. Brooke just wanted to get to the bar where Jake was waiting.

“Thank you for everything,” she said as she grabbed her purse and headed outside. The cold air felt great on her hot body, and it released some of the tension.

Hailing a taxi, she pulled herself and her gown in the car and told the driver where she needed to go.

Staring at the hotel as they pulled up, Brooke wondered what waited for her. The last time she ended up at Jake’s and it led to him making a decision. This seemed to be the place where he finally found the answer to his questions.

He had decided at this bar to marry Brooke, he had decided that they should work on their marriage, and soon she would come to know the answer to this latest issue she had provoked.

Through the lounge, up the elevator and into the bar lounge lobby, Brooke looked for Jake. Sitting with his back to her, hunched and alone, Jake waited. Taking a deep breath, Brooke approached. When she was close enough, she ordered two white wines from the bartender, using her fingers to make it clear. She was not alone.

Lifting her dress, Brooke propped herself on the stool and matched Jake's posture.

"I'm here," she announced and he turned to her.

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" he asked rhetorically. "You didn't warn me. Just wanted to see how I would react."

The bartender placed their drinks in front of them and Brooke took a drink. The champagne had only taken away some of the tension.

"Yes, I did," she agreed, but she was not proud.

"Why would you do that?" he asked. "What do I have to do?"

Brooke sighed.

"She's always there, Jake," Brooke said exhausted. "You were going to keep thinking about her. You will always think about her. I just wanted to be around."

"Why?" he asked incredulously.

"She has a power over you, Jake," she explained. "I can't go into a relationship with you wondering when you would go out to seek her. She left you hanging."

"I had made peace with that," he said.

"Really?" she said.

Jake lowered his head.

"What did you feel, Jake?" she asked softly.

“That’s why you did it,” he said, almost angry. “You wanted to know if I still had feelings for her, if I would run off after her.”

“Yes,” Brooke whispered. “If you need to do that, I want you to do it now. You talk about maybe having kids someday. I need to know, Jake, as I’ve said before, I need to know you’re committed and willing to work on our marriage.”

Jake took a long drink of his wine and contemplated her confession.

“I couldn’t do it again,” he confided. “I saw Jenny and I was about to start all over again, and I knew it would always end with us separating and getting back together again. I just couldn’t do it again. There’s no forward movement. That doesn’t mean I don’t love her, I just can’t have a life with her.”

“So you’re alright with settling for me?” she asked, wondering what he meant.

Looking over at her, Jake scrutinized her and winced.

“I’m not settling, Brooke,” he said. “I’m committing. If compromise and shared goals are settling, then I guess I am,” he said sarcastically.

“It’s not a victory for me, Jake,” she said. Shivering, Brooke realized she had not respected his commitment enough.

“I didn’t do this to win you over,” she explained. “I didn’t do this to make you choose me over Jenny. I did this for you. You had a right to find out why she didn’t come back to you. You were hurt. I could see that. I wanted you to have closure. If that meant risking you’d leave me to be with her, I preferred if you did that now not later.”

Jake gasped. She knew he had realized it was exactly what he had needed. Brooke had seen him, seen his soul and knew what she had to do even if it meant losing him. She would fight for him, but only if she knew he would be there to fight for her.

Standing, Jake wrapped himself around Brooke.

He was ready to fight to keep their marriage alive and moving forward even if a part of him would always yearn for another.

Shaking uncontrollably, Brooke let Jake hug her until she was filled with nothing but warmth.

“Let’s go home,” he whispered.

Brooke wanted nothing more.

Chapter 40

Bringing home flowers, Jake presented them to Brooke.

“What’s the occasion?” she asked puzzled.

“Did you realize it’s our third anniversary?” he asked, putting his briefcase on the counter.

Looking into the air, Brooke seemed startled.

“Three years?” she said incredulously.

“Wait,” she said, realizing it was their first real anniversary as a couple. The flowers weren’t so special anymore. Hugging her, he knew what she was going to say.

“I got you more than flowers,” he reassured her with a kiss to her forehead. “Get dressed, we’re going out.”

Brooke pulled away and glared at him.

“Is that why your mom insisted on a spa day with me?” she asked and Jake kissed her forehead again.

“Did you really want to be caught off guard?” he asked.

Thinking about it, Brooke shook her head and Jake sent her to get ready.

“We have reservations in two hours,” he called.

When she left, Jake pulled some papers from his briefcase and headed into the living room to work.

An hour later, with Jake urging her to hurry up or they would be late, Brooke finally came down the stairs. Jake watched in admiration.

“How do I look?” she asked as she walked down the stairs.

“Lovely,” he said and kissed her on the forehead.

“I’ll take that,” she shrugged.

“What does that mean?” he laughed. Brooke lowered her eyes and then sighed.

“Never mind,” she said and Jake didn’t pry. He knew Brooke would always feel just a bit self-conscious about being compared to Jenny in Jake’s eyes even though he vowed she was no longer a threat to their marriage.

Taking Brooke to the most incredibly elegant restaurant within a five-mile radius of their home, Jake made sure the soufflé was ordered before they sat down.

Gazing into each other’s eyes, they reminisced about the night they met.

“What did you first think when you saw me?” he asked as they drank wine and picked at their elegant meal.

He knew that she knew there would be a soufflé or two involved. Sometimes just dessert was all that was necessary.

“The first thing I noticed were your intense green eyes,” she said, remembering that night.

“What did you remember?” she asked.

“I remember you taking down that man,” he said. Holding her hand, Jake fingered the gold ring he had placed on her finger at their city hall wedding.

“Then when you sat with me at the bar and confided everything to me,” he said softly, “a part of me knew my life would never be the same.”

What was the look in her eyes? Jake couldn’t tell what she felt about his confession.

“You have no idea how stunned and glad I was to see you at city hall,” she confided. “When I saw you, for some reason it felt like I wasn’t marrying a stranger.”

That revelation nearly caused him to gasp.

A part of Brooke had been in their marriage from the start. He hadn't gone into the arrangement alone, as he had thought.

"Isn't it sad that we can't say it was love?" she asked quietly as they caressed each other's fingertips.

"Does it really matter now?" he asked.

"I'm really glad it was you," she said.

"Me too," he said and she smiled. The waiter arrived and they parted while he took their plates. Moments later, a soufflé arrived.

Brooke offered him a spoon, but he slid the soufflé closer to her side, watching as she ate the dessert. Brooke contained herself from having a chocolate orgasm in public. Just watching her was dessert enough for Jake.

Later on he would have some dessert of his own, and she wouldn't be the only one enjoying an orgasmic pleasure.

When she was done, Jake pulled out her gift. It was a long box.

Amazed, Brooke carefully examined the velvet-encased box.

Opening it carefully, he saw the sparkle in her eyes as she held up the diamond necklace. Quickly removing the necklace she was wearing, Brooke deftly maneuvered the clasp of the new one and was modeling it for Jake.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, still looking at the elegant and sophisticated necklace.

"I thought of you when I saw it," he said. When he motioned for the check, the waiter arrived and when he got back with Jake's card and receipt, the waiter placed a white to-go box in front of Brooke.

"Should I open it?" she asked, looking at the box curiously.

"Not unless you want it to get cold," he insisted and Brooke contained her glee, barely.

There was no way it was a one-soufflé night.

Driving home in silence, Brooke held the warm box on her lap.

When they arrived home, Brooke was going to open it when Jake said he had another gift for her in the living room.

Deciding the gift in the living room was important to Jake, Brooke said “good-bye” to the soufflé.

“I’ll be back,” she told the box and followed Jake to the living room. Flicking on the fireplace, Jake had Brooke sit on the couch. Jake was starting to get nervous and Brooke noticed.

“You’re making me nervous, Jake,” she said and he saw her swallow hard.

Fumbling with his briefcase on the coffee table, Jake gave his speech.

“There’s a reason I remembered our anniversary,” he said and then loosened his tie. He was getting very hot.

Brooke looked at him very intensely.

“I was having lunch with the lawyer who handled our pre nup,” he said and Brooke’s eyes got very wide.

“You want me to sign another pre nup?” she said, starting to get angry. “Is this what this is about?” she asked, grabbing her necklace.

She suddenly looked very sad.

“You never let me finish,” he said. “You always expect the worst.”

Brooke calmed down, but she was tense.

Jake pulled out a manila envelope.

“Open it,” he said, handing it to her.

Pulling out the legal papers inside, Brooke gasped.

“The lawyer said we should consider revising it,” he said. Jake sat carefully next to Brooke as they looked over the documents they had signed almost three years earlier. Jake couldn’t even remember that time anymore. It seemed so ridiculous now.

There was a clause for taking care of her son and her mother in the event they decided to part ways after a year.

Brooke was to present herself as his wife to his mother and act accordingly. She was to be a companion for his mother.

If either decided to dissolve the arrangement within one year, Brooke would leave with nothing.

Jake could have dissolved the relationship if Brooke did not uphold her end of the arrangement in presenting herself as a dutiful wife in his mother’s eyes, and companion to her mother-in-law.

Brooke pointed to the last clause.

“After I threw all your mother’s photos in the backyard, I thought that was it,” she confessed. “You had every right to tear this up.”

“The fact that you didn’t back down was the only reason I didn’t,” he confessed. “At first I was going to dissolve our agreement, but my mother pressed me to reconsider. She really liked you for standing up to her, for standing up to me.”

Brooke laughed and wiped away a tear.

Putting the paper on her lap, Brooke looked up at Jake with resolve.

“What changes do you want to make?” she asked.

Jake was still amazed that she always thought the worst when he presented her with changes to their relationship. She was always on alert, ready to get up and start a new life. He needed to change that, to make their relationship as permanent as he could.

Jake leaned over and took a small box from the pocket of his briefcase.

Nervously slipping to one knee, Jake opened the box and Brooke was frozen.

“Brooke, will you be my wife, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health?”

Brooke didn't say anything.

“You're still thinking about the pre nup, aren't you,” he asked and she nodded. Jake sighed. She still didn't understand.

Jake stood and closed the box. Taking the pre nup, he pulled Brooke up and they stood in front of the fire.

“Toss it,” he said. She looked at him puzzled. Looking at the papers, Brooke took a deep breath and threw the agreement in the fire. They watched as the fire devoured the last wedge in their marriage.

“I should have had you do that first,” he confessed.

Looking at Brooke, he saw tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Did you think I was going to have you sign another pre nup?” he asked, wiping away her tears.

“It was pretty much null and void after the first year. I just wanted it to be symbolic.”

“That's not it,” she said sniffing. Sighing, she held his hands pressed against her cheeks.

“It was very symbolic,” she agreed, looking at him with sad eyes.

“That represented the severing of my ties to my first marriage,” she confessed, and Jake realized the burning of the arrangement was more symbolic than a proposal.

“I am married to you now, Jake, no strings attached,” she said. “I am your wife. Do you understand the symbolism? I was holding on to my first marriage so tightly. As long as we had that agreement, I could still feel I wasn't betraying my first vows, the vows I meant.”

Jake realized her words were stronger than any vows he made to her.

“I was supposed to be married to Matthew forever,” she cried and fell to her knees.

Never in his wildest imagination did he realize she would react this way to his gesture. He knew she kept him at a distance, he just didn’t know how far.

“Now I’m not anymore,” she cried into her hands as she wiped away the tears. “He’s never coming back. I have to learn to love again, Jake. Learn to love you like you need to be loved. But I don’t have it all to give anymore.”

Pulling at his pants, Brooke wanted him to join her.

Kneeling, Jake wasn’t sure where she was going with her confession.

Holding his hands, she sighed and there were no more tears. Face flush and streaked with the trails of her tears, Brooke made a proposal of her own.

“I will love you with whatever I’ve got left,” she proposed. “I cannot promise anymore.”

Jake understood.

“I accept that, Brooke,” he said. “You know Jenny will always be on my mind. I promise you that with everything I have I will love you. I cannot promise any more.”

Brooke sniffed and smiled.

Kissing to close the deal, Brooke wanted to see the ring.

“Can we turn this off now,” she said as Jake picked up the box.

“Thank you,” he agreed and flicked the switch. The blazing fire died as suddenly as it had blazed up.

Jake presented the ring again.

Taking it carefully, she examined the ring.

“I bet I could retire on this if we ever left each other,” she joked and put it on her finger.

“Were you ever an optimist?” he asked.

Looking up at him, she laughed.

“Never,” she said, kissing him. “Just because I was with the love of my life didn’t make me an optimist. He had to drag me into marriage,” she said and suddenly trailed off.

Jake didn’t want her to remember and accepted her answer.

“That’s very helpful,” he said and pulled her up with a groan. “I think your dessert is getting cold.”

Excited, Brooke pulled him to the kitchen. Opening the box like it was more precious than the ring he had just given her, Brooke lifted the soufflé out and placed it on the counter.

Getting two spoons from the drawer, she offered to share with Jake.

As she moaned at every bite, Jake couldn’t take it anymore. Picking her up from where they stood, Jake dragged her away from the soufflé while she protested and laughed at the same time.

Throwing her on the bed, she still had the spoon with her. Putting it in her mouth, she sucked off the imaginary chocolate and leaned back seductively.

“You’re so easy,” she said, kicking off her heels.

“Were you teasing me?” he said, climbing onto the bed with her and caressing the body beneath her satin dress.

“I have a present for you,” she said, tapping his forehead with the spoon.

“Yeah,” he said, kissing her shoulder.

“Your choice,” she said and he looked at her puzzled. “Lights on or off.”

Jake moaned and kissed her as she laughed.

“Just remember I look better in dim light,” she insisted.

Jake held her head in his hands and disagreed.

“You look beautiful when we’re making love,” he whispered and he heard her gasp. Kissing her passionately, Jake lowered her to the bed and felt the ring on her finger over her wedding band.

Jake gave Brooke all the love he had to give.

Chapter 41

It was a beautiful day for a wedding.

Sitting on a folding chair on the beach with a hundred other guests, Jake only had his eyes on Brooke, her blue bridesmaids gown whipping in the ocean breeze, her hairpiece struggling to free itself from her hair she had to keep wiping away from her face.

Jake guessed the ocean wedding seemed romantic in theory, but watching Brooke try to be an observant member of the wedding party, while fighting the elements, was only amusing. The wedding video would be a must-view at a later date.

The ceremony wasn't very long, but Jake realized it was ceremonious compared to the five minutes it took for his and Brooke's ceremony.

Thinking about their own vows, Jake forgot what they said to one another. The wedding picture Melinda had taken and given them summed it up. They had both felt stunned that day.

As Melinda and Dave stood at the makeshift alter under a tangle of flowers that struggled against the wind, they looked happy. They did not look stunned.

As the minister announced them husband and wife, the couple kissed and everyone applauded as they headed down the sandy aisle as newlyweds. Jake caught Brooke watching him.

Did he see sadness in her face? Was she thinking about their wedding or her first to the man she loved? As she passed, she smiled at Jake, but he sensed some sort of sorrow or regret. He didn't know which.

Grateful the reception was in a banquet hall and not on the windy beach, Jake waited until all the toasts had been made, the cake was cut and wedding party pictures were taken before Brooke could join him at the table. Jake wasn't lonely, he just wanted to be with Brooke.

Taking off her headband, Brooke sat next to Jake and begged for a hug.

"That was so tiring," she whined. Holding her close, Jake wanted to ask what she was thinking, but it might depress her, so he just held her.

“Let’s take a walk,” she said, taking him by the hand. “I need some air.”

Passing through the crowd, and the couple on the dance floor surrounded by family and friends, Brooke led him to the beach and took off her heels.

“Finally!” she exclaimed as she threw them at the incoming waves.

“Aren’t you going to need those later?” he asked, watching the waves grab and pull the shoes from the shore.

“I couldn’t get back into those if I tried,” she explained.

Taking off his shoes and socks, Jake placed them on the deck.

Holding his arm, they walked down the beach, watching the sun slowly make its way to the horizon.

Resting her head against his arm, Jake knew she was thinking, but never knew what.

“It was beautiful, wasn’t it?” Brooke asked wistfully.

“Better than a five minute ceremony at city hall?” he joked, hoping she’d reveal what was making her distant again.

“I barely remember if there was any ceremony, it was over before I realized we had agreed to marry,” she said. “Just like that. Married.”

Jake had nothing to add. That’s exactly what it was like.

“Don’t you regret it, Jake,” she asked and he wasn’t sure what she meant.

Brooke looked up at him and stopped. Jake looked into her eyes and wondered what he was supposed to regret.

“My first wedding was a beautiful, wonderful affair like this one,” she said and Jake cringed. She had been thinking about her first wedding. “Do you regret you got married to some woman you didn’t know at city hall? That you didn’t have what Melinda and Dave had?”

A strand of her brown hair flew in her eyes and Jake pushed it away to see them. Caressing her cheek, he realized she had felt remorse for him, not for her.

“Brooke, I would never have gotten married,” he explained. “The only thing I knew is that if I were to get married, it would be to someone like you.”

A million emotions flittered in her eyes.

“Someone like me?” she asked.

Waves crashed and Jake realized his statement did not reflect his intention.

“I can’t explain,” he said, turning away.

Without saying a word, Brooke walked ahead and Jake didn’t follow.

Turning, Brooke looked confused and Jake saw that tears threatened to spill over, but Brooke swallowed and took a deep breath.

“I used to be the most special person in the world to someone,” she stated, holding onto her dignity. Jake winced. She was special to him, he just didn’t know how to put it in words even he would understand.

“There was no other woman above me,” she said, fighting for her words. “Someone like me,” she whispered and covered a gasp that had escaped. Turning, she walked off quickly into the setting sun.

Waves crashed and their cold grasp rose over his feet and pulled back.

Lowering his head, Jake knew she needed time to herself. He needed time to make better sense of his devastating confession.

On the sand, Jake saw something that caught his eye. It was a perfect blue shell. Leaning down, he picked it up. Turning the cold, wet shell in his hand, he remembered the story Brooke told him about the day Matthew gave her a rock.

What had he ever given her that meant anything? A diamond necklace? A wedding ring probably worth more than Matthew's annual salary? What did she cherish? An ugly hairy troll and a rock.

Someone like you?

With those three words he had stripped her of everything she held dear. It wasn't what he meant. The wedding had impacted her more than either one of them realized.

Placing the shell in his pants pocket, Jake headed back to the reception. Tightness gripped his throat.

Will I have the opportunity to explain? he asked himself while wiping the sand off his feet and putting on his socks and shoes.

Waiting on the deck, Jake decided he needed to give her time. A part of her must be angry about the wedding. It was supposed to be the beginning of her lifetime. Instead she had to put that to rest and get married in a five-minute city hall wedding.

Someone like you.

There was no way he could explain.

Standing, Jake looked down the beach where she walked off into the sunset. The orange glow settled on the horizon and Jake could not make out her shape on the beach.

Sighing, Jake went back to his table.

Drinking wine and just thinking, Jake thought about his wedding.

He had gone to that hotel on Melinda's suggestion. There was no assurance Jenny would return. His mother kept nagging him to find a proper woman and settle down. That is what Jake did.

Curiosity got the best of him when Melinda called to tell him about Brooke's situation. Up until he got off the elevator, Jake wasn't sure what he was thinking. Spite had urged him out of the elevator. His lover had chosen a title over his love. Spite got him to the lounge, but it was Brooke's desire to hold on to her dignity in the face of someone taking advantage of her situation that made Jake realize she was what he was looking for.

Even though he reprimanded Brooke for how she treated his mother, that is what Jake had needed. He wanted a companion, someone to make his mother believe she had a daughter-in-law and grandchild. What Jake needed was someone who could mend his relationship with his mother.

Jake had wanted a wife in appearance only, but what he needed was someone to show him that being a husband and father wasn't boring, it wasn't settling. It was about building a meaningful life together. Jake needed someone to show him that, but he didn't know it at the time.

When Brooke confided in him that night, he knew she was that person.

As scared as Brooke was in making her decision to marry a man for security, Jake was only nervous like the first time he went hang gliding. He just had to get up off the ground. Once in flight, there were no guarantees, but at least he had made the leap.

Someone like you.

Jake would have married Jenny, but that wasn't something he planned on. He would have been content just to be with her.

At the time Jake didn't know it, but he knew deep down he wanted more. He needed more than just good times and great sex. Brooke showed him that settling down wasn't boring, it was just a different journey. It wasn't as exciting as life with Jenny, but it wasn't boring.

Melinda saw Jake alone, and pulled him up from his chair.

"Dance with me," she said and Jake followed her. It was her day.

Looking into his eyes as they swayed back and forth, Melinda asked what had happened.

"I said something stupid," he admitted.

"Doesn't that happen all the time?" she joked and Jake smiled, but it faltered and she asked again.

"What was it about?" she asked softly above the music and the voices of the other guests.

“I was trying to explain why she was the only one who could get me to the altar,” he said. “That sounded much better than what I said.”

“What did you say?” she asked.

“I said something about someone like you,” he confessed and she looked frightened for him.

“I’m sure you meant well,” Melinda said, not concerned, and Jake relaxed. “She will think about it and when she’s ready she’ll come back.” Melinda looked over his shoulder.

“There she is now,” Melinda said and wished him luck as she went to find her husband.

Turning, Jake looked past the other guests and saw that Brooke was staring at him, angry and remorseful all at once.

Walking through the crowd, Jake approached carefully because he thought she would walk away again. Keeping eye contact, even when she wanted to look away, Jake put his hands in his pocket.

Cold and hard, the shell was all he had to offer.

Presenting it to her as he got closer, Jake waited for Brooke to take it from him, but Brooke just looked at it then at him as she pulled her sweater tighter over her chest.

“I wanted you to have this,” he said. Brooke didn’t accept his offer.

“I wanted you to have this to remember this day,” he said, still holding it out to her. “I wanted you to remember this,” he said, but his throat was tightening and he had to struggle for his words, “if anything happens to me, I just want to know someone is going to care enough to remember me. I didn’t know I needed that, Brooke. I didn’t know it was important. I knew that if anyone could teach me that it was you. That’s all I meant.”

Tears fell and he just wanted her to take the shell, he needed some air. She didn’t take the shell. Through his tears, he saw her loosen her clutch around her chest and wrap herself around him.

“That sounds so much better,” she said and he could feel her starting to shake. Holding her tight, they cried in each other’s arms. Jake never knew he could feel this way. It was what he needed.

Releasing her, Jake placed the shell in her hand and Brooke squeezed it tight.

“I’ll never forget,” she promised and he knew she never would. Taking her hand, he pulled her onto the dance floor.

It was as close as they would get to a first dance.

Chapter 42

Since the agreement was no longer between them, Jake brought up the idea of him adopting MJ. He thought it was a natural phase in their marriage.

Brooke stood in the kitchen and looked at him terrified.

Quickly wiping her hands, she passed by him and headed to her old room. Jake found her sitting on the edge of the bed.

“What did I do now?” he asked. He never knew how she was going to react.

“Sit,” she commanded. Jake sighed and sat next to her. It was hard enough to bring up the subject, but he thought it was something she might have wanted.

The first time MJ called him daddy, Brooke was startled and angry, but MJ had been calling him daddy, now dad, for years and he thought he would make it official.

“That’s very sweet of you, Jake,” she said, patting him on the thigh. “When you have your own child you’ll understand,” she said, consoling him with her eyes. “You weren’t there when I got pregnant, you don’t know how happy Matthew was when he found out I was pregnant and we were going to have a son. I love the fact that you want to make MJ your own, but he’s not. I can’t let that last connection to his father to be severed. I know he’s confused that he doesn’t share our name, but I owe it to Matthew. You won’t understand until you have a child of our own.”

Jake nodded.

Brooke stood and walked out of the room.

“I have some more family photos to hang,” she declared as she went back to the kitchen.

Nodding, Jake followed her to the kitchen.

Making dinner, Brooke had given Jake the job of hanging the photos, so Jake hung up more photos. The hallway wall was almost full. There was his first Christmas with MJ under the tree and the family at the care center, MJ and Jake at the first birthday party, in the middle their wedding photo, and, at the other end, Brooke’s happy family photo. Going through the new

photos in frames to decide how to hang them, Jake was stopped by one in particular. It was a framed photo of him and Jenny.

Looking to the kitchen door, Jake wondered if she meant for it to be among the family photos. Putting it to the side, Jake hung the other photos and had Brooke look at his work.

“Very good,” she said then noticed something missing. “Where’s that photo of you and Jenny?”

It wasn’t a mistake.

“Why would you put that on our family photo wall,” he asked incredulously.

Brooke pointed to her happy family photo.

“I put mine up,” she explained. “For better or worse, she’s just as much a part of our life. Without Matthew I wouldn’t have found you, and without Jenny we wouldn’t be together.”

“That’s incredibly pessimistic of you,” he declared and Jake went to place it at the end next to the happy family photo.

“No,” she said, pushing it away. “That should always be at the end.” Jake put the photo on the other side of her happy family photo.

“There, are you happy?” he asked, looking at the photo of him and Jenny with a guilty conscience.

“Works for me,” she said.

They walked back to the kitchen.

“I’ve got to get back to the city,” he said and she moaned.

“How long this time?” she whined.

“Just a week,” he said. “Were finishing negotiations with an international company.”

“When?” she asked.

“Tomorrow,” he said.

“Then we have tonight,” she said and kissed him. Running in, MJ saw them and said, “Yuck.”

“I’m hungry,” he declared and they parted.

“Go get cleaned up,” she commanded and MJ dropped his book bag by his desk.

Hours later, in bed, Jake asked Brooke a serious question.

“Do you really want to have more kids,” he asked. Brooke got tense then relaxed. She was getting better at not always anticipating the worst.

“Why?” she asked, waiting for him to explain.

“I’m just wondering if you’re opposed to it,” he shrugged. Brooke propped herself on her elbow and looked down at him quizzically.

“Do you not want to have kids?” she asked him. “Do you want to have kids?”

“I asked you first,” he said, but he knew he wasn’t going to win. Jake sighed.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but yes,” he confessed.

Brooke looked into his eyes and sighed.

“What happened to the bachelor who always patted MJ on the head like he was a dog?” she joked and lay back down staring at the ceiling.

Then she answered.

“Someday,” she said.

Jake did not press her. That was all she could give him. Curled in his arms, Brooke was silent and Jake felt a familiar distance once again. He knew a child would seal them forever and he knew that terrified her on some level.

It was another betrayal, but he knew, with enough prompting, she would confront her issues and they would have a child born of their love.

The next day, Jake kissed Brooke and promised to be back soon. He shouldn't have used those words because he saw the concern on her face. She had been promised that before.

The moment he got into work, Jake was busy and soon realized he should call Brooke to tell her he was thinking about her.

When MJ answered the phone, Jake barely had the opportunity to say anything before MJ said his mother wasn't feeling well.

Jake put down his pen.

"What's the matter?" he asked, wishing he were there.

"Says it's the flu," he replied and Jake's mother asked for the phone.

Calling out, *"bye, dad,"* MJ was gone and Jake's mother took the phone. Jake hoped she had more information.

"You might want to come home dear," she asserted, commanded and demanded. *"I think it might be serious."*

"Does she need to go to the hospital?" he asked, rising from his desk and grabbing his jacket. "I can meet you there."

"Come home now," she said and hung up the phone.

Jake's co-worker wanted to discuss the contract, but Jake said he had a family emergency, waited impatiently for the elevator, and raced home without caring about the speed traps.

Running into the house, Jake called out for Brooke and heard someone call him to her old room. As Jake entered, Brooke stepped out of the bathroom.

He knew what she was holding in her hand.

It had the power to determine the rest of their life together.

Chapter 43

Brooke was full of new inspiration, and started painting again. Her theme was rebirth and while Jake was away, she spent all her free time putting her inspiration on canvas.

The day after Jake left, she started feeling unwell. She didn't know what it was, but she couldn't stomach anything.

When she vomited one morning, her mother-in-law came in unannounced and Brooke didn't mention it. Ever since they told her mother-in-law that they were officially married, she had been pushing Brooke to have a baby.

Ashamed, Brooke didn't tell anyone she was still on birth control. Ever since she started having sexual relations with Jake, she had gone out and gotten a new order of birth control.

She knew he wanted a family with her, but she just felt it was too much too soon. She was just adjusting to her new life with her new husband. She was still young enough to wait at least a few years.

The next morning, though, her mother-in-law found out from MJ. He had heard Brooke in the bathroom vomiting on his way to school and mentioned it to his grandmother. Brooke wasn't angry, but she knew what his mother would say.

After the third day, Brooke knew it was something more than the stomach flu. Making an appointment with her doctor, she lay in bed wanting to get back to her project.

"You feeling better, mom?" MJ asked concerned, but she just consoled him.

"It's just a flu," she told him again and looked into the eyes that reminded her of Matthew every day. It was so hard getting over a man who no longer lived when he lived in his son. He was a constant reminder of their love, hope for the future, and life together.

"I made you a sandwich, MJ," his grandmother said and Brooke groaned. Food awaited MJ and he ran to the kitchen.

"What do you say?" Brooke called after MJ.

“Thank you, grandma,” he said without emotion from the hallway and ran to the kitchen.

From behind her back, Brooke’s mother-in-law presented her with a bag. Brooke knew what it was.

“Thanks,” she said, not opening the bag. “I’ll look at it later.”

Her mother-in-law was not leaving until Brooke looked at the contents of the bag.

“I know what it is,” she said. “It’s just the flu, so don’t get too excited.”

“How do you know for sure?” she asked cheerfully and Brooke contained her embarrassment.

“You’re right,” she agreed just to send her mother-in-law away. “I should make sure.”

When Brooke didn’t make a move, her mother-in-law insisted that she check right away.

“You’re going to be disappointed,” Brooke warned her as she grabbed the bag from her mother-in-law.

Closing the bathroom door, she saw her mother-in-law bowing her head and clasping her hands in prayer.

At least someone is happy, she said to herself.

The last time she took the test, it had seemed to take forever for the results. She didn’t believe those results, even after the doctor confirmed her pregnancy with another test.

The moment she put the stick under her urine stream this time, the results showed up in no time at all. By the time she recapped the test, she had the result.

She was pregnant.

What the heck did I spend all that time and money on birth control for?

Staring in the mirror, Brooke looked at herself. She was not ready for this step yet.

She wanted to lie, tell his mother it wasn’t any of her business, but this was bigger than just her.

She should have never taken the test with others present. It should have been between her and Jake first.

His mother knocked on the door.

“It didn’t work right,” she lied.

Suddenly, she heard Jake’s voice. He wasn’t supposed to be home for a few more days.

My mother-in-law.

The moment she had heard Brooke was vomiting, she probably told Jake. If MJ didn’t love his grandmother so much, Brooke would have insisted they move away. The house could be her mother-in-law’s again.

Stick still in hand, Brooke opened the door to meet Jake. Unable to meet his eyes, she just stood there with the stick in her hand.

Stunned. They both stood stunned as Jake walked in and Brooke stood by the bathroom door holding the test. His mother was more excited than they were.

“Let me help you,” she said, taking the stick from Brooke. “I’ve waited forever for this.”

Adjusting her sight, her mother-in-law’s lips quivered. A tear fell down her wrinkled cheek, and she looked up at Jake before stumbling back to the bed just staring at the stick.

Covering her mouth with the other hand, Brooke’s mother-in-law just continued staring at the stick.

“What is it?” MJ pleaded, trying to grab the stick. His grandmother held it away.

“You’re going to have a new baby brother or sister,” Jake’s mother choked and MJ looked at Brooke puzzled.

Brooke nodded and lowered her head.

“Yeah,” MJ cheered triumphantly and went flying like an airplane throughout the house. Jake sat next to his mother as MJ came back and hugged him. Jake hugged MJ and looked at Brooke with pleading eyes.

Brooke wanted to go back in the bathroom, close the door and rewind the day.

This was not the plan. She was not ready to have another man’s child again. It was the final crossover. This would be the event that affirmed their life together. There would be no holding onto the knowledge that if she stayed just far enough away from this point, she was still faithful to her love to Matthew.

“I hope it’s a brother, dad,” MJ rambled on. “But a sister would be alright,” he said, making a funny face.

Jake was looking to her. Her reaction determined his reaction.

A glint of gold caught her eye and she felt her throat close. The ring she had placed for safekeeping in the plant was almost buried beneath the dirt. The ring she was supposed to wear for the rest of her life almost finding a resting place in the soil.

She remembered her mother’s last words.

Love again. Love for them.

Brooke hadn’t understood the full impact of her request until that moment. Being an inactive member of the family was no longer tolerable. She was all the way committed or not.

This was the time to love again or leave.

She was filled with anger that it was another man who had given her this new life. It should have been Matthew and their second child. That was the plan. They would grow old together.

But her plans were never under her control. When they were, they didn’t work out well.

Jake’s eyes begged her to make a decision.

Brooke melted.

This was his first child. He just realized he was going to be a father and the mother of his unborn child had doubts.

Brooke gritted her teeth.

Closing her eyes, she pushed the ring Matthew had placed on her hand into the dirt until it was buried.

I will always love you, she said to the universe. When she looked at the plant, nothing was left but the indentation of her finger in the dirt.

Every step to Jake took her further away from the life she desperately longed for and into the unknown of another.

Jake let go of MJ and pulled Brooke onto his lap.

“Be happy for me,” he whispered. Brooke hugged him tightly.

“I’m happy for us,” she said and he hugged her back until he was sobbing and shaking. His mother leaned on her and MJ ran out of the room flying like a plane again.

This was her new family. This was their home. Her son was going to have a sibling.

This child would be the rebirth of her love. Not the same as the old, but more than most could ever hope for.

“I love you,” he whispered and Brooke’s throat tightened again, but she made sure he knew how she felt.

“I love you too, Jake,” she said. “With everything I have left, I love you.”

EPILOGUE

Brooke was exhausted. First the baptism of Timothy Ryan Parker, her first son by her second husband, then the party at her mother-in-law's house afterward and then a special gift from his mother.

Standing at the front of the church with her husband while their son's godmother, Melinda, held him, Brooke was starting to feel her anger simmer into a smoldering warmth.

As part of their commitment to one another, Brooke and Jake had started taking marriage counseling at the church. As part of her commitment to the memory of Matthew, Brooke had joined group grief counseling.

Accepting that she would never completely stop mourning her love, Brooke found solace in her pain while at the meetings.

When she first attended therapy, she had thought the purpose was to eradicate Matthew from her life, but now, the pain was diminished and she had a more constructive outlet. At home, she could devote her love and happiness to her family without dragging them down with the memory of a love that would live in her forever.

Someday she would revive the memory of Matthew for MJ when he was old enough. Jake had preserved the video of his life for that reason.

Whereas Brooke would have some closure, Jake would see Jenny around the city on occasion and remember the good times. Although he never yearned to be with her over Brooke, he would never forget the love he felt for her.

Jake knew Brooke had been right. If he had not properly said his good-bye in his heart as he had done at the gallery, he would always have regretted his decision to choose Brooke and their life.

Even Timothy would not have been enough to seal the bond between them. Now he could think of no other life he preferred to be living. His life with Jenny had been wonderful and exciting, but now he was on a journey into the unknown that was more compelling than continuing his dizzying cycle with his lover.

Brooke was painting again. It was only a matter of time before she wanted to travel again. Life was not boring. Being married and raising kids was not boring. It was what they made of it.

Holding hands, they prayed not only for their son, but also for the strength and courage to commit to the end.

Hugging friends and family at the party afterward, they headed home for a private party at his mother's house.

Taking Brooke to the side, Jake's mother showed her the will she had drawn up when Timothy was born.

She was leaving everything to her grandchildren in a trust to be distributed once they turned 21. Although it was morose to think of her dying, Brooke thought it was a wonderful gesture.

To the children born of my son, and the ones I have come to love as my own grandchildren.

Brooke hugged her mother-in-law. Although Brooke didn't want Jake to adopt MJ, she wanted him to keep Matthew's name, Jake's mother still considered MJ a grandson of her own, and that meant everything to Brooke. Her son had a family, no matter what.

They all gathered for a photo. It would go up on Jake's mother's wall. It would go on Brooke's wall.

Hugging and kissing, they left and made the short journey across the backyard to the main house.

Placing the baby in his crib while Jake tucked MJ into bed, Brooke sighed. Looking down at the child, she knew that if anything ever happened to Jake, he would always live on in his son's eyes.

Everything did happen for a reason. Maybe it wasn't a reason she understood, but she wasn't very angry anymore. How could she be angry when their child lay sleeping? Brooke had endured great loss, but she also had gained as much as well. She didn't have the family she thought she would, but she had a loving family nonetheless.

It was what kept her going. Her mother had taught her a valuable lesson for which no money could ever make up. In order to make it in life, when it knocks you down, you had to get up and

love again. Don't mire in misery, it seemed comforting, but it was just a drug that eventually stole the spirit.

Turning off the light to her old room, Brooke waited for Jake. Closing MJ's door just so, they hugged and swayed in the hallway.

"I understand now," he whispered into her ear.

"Understand what?" she asked.

Looking into her eyes, Jake kissed his wife, the mother of his child, the woman he loved even if another would always be on his mind.

"All those times you were angry when MJ started calling me daddy," he explained. "You don't know until you're holding your own child. I understand why you didn't want me to adopt MJ or change his name. It's not that you don't trust me, that you don't love me. It's that you don't want to take away the love his father had for him. I didn't understand that before Timothy was born. I thought you just changed names. I love the fact that you will protect that memory. I would never want to take that away from you. I know MJ will understand someday. If anything happens to me, I know you would do the same."

Brooke hugged him. He squeezed her tight.

"Coming to bed?" he asked.

"I'm going to get a drink," she said. "I'll meet you upstairs."

Kissing her passionately, Jake let her know he was ready whenever she was, then quickly climbed the stairs to their room.

Bringing a glass of water from the kitchen, Brooke did her usual walk by of the family photo wall. From the first picture of MJ and Jake playing with a Christmas toy, Christmas with her mother and new family, to the latest, a photo of all of them around the newborn Timothy. The wall was getting full. Like his mother, she would have to expand to other walls.

Brooke wished her mother could have seen her new grandson. Locked away in her own memories, her mother escaped just long enough to tell Brooke not to take the same journey. As hard as it was to pull herself out of the grief, Brooke was grateful her mother loved her enough to entrust the job of getting her back to life to a friend in the event she couldn't do it herself. Even though she could have hated him for it, Jake knew he had to fulfill Brooke's mother's last wishes. That was a form of love.

As she passed over the last two photos, Brooke always lingered. Happy Jake and Jenny. Happy Brooke and Matthew and MJ.

They weren't photos of her family as they were, but the memory of the families that made Brooke and Jake the people they were in their new family. These were the people who brought their lives together even if they weren't active participants.

It wasn't a testament to remorse or regret; the photos were memories of love. Love in any form never died; it lingered, settled in deep crevices only to be remembered in dreamy longing retrieved from the deepest reaches of the soul on occasion and put back for safekeeping.

Matthew's eyes caught her attention.

What would happen the day MJ grew up and looked exactly like his father? she asked herself again. Would she be able to overcome her grief at constantly being reminded of Matthew?

Taking a deep breath and closing her eyes, Brooke cleared that thought.

Lingering over the photo of her other life, Brooke prayed for the man whose love she could never replace.

Although she had learned to love again, he would never be replaced.

Letting go once again, Brooke climbed the stairs to her new husband. He was in the mood for love, and she was going to give him all the love she had left to give.

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When I was younger, I would read fiction books with desperate fictional people trapped in desperate fictional lives and wonder, *Why don't they just leave and find a better life?* That thought has followed me into life, as each day another page is written down in permanent ink.

Jobs that pay the bills but suck the soul, family drama, relationships filled with love and compromise, they are all added to the book and cannot be changed. So we pick up a book, we read, we understand. *Why don't they just leave and find a better life?* The only life you can lead is your own. Tomorrow has not been written yet, there is just an outline. May we realize that before the answer to that question is, "*They didn't know they were trapped.*" (Boring facts about the author - Aspiring novelist and published news and feature writer living in the western part of the United States.)

Other eBook Titles by R. A. Lee
The “Desert Town Angels” Trilogy

“Desert Town Angels”

PART ONE “The Last Will and Testament of Howard Thornbon”

(Free on Smashwords.com)

The patriarch of Golden Peaks is dead. The fate of the desert town is in jeopardy as the residents fear Howard Thornbon’s daughter will sell the dying town and displace them.

But when Howard’s Last Will and Testament is read, everyone is distressed when a stranger is announced as the person chosen to carry out his final wishes.

As drastic changes are made in the town, the full fury of Sheri, Howard's daughter, is unleashed.

When the mysterious stranger is introduced, Golden Peaks Property Manager Ryan Camden realizes Sheri has met her match in the person Howard has chosen to inherit Golden Peaks.

As Sheri and the stranger clash over who is the rightful owner of the desolate desert town, Golden Peaks Property Manager Ryan Camden attempts to keep them from destroying Golden Peaks and each other.

“Desert Town Angels”

PART TWO “The Kin of Ms. Honey Hallowell”

“No!” Sheri shouted as the table shook with her pounding fist. “This is my place!”

“Are you so sure?” Van taunted. “Are you sure you are his daughter?”

“She is,” Nelson snapped and they both sat back. “She is. Sheri is legally Howard's daughter.”

“Legally?” the lawyer said, sensing the meaning of the descriptive word.

The will of Howard Thornbon has been read and the kin of Ms. Honey Hallowell, a woman named Van, has taken over the town of Golden Peaks.

Moving into the old hotel, the mysterious Van invites the residents to dinner to introduce herself. Then, Ryan learns that the fate of the town is still in limbo.

Time is ticking. Howard has stipulated Van must remain in the town thirty days before taking full ownership, otherwise the property reverts to his daughter, who will do everything in her power to take back her birthright.

Thirty days to decide the fate of Golden Peaks. Thirty days to learn why Howard left Golden Peaks to the kin of Ms. Honey Hallowell.

Thirty days before a secret is revealed changing all of their lives forever.

“Desert Town Angels”

PART THREE “The Final Showdown in Golden Peaks”

“They want to discuss some DNA results with us,” Ryan said as he hung up the phone later that night.

“They already gave them to us,” Van whispered horrified.

“The lawyer says he’ll meet us in Hamptonville,” Ryan said as he hugged her tight.

The only thought holding her together was, “Please, don’t let this all be a lie.”

The secrets have been revealed. With the fate of Golden Peaks no longer in limbo, Van and Ryan are free to engage in their own pursuits beyond the desert town.

Van attempts to come to terms with her role in Golden Peaks, and Ryan is ready to reconcile with his past and his parents.

As more strangers reveal the ongoing saga involving the residents of Golden Peaks, Van has learned to adapt to everything about her new life except her feelings for Ryan.

A visitor looking for Nelson unleashes the memory of how the octogenarian ended up in Golden Peaks. Grace’s condition worsens and Van turns to an unlikely adversary to find the dying woman’s grandson.

Before her first year in Golden Peaks has passed, Van makes a decision with Ryan that goes against her core beliefs.

The struggle for control of Golden Peaks continues.

Van prepares for one last showdown with Sheri.

But in the second year, it may be something under the soil that will decide Van’s future in Golden Peaks.

Saving the town she inherited becomes a mission that may cost Van more than the desolate town is worth.

Other eBook Titles by R. A. Lee

"The Fountain of Truth: A Novel" By R. A. Lee

"Build us a town in which we can live, build us a church in which we can marry, build us a house in which we can raise a family and I will come back to marry you."

Tim Jaskin has no time for sentimental notions even when it comes to his own family. The old town his family reputedly established generations earlier is on the brink of being demolished by eminent domain. Although he doesn't side with the city, his grandmother implores him to help the family preserve the fountain in Fountain Way for future generations.

The only evidence Tim has is a tale his family has told for generations about how his great-great-great-great-grandparents met at a fountain, the origin of Trader Fountain. A historian only interested in facts, Tim needs more than just sentimentality to obtain historical status for Fountain Way.

Cherish Tiswell is heading cross-country to be with her fiancé. Unable to maintain the family business through a dire economic cycle, Cherish has given up her family home when her late parents' medical bills make it impossible for her to keep up with the mortgage. Her only ties to family now rest in her future marriage to her fiancé. Lost on a country road looking for the Interstate onramp, Cherish stumbles on the fountain and finds herself in the middle of a family feud to protect a heritage threatened by a complacent heir.

Cherish teaches Tim a valuable lesson in the value of family, and it's up to Tim to decide if his legacy is compelling enough to preserve even without the proof he needs to believe the family tale is true. (Adult contemporary romance)

"The Beauty at the Bus Stop: A Novel" By R. A. Lee

Slinking toward them in the heavy, congested traffic was a city bus, and Evan was filled with a sense of urgency.

What could he say to make her not get on that bus?

Laid off from his bank job, Mountain Wood, Colorado, native Evan Hillaway takes a risk and accepts an offer from his cousin to work for a friend in Los Angeles. Within days of arriving, Evan sees a woman at a bus stop and instantly falls in love.

Ashley Cooper is also a small-town girl who has been laid off and looking for a way to meet her financial needs. The only difference is that her “small town” is the Westside of Los Angeles. Through a series of fortunate events, Evan meets the woman but soon learns she’s looking for someone with more financial security than Evan can provide.

With love on the line, Evan risks everything just to prove to her that they belong together. Now it’s up to Ashley to decide if love is enough to take their relationship to the end of the line. (Adult contemporary romance)

“My Vegas Valentine” A Novella By R. A. Lee

There is a code between sisters: Thou shall not be intimate with a guy your sister dumps, not without her permission. Faith lives in the shadow of her more glamorous twin, but on a trip to Vegas she bumps into a man she takes for her sister's ex-lover and debates breaking that code when she inadvertently spends Valentine's Day with him after dumping her cheating boyfriend.

Arriving on a commercial flight, Faith's adventure takes her on a local's tour of Vegas and a stay in a private Villa before she boards a private jet home to get away from her Vegas experience and back to her normal small town life.

When co-workers learn of her exploits from her ex-boyfriend, a co-worker who trashes her reputation, they refer to the stranger as Faith's "Vegas Valentine."

Realizing that she's been settling, Faith begins an adventure that takes her from the comfort of her carefully planned life and into the arms of a stranger who may break her small town heart, but for whom her heart beats. "My Vegas Valentine"

End.

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